



Sara
Lansing
Redemption

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Redemption

Sara Lansing

Life is not a fair place.

When things are good, we like to think it is, but it's all about checks and balances: the better the good times, the worse the bad. Things had been wonderful, so perhaps I should have known, philosophically, that the reckoning would come.

Nothing about it was fair, not to her, not to me, not to anyone, and the world seemed to have produced its foulest scowl to suit the occasion. I warred with myself from the moment my eyes opened that day.

The cemetery was one of the old ones still in use, filled with leaning memorials to people long dead, ornate columns and tombs carved by masons themselves long ago dust, and covered with the hieroglyphs of recent history that applauded every last soul as beloved, missed, honoured, all things good and right. There are no negative words on tombstones, it is simply an unwritten rule, and for that perhaps I should be thankful; none speaks ill of the dead.

They do not even think it, if there is someone else to blame.
Me.

Charise's family were a tight group around the open brown wound in the cool earth, all dark suits, the kind of neat, formal presentation evoked by the attitudes that had made them so disapproving of their daughter's lifestyle. Being a lesbian may be a happenstance of birth by all sane standards, but as far as they were concerned, someone else's genes were responsible. And *I* was responsible, for perverting their daughter, enticing her to a life of sin and abnormality.

The memories burned in me, then. I seemed to be in two places in space and time -- the me who had discovered the meaning of joy, and the me who had lost it once more. The latter stood under a tree twenty

metres from the burial party and watched with undisguised grief as eyes flicked to her and scowls flashed across faces a moment before shoulders were turned.

Grey skies always seemed to go with funerals, it was almost a cliché that it rained on the mourners as a body went into the earth; but it rained this day and I stood with hands in coat pockets listening to the patter of heavy drops on my hood. Umbrellas went up around the party by the grave, and I heard almost nothing of the words spoken over my beloved as she was laid to rest.

Laid to rest. What a contradiction. It was her family's wishes, not hers. She would have opted for cremation, as two thirds of the population did in the 21st century, but hers was a family of means and they upheld the old tradition of one-upmanship. Cemeteries were a venue for the display of status, of wealth, piety, of any behaviour or possessions which marked any particular family as superior to others. And my Charise, it seemed, would play her role in her family's intentions no matter what her own might have been. She had been her own person in life, but the moment life passed from her she became her family's ward, as if she had been an infant.

I closed my eyes and listened to the rain, felt the beating of my heart as tears prickled at my eyes, and felt the waves of hate from the dark-coated bunch along the path. Their stolid, unyielding unfriendliness was an echo of the ancient stone, leaning, pitted, streaked with deposits from the metal lettering cast a hundred years in the past, which bled down the face of gravestones like mascara on the cheeks of the abused.

I shut them out as best I could and focussed on what was important to me, to say goodbye to the most special person in my life, and to remember her as she had been. In a way it was more difficult to do this than to face the hate; to let the darkness come and cover me over with the things that left a person bereft of the better qualities of life. But that was the way to nowhere -- to an early grave of my own -- and I let the memories come through, painful as they were.

Charise and I met at university, sharing the same class in social science, and the chemistry was instantaneous. We could not concentrate, could think of nothing more than our fascination with each other, and spent the rest of the day together, talking, laughing, eating in the university café, and finally parting when the stars were out, each heading to our respective homes. But our hearts and minds were elsewhere. Within a week we were a couple, and kept it from her well-to-do family for a month or so. I was from interstate, I had no folks to introduce, but

Charise's family made it very clear they disapproved of their daughter's lifestyle choice, and wanted no part of me.

For my part, they were welcome to their attitude. Charise lived a half-life for a while, spending as much of her time with me as possible but going home all the same; but a day came when she showed them her back and we took an apartment together.

From that moment forth we explored our lives, made our plans, lived and loved every moment. The sweet hopes for the future that people engender so easily, and the delicious entanglements of loving around which so much of life revolves, made our existence something we cherished.

I was so ready for this. After a few unspectacular flings with both sexes, I was waiting for the chemistry, and this was it. Joy on a stick, as they used to say. Perfect, physical and mental attraction, a shared sense of humour -- we even had a complimentary dress sense, were interested in the same things, had the same passions. Could it be any righter? It ceased to matter where we were, so long as we were together. Home, university, hanging with friends, at a movie, eating out, at the beach ... life was one delicious melange, and it felt as if it would go on forever.

