

ONE

*This dog and man at first were friends;
But when a pique began,
The dog, to gain some private ends,
Went mad and bit the man.*

— Oliver Goldsmith,
'An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog' (1766)

My dad has trained our dog, Dobie Squires, to bite my mum. The dog is one of those rust-coloured dachshunds with a low-hung belly that swings kind of sensually when he's on the trot. That dog is regal for all his littleness. He can canter as smooth as a racehorse and intuit as sharp as a con man. Dad is the one who's made him nasty.

Mum and Dad started fighting around the time Dad

trimmed his pubes. I wasn't supposed to know that, but I heard it all. It seems Dad had never been much into the whole grooming thing down there throughout the marriage, so Mum found his sudden desire to mow the lawn, so to speak, somewhat suspicious. Rightly so, I reckon. Dad made out Mum was paranoid and said he didn't chuck a wobbly when Mum shaved her pits, so what's the problem? Mum reminded Dad of the time Dave down the street wanted to borrow Dad's chainsaw and how Dad had spent two hours cleaning and oiling it for him first. Dad had never been much into his chainsaw until he found someone else wanted to use it.

So they started fighting over Dad's pubic hair and then never stopped. It was one thing after another after that, although from a spectator's point of view the pubes fight was the best. The others were more run-of-the-mill stuff: Who let the air out of my tyres? Who fed my fish naphthalene flakes? Who soaked my toothbrush in chilli oil? Who peed in my briefcase? And so on and so forth. Although I must admit that it was I, innocent child and victim of my parents' outrageous behaviour towards one another, who actually peed in Dad's briefcase. He'd refused to up my allowance in accordance with market trends and inflation, so I retaliated in a way I thought he'd best understand. And I knew he'd think Mum had done it.

It was the involvement of Dobie Squires that changed things. I'm not altogether sure how Dad did it. I know it involved the pilfering of a brand-new bottle of Mum's favourite perfume (where the hell is my bottle of Sarah Jessica Parker bloody Lovely?). It also involved some covert training obviously undertaken with more secrecy than Dad's affair with the lady who liked a bald fatty, because Mum never found out about it. All I know is that one day the fights changed because Dad came to the party with a brand-new sidekick. Dobie Squires.

They were in the kitchen. So was I. They'd given up trying to fight out of hearing and/or sight of me. Neither of them had the self-control to pace themselves, nor attempt cordiality out of respect for me. I think they just didn't see me anymore. So here we were, in the kitchen, together. Dad baited and Mum riposted. The yelling began. A reference once again to genital fur (2 points), parried by a fat joke of surprising ingenuity (2.5), deflected by a fairly predictable quip about potency or lack thereof (1.8), countered by '*Gitah!*' That's what we all heard, including Dobie Squires, who promptly lunged forward from between Dad's legs and landed a vice grip on Mum's ankle, teeth exposed and lips aquiver. Mum howled in pain. Or perhaps horror. You see, it took me only a moment to understand the command. I'm guessing Mum figured it out, too. *Gitah.*

Get her. I couldn't believe it. Dad had put the dog on Mum.

That's how it was that first time. And it continues that way. It's ingenious, really. Dad hasn't trained just Dobie Squires. He's trained Mum, too. Anytime Mum gets out of hand, Dad tells Dobie Squires to gitah. And Mum gets bitten. Some of the bites are truly awful. The bruises around the puncture wounds spread dark and wide as a purple sunset. Even when Dobie Squires misses, the fear of the attempt alone is enough to shut Mum up pretty quick. She's never retaliated against Dobie, though. Not once. I think she reckons it would be cruel to kick the dog. Or maybe she's just afraid to. Maybe by the time the thought of retaliation had occurred to her, she had already been trained.

The fighting has stopped. Sometimes Dad rattles Mum's chain anyway, always with the confidence that she won't react. He watches her bristle, and it pleases him. She's become a big swallower, her throat flexing through a great rolling gulp every time Dad gives her a poke. These days, he doesn't seem to get the same joy out of it, though. Almost as if he needs, and misses, his nemesis. Once I came home from school and found Dobie Squires had bailed Mum up in the garden. She was standing slightly bent over in a flowerbed, holding one gardening glove, sobbing. Dobie Squires was a

couple of feet away, just holding Mum there with bared teeth and guttural growl. When Dad came out to see what all the fuss was about, he just called Dobie off. Simple as that. I know it's awful, but I couldn't help thinking what a wasted opportunity that was. Not that I wanted Mum to get bitten or anything, but it did occur to me that having gone to the trouble of training the pair of them, Dad was not exploiting the situation as fully as he might have. His heart just doesn't seem in it anymore.

