

Corker and the Black Dog

No one remembers his real name. Everyone in Astoria called him Corker. Corker lived with his black dog. They sheltered in a shack that sat at the end of a pier on the east side of town. Corker made cork floats for the fishermen. He used to whistle, *Down by the Riverside*, as he shaped and varnished his floats. He always put an extra coat of varnish so that the floats would last through multiple seasons. He laid the floats out on large oil skin tarps to dry in the sun. If it rained before the varnished dried, the newly minted floats would just have to sit out longer under the cloud filled sky.

Corker warmed the shack with a cast iron stove and kept a dented kettle on top for hot water. The black dog plopped down on a rag rug by the stove on those too many cold coastal nights.

Corker had his own little fishing boat, a bow picker named Cranberry. When he had sold out of all of his floats, he would try his hand at fishing on the mighty Columbia. If he had a good catch, he would earn some coin and enjoy a bit of what the town had to offer.

Mostly though, he waited in his shack for the fishing boats to drop by. The fishermen would buy his floats and share gossip and some homemade hooch. Corker would offer a warm mug of tea or coffee. The black dog would lick cold hands, wag her tail and greet every visitor.

Corker was an even tempered, soft spoken man. No one had a bad word to say about him and the fishermen found his cork floats to be very reliable.

In fair weather, Corker would take his dog out on the boat and they would motor down to Hammond, share a picnic and head off for a walk. They would walk along the railroad tracks and listen to the sealions bark. Sometimes the black dog would meet a herd of elk and chase them through the tall grasses. Corker worried that a mama elk might hurt his black dog. He would get anxious waiting for the dog to return. Often, she would be gone for hours. Corker called her name until his voice went completely hoarse. He would sit on a tree stump in the rain feeling frightened and lonely. Then the black dog would come out of the woods and sit in front of him with her tongue hanging out and her tail wagging. He wrapped his bruised arms around her and drank in the smell of her wet and woodsy fur and felt relief coursing through his entire being. He treasured that dog.

Corker loved fishing and the black dog loved to be near Corker so she always went out on the boat with him. He set his nets down. There were other boats nearby.

“I hope they don’t box us in,” he said to his dog.

Corker hung out his net. His shiny floats bobbed on the top of the water. The dog locked eyes with him and waited patiently. Corker broke open a tin of sardines and shared some with the dog.

Suddenly they heard a splashing noise. The corks were bobbing on the water.

“Look girl! I think we got a netful of beautiful chinook salmon!”

They watched the fish pull on the corks and the water splashed as the silvery fish struggled in the net.

“It looks like those other fish boats didn’t box us in after all! We did good girl, didn’t we?”

The dog looked up at Corker and wagged her thick black tail.

Corker pulled the fish on board, weeding out the by-catch and motored back to Astoria to sell his fish and hang his nets.

Corker traded some of his money for a bottle of hooch to take the chill off. When he started to drink, he couldn't stop until every drop was gone.

The cork maker disappeared into town and into the Astor Street Houses to meet with the ladies. He played cards, drank too much and staggered out into the darkness. That night, Corker stumbled down the docks and fell into the cold black water. His dog followed him and dove into the river and dragged him to the banks, licking his wet face and hands with her warm tongue.

Corker woke up in his shack the following morning with a searing headache and chilled from the damp. The stove was cold and the dog lay next to him keeping him warm.

Corker pulled himself up and off the lumpy bed. He stomped his feet and shook the soggy blankets. He was miserable. He struggled to get a fire going in the stove. He rubbed his fat fingers together and looked out his window. A soft fog lay on the river and there were ships waiting for a pilot.

He peeled off his wet clothes and hung them on hooks. He put on a moth-eaten plaid robe and a pair of hand knit wool socks and let out a sigh.

He turned his pockets inside and out and discovered that every last cent was gone.

He rubbed the dog on the top of her head and stroked her long soft ears.

“What's the point in going fishing?” he said. “How about I cook us up some eggs for breakfast?”

The dog moved closer to the stove.

Corker took some eggs from an old icebox along with a hard cube of butter. He whipped the eggs and butter in a cast iron skillet. The butter foamed and the eggs sizzled and steam rose from the hot pan. Corker retrieved some hardtack out of the breadbox. He dished out equal amounts of scrambled eggs into two bowls and split the hardtack in two. He put one bowl on the floor. Corker and the black dog devoured the hot breakfast.

“I swear to you, girl. I will never be such an ass again. If we ever bring in another good catch, I'll put my money away and leave only enough to have a good time. You know girl, I'd be dead if it wasn't for you. Maybe next time I will just play a few hands or meet up with some of the ladies but stay away from the hooch. What do you think?”

The black dog looked up at him. She didn't believe a word he said but she loved him anyway.

Some months later the Cranberry was found in Young's Bay down by the bridge. She was moving in wide slow circles. Neither Corker nor the dog were onboard. There was still money in a rusty coffee can in the sink. Corker and the black dog had not returned to the shack. They were never seen again and presumed drowned. No one remembers what ever happened to the little shack on the east side of town. Some people say that they have seen a black dog chasing elk through the tall grasses. Others say they have heard somebody whistling *Down by the Riverside* near Pier 39. Others wonder whatever happened to the rusty coffee can.