

Grampus

A blue webbing collar- twenty-two inches long bearing a simple metal tag, the name "Grampus" etched in copperplate on one side, my address on the other. As I scrunch it in my hands and bury my nose, there is still a faint smell of him, that tugs at my heart and carries me back twenty years to when he was alive.

He was my dog - not in the sense that I owned him, but that he loved me quietly and loyally through thick and thin with all his generous heart. He was a great bear of a dog with a black, shaggy coat brindled with silver and a long grey beard like a Chinese Mandarin. On his hind legs, paws on my shoulders he stood as tall as me and weighed over eight stone without a pick of fat on him.

The Breeders in charge of his rehoming, lived miles from anywhere on the Lincolnshire fens. At the time, I drove a left-hand drive Peugeot 104 of uncertain temperament, relic of my years in France and as I travelled further towards the horizon and the roads became narrower, I wondered if I would ever find them from their written instructions. The lone farmhouse eventually came into view, so, I parked up, walked across the yard and knocked on the door. As the door opened, I entered a parallel universe. Dogs littered the sofas, chairs and all available floor space. There were more in the garden. I'd never seen so many dogs in one house. The smell was overpowering. Seemingly unaware of the chaos or the smell, my hosts invited me in, and Grampus was brought to meet me. Gentle and shy, he sat beside me as I ruffled my hands through his thick coat and fell in love.

I left, with him wearing an old collar and on a string lead, he had no other possessions. He hopped onto the back seat of my car and took the three-hour journey in his stride without a murmur. I could not say the same of the first night, settling him with his new bed in the kitchen. I wished him goodnight and went up to bed. Grampus set up a weird keening, not unlike whale song that rose and fell mournfully without pause, until I could stand it no longer. Against all my principles, I gave him the run of the downstairs. After five minutes of peace it became the echo chamber of his plaintive wailing. I finally gave in and let him into my room (the only dog ever to have this honour before or since!) where he chose the foot of my bed as his place and did not move.

Our first outing was a visit to the vet. Grampus picked up the antiseptic smell from about twenty yards away, flared his nostrils, rolled his eyes and sat down firmly. There ensued an undignified tug of war to get him inside. Clearly terrified, he tried to squeeze all of his great bulk onto my lap in the waiting room, and I was thankful that the shiny linoleum allowed me to slide him into the consulting room without too much trouble. He tolerated his checkup and I said, "The Breeders think he's four, what do you think?"

"I think that's about right, but he could be older. Let's face it; no-one puts their real age on a dating site." The vet replied.

Grampus and I became inseparable. He came to work with me every day and lay at the door of whichever treatment room I was working in for the next thirteen years. My patients still talk about him.

Some dogs are extra special, and Grampus was one of these.