The irony of all this is that it was Mum who chose Dobie Squires in the first place. She got him from the dog shelter. She saw one of those appeals on an evening tabloid telly show. They were asking for people who had big hearts and a need for companionship to adopt abandoned dogs. Mum does have a big heart and a need for companionship, but I bet while she was bailed up in the flowerbed that day she had a rethink about why old Dobie might have been abandoned in the first place. Anyway, she went and bought him and brought him home, and he really was her dog. Which makes Dad's turning of the beast even more impressive, if you ask me. He was already called Dobie Squires, apparently. Well, he'd have to be, wouldn't he? Who in their right mind would name a dog Dobie Squires? The people at the dog shelter told Mum that if she wanted to change it she

should choose something that sounded very similar and work it in over time. Trouble was, none of us could think of anything good that sounded remotely like Dobie Squires. Ergo Dobie Squires he remains.

So here it is, in my own home, a priceless life-lesson on how our choices can come up and bite us on the arse. Literally, in some cases. Of course, I didn't see it when it was happening. We never do, do we? But some time later, that saucy old wench Hindsight sauntered up and planted a big wet tonguey on me. And I got it. I saw it. I learned it. And it didn't change a thing.

TWO

*Where Ignorance is Bliss,
'Tis Folly to be Wise.*

— Thomas Gray,
'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College' (1742)

I was initially quite disturbed on learning that the colloquial name for a dachshund is sausage dog. A kid at school told me. He also told me that's where sausages come from. I was younger and full of trust at the time and, having no other source of reference against which to verify the truthfulness of such schoolyard doctrine, I believed it. We eat a lot of sausages at home. They're a cheap meal, you see. We have them fried up with onion gravy and in bread smothered with tomato sauce and baked poking out of a slab of crusty mash and even

curried with apples and banana. I'd never been that fond of sausages to begin with (I don't like those hard pellets of gristle you find in them), and getting the goods on their canine origins did nothing to improve my palate. I refused to eat them for a while after that and became a bit more protective of Dobie Squires.

That was the first time I can remember consciously thinking: I wish I didn't know that. It was the first of many times. I'm nearly always disappointed with any new information I receive. And I'm not talking about the stuff they teach you in school. Ninety per cent of the information we sop up in school hours is useless crap. Everyone knows that. I'm talking about life stuff. All those little bits and pieces of unsolicited knowledge that fly at us from birth. All the stuff that is supposed to help us *get on with it*, as my parents are fond of saying. Very little of what I've learned in life, about life, has been useful or edifying. (Except when Farley McMillan, who everyone said is gay, showed me how to beat off in the school dunnies in Grade 7.)

Information doesn't have to be true in order to suck, either. Learning that sausages did not come from sausage dogs did nothing to alleviate the horror that initial erroneous information lodged in me. It stayed lodged. (Although that might have had something to do with the fact that the truth about sausages is no more

appetising than the lie.) Whether it's true or not, real or made up, I just don't want to know most of what I am told. I think it has to do with agendas. I picked up on agendas pretty early. Given my parents' method of relating to one another, this should not be surprising. I quickly learned that it wasn't just inside my own home that people carried loaded dice. It's almost always the unspoken stuff that is far more interesting, far more revealing, and far more useful. What amazes me is that most grown-ups I know never seem able to work out that real power lies not in holding tight to one's own agenda but in working out the agenda of the other person.

Let's take our neighbours, for example. (Incidentally, I am in love with the girl next door, but that's not important right now and I'll talk about it later.) My parents and our neighbours don't get on. I have yet to fully consider how this will affect my plans for the neighbours' daughter. But I digress. My parents and our neighbours haven't got on for years. It's the one area where my parents seem united. I don't think anyone can really remember how it all started. I've heard different stories/fights throughout my childhood: 'You poisoned our grapevine ...'; 'You poisoned our dog ...'; 'You let the air out of our tyres ...'; 'You pissed in our milk bottles ...' (Sorry, that was me again.) The point is that

they hate each other. They don't know why, they just do. And they have surprisingly similar agendas.

