

## The Black Dog

This is how it begins. A house sits on the corner of Cottage Street. Two pots of drying marigolds flank the front door, but there is no dog wagging his tail on the other side of the screen. The dog is chained to a tree in the backyard, which is a boring way for him to spend his days, with no one to throw a stick or scratch his wet nose when he feels lonely.

The dog comes inside at night, and Mary's father beats him in the same way that Christine's father plays golf or like Lizzie's father eats peanuts in front of the TV while he watches the Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling. It is a thing for her father to do. He might beat the dog because someone left clothes in washing machine all weekend. Now the basement smells like a pond of dead frogs that forgot about their croaks before they even died. Her father may beat the dog because corn and potatoes are both starches, and when he asks for a starch and a *vegetable* at dinner, what he means is he wants a starch and a *vegetable*. When her father beats the dog, Mary builds a bonfire in her head and sits him in the center with a mouthful of gasoline.

The dog often escapes, slipping past the screen door or taking off as someone drags him by the collar to his chain under the tree. He is vigilant, wide-eyed and waiting for the opportunity to run, so Mary saves up her birthday money and buys him binoculars so he can stay on the lookout for the right time. She slips the binoculars inside a velvet pouch that hangs from his collar. Other times, she blindfolds the dog and sits him right in front of the open door. She stands beside him and lets him smell the air, watching his ears

twitch as he listens to children roll over the sidewalk on skates. He tries to discern if this is a time to run and turns his head toward her for help, but Mary won't give a single hint and even when his shoulders fall, she doesn't rub her fingers on his wet nose.

Maybe tonight is a Tuesday night, or else it is Saturday morning. The ice maker has broken. Christmas is coming or Easter just passed, and the black dog cries out in long peals that fill the house. Frantic and lathered, his strong body twists midair, curling around the hot leather belt each time it strikes. Strings of mucus swing from his muzzle, and pain cuts his eyes into small scraps that fall to the floor. He yelps and the belt swings him into the air before dropping him with a thud. Mary stands in the corner. She is a vault in the basement of a bank, and her feet have grown into the kitchen tiles. Tattooed movers with lit cigarettes pasted to their lips could not budge her. Men strong enough to lift china cabinets overhead and carry pianos on their backs would shrug impressive shoulders, muscles shifting around like hard apples, and say without apology, "Nope, can't be done. She ain't moving. Going to have to tear the bank down around her. She ain't got plans to move any time soon." Mary wishes her dumb family had never taken the dog from his mom. Eyeballs roll in her heart and tears collect behind her teeth. Oranges are lined up on the windowsill, throwing garish color at Mary like darts. The refrigerator hums from its toes. Outside the window, a bird bleats. Mary wants to throw a dart at the bird, landing its tip square in the bird's quivering breast. She wishes she could wrap the black dog around her neck like a stole and run. To carry him far away, down Cottage Street and crossing over Vicky Lane. Running all the way into the country, away from traffic lights and sewers clogged with wet leaves and flattened cigarette boxes. She

would settle the dog under a tree and lick his weeping wounds just like his mom would. She wouldn't spit out the blood either. She would just lick his torn skin until he healed, and then fall asleep with her arms wrapped around his shuddering belly.

The black dog's mom would never let Mary's father do this if she were here. She would bite the shit out of his throat to make him stop, only walking away once he was motionless in a pool of blood. Mary stands stock still. She wishes for someone to step in the pile of dust that is her and scatter the dirt. She wants to blow away, out of the window and past the gray shoulder of the bleating bird. She wishes the dog would take her with him when he runs. She could hold onto his collar printed with pictures of soccer balls and ride his back down Vicky Lane under a sky shaken empty of stars. Mary and the dog could be two survivors living off the land, finding his mom and settling down together inside a cave. Mary could easily learn to kneel on her hands and knees and drink water right from the river with only her mouth. This would not be a big deal.

The belt whistles. The black dog cries. He will never leave her, though. Not for good. She wishes he would leave. She would die if he left. She buys green and brown yarn and crochets an afghan for his doghouse. She throws him a birthday party with balloons so he feels special. She changes her mind and buys a farewell sheet cake decorated with green icing. She orders a genuine leather suitcase for him. Puckered silk pockets line the inside. She pays extra for a gold nameplate etched with his initials. *T.B.D.* She grows worried. A rash breaks out on her arms, and she sits down at the kitchen table with her colored pencils. She draws plans for a multileveled doghouse, which can be built right under her

bedroom window. She installs a bright porch light on the dog's new house, and she hems curtains printed with bouncing cherries. But she can't do it to him. She selects a warm traveling coat for him and purchases him a train ticket. A day pass. A weekly pass. She can't bear it for herself. She is ashamed but installs a stainless steel dog treat machine beside his doghouse, wedging a stone in the coin slot so he can easily get to however many treats he wants.

The house is quiet now and the black dog is piled in the corner of the kitchen like a forgotten blanket. Upstairs, Mary holds onto the headboard and watches ladies twirl parasols on the old-fashioned wallpaper. Skirts fall from their slim waists like ringing bells and wisps of hair fall from elaborate buns and braids and chignons. Mary curls up under the bedspread. She draws her knees to her chin inside the long nightgown and gently rocks back and forth as though she is at sea. In her mind, she touches the whiskers scattered like freckles across the black dog's muzzle. She lifts his torn ear where he rests downstairs on the kitchen floor, whispering into the pink whorl inside, "I love you, sweet boy. I'm sorry, my baby. I love you, my baby."