Maybe she was thinking just those thoughts when she stepped into the road, oblivious to oncoming traffic, and a car did what cars are apt to when they encounter a human body. If so, she died as happy as anyone ever can.

I was in class, and when she did not show later I became worried, called her mobile, and found myself talking to an accident investigator who was already on the scene. She was killed outright, there was no question of survival. The ambulance crew could only collect her body. I was asked to make a formal identification, and the Police were far more conciliatory and gentle with me than her family were in the days that followed.

That was when the hate began to flow. I had felt it like a creeping stain, a silent scream, as if it had all been my fault, some sort of cosmic justice for the unnaturalness I had brought into her life. They vilified me as some demon who had seduced and murdered her, but who lived on to do it again to some other unsuspecting person. Nothing was too outrageous for them to say in their pain. I reminded myself they were grieving as surely as I was, and attacking me was a crude way for them to handle the situation.

It did me no good, other than perhaps to glean a shadow of superiority to them, simply by understanding this. That's the perspective of social science, perhaps, but it felt hollow to apply it to the tragedy of

one's own life.

Renewed flurries of rain on my hood brought me back to the sombre scene and I realised they were getting ready to lower her coffin. The priest had more or less finished his droning on, and the mourners were looking longingly at the line of black cars on the nearest access road. Hypocrites! I would have knelt in the mud at her graveside to say farewell to my heart and soul. Instead I huddled under the tree, keeping drier than them, but apart from the moment, out of sight, out of mind. Did I hate them? No, hate is not part of me; at least I don't believe so. But if anyone could inspire it in me, they could.

It was a formless emotion and I knew it was a self-destructive one. Best not to feel it. But when your mind is upside down and your heart broken, you become a plaything for the ebb and flow of your brain chemistry, and can only be washed by that tide. Washed clean, hopefully -- but onto rocks is always a possibility.

I had dreaded this moment. The coffin descended into the earth on its carefully-prepared tackle, and Charise's mother made the offering of soil into the grave, a handful of dry earth from a box, a gesture repeated by others. Handling mud would have been unseemly. I should have been there to farewell her, but I told myself that from where she was right now, she understood everything better than we, and the schism between family and partner was something she would handle in her own way.

Part of me wanted to believe she was right here, watching us; it was a comforting thought which helped the grief. And a small part of me, deep down, knew that I could be with her again any time I wished, there was nothing particularly complicated about it.

My eyes brimmed with tears and I closed them, let the tears flow down my cheeks, and listened to the funeral party breaking up. The grave was not filled in until later these days; everything was tailored to the feelings of the bereaved. I wondered faintly if anyone had spared a thought for the young woman crying under the tree? The clergymen, the attendants, the funeral directors, anyone? Maybe. I hoped so. But through my grief I was quite unaware of it, and certainly no one approached me.

Soon I heard engines started and warmed, and flurries of black flowed between the graves as the mourners departed. Some wept openly now, all shoulders were turned, all backs stiff, and I was glad that no one came toward me from that group. I turned my face and listened to the crunch of gravel as the cars drew away, and I leaned against the tree for a long while before I developed the courage to go up to the grave.

A priest looked on from a distance, speaking with an attendant under a broad umbrella, and he gave me a small smile and a nod, the soul of discretion. Ah, he had been aware of me. Priests, like doctors and lawyers, must see it all, and a private farewell for the outsider was a kindness which cost nothing, and which the family in its closed ranks need never be aware of.

I looked down at the coffin, wet with rain, its brass plaque gleaming in the dim, late light. My Charise. This was no end for a warm soul, a heart brimming with life. Not so early in her days. But in a way I sensed nothing now, as if the animating spark had gone free, and I could more easily let the simple physicality go.

How long I stood in the rain I did not know, my hood streaming with droplets, the patter the only sound in my ears, but soon the sextons needed to get to work to fill the grave -- a mound of brown earth that would seal matters until the masons arrived to construct her enduring monument. I took one last look into the earth, wiped my eyes and turned away.

I was not sure where my feet led me after that. To somewhere dry -- I remember sitting in a coffee shop in town, up some street across the busy highway from the sprawling old cemetery. Stirring a cup for so long, the contents were merely warm when I put the china to my lips. I stared out at the day as showers came and went, and my depression closed in on itself.

