

Black Dog

I returned home from a trip to a fish factory in Bicheno one evening to find Susan sitting at the kitchen table waiting for me, a glass of white wine in front of her. As I stepped forward to kiss her she raised her head. I saw with alarm that her eyes had *that* look again; they were expressionless chips of slate. It was a return to the time I had visited her in Year 10.

Only this time I had a name for it. The black dog: depression.

After some persuasion, and at the strong recommendation of our GP, we went to see a psychiatrist, Dr Harrington-Smith. He suggested I attend Susan's first interview. He sought a detailed account of any previous such episodes in Susan's life. We could only think of that time when in Year 10 she had suddenly dropped into a deep depression and just as suddenly had climbed out of it.

'Hmm, how about the opposite; any periods of excitability, shall we say?' He leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled.

'No,' she said.

But I thought of the 'cloudless sky' look in her eyes, and those 'crazy Suzie' episodes. I mentioned some: walking the water pipe, wagging school, sneaking into the boys' football team, her daring thespian activities. 'But what's the difference between high spirits, creativity and abnormal behaviour?' I asked him.

'Good question. It's difficult to tell. A lot of creative artists were bipolar, some quite pathologically so, others not. What's important is the overall pattern of behaviour. Have you noticed in periodicity, any regularity, in swings of mood?'

I caught the reference to bipolar but that didn't seem to fit Susan from my meagre knowledge of that disorder. 'No, no regular swings. The most recent bout of depression we think had a quite specific cause. You tell him, Susan.'

'What do I say? That Mother interferes too much?' she turned to me listlessly.

I explained how we had mistakenly become too involved in our parents' plans for us.

'Well, I think that's your answer. Although there are signs of mild bipolar disorder.' At the look on my face, he quickly added, 'No, don't be frightened of the name. There are two types of bipolar, Type 1 and Type 2. In Susan's case we are dealing with Type 2, the less pathological kind, and I did say *mild*. That onset around the age of 15 is typical of some endogenous depressive tendencies, but the periods of excitability and risk-taking are not manic, rather hypomanic...'

'God, that sounds worse,' I muttered.

'No, don't be alarmed,' he smiled. 'Hypomania is a *milder* form of mania. Susan's episodes are not pathological. Indeed, she seems to have used them very creatively.' He turned to Susan smiling. 'I saw you in *Titus Andronicus* and was mightily impressed.' He became business-like again. 'I repeat, Susan's condition is mild, and I certainly wouldn't prescribe lithium or any other medication. But

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such depression can be triggered by stress. From the sound of it Susan might be reacting to family pressures. If so, I would consider a life-style change.'

We looked at each other; she had visibly cheered.

Harrington-Smith noted her reaction with a smile, adding, 'Many young Tasmanians at the brink of their career feel the need to spread their wings, flee the nest for pastures new and all that.'

We returned home much happier than when we had left.

'Now I know what the frog feels like,' she said.

'What frog?'

'The frog who didn't notice the water was getting warmer. We're the frogs. Harrington-Smith was right. We've got to move out of this cooking pot they call Hobart before we're well and truly cooked.'

We thereupon decided to pool all the metaphors and be frogs that spread our wings to flee the nest of Hobart as soon as possible, and as far as possible. And where might that be? I thought of Lily and Swinbourne's connection with Hong Kong.

It had to be Hong Kong.