

## Shaggy Dog Stories

When living in Germany, Paula and I purchased a mutt (“Binky”) from the local battered dogs home. It was officially listed as mad by a German vet, which I guess says something about anyone willing to buy it. A singular beast, the first time it was left alone it ate three of my neckties and a set of headphones...though perhaps more as an attack on my fashion and musical tastes, than any statement of dietary preference (it was a very opinionated dog, and always made its feelings known). I once tried to train Binky to retrieve sausages – an experiment which was actually 50% successful: She chased after *and* located 100% of all sausages thrown, but brought back only 0% of them.

In my youth, I was among a group who moved into a house in Harwich, as we fancied a coastal setting in which to pursue our common interest (drinking). (There was talk of the police relocating to next-door, so they could be closer to their work.) We all had pets – mine was a tortoise called Captain Christy, who surprised everyone by being even less active than I was. One of my friends owned an Irish wolfhound – twelve and a half stones of utter chaos. It wasn’t popular with the locals: its amorous nature meant that neighbours couldn’t take little Fifi (or whatever) for walkies, unless their pet was clad in a full suit of armour. It was also in the habit of lurking in a side-road, and bounding out in front of oncoming cars....much like the Hungarian policemen I mentioned previously.

One day, Captain Christy the tortoise went missing. I was beside myself with grief (or not hugely bothered – I can’t remember which). Three days later he was spotted by another friend...or at least, *part of his shell was* - protruding from a large mound of wolfhound droppings. I suppose to the dog, it must have looked like a slow moving Cornish pasty on legs. I declined to give the Captain a decent burial. There wasn’t much left, and I didn’t fancy retrieving what little there was.

The other night, Paula and I watched a low-budget dog-show on the box. It featured the kind of mongrels that – in many countries – would give their owners most pleasure in a casserole. One trick they had to perform, was to run up the ‘corridor of temptation’: This included a variety of toys, a cooked chicken and – right at the end – a mouth-watering platter of honey roast ham. Their masters would call them ever more desperately, as they approached this ultimate test. A few dogs slowed down as they came to it, and a gratifyingly pained expression would cross their faces. But they all made it.

In truth, Binky failed at sausage rescue and recovery because she was thirty yards away with her back to me. Likewise, the wolfhound wouldn’t have wolfed down the mobile pasty, if his owner had been in the room. And yet these other hounds were able to overcome temptations at least the equal of those. How? Each one of them kept his eyes on his master, and prevailed.

There’s a lot of rubbish talked about the authentic Christian life. People say it’s difficult, but it isn’t. *It’s actually humanly impossible*...though God can make it work for us, *if* we are willing. It’s mostly about allowing him to change us from the inside, rather than anything *we* do. And when it comes to temptation, he doesn’t expect us to have iron willpower – he’s a realist. He just expects us to keep our eyes on our master, and prevail!