

Elise

by Ivor John

It was an unexpectedly warm day in May. Even though late afternoon, the low sun shone over the hills in the distance. Imbuing me with a feeling of contentment. Increasingly rare these days, to have such a feeling of optimism, but it was one of those beautiful days, when all seemed joyful. I had spent the morning, in the office at home finishing off some invoices and finalising the ledgers. Julie, was also home. An inset day had finished mid-morning. We had decided to take advantage of this unusual opportunity for time off together and on such a lovely day.

It had been warm enough for us to sit in the garden at The Bell. The Leeds and Liverpool canal ran alongside it and every so often a narrowboat would chug past. The boaters, cheerfully waving back as they moved slowly by.

Elise, our two-year-old red setter sniffed around the beer garden, off her lead. She was a large dog, but glorious with her long red fur. Julie would spend hours every day, brushing her with a nylon bristle brush, to keep her in top condition. Despite her size, 'Ella' was gentle and she would wander around the tables, hoping that somebody may stroke her long warm fur. Or perhaps they would nod to us, to see if it was OK for them to feed her with a piece of sandwich or maybe some chips. She adored this and would invariably repay their generosity by rolling onto her back to allow them to stroke her.

We had spent a long time deciding whether we should get a dog. We had wanted children very much. For Julie it been particularly heartbreaking that after years of tests, advice and treatment, we had never managed a pregnancy. We had reluctantly decided to accept that we wouldn't be parents, and that was when we adopted 'Ella'. She was just a tiny puppy in a litter of six when we had first seen her. Each had a different coloured collar to identify them, as the puppies had excitedly rolled around with each other, play biting. She had come over to see us. Her tail wagging so excitedly.

"She is very taken with you."

Julie had said, as the tiny red ball of fur hooked my hand, and enthusiastically took the treat which the breeder had handed me to tempt her with.

"Yes, she is the one, for sure, she is adorable."

The breeder took our details, we paid the deposit and the little girl with the orange collar was ours. We tried to pretend that 'Ella' was not in lieu of our own child. But we both knew that really she was going to be exactly that.

We were so excited to collect her when she was eight weeks old. It seemed a shame to take her away from her mum, but we were so happy to have her. We had bought her a lovely basket, a cupboard full of expensive dog food, several dog coats and a handmade leather collar. We adored her from the moment she got home and thoroughly spoiled her.

We had finished our lunch, called 'Ella' away from a couple a few tails away, who were tempting her with salt and vinegar crisps. She came to us when she saw us getting up from the table. She always did, she seemed to adore us, as much as we did her.

From the pub, we walked towards the distant hills. A flint track, lined with wild flowers. The main road to Skipton was a few hundred yards from us, and the noise from the traffic jarred with the tranquility of the track and our otherwise peaceful walk. "Ella" sniffed around the hedgerows, running back to us every now and again before returning to continue her exploration of the undergrowth.

As we neared a stile, where our track intersected with the country lane beyond the hedge, I could hear a car, some distance away, probably half a mile, but it sounded noisy, moving fast. I immediately felt anxious. I don't know how, but I knew that something was going to happen. Something bad. The sound of the car, grew louder as it got closer. I called 'Ella' as we were close to the road now. Then, a rabbit, ran from a ditch beside the track, toward the road and under the hedge. Our beloved 'Ella' seeing the quarry, forgot her sniffing about and chased.

The car was louder, faster and she was running towards the road. Straight around the stile, and into the path of the car. I knew it would hit her. A loud dull thud followed a brief screech of disc brakes, but the car didn't stop, but accelerated away, I didn't even see it.

'Ella' was laying by the bank. Her glorious red fur matted with blood and dust from the road. I carefully picked her up, and wrapped her in my jacket. It was a long way back to where our car was parked. She was warm and whimpering, but I knew it was hopeless. I don't remember the drive to the vet, Julie sitting in the back holding her.

As we sat in the car, parked outside the vet where we had taken her. Julie spoke, the first since it happened.

"Should we ask the vet, what we should do?"

I could barely speak as I listened to what she had said.

"I can't think about that right now. If I do, I'll go crazy. I'll think about that tomorrow."

I managed to say, between sobs