Memory was wicked, and my thoughts were of the person I had lost. The silence of my days and nights. I now shared a bed with none, and my foreboding was terrible. How would it be, to once again come home to loneliness? Let alone to ridicule for my lifestyle choices. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I had not mistaken the looks of disapproval from the evangelical students' association these last few months. Sod them, it was none of their business.

My thoughts trended darker as the afternoon wore on, and perhaps I napped in the warm back booth of the café, my second empty cup before me, a plate with a few crumbs testimony to something I could not remember eating. When I looked around at the few patrons I realised the shop would be closing soon and I had to go. Home?

A home is made by the people in it, and I could not bring myself to go back to our apartment. Where, then? Pubs and clubs, bury myself in the blaring jangle of nightlife, try to shut out all I was feeling? That did

not work. I had seen friends drink themselves close to alcoholic poisoning, only to once again remember all that ailed them in the worst hours of it. I felt there was a demon on my back, I needed to strike out at the world, or lose myself in it ... something, anything. Anything was better than sitting helplessly and letting life come to me in its own time, with all its pain and betrayal.

The rain had lifted now, though the sky was still dense, and as I walked out of the café the wind was a chill gust from the west, blowing old leaves from the city trees. I was not really sure where I was going, I had no clear impression, but just walked. Street by street, businesses were closing for the day, pubs and restaurants beginning their evening trade. Gaiety -- the other meaning of the word: people enjoying themselves.

Now it seemed a cruel joke and my mood became black. Even blacker, as I watched couples coming and going, two by two. There would never be another like my Charise, I told myself, and part of me wanted there never to be. I must remain true to her ... to her memory. There was no moving on yet, the wound was still too raw, and I walked with my hands thrust deep into my coat pockets, resenting the bright lights and the building beat from every public house as the dinner trade gained momentum.

Who were they all, these so-called normal people, to judge me and how I lived my days? Anger flared in my heart. I had looked under the rocks of the human species, I knew what dwelled behind closed doors. There were parts of a society I refused to be judged by, whose reproof or approval held no meaning for me, and only my scorn met their choices. I was my own person, my own reality, and if society had no place for me, then I had no place for society.

As I thought these harsh, ungainly things, I stepped out of a side street and found myself on the busy main road across from the city railway station, and abruptly I needed to put the town behind me. As the evening gathered and the night-life came out to play, I turned my eyes from the girls in their glad-rags, the Little Black Dresses and the heels so high, the parade of long legs and sexual flash outside every bar. It tore my heart because none of it was for me, nor did I want it anymore -- or thought I did not, or only if it came to me in some particular way.

My confusion was deadly, and I almost ran across the road to the station, down the steps and into the airy cavern of the terminal building. I closed my eyes to the stream of half-clad teens of both sexes making their way to the nightspots, and wandered along the line of monitors, looking for a train, anything to get me the hell out of here.

Not to the north. The suburbs got rough that way, and there was nothing at the south end of the line but more concrete and streetlights. East, perfect. A long line to nowhere.

I passed coins through the ticket window and received the smartcard slip which earned me two hours' public transport. I went through the turnstiles and took a seat to wait, closing my eyes and ears yet again to the flow of humanity. A lumpen flood of the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful, all striving for something, chasing their desires. *Giert Sava*, they call it in Africa. A nonsense-game of running and chasing, competing relentlessly for the object of the moment -- exhausting the wild energies of life and the instinctive needs to be and to do which are otherwise without expression, because life shuts us in, locks us away and makes us into what others would have us be.

I wanted to get spray cans and graffiti walls, *I am a lesbian and I am proud of it!* Beholden to none, and at no one's leave to be what I am ... but that is the sort of display you get from younger ones who have learned a different socialisation.

I just wanted to be left alone to be what I was.

The train was leaving soon, a long streak of silver metal and bright colours, and I shuffled aboard. I validated my ticket and found a corner in which to curl up with my black mood. Waiting for it to pull out was a difficult few minutes and I closed my eyes, huddled in my jacket and tried to make the world go away. Then it was all in motion, the slow pull through the marshalling yards, then out onto the track to the south, and the divergence to the east. Now I could turn in on myself, let the exhaustion flow around me, and listen with half an ear to the station announcements and the low murmur of chatter in the long car.

