

Destroyed

By Hilary Mantel

‘When I was very small, small enough to trip every time on the raised kerbstone outside the back door, the dog Victor used to take me for a walk.’

When I was very small, small enough to trip every time on the raised kerbstone outside the back door, the dog Victor used to take me for a walk. We would proceed at caution across the yard, my hand plunged deep into the ruff of bristly fur at the back of his neck. He was an elderly dog, and the leather of his collar had worn supple and thin. My fingers curled around it, while sunlight struck stone and slate, dandelions opened in the cracks between flags, and old ladies aired themselves in doorways, nodding on kitchen chairs and smoothing their skirts over their knees. Somewhere else, in factories, fields and coal mines, England went dully on.

My mother always said that there is no such thing as a substitute. Everything is intrinsically itself, and unlike any other thing. Everything is just once, and happiness can’t be repeated. Children should be named for themselves. They shouldn’t be named after other people. I don’t agree with that, she said.

Then why did she do it, why did she break her own law? I’m trying to work it out, so meanwhile I have a different story, about some dogs, which perhaps relates to it. If I offer some evidence, will you be the judge?

My mother held her strong views, there’s no doubt, because she herself was named after her cousin Clara, who died in an accident. If Clara had lived she would have been 107 now. It wasn’t anything in her character that made my mother angry about the substitution, because Clara was not known to have had any character. No, what upset her was the way the name was pronounced

by the people in our village. Cl-air-airra: it came sticky and prolonged out of their mouths, like an extruded rope of glue.

In those days we were all cousins and aunts and great-aunts who lived in rows of houses. We went in and out of each others' doors the whole time. My mother said that in the civilized world people would knock, but though she made this observation over and over, people just gave her a glassy-eyed stare and went on the way they always had. There was a great disjunction between the effect she thought she had on the world, and the effect she actually achieved. I only thought this later. When I was seven I thought she was Sun and Moon. That she was like God, everywhere and always. That she was reading your thoughts, when you were still a poor reader yourself, because you were only up to *Far & Wide Readers, Green Book III*.

Next door to us in the row lived my aunt Pauline. She was really my cousin, but I called her aunt because of her age. All the relationships were mixed up, and you don't need to know about them; only that the dog Victor lived with Pauline, and mostly under her kitchen table. He ate a meat pie every day, which Pauline bought him specially, walking up the street to buy it. He ate fruit, anything he could get. My mother said dogs should have proper food, in tins.

Victor had died by the time I was seven. I don't remember the day of his death, just a dull sense of cataclysm. Pauline was a widow. I thought she always had been.

When I was seven I was given a watch, but for my eighth birthday I had a puppy. When the idea of getting a dog was first proposed, my mother said that she wanted a Pekinese.

People gave her the look that they gave her when she suggested that civilized people would knock at the door. The idea of anyone in our village owning a Pekinese was simply preposterous; I knew this already. The inhabitants would have plucked and roasted it.

I said, 'It's my birthday, and I would like a dog like Victor.'

She said, 'Victor was just a mongrel.'

'Then I'll have just a mongrel,' I said.

I thought, you see, that a mongrel was a breed. Aunt Pauline had once told me, 'Mongrels are very faithful.'

I liked the idea of fidelity. Though I had no idea what it implied.

Amongrel, after all, was the cheap option. When the morning of my birthday came I suppose I felt excitement, I don't know. A young boy fetched the puppy from Godber's Farm. It stood blinking and shivering on the rug before the fire. Its tiny legs were like chicken bones. I am a winter-born person and there was frost on the roads that day. The puppy was white, like Victor, and had a curly tail like Victor, and a brown saddle on his back which made him look useful and domestic. I put my hand into the fur at the back of his neck and I judged that one day it would be long enough to hang on to.

The boy from Godber's Farm was in the kitchen, talking to my stepfather, who I was told to call Dad these days. I heard the boy say it was a right shame, but I

didn't listen to find out what the shame was. The boy went out, my stepfather with him. They were chatting as if they were familiar.

