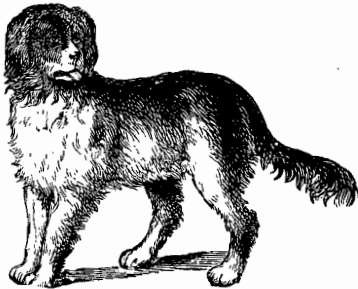


# Someone's Birthday

Jon Wynne-Tyson



Well-appointed is how the agents would have described the house, had the Hammonds been selling it. But the Hammonds were not selling. They were very attached to "Marbella" which purred with fresh paint, double-glazing, eight-inch roof insulation, luxury kitchen, two Hollywood bathrooms, and every other comfort imaginable to an owner who was in the building trade anyway.

The colours, perhaps, were not to everyone's taste, nor the surfeit of wrought iron, the liberal statuary, the crinkle-edged fishpond, and the fulsomely upholstered leisure furniture that was brought out (plastic-wrapped on days of threatening showers) from May to September. But *chacun*, as the French so democratically say, *a son gout*.

The car rolled down the pristine tarmac drive into the quiet estate road. Like the house, it bore evidence of a keen eye for those minor symbols that keep the neighbours informed of the pecking order.

Malcolm Hammond pulled into the curb and went back to close the intricately designed gates.

"Paid the milkman?" he asked, fitting his seatbelt.

"In the envelope, with the note cancelling."

"You didn't say for how long?"

"I'm not a fool, you know. Just 'until further notice'."

He looked in his wing mirror and pulled away from the curb.

"I should have put a second lock on the side door. I asked you to remind me."

She chain-lit a fresh cigarette. "No one's been burgled round us in months." Like most women, she could be philosophical on the brink of a holiday. Even the best-appointed kitchens can pall.

He sighed the sigh of a man over-burdened.

"Well, if the bastards mean to get in they'll take a jemmy to the frames, so there's no mileage in worrying."

"That's right," Angie said, settling back comfortably in the glistening purple nylon upholstery. She looked at her gold watch whose strap was rather too small for her plump wrist. "Mother and the children should be there by now."

Malcolm grunted. "I hope she airs our beds."

"Handy, having the caravan in her garden."

The car stopped at the lights. The wind had got up and was tearing at the plastic sheeting wrapped round the contents of the roof rack.

"Did you remember the gumboots," he asked, half turning toward the back seat which was almost filled by the golden labrador.

"And the anoraks," she confirmed. "In the boot."



## FICTION

"Come on," he said to the traffic lights.

They turned left, then right and on to the new road that led to the motorway.

"Where are you going to do it?" she asked.

"A few miles along," he said.

"Near the town?"

"Not far."

"I don't know what the children are going to say."

"By the time we're back they'll almost have forgotten. Three weeks're a long time to kids."

"I doubt Sandra'll accept it that easily. She's daft about animals."

"She'll have to, won't she?"

"Even so..."

His grip on the wheel tightened. "It's better this way. We agreed."

She shrugged. "Suppose so."

They were on the motorway and he put the car up to seventy in the centre lane. It was at the top end of the Ford range and there was still plenty of give in the pedal.

"When we've had the week with the kids," he said, "it'll be nice to get her abroad. Blow the dust out of her."

"It hasn't had its first full service yet," Angie said.

"There can't be much 'dust' in it."

"Give me a smoke, will you?"

She lit a cigarette and put it between his lips. "Junction four," she said. "Ledgeworth's only a mile or two."

They drove on in silence, then he took the slow lane and decelerated. The motorway stretched ahead, bleak, wind-swept, running straight ahead of them for a visible two miles. The traffic at that time in the afternoon was light.

"Just up here," he said. "We'll drop it up here."

"It?"

"The dog," he said impatiently.

"Harry. He's got a name."

"We must be quick," he said. "They can do you for stopping on the hard shoulder without good reason."

