

Black Dog

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1.

Everyone said my mother slipped on the rocks, hit her head, and drowned.

But I know that's not what really happened. My mother and a black dog walked out into the sea and disappeared.

That black dog was the devil and my mother and the devil walked out into the sea and then she was gone.

It was as simple as that.

She was gone and the rest of us were left behind,
because before the dog came she made a family, and that was me and my sister, and my father. My father had made himself, or, he had come from his own family, and we were all left behind the day the sea took my mother.

We almost never saw whales. My mother would say, before she and the dog that was really the devil disappeared into the sea, that whales are the angels of the sea.

I told my mother that whales are whales.

After my mother and the dog and that whole thing, Father was stiff and gray for a while, but then that passed.

He sent us out to cut the grass, he called us in at night, he sent us out to take in the fishing nets, he called us down to the sitting room to pray, he sent and called and sent and called, and then we got a little older and I realized he hadn't actually stopped being stiff and gray, it had

simply become a part of him, and then I guess I forgot to notice it. But he was stiff and gray, and my sister shrank beneath his gaze.

Long before the thing with the dog, Mother and Father lay close together in the white house. They could lie close together in the house because the house was built by his father. He worked the docks on the neighboring island, and after many years, he built himself a home on Ytterholmen.

And it's here, in the white house on Ytterholmen, that my mother and my father lie close together.

They make me.

I've sometimes thought about how they could just as easily have made another boy, maybe a boy who didn't need to know about the thing with the dog and the devil and the angel whales.

I became a body that could run from the kitchen through the hallway into the sitting room back to the kitchen. Mother dried fish and made food, but then she found the darkness and the dog was inside that darkness, and then the thing happened with the rocks by the sea.

Ytterholmen has a white house for the people and a red house for the animals, and we also have a barn, plus an outhouse. It was tall and straight and painted red when my grandfather built it, but then with time it became warped and gray.

It stayed warped and gray but we used it anyway, and from there I could see Innerholmen and all the way to the mainland, I could see the fish processing factory and the stockfish racks and I could see the inlet between the islands, Father's boat, the grass and my own shoes.

In the newspapers we used to wipe our rears there were symbols I couldn't understand, but then I got older, that was when Mother was gone and Father was stiff and gray, then the symbols told me about the weather and the world over on the mainland, but as a child, when I saw Father's boat and the grass and my own shoes that didn't quite reach the floor, the newspapers were just rough when we wiped our rears with them. But that's what we did, us island people.

Straight to the rear with the rest of the world.

My sister shows me where the birds lay their eggs.

The eiders lay their eggs by the big flat stones between Eaholmen and Innerholmen. My grandmother was the one who set up the nesting places. One of the eiders was tame and came to her every year.

Then it stopped coming, and my grandmother called for it, but the eider was gone and other birds ate the food she set out.

My sister and I don't have a tame eider but we eat a lot of the eggs we find and she teaches me how to check whether the eggs are fertilized or not.

I ask if we can get a dog.

We can't, but later, when my mother finds the darkness and the black dog that's really the devil, then a dog comes to Ytterholmen after all.

A secret dog that only comes to life when you whisper to yourself about what happened with the rocks by the sea,
when you ask the bedroom walls about what happens when a body rots.

The thing with the dog started when my mother started walking in the shadows.

First she was in the kitchen, she was over on Innerholmen to hang up fish to dry, she fried fishcakes and she washed our clothes and she tore up newspaper that was rough to wipe our rears with.

But then she started walking in the shadows beneath the eaves, she moved slowly along the walls in the parlor and she sat in the shadows by the stones where the eiders nested. Then the shadows ate her, she got pale and thin and she went out to the west side of the island and the wind whipped and the rain fell on her, but she was a statue and we couldn't get her to come inside until nightfall.

She shook and shivered and said sorry even though there was nothing to be sorry for, and a dull film clouded her eyes, the way boiled cod eyes look.

The black dog found my mother no matter where she was, in the shadows and by the outhouse and over on the west side of the island, and in the end they walked out into the sea and disappeared.

Father got stiff and gray after this and we had to pray because we must have done something wrong, all of us, we prayed and the eiders laid eggs and the stockfish racks on Innerholmen stood steady through the storms.

I never walked along the walls of the house where the shadows stretched down toward the shore, I slept with the light on,

I was at the furthest edge of the sea, I was a boy they'd made when they lay close together, my mother and my father, and now there was one less of us and I was told to take over my mother's duties at the fish processing factory.

2.

Even though we're island people, we go to church every Sunday.

We row a small wooden boat over to the mainland, God's country, people call it, and I hope they count our little islands when they're deciding what is God's and what isn't. I sit between my father and my sister and we all stay quiet, except when we're supposed to sing, and then we sing.

My sister has a beautiful voice and I lean against her as we sing amen, amen, amen.

The priest talks about forgiveness and about how God is great and sees us all, and about how time is a wheel that turns and turns. I think about the eggs my sister and I eat, I think about how my mother disappeared into the sea with a black dog and that we wipe our rears with newspaper and I wonder whether God has seen all this, and whether he has seen my mother and my father lying close together in the white house that my grandfather built.

He must be happy about that last thing, because without men and women who lie close together in white houses people would stop multiplying, and if we're careful and pray enough down in the sitting room and don't disappear into the shadows, we are God's people, and he must want a lot of those.

After the sermon and the song where I lean against my sister as we sing amen, amen, amen, people drink coffee and talk. They ask Father how things are going with us out there.

