

**Some say that Hector the Badger wasn't a Badger after all.**

‘Badger or scammer?’

I cocked an ear from my vantage point in front of the gas fire. *Midlands Today* blared out from the big box. Some pale Labrador of a man held up his photograph of said badger, protesting his innocence. Fortunately, Joyce was putting a steak and ale pie in the oven and Keith wasn't back from the pub yet.

I propped my head on my paws and eyed the screen. Yes, it was definitely the man who smelled of pepperoni with whom I'd had a brief *vis-à-vis* on Hergest Ridge.

‘What do you say to the accusation, Mr Hollingsworth?’ Asks a whippety one in a big striped tie.

‘It's ridiculous. I've seen him up close. I held his gaze. He stared straight at the camera, left paw raised, a glint of madness in his eye. That was a badger alright.’

‘Could you tell us more about how the picture was taken?’ Tie-man scents a *coup*; he's leading the unfortunate Mr H up a cul-de-sac.

‘I'd stumbled on the sett by accident while looking for tawny owls. The badger stood its ground. I fired off a rattle of shots; fast lens, wide aperture, beautifully back-lit against a hazy orange sunset. The best photograph of my life.’

A close-up picture of me begging – in vain – for sausage, fills the screen.

‘It is certainly a stunning image; indeed, it was shortlisted for the BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year Award, which is how the controversy started.’ Deadpan with a hint of *schadenfreude*, tie-man goes in for the kill. ‘How do you feel about the decision to disqualify you?’

‘Completely gutted. I was odds-on favourite until bloody Chris Packham calculated the tail to snout ratios and concluded that if you called “walkies” it would come running.’

‘And how has this affected your mental health?’ A head-tilt of mock concern before the camera closes in on the hapless Mr H.

‘It’s been hard, you know.’ A quaver in his voice. ‘Aside from the public humiliation, I really thought that we shared a moment. The missus tells me to get a grip, says it’s bad enough the neighbours’ kids barking like terriers every time she steps out for the paper without me going soft over a bloody badger.’

Cut to tie-man talking directly to camera. ‘There have been many reports of a white badger up in the Hergest woods, according to wildlife experts the so called leucistic colouration is very rare. Locals describe the animal as a bumbling creature exiled from the sett. He has been nick-named Hector for his dog-like gait. A storm now surrounds the very existence of the animal, some claiming it was a carved model, others a felt-knit. There have been sightings as far afield as Hay-on-Wye with several Welsh farmers claiming that Hector is living on their land. Some have even set up field car parks; charging five pounds per vehicle to include hand-drawn maps. And now over to Carole for the weather.’

Joyce came in smelling of pie and ruffled my shaggy coat.

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I’ve struggled with my identity, I can’t lie. I was born from a brief union of corgi and Samoyed. Alas, I never knew my father. You know how if you cross anything with a corgi it comes out looking like a corgi with a random scatter of secondary parent; well, I was a goddamn mess. Long snout, broad body, short legs. Psychologically too, confined to a newspaper strewn kitchen, no litter mates, no playtime and precious little conversation. The only enrichment a *Teach Yourself French* CD that Vivian played on repeat. It’s tough growing up in a mid-terrace in Tenbury Wells when you’re designed to haul sledges and hunt

reindeer. When I was finally granted access to the living room, I chewed up some Jimmy Choos. The English language is full of pitfalls. Vivian had apparently been buying the Choos from Dodgy Dave on tick; a word that sends shivers down the withers. Anyway, she was *très furieux*. At barely six months old, I was out on my round white ear.

The streets of Tenbury are no place for a discarded Samorgi whose only skill is a smattering of rudimentary French. Lethal weaponry lurked at every turn; bicycles, shopping trolleys, mobility scooters. I did the only thing that I excelled at – I ran. I headed cross country, keeping a steady pace under the cover of darkness, following *Canis Minor*, west-south-west. Have to say I loved it. The rolling hills, the wooded valleys, the alluring scent of chicken farms.

On and on I padded, driven by instinct and the hunger in my heart. By the time I reached Hergest Ridge I realised it was actual hunger; twenty-four hours without tasty-meaty chunks and I was famished. I followed the old drovers' road, hoping I might surprise an unsuspecting sheep, but who was I kidding? I'd never eaten anything that wasn't shaken cheerlessly from a tin in a coating of rich jelly.

