

## **The Repossessed Dog by Beulah Gross**

Chelsea was an ugly white boxer bitch owned by Janie and they lived in a small weatherboard house on the edge of town. Sometimes Janie's large, hulking, useless son shared the house with them but most of the time she was alone with Chelsea.

Janie was short and dumpy, with a greasy, olive skin, secretive eyes and straight, dark hair which clung stickily to her head. She usually wore gold brocade slippers, a dusty black skirt which swirled around her ankles, limp, lacy blouses in a variety of colours and glitzy earrings. She wore no makeup except bright blue eyeshadow and matching nail varnish.

Every morning Janie would tramp down to the shops tugging an unwilling, barking Chelsea on her gold lead. When Janie had finished her small purchases - and she bought something every day - she would stop off at the bottle shop for her daily bottle of plonk before staggering homewards, once again dragging the still barking dog.

Janie lavished all the attention and affection of a doting mother on Chelsea but her only reward was nips and bites and disgusting messes as evidenced by the sad state of her hands and slippers. Caring for the spoilt beast as she did, it was only natural that Janie should haunt the vet's surgery with minor and imagined problems. When Bob, the vet and my boss, told Janie she'd be better off spending her money on a doctor and a course of tetanus shots, she bristled.

'It's nothing! Just a couple of scratches,' she cried. 'They're just love bites.'

However, all of us in the surgery, especially Bob, knew different. Chelsea was an ungrateful, unlovable animal who lavished her painful 'love bites' indiscriminately.

As far as payment went, it all depended on the time of the day Janie consulted us and therefore how much plonk she had consumed. If it was morning she was relatively sober and paid cash; if afternoon she was usually slightly glazed but if she appeared at evening surgery she was deeply under the weather. She paid occasionally and only when pressed so all we could do was bill her and hope. Unfortunately, Janie appeared mostly in the evenings because the more in her cups she was the more she worried about her beloved Chelsea and it wasn't too long before she owed us several hundred dollars. After months of visits for trivial problems and tearful promises to pay up, Bob told Janie to go to another vet. Sadly, dragging the barking, snarling Chelsea, Janie swayed out, muttering about uncaring vets and their heartless staff.

Months went by and we'd all but forgotten Janie and her horrible dog. Then, one day during a particularly busy session, the surgery door crashed open and Janie flew in. Skirts swirling, earrings swinging wildly, with eyeshadow on only one eyelid she looked bizarre, rather like an escapee from a seedy vaudeville show.

'You've got to help! Chelsea's having her babies!' she shouted hysterically. She grabbed Bob's arm and pulled but he, staunch man, resisted.

'Can't come now. Can't you see I'm in the middle of an examination? And I've got two operations waiting. Chelsea will be OK. I'll come when I can.'

'You don't understand!' Janie was almost dancing. 'Chelsea's in the taxi outside and the pups are coming!'

'Will someone get this \*\*\*dog out of my cab!' a male voice yelled from the front office.

'I suppose I'd better take a look,' Bob said guardedly. Clearly he wasn't looking forward to another session with Chelsea and just as clearly he wasn't going to let Janie's hysteria get to him. Carefully, he placed the protesting cat he'd been examining into my arms and sauntered out. I thrust the cat into a cage and dashed after him, closely followed by the rest of the staff, two fascinated pet owners and the irate, cursing cabbie.

The back of the cab was a mess. Birth fluids were everywhere and the thin rug Janie had supplied for Chelsea's comfort was under her head rather than where it would have been of some use. Chelsea herself, as always, was barking and snapping and didn't seem the slightest bit put out by impending motherhood.

Almost tripping over Janie who was shouting, 'Be careful with her!', Bob unceremoniously wrapped Chelsea in the rug – being savagely nipped in the process - and carried her into the surgery followed closely by his entourage. The cabbie was yelling something about the mess and who was going to clean it up.

'Get Janie to do it, man,' Bob snapped, sucking a bleeding finger. 'It's her dog.'

'C'mon lady, what about it?' The cabbie sounded quite belligerent.

'OK, but I get sick at the sight of blood,' Janie threatened.

The cabbie hesitated. The thought of extra mess in his cab was daunting. Except for Chelsea's barking, the surgery was silent as we all watched him. He stared at the floor for a moment then stared at Janie. Her concern

for Chelsea pushed aside for the moment, she stared back, her expression one of helpful innocence. She nodded once to emphasise her predilection to sickness and then he shrugged.

‘OK. You win. We’ll call it quits. But don’t you ever call me again!’

Janie smirked as he stalked out, his fare forgotten, then, her agitation suddenly renewed, turned her attention back to Chelsea. With great difficulty we managed to keep her out of the surgery and eventually, after whispered consultations with Bob, persuaded her to go home as the delivery was going to be a long one.

