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Opening extract from

Brilliant

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The Black Dog came in the night. He came in a cloud – he was the cloud. A huge cloud that covered the city. And the city – the air above the city – became even darker. For just a while. Then the black cloud got smaller, and smaller. Until it was a small cloud that sank lower to the ground, and its shape became doglike and the doglike shape became a dog.

The Black Dog of Depression had invaded the city of Dublin. No humans noticed.

But the animals did.

The city's pets tried to warn their owners but the humans weren't listening. A bark was a bark, and a mew was just a mew.

The Black Dog crept through the city's streets. He slid along the shadows and made no noise at all. He slid and crept, and sneaked into houses and flats – wherever he could find the humans.

The city's dogs hated what was happening.

Dublin loves dogs. And the city's dogs know they're lucky.

'All this food and water!' said a dog called Sadie. 'Oh my God! And all I have to do, like, is wag my tail and remember to pee and, like, poo in the garden.'

'I forget sometimes,' said a second dog, called Chester.

'Me too, like,' said Sadie.

'The only thing I have to do,' said Chester, 'is pretend I'm happy when my owner comes home from work.'

'Do you have to pretend?' Sadie asked.

'Sometimes,' said Chester.

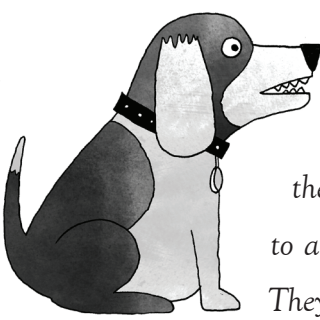
'Oh my God,' said Sadie. 'I never do.'

'Aren't you great?' said Chester, a bit sarcastically. (Dogs, especially Dublin dogs, can be very sarcastic. Just listen very carefully to the barks, especially early in the morning.)

The dogs knew: there was only one way to stop the Black Dog of Depression. But all they could do was watch as the Black Dog started to prowl in the night and move in closer to the humans. It was horrible to

see how he could become part of the air and slide into houses. How he could change the mood, kill laughter and wipe smiles from faces that had been smiling for years. How he could change sleep from a pleasant dream into a nightmare.

The two dogs, Chester and Sadie, lived very near each other. They were almost next-door neighbours. There was only one house between theirs, and it belonged to a man called Ben Kelly. They both liked Ben. He didn't have a dog of his own but he always treated them well, whenever he saw them going for a walk or barking at him through the windows of their houses. They both liked sitting on the backs of the couches in their front rooms.





'Oh my God!' said Sadie. 'Do you do that as well?'

'I do, yeah,' said Chester.

'That's, like, amazing!' said Sadie.

'Passes the time.' Chester shrugged.

Ben lived alone, but there were always people coming and going. There was always music and laughter. And there were two children that the dogs liked. Two kids who used to come to Ben's house. They called him Uncle Ben.

'What's an uncle?' Sadie asked Chester.

'Don't know,' Chester admitted. 'But I think it might have something to do with chips.'

'Chips?'

'Yeah,' said Chester. 'He buys them chips whenever they come to the house.'

The children, a boy and a girl, loved their Uncle Ben. And it was clear Ben loved them. But then the Black Dog slid into Ben's house – and hundreds, thousands, of other houses. He came at night, hiding in the darkness.

Dogs, and most other animals, love the night-time. It's the time when they can be themselves, when they

can do most of their barking and howling. They're not expected to wag their tails forever or to fetch sticks and stupid plastic toys. People go to bed, and their pets can secretly relax. It's a magic time, when the daylight rules wobble and the humans don't pay as much attention. Unusual events seem normal or don't get noticed. Two talking dogs might actually be two human voices carried in the wind. A black dog-shaped shadow creeping up the stairs is probably the moon behind the tree outside in the front garden.

It made the city's animals angry that the Black Dog used the night to spread his poison. But they knew there was nothing that Sadie or Chester or any of the city's other dogs and pets could do to stop him.

Only the city's kids could do that.



1

Gloria Kelly lay in bed. She was wide awake. She knew her brother, Raymond, was too. She could tell by the way he was breathing. It was awake breath. He was lying there, thinking and listening. Sleep breath was different. It was longer and lighter, less in and out.

'Rayzer?' she whispered.

Raymond didn't answer. But she didn't care.

She liked sharing the bedroom. Although she knew Raymond didn't. She didn't care about that either. She could like it in secret. She didn't have to tell him.

She'd been moved into Raymond's room when



their Uncle Ben had come to live with them. For a while. That was what her mam and dad had said. Uncle Ben would be staying 'for a while'. At first her mother had called it 'a little while'. But the 'little' had disappeared when Uncle Ben kept staying, and Gloria began to think that her bedroom wasn't hers any more. And Raymond, she supposed, began to think the same thing. His room had become *their* room.

