

Cobbles – By Mike Leeman

Stop reading and imagine one week of no toilet going at all.

Now imagine this self imposed. Why did she do it and what drove her to it? Let's consider this not a tale of morality, more one of caution.

Maree lived in a typical terrace in a typical town, there was nothing special about the place in which she had found herself. The streets had been around for years and at times it seemed that the subsidised housing had as well. There was certainly not much of a change from the suburb's Victorian past.

For a brief period of time in the mid 20th Century there was a vibrant community that built up around the terraces and the pubs and the parks in the area. A community made up of the local factory workers and their families. People still looked back on the time as a golden era, in fact the community was banding together in it's death throes as the factories closed and the families moved out (of both the area and hope). Though the terraces cramped in together the occupants moved ever further apart.

Maree liked the anonymity about the area though, she preferred being by herself, preferred dealing with the awkward tasks that she had to cope with and preferred not having to speak, to constantly explain herself. She even felt that had somewhat of a celebrity status in the streets around, the nets of certain houses twitching as she wheeled herself past them, everyone getting the glimpse that they craved.

The coping was one of the reasons that she got the dog. Maree thought that if she had another to look after as well it would make her stronger. The dog gave her an excuse to go out as well, being a dog it was not happy enough laying on the fake sheepskin rug in front of the fire. It needed to exercise it's legs even if Maree didn't.

This particular week had been different to most. First of all there had been the party of the weekend before. Parties were a rarity but there was still the part of her brain that loved the celebration of her birthday. People had come, some from the past, from before, some from the rehab group and as ever some uninvited.

There had been a row, a now forgotten argument – Maree was often used to winning them these days and had the uncanny ability to cause the person on the end of her lashing tongue to storm off (unable to do so herself she gained more satisfaction from seeing them quickly turn tail and waddle away in disgust).

This time however the narrowness of her hallway constricted the huff walk and so the subject of her latest argument sidestepped into the downstairs bathroom and swung at the toilet pan with a large, laced boot.

The silence held for a moment before a splitting was heard. Maree had heard the sound before, bones she thought were much like porcelain. The gush of water followed the crack, widening the wound and allowing all of the effluence to seep onto the white and black bathroom lino. The owner of the booted foot made a swift exit only stopping to pick up the bottle of wine that they had brought. Good, though Maree, I never was a fan of the sweet German stuff, never a fan of wine full stop. She was a cider girl, and though it had got her into trouble before she enjoyed the slightly chemical taste and most importantly the price.

The party soon finished and in the early hours Maree only partially mopped the floor, one of the advantages of having wheels instead of legs was that her socks never got wet.

She tied up the cistern with an old pair of tights that had sat unused for a long time now, more from the fact she was never keen on the thicker denier than having anything to put them on (after all she could always do a bank raid, she had her getaway car always attached). Initially Maree wanted to get this tying done so that she would not unconsciously flush the toilet at any point as she usually used the handle as an aid when shifting and shuffling herself into the bath. As soon as she had completed the makeshift operation though an idea stole into her head. If she could not use her own toilet then she would not use a toilet at all until she had it fixed. This thought gave her a small amount of excitement, the thought of going against nature had always intrigued her. She used to love holding her breath when ducking her head underwater (be it in the pool, in the sea or simply washing her hair). Maree would wait until her vision started to turn red and flashes of gunshot type light bore into her retina, she would then quickly raise her head out of the water and draw in a deep breath mixing the oxygen with her laughter. Whilst she would never be a champion free-diver but she did improve her timing.

This new idea was essentially the same. One was about keeping water from getting in, the other about stopping it getting out.

The next day she found that the dog had worms. The first few times she saw it pulling itself across the floor, it's front legs pulling while it's arse and back legs dragged behind it, Maree laughed and was secretly hoping that she had bought a dog that knew circus tricks.

However after seeing the pitiful look and scratching that the dog continued to do (particularly after going for his toilet) she reluctantly took him to the vet and got the diagnosis as well as some drops to put in his food. It seems her circus dog was of the same ilk as that of two she had seen as a child. Convinced and impressed at the fact one dog was balancing on top of the other Maree ran home to tell her mother that there were some dogs escaped from a circus and could she keep them.

Much to Maree's disappointment, like the Vet, her mum soon put her right.

We have all had experiences of seeing adult happenings as a child and making fools of ourselves. I think mainly we manage to forget these and use them as experiences which teach us to grow and gradually erode our simple view of the world. To some people though these memories scar and keep recurring. It seems Maree was one of these people that could not just let go.

One of the side effects of the dog's worming drops was an incessant need to go to the toilet at all times of day, and night. That Sunday was once such time. Maree did not mind too much as her insomnia had taken hold again. For the fifth time that year she had given up smoking, each time a small moral victory followed by a larger moral loss. Maree did not have many of the mood swings associated with the sudden lack of nicotine (she always went cold turkey, hating the thought of spending money on patches, effectively paying for smokes without getting their pleasure). Her view of the world was such that she could not get too much grumpier with it, however she did find sleep a problem. The early hours were the worst when the niggles and doubts of the day escalated to a volume where they would dance around her brain and knock on the side of her head until a migraine was close and a panic attack even closer.

