

Heartworm

by **Devorah Uriel**

A shrill whistle cuts through the warm summer air and I spin to follow the sound, my mouth suddenly dry. Fear takes up residence in the heart like a writhing thing. The mother of all worms, it grows plump and comfortable. Some people believe the heart is the place where love resides. I'm not so sure. The sharp snap of a twig, and my worm begins to thrash.

A brindle hound leaps through the tall tow-colored grass responding to the call of its owner. Releasing a gust of air, I bend to kiss the head of my own four-legged companion, who is sniffing the ground near my feet. The off-leash dog park is spacious, an open place where the breeze can flow between sounds, where internal alarms can quiet, where panic can be more easily soothed.

Countless things can activate my fear. Car brakes screeching. A child screaming. Fireworks. My partner's angry scowl. Someone, anyone running. Thunder. Arguments. Light coming from under a door into a dark room. Shadows. Men with large hands. Not having correct change. Baths. The dark. Closets. Rope. Women with straight, black hair. Anything sharp.

There was no singular event. My fear was nurtured day-to-day, in tedious, predictable moments. I survived being locked in a closet and being bound by twine to my bedposts. I survived the rhythmic lashings of the belt, and the creeping touch of my grandfather's hands. I didn't survive the scorn and disapproval in my mother's eyes. She continues to influence my thoughts. I know how to not believe everything I think; I don't know how not to feel everything I feel. And I feel too much.

I feel my clammy hands, my pounding heart, and the urge to run. I feel unable to breathe, and the dull pain from pinching myself. I feel my lips stuttering and unresponsive, the cold sweat dripping down my spine, and the need to pee. I

feel bound to the knots in my stomach. I feel disoriented and angry. I feel alert, watchful, and exhausted. I feel crazy. Mostly, I feel afraid.

It turns out fear is fertile ground for worms. I've learned to confine mine to my left ventricle, to refuse it room to spread. When it's sleeping there where I have confined it, I get a taste of another life: my skin can warm to my lover's touch, my heart to the affection of friends. But the worm will awaken, and I can't know if it will be in the middle of the night or in the middle of the grocery aisle.

Every spring I take my dog to be tested for Heartworm, then we go to the dog park. Bounding across the fields and jumping to kiss me when he returns, I know that his heart is clear. I take comfort in giving him the preventative, understanding that my worm is a lifelong companion, that my fear has burrowed too deep.

My life depends on vigilance and a kind of perverse caretaking. When my body clamors in distress, my mind must counter with calm denial. I must acknowledge fear's power but deny it control. I must simultaneously soothe it and starve it. I must not let it own me. The worm is resilient, but I am strong. I will fight for my life.

I startle at a cracked twig. "Shhhh, it's not real." I coo to myself. "Nothing is going to hurt you anymore."



Devorah Uriel is a retired family therapist and teacher. She's worked with families at risk of losing custody of their children and with young children with attachment disorders. She now lives and writes in Denver, Colorado. Her stories have been published in *Write Denver* and *Dime Show Review*. She recently completed her memoir, *Mama Dama Doozy*, about growing up in a crazy house.