I didn't understand in those days how people knew each other. They'd say, you know *her*, *her* who married *him*. *Constant* was *her* name before she married him, or, *her* name was *Reilly*. There was a time when I didn't understand how names got changed, or how anything happened, really. When somebody went out of the door I always wondered who or what they'd come back as, and whether they'd come back at all. I don't mean to make me sound simple, my infant self. I could pick out reasons for everything I did. I thought it was other people who were the sport of fortune, and the children of whim. One day about a year back, my father had gone out of the front door, looking so happy that I thought he was off to the corner for twenty cigarettes. If he had luggage, I didn't notice it. An hour had scarcely passed when the back door flew open and another man dumped a case down. He occupied a bed and tried to thief a name.

So, when my stepfather had gone out, I found myself alone in our front room, before the slumbering and low-burning fire; and I started talking to the puppy Victor. I had read manuals of dog training in preparation for his arrival. They said that dogs liked a low, calm, soothing tone, but they didn't suggest what to say in it. He didn't look as if he had many interests yet so I told him about the things that interested me. I squatted on the floor next to him, so my great size wouldn't intimidate him. I looked into his face. Know my face, I prayed. After a certain amount of boredom from me, Victor fell to the floor as if his legs had been snapped, and slept like the dead. I sat down beside him to watch him. I had a book open on my knees but I didn't read it. I watched him, and I had never been so still. I knew that fidgeting was a vice, and I had tried to combat

it, but I did not know stillness like that was in me, or calm like in the half-hour I first watched Victor.

When my stepfather came back he appeared to be himself, and no other; you could say that at least. He had a worried frown on his face, and something under his overcoat. A foxy muzzle poked out, noisily snuffling the air. 'This is Mike,' my stepfather said. 'He was going to be destroyed.' He put the new puppy on the ground. It was a bouncing skewbald made of rubber. It ran to the fire. It ran to Victor and sniffed him. It raced in a circle and bit chunks out of the air. Its tongue panted. It jumped on Victor and began to pulverize him.

Mike – let it be understood – was not an extra present for me. Victor was my dog and my responsibility. Mike was the *other* dog: he was everyone's, and no one's responsibility. Victor, as it proved, was of sedate, genteel character. When he was first put on his lead, he walked daintily, at heel, as if he had been trained in a former life. But when the lead was first clipped on to Mike's collar, he panicked. He ran to the end of it and yelped and spun into the air, and hurtled out into space, and turned head over heels. Then he flopped down on his side, and thrashed around as if he were in danger of a heart attack. I fumbled at his collar, desperate to set him free; his eye rolled, the fur of his throat was damp.

Try him again, when he's a bit older, my mother suggested.

Everybody said that it was nice that Victor had got his brother with him, that they would be faithful to each other, etc. I didn't think so, but what I didn't think I kept to myself.

The puppies had a pretty good life, except at night when the ghosts that lived in our house came out of the stone-floored pantry, and down from the big cupboard to the left of the chimney breast. Depend upon it, they were not dripping or ladies or genteel; they were nothing like the ghost that drowned

Clara would have been, her sodden blouse frilled to the neck. These were ghosts with filed teeth. You couldn't see them, but you could sense their presence when you saw the dogs' bristling necks, and saw the shudders run down their backbones. The ruff on Victor's neck was growing long now. Despite everything my mother had vowed, the dogs did not get food out of tins. They got scraps of anything that was going. Substitutions were constantly made, in our house. Though it was said that no one thing was like any other.

'Try the dog on his lead again,' my mother said. If a person said, 'the dog', you knew Mike was the dog meant. Victor sat in the corner. He did not impose his presence. His brown eyes blinked.