I knew I was running, but toward or away was an open question. All I had cared for in the world, I had left in a hole in the ground that afternoon, and no amount of philosophising was going to change this. Charise was dead, and I felt almost guilty for being the survivor. Why couldn't it have been me stepping in front of that car? Then she would have had the family that circled, fortress-like, around her, she would have blended back into them -- maybe not happily, but her life would not have stopped. I felt mine had stopped. I could not see a day ahead of me, it was as if the future did not exist. Not without her. There was no point to it any more.

I heard a few stations go by, but my eyes were closed and the motion of the train lulled me. Sleep was something I desperately needed, and against the raging of my thoughts I began to slip into peaceful space at last. Just at the end, before crossing the threshold of sleep, I thought

I heard her voice, soothing, reminding me of my humanity, and telling me that death was the end of neither life nor of love.

The next I knew, the train driver was shaking me by the shoulder and telling me I was at the end of the line. I blinked awake and saw only darkness outside until my eyes resolved the station, and I unfolded stiffly from my seat. The driver was setting the ramp down for a person in an electric wheelchair to leave the train, and when he was away I stepped out into the windy night on the platform.

A few spots of rain were in the air again and I saw the last passengers heading for parked cars or to meet their pickups. The train waited a few minutes to collect the early evening commuters for the city -- kids headed for the bright lights, tricked out like whores despite the chill. I closed my eyes and did not open them until the sound of the train had faded.

I was in the hills. Many expensive suburbs had sprung up in the ranges, despite the fire risk, and it was a busy part of the world. The wind shook the trees and I drew my hood forward again as droplets scattered through the platform lights. I made my way to the carpark and looked around, but of course there was nothing for me there. I had wanted to be far from the city, to find a place as dark as my thoughts, and I had done it with ease.

Without a glance back I strode off along a gravel path which led up, away from the station and its deep cutting toward the forested hillside. It met a bike trail that snaked through the bushland like a black ribbon to nowhere, lit at infrequent intervals by the sulphurous glimmer of solar lamps.

This was where I needed to be. Alone with my thoughts, and not a person anywhere to intrude. I saw houses through the trees, the glimmer of lights. I heard maybe a whisper of TV noise if I listened hard, but I set one foot before the other and walked on into the night. I was going nowhere but compelled to be in motion, and now the rage could begin. My fists balled at my sides, turned into knots of white-knuckled bone and muscle that shook, and tears were replaced with fury.

Nothing about it was fair, not the fact that fate had taken my love away from me, not the rejection of her family, their repudiation of me and of what we had been. I was not dirt beneath their feet! I wanted to lash out at them, beat their stupid faces, pour my vitriol into the air they breathed. so they would know what it was like to be me. But our society

does not allow us to do these things, and screaming in my own heart was all I could do.

I welcomed the return of the rain. I put my face to the falling drops and let them wash the heat from my cheeks. I listened to the patter on the leaves, a sound as old as the world, and tried to stand apart from ... everything. Ancient philosophers used to say that to avoid disappointment one need only desire nothing, but I had observed that without desire to drive us, the years of our lives slip by, one by one, and we finish our days with the same nothing with which we began them. That was not for me -- nor could I suppress the cravings of desire. But to love is to run the risk of loss. I had loved, and I had lost.

At some point I stopped, leaned against a tree and let myself cry again, a hopeless, desperate weeping, the kind of grief I knew would go on for hours, until I was so exhausted that I slept. I preferred my anger, so I beat my hands against the tree until my palms were raw, and then made myself stalk onward.

Who was I? Did I know, really? Had my life been defined by others at every instance? Parents, school friends, the fashions, the law, pressures and encouragements, finally my partner. What would I have been without them? A blank slate. *Tabula rasa*. Or something else -- a primal human, untarnished by the constructs of society? It was an interesting concept, but we are what we are, here and now.

Wondering what we might have been, as a contrast to intolerable reality, was merely an exercise in managing grief. Would I have preferred a life in which Charise played no part? Maybe. I would have been spared this grief, but then ... ah, then there would have been no heart for her to live in ever after.

And in the end, remembering those who are gone is the only way for the mark they made on the world to endure; and even the least among us may make an impression that is worthy of recollection.

As I walked I let myself remember her, her smile, her laugh. Things we spoke of, plans we made, and I let myself smile too. Our days had been so good, and our nights perhaps even better. Her passion, her willingness to experiment, to find ways to please each other that never failed to excite, all these things were memories beyond price, and created a rich weave through the fabric of my life. I hoped wherever she was, she carried with her a similar gratitude, and deep down I chose to believe our paths would cross again.

