

Dodie's Gift

by Vanessa Gebbie

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There is a little blood on the sand, in a hollow in the dunes. There is semen too, although it is hidden in the shadows where sand and grass have been churned. The blood is clear, scarlet, bright; both its colour and its brightness out of place in the soft grey-green and pale straw colours here. It will fade soon, darken until it's almost black, and it will be lost when a herring gull chooses this place to bring the head of a newly dead catfish. He will drop it, stand over it, stabbing at it with his yellow hooked beak, parting skin from muscle, lip from cheek, eye from socket, until all that is left is a mess of reddened bone and one thin sliver of catfish skin with a feeler still attached.

There are tracks leading in different directions. One set, Dodie's, scramble up the side of the dune, the sand puddled and broken where she tried to claw her way out of the hollow, the top slipping further away with every step. The marram grasses are crushed where she slid down towards the field. The barley stubble is also crushed, over, over, over, where Dodie ran crying to the General Stores.

The other footmarks are The Philosopher's, weighted, regular, the

sand only disturbed and uneven in one spot at the base of the slope where he stood to adjust his clothing before striding away towards the caravan site.

Who is Dodie? Just this: a woman in her forties who works at the Stores. Invisible. She wears a blue nylon overall, and if it is hot she is uncomfortable by the end of the day. Maybe she smells of onions. She sleeps above the Stores in a small room that overlooks the yard. She's worked here as long as the surfers and body boarders who stay at the caravan site can remember. If you find her at the Tinnars Arms in the evening, you'll see she doesn't drink much, makes half a cider last all evening, but Bill at the Tinnars doesn't mind. She's a fixture who has a place here, whereas in a city she would drown.

It is difficult to give a name to what makes Dodie different. There is no lack of intelligence, with her appetite for reading of all sorts, crosswords, number puzzles. But it is as though a membrane separates Dodie from the world. As though she was born covered in a cowl which was never quite stripped away. She looks at you, puzzled, trying to work you out, trying to read you, know you.

What she does know is here, in the Stores. She knows the pastel and black plastic tops of deodorants and the gold, white and green of hairsprays. She knows the sugary smell of Lux soap, the deeper elusive scent of Imperial Leather. She knows the jolly primary colours of perfect cereal bowls on the packets of own brand and Kellogg's. She knows how sticky soap powder feels if it spills out of the box.

Dodie reads everything. Everything that comes in to the Stores in twine-tied bundles brought by the paper van. Newspapers. Women's magazines, white smiles on the cover, *How to cook for six on a shoe-string*, or *Sex after the menopause? It's great!* Men's magazines with bottoms and breasts pushing out on the front cover. Children's comics. Puzzle books. She uses the photocopier in the back to copy the puzzles. Fishing periodicals. Surfing magazines. Music magazines. The special stamp-collecting issue that comes in for Mr. Fisher next to the Church Hall. She takes them up to her room and reads them all, careful not to mark them, then pushes them under the mattress to flatten them and puts them on the shelves the next day.

Who is The Philosopher? Just this: a man in late middle age, like a million others, greying, spreading, unremarkable. Invisible too. He

came into the General Stores towards the end of a day in mid-September, and stood by the bread racks. He put one hand up to a Mother's Pride plastic wrapper, and just stood there, head bowed, his rucksack making it difficult for other shoppers to pass easily. Dodie waited for a while before coming out from behind the counter.

“What are you doing?” she said, glancing at his face, then away.

The man looked up at the bread, then at her. “I'm thinking,” he said. “I'm thinking about bread.”

“OK, but could you think over there?”

The man did not smile, although his eyes narrowed a little and it could have been a smile coming. Dodie had read that smiles start with the eyes. But if she had looked closer, there were no laughter lines. He took a loaf of bread and moved to the till. Dodie took his money without a word. From then on he was, to her at any rate, The Philosopher.

They know little about each other after a few days of him appearing in the Stores, standing there, thinking. He chooses his times. Chooses times when the Stores isn't too busy, so he can stand and think. Because he knows it intrigues her.

She has no idea who he is. Just a man, slightly overweight, staying on the caravan site (she asked), cheap deal, last minute. Caravan sleeping four, but he's only one. He goes for long walks, alone. She's seen him in The Tinnerns, drinking beer out of a bottle like a teenager. She asked his name "Mr - Can't remember," someone said.

She imagines him shaving in the morning in pyjama bottoms, peering into a speckled mirror that spots his face. He has a mouth that might have turned up once, now it is pinched. His hair is faded, was reddish. Thinning. His eyebrows are a straggle of too-long hairs. He looks wild, energetic. But that may be just illusion.

Now Dodie's thinking too. She's thinking she's never met anyone like this. He stands there in the Stores at different times, day after day, where she can see him, but she's sure he hasn't stood there deliberately. By the bread one day, the tinned food, the next. He sat on the floor once with his head in hands. He is so deep, she thinks. So lost in thought. He was thinking about bread that first time. *Bread*. What about bread? A fundamental of life? Biblical? What, Mother's Pride? Then *tinned food*? Thinking about tinned food? Time, that must be it, with tinned food. Preserving time. Keeping things unspoiled, but in the dark where you can't see them, and they can't see you. Baked beans, own brand cheaper

than Heinz. Tomatoes, dented tins cut price. It must all mean something.

