

BINKIE AND THE SNOWBIRDS

(A monologue to be performed with a Southern drawl)

By John Dixon

Excuse me. Why are you staring at me like that? There's nothing wrong in looking good, is there? Haven't you ever seen a man wearing a bracelet before? New here, are you? Snowbird? Flown in for our winter. Well we're hot all year round.

Oh, it's my dog you're looking at, is it? A lot of people do. Almost everyone round here has got a dog. A little dog. Wonderful ice-breakers. It's how we became such a tight-knit community. You can stroke it if you want. It won't bite. Can't you see? It's not real. Not anymore. It's stuffed. Runs on castors. A lot of people have their favourite dog stuffed. And then made up to look its best. My one's not actually my favourite. And that is quite unusual. There's a story behind it. Buy me a cocktail, and I'll tell you.

I got Binkie as a puppy. So I could train her. She didn't need it. From the start she had her own routines. She ended up planning my life! Always the same route for her walks. Always the same time. And always ending at this café. Binkie just loved it here. Ever the centre of attention. She showed up all the other dogs. Everyone made a fuss of her. She never went without.

She had a really good life. All she ever wanted. Not terribly adventurous perhaps. They say dogs walk three times as far as their owners. Binkie didn't. Most times when I let her off the lead she'd still trot along by my ankles, half the time expecting to be picked up and carried. It was the same routine every day. Out the apartment, down the stairs – she hated lifts – over to the greenwalk alongside the swamp, then on to the bridge, where we'd look down on the alligators. And I'd cuddle Binkie and say, 'Be a good girl, or the crocs'll get you.' She knew I didn't mean it.

'You can't be too careful,' I said. Which was true. Because the alligators do come out – on the road you see them sometimes. They're no danger to

humans. Adults, anyway. But they do take dogs. Quite frightening some of the stories you hear.

I actually thought of changing the route we took for our walk. Especially when building started on that apartment block overlooking the swamp. Too close for comfort for my liking. The apartments weren't cheap. They were advertised and sold before they were built. The dirt and disruption! And the thought of being spied on as you walked past with your dog. I tried another route, but Binkie wasn't having it. She was so set in her ways. The block got higher and higher, and some flats were occupied before the garden surround had been properly landscaped. They just couldn't wait to get in and take over. Not likely to be the sort of people we'd want to know. Binkie and I hastened past the block and avoided eye contact. When we got to the bridge we'd studiously look at the swamp, and spot the alligators.

Well, one day as we were hurrying past I heard a peal of laughter. I thought it might be at my expense. I was not going to let that pass. I looked up and on the top floor, right in the picture window, was a couple, both young, both stripped to the waist, nice bodies, just fooling around. I have to admit they were the finest newcomers I'd seen that year. Take back all I said. Roll on the fresh meat. Made me feel younger just looking at them. They were so into each other, so pre-occupied they hadn't seen me. I couldn't take me eyes off them. Then they both waved, genuine, smiling. I thought, 'That's nice. Snowbirds fitting in so quickly.' I waved back. They tried to open the picture window, but they couldn't manage it and began tapping on the glass fit to break it – as if they were trying to get out, with a fire or something trapping their exit. I ran across the road to help. They started shaking their heads and pointing frantically. Then I realized.

They were warning me. I turned round and saw Binkie being tossed in the air by an alligator, and plunging headfirst down its open jaws. Before I could shout, 'Come back, that's my dog!' the croc was underwater with hardly a ripple. Nothing surfaced. Not even a bubble. I ran to the bridge and looked both sides. There was nothing. It was so silent. I could hear my own sobs.

One of the regular dog-walkers saw me and ran up and I told him what had happened. He said, 'You've gotta get another dog. You mustn't let this put you off. It's like a car accident or a plane crash. You must get straight back in the driving seat. Get on the next scheduled flight wherever it's going. That's the only way. Promise me you won't leave it too long.'

I supposed this was right, but I didn't feel to do anything immediately. A week or so later I forced myself to the local pet store. It's a very good one. A comprehensive range of dogs. Little dogs. I saw one there. The splitting image of Binkie. I couldn't believe my eyes. Almost as if she'd come back. Unfortunately it was a He. But in everything else it could have been her. I just knew I had to have it. I didn't even ask the price. I said straightaway to the assistant, 'I want that one.' 'Certainly, sir,' he said, 'and is there anything else.' 'Yes,' I said. 'Have it put to sleep and get it stuffed.'

I got the idea for the platform castors from a lady friend. She had a dachshund, a sausage dog. I never liked them myself. Their back legs go. You can strap on a special trolley. Like a horse and cart, with the horse pulling its own back legs.

So there we are. Things haven't changed. I still take the new Binkie for a walk. We're here every day about this time. Most of the regulars think it's the original Binkie. If they look too closely between its legs I say, 'She had a sex change just before she died.'

The only difference is the dog lead. I bought one of those retractable ones. It works on the same principle as a Hoover cable, but much more powerful. I keep it at a short length to pull Binkie alongside me. But when we get to the greenwalk, in front of the new apartments, I take Binkie down to the water's edge and rush back to the sidewalk unthreading the lead. In no time the alligator comes out and heads straight for Binkie. I push the catch on the lead and Binkie shoots across the grass faster than ever a living dog could run. You should hear the castors clatter on the sidewalk. And the alligator – it's the same one, I know, they're very territorial – goes without. Serve it right. It'll come to regret what it did. It's already looking thinner.

I do this every day. Just to taunt it. And I like to think that the pair of Snowbirds are still looking out the apartment block. I couldn't live like that.

Stuck inside, top floor, viewing the world out a picture window. Lift permanently out of order. Pretty sure I saw one of them recently. Close up he was nothing. And much older than you'd think. Hardly worth a second glance.

Go on, pat him if you want. It'll cost you another cocktail. You don't wag your tail anymore, do you, darling? Don't suppose the alligator does either. What did you say your name was?