

A MORAL SWERVE

A Novel

By

Annie Cook

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Thursday
- Alison -

As I walk up the garden path to my house, I'm congratulating myself that I've survived one of the most difficult days at work that I can ever remember, and I've managed to make it home without having a complete meltdown.

That's no small thing, to be fair, since I've spent the entire day trying not to lose it with a higher-than-usual number of whining, moaning idiots on the other end of the phone who use every ridiculous excuse in the world to worm their way out of paying their overdue bills. Some people think credit controllers and call-centre staff were born yesterday, and it hasn't occurred to most of them that we've heard all their excuses before, and we actually *don't* have a bottomless barrel of sympathy or the patience of a saint, for the mess they got themselves into.

I could probably write a bestselling book about it all. I'd probably call it something as ludicrous as its contents would actually be; something like *'Every Excuse You've Ever Thought Of (and Some of the Ones You Hadn't) For Failing To Take Responsibility For The Debt You Got Yourself Into When You Knew You Couldn't Afford That Sofa You Bought On Tick.'*

Catchy little title; it would go down a treat. I could look forward to a landslide of royalties. Then, maybe, I could give up my miserable job and forget the wretchedness of listening to endless tales of woe for eight hours a day, five days a week. That would be lovely.

I'm home an hour or so earlier than usual, crying off with a headache that's been hanging around all day, coming and going and driving me mad. As I put my key into the lock, I'm mentally preparing for a delicious glass of cold chardonnay out in the back garden, with the condensation forming in glittery beads on the glass, on what will surely be one of the last nice evenings of the summer.

But alas, so often in the midst of innocuous tasks, like simply unlocking one's own front door, life-defining moments can steal upon us and blindside us completely, knocking us off kilter and sending us spinning in a totally different direction. So what I'm *not* prepared for, in the slightest, is the fact that within the next few minutes the notion that I'm safe from harm in my own home will fly straight out of a broken window, and my life will change forever.

The first thing I notice when the door swings open to a warm and slightly stuffy house, is that Badger isn't there to greet me. At first I think he's probably still out with the dog walker, and maybe she's just late bringing him home, so I'm not too worried. I am home early, after all.

I have soft-soled shoes on, so there's no real sound as I leave the front door ajar to let some air into the hallway, and head towards the kitchen. But, as I make my way forward I hear two unfamiliar voices. Male voices. I freeze, horrified.

Somebody is in my house.

On the occasional table in the hallway is a heavy metal skillet, which I was drying with a tea towel at the weekend when the doorbell rang, and I came up the hall with it still in my hands. I put it down on the table to open the door and for some reason I didn't take it back to the kitchen afterwards. Forgetfulness; probably borne of another stupid headache. I've been having a lot of them lately.

The thought flies quickly through my mind, that I should probably book an appointment with my GP. Another thought quickly follows; that it's weird what we end up thinking about sometimes, when we should be concentrating on something else that's probably a lot more important.

I refocus on the metal skillet in my hand. It feels like an unexpected gift; a weapon to whack someone over the head with, should the need arise.

It's funny how much can go through your head in just a few seconds. In the short time it takes to creep down the hallway, I'm mentally wondering who would be in the house; running off a mental checklist of who's got keys, whether my cousin might be here, thinking it unlikely since she lives 140 miles away and hasn't called me; that sort of thing. As I tiptoe down the hall, the sound of two people laughing and chatting away to each other effectively masks my arrival.

As I near the door to the kitchen and look through the barely-open crack, the air is suddenly sucked out of my lungs by the sight of my border collie dog, Badger, unconscious (*or dead?*) on the kitchen

floor. Blood has seeped from his muzzle and, in a split-second, confusion turns to rage as I'm suddenly certain, beyond all doubt, that whoever is in my house is here for all the wrong reasons. The bastards have attacked my dog.