The grieving mind moves in cycles, buoyant one moment as the positives and the hopes play out, then diving into the depths the next as the inexorable rush of brain chemistry drives us down, and the pain and

anger return. Why me? Why her? Were we so wicked that we should be punished with separation? Was there a god, looking down with stern disapproval and parting us with grim finality? Oh, how the fundamentalists would love for this to be the case -- but the crowning irony is that for all their faith, the tangible world remains mute on such matters.

Destiny is a strange thing to comprehend. A flow of interconnected events that form a tapestry. Threads and skeins of meaning, intent and consequence come together as the shuttle of action crosses the loom of the present and the infinite, latent possibilities of time become fixed. Had I not met Charise, I would not be grieving; were I not grieving, I would not be in need of wandering; were I not wandering, I would not have been on this path. Were I not on this path on this windy, rain-wet night, I would not have encountered the young man with the knife. Therefore, had I not met Charise the man with the knife would not have met the destiny he did.

One moment I walked doggedly on, hands in pockets, water flicking from the toes of my boots on the wet tarmac of the bike path, the next a shape detached from the gloom where the shadows were deepest, mid-way between one lamp and the next. Something gleamed in his hand and his face was hidden by a hood as sodden as my own. An aura surrounded him, something my senses picked up and I did not question -- a throbbing darkness that suited the night so well. I knew his intent without needing to hear the guttural words that came across the rustle of the leaves and still-pattering rain.

Perhaps locals made their way home from the station on this path, perhaps he had watched them, staked out their route like the ambush predator he was, but on this fateful night he had caught the wrong one. Under other circumstances, on other days, I would have been afraid, perhaps his malice and aggression would have intimidated me. But tonight my brain chemistry was in no condition to be manipulated.

The fury that had boiled in me for hours found a perfect release, a welcome catharsis, and I did not break stride, simply snarled incoherently as I walked into him and a double cross-hand block snapped the knife from his hand. His surprise was palpable, and he had barely reacted when my knee drove up between his legs. Shock and pain paralysed him, and sealed his demise. I head-butted him, not very accurately, but it was quite sufficient to put him down, and then I began to hit him, feeling my fist slither in the wet. I have no idea how many times I found his face and middle, going through the desperately flailing hands that tried to fend me off. At last, when he was on the ground, I

kicked him until I was exhausted.

It was a blur, a moment as black as the night and my mind, and only when I seemed to snap back to my senses did I recoil from the horror of my own actions. I staggered back from the groaning mound by the track and felt a tree solid behind my shoulders. My heart was torn for brand new reasons as the merciless chain of causality made itself clear.

This is what I am made to be ... I am not this person ...

I put a hand to my mouth and turned to run on down the path to the island of yellowish light by the next solar lamp. I was shaking all over, and my knuckles were raw, my right hip protesting from the jarring it had just suffered. I found myself crouching by the light, huddled to it as if by a campfire in the wilds, wringing my hands. Processing the event took far longer than to enact it, and I could not recognise myself in that moment.

After a short while I looked back along the trail but the place where the young thug had chosen to wait in ambush was a pool of darkness. The lights of a few houses were faint through the forest ahead and I knew the trail was coming to its highest point. Soon it would loop back around the hill and find its end among light and people once more.

The very thought of facing the inevitability of streets and the society that lived upon them was enough to nail me to the spot, as if between Scylla and Charybdis. My own actions were behind me -- the judgements of my peers ahead. I put my head in my hands and tried to find a scream of frustration, but managed only to whimper.

I staggered up and on, blundered off the path a few hundred meters on and found myself among trees in the crackling, shifting dark. I saw the next solar lamp as a flare through the wet foliage, striking sparkles from the wind-blown leaves of the gums, and a shiver went through me as the cold and wet overcame adrenalin and told me how wretched I really was.

Wretched woman, I thought, miserable woman, look at you. You can look after yourself in a scrap, but you're helpless to change what needs to be changed. I crouched in my sodden clothes and closed my eyes, panting, shuddering, wet hands deep in pockets to find any shred of warmth. *Are you going to let them take your humanity from you?*

There are moments when you know you are not in the driver's seat of your life, but grasping the subtleties is not easy. Such moment go by like a scent on the wind, and only the alert are properly aware of them. Two such ephemeral traces hit me in the same moment and somehow my spinning mind grasped them both.