Good, my father answers. He nudges me in the back and tells them I've taken over my mother's duties on Innerholmen and people nod, but then they shake their heads too because it was so tragic, how she slipped on the rocks by the sea, and inside me I tell them that the black dog was the one who took her but on the outside I just sit there quietly, and Father says well, we should be getting home, wind's coming in from the west and we need to get out to Ytterholmen, we should probably be out there and keep an eye on things on the furthest rocks.

I sit in the wooden boat, Father rows with slow strokes, dipping the oars into the surface of the sea. Down there are starfish and annelids and monkfish and black dogs, and when the oars cut through the water's surface they look crooked, when they curve through the air above they are straight and stiff and made of wood.

We row back home and it'll be a week before the next time we sing amen, amen, amen and I'll lean against my sister and people will ask about Mother. We stay put on Ytterholmen in the meantime.

Father whets the scythes, my sister hangs up clothes on a cord that runs from the window by the kitchen over to the wall of the barn. I keep away from the shadows, I hang up fish on the stockfish racks on Innerholmen, the sky exists and the sea exists and the fish exists.

Have I mentioned our sheep?

We have sheep. They give birth in the spring.

The lambs are speckled or solid-colored and some of them have spots on their backs or legs. They're often born early in the morning and they're thin as rails. It's early spring when the ewes give birth, there might even still be snow in the air. My father sometimes kills the smallest ones. I bury them in the potato field.

Sometimes, when a ewe has two lambs, she completely ignores one of them. Or sometimes one of them will be very strong and the other very weak. One stands up and eats, and one is a bundle in the hay and does nothing besides be thin and wet. One stands up and drinks and you can see its stomach bulge with milk, while the other is a bundle without a bulge in its stomach.

Even though we shut them together in a pen, even though we tie up the ewe at night and put the lamb that looks like a bundle close to her, one becomes a bulge, and one stays a rail. Then Father shakes his head and tells me to go outside, and then he slams the smallest lamb against the barn wall.

This doesn't always happen. Sometimes we also try to get one of the other ewes to be a mother. It works most times. The scent of the motherless lamb mingles with the scent of the lambs with a mother, and it gets a bulging belly and bleats loudly and seems not to remember anything about how it was to be a rail.

We also give bottles to some of the motherless lambs. They suck on our fingers and follow us wherever we go and they even come inside the outhouse if you leave the door open. But sometimes Father also slams those against the wall, the lambs that just stay rails.

During the summer, the grass grows extra green where I bury the dead lambs, and the lambs that survive eat the extra green grass and they have bulging bellies and suck on my fingers with tongues and palates that are rough and soft at the same time.

The lambs come out in slimy bags, they are bloody and get cold quickly if their mothers don't lick them clean. I fold myself into a boy so small that the ewes will lamb even though I'm there. The whites of their eyes get bigger when the little ones come out, it looks painful, I sing to them as the sun rises over Ytterholmen, I can see the ribbon of light below the barn.

I sing amen, amen, amen. I look up at the ceiling, I think about what the priest said about God seeing us all.

God, if you're up there and you're keeping track of us out here on the islands too, I want you to remember us. That we are here, on the crusts in the sea, with the slimy lambs in the barn, amen,

and I promise to take care of them so they get big over the summer and I promise not to walk in the shadows.

Amen, amen, amen.

4.

My sister is older than me, she is strong and I lean against her during church and sing amen, amen, amen. Sometimes we still play together, once we dressed up in clothes from Mother and Father's wardrobe. We still call it Mother and Father's wardrobe even though Mother went into the sea with the black dog. My sister uses some of Mother's things for her everyday clothes. It doesn't smell like Mother in the wardrobe anymore, it just smells like a wardrobe.

My sister and I sneak into their bedroom, the wardrobe creaks when you open it, there are dresses and suits and vests and trousers in there.

My sister puts on our father's clothes,

she tightens a pair of gray trousers with twine, she wears a shirt and a vest and a jacket, the vest hides her breasts, she isn't quite thin yet not quite big either, she is just strong and smells good when we sing amen, amen, amen, and I put on a dress with long sleeves.

Her eyes are gentle and it's calm outside and I don't think about the black dog, we're just here and carrying on in old clothes, the lambs have stomachs that bulge and my sister has a woman's body.

My sister dries our clothes on a cord that runs from the window by the kitchen to the wall of the barn. My sister is strong and her legs are like tree trunks in her boots and on the ground.

She walks heavily over the kitchen floor, she makes the planks sing. She wears Mother's apron, she cooks the recipes in the green booklet, she is a shadow of her mother who disappeared with the dog and I make sure to keep an extra close eye on her so she doesn't go walking into the shadows, too.

When she's been in the kitchen with the knives and the pots and pans for too long, I go to her and say things like

come, you have to see what the lambs have done behind the shed
come, I can't figure out how to mend the net
come, the sun is red and purple over Bøvelskjær right now

Because if you're in the kitchen for too long with Mother's apron and all the shadows in there you might see the black dog by the sea too, and then it would only be me and Father left on the island, and then only I can shrink beneath his gaze and bend my neck when he calls us down to the sitting room to pray and that won't work, I need your legs that are strong as tree trunks and your shoulders when you get dressed up in grown-up clothes.

But I don't say this, and the sunsets and the lambs work just as well, because my sister takes off her apron and comes out into the light and air and we see only seaweed and foam in the sea, sometimes we see whales far in the distance, but they're just whales and they don't have anything to do with the dog.