Actually, what happened was that Chelsea was delivered by Caesarean section of a single stillborn pup. When Janie was told she cried and sobbed and then rushed out. She returned about an hour later staggering drunk, clutching a pink, beribboned cushion for Chelsea. The dog, barking so strongly that Bob thought she’d pop her stitches, nipped Janie viciously as she tried to place the cushion under its head.

‘Poor darling’s been through so much,’ Janie gulped. ‘When can I take her home?’

‘She’s not fit enough to go home yet, Janie. Perhaps in a day or so.’”

Throughout the next week Chelsea barked constantly. This being the nature of animals, our other patients joined in and the constant daily cacophony became unbearable.

Eventually, we put Chelsea into solitary confinement in a back room but even through the closed door we could hear her. Janie visited her beloved pet three times a day. She didn’t seem to mind Chelsea’s Coventry; perhaps she saw it as a kind of one-upmanship. As usual, Janie’s sobriety depended on the time of day and we dreaded her evening visits but at last Bob said that Chelsea could go home - on condition Janie paid the account.

‘If you don’t pay, Janie, you won’t get Chelsea back. We’ll just keep her as security.’

‘Let me take her home now,’ Janie begged, tottering drunkenly against the front counter. ‘I’ll go to the bank first thing in the morning.’

But Bob had learned his lesson. ‘Not a chance, Janie. We’ve written you off once already and we’re not going to again. No cash, no Chelsea.’

Once again muttering about heartless vets and their staff, Janie staggered out of the surgery. She returned every day in her dusty, swirling skirts and lopsided eyeshadow, demanding her dog but never brought any money. Meantime, Chelsea continued to bark.

She barked through meals, through exercise periods, through visits from Janie and through the night. She also continued to mess disgustingly and to 'love bite' anyone who came near. Every one of us dreaded having to attend to her so we drew up a roster and stuck to it religiously. Then, one day, desperate for an end to this situation we went on a mini strike.

'Let's call it a day, Bob,' begged Jan, his wife and bookkeeper. 'It's costing so much in board and lodging for the blasted animal you might as well cut your losses and restore the peace.'

'Hear, hear!' the nurse, the cleaner and I cheered.

'Besides," Jan continued, 'Janie probably hasn't got the money to pay us anyway.'

'Nonsense! Janie's got more money than all of us put together!' he scoffed. 'If she paid us what she spends on liquor we'd be ahead.'

Disgruntled, we went back to work and things remained in status quo for another week until the day Bob said to me, 'Listen!'

I listened but heard nothing. I said so.

'That's just it! There's nothing to hear! Chelsea's quiet!'

Fearing the worst, we rushed down the passage to the back room. But as usual Chelsea was there, sitting on her grimy pink cushion, her head on her front paws, barking away. Except there was no sound.

'She's barked herself hoarse!'

Cursing as she nipped him, Bob examined Chelsea but found nothing seriously wrong. She had just given herself a bad case of laryngitis. He toyed with the idea of not treating her so that we could enjoy a respite from her monotonous noise but in the end, being soft-hearted, gave in. Chelsea remained voiceless for four blessed days but she never gave up trying. It was quite a sight to see her in her cage as she went through the motions, jaws moving, chest heaving, and not hear anything. We couldn't understand why she never gave up. We knew she wasn't deaf so she must have known she wasn't making any sound. Finally, after much discussion, we decided she was just plain stupid and left it at that.

Janie's visits became more frequent and the drunker she was the more she demanded Chelsea's return but Bob stuck to his guns. No cash, no dog. It became a battle of wills and it seemed likely that Bob would win. After all, he had the dog and was therefore in a good bargaining position. But we balked at the prospect of keeping the barking Chelsea as a permanent resident in the surgery and gave Bob an ultimatum. Chelsea or his staff. He had no choice and when Janie came in later that day Bob was waiting for her.

‘Janie, we've decided we've waited long enough for you to pay up. If you don't pay us for Chelsea's operation and her board and lodging since then, we'll have to get rid of her. We simply can't afford to keep her anymore and we need the space. You have until 4 pm tomorrow afternoon.’

It was amazing how quickly Janie sobered up. She assumed, as Bob had intended, that he was going to put Chelsea down.

‘You can't! She's not your dog!’

‘Yes, I can,’ Bob assured her.

Janie flew out in a flurry of skirts and hair. She returned a few hours later clutching a brown paper bag. From it she extracted a large bundle of one-dollar notes.

‘There! Take it all! Just give me back my darling!’

Quickly I counted out the money, gave her a receipt and raced into the back room to fetch Chelsea who was once more in full cry. Ignoring the snaps and nips I attached the gold lead to her gold collar and dragged her into the waiting room.

‘There! Take her and don't bring her back!’ I said gleefully and the last I saw of them was of Janie tugging the resisting, barking Chelsea down the road with one hand and sucking a bleeding finger on the other.

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