

To follow is a novel excerpt from a novel in progress.

The Black Dog

This is how it began.

Mary's father might beat the black dog because someone forgot to remove laundry from the washer's metal belly for a few days. Now the clothes were stiff and stank like old people's shit. The dog might get a beating because it was a Tuesday night and her father had to work in the morning, or else it was a Saturday morning and the asshole across the street had to mow his lawn at 7:30 AM and wake up the whole neighborhood. Or it was too hot outside and the flowers kept dying. It was too cloudy. Leaves blew all over his lawn after he'd just raked it because the asshole next door was retired and apparently didn't have to take care of his house anymore. It kept snowing. Her father was sick to death of shoveling the goddamn driveway. He had a bad back. Did anyone even know he had a bad back? It rained for a week straight. He hadn't seen rain in two months.

The black dog was no dummy so when he saw an opportunity, he slipped past the screen door before it slammed shut. He was a magical dog. He wiggled his nose, flicked his left ear three times, and lightly drummed his back right heel on the kitchen floor to turn himself into a cloud of gray smoke as he slipped through the metal screen.

Each time the dog ran, he was caught and brought home. A construction worker spied the dog running down 4th and Union just before he was scheduled to go on lunch. Or a neighborhood kid took the dog by the collar and dragged him, muzzle weeping, back home.

Or a new neighbor telephoned the house. That was how it happened last time. The orange phone, which hung on the wall at the other end of the kitchen, rang. Mary's family had a kitchen so large that there were two telephones, a fact that made her proud. They also had two phones in the basement, one in the den, and one in the master bedroom, a maroon telephone that matched the stenciling.

Mary picked up the orange phone in the kitchen and the new neighbor was talking into Mary's ear before she had a minute to say hello. The neighbor said she'd seen a black dog tearing through the backyards two streets over. It took a few tries, she added, but she'd caught him and she was going to march the dog over to Mary's right then because Lucille next door said the dog belonged to Mary's family. Oh good God, the neighbor said. Please excuse her manners. She laughed at herself. She was just so excited, see, to catch the dog, so glad she could help that she'd forgotten to even introduce herself. Her husband always was telling her to just slow down her crazy brain. Her name was Mrs. Witt, the neighbor said. Her family just moved into the Wilsons' old house. Did Mary know the Wilsons? Mrs. Witt didn't wait for an answer. She said that she'd heard that Mrs. Wilson was such a nice lady, and Mrs. Witt was so sorry she didn't get to meet her. It sounded like her passing was a terrible surprise to everyone and Mrs. Witt had heard about how the old lady was laid out at the side of the house for more than a couple of hours before her husband found her there, hopefully already dead. Not to say Mrs. Witt was hoping that the lady was dead, that was a terrible thing to say. Just to think that Mrs. Wilson was there all that time and since she did end up passing, it would be good, Mrs. Witt felt at least, if she'd died as soon as she hit the ground. God, to fall out of a second-floor window. A terrible thing. Well bless her and hopefully she didn't know what hit her and Mrs. Witt was sorry about

all of it. Especially for poor Mr. Wilson, who was the one to come out and find his wife dead on the sidewalk. Hopefully dead because if not she was sure to have been suffering but if there was one thing Mrs. Witt knew for absolute certain, it was that the Lord was kind, wasn't he. He would never let a person suffer for longer than they could take.

Mary hung up the phone. She thought to herself, "Welcome home, black dog!" In her mind she twisted streamers and hung them from the kitchen ceiling. She squeezed lemons into a glass pitcher, wincing when the bright acid touched her torn cuticles. She poured in heavy cups of white sugar. She iced vanilla cupcakes and arranged them on a milk glass cake platter set at the center of the dining room table. She couldn't wait for the dog to get home.

That was how it happened last time.

Here is how it begins this time.

Tonight the problem is that corn and mashed potatoes are both starches, and when Mary's father says he wants a starch and a vegetable at dinner, what he means is that he wants *one starch* and *one vegetable*.

The black dog cries out in long peals that fill the house. His strong body twists midair and curls around the leather belt each time it strikes. It is like his body loves the hot strap, like it is the strap that keeps him airborne and he cannot let it go. 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 back up into the air before dropping him like a hamburger flipped into a pan of sputtering grease

Mary builds a bonfire in her head. She has learned how to make campfires when she goes camping with her Brownie troop. She piles heavy dry logs and then makes a tee-pee of branches

in the middle. She sits her father in the center with a mouthful of gasoline.

Mary stands in the corner under the orange phone. She wishes for a tissue to wipe the dog's mouth or for a dustpan and broom to sweep up his eyes. She could put the pieces into an envelope and then reassemble the dog's eyes once things settle down a bit.

Mary is still as can be. She is tucked into a corner of the kitchen. She is tucked into a shirt printed with sliced lemons that have faces. Flirty eyes with long eyelashes and small mouths without teeth, from which the lemons speak these words, printed above them in black, *Well ex-squeeze me for living!* Mary's skinny legs are folded into a pair of yellow shorts with white polka dots. She is thin as a tissue. You can see right through her. She is made of air. She is a pile of dust. She is waiting on the dustpan. She has swept herself into a small neat pile, edges drawn into straight lines by the broom's long bristles.

Mary is a vault in the basement of a bank. Her feet have grown into the kitchen tiles, and even if they showed up, muscled movers covered in tattoos could not budge her. Not even if they were strong enough to lift china cabinets overhead and carry pianos on their backs. Men in t-shirts with the sleeves torn away. They would shrug their shoulders, muscles shifting around like hard apples. Cigarettes hanging from swollen lips, they'd say matter of fact, "Nope, can't be done. Going to have to tear the bank down around her. Stubborn thing. She ain't got plans to move any time soon."

Fat, salty tears collect behind Mary's teeth. A pair of oranges sit bright and garish on the windowsill, throwing color at her like darts. The pebbled skin separates into small pieces midair. The skin hits her like birdshot.

The refrigerator hums from its toes. A bird bleats from a tree in bloom outside the kitchen window. Mary wants to throw a dart at the bird, landing its tip square in the bird's quivering breast. Silverware clatters in the drawers. Mary 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 swinging traffic lights and sewers clogged with soggy 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 once his shiny black fur coat grew in, she'd fall asleep with her arms wrapped around his shuddering belly.

She wishes her dumb family had never taken the black dog from his mom who would never let Mary's father do this if she were here. She would bite the shit out of her father's throat to make him stop, walking away only after he was motionless in a pool of blood.

Mary wants to blow away, out of the window and over 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.

This is how it could be. Mary and the dog could be two survivors living off the land. They could use his sense of smell and her smart brain to find his mom who would happily agree to be Mary's mom, too, since Mary and the black dog are like brother and sister already. Mary could figure out how to bark when she was happy or angry, and she would learn to growl with practice. She 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.