Dodie thinks this must have been coming for a long time. She hasn't exactly been waiting for it, more it has been waiting to happen. She knows she's clever, because they told her, years ago at school, she won prizes. Books, with stickers in. Bookmarks. A painted plate.

The Philosopher has been coming for a long, long time. It's been in her horoscope. Over and over she's read it: *Virgo: With the moon in Mercury, you're going through a difficult time in your love life. But your time will come. Your even temperament will please someone who needs you.*

Dodie the *Virgo*. She knows, because she's read it so many times: *Only 5% of females are still virgins at the age of forty-five.*

She's forty-five before Christmas.

Today The Philosopher stands by the washing powders, fabric conditioner and Fairy Liquid. It's nearly closing time, and Dodie needs to mark some unsold goods with today's sell-by date at half price. She needs to walk past him to collect two Mother's Prides and some malt loaf, some wedges of Farmer's Own Choice cheese and a four-pack of

cherry yogurt. He says nothing as she passes him. But when she comes back, he's blocking the aisle.

"Excuse me," she says.

He says nothing but moves back. Then, when Dodie is touching him with her arms, holding the goods close to her breasts, because he has not moved quite far enough, he says, his voice so close to her ear that she jumps,

"I'm still thinking."

"What about?"

"Guess."

Dodie looks round, sees a Fairy Liquid bottle. "Recycling?" she says, "Reincarnation?"

The Philosopher smiles, kind of. "How clever," he says. "We are on the same wavelength."

"Are we?" says Dodie, nonplussed, putting half-price stickers on the malt loaf. The Philosopher puts a hand on the loaf, catching two of her fingers under his. She jumps again. His breath smells sweet-heavy.

"I'll have this," he says. "And that," he nods his head at the bread

and cheese, “when you’ve finished.” He waits.

Dodie adds the prices up wrong. Blushes.

“When you’ve finished...”

“Sorry,”

“...we could talk about thinking. At the pub.”

“Sorry?”

“Well?”

She was right. It was coming. He was always coming, and she should have been ready. He’d seen something in her that she hasn’t met herself yet, and she didn’t *see* it. *Your time will come. Your even temperament...*

“Yes please.” Dodie says. And knowing she smells of onions, “Half an hour?”

And Dodie starts to make herself ready. Not just herself, although this is unconscious. Her room is as tired as she is. The bed slumps; what was bright pink candlewick is faded, uneven, the fringe pulled, trailing on the rug. There is a framed print above the bed of the sea crashing

against rocks; someone, a long time back, pencilled a boat in one corner. She tried to rub it out but it's still there, a stick man waving through the ocean at her. Dodie takes down the unlined cotton curtains and takes off the bedspread, bundles them together and puts them in the downstairs washing machine. That makes her feel better.

Later, in The Tinnerns, they sit together in Dodie's corner on sagging burgundy plush cushions. He has bought her a cider, he drinks beer from the bottle. They talk. Dodie is half listening, looking at the scratches through the varnish on the table...the number four among the scratches.

Bill calls over. "Dodie? You OK, love?"

The Philosopher answers, before she does, "She's fine." Dodie just looks up and smiles.

"Look," Dodie says, tracing the scratches with her finger. "Number four."

"It will mean something," he says "You wait."

Dodie waits, breathlessly, drinking in instances of the number four the next day. Four silver cars in a row outside the General Stores. Four stamps on a letter from New Zealand awaiting collection under the

counter of the post office shelf. Four brown moles on her left thigh. Four packets of condoms sold to the driver of the paper van.

She's picking up some apples that have fallen to the floor. A voice close to her ear, a hand on her shoulder, "So what did the number mean?" Dodie drops the apples. Four of them.

"I don't know," she breathes.

"Yes you do," he says. "You have the gift."

Dodie straightens up, the apples in her hands. "Have I?" she says, eyes bright.

So it goes on. Dodie's curtains are rehung. She cleans her room over and over, getting down on her knees to wipe the skirting board with a blue cloth. She buys herself some hair colour, first time ever. Chestnut lights, it says, and it splashes in the sink, works its way into the cracks round the plughole. Leaves her hairline looking dark, dark. She tries the lipsticks, buys a chalky pink one, *Moonflower*.

Bill at the pub keeps asking if she's OK. She smiles every time.

Four days. They've been going out for four days, and people are smiling at Dodie, not at The Philosopher, and she thinks they mind

about something. Maybe they are jealous because not everyone can think so deeply. Today, today, today and today. Four of them. He's so clever. He thinks about hedges, drainage ditches, yellow diggers, dead crows, sheep's wool and seaweed. He says there is so much to think about in this life.

