

PROLOGUE

‘Jeez, look at you,’ my girlfriend said. ‘You hardly smile. You used to be hilarious but I haven’t heard you laugh in weeks.’

When I was diagnosed with cancer, I worried I would die. When I lost my husband, I wondered how I would live. I needed something to make life worthwhile. Somehow, I ended up with Harry.

Not the dumbest dog in the world, but not the smartest either. A friend called out Harry on day one: ‘He’s a dropout dog, not a university dog.’ And he was. He wouldn’t sit or stay. Plain refused to fetch a ball. ‘Wotsya dog up to?’ a guy at the park barked as I picked up the ball for the thousandth time. The short answer was, ‘Not much’, but where to start with a pup like Harry?

To my untrained eye, he wasn't quite the dog he was meant to be. Chest too thick, ears that flopped and a stomach that expanded when he was in the same room as food. Harry's vet had none of my misgivings. He wrote 'very lovely puppy' in spindly letters on Harry's vaccination record. And then he said something that floored me: 'I've never met a dog more like a teddy bear.' Some teddy. Harry liked socks and undies and David Jones silk shirts still wrapped in tissue, which he tried to bury in the garden. Most days he liked couches too. Dog v. couch. Dog wins every time.

The recommended guide had made it sound so simple. Lesson one: Teaching your dog to come when called. 'Begin this in a quiet place, such as the kitchen or the living room. Be sure there are no distractions to compete for the dog's attention. Say his name in a clear voice. If he turns to look at you, immediately say yes and toss him a tasty treat.' You must have been joking. I think the vet thought Harry was one of those zen dogs. Harry's idea of zen was opening his eyes at 5.13am and sitting still until 5.14 before making the hole in the doona bigger.

It was my doctor who had thought a dog might heal me. When his poker face dropped, I could see he knew I was living on the edge. My husband had died suddenly

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and weeks later I was diagnosed with cancer. I needed something to give my life purpose, but could that really be a snoring, howling, digging, chewing, barking non-university dog like Harry?

Harry spent half his life begging for food – the rest he knew he had wasted. For him, getting fed was a process. Nothing happened unless you followed five simple rules. 1. Congratulate her on having found her way home with the shopping. 2. Show her to the fridge. 3. Somersault as the door opens. 4. Trip her as she grabs the dish. 5. Walk to the back door on hind legs – backwards.

I thought all dogs loved walks, but Harry had no idea what that outdoorsy stuff was all about (far too far from the fridge). He believed the walk to the park was far enough to need a chauffeur. Once there he had his schtick down pat, working the place like a politician at a party. Every hand a cuddle. Every pocket surely a treat. Some days I thought he must have a slogan: *Can I eat my own bodyweight in treats before we go? YES, I CAN.* To watch him was to see pure sales genius. If every deal had a unique selling proposition, his was killer: *Come on, she doesn't feed me. Look at me – the only skinny mutt in the park.*

My miracle dog moved in a few years after I finished chemo. He had longer hair than I did, a tiny cat's collar

and a recipe for homemade meatloaf I was expected to cook for him each day. He trembled when I touched him and howled when I shut the bathroom door at night. But he soon learnt the important things in life – which way the fridge door opened, how great garbage was and why humans spoke in that stupid voice when they got the lead and said, ‘Walkies’.

Harry tried to be the perfect dog, and every year or two he was, but some days I wondered how this dog had a hope in hell of saving my life when he couldn’t get his own in order. He had his own take on eating me out of house and home – shoes, socks, undies and much, much worse. He gnawed the back door and ripped flyscreens to make sure he was never left outside. Friends – who considered takeaway when Harry made short work of their dinner – suggested behaviour-modification classes (aka puppy school) and then heavy-duty brainwashing (obedience classes). If brainwashing was trying to change the thoughts of another against their will, then it had met its match in Harry. First the affirmation method (what trainers called ‘Just do it’). Harry said, *Let’s not*. Then the education method (‘Do it because I told you to do it’), which Harry dismissed as nonsense. I went to lesson three with a heavy heart. We tried the persuasion

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method ('Do it and you get a treat'), and suddenly my dog was hooked.

The tricks that had eluded him eventually came thick and fast. Shake hands – no problem. High-five – you betcha. Play dead – how long? But he also had more than his share of shockers – like the day he played dead in the middle of a highway and, of course, the night before Christmas.

