

The Life Cycle of a Dog

My mother was a dog. At least that's what my father called her. Sometimes he said she was a female dog. Other times a wild African dog, or the progeny of a dog or the mother of a dog. Whichever was true, I know she must have had some canine qualities that she passed on to me. How else could I have tuned into my mother's thoughts, dreams and hopes; or smelled the perfume she wore all around the house, years after she left?

My father is not blessed with any canine attributes, unless you count the fact that he pisses up car tyres and has a habit of burying things only to dig them up later when they're rotten.

The last time I saw my mother she had been in the paddock nearest the house, swaying in rhythm to the easterly that blew across our parched brown land, and made percussion out of the stand of gum trees that edged the property.

"The leaves are talking to me, Charlie," she said.

"What are they saying?"

"This and that, everything and nothing, truth and lies. Stories of Jack. Stories of Bill. Bill and Jack. Bill or Jack. Jack or Bill."

I stared at her feet, brown and dusty and uncovered. Her shins were scuffed and cut from where she climbed the branches and sat watching the nothingness that unfolded for miles in each direction. Her shorts were tatty cut-offs, her singlet grubby with age, her breasts jutting out shyly below her bony chest. She had a long, long neck and scruffy long blonde hair. She was beautiful.

"Or maybe, stay or go? Which one, Princess Charlie?"

I knew she'd chosen go. I heard her leave with a howl and a growl. I tracked her for a while: run, walk, turn back, pause. Then she just kept running. When the freight train hammered through, I lost her.

Being dog-like gave me superior qualities on the farm and that kept Dad off my back most of the time. I could get those sheep penned pretty quick when I needed to. I just thought about the whistles and commands that Dad used make when he had the dogs working, the same calls that my Mum used to slink and prowl to in the paddocks before she went off.

The Life Cycle of a Dog

My fine-tuned hearing also allowed me to hear him stalking back from the pub, long before he shuffled, cursing, up the dusty driveway to the house.

“Fucking bitch-whore. Who needs that bitch anyway?” he’d grunt as he staggered home.

“Jack Hollins, you bastard!” was another favourite.

When it came to shearing time, I was relegated to kitchen duties and rarely saw Dad. I used this alone-time to study. Mum had always encouraged me to work hard at school, even though Dad reckoned there was no life other than sheep and wheat in this part of the world.

“Best you learn to knit, Charlotte,” he used to say. “You’ll be married to one of the boys and dropping sprogs before you’re twenty.”

“Bill! Honestly, don’t listen to him, Princess Charlie,” I remembered Mum countering. “You’ll be someone. Whatever you want to be. There’s a world out there, past the gold and brown and wool.”

By the time I was seventeen, I knew the gold and brown was in me, but not all of me. I needed to see green and blue and orange and red. I had the habit of standing under the gum trees and listening to their advice, just like Mum had. That was when Jack Hollins rode back onto the farm in his battered white ute, with his mutt called Dog.

Jack was dirty brown and unshaven, but he was beautiful in a way I hadn’t imagined possible. He’d been around years before. Years when my Mum was still at home. Dad had taken an instant dislike to him, but accepted he was the best shearer going. His last season was when Mum left.

I’d turned this coincidence into something tangible; a reason for why my Mum left; the possibility of finding her again. I walked around with a permanent tingle in the base of my throat and my hands and legs jittered when he walked near me. My canine instincts were on high that brittle summer. I could detect his odour from paddocks away, so that I could arrange myself to look alluring around the hay bales, or else I’d feign a problem with one of the quad bikes so that he’d have to bend over the engine, flexing and sighing. I could hear Dog whine and yelp in his sleep, over in

The Life Cycle of a Dog

the sheds where the shearers slept. I'd taken to wearing my mother's cut-off shorts, only I was longer and fuller in the leg, so they rose high on my buttocks. I saw the other shearers watch me as I walked, but Jack kept his head down.

"What's wrong with you?" my Dad asked one morning as I skipped around the breakfast table earlier than usual. If I had a tail, it would have been wagging.

"It's a nice day," I said. "Can't a girl be happy when the sun shines?"

He stared at me, his mouth open to speak but nothing came out. I wondered then if he'd had a sudden thought of Mum. Just something in his eyes let me feel as though he was comparing me to her. I was buoyed by that thought. I wanted to be like her. Despite her desertion of duties, I wanted to know what it was like to be free of this place, free of the pressed-down, never-ending responsibility of life on the land.

I caught a scent, sensed the familiar loafing stride of RM Williams boots on red-dust track, picked up the further-away sound of Dog's panting. I grabbed my hat, a sweat-dappled Akubra my mother had worn, and took the dirt bike to ride out to the creek. I'd watched Jack take Dog in that direction every morning.