He got out and walked round to the nearside rear door. "Come on," he said.

The labrador got out of the car and stood on the tarmac, his hair blown up in patches by the wind which held the first signs of rain. His tail slapped the open door rhythmically, like a drum beat. He looked up at Malcolm with that patient certainty of which only dogs seem capable.

"There's a bit of a bank here," he said. Shrubs and a few young birch trees made an attractive background to the grass and flowering weeds which bureaucracy had not yet tidied up.

Angie did not get out of the car or look at him or Harry, but she put her arm out of the window and dangled a plastic bag.

"Here's the bone," she said. "Give him the bone up among the trees."

"Christ!" he said, "I must take its collar off."

"Why keep calling him 'it'?" she said irritably. "Here, give me the collar."

He took Harry up the short bank and gave him the bone under a birch tree, then walked quickly to the car. Angie was staring straight ahead with a far-away expression, as though her mind was elsewhere. He drove off through the slow and overtaking lanes, pushing the car to over eighty in a very few seconds. It was ten minutes before anything was said.

"Sandra would like a hamster," Angie remarked, as though continuing a conversation broken by deep thought. "Maybe that'd help."

"You don't think we should have done it, do you?" he asked truculently.

"It's what we tell the children that worries me."

"We tell them what we agreed. That we had to give it away."

"Him. Harry."

"Harry, then."

"They'll want good reasons."

"There are good reasons. They've got to learn the economic facts of life some time."

"I wish you hadn't given Kevin that fishing rod, so soon after the bicycle."

"You've got to encourage children if they show ability. Kevin's taken to fishing."

"It'll just make it more difficult for them to believe we couldn't afford to keep Harry any longer."

"Kids don't do those sort of sums. Anyway, we can't afford it. Him. Apart from what they'd have stung us for kennels, do you know what he's been costing us in food recently?"

"Of course I know. I do the shopping."

"Well, then. You could buy a bottle of Scotch for what it takes to feed that dog for a week."

"We get through a bottle in three days; less when we have people in."

"So what are you saying?"

"We should never have bought him."

"It wasn't my idea. Anyway, we didn't buy him. The RSPCA people were lucky we took him off them. Labrador pups are two a penny."

"They did ask if we could afford to keep him, and you said 'yes'."

"You know what happened. Bricks, plasterboard, timber, all up as soon as I'd quoted for that schools job. Anyway, it was bloody cheek their asking."

"The girl said a lot of people take animals before Christmas, then get tired of them."

"It wasn't a question of getting tired of him. It's a matter of cost."

He flashed his headlamps at the car in front. "Get in the slow lane, you dozy sod."

"Don't go so fast; you're doing ninety."

"Look, after a few weeks' holiday the kids won't give Harry another thought. We've done it the right way."

"I heard his tail on the door. I wish he hadn't wagged his tail."

"For Christ's sake, Angie, stop working yourself up. He's probably eating steak on a stockbroker's settee in Ledgeworth by now."

"Or smashed to pieces by someone driving at this sort of speed."

His voice rose. "She'll do over the ton in perfect safety, so don't start on my driving."

"You just don't care, do you? About the children or about Harry or me or anyone."

"Christ! Thank you very much! Thank you very bloody much! I never *stop* paying out for this family. It was a new fridge last month, a whole new outfit for you to come away in, and if the hints I've been getting are anything to go by, it'll be a new video when we get back."

She knew his tempers and tried to calm him. "Life isn't all what you spend on things, Malc. It's...it's something more than that."

"From the way you lot consume, you could have fooled me. Anyway, what's suddenly turned you into a philosopher?"

"I just feel that somehow you...we...have begun to undervalue things."

"My impression is you value a nice home, a car, holidays, clothes, everything you want, very highly indeed."

"I didn't mean that. You bring everything down to money."

His patience snapped and he smashed his fist on the console.

