

## **In search of wolf roots: Day 1**

*Economic mole report: Dear Master, Apparently Mistress and her sister had a female bonding session with the Diners card in a curtain shop in the big smoke. Expect the worst. Sturgess Ursule put new meaning in 'cloak and dagger' with a hideously expensive sequined purchase from his haberdasher in Bicheno. I feel like a failure. Your devoted dog, Bluey.*

*Dear Bluey, If at first you don't succeed ... Love, Master.*

Here's the story of how I came into Master's life and what happened during a further education interlude in Paris France.

I'm the dog that Master Peter never had as a boy. He asked his parents for one when he was nine, and then waited. He never asked again. He got excited at the age of eleven when his father announced he was going to see a man about a dog. Finally!

Master was so happy that he stationed himself at his bedroom window and listened for every approaching bark and watched every wagging tail, hoping against boyish hope for one to come his way. He waited as the sky darkened and blackened and planned to wait until it lightened again, but he fell asleep.

When he told Mistress this story, she cried into the night and vowed to find just the right dog for her man. Mistress once mentioned the subject to Master's mother, who said they thought he'd forgotten as he never repeated his request.

Mistress Deirdre rescued me exactly one month before their wedding. They eloped two and four-fifths years ago, but finally bowed to familial pressure and did

the conventional. I originally came from Germany, unlike the bears I live with, who are both indigenous to their pawtips.

My birth country was a stone's throw from my current location with Master Peter. And what were we doing? A course in Gay Paree so Master could cross over into his preferred profession. It was the weekend and Master needed to re-energise his batteries in the City of Light. His solution was sleep.

I, Bluey Bligmund the Faithful, knew he'd be out for the next forty-eight hours when he hit the pillow, aside from occasional grunting forays into consciousness. Master P didn't need me until Monday morning.

Adventurous vistas unfolded. I planned to ignore his warnings about those little French numbers, but my spirit guide Sri Canakali directed me otherwise. If Sturgess Ursule discovered his conception, said Sri C, then I'd certainly explore my wolfhood at a hideously expensive retreat in the remotest Scottish Highlands where real wolves roamed and which happened to be occurring this very weekend. And Scotia's wolves were our true ancestors. Never mind that my breed purportedly started in nineteenth century Scotland.

Ach Scotland, land of jaw-shaped lochs, biting gossip and sink-your-teeth-in shortbread.

I donned my special tartan collar studded with crystals and trotted northwest across the water as soon as Master Peter was breathing heavily through his open mouth. I was excited to meet six other dogs from all over.

We convened in a newly renovated Victorian hunting lodge.

Guru, supported by a Betty Boopish female, handed out large decorated dog bones engraved with the day's 'In Search Of Your Wolf Roots' program:

**Day 1. Dawn and early morning.** Heather Howl. Howl to your hearts' content without disturbing anyone.

**Day 1. Late morning.** Sauna Roast. Enter via tunnel. Explode [sic] your boundaries.

**Day 1. Afternoon.** Wild Dog Talking. Bring your sons, beat drums and recite poetry.

We gathered in the late-summer, pre-dawn dimness on a windswept moor, seven dogs and one stately guru, all in various stages of wakefulness. I'd eaten a huge breakfast of porridge and bacon cooked floating in inches of lard, so was well insulated against the insinuating mist that made shorthaired dogs shiver.

Shapes all round us formed in the creeping light, of distant mountain peaks and silent lochs glazing the glens. Nearby loomed a pale mound of something indistinguishable. I felt how tenuous was the claim we had upon life. One lusty gust could sweep me over nearby cliffs into nothingness.

Guru opened the proceedings, voice thick from alcoholic excess. 'My strategy is to scramble the order of things, so we'll do Introductions later in the sauna.'

Curiosity about my fellow questers impelled me to scratch my back while doing a furtive survey. My eyes locked with those of a large black poodle engaged in exactly the same pursuit. I'd met a soul in synch.

'Now, boys, to get us off on the right paw, to free up the howler within you, I want to you think of your mothers.'

*We paid good money for this?*

'Come on, you sceptics, remember how Mama rocked you as a pup ... '

'Aooooo,' yapped a West Highland terrier whose badge said Fergusson.