He stretched his arms up, the muscles in his bare back flexing and grinding, shimmering under a sheen of sweat. He threw a stick for Dog, into the water that barely gurgled along the creek bed at that time of the year. Dog saw me when he returned the stick and stood rigid at the sight of an intruder.

"What are you doing here?" Jack called out, shielding his eyes from the sun-glare as he stepped out of the trees that lined the water's edge.

"Watching."

Jack patted Dog's head; his fingers drumming on the heeler's bony skull. Jack laughed then. "You look like her. Your Mum. For a moment, I thought you were her." So cool, so detached yet he held the answer to my life's puzzle.

I walked forward, adrenaline surging through my blood so that my heart pumped hard and I felt diamonds of sweat dotting my upper lip. "Where is she?"

He let out a half-laugh, half-cough. I don't think he realised I didn't know her whereabouts. He looked genuinely shocked. "She moves around, you know." He was holding back, trying to gauge the extent of our rift, perhaps.

I had always imagined her running free. Like a wild dog. Roaming around, hooking up with other free spirits. Escaping when it was too claustrophobic.

The Life Cycle of a Dog

“Is she okay?”

“She’s good. Still crazy,” he added, throwing the stick for Dog.

“I want to see her. Can you take me to her?”

He scratched the back of his head, the hairs under his arms stuck together in the heat even at that early hour. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea. She’s...she’s a bit unstable.”

I sucked in my disappointment. “She used to talk to the trees here, you know. I always thought that was a pretty cool way to make a decision. Just let nature guide you. Is that what you do? Wander up and down the country, wherever sheep need shearing? Wherever nature takes you. ”

He squatted down. “You should go back home. Finish school. Your Mum would want that.”

It stung me that this drifter knew more about my own mother than I did. I wanted so much to scream, but I held back. I slunk my hands deep into the front pockets of my shorts, stuck my right hip out, the way my mother used to, took a deep breath, increasing my bust size for a few seconds. Jack looked away, back towards the rippling water. I made my move.

“Did you fuck her?”

Before he could answer, I rushed towards him, pulling his hot face to mine and kissing as hard as I could. He tasted salty, bitter.

He pushed me away, holding out his hands. “Whoa, where did that come from?”

“My Dad says you’d fuck anything in a skirt,” I stared into his deep green eyes. “That he only has you back here every year because the only thing you do better than fucking is shearing.”

Jack squeezed his hands together and laughed. “Your Dad’s a hard man to please. And there’s no way I’d cross him by treading on his turf. With your Mum, or you,” he added.

I bit my lips together as embarrassment burned bright in my cheeks. “Am I not pretty enough? Not like her? You liked her. You hung around her all the time. She’d sing when you were around. Remember that? She was soooo happy when you were around. I can only remember her happy like that or talking to the trees when you weren’t there. You can’t tell me you didn’t have a thing for her. That’s

The Life Cycle of a Dog

why she left. She followed you. Didn't she?" I held down the tears and the frustration as I ranted.

Jack shook his head. "I was never interested in your Mum. Not like that. And you are just way too young for me. You need to go back home. You're wasting your time here. And mine."

I watched him stride away. Dog looked back once.

I curled up on my bed and slept a dream-filled sleep, waking with my tongue dry and my skin crawling with humiliation. I wondered if that's how my Mum felt; the day before she left. Or had she got what she wanted?

The kitchen was stifling. Dad even more oppressive.

"Jack's gone. Pissed off as quickly as he came and half the stock's unshorn."

I paused, watching him stalk around the kitchen. "Maybe he'll be back," I added, weakly.

"What do you know about it?" His voice was high, tight.

"Nothing. I mean, he's a transient. He might come back."

"You followed him yesterday. I saw you. What did you get up to, you little bitch?" He raised himself high, thrusting his chest and chin forward. He expanded before me, his face purple. "I always knew you were just like her."

I stepped back, pressing myself up against the kitchen bench. "I didn't do anything. I went to see Dog. I like Dog." I heard the desperation in my voice as he raised his arm and issued a stinging slap that connected sharply with my left cheek. I dropped down, the heat of the welt already throbbing against my shoulder as I bit back tears.

He slammed the kitchen door, and I heard the fly-wire slam too. His boots were quick and light across the dusty track to the shearing shed. His voice issued rapid instructions like machine-gun fire to the remaining men. I sat on the cool kitchen tiles licking my wounds.

I left in the early hours of the morning with a howl and a growl; not certain of what I was going to be, but sure that the gold and the brown and the wool would never get the best of me.

The Life Cycle of a Dog