It was a chilly moonless night that I first saw the badgers, six of them, fat as pies, rooting amongst the old beech trees. Nothing spells opportunity more than a fat badger. I greeted them with a convivial wriggle. They look friendly enough but they're mean bastards, badgers. Definitely not a fan of the dog however much I grinned and wagged my stumpy tail. I channelled my inner badger, snuffled around, bided my time until they finally relented. Their lifestyle was a huge disappointment; a diet of worms, mice and the occasional unfortunate hedgehog. And noisy, oh my God, they never shut up with their growls and squeaks and nonsense chittering. I had to dig my own den despite the inadequacy of my claws, no offers of help Brock-side.

We learned to tolerate each other. I'd pick at their scraps when they retreated underground; neurotic as nervous ticks, they'd hurtle for cover at the snap of a twig. They're big worriers, badgers, mostly they fret about catching TB from cattle and human viruses really give them the heebies.

The first human – Mr Hollingsworth as it turned out – pitched up one drab September evening, creeping through the undergrowth with all the stealth of an elephant seal. The badger boys scarpered of course, but I'd caught the scent of processed food and I wasn't going to be deterred by an orange anorak and a long lens. In return for my hoisted paw and beguiling smile I received nothing but a ricochet of blinding light.

My welcoming gambit was a *faux pas terrible*; within days the place was teeming with tripods and Thermos flasks; a camouflaged army of whirring, whispering and shushing. I've no idea why they bother wearing khaki, badgers are blind as bats but they can sniff out an earthworm at twenty metres. The approaching smell of Brut for men sends them into a tailspin long before the homo sapiens actually appear.

I can't blame the badgers for turning on me; I'd overheard their tales of the flat caps with their Land Rovers and shotguns and I was evidently the reason for the ever more daring incursions of rogue humans lying prone in the blooming heather. Old Todd led the attack – more a lumbering waddle and a volley of grunts – but I got the message and high-tailed it into the bracken.

Gorse is impenetrable and ferns are pretty much head-height for a Samorgi, so I threw caution to the wind and took to the human path. It's even signposted for the spatially challenged with a helpful acorn pointing the length of Offa's Dyke. I followed it for days accompanied by singing larks, piping pipits and the roar of RAF Tornados. The path brought unexpected bounties; a discarded sandwich, a slice of boiled egg, the occasional bag of Cheesy Wotsits; a *fête magnifique*. Benches were prime spots. I'd lie in wait, flattened in the

undergrowth, ready to dash in and Hoover up the remnants once the humans had taken their selfies and moved on.

I crossed into Wales and became a fabled beast. At least I'm pretty sure I'm *Helgwm Gwyn*, the White Hound of Powys, said to trot along the backs of sleeping dragons. Weaver of rainbows; bringer of ice and snow; you know what the Welsh are like. Still, it beat being shot at by the English. But that legend got me thinking. I could smell winter in the air. If I stood on my hind legs I could see for miles, far beyond to the bleak expanse of the Brecon Beacons, three-quarters sky, an unforgiving landscape soon to be etched with ice. I needed to lower my horizons. I needed a bed and a cosy fire.

I needed to find myself a human.

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Gavin was a big mistake. He had a certain *je ne sais quoi*, striding gaily through the heather whistling *Love Me Do* and he was friendly enough as he coaxed me into his rusty Ford transit with a disc of waxy cheese. But I had overlooked the splattered wellies and the smell of sheep. As we bounced over the track leading to his ramshackle farmhouse, he proudly pointed out a flock of grubby Cheviots chewing in the meadow; *quelle horreur!* I was to be a working dog.

My corgi ancestors might have been content to herd cattle but they'd never known the comfort of a radiator and a tufted Axminster. One would expect a Samorgi to rate highly on intelligence but I'd been led astray by a sniff of Babybel. As I lay shivering in my concrete kennel my thoughts turned to manicured lawns and twisted shagpile. I wasn't asking for much; a nice semi-detached with an enclosed garden and gas central heating. My exclusion criteria ruled out a good percentage of the population – farmers, postmen, cyclists, joggers, badger-botherers.

I hatched a plan.