'That's right, and when the doctors thought they'd lose you from distemper, who sat by you day and night ... '

'Hoo-hoo,' whined an Alaskan malamute named Icecap Mal, who would later reveal chilling problems.

'Ver-ry Good, and that time you got lost ... '

'AAOOOOOO,' puled Fergusson.

A memory splinter of abandonment at an exclusive shop niggled into consciousness. I swallowed. Hard.

'Remember when you bit a fair-haired boy who was tormenting you?'

'Arrrrggghhhhhh,' snarled a dachshund named Ramo.

An image sprang to mind of Master Peter as a child, red-haired and gangly, gazing lonely into the horizon from his bedroom window. A lump blocked my throat. Master often told me that I was the dog he never had as a boy.

'Let it all out!' Guru said.

I tried to be dignified but 'Boo hoo' escaped.

'That's right! Now I want each of you to grab two bones from that mound. Beat them on the ground. Pretend it's the vet coming to take you to the RSPCA.'

'Boo hoo.'

The lard-coloured loch, oatmeal moor and bacon-pink sky witnessed our rage.

'Boo hoo.'

We gathered in the sauna later that morning.

'Introduction Time,' chirruped Guru. He scooped water pooled in the hot rocks with a ladle he treated like a ceremonial object.

Seven dogs, including myself, perched on serried wooden benches in the sauna. I read our nametags: Conor and Boris, Irish and Russian wolfhounds; Fergusson the West Highland terrier; and Icecap Mal the Alaskan malamute. Also present were Ramo the disdainful dachshund and Inchmartin the simpatico large black poodle from the morning's Heather Howl.

'You start, hot dog, like this.' Guru illustrated by tossing more water onto the hot rocks. Sizzling steam made the tiny cedar-panelled room suffocatingly hot.

The insolent dachshund flicked the merest coating of water onto the rocks. 'I'm Ramo.' A soft sizz underscored his words. 'I belong to a beloved Edinburgh author, a modern Dickens; no, no, not the hard-boiled crime writer.'

'*That* honour belongs to me,' yawned a large poodle, black from paw to nozzle, crackling with intelligence and Scottish pride. 'They call me Inchmartin the White.'

'And I'm Fergusson, with two 'Ss' same as the mad bard whom Robbie Burns called his big brother and Scotia's poet,' yipped the West Highland terrier proudly. 'Even Alexander McCall Smith — whom we Scots claimed even though he was accidentally born in Southern Rhodesia — made one of Bertie's neighbours weep when he sees the grave of the bard with the brief life in Canongate Kirkyard.'

I surreptitiously compared lengths and smirked inwardly. My body was longer than Fergusson's, in keeping with the differences between terriers, and darker. No getting round it, though: I was blue, with no tinge of steel or iron, just blue, perhaps not the most prized colouring.

'Since when do wolves use saunas?' asked Boris the Russian wolfhound.

'We're utilising all *aides d'guerre* at our disposal, including poetry, to crescendo to tomorrow's Big Event: Wolf Prowl,' explained Guru.

I grabbed the ladle. 'My name is Bluey Bligmund Brownlow and I'm here to discover my wolf roots.' Aided by my spirit guide Sri Canakali, I added silently.

'We're all here for the same reason,' scoffed Inchmartin. 'What does it *mean*?'

I pawed at my tartan, crystal-studded collar. 'For me, taming the warring factions within my psyche will have a positive influence on world peace and personal prosperity.'

'*Positive* influence,' Ramo corrected.

Inchmartin sniggered. '*Pissy* is perfect.'

'I, I, I must have misread that sentence in the self-help book,' I yelped. 'I do so want to be integrated. If you only knew what my home life was like ... '

'Why don't you give us some personal background, blue Scottish terrier?'

Guru asked.

‘Well, er, uh, Mistress Deirdre rescued me at great expense from a swish toy shop in the big city named for a fruit.’

The dachshund grabbed the ladle and threw water on stone with abandon.

‘My tummy hurts.’

‘Ahhh, Bodily Metaphors,’ uttered Guru. ‘So the proceedings are a pain in the gut.’