When I told a friend about that terrible night she jokingly asked whether this crazy non-university dog of mine might be my third dose of bad luck. I wasn't sure 'bad luck' was the way I would describe what Harry did that Christmas Eve. Bad management – possibly. Bad owner – probably. Bad dog – undoubtedly. If Harry was one of those social media hounds whose owners put a sign around their neck listing alleged crimes, his would have read: *I stuffed Christmas. I hope Mum will forgive me one day.*

Christmas Eve was party time at my friends' house. Guests were set to arrive. Everything I loved to eat and drink was on the stone table outside. Oysters with lime. Bubbles on ice. Popsicles for the kids. The sun was fading after a perfect day in the pool. Fairy lights twinkled in the olives. Carols played on the outdoor speakers. The kids screeched on the jumping castle. Silk dresses, sunnies and

bare legs were the dress code *du jour*. All was right with the world. Harry was locked down the side of the house. I might have fibbed a bit when friends had asked how he would go at the party. Could he be tied up outside? Sure. Would he bark if left on his own? Never. Had he ever tried to escape? Of course not. He wasn't that sort of dog.

I guess I should have worried when it was so quiet. Too quiet. When the carols stopped, there was no sound. No barking, howling, yelping, snorting, whining. Nothing. Then I saw it. A curly, muck-dripping orange streak. Harry had made an unforgettable entrance. After tunneling out of puppy prison, he wanted to join the party. There was gunk from here to kingdom come. Looking like an escapee from one of those kooky new-age mud spas, he tore around the garden. He oozed sludge near expensive shoes, wanted to plant muddy paws on silk frocks – and then turned his gaze to the food.

‘HARRY – *Noooo!*’

I can't remember who coined the nickname, but one thing was certain: it stuck. And every year the night-before-Christmas story was told with a little more embellishment: how the dog that was meant to save my life became known as Dirty Harry.

PART 1

**A girl known for
being ordinary**

1

SOMEONE, SOMETHING TO LOVE

I had always been a dog-a-holic. Mum and Dad tried to fob me off with a tadpole (it grew), and then suggested befriending the blue-tongue lizard who'd set up home in the bottom of the incinerator (cold-blooded friends were no good). All I wanted was a puppy – any puppy. When I asked Dad again, he shook his head and said we were getting something much better. What could be better than a puppy? A pony, I thought. Two ponies? When it arrived, I was horrified. Mum was aghast. He'd bought a hot pink Leyland P76 – or as it was more commonly known, a P38, only half the car it should have been. The boot had been designed to hold a forty-four-gallon drum,

but why on earth you'd want that heap of junk rolling around in the back I had no idea. Once he got it home, even Dad realised he'd been sold a lemon. The body wasn't watertight, so when we drove in rain, water sloshed across the floor like a wave pool. The side windows fell down when we drove forward, so Dad was sometimes forced to get us where we were going with more than a little reversing. Oh, and there was the thing Mum hated most – the number plate. You only need to know the letters: LOO.

When I asked Mum for the 10,864th time about a puppy, she had 10,865 reasons why we didn't need an extra mouth to feed. She was ecstatic when my primary school science teacher suggested a solution to the problem – a fertilised egg that needed hatching. Now, as pets went, even I could see my egg wasn't high in the pecking order. Of course, to Mum it was perfection. It had all the convenience, athleticism and innate charm of a pet rock. It didn't need to be fed, walked, let out, let in, pooped, brushed, bathed, de-fleaed, kennelled or vetted. But I knew the truth – it was about as useful as egg whites before someone invented the pavlova. It didn't do anything a pet did – bark, whine, destroy, sniff, lick, chew, dig, demand tummy rubs or do tricks. I had one question for Mum:

‘Will it be the perfect pet for me?’ She replied with her usual delicious understatement: ‘Nothing comes without hard work.’ Perhaps Mum felt a pang of guilt about my unsuccessful eggnog adventure, because eventually we got three pets slightly higher in the pet pecking order. Slightly being the operative word.

