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Cousin Alfie

By Gary James

I was on my way over to my mother's house the other day – it was Monday, and Monday means my favourite chicken Kiev for tea – when I received an intriguing text message. It said:

TEA WILL BE LATE.
COUSIN ALFIE HAS
COME TO STAY.

My immediate reaction was one of frothing excitement. Cousin Alfie was home!

I didn't even know I had a cousin Alfie so I let my imagination run wild. I bet he was an explorer or something. Perhaps we had never discussed him because he had been missing for years in the lower reaches of the Um Bongo, where he had been gathering deadly insects and irritating plants for proper identification.

Alfie would be tall and mysterious and partly obscured by a moustache of such splendid arrangement as to draw appreciative murmurs from complete strangers in railway carriages. His room at my mother's house would be stuffed with all sorts of wondrously exotic junk. There would be a heavy trunk made of teak, a spear, a few fearsome masks no doubt wrestled from

terrifying cannibals, a stuffed crocodile, an elephant's tusk, and a gun with a barrel the shape of an enormous trumpet. He would be a little bit frightening too, possibly even slightly mad from exposure to tropical diseases and years of licking poisonous frogs.

I couldn't wait to meet him. I could just see my mother breaking out the Good Biscuits over that.

My mother and Alfie were waiting for me at the gate. All at once I remembered who Alfie was, and I gave a small groan of dismay. Alfie, you see, isn't a person at all. He most certainly isn't my cousin either. He is in fact a dog.

"I didn't even know I had a cousin Alfie so I let my imagination run wild. I bet he was an explorer or something."

I don't know what it is about some older women and those dreadful little dogs they have. I can't decide if they grow old and putrid together or whether she simply wakes up one morning with an overwhelming urge to own the canine equivalent of an old rug pulled out of a skip. You can almost imagine her at the pet shop:

"I'm looking for a dog."

"Certainly, madam. How about a beautiful golden retriever? Very playful, very loyal, good with kids and hardly ever barks."

"No, no, that won't do. I'm looking for a dog that looks like a cross between Jack Nicholson and a burst rugby ball. One that walks like a middle-aged penguin trying to cross the deck of a ship in heavy seas. I want something that will snap at friendly children and turn the colour of a nicotine stain around its back end, a dog so irredeemably foul and manky that it sheds great greasy clumps of smelly hair into the hands of anyone stupid enough to stroke it. Have you got anything like that?"

And he most certainly will. You see it on every street, spindly little old ladies dragging dogs that look like small compost heaps with crooked yellow teeth. These dogs seem to lurch along with that painful, hip-swinging effort of the extremely arthritic, right until the moment when your trouser leg brushes against fur, and all of a sudden it is transformed into a snarling,

snorting, dervish, or some kind of possessed mop-head. I have lost count of the number of unprovoked attacks I have suffered at the hands of these gremlins. They take savage delight from clamping themselves to the hem of your new jeans and fixing you with their hot, gleeful little eyes.

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“Just watch this,” those eyes seem to say. “By the time I get through with these jeans they might just be fit to wash the windows with, and there’s not a thing you can do about it because I’m the only companion of that poor, frail old lady over there...” At which point they launch into an impossible frenzy of activity that leaves you standing there with legs like Robinson Crusoe and a mildly apologetic old lady next to you saying, “Oh dear, he’s never done that before.”

The dog my mother likes to refer to as cousin Alfie belongs to my sister. In fairness to the dog, it is still some years shy of turning into a walking cowpat, though it is nevertheless a Yorkshire terrier and occasionally given to moods of, shall we say, motiveless hostility. I’m afraid the writing is on the wall for Alfie, as it must be for my mother. In fact I could now see that in looking after Alfie for a few days my mother was in fact enjoying a sort of test drive.

“Keep him for a few days,” my sister would have said. “Take him down to the shops and see if he’ll

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eat some toddler’s crisps or lick a baby’s face until it screams.”

At the garden gate I bent down and gave Alfie’s head a dutiful ruffle. I detected a curious whiff of garlic on the dog’s breath, a point I raised with my mother.

“He fancied your chicken Kiev,” she confided. “I’ve done you a nice corn beef hash instead.”

I was crestfallen. I don’t ask much from life, only that I don’t get trapped in a lift with Richard Madeley and that I never again have to eat corn beef hash. “I hate corn beef hash,” I muttered.

“Really?” she said brightly and with absolutely no interest. “I thought that was your father. Well hurry up, it’s corn beef hash for tea.” We went through the gate, Alfie trailing behind us like some plotting outcast. “You look nice, dear. Are those new jeans?”

I glanced back at Alfie. I swear I saw a crafty little smile touch his face.



ABOUT GARY JAMES Gary James lives in Northern England, where he spends too long getting lost in the Pennine hills and being attacked by otherwise docile farm animals. He occasionally writes humorous travel articles, most of which feature him getting lost and being attacked by otherwise docile farm animals. He is 39 and should know better. He also really does like little old ladies and their small dogs.

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