She looked into her room sometimes, when her Uncle Ben wasn't in there. He hadn't done anything to it. He hadn't touched her pictures or her other stuff. It was still pink, nearly everything in it. The only really new thing in the room was her Uncle Ben's smell. It was kind of an adult smell. A mixture of soap and sweatiness. There were none of his clothes lying around, and just one book that wasn't hers. She'd looked at the cover but it had looked boring, about a war or something. Except for the fact that she didn't sleep or play in there

any more, it was still Gloria's room. So maybe her Uncle Ben really was only staying for a while – but the while was a bit longer than they'd expected.

Maybe.

'Rayzer?'

He still wouldn't answer.

She didn't like her bed. It wasn't a real bed. It was just a mattress on the floor. She'd liked it at first. It had been fun, nearly like camping. But not now. Her face was sometimes right against the wall, low down, at the skirting board, nearly where it joined the floor. It was cold there. Always – even when the rest of the room was warm. And she could hear things sometimes – she thought she could. Behind the skirting board.

Gloria wished she had her own bed back. That was all she missed really. She had her duvet and her pink cover. But it wasn't the same.

'Rayzer?'



She said it a bit louder. Nearly proper talking.

Maybe he was asleep. She kind of liked that, the fact that her big brother had fallen asleep before her.

She tried again.

'Rayzer?'

'What?'

'Are you not asleep?'

'That's a stupid question.'

'I bet you were asleep,' said Gloria. 'And I woke you.'

'I wasn't,' said Raymond.

'Bet you were,' said Gloria. 'Prove it.'

'Easy,' said Raymond. 'You said "Rayzer" four times.'

She heard him moving, turning in his bed.

'Didn't you?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'I think. Why didn't you answer?'

'Didn't want to.'

'I knew that,' said Gloria. 'I knew you were awake.'

'What d'you want?'

'Can you hear them?' said Gloria.

'Yeah.'

Gloria was talking about the grown-ups. Her mam, her dad, her granny and Uncle Ben. They were down in the kitchen. Raymond's bedroom was right on top of them.

'They're mumbling again,' Gloria whispered.

'Yeah,' said Raymond.

The house was full of mumbles these days. Mumbles that often stopped whenever Raymond or Gloria walked into the room. Mumbling was what grown-ups did when they thought they were whispering. Whispers only stayed in the air for a little while but mumbles rolled around for ages, in the high corners, along the window frames, all around the house. The mumbles had almost become creatures. Gloria imagined she could see



them. They were made of dust and hair, pushed into a ball, with skinny legs that barely touched the walls and ceilings as they slid along the paint and glass and wood.

The mumbling had started when their Uncle Ben had come to live with them. Or just before he came. Gloria didn't like the mumbles. They worried her. But she didn't blame her Uncle Ben for them.

Neither did Raymond. He didn't like having to share his bedroom with Gloria, but he didn't blame his Uncle Ben for that either. Gloria was a pain in the neck – and in other places too. But Raymond knew all little sisters were like that. It was one of the rules of life. And sometimes sharing the bedroom wasn't too bad. Like now. Raymond had always been a bit afraid of the dark. Just a small bit. He was nearly two years older than Gloria, so he went to bed half an hour after her. It was a quarter of an hour for each year. That was

the rule, his dad had told him.

'Who made the rule?' Raymond had asked his dad.

'The government,' his dad had answered.

His dad thought he was funny.

Anyway, when Raymond had gone up to bed he'd always left his bedroom door open a bit, so that light from the kitchen downstairs could get in and push away some of the darkness. He'd hated it when he saw Gloria's door closed, with her stupid sign: 'Keep Out – I Mean U! XX'. Because Gloria wasn't scared of the dark. And that made Raymond feel terrible, and ashamed.

Now, with Gloria sharing the bedroom, Raymond wasn't really scared of the dark any more. And he didn't have to say anything about it, or be grateful or anything. It was just a fact.

'Mumble, mumble, mumble,' said Gloria now.

Raymond did a deep, man mumble. 'Mummm-bull.'



Gloria did a lady one. 'Mimm-bill, mimm-bill. Know what we should do, Rayzer?'

'What?'

'Sneak down, under the table.'

'Cool.'

It was the night before Saint Patrick's Day. There was no school the next day, and they'd already been allowed to stay up later than usual.

Gloria heard Raymond getting out of his bed. She stood up on the mattress.



Gloria and Raymond had this secret thing, a game. They'd sneak back downstairs – only at the weekends – after they'd been sent to bed, and only when the grown-ups were in the kitchen. It didn't really work in the other rooms. They'd sneak down the stairs and along the hall. They'd creep into the kitchen on their hands and knees, or sliding along on their bellies. They'd crawl in under the table, and they'd stay there. For as long as they could.

They couldn't touch the adult feet, or they'd be caught and the game would end and they'd be sent back up to bed. The first time they did it, they'd only lasted two minutes and fourteen seconds because their dad moved his foot and felt something.

'There's a dog under the table,' he said. 'But we don't have a dog.'

Then they saw his big face, upside down, looking at them.

'Messers,' he said. 'Get back up to bed.'

