The Lead.

by M Bradley

The morning sun was glinting off the Irish Sea as Emily set out on her morning dog walk across the sands. It was 'splitting the rocks', her husband would have said, God rest his soul. On the distant rocks a Heron turned his head, watching her suspiciously.

At forty-eight, Emily had fast tracked her way to Head of the local secondary school. Her grit and determination were second only to her keen sense of order; something, she felt, essential to a good teacher. Everything in her office had its place; that way you knew where to find it. It was said of her that she had her Christmas presents bought and wrapped by September. When asked by a young teacher if this was true she looked at him for a moment,

"Young man," she replied testily, "You are just beginning as a teacher and have much to learn. The Autumn Term is a busy one; what with new students settling in, not to mention new teachers, mock exams, work experience, school productions, carol concerts. As Head teacher there are piled on ever more commitments: Governors meetings, Local Head of school meetings, invites to numerous concerts and other social engagements where it seems that, though my presence may not be of paramount importance my absence would be! So you see that maybe getting these things out of the way in good, and well organised time, is just common sense."

The young man considered her words and agreed, though he couldn't help wondering if this didn't make Christmas seem a little sterile and un-magical.

All through her life she had enjoyed what she considered to be this clarity of focus through absolute organisation; until that is on her 40th Birthday when it all changed.

She awoke promptly at 6.30am as was her routine, and by 7.00am she was sitting in her garden drinking coffee. Behind her the door opened and a small nose poked through. She turned at the sound and there she saw something to make the hardest heart melt; a small Labrador puppy, a leather collar around its neck. They sat there both, in the early morning sun, sizing each other up. It was the puppy that was first to break. It fell over the doorstep and rolled to Emily's feet.

"You poor thing," Emily almost sang as swept it up, the puppy buried its wet nose in her embrace. Behind them both, Emily's husband stood watching and smiled softly to himself as he saw Emily wipe away a small tear.

Before the week was out a routine had been established and typed up neatly in a chart fixed next to the fridge. Unfortunately for Emily it seemed no-one had told the puppy. By the end of the first week Emily had read the books, tried various training

methods and had been relieved of two mobile phones, three shoes, an armchair and her tv remote control. Accordingly the pup had been awarded his name: Chaos.

By the end of the month the new routine had been settled and Emily now religiously enjoyed both her morning and evening constitutional. Even as her husband grew sick, she could never miss a walk. After two years, Emily's husband passed away. The walks, particularly the evening one, grew longer. Chaos became her constant companion and in the evenings they would curl up together by the fire, watching till the embers died. Often Chaos would look up and see the sparkle of a tear on Emily's cheek, and would wriggle closer.

"What would I do without you, eh?" she would ask. But the only answer would be an echo in the empty house.

With her husband gone, Emily began to close herself away. She took to staying home at night, as 'Chaos needed her.' She turned down more and more of the functions she previously thought pre-requisite to her position. And the walks began to take on a new meaning.

During the walks through the glen she would watch Chaos as he would too and fro beneath the trees, diving into the river and racing round, always checking to see that she was there. She would watch as other dogs appeared, she loved the way he would stand tall and proud and, should the other dog make any kind of advance, then scamper behind her. Then as the imposter would leave Chaos would spray his scent as if to say,

"Yeah! You better keep on walking!"

She would watch him as swam in the sea, on those beach walks. The way his tail would slide from side to side like a rudder. He would chase the birds, hopelessly wondering if today they would play. Sometimes she felt that his presence would define her entire happiness; at other times she felt more alone watching him play- her one true focus. Sure, he still drooled in her shoes, ate her remotes and well more that he had organised her. It was she that stood in rain and shine, waiting for him to finish his ablutions, nappy sack in her hand. It was she that fed him, brushed him, and sat through the thunderstorms and fireworks being there for him. And what's more, she liked it that way.

Breaking Emily's reverie, the Heron suddenly turned its head and, lifting its clumsy wings, climbed into the air out of reach of the large Springer spaniel, an auburn blur barking and dancing in the waves.

"Hello, ma'am!" The voice came from behind her. Turning she could see a young man of about 21. There was something familiar in his eyes. "Colin, miss you probably don't remember me!"

She thought for a moment, “Dempster! Third from the back behind McFarland. Oh yes, I certainly remember you. In fact if I remember correctly it was you stuck the Freshmint chewing gum on my picture in the hall.”

“Actually it was juicy fruit, ma’am. And I never did understand how you knew it was me.” He looked her straight in the eye and Emily noted there was something different there, something she didn’t recognise.

“McFarland,” she replied. “Five minutes detention and a threat to call in his father and he was crying like a baby.”

There was that awkwardness of not knowing what to say to someone you have met on the off chance and with whom you have nothing in common.

“Well I best be on!” She said at last. “Take care of yourself.”

She went to move past him but Colin caught her arm.

“I…” He began. Emily froze for a moment and looked hard at him, wondering whether she ought to scream.

“I just wanted to thank you, ma’am!” He said at last. “You taught me so much. I was a waste of space; everyone told me so, but you. You taught me to look forward. You said the past was only a foundation - You ain’t nothing but your future.”

She smiled, “You are what is yet to come. But close enough.”

“Well I am a soldier, ma’am, doing me exams and all. They say, if I keep me head down I might even get promotion. But I ain’t there yet. After all what’s past is only past, eh?” He looked over at where his dog was worrying at a rock and whistled for him to come. The dog looked at him- and proceeded to keep on worrying. “Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you.”

“Well, thank you, Dempster. That means a lot to me. You…” She began but then thought better of it. “You take care.” She finished instead and turned to walk away.

“Ma’am!”

She looked back and Colin was picking something up from the sand. It was her dog lead. She must have dropped it when he had touched her arm. Colin handed it across but she couldn’t help notice the question in his eyes as he saw the collar attached, still, to the end.

Emily felt the world open up on her and a cold wind rush through her stomach. The sunlight blurred across horizon and the sound of the waves that up till now had gently lapped, now roared in her ears.

“He died.” The words fell from her lips and hung in the air like a guilty confession.

“It’s okay, ma’am…” he began.

“No!” she cut him short. “No, it’s not okay. My husband died and I carried on, I organised him into a little box, neatly buried in a plot of land; everything neat and in its place. Do you know I must have cried only five tears before I drew myself up and resolved to carry on? But my bloody dog dies and I fall to pieces. I have been walking this beach now for three months without him. Morning and night clutching at this lead as if…as if I don’t what? As if he would suddenly bound out of the water, shake himself over me , wagging his clumsy great tail and look at me as if it has all been one great big joke. And it hasn’t.” She paused and looked at him earnestly, “I have.”

Colin looked at her, not knowing what to say.

“Because Dempster this is the joke. You are stood here thanking me whilst it is you that maybe just is saving me. How time changes things, eh? Dodgy Dempster, teaching me with my own words. Thank you, Dempster, thank you.”

“Erm…no probs. You’ll be alright then, ma’am? Cos if you are I’ve gotta get going, like.”

“Yes, thank you” and then adding softly, “Colin.”

He smiled but she couldn’t help but notice the relief in his eyes as he let go of her hand and scampered away across the sands. She looked down at the lead and placed it in her pocket. Taking a deep breath she tasted the morning air.

Morning: The beginning of a new day. And for the first time in a while she felt she could take it on. She knew that an empty house still awaited her at the end of the day. But there were several hours before then. And a lot can be achieved in several hours, if you organise them properly.