I tried the dog on his lead again. He bolted across the room, taking me with him. I borrowed a book from the public library, *101 Hints on Dog Care*. Mike took it in the night and chewed it up, all but the last four hints. Mike would pull you in a hedge, he would pull you in a canal, he would pull you in a boating lake so you drowned like cousin Clara, when her careless beau tipped her out of the rowing boat. When I was nine I used to think quite a lot about Clara, her straw hat skimming among the lily pads.

It was when my brother P. G. Pig was born that my mother broke her own rule. I heard the cousins and aunts talking in lowered voices about the choice of name. They didn't take my views into account – no doubt they thought I'd recommend, Oh, call him Victor. Robert was mooted but my mother said Bob she could not abide. All those names were at first to be ruled out, that people naturally make into something else. But this left too few to draw on. At last my mother made up her mind on Peter, both syllables to be rigidly enforced. How did she think she would enforce them when he was a schoolboy, when he went to the football field, when he grew up to be a weaver or a soldier in a khaki blouson? I asked myself these things. And, mentally, I shrugged. I saw

myself in my mind. 'Just asking?!!' I said. My fingers were spread and my eyes were round.

But there was something else about the baby's name, something that was going to be hidden. By listening at doors, by pasting myself against the wall and listening at doors, I found it was this: that the baby was to be given a second name, and it was to be George, which was the name of my aunt Pauline's dead husband. Oh, had Pauline a husband, I said to myself. I thought widow, like mongrel, was a category of its own.

Peter George, I said to myself, P.G., PG, PIG. He would have a name, and it would not be Peter, nor would it be Pete. But why so hushed? Why the averted shoulders and the voices dropped? *Because Pauline was not to be told.* It was going to be too much for her altogether, it would send her into a fit of the hysterics if she found out. It was my own mother's personal tribute to the long-destroyed George, who to my knowledge she had not mentioned before: a tribute, to pay which she was prepared to throw over one of her most characteristic notions. So strong, she said, were her feelings in the matter.

But wait. Wait a minute. Let logic peep in at the window here. This was Pauline, was it not? Aunt Pauline who lived next door? It was Pauline, who in three weeks' time would attend the christening? As Catholics we christen early, being very aware of the devil. I pictured the awful word 'George' weighting the priest's tongue, making him clutch his upper chest, reducing him to groans until it rolled out, crashing on the flags and processing down the aisle: and Pauline's arms flung up, the word 'Aa . . . gh!' flashing from her gaping mouth as she was mown down. What an awful death, I said to myself. Smirking, I said, what a destruction.

In the event, Pauline found out about the naming in very good time. My mother said – and thunder was on her brow – ‘They told her in the butcher’s. And she’d only gone in, bless her, for her little bit of a slice of –’

I left her presence. In the kitchen, Victor was sitting in the corner, curling up an edge of liver-coloured lip. I wondered if something had provoked him. A ghost come out early? Perhaps, I thought, it’s George.

Pauline was next door as usual, going about her tasks in her own kitchen. You could hear her through the thin wall; the metal colander knocking against the enamel sink, the squeak of chair legs across the linoleum. In the days following she showed no sign of hysterical grief, or even nostalgia. My mother watched her closely. ‘They never should have told her,’ my mother said. ‘A shock such as that could do lasting harm.’ For some reason, she looked disappointed.

I didn’t know what it was about, and I don’t now, and I doubt if I want to. You can say ‘how strong are my feelings’, but be smiling all the while; and pay back obscurely for some obscure injury inflicted, maybe before I was born. It blights my life, trying to fill these gaps: I’m glad if I can persuade other people to do it for me. As far as I could see then it was just some tactic one person was trying on another person and it was the reason I didn’t like to play cat’s cradle, patience, cutting out with scissors or any indoor games at all. Winter or not, I played outside with Victor and Mike.

It was spring when P. G. Pig was born. I went out into the field at the back, to get away from the screaming and puking and baby talk. Victor sat quivering at my heel. Mike raced in insane circles among the daisies. I pushed back my non-existent cowboy hat. I scratched my head like an old-timer and said, ‘Loco.’