Boris and Conor, the Russian and Irish wolfhounds, huddled a bit apart, consciously exclusive. ‘Cut the crap. I’m Conor and this is Boris and we’re thirsty!’ barked the raspberry-coloured Irish hound. ‘We want Guinness and vodka!’

‘Stereotypical behaviour!’ cried Guru.

‘This is boring,’ yawned Ramo the dachshund. ‘I’d rather be reading *the Scotsman*.’

‘No reading material allowed, especially regional newspapers.’

‘You’ll excuse me now,’ said Fergusson the Westie. ‘I’ve a prior engagement.’

‘Avoidance!’ cried Guru. ‘Let Us Go Beyond Our Comfort Zones.’ He furiously ladled scoops of water onto steaming stones.

We emitted nary a howl. We were concentrating on not falling apart psychologically due to relentless heat, claustrophobic surroundings and demons dredged up from our submerged psyches.

*‘I wish Coke was still cola, and a joint was a bad place to be . . .’* sang Ramo the dismissive dachshund into the void. The contemptuous dog of a hallowed author was a fan of The Hag? Crooner Merle Haggard had fans in unexpected places. I wondered if Ramo sang the rest of the song in his gentle Georgian home as he turned the pages of his daily paper in the most civilised city of Edinburgh ... *‘Before microwave ovens, when a girl could still cook and still would ...’*

I couldn’t believe my ears. Here we were in the land of standing stones, and instead of being transported by Druidic music (whatever that is) we were importuned by a whining human spoiled by his women.

Now I ask you.

The voice of one of my professors counselled across time: *Expect trivialities as a frantic barrier before Getting Down, in the true Blues sense of the word.*

'... secret standing stones,' Inchmartin intoned. 'Yes they were used by Druids for human sacrifice and religious worship, but their true use may never be known.'

The Westie's face broke out in a proud grin. 'Did you know they do a belt buckle and a sporran featuring my face? Check out the Internet. I'm proud to belong to a race the letters of whose alphabet were traditionally named after trees.'

Without warning the Alaskan malamute leapt snarling at Ramo.

'No!' Guru interposed himself between the dogs.

Conor and Boris left off their plotting long enough to intercede, deflecting most of the nip on the bicep Icecap Mal inflicted on Guru. They pulled Icecap off Guru and forced him to sit between them on a blisteringly hot bench.

Soon the malamute calmed down. 'I also have something to overcome.' His handsome coat shook as he accepted the ladle. 'One night I did something that changed the course of my life forever. I couldn't help myself. I'm different from a husky, although people confuse often us.'

'Therein lies the problem,' Conor said.

'Members of my breed are bigger and have brown eyes instead of one or two blue ones,' Icecap Mal continued. 'We're more aggressive, but we're just as friendly. Now, my humans loved animals but weren't very knowledgeable about dogs. They had two dogs, me and a husky, and they were unable to distinguish between us. The human children had their own menagerie, mainly hamsters and rabbits. Then, one dark night, something came over me.'

He paused. I'd been mentally preparing what to say next, but his silence captured my attention. The wolfhounds lurked, ready to regrip the malamute.

Icecap Mal sighed. 'I ate one of the pet rabbits.'

‘Understandable, my dear chap,’ I said.

‘Part A, yes, but not Part B. I didn’t accept responsibility; rather, I blamed the husky. He ran away in wrongly accused distress and was run over by a car. The family eventually forgot it, but how can I ever come to terms with such an execrable breach?’

‘We all do things we’re not proud of,’ Guru said. ‘Sometimes they don’t seem so bad when we air them, but your case is an exception. How *could* you?’

Icecap Mal dissolved into yowls, precluding his further participation.

‘Hrrrrum.’ Fergusson cleared his throat regally. ‘I represent Scotia, known in Scottish Gaelic as Alba. I have a confession to make.’

Seven canine bodies twisted. Fourteen ears perked to attention.

Guru narrowed his eyes.