"Jesus Christ!" he shouted. "It takes two to tango." The rain was heavy now, coming out of a black sky. "You'd better turn your lights on," Angie said. He twisted the control savagely, his face lowering with resentment.

"Maybe you'd like to drive this car while you're about it?"

"Mother won't be fooled. You realise that, don't you?"

"Now what are you on about?"

"She'll guess about Harry."

"Your bloody mother would suspect the angel Gabriel if he turned up with a pools win."

"We should have told her. She might even have taken him."

"And complicate her trips to Benidorm and Majorca with an animal? He'd end up back with us each time, with me fetching and returning. No thanks."

"Do slow down, Malcolm. I can hardly see the road and the traffic's getting worse."

"Will you bloody stop driving this car?" he shouted. He turned on the stereo at full pitch, but without dropping speed.

Angie put her hands to her ears and screamed at him.

"Malcolm!! Slow down! Are you mad?"

The car was flashing under a series of bridges. The traffic volume foretold the great sprawl of the city that lay ahead. The road surface was a thin sheet of water that covered the car in hammering, blinding swathes each time they overtook a lorry in the centre lane. The motorway warning lights pulsed forty. Malcolm dropped to seventy, but the huge vehicle he had just passed, its shining tarpaulin sides bearing French wording, gave him a high-beam opinion of his road sense.

"Oh, shit yourself!" he yelled.

"Malcolm! For God's sake!"

So far as could be seen, the road ahead was clear. He accelerated again.

"Shut up!" he said viciously. His hands were clenched on the top of the steering wheel.

His wife's nerve broke completely. The din of the stereo above the roar of the engine and the thrashing rain overcame everything but fear. She raised Harry's collar, which she had been holding in her lap, and brought it down on Malcolm's left hand.

"Slow down!" she screamed. "You fool! You fool!"

They were approaching another bridge. Malcolm was so surprised by the pain of the collar's name disc on his knuckles that he looked round at Angie at the very moment that she screamed again.

"Stop! For God's sake, stop! There's a dog in the road."

It wasn't a dog, but they didn't know that until the car was locked into a skid and on top of the crumpled heap of sheeting lying in the outer lane. After that there was no time for accurate identifications. The car spun twice before hitting the structure of the bridge and bouncing off into the central lane. The Belgian vehicle behind was itself going nearer sixty than forty.

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The police sergeant blew out his cheeks. Sustained compassion is an emotion sometimes found in short supply among motorway police patrols.

"Blithering bloody idiots," he said objectively.

The young constable had been on motorway patrol long enough to share his superior's familiarity with such scenes. He ran his eye along the crushed concertina of jagged metal that had lately been a cherished motor car in Ford's upper range.

"What you reckon's the length of one of these, Sarge?"

The sergeant shrugged. "Fifteen feet? Fifteen and a half?"

"Can't be more'n eight or ten now. Wouldn't believe it, would you?"

"If you caught a fully-loaded container lorry up your backside, son, you'd believe anything except it was your birthday." He sniffed. "Especially if it was driven by some push-on wog."

The young constable poked gingerly into the small space that had been the passenger seat area. The ambulance men had had to take Angie out in handy pieces. He fished something from between the crushed seat and the twisted metal that might have been the door frame. It was a blood-soaked dog collar.

"Funny," he said. "No sign of a dog in there."

The sergeant made a face.

"Must have been *someone's* birthday, then," he acknowledged.



## TIME FLIES

this is the bird's hour  
when fog merges land and sea  
and the sun's audience is lost  
to those who sleep

in the tranquil hours of dawn  
I watch these winged creatures  
from my perch upon the hill  
they flirt with waves of air  
and carry songs above  
the thunder of the city  
where sirens replace  
the urgency of the wind  
and bulldozers silence  
roaring rivers

I hold the vision that these friends  
will survive the wreckage  
when humans have flown too high  
and the birds' hour  
will be the only hour  
to witness the morning sky

Katherine Minott