My brother was still a toddler when Victor's character took a turn for the worse. Always timid, he now became morose, and took to snapping. One day when I came to put on his lead he sprang into the air and nipped me on the cheek. Believing myself an incipient beauty and afraid of facial scarring, I washed the bite then rubbed raw Dettol on it. What resulted was worse than the bite and I rehearsed to the air the sentence 'Hurts like hell.' I tried not to tell my mother but she smelled the Dettol. Later he chased P. G. Pig, trying to get him on the calf. P. G. marched to the German goose-step. So, he escaped by inches, or even less. I plucked a ravelled thread of his towelling suit from between Victor's teeth.

Victor didn't attack grown people. He backed off from them. 'It's just the children he goes for,' my mother said. 'I find it very perplexing.'

So did I. I wondered why he included me with the children. If he could see into my heart, I thought, he would know I don't qualify.

By this time we had a new baby in the house. Victor was not to be trusted and my mother said a sorting-out was overdue. He went away under my stepfather's overcoat, wrapped tight, struggling. We said goodbye to him. He was pinioned while we patted his head. He growled at us, and the growl turned to a snarl, and he was hurried out of the front door, and away down the street. My mother said that she and my father had found a new home for him, with an elderly couple without children. How sad! I pictured them, their homely grieving faces softening at the sight of the white dog with his useful brown saddle. He would be a substitute child for them. Would they dip their old fingers into the ruff at his neck, and hold on tight?

It was strange, what I chose to believe in those days. P. G. Pig knew better. Sitting in the corner, he took a sideways swipe at his tower of blue bricks. 'Destroyed,' he said.

About a year after that, we moved to a new town. My surname was changed officially. Pig and the younger baby had the new name already, there was no need for them to change. My mother said that generally, the gossip and malice had got out of hand, and there were always those who were ready to do you a bad turn if they could contrive it. Pauline and the other aunts and cousins came to visit. But not too often. My mother said, we don't want *that* circus starting up again.

So the years began in which I pretended to be someone else's daughter. The word 'daughter' is long, pale, mournful; its hand is to its cheek. The word 'rueful' goes with 'daughter'. Sometimes I thought of Victor and I was rueful. I sat in my room with compass and square-ruled book, and bisected angles, while outside the children shrieked, frolicking with Mike. In truth I blamed Mike for alienating Victor's affections, but there is a limit to how much you can blame a dog.

With the move to the new house, a change had overtaken Mike, similar in magnitude though not in style to the one that had overtaken his brother x years before. I call it x years because I was beginning to lose track of that part of my life, and in the case of numbers it is allowable to make a substitution. I remembered the facts of things pretty well, but I had forgotten certain feelings, like how I felt on the day Victor arrived from Godber's Farm, and how I felt on the day he was taken away to his new home. I remembered his straitjacketed snarling, which hardly diminished as he was carried out of the door. If he could have bitten me that day, he would have drawn blood.

The trouble with Mike was this: we had become middle-class, but our dog had not. We had long ago ceased trying to take him for walks on a lead. Now he

exercised himself, running away at all hours of the day and night. He could leap gates and make holes through hedges. He was seen in the vicinity of butcher's shops. Sometimes he went to the High Street and stole parcels and packets from baskets on wheels. He ate a white loaf, secretly, in the shadow of the privet. I saw that he looked dedicated and innocent as he chewed it, slice after slice, holding the dough carefully in paws that he turned inwards, as if praying.

When my mother saw the neighbours leaning over the larchlap, imparting gardening tips, she thought they were talking about Mike. Her face would become pinched. She believed he was letting the family down, betraying mongrel origins. I knew the meaning of the word now. I did not get involved in any controversy about Mike. I crouched in my room and traced the continent of South America. I stuck into my geography book a picture of Brasilia, the white shining city in the jungle. I placed my hands together and prayed, take me there. I did not believe in God so I prayed provisionally, to genies and ghosts, to dripping Clara and old dead George.