The West Highland terrier cleared his throat, gazed into the middle distance and began:

‘Nor bonny blackbird skims and roves

To seek his love in yonder groves’<sup>1</sup>

‘You Scots! Think you’ve got poetry *down*,’ Conor mumbled in a superior manner. ‘How’s this:

‘I hear the stag’s belling

Over the valley’s steepness;

No music on the earth

Can move me like its sweetness’<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Fergusson, Robert, ‘from *Auld Reikie*, a Poem,’ *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, ed Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah, London, 2001, p 270.

<sup>2</sup> The Sweetness of Nature, from the mad king Suibhne (Sweeney), trans Frank O’Connor, fr 12<sup>th</sup> CE romance: the king flees the battlefield, ‘driven mad by the sight of broken bodies’ pp 54-5, *Penguin Book of Irish Verse*, intro and ed Brendan Kennelly, Penguin, London, 1970

‘Now now!’ Guru’s voice was sickeningly hearty and finger-waggingly directive. ‘Poetry is planned for this afternoon. Fergusson, please continue with your confession.’

The Westie addressed the assenting murmur. ‘I’m not as smart as people think. I, er, I’ve come here to deepen my knowledge of how wolves tick so I can hunt them better. I expect Conor, our Hibernian representative over there, feels likewise.’

Stunned, confused, fraught with consternation: such were the silences greeting this revelation. The Irish wolfhound at Boris’s side nodded stiffly, as if he were holding something back.

The maddening heat affected us all.

Dogdemonium prevailed, in full yipping, yapping, growling, grunting, howling, yowling, yawping, barking glory.

The sessions ended in disaster, of interpersonal interactions, loins draped with white terry towels, bodily metaphors, stereotypical behaviour, avoidance, confessions, and demons dredged up from our submerged psyches.

We clawed canine hides to exit the tunnel, each grappling with his own private betrayal.

We gathered in a meagre circle by a loch on the moor after luncheon in the kennel refectory — sparse, supposedly to make us lean and mean for tomorrow’s prowl but really to enhance profits.

The wind wailed.

A clutch of puppies piled in a mound in our midst, ready for Father-and-Son Bonding.

The sky shimmered like water-patterned silk splashed with charcoal-clotted clouds. Opal, plum and silver of land, loch and sky had replaced the morning’s colours of lard, oatmeal and bacon-pink.

Each battering wind gust thrust into my nerves a memory shard from the morning's Heather Howl: young puphood, illness, abandonment, the torments of boys and mother issues.

Each cloud scurrying across the sky twisted deeper the slivers of the Sauna Roast that had culminated in dogdemonium as we tried to escape the overheated, claustrophobic surroundings.

My spirit guide Sri Canakali helped me stay grounded and prevented my freaking out at the first opportunity.

'Where's Icecap Mal?' I was concerned about the Alaskan's psychological well being after his freak-out in the sauna.

'I'm afraid we've lost him,' Guru said, beating the rhythm of the sentence on his knee.

'Sorry to hear that.'

Various tiskings showed that I was not alone in liking the malamute.

'And I regret to report that the wolfhounds have gone AWOL,' Guru said. The minuscule presence of the yipping puppies mounded in our midst somehow diminished Guru's stature.

Conor and Boris had probably found a pub somewhere.

Three down. That left Ramo the dachshund, Fergusson the West Highland terrier, Inchmartin the White and myself, Bluey Bligmund.

Fergusson turned toward the puppy pile and sniffed. 'What's that smell? Who's had an accident? Was it you, Wee Ferg?'

'No, Dad,' said the little pup, looking up at his father with expressive eyes.

'Wee Ferg, turd, maird,' I recited to unanimous paternal glares.

Ramo look at his little Bertrand, who stared back defiantly.

'Don't look at me, Pop.'

‘Enough of this! Gather your young.’ Guru accompanied this pronouncement with a portentous raising of his robed right arm. ‘We’ve hired a top-notch child-minder. Take them to the Puphouse.’

After the scuff and tumble of removing the next generation, it transpired that the only childless participants were myself and Inchmartin the White, which led to a certain camaraderie.

This was a time of poetry, of masculinity, of digging deep for the lupine within us.

I inhaled and lost myself in my surroundings. Unfolding magenta heather glazed the moor. Ripples in the water shimmied the hovering hillside like an inverted breast. The sky co-operated with Guru by turning misty blue, winding round water and mountain like the beloved merging with the Infinite.

