

My Dog Chum

by Michael Lewis

My Uncle Les owned a pub, called the Black Swan, in Casnewedd (Newport) just over the Welsh border from England. It was a plain, scrubbed and weathered city pub, but as a “free house” Uncle Les independently negotiated purchase of beer from those breweries he preferred at beneficial prices. In addition, because his pub was near the busy wholesale markets with its large workforce of porters and buyers, Uncle Les gained a special dispensation to open in the early mornings and late at night when every other pub in the town was closed.

The Black Swan was a goldmine with a license to print money.

By our standards Uncle Les was a wealthy man, as evidenced by the car he drove, a Rover 90 that was only a few years old when he bought it. For cash you know. We always visited Uncle Les and his wife Auntie Alma when we traveled to the Rhondda to visit my grandparents and our extended family.

That’s how I met Uncle Les’ dog Chum. Chum was part of the money making machine of the pub because he could take an order and transmit it to the bar. His vocabulary ran only to “Wuff” which meant “a pint of bitter.” That profitably upgraded customers who wanted a half-pint to the larger volume or those who wanted the much cheaper mild ale to the more expensive product. Some customers tipped Chum with a small measure of beer so he was more or less comatose ten minutes after opening time.

Chum had another money making and beer-earning skill. He could unerringly identify in which hand a customer was holding, for example, a coin or pencil stub or a cube of chalk for a billiard cue. Uncle Les called this game Tebbit. He would cajole customers into making bets by recounting this unlikely canine skill. Chum then failed to win this evens bet when the bets were small, but magically transformed into an Houdini when the win was a pound or two and worth having.

Chum was a well-groomed little dog, but managed to project a lovable scruffy

and rakish image as many terriers do. He could do every dog trick upon voice command and by hand signal. He was smart and an absolute charmer and I fell in love with him.

I knew that Chum was the only dog in the world for me.

Nevertheless, it came as a great surprise, a week later, when we visited Uncle Les on the way home from Wales and he asked me if I would like to have Chum to be my own dog. I was giddy with delight. My parents refused absolutely, no way, not in a million years. Theirs was a firm, unmovable, absolute NO! justified with a thousand reasons.

It took about an hour of outrageous behavior to turn that ship around.

Chum became my dog.

Uncle Les said he was a pure bred Welsh Wire-Haired Terrier, but I could find no such breed in the dog encyclopedia. Chum, who was a white dog with brown and black patches, looked nothing like the photo of a Welsh Terrier. I didn’t care. Mind you, I did wonder why Uncle Les would part with a pure bred dog of Chum’s obvious talent and engaging charm.

Try as I might, I was never able to monetize Chum’s amazing skill at playing Tebbit. He did not “get it” with me the way he “got it” with Uncle Les. I even risked terrible retribution when I nicked a bottle of dad’s beer, thinking the lack of liquid reward was the problem inhibiting Chum’s detective skills.

Chum fitted perfectly into our neighborhood gang of small boys and street urchins and roughhoused with us. He went with us everywhere and chased whatever we threw for him and discouraged other dogs who entered our urchin space by a threatening growl that deterred even the largest invaders. He warned us urgently when the local Bobby, who had a nasty way of telling us to clear off, hove into sight.

That turned out to be Chum’s big problem, his Achilles heel: Chum could not tolerate anyone wearing a uniform and

this phobia got worse as time went on. The postman in his navy and red carried a spray can of self-protection and thought Chum was merely another damn nuisance. The American soldiers, who walked our street from the large and mysterious factory at the bottom of our hill to the bus stop, had seen much worse and gave him the boot.

But one fateful day Chum chased after a policeman who did not see him coming until my sweet dog was firmly and painfully and bloodily clamped to his lower leg. A few days later Mam and I opened the door to a Bobby in full uniformed regalia. He had a summons in his hand. Mam could barely restrain Chum who was apoplectic.

“Ah yes, Mrs. Lewis. Savage little bugger isn’t he?”

That summons was a death sentence, of course. The last I saw of Chum he was trotting beside my dad on his bicycle, not knowing he was going to his execution. I cried and cried but I knew that was a journey he had to make.

Many years later I talked to Uncle Les about Chum. Turns out he gave me the dog because Chum was under a similar order of execution for a similar crime committed in the Black Swan. Uncle Les gave him to me because he was too soft hearted to have him euthanized.

I asked how Chum got so good at Tebbit, and could choose the correct hand on cue. “Oh!” he said “The stupid dog didn’t have the faintest bluddy idea which hand to tap. But I knew, and gave him a hand signal, left or right.” ♦



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