So these were the times when Maree and the dog would go for a walk, a clearing of the head for her and a clearing of the bowels for the dog.

Who was taking who for a walk? Or rather in her case a wheel. Something that most dog owners will ask themselves at some point in their lives. It is said that a dog often reflects it's owner and vice-versa. Perhaps the opposite is true on the fitness side. You see celebrities with mutli-hour workout figures, diets and toning carrying around sickly little rat-like creatures who look as though they would collapse under their own weight if not stuck into a carry case. You also have large bellied, beer swilling, chip eating chaps with their muscular and primed hunting and fighting dogs. Of course there is also the correlation between old people and greyhounds.

The dog seemed to instinctively know the streets better than Maree did. He would pull ahead on his lead straining at his neck and straining on the wheelchair pipe-work on which she had tied it. Maree would spin her wheels quicker than she thought possible. Pulling hard on one wheel when the approached the turning into a side street or more often on both if a collision course with some person, lamppost or bin bag.

That week the dog had been quicker than usual, desperate to get to the park where he had been trained to do his toilet. Maree, conscious of the same twitching curtains eager to get on the phone to complain about the various dog messes that dotted the streets like bodies scattered after a battle, had made sure that the dog would always wait until the park.

This quickness coupled with a real need to get to the park had meant that this Sunday morning in the dark streets after even the clubbers had gone home the dog explored a new route, one that Maree had never been down.

She should have stopped after the first accident. A narrow cut through was bracketed by two bollards. Probably put there to stop the gangs of kids on their BMX bikes haring through path and leaving destruction in their wake. The dog snaked through and off he went giving Maree not a moment to think as she followed, less snake more juggernaut. There must have been millimetres to spare but the chair went through, turning to view her triumph Maree caught her watch on the passing bollard and crack, it was always a crack or a splinter with her, always preceding something bad. The face was broken and the watch stopped dead. The second hand shivered slightly and then decided going on was not worth it. Useless to her as a time piece it would forever stand as a memorial to that night stuck at 3.04am.

The dog, having no need of time, carried on regardless and without time for mourning Maree thrust forward and around the corner.

The cobbled street lay out in front of her like the Red Sea in front of Moses, there would be no heavenly intervention for Maree though, no parting of the stones to show fresh smooth tarmac which she would glide across to salvation.

Potholes were not too much of a problem, even kerbs were manageable these days. Cobbles never were nice but with her bladder there seemed an impossibility. Maree had been a week so far (a plumber booked in for the following Monday) and though there had been close calls she found that deep breathing and a Jacob's Cream Cracker slowed her desperation. The thought of the constant bumping up and down filled her with a fear that she had not felt in a long time.

The dog sensed this change in her and paused. Maree looked down at him and realised that his need also was desperate and there would be not much holding in for him. In a rare moment of compassion she urged on the dog and gripped tighter to the wheels. As the dog picked his way gingerly across the cobbles Maree tried to picture deserts and barren wastelands, however her mind did the trick that minds like to play at times like these and showed her a rich oasis in the desert, across the wasteland a pipe the dripped water from the rivets that held it together.

Maree was sweating, she hoped that this would draw the excess water from her and out through her pores. She started to really feel the bumps though, as the wheelchair crept forward each time it dropped into the cement grouting a shudder ran through her body, up into her teeth and seemed to run through her fillings which tried to force open her clenched mouth.

The dog kept looking around in concern both for itself and for Maree. She had stopped seeing it's worried glances now. The familiar red was forming on the horizon of her eyes and encroaching it's way inwards, slowly flooding her vision – flooding, again more aqueous symbols and words tormenting her, seeming to fly from her brain to consistently poke her in the bladder area.

Three quarters of the way there and Maree started to do something that she had not done in a long, long time. Certainly not since before the accident. She started to pray. Not to God or even a god. More to herself and her body, squeezing every element of hope from her pores.

This focus on her body only intensified the fire that was raging across herself, a new flame licking up to and smouldering her resolve with every stone she crashed over.

The story could go on, tell you in every expanding and more ridiculous similes and metaphors but I think you get the picture. I would not liked to have taken such a journey but then I am not as stubborn as she seems to be, hopefully you are not too. If you do have unrelenting ways that need to be changed this last paragraph is for you.

Finally the end of the street was in sight and the park beyond that. The usual greenery of the park was draped in a soft blue by the lack of light. Maree tried to focus on the blue painting sections of it green, it was no good though the lock gates were opening and the levels were about to be restored to equilibrium.

The last bump jarred through her and as they reached the park entrance, owner and dog joined as an unfortunate one in relief.