My dad, deep down, feels out of control. He has a shit job as one of those booksellers who drive around to businesses and factories with a box of shit books and then have to try and flog as many as they can to make a shit wage. He really wants to be selling nuts and bolts, or modems and fax machines. But he is selling books and he thinks, again deep down, that bookselling is feminine. A girl job. He doesn't even like books. He especially hates that some of the books he lugs around are cooking and craft books. So he feels out of control. People who feel out of control are always spoiling for a fight just to prove how in control they really are. They're stupid like that.

Then there's our neighbour. This fellow always looks like he has a mouthful. It's because of his teeth. He has these big teeth. Big, waxy-looking teeth, and lips that stretch like custard skin and never seem to move when he talks. He's always smiling with those custard lips, all smarmy and familiar-like, but you get the impression he'd just as quickly back over you in one of his limos. You see, that's what he does for a crust. Drives limos. Mostly for weddings, but he'll do a drunken twenty-first as well if you pay the surcharge for post-party cleaning. Therein lies the rub. No matter which way you slice it,

if you're being paid to drive other people around town (and clean up their hurl and wee), you're at the bottom of the food chain. Call it having your own business, or being self-employed, or whatever else you want, but you're in service, my friend. People in service have no control. They're all operating on someone else's timetable. A man's got to resent that.

So you've got two blokes living next door to each other, each wondering where and when during the preceding years they lost their balls. (I'm not sure my dad's ever descended, but that's another story.) There's a proper word for it. I learned this word in a book. The word is *emasculatation*. It means feeling as if your bits have been removed. That's putting it very simply, of course. Naturally, the book I was reading at the time was not a schoolbook. I attend a pretty swanky religious college (we eat a lot of sausages to pay those fees, let me tell you), and there are no books in our library that make reference to testicles, attached or not. We're not supposed to have sexual organs at my school. (Poor old Farley McMillan was expelled after finding his.) I check my jocks every night when I get home, just to make sure this expensive education isn't emasculating me. (Talk about agendas.) So anyway, you've got these two emasculated blokes living right next door to one another, thumping their chests and screaming at each other like

banshees. Same agenda: control. You'd think they'd get along. Or at least get the same therapist.

Let's face it. Neither of them would recognise their own bullshit. They just see themselves in each other, and that's got to hurt. I feel sort of grateful to Limo-Lionel, though (that's what we call him), just for giving my parents a bit of a joint venture. Something to focus on besides each other. It can warm my heart to hear Mum out there on the front lawn, supporting my dad like any other wife and helpmeet: 'Don't just pull his hair, Merrill! Punch him in the solar plexus!' Unfortunately, Merrill thinks a solar plexus is some sort of new Japanese four-wheel drive. That's my dad's name, by the way. Merrill. (I know.)

There was a time when my parents had more in common than Limo-Li. A time when their agendas were similar, or not as well developed, or maybe even unformed. I know this because they used to hold hands. When they were at their beginning and their future was poking up just a little bit, dirty-faced and hopeful. I wonder if it was love or if they just knew each other the way you know a good comfortable shoe, or a toothache, or the view from a favoured window. I've seen photos of them holding hands. Mum keeps photos in shoeboxes in the bottom of her wardrobe. I found them when I was going through her stuff one day, these photos of

her and Dad holding hands. I'm in some of them. In my favourite, the three of us are walking and I'm in the middle and each of them is holding one of my hands and they've swung me up off the ground. We've all got our eyes and mouths wide and I bet our lungs were full, too, and I'm like this little bridge between them. It's the beginning of the day in this photo. You can tell by the light. Beginnings are pitiless things; they are full of promise and hope that they never have to realise. I pinched that photo.

Every now and then, Dad will make a gesture that reminds me of that photo. Like sometimes when he and Mum are watching telly together, he'll run his index finger along the back of Mum's hand and her lungs will fill again. They don't know I see that stuff. I sort of like seeing it, the same way I like seeing them fight. They don't know I see anything.