

TRIXIE

It's hard to get out of bed in the mornings now. But I still have to take Trixie for her walk. We go early, when no-one else is about, so we can enjoy the new day together. Track suit on, get Trixie's lead. Down the garden path. There's a grey dawn-mist wisping around the streetlamps as we set off for the Hill. Trixie always likes to stop and sniff where the other dogs have been. She's curious like that. Oh! yes, I remember the trouble we had coaxing her back, that time she got through the fence at the builder's yard. She can be a real mischief, can Trixie.

She knows her way to the Hill, so she takes me round the corner, past the big houses with the inviting driveways and hidden secrets. She stops to peer through the gates, her pointy red tongue quivering out. We go down the cycle path, her little legs pattering along and her tail erect, until we come to the open grass and start to climb.

We love our walks in the mornings. But we come out at night, too: late, into the silent streets, just Trixie and me. I'd never have let Lucy out in the dark.

Here you are, Trixie. Good girl! Shall I let you off your lead? Off you go. Don't get out of sight. Off she runs, in and out of the tussocks and the molehills, stopping now and then to sniff. Soon her curly white coat is glistening with dew.

Better keep moving. Come on, Trixie. This way! Good girl. I stop under a tree, fumble amongst twisted roots and last year's leaves. Ah, here's a good one. Would you like to fetch it, dear? No? Not a stick? Well! I know what *you* want. Yes! You want your ball, don't you?

It was when Lucy first got ill that we started taking our walks at dawn. She was so brave, my Lucy, but it was embarrassing for her to meet people. She could always see their walls going up. They were horrified, and scared, and they didn't want it to be them, and they wanted to help, but they didn't know how; so Lucy had to talk to them through a wall. Sometimes she just wanted to be alone, with me and Trixie.

I fish the ball out of my pocket. It's Trixie's favourite, and I throw it high in the air, up over the trees, over the highest branches, higher than the tower blocks, soaring, soaring to where Lucy is; and down it falls to earth and Trixie gives a yap and chases after it. Yes, Lucy was very brave. So brave I couldn't believe she was my own daughter, because I'm not like that. But then, neither is Frank.

Another thing that made Lucy want to take our walks so early was when all her hair fell out. Dr Williams had said it would, of course, and Lucy liked the hat they gave her, but she was so tired of all the questions, all the how-are-yous, and the you're-looking-well lies.

Trixie! Oh, you silly dog, aren't you going to fetch it? Now I'll have to get it myself. Shall I throw it again? No? More interested in that bush, are you?

At first Lucy could still walk Trixie, but then she got tired and Trixie would run on ahead while Lucy took my arm. Later we tried the wheelchair, but it was such hard work. Frank could have done it, he's a big man. But then, what's big about running out when your daughter gets cancer? We still can't believe it, can we, Trixie?

Ah, *I* see what you're up to. Good girl, that's a good place to do it, under the bushes there. Don't worry, I've got my plastic bag. Yes, good dog! I slip the bag over my hand, turn it inside-out. Pick up the still-steaming mess, feel the warmth through the bag. Tie the bag inside another. She's such a good girl, aren't you Trixie? She never does it in the garden any more. No.

For a while it was awkward. When I couldn't get the wheelchair up the Hill any more, Lucy said it would be okay to go to the park instead. We'd walk around the big pond and watch the ducks skating on the ice and hear the birds chirruping in the branches. Trixie was such a good dog. You only chased the ducks now and again, didn't you? Do you remember when they chased you back? How Lucy laughed! Yes! I think that was the last time.

Here's the doggie-bin. See, Trixie, this is where it goes. Pop it in! That's better. Come on. Not far to the crest. The sun will be coming up over the rooftops. Are dogs interested in sunrises, Trixie? You never said.

Dr Williams was very kind near the end. Once we met him in the park with his big labrador, Magnus. Trixie was afraid, weren't you dear? But she went and sat on Lucy's lap, and Magnus is a very well-behaved dog, so it was all right. Dr Williams chatted for a long time while Lucy dozed in the spring sunshine. He seemed sad that Frank had left us, but he said that kind of thing sometimes happens. He knew better than to say that Frank must have felt so helpless and was probably hurting deep inside. Because he knew that's what I felt, too. Instead he said how nice it was that we had a dog, and Trixie looked at him and stuck her tongue out. That meant she understood.

Well. Afterwards, I thought it'd be better if Trixie kept up the early-morning walks even though Lucy wasn't there any more. It's good exercise, you see. That's when we started coming out at midnight, too: the moment between the days. Trixie wasn't sure at first, but I like the loneliness and the remembering in the dark as my breath steams in the damp air and above the streetlamps the moon lights up the clouds with an usherette's torch. Trixie humours me. She won't tell Dr Williams.

Here we are at the top of the Hill. Shall I put your lead back on? No? Well, I'll just have a sit down on the bench here. You run off, see if you can find a rabbit. Look, there's the sun. He looks very red this morning, as if we've caught him getting dressed. Lucy would have liked this dawn. I can picture her squinting and smiling as she feels those red rays on her face. She turns and catches my eye. A lump comes into my throat and I shiver.

I'm sitting there, with Trixie's lead in my hand and her ball in my pocket. I'm wondering when it will ever end, when I see someone else coming up the hill. It's a man in a thick coat, and the dog is a labrador. I want to run, but the man has seen me, and he waves. Now I can't hide. Trixie! Trixie! Where are you? She won't like it – she's scared of big dogs. *I* know Magnus won't hurt her, but Trixie doesn't.

Hello Emily, says Dr Williams, and he stops in the middle of the path. He's frowning. Magnus stares and whimpers. I can see Dr Williams is thinking. How are you, he says, but I can't answer, because I think he knows. And I'm shivering.

You look like you're out walking the dog, says Dr Williams. I try to look him in the face, and I think I'm crying. Good heavens, woman, he says, and sits down beside me. It's two weeks since your dog died, he says. You're not still coming out in the mornings? That's never her lead there? *It is!*

I'm definitely crying now. I cover my face with my hands but I'm sobbing, sobbing. Poor Emily, he says. You've been so brave for so long. You're cold. Here. And I feel a coat around my shoulders, because I'm only wearing my tracksuit and it's a chilly morning and I know he means well but I don't want to be comforted.

Your dog, he says, and I say Trixie. Ah yes, he says, Trixie – Trixie was your last link, wasn't she – with Lucy, I mean. You poor, poor thing. And I cry some more, and he puts his hand on my shoulder, and I want him to hold me but I know he mustn't because he's a doctor.

Then a cold nose presses against my hands and I open them and Magnus wants to lick my face. I think he knows too, because he can see Trixie's not really here. And Dr Williams takes my hand and puts Magnus's lead into it. Come on, he says, you can walk Magnus. He's a good fellow. Not the same as Trixie, I know, but he'll do his best.

Magnus takes us down the hill and they're just opening the park and I can see the autumn crocuses among the red leaves. We walk past the coffee shop and smell the beans and hear the steam and the cups. And I'd like us to stop for a bit, but we'd better not. We reach home, and Dr Williams and Magnus see me to the door. I say thank you, Dr Williams. Call me Richard, he says, and would you like to walk Magnus again tomorrow?

I say no, thank you, I'll be all right. And I close the front door. But before they can get down the path I open the door again and shout yes please. And it was a bit abrupt so I say, I mean, that's very kind of you and yes I would like to walk Magnus again if it's not too much trouble and if it's not putting you out –

And he smiles a big smile. I'll look forward to it, he says.

Back indoors, I hang Trixie's lead on its hook. She won't mind if I walk Magnus tomorrow. She was always a good dog.