Mike was less than five years old when he began to show his age. He had lived hard, after all. One year, he could catch and snap in his jaws the windfalls our apple tree shook down. Those he did not catch as they fell, the babies would bowl for him, and he would hurtle after, tearing skidmarks in the turf as he cornered; then with a backward jerk of his neck he would toss the fruit up into the blue air, to give himself a challenge.

But a year later, he was on the blink. He couldn't catch the windfalls if they rained down on his head, and when old tennis balls were thrown for him he would trot vaguely, dutifully, away from the hue and cry, and then turn and plod back, his jaws empty. I said to my mother, I think Mike's eyes are failing. She said, I hadn't noticed.

The defect didn't seem to make him downhearted. He continued to lead his independent life; smelling his way, I supposed, through gaps in wire netting and through the open doors of vendors of fine foods and High Class Family Butchers. I thought, he could do with a guide-person really. Perhaps I could train up P. G. Pig? I tried the experiment we hadn't tried in years, clipping lead to collar. The dog lay down at my feet and whimpered. I noticed that the foxy patches of his coat had bleached out, as if he'd been in the sun and the rain too long. I unfastened the lead and wrapped it around my hand. Then I threw it at the back of the hall cupboard. I stood in the hall and practised swearing under my breath. I didn't know why.

On New Year's Day, a fortnight before my twelfth birthday, Mike went out in the morning and didn't come back. My stepfather said, 'Mike's not come in for his tea.'

I said, 'Mike's bloody blind.'

They all pretended not to have heard me. There was an edict against quarrelling anywhere near Christmas, and it was still near enough; we were lodged in the strange-menu days leading to the Feast of the Epiphany, when babies daub jelly in their hair and *The Great Escape* is on TV and no one notices what time it is. That's why we were less alarmed than we would usually have been, yawning off to bed.

But I woke up very early, and stood shivering by the window, the curtain wrapped around me, looking out over land that was imagined because there was no light: leafless, wet, warm for the time of year. If Mike were home I would feel it, I thought. He would whine and buffet the back door, and someone would hear if not me. But I didn't know. I couldn't trust that. I ran my hand through my hair and made it stand up in tufts. I crept back to bed.

I had no dreams. When I woke up it was nine o'clock. I was astonished at the leniency. My mother needs little sleep, and thinks it a moral failing in others, so usually she would have been bawling in my ear by eight, inventing tasks for me; the Christmas truce did not apply in the earlier hours of the morning. I went downstairs in my spotted pyjamas, the legs rolled up above the knee, in *a jeu d'esprit*.

'Oh, for God's sake,' my mother said. 'And what have you done with your hair?'

I said, 'Where's my dad?'

She said, 'He's gone to the police station, about Mike.'

'No,' I said. I shook my head. I rolled down my pyjama trousers to the ankle. Fuckit, I wanted to say. Why pretend I mean him? *Answer the question I put to you.*

The next day I went out calling, through the small woods that belted open fields, and along the banks of the canal. It rained part of the day, a benign and half-hearted precipitation. Everything seemed unseasonable, forward: the rotting wood of fences shimmered green. I took my redoubtable brother with me, and I kept my eye on the yellow bobble of his bobble hat. The minute he went out of sight, in undergrowth or copse, I called him, Peegie pig, Peegie pig! I felt him before I saw him, loping to my side.

I had penny chews in my pocket and I fed them to him to keep him going. 'Mike, Mike!' we called. It was Sunday, the end of an extended holiday which had added to the dislocation of Advent. We met no one on our quest. Peegie's nose began to run. After a time, when the dog didn't answer, he began to cry. He'd thought we were going to meet Mike, you see. At some place pre-arranged.

I just tugged Peegie along. It was all I could do. The word 'interloper' was rolling around my mind, and I thought what a beautiful word it was, and how well it described the dog Mike who loped and flapped his pink tongue in the open air, while Victor squatted in the house, thin like myself, and his skin leaking fear.

