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## The dog that barked in the night

Another strange story from Mike Roden

It was a few days before Christmas last year that I found myself in front of our block of flats in dressing gown and slippers. It was just after six in the morning, the sky was still dark, and it was very quiet and very cold. Hardly a sound. The dog that had been barking so furiously had gone silent the moment I got outside.


I'd been sure it was Benny, Ella's scruffy little terrier. He sounded in real distress. I went towards the door of her ground floor flat. And then I heard Ella's voice. "Is someone there?"

I tried the door and found it was unlocked. I pushed it open and stared into the darkness, "Ella, are you there?"

Ella's in her late eighties, and the years have rewarded her with a well-honed line in sarcasm. "Who else is going to be lying on my hall floor? Put a light on!"

She was at the foot of the stairs, half on her side, glaring up at me. "I can't move my leg. Well, I can but..." She winced as she tried to move her right leg. "Might be broken." She pushed me away. "No, don't touch it. Just call an ambulance."

I phoned 999 and tried to be efficient, but Ella kept butting in and putting me right on the details. She'd woken up, thought it was the middle of the night, and remembered she'd left the door on the latch. She tripped on the loose carpet at the foot of the stairs, and thought she might have knocked herself out for a moment. Anyway that was enough and the



quick arrival of the paramedics was promised.

"Why didn't you put a light on?" I asked.

"Why don't you go and make a cup of tea?" she retorted.

"Yes, but where's Benny?"

"What?" Then there was a sudden rap on the door, and a cheerful paramedic looked in. "What we got here, then?"

"You were quick," said Ella.

"I was on my way back from somewhere. Ambulance won't be long."

He took a few details, had a cursory look at the offending leg, and then the ambulance arrived. There was general agreement that her leg wasn't broken, but the doctors should take a look at her. As they were moving her to the ambulance Ella said, "Why were you wandering around at this time of the morning?"

"I heard Benny, of course – barking fit to bust. Where on earth is he?"

"You never heard Benny!" she said, "Didn't you know? He's gone." She sighed, "Two days ago, it was. Course I miss him..." She became brisk. "Anyway, you'll let Lizzie know what's happened will you? Her number's in my book."

I managed to say, "Yes, I'll phone her now," and in a sort of daze watched the ambulance disappear past Montevetro.

Once she gathered that her mother wasn't seriously hurt, Lizzie was predictably phlegmatic. "I'll get over

to the hospital quick as I can. It's a good job you found her so quick."

I said slowly, "Well you see, I heard a dog barking – I thought it was Benny. I've been away a few days. Only got back last night. I didn't know he'd died. That must have been really upsetting for her."

There was a long pause at the other end of the line. "What time was all this?"

"I suppose I woke up about twenty to six."

Very quietly, Lizzie said, "Benny's not dead, you know. He's standing by me now wagging his tail. He needs his walks and right now – whatever she says - it's too cold for Mum to take him out. So he's staying here at the moment. If she's OK, he'll go back home after Christmas."

Again she paused. "You see, it was round about half past five he started barking. We couldn't calm him down – he just wouldn't stop. Then suddenly, he shook himself, shut up, went back to his bed in the corner, and off to sleep. That would have been at about..."

"Five past six," I interrupted, "That's when I found her."

If we'd been in the same room, I suppose we'd have been staring at each other in awed speculation.

"You know I live in Tooting?" said Lizzie at last.

"Oh yes," I said, "I do know that."

"Mum often says that if something can't be explained, it's better to leave it be," said Lizzie.

"She's probably right." As I shut Ella's front door firmly behind me, for a moment I wondered if I'd heard a short, sharp bark from inside. "That's OK Benny," I said, "Any time."

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