The first was the thought, clear as a bell. *No one can take my humanity from me, only I can give it away. And I do not choose to.*

In that moment it seemed I regained control, and an odd, shuddery calm went through me, something I could not explain. A turning down of the volume of the mind-scream, an ordering of perspective. And perhaps it was this that allowed me to sense, a few seconds later, I was not alone.

My heart beat hard and fast as I assumed the lurker in the trees had friends -- ferals usually ran in packs, and I looked around wildly, half-rising. But the sound was not a human footstep, and before the glow of the next pathway lamp I saw the slinking shape of a hound. There were feral dogs as well as humans, and now my heart raced. A mauling would be the perfect finish to a perfectly terrible day, assuming I did not lose my life from shock and blood loss in conditions that would make the merely cold seem like freezing. I lost the long, low outline of the big dog in undergrowth a few moments later but heard heavy paws in the leaf litter, and I scattered quickly back toward the path, or where I thought the path might be.

The darkness was now the enemy instead of the solace I had craved, and I blundered between the trees, fighting for balance, all the while hearing the tread of those big paws, out there somewhere. In a rising swirl of panic I realised I could not find the path, and the glimmer of the next light was beyond the dog. I found a branch under my foot and snatched it up, ready to lay about me as best I could, then drew a deep breath and headed for the light one stealthy step at a time.

I heard panting in the dark, leaves slithering under the dog's feet, and the rain obliterated all but the clearest sounds, telling me my stalker was in fact dangerously close. I swung the branch in wide arcs that crackled through the overhanging foliage. The minutes I took to reach the glow of the next path lamp were far more terrifying than the encounter with the young thug.

I crouched by the lamp, branch upraised, knowing the light was more a comfort than a protection, and heard steps in the dark. They seemed to go on for a long time as the hound circled outside the patch of light, then there was silence for a long moment. *Where are you? I thought. If you're going to have a go, get it over with...*

A bush moved with a flurry of raindrops and a long, tawny shape moved stealthily into the light. Eyes gleamed, green as a wolf's, and ears laid back as if this hound was about to take up my challenge. A big dog, hungry and bedraggled, desperate as myself, if in different ways. I raised the branch over my shoulder and a snarling challenge was on my lips –

And then my perceptions and my world turned over with the simplicity and ease of the rain on my face. I lowered the wood and dropped it by my side, crouched gently and let my fear be replaced by something altogether better in the realm of human feelings.

Pity. This was no feral hunting me, this was a German shepherd, cold, wet, alone, her sodden fur filthy, her ears down because she was frightened, and she was the one asking for help. Her belly was on the ground, her tail down, but that spark of desperate courage kept her in the light, her brown eyes flashing green reflections as she implored me. Suddenly I was swamped by a whole new rush of feelings. All it took was one hand extended to her, and she slunk forward, a hopeful twitch of the tail telling me all she wanted was to be saved.

“Are you lost?” I whispered, hardly recognising my own voice. The name and registration tags of her collar were missing, and she trembled under my touch. “More likely abandoned,” I added, and I could find no more words. Everything changed in one stroke, clear as daylight, and my sense of the motion of fate was distinct. Had I not met Charise, I would not be grieving. Were I not grieving, I would not be seeking seclusion. Were I not seeking it on this path, on this awful night, I would not have been in the right place to save a life.

The dog trembled as I put my arms around her, and my tears were now the soft fall of emotional release. Circles do reach their own ends, and each ending is a new beginning. We lose sight of this when the grieving is too much, and some of us miss the new door as it opens.

I looked around on the path and saw streetlights not far away. I knew where I was, and I could walk through the streets back to the station in less than an hour. Somehow the warring inside me had taken a back seat as I realised I had a responsibility now. It brought a peace such as I had not known since this whole nightmare had begun. Perhaps having someone to look after is a greater anchor than any of us know until that someone is gone.

The dog licked my face, her tongue very warm in the chill, and I could not help but laugh, for the first time I had laughed in what seemed an age. I put my face to her wet fur and just let the moment fill me, then I yielded to the miserable discomfort I had welcomed, realising that more than grief had driven me. There was purpose in the most abstract events, and as I was *meant* to save her from exposure, she was *meant* to save me from a grief that would destroy me.

At last I rose and the shepherd looked up expectantly from her liquid brown eyes.

“Come on,” I whispered, fondling her ears. “Let's go home.”