

**Highly Commended: Anonymous (NSW)**

## *Please Don't Pat the Dog*

The Black Dog comes to you. Never whistled, never welcome, and never leaving until good and ready.

What kind of reward is that for someone finishing nearly 50 years in the workforce?

You've taken the package and made the pledge to shift down a gear. The stress is gone and your time, your life, is no longer a possession of others. You tell yourself that you can live easily in this different space. There's an endless list of new things to do and more than enough time to catch up on projects put aside for so long. The first 12 months is a blur as you tick the list, but, although the second year is more leisurely, you now feel it's there that something – an intangible something – began. Its nascence remains unmarked in the past, but you sense that there must have been a signal that was simply disregarded and dismissed. After all, you were a captive to other things, matters that meant more in your new life.

The cur comes.

Your life changes.

At first, there is a subdued hum of anxiety that distracts you. The days seem a little darker, your hopes a little weaker. Strengthening doubt seems to lock out calm consideration. Your thoughts are scattered, skidding in all directions. Disquiet and Doubt. That makes you smile. The myth-makers of old had Seylla and Charybdis, and now you have your own twin perils.

Disquiet and Doubt. To those you can add Denial.

You say you're just moody. That's a better way to put it, you insist. And you're perhaps a little bored. But the others – the ones you love and by whom you're loved – prefer to say grumpy or out of sorts. Not wanting to offend the old bloke, they use the words softly, with humour. What do you expect, you remind them. You're getting old. It's just a phase, sure to pass soon enough. Your answer is nodded to, but the question lingers in their eyes.

You're starting to sit a lot. By yourself. No, that's not quite accurate; it's more like sitting inside yourself. Or you're simply beside yourself; you joke and try to lower the temperature by saying you're thinking things through. Surely they can see that.

It's a long time before someone uses the word 'depression' and – after a wrenching reaction – an even longer time before it's used again.

You feel better, you lie. That's one thing at which you're getting better. That's what you tell them, but what you tell yourself is that you've embraced a dark indulgence. You don't know what it is, either in shape or intent. It sits like a stone in your belly. Self-absorption shifts up to self obsession. You want to know what that feeling of dread is. That's why you're distracted. There's nothing more important. If you dissect this feeling, you may be released. You'll say it again: surely the others can see that.

The problem solver appears to have a problem, one says in return.

They shouldn't use the word 'depression', that's one thing of which you're pretty sure. It's become too much the flavour of the month. There seems to be a lot of it going around. Not that that means you are suffering from the same illness. Something similar, perhaps. If anything. Probably nothing, really. Some are calling it a crisis; If you were the media, you could look serious and call it an epidemic. And at the centre of this is the almost daily ritual of public confessions from familiar figures, 'outing' themselves as unable to continue with their duties and diversions because of... well, you know, the D word. How could you number yourself among them? Who'd want to be a part of that abasement? Have a little dignity, please. There's a world of difference between feeling just a little more anxious than usual, and thinking you should expose yourself on that bandwagon.

Still, it'd be good to tidy up matters by putting a label on the malaise. Something succinct to denote these sudden, surprising plunges into nagging despair. Maybe if they plumbed a little deeper they'd learn why there's not much laughter these days. And why the others say your moods are darker and your silences longer, and when those intervals end, there's a destructive edge to your words. You dispute that. Of course. Just as you dispute much, most, practically all judgments of your condition.

Condition? You most certainly dispute *that* as an appropriate description. Especially while it's still possible to maintain that you might be just fussing too much about an adjunct in the process of ageing. But your case is shaky.

Take a look at yourself, they say. We do. We see...

You see what you want to see, you say.

There's no need to snap, they say.

I didn't, you say.

Every conversation is a loop, taking you back to where you don't want to be.

The Dog bides its time. It's an uneven attendant. Its absences are welcomed, but you know it'll be back. Often now, its return catches you by surprise, and the creeping suspicion grows that the visits will never end. Lighten up, you urge yourself; manage the melancholy. Management is the key, you emphasise, almost believing it. You're sure your familiar others have their own Management 101 – deal with the matter by not dealing with it. You resent that but you see they're receding from you and you want them to stay in the fight. Not that you want to appear to need them, but if they bow out, you'll be alone out there on the fringe.

Just you and the Black Dog.

Lighten up, you tell them, but they seem to have stopped listening.

You have to give more ground to them. You could bear the gloom and the dark meditations, but it's all the other tangled emotions that are bringing you undone. Do you really believe that, you ask yourself. And what about Santa Claus? Hopelessness and regret are the norm in your existence now. Your confidence has drained away. There is dislocation. Foreboding. The only decision you can make is not to make any more decisions. One morning, you wake and instantly know the Dog is with you, as it was you went to sleep the night before. You pull up the sheet and curl under it. Before, there was limited refuge in staying still, but this is different. This is the beginning of a new phase. Now you seem paralysed. There's so much to do and you've not the will to begin. It's better to stay where you are.

You should see someone, you're told.

That rankles. Don't they think you can get on top of the situation? It's better to wait – you figure – things always change. This will stabilise. You'll soon have the measure of matters. You'll shake off this lethargy, this torpor, and whatever else has such a tight grip on you.

You should see someone, you're told again.

You've always taken care of yourself, made decisions and lived by them and you'll do so in this case. You just need some separation – some time out – from the problem. With that time, you'll steal back the day from the Dog. The choices are limited. Let things roll over you, but where would that end? Besides, it's not your way. Try focusing further ahead, beyond the nearest hurdle? The Dog drags you back. Ignore it? That merits no response. Seize on something someone says and distract yourself by expanding it? Let their thinking become yours?

There's a new voice now, a repetitive one, saying simply that you're no use to yourself. Or anyone else.

You should see someone, the others say.

I should see someone, you say.

For now, the Black Dog comes. Never whistled, never welcome.