

# HAIR OF THE DOG

*It was there again today lurking in the shadows. Just beyond the light. I could hear it feeding on the scraps I'd put down.*

**'We appreciate all you have done for this company, your loyalty over the past five years – but economic measures must be taken to maintain viability and with the downsizing, we find... er - Ashley - we can no longer support your position. These men will escort you off the premises.'**

**The General Manager's trite tight-arsed speech replays in my mind as I wait for my toast to pop. Then I grab the milk from the fridge, dragging my feet back to bed while swigging from the bottle. Jessy Raphael is about to start.**

*Outside the light patter of four feet impinged on my periphery of recognition.*

**At first I'd felt confident of finding another job. I was a pixel pusher. I had qualifications. Sure, they had not been updated, but I was young and bright and eager. After the fourth letter stating 'You are thirty – seven and we prefer to employ younger people' I simply stopped sending my resume.**

*I heard a shuffling up the outside path as the black dog settled comfortably against my screen door. When had I first noticed it? I couldn't really remember. It had limped through my gate. A dull unhealthy glaze to its eyes nursing a miasma of mange and fleas.*

*The dog stayed on. Faithful.*

*Rapacious.*

**My life took on a pattern of monotony. Punctuated only by the trips to social security and the store to forage for supplies. The latter I prefer to do under cover of darkness at a Twenty-Four-Hour. That way there's no danger of seeing anyone I know. Often I don't even bother with shoes. And I loved the power I felt when I ignore the cashier's cheery call of 'Have a nice day.' I'll be damned if I will.**

*The dog took to following me and waited patiently for me to reappear. He was my shadow and companion. 'Night dog,' I'd whisper to the shape beside my bed at night.*

**My friends have stopped visiting or ringing. They find the petering out of their one-sided conversation too unnerving. Even the Jehovah Witnesses give me a wide berth.**

**I'd cancelled the paper. Letters lay unopened for weeks. Mainly bills anyway. I leave the junk mail decaying amongst the rampant dandelion lawn. It comforts me to think of it fading and deteriorating...Just like my life. Hand written notes appear in my letterbox. 'Keep your yard tidy by disposing of your junk mail.' Occasionally I'd stumble out in the daylight to find it gone - a neighbour presumably swept the detritus into a bin.**

**One day I wake to an 'uff uff ' sound under my window. My brain wrestles with its classification. Then I recognize it. It was the dog. The dog was barking. It had never barked before. I peered out the window. A moving van drew up. I was getting a new neighbour.**

*It's all right, Dog. He won't bother us. I patted the dog reassuringly...*

**A week later I was vibrated to consciousness by the roaring of a machine under my window. It was my neighbour. Mowing... Not the yard across the street. But my own lawn!**

*'Uff, uff uff'. Dog barked at him.*

**It was an invasion of privacy... It was trespass... It was interference... It was disturbance of the peace... It was...**

**The neighbour looked up at me, gave a wave and walked his mower back home.**

**Each Monday it became a ritual.**

**Til one day the neighbour doesn't look up...**

**I feel cheated. Why didn't he wave? Had I done something to offend him?**

**I get out of bed and lie in wait beside the door. When I see the neighbour go to the mailbox I scuttle down too. I raise my hand in greeting. The neighbour waves back. Everything is all right.**

*Dog grew fat, shiny, healthy. But the more I feed it, the more ravenous it grows.*

*And it never stops scratching.*

The neighbour called out '*Mornin*' whenever he saw me – even if it was afternoon. Innocuous remarks would follow about the weather that required a reply. My creaky voice answered – a bit like a door that had not been opened in years. I said to the dog, 'Dog, I like him'.

*Dog whined. And moaned. And scratched vigorously.*

**Then came the knock.**

**I open the door cautiously.**

It's the neighbour. 'Mornin', he says. Think it 'ill rain today? 'No, don't think so,' I reply. He goes on, 'I've been thinking about that patch of yard in the corner, where the grass won't grow. 'Yeah, it's strange,' I agree. Half - joking he asks, 'If you could have anything you want there, what would it be'? I hesitate... He might laugh. 'A fountain. I'd like... a fountain. A ...sculpture fountain.'