The sight of him lying there on the floor like that is too much to prevent me from screaming, as I fly though the door to confront what turns out to be two youngish males, who clearly didn't expect me to turn up just at that moment. They are calmly enjoying two of my beers from the fridge and having a bit of a laugh, at my expense no doubt, but the grins soon fall from their faces. They freeze, all merriment gone, as I roar into the room. My brain registers an open, scruffy holdall on the kitchen bench, with one bright corner of my metallic pink-covered i-pad sticking out of it, along with the silver filigree jewellery box my grandmother left me in her will.

One of these scumbags is about twenty or so, around six feet tall, heavily tattooed and solidly built, with longish, dark brown hair tied back in a shambles of a ponytail. He's clean-shaven, and his clothes are average; jeans, a t-shirt, and a pair of tan-coloured boots. Nothing spectacular.

The other lad is, I'd guess, around four or five years younger. Similarly dressed, he is unremarkable in almost every way except for the fact that his hair is a dirty-blond, and his face is full of bright, red, angry pimples. It's a total acne city, and that's the only thought I have, until the older lad pushes the younger one out of the way and sprints past both of us towards the French door which, judging by the broken pane of glass about halfway up, has been their point of entry. He yanks the door open and runs clean away, just as the front door slams shut from the backdraft, with a finality that leaves my teeth ringing.

I've had a *really* shitty day, my head is pounding, and I'm seriously upset about Badger, who still hasn't moved a muscle. At this point I don't know if he is dead or alive but that cannot, for the moment, be my most pressing concern.

Scumbag Senior has run off, and Scumbag Junior wants to, but I can't let him. I really can't. I can't explain quite why, but stopping this lowlife from leaving has just become my number one priority.

I take a step towards him, without a truly formed intention in my head of what I am about to do, and then he moves to duck past me and head for the door. I swing the skillet and it hits the front of his head with a light 'crack'. It's not enough to knock him out, but he stumbles. He loses his balance and falls to the floor. The back of his head hits a handle on my Rangemaster cooker and it obviously hurts because he lets his breath out in a big, quick 'owhh'. He's not laughing now, far from it. He looks at me warily.

'You came here to steal from me,' I say to him, flatly. He says nothing, so I kick his foot. He still doesn't respond. Instead, he stares at the skillet, then looks straight ahead and into the middle distance, in direct defiance. Perhaps he is hoping that if he ignores me I will go away, but that's not going to happen, dickhead. I kick his foot again. 'What did you do to my dog?'

Silence. His jaw sets hard. He is determined not to respond.

'What did you do to my dog, you scab-faced, thieving fucking bastard?' I scream, *really* scream at him, so loud that it comes out in a surprisingly high-pitched screech that surprises even me. He flinches hard, but still says nothing. Then, still refusing to look at me, he shrugs. *He shrugs!* He is defiant, and seemingly indifferent, to the fact that he or his bastard mate may have just killed my very best, most treasured friend. It sends a red-hot rage right through me. My banging head feels ready to explode right here and now, and I can hardly believe my eyes when he then tries to scramble to his feet.

Escape? I don't think so, mate.

I hit him again with the skillet, square across the left side of his head. This time the crack is just a little louder, just a little more satisfying, and this time it does knock him out. He crumples back into his sitting position on the floor. His head slumps forward, his chin hits his chest, and there is silence.

I leave him there on the floor and run to Badger, my beautiful boy. He still isn't moving, but his nose has stopped bleeding. It is wet and cold, but he doesn't respond to my touch. I sit on the floor, gather him into my arms and mercifully he begins to stir.

He's alive!

I'm shaking with rage, outrage, relief and disbelief, a hodgepodge of mixed emotions that swirl around, chaotically interweaving with my crippling headache, as I try to assimilate all that's just happened.

I breathe gently into Badger's face to bring him around, and he opens his eyes and looks straight into mine. He whimpers softly, and struggles to get to his feet, but he can't stand up. Fighting back rage and fear-filled tears, I feel along his big, shaggy body for anything untoward. There don't seem to be

any broken bones, but I'm no expert, and without a proper vet check it would be impossible to know what his injuries might be. Together, he and I, we manage a half-drag and half-walk till I get him into his bed in the corner of the kitchen, where I try to make him comfortable, and I put his water bowl next to his face.

