

## **How to live with the Black Dog**

**This story is about how I, as a child, made meaning from living with the black dog, and how I, as an adult, have come to understand and accept it.**

*It was when my dad left my mother that the black dog moved in. It fed and fed so much that eventually us kids were squeezed out of the house too. It was scary being a kid with a fast growing black dog taking up all the space in the house, and all the attention of our mother. Mostly it stayed in the bedroom with her, but its presence permeated the house - it was the palpable odor of loneliness, silence and despair.*

When dad lived with us he would shoo the black dog away, it was ok then because he knew how to ward it off, but we didn't. We were no match for its cunning. The black dog was only a puppy when, uninvited, it came to live with us. It was a small but powerful presence and not much welcomed by us kids. It didn't respond to kindness or warmth and affection like my best friend Angela's black dog did, it fed on misery and isolation. And feed it did, there was much nourishment around for him to feed on when dad left. For the next two years it dominated my mother's life and in turn our lives, the lives of us three kids aged between 8 and 14. I was the eldest, the big sister of my two younger sisters.

When dad left, mum painted her bedroom. But not in the normal way someone paints their bedroom, she turned her bedroom into a beach. She painted two walls dark brown (even the wooden cupboards) one wall bright yellow and on one wall she painted a mural of a sunset on a beach with gentle waves breaking on the shore. She even painted the curtains, which she said was ok because they were rubber backed. She had an orange spotlight onto the setting sun. She said that this would be her healing place, that she could pretend that she was somewhere else. I wondered then why mum wanted to be somewhere else and where did she think we were when she was there. When I told dad he said that it would devalue the house.

After a while I realised that mum's bedroom wasn't much of a healing place, not a healing place at all really. When mum started to spend more and more time in her bedroom we all supposed she was healing, starving the dog, working out ways to get rid of it. But she wasn't healing and she wasn't starving the dog, in fact she was feeding the dog and resigning herself to keeping it.

Mum spent more and more time in her bedroom, coming out only when necessary, to cook meals, to help get the kids ready for school, sometimes to answer the phone. But none of these chores were done like they used to be. Dragging herself away from the burgeoning black dog was becoming increasingly difficult for her and these intrusions and separations were met with stony silence and loathing.

No one ever told us that it wasn't our fault, that it wasn't us that was responsible for letting the dog in, for not chasing him out, for not cutting off his food supply. So naturally we thought it was. Our lack of effort made mum sad and cold. Why didn't someone tell us that it wasn't our fault – dad could've, mum could've, mum's dwindling supply of friends might have, my auntie could've, anyone that could see what was happening to my mother should have told us that it *ISNT YOUR FAULT THAT YOUR MOTHER IS SAD*. I might've believed them if they told me early enough.

As month turned into month, things became increasingly worse and in my mind I was responsible for it all. If it wasn't for us kids mum could heal properly, she could lay on a real beach and let the dog go, maybe find it somewhere else to live, some other owner who would know how to ward it off before it got too big to budge. The house became oppressive, sometimes I panicked, the air was too thick to breathe, too hard to swallow. I started to ring people, my auntie, my dad, I was scared sometimes that mum would never come out of her bedroom, that I would never see her again.

*I pressed my ear to her door and listened - I heard nothing, no sound, nothing. Where is she, the door is locked and she can't hear me, am I yelling out?*

I was the eldest and in my mind the most responsible, the one that failed my mother and my sisters. Noone told me back then that I hadn't. Twenty years later and Angela is still my best friend. When mum was battling the black dog, Angela's father was battling the demon drink but I didn't know it back then. We talk now about growing up in the presence of 'another' in the house and the effect it had on us then, and to some extent, now. If a child is forced to cope with something they can't understand they will inevitably try to make their own meaning. Noone tried to make me understand back then.

I felt responsible for my mother's suicide because everyone left it too late to tell me that it wasn't my fault.

A child's sadness can be blown away with a raspberry icypole, a few jovial words or an amusing event, that was my experience at the age that I felt responsible for my mother. I could no more understand my mother's plight back then than I could understand algebra. But it took until adulthood to reach this conclusion and only then because I got the sort of help and support that my mother so desperately needed. Someone should have told me back then but noone understood, that the very thing mum craved, being left alone, was the thing she needed least of all. Mum needed someone to fling open that bloody door to the imaginary beach, open the curtains and walk her back home.

I lived with the stench of that black dog for a large part of my life until I sought help to unravel the feelings that had dogged me since my mother died. I miss my mother and think about her all the time. I have children of my own now...recently as my sixteen year old daughter tried to console a friend upset at her parent's impending divorce, I overheard her say... 'Don't worry be happy'.

*Somewhere inside me an old black dog stirred, I'm back at mum's door with a raspberry icypole.*

I knew it was time now to tell her about her grandmother. The whole story. She had a right to know. We need to tell our children, while they are children, that black dogs don't like raspberry ices, they don't respond to a kiss on the forehead, they need more than a few jovial words to budge them. So gently and patiently I try to help her understand that when someone is sad, they need you to go there with them, just for a little bit. It's not an easy thing to do, leaving your sunny happy place to peer into their dark abyss but in order to understand you need to visit, have a look around, take their hand and walk them out. No matter how much they want to stay there, because they often do want to stay there, we know that it is a dangerous place to be left alone.