Her father comes late at night, early in the morning. She opens her eyes and he is sitting beside her on the bed. Her eyes hurt. In the morning they will feel chapped and when she blinks, she will feel each crack scoring her eyeballs. This is how it begins. He works his hands around her foot, pressing his thumb into the sole. His breath catches like he is working the air in her bedroom, knitting it into something heavy. The air tastes bad. She does not want it inside her mouth. Tears pool in her ears. Low inside her belly, a ship

rocks on stormy seas, and in her mind, skies darken and the wind picks up. The ship pitches, and a coil of rope slides from one end of the deck to the other. Sailors lose their balance and fall over. The storm has come on quickly. No one sensed its arrival, not even the wizened sailors who could forecast weather days ahead of time. It is too late to batten down the hatches. The wind gathers strength. Rain falls in buckets, hammering the sailors' heads like the raindrops are made from lead. A crewman with brown curls and a dimple in his chin looks to the sky. Mary sees him lose hold of the wheel, of a railing, of the rigging and watches him tossed over the side of the ship like popcorn from a skillet. The churning sea takes him under and tucks him beneath her skirts.

Someone will have to talk to his wife, to visit her up on the widow's walk where she reads novels in the mornings and paces in the evenings. The captain pulls on his wiry beard and gently hands her the news up above the house where she has been waiting for it. She gathers her skirts, clenching the fabric with white knuckles, and bends at the waist like her strings have been snapped. She falls to the deck and tastes salt. She is crying and biting her lips, tearing away the skin, as tears slip inside her mouth like coins slid into a silk purse. Each night she is back up on the widow's walk, circling the deck as the gray sky closes in around her and then stretches out, grotesque in its girth. The evenings do not hold onto any sort of shape. Her lips crack and bleed for weeks to come, blisters weeping and scabbing over into a golden crust. Each time the sores begin to heal, they split open again and bleed. She will hold the taste of pennies in her mouth until she is a very old lady.

This is how it goes. He works gently, his hand running the length of her as he whispers into her ear all the words he saves up under his tongue for her. He wanted to wear a suit to work. He kneads her foot, pulling at her toes. He wanted to go to France on a ship to buy chocolates and expensive cologne. He wanted to take the whole family. He uncurls her hands where they clutch the lace hem of her nightgown. He wanted to drink expensive scotch and roll a cigar in between his thumb and fingers. He snaps her strings, one after the other, giving each one time to loosen before he turns his attention to the next. He inhales her hair and her mouth. He smells under her arms and across her belly. He breathes up all of her, and she leaves behind a watermark of herself for his nose, for his sad and sorry hands and all the words under his tongue and all the pictures in his mind. She lifts up, reaching for the salty air coming in through the dark screen at the window.

In the morning, Mary sits at the table for breakfast. She is tired and achy like she has been stretched on a rack during the night. She has chewed away pieces of her lips. She tries not to blink. Her eyes hurt and everything looks swollen and distorted. Cheerios grotesque and fat in a bowl of gray milk. The torn skin of an orange.

The neighbors don't know it as they drag trashcans to the curb, but Mary is dry in her eyes and sour in her stomach. She falls in on herself as she walks, collapsing like a deck of cards left out before a storm. After the rain stops, the sun splits the sky, and each card dries hard and wrinkled as a seashell. No one remembers losing the cards. No one is going to collect them. Even a poor kid without any toys would walk past them on the

sidewalk. Bands of sunlight touch the metal swing sets. The light makes each leaf glow like it is carried on the back of a tiny lantern. The trees quiver with light.

Listen, this is how it happened. It began when the black dog was drug by the collar to the backyard where his breakfast was waiting under the tree. No one can know for sure whether he saw a squirrel or if he wanted to play or if he said fuck this shit. Whatever it was, he took off, but no one was super worried because he did it a lot.

Later that morning, a lady pulls up her cart of yogurt and tangerines beside Mary's mother who is standing in front of the shelves of condiments and thinking about salad dressing. The lady herself hadn't actually been there, she's quick to say, but she had heard about what happened. She touches the pearl at her ear. She wants to make sure Mary's mother knows it all happened very quickly and it was over so fast and the driver, he felt just *terrible*. She touches Mary's mother on the arm like they wear the same size slacks and have secrets together. An old man, the lady whispers. He felt just terrible about it. She rocks back a little on her spectator pumps. She wanted to make sure Mary's mother knew what had happened, just in case. She touches Mary's mother on the arm once again and then turns and pushes her cart toward the bakery.

Mary's mother did not know. She holds a loaf of white bread by the neck and drops it into the cart. She had no idea and she still hasn't decided on a salad dressing. Not one of the tomatoes feels ripe, but a crate of oranges catches her eye as she is about to get in line. Her hand is damp as she drops each heavy globe into a plastic bag.

Without the black dog, the house is shaky and uncertain. Pipes bang in the walls and ceiling fans are dizzy with nervous spinning. Mary stands at her bedroom window and looks down at the doghouse. Her eyes feel empty of eyeballs. The beds of her fingernails ache. Space blooms inside her skull. Her arms are loose and too long. She could open her fists and touch the ground with her throbbing fingertips if she wanted to. She doesn't want to. Tears slip inside her mouth. She cries, catching her breath and losing it. The ladies on the wallpaper twirl in circles. Mary chews her lips. She circles around, catching herself and losing her breath, circling herself like a black dog chasing its own black tail. This is how it will end, if you believe such things can end. But things don't ever really end. They are always just getting ready to begin again.