I need to call the vet. I'll need a house call because I'm afraid to move Badger any further, in case I make his injuries worse. It's bad enough that I've had to move him at all, but I can't stand the thought of him being uncomfortable on the hard, cold kitchen floor. I move warily past Junior, who's still out for the count. I give his foot a kick for good measure, but nothing moves. I pick up the telephone handset and speed-dial the vet. Luckily, someone is still at the surgery and although they're about to close, they assure me that they can get an on-call vet to me within the hour.

So someone is on the way, and in the meantime, I have to decide what to do with Junior. I can't have him there on the floor when the vet comes. I don't want to call the police, either. I want to deal with this prick myself.

There are cable ties in the kitchen utility drawer, so I fish a couple out and tie up his hands behind his back, like handcuffs. I've heard somewhere that the police are using cable ties these days. I'm not sure if it's true, but it seems like a pretty reasonable option. I tie Junior's feet as well and, thinking on the fly, I drag him to the hallway.

There's a cupboard under the stairs, so I figure I can hide him in there until after the vet has been, because I don't think I could heft him all the way up the stairs, and since he has already defiled my home I don't want him up there again anyway. I could put him in the downstairs toilet, but what if the vet needs to use it? Too risky. No, I will put him in the under-stairs cupboard, and I'll decide how to deal with him after the vet has gone. Now, the first priority is my dog. I try to ignore this crushing headache I've got, and hold my fear, outrage and confusion at bay.

What the hell just happened?

It occurs to me that if Junior comes to, while the vet is here, he could scream bloody murder. That won't do. There is duct tape in the drawer where the cable ties were, so I run back to the kitchen, pull it out, and cut a piece off it. Back in the hallway, I place it firmly across his mouth, taking care to keep his nose clear.

I open the door, and I have to pull out the vacuum cleaner and other bits and pieces before I can get him in there. He's not too big or heavy, so it's manageable; just. I heave and push, and all of a sudden he is in there. I have to fight to get the door shut after I pile everything else back in, but I manage it, and all of a sudden the house is quiet. No burglars, no thieves, no noise. My ragged breathing is the only thing that disrupts the blanket of silence that suddenly descends upon the house.

I clean up Badger's blood and the shards of shattered glass from the floor, wedge the French doors open so the broken pane will not be obvious from inside, and in a flash of inspiration I decide to put some music on; some light jazz, to dispel the crushing silence. It might also deflect any noises that might come from the under-stairs cupboard if Junior does wake up and start trying to move about while the vet is tending to Badger. I don't want to have to explain anything.

I put the kettle on. The vet might want a cup of tea. Personally, in spite of this wretched headache, I feel a need for something stronger, but the chardonnay will have to wait. So will the summer evening. For now I need a shot of whisky. I pour it, down it, and feel the warmth spread through my chest. It soothes my jagged nerves, stops me from shaking, and helps me to focus. A second shot has me thinking coherently again, and when the doorbell rings, I feel fully prepared.

The vet is a tall, thin, thirty-something man with a serious expression, a receding hairline and rimless glasses. He has a kind smile, which transforms his face into something animated and delightful, and he listens patiently while, after closing the door to the hallway and moving us a little closer to the stereo speakers, I tell him that I came home from work to find my dog acting strangely, as if he had been hurt. I confirm that I have a competent, trusted dog walker, and that Badger hasn't been neglected or ill-treated; that he has in fact been loved and cherished every second of his life. I also confirm the details of our usual veterinary practice, and this vet makes a few notes. Then he kneels on the floor next to Badger's bed, and checks him over, slowly, gently, but very thoroughly.

'Okay, it's okay, boy,' he murmurs. Badger gazes at him with pain-filled but trusting eyes. The interaction touches me deeply and it's all I can do not to burst into tears. At length, the vet stands up, stretches his neck, and looks at me levelly.

‘He may have a broken shoulder and a possible fracture to his nose. He has either been hit by a car or has been very strongly kicked by someone, and more than once. I think you need to have a chat with your dog walker to see if she can shed any light on what may have happened today, and let me have any information you get about it. I'd like to take him with me now to the surgery and have a good look over him, if that's ok? With sedation he should be fine to rest overnight. I'll x-ray him and we can take things from there.’