Mum had a simple view of the guinea pig we adopted after we moved from Sydney to Melbourne: she ate truckloads of lettuce and suffered from an unfortunate nose twitch. She couldn’t have been more wrong about our little piggy. Pinky was the Kim Jong-un of the pet world. The threat of nuclear explosion was always close. It usually happened about 4.09pm when I arrived home from school. From 8am to 4.08pm, Pinky would eat through all the lawn she could access from her hutch – though she could have single-handedly deforested half the Amazon jungle if we’d let her – and by 4.09, she yearned for fresh delights. Each night Mum and I carefully opened the hutch door. We had a noble plan: Pinky would gracefully hop out, twitch a little and keep on munching. Not this little piggy. She bolted. Her body morphed from cuddly blob into the length of a garden stake with the speed and dexterity of the Jamaican bobsled team. She went straight for the only place in the garden impossible to catch her:

a tiny gap between the side wall of the garden shed and the back fence. It was the Pyongyang of Mum's garden, completely cut off from the outside world. Pinky loved it. Mum and I spent the long hours after night fell stuffing piles of hand-cut greens into each end of the chasm. Pinky – who loved grass like a Nimbin hippy – turned up that twitching schnoz of hers to our hand-stuffed Uber-eats dinner. Over the years one thing became clear: Pinky was prepared to live with the daily famines of her reclusive state rather than settle for a life behind bars on our back lawn.

Mum was careful before we welcomed another pet. She carefully researched whether potential new family members had what she called 'redeeming features'. She went to pet shops. She asked a raft of questions. She applied the scepticism of a kindergarten teacher who knew her professional reputation was in the hands of a bunch of four-year-olds. There were some non-negotiables: pets that bolted, hid or squealed when chased were banned. That cut the possibilities. The man at the shop scratched his head before he disappeared out the back. He came back with two things so slow moving they could have been glued to his hand. A pair of terrapins. The guidebook said they were lovely pets. The guidebook writer must have led

a quiet life, because the most exciting thing these turtles ever did – and this was as rare as a banker saying sorry *before* being called to a Royal Commission – was put one leg in front of the others. The only trick they ever learnt did nothing to enhance my animal-whispering credentials: the world's slowest pets started digging. They began in their cage and then, wanting to live dangerously, moved to the big wide world outside. Perhaps a tad unwisely, they dug their way under the fence to a yard best known for being home to a large woofer. Never heard from again.

Mum knew it was time for a proper pet, but our next animal adventure wasn't the marriage made in heaven I had wanted. We finally got a dog. It didn't last. He had to go back to the farm he came from (yes, I know) because he had . . . er . . . (how to describe this diplomatically?) a problem in the nether regions that couldn't be fixed. He was our first and last puppy.

Years later when my husband, George, and I bought a farm a few hours out of Melbourne, I was sure a puppy would follow. I studied dog breeds to find one that would love the farm life. It never happened. We had a menagerie – Pekin and Muscovy ducks, chooks with dark feathers so they laid brown eggs, two hopelessly in-love alpacas, a pair of Toulouse geese called George and Jill (don't ask),

guineafowl with faces only a mother could love, peacocks and a clowder of Burmese cats. When I mentioned a dog, I got a dark look and darker mutters referencing *Animal Farm*. There were three reasons a wag was verboten, I was told: 1. Dogs barked at cows. 2. Dogs unsettled bulls. 3. Dogs chomped calves. I kept asking but always got the same *blah, blah, blah*. Dogs were a no-go zone on our farm.

Eventually I forgot puppy love and become a rabid cat woman. Remember that old joke about dogs having owners and cats having servants? It wasn't true about Marmalade. She worshipped the ground I walked on. When I left the farm for the city each Monday morning, she padded from room to room searching for her true love. So disgusted I wasn't there, she moved to the shed for the first few days each week. She heard the car on the gravel driveway when I drove in late on Friday and appeared at the kitchen door. For the first hour she didn't come near me, rejecting every advance. By midnight, she could stand it no longer, purring like an F1 engine the moment I enveloped her in my arms.

Woofers never got another thought after that. Well, not until a girlfriend was brave enough to tell me the truth about the person I'd become. We were drinking in the sun on the last of a summer's day. I was still recovering

from cancer treatment and desperately lonely being on my own for the first time in decades. She had tried all afternoon to perk me up.