Dodie breathes faster. She searches for things, finds them, throws things out for him to think about.

“What about beer mats? Darts? Chipped pint mugs? Alcopops? Boiled eggs? Coffee?”

The Philosopher smiles and pats her hand. She doesn't jump any more. “Some things are deeper than others,” he says. “I'll teach you.”

She listens looking through him, her lower *Moonflower* lip hanging loose as he thinks in streams about newspapers, printing ink and trees, the 'circle' as he calls it of capitalism (where, he says, lots of people work in a circle, or a spiral, doing things made necessary by the 'work' done by the person before, but take them all out, and the world wouldn't suffer). Sometimes he bangs the table with his fist and her cider jumps and Bill looks over and raises an eyebrow.

It's late on the fourth day. She's going for a walk with The Philosopher today. He's coming for her soon, half an hour after closing time he said, seven thirty they close. Eight he'll come. They'll walk down the lane towards the beach, and they will think as they go about bungalows, lamp posts, telegraph poles maybe. *Communication*. That's it. Tarmac, double yellow lines and crows flying high up above the bent fir trees. Wind. She'll ask him what wind is, because you can feel it, but can't see it, and that must be like God. Or is it the world turning faster and faster and faster so in the end everyone will fall over? She laughs at the thought and feels the power of it.

Dodie remakes her bed and buys herself some freesias from the bucket outside the door of the Stores. Yellow like slab cheddar. And lilac. She cuts the stems, puts them in a handleless mug painted with a boat flying the Cornish flag, and the freesias splay out on the chest of drawers, hanging in her room like aliens. She showers, using a new shower gel the girl surfers buy, which smells of lemons and limes. She puts on a flowered skirt she hasn't worn for years, a white blouse. *Moonflower*.

The lane is quiet. They pass the bungalows, and just as she knew they would they think about bungalows. About old people, zimmer

frames and holiday-makers, buckets of dead whelks. They pass the telegraph poles, wires, and she was right, they think about the buzz of conversation, and she brings in God then, about how God can differentiate between prayers and ordinary conversation. About whether whispering is a better way to communicate than shouting, about letters from New Zealand that no-one picks up, and she's sure it's a woman's writing.

They pass the barley field and think about the razored stalks, about harvest mice displaced, and she feels the sadness of it.

They walk on to the beach, the sea pounding to their left, the dunes on their right. They pass three herring gulls tearing at a dead catfish, and they think about predation, food chains, starving and feasting. The beach is empty, and it's getting cold. The sun is still up there, just.

The Philosopher has been holding her hand. His grip tightens a little and she starts to think about her room, the curtains, how the sun will come through the curtains early in the morning, the freesias. The stick man in his boat. She wants to tell The Philosopher about the stick man, because it must mean something, and he says, "Let's sit down here," pulling her towards the dunes. But Dodie doesn't want to go there. She wants to go back to her room, because her horoscope did say, *Your time*

will come. Your even temperament will please someone who needs you.

But he doesn't listen. He's not saying what he's thinking any more, and their footsteps, which had left regular tracks in the damp sand, flat flat sand right to where the waves are beating, become crossed, muddled, fast.

Dodie stumbles on the dry sand of the dunes as he pulls her up the side. "Why?" she says. "Why are we going here?" and she says something about freesias and stick men and The Philosopher says nothing, just pulls, pushes, doesn't even look at her face, pulls, pushes, pulls, pushes and hurts her.

He doesn't come in to the General Stores the next day.

At the end of that day, Dodie walks down the lane waiting for the thoughts to come. She passes the bungalows, and they are just bungalows, their windows blank. The telegraph poles carry wires that hum in the wind. The barley stalks have cut her legs. She walks along the beach, looking to see if the tide has left any footsteps. They are there, somewhere, she thinks, even though their shape has gone.

She sees a young couple walking, the girl's hair blowing over her

face like a veil, and she feels the sadness of that.

She waits for them to pass and climbs slowly up the dune, searching. The grasses are still flat, but the breeze has softened the shadows in the sand. The place is healing itself. But there, at the bottom of the hollow, a gull has had a meal, and the sand holds white bone, red bone, skin, and Dodie doesn't want to see it.

She tries to make something out of yesterday's incident that is not hopeless. She won't allow herself to name the act that happened here, and will wonder, if someone takes something you were going to give them anyway, is that stealing? She will think. In time her thoughts will become memories, and she will recall a little kindness where in fact there was little, and some meaning where there was none at all.

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Novelist, short story writer, poet, **Vanessa Gebbie** has won awards for both poetry and prose, including the Troubadour International Poetry Prize, a Bridport short story prize and a much-coveted Willesden Herald short story prize. Author of ten various books, her novel *The Coward's Tale* (Bloomsbury) was a Financial Times novel of the year, and her debut poetry pamphlet was selected by the TLS as one of the best of its year. She is commissioning and contributing editor of *Short Circuit*, *Guide to the Art of the Short Story*, editions 1 and 2 (Salt). She teaches widely.

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