He doesn't laugh. But his eyes shine. Slowly. Let's make it out of things we don't want. Junk!' he says.

'Junk! A junk fountain!' I nodd. We both smile.

*The dog cringed. And whimpered. And scratched harder.*

**While he collected the tools, and bought the pump, I collected the junk.**

**The box that still contained my office stuff from work. All perfect junk.**

**For two Mondays we planned. One Monday we dug the pond. For three Mondays we built the fountain. We made a trifle of disks and pens and staplers and paperclips. A chipped cup crowned the pile. Pipes wove through it like black serpentine monsters. And concrete held it all together.**

*The dog peed on it.*

**On the seventh Monday it was finally ready. We tested it...**

**The fountain failed.**

**The neighbour's eyes glistened. He was going to cry. Something was happening to my eyes too.**

*...The canine loomed large. It bared its rotting teeth, leaking a low growl at my neighbour. Saliva dripped from its jaundiced fangs...*

**Ancient keys jangled in my throat. Again and again they jangled. My neighbour guffawed. Then the tears overflowed.**

*The dog deflated. It fled to crouch behind the woodpile, shivering and howling.*

**I held my side. I snorted. My neighbour rolled on the ground. Eventually when our laughter quieted, he said, 'At least it covers up the bare patch.' That set us off again.**

*Although I fed it four times a day the dog began to look unhealthy. It grew skinny and runtish. I brushed Dog's coat to reclaim the gloss. But it cowered as if I was hurting it.*

**One Wednesday my neighbour knocks at the door. I smile at him. But the neighbour doesn't smile back. He says, 'I need help. I work as a Volunteer Odd Job man. There are two others off sick. And we were in the middle of concreting a path for an elderly man. Could you help me? Please?'**

**Today Jessy Raphael is interviewing two gay couples; in 'Days' Hope might have her baby; and Judge Judy was going all out.**

**Thoughts of my neighbour's friendship crowd my brain. I couldn't give him anything in return. My mouth opens to say 'It's not Monday... it's Wednesday...I ...can't'. But instead what falls out is a cracked 'Y...ezzz'.**

*Dog growls and slinks away.*

Phil had said how hard I'd worked. That was my neighbour's name. Phil. The service had even asked if I could help out occasionally. I arrive home that night aching and exhausted. The bed opens its arms and I tumble into them.

A God-awful smell assaults me when I wake. I sniff. I gag. It's me!

I strip the bed, wash myself and the sheets and myself.

I air the house and open windows to let the sunshine in.

The toast and stale cereal looks gross this morning.

'Dog, bacon and eggs and a mixed grill I think,'

Which means, of course, a trip to the store.

*Dog stayed home. Sulking. And frantically trying to scratch.*

**The cashier said 'Have a good day'. 'Thanks', I reply. Then realize I had answered her *and* smiled. She smiled back.**

**The porridge is spotless... The bread to mops up the last of the eggs and meat.**

*Dog looked up expectantly. 'Sorry Dog, no bone for you today.*

*You'll have to starve.'*

**Dog said nothing. It just shrank a little more.**

*The Black Dog – depression, may bite any one. It can be event driven or have a biological cause. Seek a GP's help with medication or a counsellor. Do not expect an overnight cure. Depression is a condition – not a death sentence. Would you know The Dog if it came calling? In this allegory count the negative actions that feed The Dog. Then the positive strategies that starve it.*

## NEGATIVES

*1-3 ... its looming*

*4-8 ... its growling*

*9-11 ... its biting*

*11-13 ... its scarred you*

*above ... it has your number*

## POSITIVES

*1-3 ... its whining*

*4-8 ... it's shaking*

*9-11 ... it's moaning*

*11-13 ... its starving*

*above ... you have its number*

## **MAIN SOURCES**

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