Finally she blurted: ‘Jeez, look at you. You hardly smile. You used to be hilarious but I haven’t heard you laugh in weeks.’ She went through a list of things she thought would snap me out of it. ‘Glass of red? Okay, a bottle? Grab your bathers and move to the beach? Six months in Byron Bay? A trip to France?’

When the answer was no to everything, she was worried. ‘JB, you need something to love.’

It took a month to make up my mind. She was right, of course – I needed something, somebody in my life. It sounded pathetic, but I had no choice. I needed one simple thing: something excited to see me when I woke and who cuddled me at night. As my doctor had said, I needed a dog.

I first saw him online. He was so shy he dipped his head when they took his photo. I just made out a white chest, three white paws and a cute white tip at the end of his tail. The spiel said his colour was ruby, but that was just posh talk for what he really was – the loudest, brashest, most shockingly seventies-hipster-orange dog you could imagine.

He was a cavoodle. I knew nothing about dogs but once I read this guff somewhere online I was sold: ‘Cavoodles are people dogs that often prefer the company of their human family over canine companions. They can be needy. They will follow their owner around incessantly, for better or worse, and require constant TLC.’ My logic was simple: two needy beings would be perfect for one another. The dog-a-holic was finally getting a dog for keeps. It was still a few weeks before he was old enough to leave his mum. I couldn’t wait. I needed a puppy – now. So, what did a dog-a-holic who’d never had a forever dog do when her first seventies-hipster-orange puppy was about to arrive? She went to the pet shop, of course. Except it wasn’t the pet shop anymore. It was mega. It was almost bigger than my local supermarket, had dozens of aisles (from memory, woofers were aisles 6–12), an organic section and a pamper salon. And there was a guy who was *s-o-o-o* sorry I hadn’t brought my dog to the shop, wanted to see a photo and couldn’t wait to meet him next time I came. I’d never been shopping for a dog before but I think my new friend and I started our relationship something like this.

Puppy wrangler: What does your best friend need?

Dog-a-holic: Nothing. I haven’t got him yet.

Puppy wrangler (with the smile of a Lotto winner): You're getting a puppy?! How incredible. We have a puppy starter pack with everything you'll need for the first three months. Comes at a great price. Your puppy will *l-e-r-v-e* it.

Dog-a-holic: No thanks. Think I'll browse for a while. What aisle is the dog stuff?

His answer was as long-winded as the McDonald's 'two all-beef patties special sauce lettuce cheese pickles onion on a sesame seed bun' jingle. Aisle six was for treats, seven for dry kibble, eight for wet food, nine for fashion, ten for plush toys, including squeakers, eleven for IQ toys and twelve for electronic puppy aides. When I'd finished those, he said not to miss the bed section. He asked what I had in mind for my new best friend? 'Maybe a ball.' The puppy wrangler pulled a face that told me he needed to take me firmly in hand. We started in aisle six. It took a long time.

I thought puppies needed a collar, a bed and masses of cuddles. The puppy wrangler knew better. Around aisle eleven he suggested the Dog Activity Level One Solitaire Strategy Game and Find the Treat Puzzle. Or maybe an Interactive Dog Food Treat Maze Toy Puzzle Dispenser Smart Training Feeder ('Your puppy will *l-e-r-v-e* that').

When he suggested a Treat Cam, I made the mistake of asking what it was. He read the bumf and said I could give my puppy ‘the fully coordinated canine lifestyle’ and with the touch of a button I could be anywhere in the world and still see, speak and treat my puppy. Next was something that looked like it would have been at home in the Afghanistan War. I could load treats in the top and then at random intervals it would fire them in any direction. The puppy version of an AK-47.

I told my friend I’d bring my puppy in before I bought clothes (‘Smart – always best to see what he looks good in’) and headed back to aisle ten. My friend gave me the spiel on how scared puppy would be away from his canine mum that first night. Of course, the store had something that would ‘absolutely’ solve that nightmare. I think it was called a snuggly puppy. A pink padded thing with its own battery-operated heart that could beat for forty-eight hours non-stop before I would need to change the battery. And in winter I could insert a heat pad so puppy would feel like he was snuggling up to Mum all night. Sold, sold, sold – don’t blab but my new friend had me at snuggly puppy.

Next he wanted to know what puppy would eat.

‘No idea. What do you think?’

