

Her Favourite Place

by Liz Meyer

Jess's calves were burning as she pushed herself up the final few yards of the slope, boots somehow keeping their grip in the slippery mud. Her breath was catching. She was aware her fitness was very different to this time last year, before she had been ill. But as the view across the vale appeared through the trees, the climb suddenly became worth it. Archie stood above her, tongue hanging out, every inch of his little tufty body alert, gazing at her as if to say, "Come on then, what are we waiting for?"

"Let me have a rest Archie," Jess said as she reached the bench at the top of the hill. As always when she came up here, she released a sigh of contentment. It was as though her anxieties were being blown away, down the steep escarpment. She felt lighter, as if she could jump into the view and fly above the fields dotted with oak trees and held together by ramshackle lines of hawthorn hedging. Only the peaceful baaing of sheep and the cry of a buzzard as it circled above disturbed the silence. Ribbons of Autumnal mist threaded across the vale and Jess knew she was unlikely to meet anyone else up here. Most stuck sensibly to the gravelled lower paths but she was always drawn to the peak, to her, the view was worth it.

"Hello Katie," Archie cocked his head, wondering who on earth she was talking to. Jess wiped clean the inscription on the bench she sat on. "*In memory of Katie Jenkins. 15/1/1983 – 18/11/2018. She loved this place*". Katie shared Jess's birthday and was the same age that Jess was now when she had died. This was enough for Jess to feel a strange affinity with the girl she had never met in life. She had recently developed a habit of coming here and talking through her problems with Katie, with no-one to hear her but Archie and the trees.

"Simon's gone back up to London," she said now. "I know he wants me back now that I'm better, but something's stopping me." Jess gazed at the view, framed perfectly by the stretching arms of the huge oak tree the bench sat beneath. Until a year ago, she had been living a very different life. A PA at a busy law firm, working hard and enjoying a busy social

life, with no time to realise whether she was happy. And then everything had come crashing down. Luckily, she was told her illness was likely to be completely curable. But there were months of chemotherapy to endure. Simon, her boyfriend, had found it hard to cope and she had moved in with her parents, newly retired to Dorset. They had been brilliant, driving her to appointments and looking after her.

“I’m so grateful I’ve got them,” she told Katie. “But I can’t stay forever, and I’ve got to decide what to do. They’re only going to hold my job open for me until the end of the month.” Jess had found her priorities had changed. Now, she was bored with the office gossip Simon fed her on the odd weekends he came down. And she had no urge to get dressed up and cram her feet into heels for a night out either. She was happier in a pair of jeans and her walking boots, with Archie, her parent’s dog for company. “Maybe my brain has slowed down too much since living here,” she told Katie. But she knew that wasn’t true. During her recuperation she had completed an online diploma in canine behaviour. For fun to begin with. But then with a growing conviction that working with dogs was what she had always wanted to do. “I don’t want to go back to my old life.” Saying the words out loud to Katie helped cement the feeling.

A sudden crashing of branches and undergrowth made Archie shoot up, tail quivering. A Dalmatian bounced up to the bench barking loudly, as if to demand, “And who are you?” Jess fished in her pocket for a treat. “It’s ok,” she said softly. The dog greedily snaffled the treat and then barked again as crunching leaves signalled the arrival of her owner. She was breathless from climbing the hill, pulling off her woollen hat to reveal fading auburn curls.

“Daisy be quiet,” she scolded. “It may be Katie’s bench but it’s for everyone to sit on. I’m sorry,” she addressed Jess. “Daisy thinks she owns this place.”

Jess, moved over, allowing the woman space to sit. Daisy had stopped barking now, sitting attentively at Jess’s feet.

“Look at that dog. She never gives me her attention like that,” exclaimed the woman.

“It’s always worth having a few treats in your pocket,” laughed Jess, slipping Daisy another biscuit. “Did you know the girl this bench is dedicated to?” she asked cautiously. “I’m Jess by the way.”

“I’m Megan,” the woman replied. “Yes, she was my daughter. And Daisy’s mistress.”

“I’m sorry, I feel like I’m intruding on your space.” Jess felt uncomfortable.

Megan waved a hand. “Not at all. It’s nice to see it being used. Not many people make it to the top, but Katie loved it up here. It’s where she always came, happy, sad, good news or bad. She used to say she could talk to the trees, that they would always listen.

“She was right, I come up here to do the same.” Jess blushed, feeling a bit embarrassed. “I’ve often found myself offloading my problems to Katie. It’s nice to feel that I’m sharing the place with someone else who loved it.”

“She would be pleased that her bench and the view was being enjoyed by others,” Megan said firmly. She looked at Jess with kind blue eyes.

“Is there no one else who is willing to listen to you?”

Jess shrugged.

“I can’t seem to talk to Simon anymore. He’s my boyfriend...or he *was* my boyfriend. I’m not sure exactly what he is now. And Mum and Dad were so supportive while I was ill, I don’t want to burden them with any more worries.”

Megan waved her hands.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be nosy. Katie always used to tell me I was interfering when I asked her what it was that she could tell the trees and not me.”

“It’s ok. It’s just...” Jess paused, and then it all came tumbling out. “I moved down from London because I was ill. And now I’m better.” Tears suddenly prickled the backs of her eyes. “And I’m so grateful. But something has changed. I don’t want to go back to my old life. I don’t like cities anymore. And I hate the thought of going back to my old job.” Jess fondled Daisy’s ear.

“I’ve always loved dogs. I used to have one. Fly. We did agility. Even competed in the junior finals at Crufts once. What I want to do,” she said, conviction starting to take hold, “is work with dogs. Have a training school. I don’t know how on earth I ended up working in an office.”

Megan squeezed her hand.

“If it’s Katie’s advice you want, I know for a fact she would say, do it. She always said you should follow your dreams. That life was too precious to do anything else.”

“Simon says that I’ll never make any money training dogs. He says it’s all very well as a hobby, but I need to get back into the real world.”

“And what is the ‘real world’?” asked Megan gently.

Jess paused and took a breath, gazing out at the view. The beauty of it calming her, as always. Making her feel that the only thing that mattered was being here in this place. Right now.

“There’s something magical about this hilltop,” she said. “It’s like nothing else matters when you’re up here. Here are the trees, and there is the view, constantly, whatever happens. If anything is the real world, then it’s this.” She spread out her arm expansively.

“Some decisions are difficult,” Megan said. “But you know in your heart what’s right for you. Katie only had a short life but knew how to live it to the full. She knew she wasn’t going to live to a great age. It made her understand what was important.”

Jess slowly nodded.

“Thank you. You’ve helped me to work out what it is that I really want.”

Jess felt a bubble of excitement as she realised that she had known what her decision would be, all along.

And Megan, slowly walking back down the hill, watched as Daisy tore off after a squirrel, remembering the joy she had brought Katie. There were many more memories; the clearest and happiest of which always returned to her at the top of the hill, where some essence of her daughter seemed to live on, in Katie’s favourite place.