‘Pull yourself together,’ my spirit guide Sri Canakali ordered.

Guru inclined his deerstalker in Fergusson’s direction. ‘We didn’t hear much from you in the Sauna Roast.’

‘Aside, that is, from the confession of your motive for attending the seminar, which led to dogdemonium,’ I puffed.

‘Sorry about that,’ said Fergusson. ‘It’s jetlag. I’ve been hunting in North America. I should be right for tomorrow’s Glen Prowl.’

‘I’m bred to hunt, too,’ I said. Vermin may not have had the same cachet as deer and wolves, but farmers appreciated having their eggs, poultry and grain left alone.

Guru beat the mulberry-wood bodhran with his fists. ‘And then there was The Word!’

Ramo the dachshund signalled his intention to recite by grabbing the Irish drum, whose rim was inlaid with rosewood and whose head was goatskin. He flicked the wooden beaters on the resounding surface with his tiny paws. The sun splayed behind him, rocking earth and sky in a mother-of-pearl cradle, like a splashed-ink

painting in which artist approaches canvas only after meditating upon a vision of the painting and unifying himself with that vision. Ramo incanted an embarrassing ditty about Paternal Duty, No Bones About It.

Inchmartin rolled his eyes at me from thirty feet away, over the heads of Fergusson and Ramo. I returned the gesture. This was new to me; I was unsure if I performed the motion correctly or whether I appeared to be doing ocular yoga exercises. I must have got it right, because the poodle padded to my side, nodding approvingly.

I shrugged and gazed into the water yapping at my feet. The Vedas regard water, present in air, rain, mist and clouds, as the tangible manifestation of the divine presence. I imagined my short blue terrier snout transmogrifying into an elongated lupine one. Half-inch goldy fish zigzagged frenetically through the clear brown water. A feeling of resistance spread through me, creating whirlpools roiling just beyond reach.

Guru dropped the bodhran in a flurry of excitement to impart his wisdom.

'Let me get that for you.' I bounded over, retrieved the drum and returned it to Guru.

A wedge of resentment cracked Fergusson's features. 'Sycophant!' he shouted.

'Rivalry!' cried Guru. 'The West Highland terrier can't help his nature but *you*, Bluey — '

I growled, ready to pounce. How had all my good intentions become so twisted?

'*You*, little blue Scottie, are suffering from NEET Syndrome.'

'I'm not neat, I'm compact!' I cried. 'I'm just what the standard for good breeding specifies: well muscled and giving the impression of immense power in a small package. A mature male should be ten inches at the shoulder and weigh about twenty pounds, which I am and do!'

The omnipresent loch and mist magnified my words as once again I battled my demons and ached to return to Master.

'Not neat,' Guru corrected. '*NEET*. Neurotic Earnest Eager Toadying.'

'What are your qualifications?' demanded my new friend Inchmartin the White. 'I'm *au courant* with the dark side of my city and Ramo keeps me abreast of intellectual life on our turf. I've never heard of this syndrome.'

'Beat that drum, Whitey!' Guru cried. 'New Poetry! Very challenging!'

Ramo the dachshund howled with laughter. "Wait 'til I tell 'em back in Edinburgh!' He laughed so hard he clutched his tummy with both paws.

Certain thoughts percolated into consciousness. I wish I hadn't come. Whatever was I thinking? I hated airing dirty laundry in public. I was far too private and independent a dog for this sort of nonsense. I'd rather be at Master's feet or digging in the garden, driving mistress crazy. Once Mistress sent me to obedience school. She was sick of the household revolving around me. What a martinet ran the school! Nearly broke my spirit, the old cow. Master rescued me just in time.

I was proud to say I was well high impossible to train. Long may it continue! I owed everything to Master. I let him think he was the Boss, and perhaps he really was. I suspected he secretly liked me as I was. He didn't really mean it when he called me 'incorrigibly stubborn.' He let me come and go and didn't ask me where I'd been.

What more could a dog want?

And I'd nearly got Mistress trained ... just a few more years ...

O life was good. So much to look forward to.