

## In Memory of Kipper Thompson

I met Kipper Thompson when I was 19, almost 20. He played guitar in a band with his brothers — every Sunday and sometimes Tuesday nights at the Station Hotel — and I was a studious, middle-class undergrad.

We had almost nothing in common, but before long Kipper became the older brother I'd always wanted but never had. An almost imperceptible nod from the stage when I joined the shadows at the back of a Sunday crowd. Me making him wear jumpers in the winter. A squeeze on my shoulder as he passed when unknown men talked to me at the pub. Beered up games of pinball with his wife and brother at a birthday party. I knew when he was in the room without looking.

But when I was 22, and he was 32, he killed himself. Just like Pip in *Great Expectations*, I'm not going to tell this story the way it happened, just the way I remember it.

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On a Tuesday night in the summer of 1996 I set off for the pub, thinking that once the university term began it would be difficult to get to shows. We talked between sets. Kipper's brother and his wife were expecting, and I'd been working to master some guitar chords Kipper had sent me two weeks before.

Six days later, around 6pm, I received a phone call from the band manager to say Kipper had fallen off a cliff while bushwalking. We learnt the true story later: after an argument with his wife, Kipper took a train to the Blue Mountains, walked for an hour into the national park and jumped off a cliff. When walkers found his body the following morning, Polair winched it out. As I'd left the hotel the Tuesday night before, I had turned in the doorway, telling Kipper to go home for some sleep to get over his 'flu, and as he snapped the locks on his guitar case shut he promised me that he would. Instead, he decided to die less than 48 hours later.

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I returned to my studies soon after, trying to put one foot in front of the other, hoping to finish my final year. It worked, up to a point, but in April the initial shock began to wear away and I suddenly understood the immense pain that

Kipper had been in. Depression clung to my back during the day like a child, weighting down my every step and slowing every movement. It sat on my chest during the night. When things were really bad I lived for the few seconds of grace when I woke, that window into the day just before remembering everything else. Sometimes I slept just for that. Often I woke as if freezing cold, with my feet pulled up and my knees under my chin, crossed arms wound around me and hands balled into fists, and some days I found I had been crying in my sleep.

The ocean seemed to help. I sat on the sand watching the waves rolling in and out, watching the sea take whatever it wanted and only giving back what it felt like. But bending down to tie the laces on my running shoes above the beach one day, I felt a pain under my ribs on the left side of my chest. More diffuse than a stitch, this was painful enough to make me put my hand under my shirt and my palm across my ribs. I pulled it out after a minute or so and looked at it as if there should have been something there, but nothing. I was surprised but didn't know why. A while later I realized: it was almost as though my heart was actually bleeding through my chest. I had been looking for blood.

Over the next 6 months my health continued to decline. By the time I saw my GP in September, I had lost more than 12kg, regularly slept more than 12 hours a night and struggled with basic tasks. Fortunately, she did a careful history and prescribed antidepressants. Things got a little worse before they got better, but within a few weeks I was back in her office explaining that some of the fog had lifted. I was terrified at how unwell I had been. We made regular appointments for a few months until I stabilised, and she referred me to a psychologist in the local area.

The depression made it hard to think clearly. Kipper hadn't told me about the parts of the situation which had already unfolded before I last saw him. He had also seen his brother after the argument with his wife. I was blindingly angry, but for some reason the rage wasn't directed at Kipper, and for a long time I couldn't piece these things together. The breakthrough came when I finally understood why Kipper had hidden his pain. After his death, family and friends replayed every conversation a thousand times for clues, but he wanted us to understand that there was nothing more we could have done. In his mind, he had given us the very last thing he had left to give: freedom from a lifetime of guilt.

Twelve years on, there is a lot I wish I'd known at 22. Medication helps a great deal, but managing depression – in the short or the long term – is generally a more complex and individual game. At 22, my black dog was a gigantic, slobbering Doberman that slept on my bed during the night and followed me everywhere I went. Now I have a Scottie that mostly sleeps outside in his kennel. I still have to take him to obedience classes, but sometimes I can leave him at home. Here's what I've learned about managing my black dog:

- Tell your close friends and family about your pet: they may notice he is getting bigger and developing bad habits before you do.
- Read your dog books about zen, particularly the parts about acceptance. Read him Harry Potter books, particularly the funny bits.
- Find a canine-friendly GP and take your dog along for regular checkups (particularly after an initial diagnosis or if you've just started taking medication).
- Recognise that black dogs choose their owners, not the other way around. The black dog will pick anyone it wants to, irrespective of age, gender or intellect (and he doesn't care whether you believe in him or not.)
- Take your dog to the park: sit in a stripey deckchair in the sun.
- Never ask your black dog for his opinion: while he may seem convincing, he often makes very bad decisions.
- Get your dog a timetable: even if the only structure in your days are regular sleeping times, going out for a newspaper after lunch and a quick game of 'fetch' before dinner.
- Keep an eye out for other black dog owners, they pop up in the most unexpected places and often have good training tips.
- Take your dog to visit people you know well and places where you feel safe. Take him to play with children you like.
- Getting angry and yelling at your black dog's bad behaviour rarely helps, but if you consistently speak to him in a firm voice he will eventually learn.

- Black dogs hate water: have a bath, go swimming, sit by the river or walk along the beach without your shoes.
- If you suspect that someone you know lives with a big black dog, don't assume they know, because sometimes he hides behind the lounge.

Also, I've learned that what you are feeling isn't always what other people expect you to be feeling, and this is OK. Scrambled eggs is better than no dinner at all. Trust your instincts to help choose a psychiatrist or psychologist: they need to understand you and you need to trust them. And finally, understand that you will be OK one day, although that day might not be today. I'm all right now, more or less. My Scottie still lives with me but after lots of training he's generally fairly well behaved.

Its just you and me today kid. Just us. We'll wade out a bit further against the tide where the water gets dark, we'll sing a bit louder in the chorus and we'll laugh the most of anyone in the funny bits. We'll run up to the top of the highest mountain we can see, really fast and breathing hard. We'll have the best time. Stand up here on my shoulders and catch me down a star! I've got you now, just hang on tight. I've got you, Kipper says to me.

I think he might have been crying when he was standing on the top of the mountain, just before he jumped. To this day, I cry because he would have been cold and alone, and to this day I would do anything to have him back.

NB: The names of people in this essay have been changed for confidentiality.