If I'd learnt anything from the Brocks it was how to dig in. After a week of steadfastly refusing to come out of my kennel Gavin manhandled me into the pickup and took me off to a livestock auction where I drew nothing but sideways glances. He finally swapped me for a mothballed collie and I was shoved unceremoniously onto a trailer with six Leicester Longwools, my humiliation complete. I took my opportunity and jumped out at the lights as we trundled through Great Malvern.

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Once bitten twice shy. I staked out Keith and Joyce Merriweather of number twelve Sycamore Grove, from behind the bins – a thorough search of which had produced evidence of regular cake consumption and a *penchant* for Quality Street. With their tidy gnome-filled garden, gleaming Fiat Uno and crisp white nets the Merriweathers were more than keeping up with the Buchanans at number ten. Mercifully, there was no sign of children, bicycles or musical instruments. And they clearly adored Sally, a decrepit spaniel whom Keith dragged around the block twice a day and who appeared long overdue for the old one-way ticket. *Quel dommage.*

I waited.

The Merriweathers found me sitting mournfully on their doorstep on their return from the vet *sans* Sally. I was a miracle. Of course, no one could replace their Sally, but I was a wondrous gift sent to fill the dog-shaped hole in their hearts.

I was ensconced on a crocheted blanket in the double-glazed living room before you could say 'extra saveloy, no vinegar.' I must confess that I resorted immediately to an emergency moult – the smell of sick spaniel is not conducive to a good night's sleep. Joyce was exhaustive with the Shake n' Vac, *et voilà!* I was in a pine glade. My luxury dog bed arrived by next day delivery, courtesy of John Lewis.

Joyce was *très charmante*, she chatted away like we were long-lost friends, groomed me with a soft brush, sang songs from *Lady and the Tramp*. And you could set your watch by Keith; two good walks a day and twenty-minutes round-the-block before bedtime. Rowan Drive, Acacia Avenue, Laurel Close, Sycamore Grove; he let me stop at every lamp-post. I couldn't have been happier. On Sundays, Keith took me for a five-miler up in the Malvern hills while Joyce prepared the roast dinner. The smell of slow cooked lamb shank as we rounded the trimmed privets a tantalising promise of the feast to come.

As well as sleeping, eating and exercising I enjoyed a packed schedule; my morning stare at cantankerous Clive the bay-window beagle, an afternoon snuffle through autumn leaves, twice a day catch-up with the shipping forecast.

I was in heaven; my feral days were over.

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I was just limbering up for my evening constitutional when Clive's human, Derek, popped round, eyes like a fox; had they seen *Midlands Today*?

'Well, get this,' he says, 'your Sid is the spitting image of the animal in the badger-gate scandal.'

Long story short, crack of dawn the following Wednesday I'm dragged into the bathroom for a shampoo and towel dry ready for my television debut.

It was the stripy-tied interviewer who had demolished poor Mr Hollingsworth. My hackles were up; no one was going to humiliate my Keith and Joyce. Oh, the crew went crazy for the raised fur, exactly the look they were going for, very 'badgery' apparently. They framed me with a couple of pot plants and a yucca purloined from the Newsnight studio, back lit me in an orange glow and offered a sausage in return for a raised paw.

I was a huge hit. Turns out it wasn't just Mr Hollingsworth's prowess with a Nikon, the camera loves me. Tracey from hair and make-up recommended a friend in commercials and

*tout à coup* I was the new face of Hutchinson's Meaty Chunks, landing my humans a Fiat Grande and a fifty-two-inch plasma screen and me a lifetime's supply of meatballs and squeaky badgers.

Keith and Joyce became the talk of Great Malvern and my walks a non-stop coo-and-stroke fest. It's quite a relief to retire to the back garden of an evening. I sit in the lupin border and watch the sunset. I think of old Todd and the boys venturing out to snuffle for worms. They'll still be muttering about me, bless them. They won't know that my infamous picture heralded a renewed love for the badger, a public outcry and a halt to the cull.

My local celebrity attracted copy-cat advertising; apparently Clive has landed a deal with DFS soft furnishings, so that'll take the pressure off. As for Mr Hollingsworth, he declined the use of his photograph for the front cover of the 'Mixed Mutts' 2025 calendar, instead they're using Joyce's snap of me catching a Frisbee in the back garden. All proceeds to the Dogs Trust; the Merriweathers are that sort of human.

The best news of all is an adorable new arrival at number ten; the Buchanans have acquired Nancy, a strikingly coiffured French poodle.

*Je suis un chien très chanceux.*