On the banks of the canal at last we met a man, not old, his jacket flapping and insufficient even for the mildness of the day; his hair cropped, his torn pocket drooping from his checked shirt, and his gym shoes caked in mud. Who was Mike, he wanted to know?

I told him my mother's theory, that Mike had been mowed down by a Drunken Driver. Peegie sawed his hand back and forth under his snuffling nose. The man promised he would call out for Mike, and take him if recovered to the police or the RSPCA. Beware of the police pounds, he said, for the dogs there are destroyed in twelve days.

I said, that within twelve days we would be sure to hear from them. I said, my step my step my father has been to the police: I managed the word in the end. I swear by Almighty God, the man said, that I will be calling for young Michael day and night. I felt alarmed for him. I felt sorry for his torn pocket, as if I should have been carrying needle and thread.

I walked away, and I had not gone a hundred yards before I felt there were misunderstandings that needed to be corrected. Mike is only my step-dog. Supposing I had misinformed this stranger? But if I went back to put the facts to him again, perhaps he would only forget them. He looked like a man who had forgotten almost everything. I had gone another hundred yards before it came to me that this was the very kind of stranger to whom you were warned not to speak.

I looked down at Peegie in second-hand alarm. I should have protected him. Peegie was learning to whistle that week, and now he was whistling and crying at the same time. He was whistling the tune from Laurel and Hardy, which I can't stand. I knew full well – 'full well' is one of my mother's expressions – that Mike was dead in a ditch, where he had limped or crawled away from the vehicle that had smashed him up before he saw it. All day I'd been searching, in defiance of this fact.

Oh, I'm tired, Peegie wailed. Carry me. Carry me. I looked down and knew I could not, and he knew it too, for he was such a big boy already that it could almost have been the other way around. I offered him a penny chew, and he smacked my hand away.

We came to a wall, and I hoisted him on to it. He could have hoisted me. We sat there, while the air darkened. It was four o'clock, and we had been walking and calling since early morning. I thought, I could drown Peegie Pig, and blame it on the man with the torn pocket. I could haul him across the towpath by the hood of his coat, and push him under the bright green weed; and keep pushing, a hand on his face, till the weight of his clothes pulled him under; and I saw myself, careless beau, other life, lily pad and floating hat. As far as I knew, no one had been hanged for Clara. 'What's for my tea?' Peegie said. Some words came to me, from the Shakespeare we were doing. *When the exigent is come, that now is come indeed.* The damp was making me ache, as if I were my own grandmother. I thought, nobody listens, nobody sees, nobody does any bloody fuckit thing. You go blind and savage and they carry on making Christmas trifles and frying eggs. Fuckit, I said to Peegie, experimentally. Fuckit, he repeated after me. Mike, Mike, we called, as we trod the towpath, and early night closed in on us. Peegie Pig slipped his hand into mine. We walked into the dark together, and our fused hands were cold. I said, to myself, I cannot kill him, he is fidelity itself; though it did occur to me that if he drowned, someone would be named after him. 'Come on, Peegie,' I said to

him. 'But cut out the whistling.' I stood behind him, put my cold hands into the hood of his duffel coat, and began to steer him home.

There was a lot of blame flying in the air, about where had we been, up by the canal where vagrants live and anybody. My mother had already washed Mike's dishes out, and put them to drain. As she was not much of a housewife, we knew by this sign that he was not coming back, not through our door anyway. I cried a bit then, not out of the exhaustion of the day, but sudden scorching tears that leaped out of my eyes and scoured the pattern off the wallpaper. I saw Peegie gaping at me, open-mouthed, so I was sorry I'd bothered crying at all. I just wiped my fist across my face, and got on with the next thing.

Michael Bazzett

'It was a commonplace / to enter the woods / with meat, lay it on the ground,
then / wait for what might come.'

Poetry by Michael Bazzett.