He sees my distress, and the tears welling up in my eyes. He places a hand on my arm. ‘He'll be ok. It's painful, but it's not life threatening. It will all take time to heal, of course, and he may end up with a bit of arthritis in later years. But try not to worry. Can I take him now?’

As I start to nod, a small thump comes from the hallway; the sound of something having moved in the under-stairs cupboard. The vet raises his eyebrows at me.

‘Vacuum cleaner,’ I mumble. ‘I'd left it in the hall, just put it away before you came.’

He seems satisfied with my explanation. ‘I'm Simon Westrupp, by the way. Here's my card. The details of the practice I work at are on it, so you have the address and contact numbers. I'll take him now, and if you give us a call about ten tomorrow morning, we should be able to update you on his condition. We'll also contact your usual vet, get a report on his history, and let them know what's happening.’

With surprising ease, he lifts Badger gently in his arms, and heads towards the front door. I brush past him to go and open it for him. As I do it, I feel myself blushing. Briefly, from out of nowhere, I wonder if he is single, like me.

He drives away, with my beautiful best friend in the back of his estate car. I send a silent plea to any existing angels out there in the ether, to be with my dog and hold him safe until morning, and I close the front door.

I walk, zombie-like, to the under-stairs cupboard door. No sound comes from within. I know I need to deal with Junior, but right now I don't feel ready. My dog is alive and in the best possible hands, and that is all that matters right now, at this moment. I need another drink. I need to sit in a chair, with a drink, and contemplate what to do with Junior. He may be waking up already, and I need to have a plan for how to handle him.

The jazz CD finishes, and silence returns to the house. I pour another hefty whisky, and I sit. I think about Badger, and how lucky it is that those bastards hadn't killed my boy. The fact that they didn't was probably down to simple good luck and nothing more. They hurt him badly. They wouldn't have cared if he'd died, in fact I'm close to assuming that to have been their intention. At worst, intent to kill. At best, a lack of caring. Either scenario is so intolerable I can barely sit still. Every cell in my body roars with violation. I am quivering, and raw with rage.

I've never been squeamish about human pain. Show me a picture of dismembered, blood-covered body parts and entrails, and I'm more or less indifferent. Show me an animal in pain, or the victim of cruelty, and I want to rip someone's face off. I don't know what sort of person that makes me, and I suppose at some stage it might be cause for some self-examination about my level of humanity. But not now. Right now, as the whisky washes over me, I don't give a shit. And I hardly feel human at all.

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Thursday
- Darren -

I didn't expect her to come home when she did. I'd been watching her come-and-go movements for fucking weeks, and she *never* came home before six. *Ever*. I'm not stupid enough to think it wasn't possible, but after weeks of watching, and never a day out of place, I just wasn't expecting her to come home right then. I estimated we still had a good hour and a half, to get clean away. If we hadn't decided to get cheeky and help ourselves to a beer, we'd have been away alright. It's that cheekiness that always seems to land me in the shit. My Mum often says I push the envelope, and that's what'll always get me sprung, and she's right. She also said I never fucking learn. She's right about that too.

It's why we never rob people on a Friday afternoon. Sometimes they'll take an early dart from work for the weekend, and come home as early as lunch time. It's the one day you can never really bank on. But on a Thursday afternoon, just a random fucking day, after weeks of clockwork comings and goings? Nope. Didn't see that one coming.

I haven't a clue where Tommy is. It's been hours now and I haven't heard a fucking peep from him. I don't even know if he managed to pick up the bag of stuff before he got out of there. I expected him to be right behind me when I legged it out through that French door, but I was over the fence and two blocks away before I even looked behind me, and saw he wasn't following. He must have run a different way, but wherever he's ended up, he hasn't called me yet. I guess he will when he's ready, but I'm out of credit to phone or text him, so I'll have to wait. I expected him to have called me by now, but it is only his third burglary, so it's probably really spooked him, being sprung like that. He'll be lying low, I expect.