We could have come up with a Middle East peace plan in a shorter time than his answer. There was grain-free, organic, holistic, free-range, paleo, dental-cleaning, vet-developed, natural and human grade. I decided I'd feed my puppy homemade meatloaf for a while. The puppy wrangler was worried. 'I think your puppy would be happier on a hypoallergenic grain-free dog food that promotes healthy digestion and is packed full of everything he needs for lean-muscle maintenance.' After the kibble debacle, we moved to bones. Did you know that dogs don't chew ordinary bones anymore? Any new-age owner understands what their dog really needs – deer antler at only twenty-five dollars for about eight inches.

We agreed to disagree on food and moved to the bed section, where things went from bad to worse. The wrangler wanted to know if puppy needed an orthopaedic bed, memory foam or if he would be happier on a pet futon? I told him I had no idea but he was so small he fitted in the palm of my hand. He decided we should consider something like a multi-functional faux-fur dog travel case. It was a full-size dog bed and bag for carrying puppy's luggage. I didn't think puppy would have luggage, so I asked him to suggest something else. We finally agreed on a shaggy faux-fur dog beanbag.

I was sure I was done, but my friend had other ideas. He suggested other puppy must-haves: a thermal pet mat to keep puppy warm or cool, and a backseat pet hammock to make sure puppy loved the car.

I was so tired I would have bought a crate of sexy-beast perfume for the unleashed hound in my life just to get out of that shop. The puppy wrangler took my credit card and carried everything to the car. ‘Your puppy is going to *l-e-r-r-v-e* you. Send me a photo when you get him home, and ring to tell me when he sleeps like a baby that first night.’

With friends like that in my corner, I felt confident as I built puppy digs reminiscent of a six-star hotel in the bathroom. There was the shaggy faux-fur beanbag. The snuggly puppy beating-heart-and-heat-pack thing. A plug-in pheromone gizmo from the vet. And the low-tech essentials – water bowls, puppy pads for accidents, and torn-up newspaper everywhere.

A neighbour and I drove to pick my puppy up. He’d never been away from his mum before, and when they handed him to me he trembled. I cried when I heard him whimper as he left his mum and brothers and sisters for the last time. He cried on the way home and did a great impersonation of almost being sick every time we went

around a corner. He was so scared when we got home he hid under a chair. Eventually he fell asleep on the couch and – in the first sign that he might like me just a smidge – moved ever so slightly to give me unfettered access when I stroked his tummy. I decided that because he was so sleepy our first dinner would be a slow affair. I put two teaspoons of homemade meatloaf on a saucer and gently plopped him in front, telling him to sit. Of course, he took no notice and went nuts. He snorted, he hooted, he did somersaults. It took two seconds before he had bits of meatloaf up to his armpits. I washed him in the laundry sink with the puppy wrangler’s hypoallergenic ylang-ylang-and-peppermint gentle-on-the-skin won’t-sting-the-eyes shampoo and – of course – the matching grooming spray.

I thought of my pet-shop friend when I told puppy it was time for bed. I carried him to the doggy Hilton, made sure the pink heartbeat thing was working, waited until he started to look sleepy and then crept to the door. I thought of my pet-shop friend again as I headed for bed. *Hey, with all the stuff I bought, what could possibly go wrong?*

It took all of a minute to find out. I wasn’t sure what the noise was at first. It sounded like *ruff-ruff-ruff, thump, thump, T-H-E-R-W-H-A-C-K, S-H-H-U-D-D-E-E-R-R,*

M-M-O-O-A-A-N-N. Eventually I worked it out: my miracle dog was hurling himself against the door, desperate to get out. I grabbed the puppy book for advice. It said whatever you do don't give in that first night: 'It will only take a few minutes for your puppy to fall asleep – and then you can too.' Rubbish. I admitted defeat at 2.28am when I was worried the door was about to fall off its hinges. When I finally went in, Harry was so happy he did cartwheels. He didn't want any of that expensive pet-shop stuff. There were just two things he needed: me and my doona. We spent our first night snuggled together. Scorecard: Harry, one; puppy book, zero. He was exactly where he wanted to be – with me under the covers. I thought about returning the stupid snuggly puppy beating-heart-and-heat-pack thing but didn't have the guts to ring the shop the next morning. How could I tell my friend the truth about how puppy and I really spent our first night?