



That's Life
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SAVAGED by a dog saved by my sister



I couldn't see past the disfigurement.

After a horrendous dog attack, life was tough for Emilie until she was sent a saviour *Emilie Duthie, 16, Greystanes, NSW*

Playing with my dolls, a noise in the garden disturbed the silence. Barking was coming from the backyard. At four years old, I loved animals, so I scrambled outside for a closer look. I spotted a big, brown dog and ran over. Stretching out my hand, I went to run my fingers through his soft fur.

All I remember next is an angry snarl of teeth slicing into my skin as blood poured down my face. Pain exploded through my little body as everything spun into a blur.

I passed out from the agony and Mum found me lying on the grass. She rushed me to hospital and while I can't remember the journey, Mum told me that when I woke up in her arms I wouldn't stop crying. I'm not surprised. The dog had sunk his teeth into my right cheek, ripping an enormous hole in my face.

Doctors gave me 142 stitches to try to knit the wound together. Who knows what would have happened if Mum hadn't found me. I was lucky to be alive.

Sobbing and fingering the enormous bandage swathed around my face, I clung to Mum, confused and horribly shaken. 'The dog was angry because you were in his territory,' Mum explained tearfully.

I tried to understand. But I don't remember being upset with the animal. I still loved dogs, I just hated my itchy, sore face and wanted it gone.

After two weeks in hospital I was allowed to go home but I needed plastic surgery on the angry scar. It snaked from my mouth, up my cheek to just under my eye.

Mum said the doctors were trying to make it disappear, but no matter what they did I hated looking at myself in the mirror. Stroking the swollen wound for the hundredth time, tears rolled down my cheek. 'I'm not pretty anymore,' I sobbed.

'You're beautiful,' Mum said. 'And I'm going to prove it.'

Trying to take my mind off the attack she took me to a special photo shoot. Dressed in a sparkling fairy outfit, I had my photo taken. I felt like a princess. In fact it almost made me forget the accident – until I saw the photos.

'I'm still ugly,' I cried, distraught. I couldn't see past the disfigurement.

The attack had changed me in other ways too. Despite not being scared of dogs, I was terrified of everything else. I clung to Mum not ever wanting to leave her. My first day at school was frightening. I tried to hide my scar under my hair but it was no use. All eyes were on me.

Too shy to make friends, I was a target for bullies. They called me 'scar face' and teased me endlessly.

Mum tried to encourage me to gain confidence and as I got older, I realised I didn't want to be the bullied girl. That's when I decided to retaliate.

'Get away from me!' I spat when I was picked on next.

Watching the kids' faces change when I fought back made me feel confident for the first time. By the time I was in year two, I was using my fists as well. Getting into tussles every day, the teachers despaired. Eventually I was suspended.

Mum sent me to another school but my behaviour got worse. Learning to hide my scars with make-up, I no longer felt like the victim. I gave up trying to make friends, becoming the bully instead.

As well as the fights, I threw chairs at teachers and ditched class to smoke. I even cut off a girl's hair when she shouted at me. My relationship with Mum crumbled. She tried to help, but by the time I was 14, I'd gone through four schools.

When my latest principal threatened suspension, I didn't care. This was who I was now.

But instead of sending me away, he made me visit the school counsellor. I'd never told anyone my problems before and didn't want to

I tried to hide my scar under my hair but it was no use

press clip



Jade has taught me so much

From Emilie's Big Sister...

Jade Olsson, 26, Bellevue Hill, NSW
"Growing up, I was the eldest of four, so being a big sister comes naturally. When my dad passed away, I wanted to provide that support for someone less fortunate. The first thing I noticed about Emilie was how resilient she was. When she told me about her life I was in tears. It was challenging to get her to change but I didn't give up. The program might be over but she'll be my little sister forever." To find more out about SISTER2sister or to become a big sister yourself, visit www.lifechangingexperiences.org.

start. But she suggested SISTER2sister, explaining an organisation called Life Changing Experiences ran a program for girls like me. I'd be paired with a mentor for a year and they would help me turn my life around. I didn't want to go – how would some stranger be able to help me? But I was on my final chance. I had no choice. In January 2009, I nervously went to the Butterfly Boot Camp, a four-day course where I'd meet my 'big sister.' Mine was called Jade and as she smiled at me, something made me hope we were going to get on. Letting down my guard, we started chatting about school. 'I'm going to help you stick it out,' she said. It was the first time in years someone wanted to be my friend and it felt good.

Over the next week, we got to know each other through team-building activities. When one girl in the group told us she had been raped, I couldn't stop crying. The shield I'd put up to protect myself broke down. I didn't need to fight anymore. Telling Jade about my life was hard. Scared she'd judge me, I held back. But when she opened up about losing her Dad I knew I could trust her. I told her about the dog attack, the fights, the anger. There were times when I wanted to stop, but Jade encouraged me. 'You can do this,' she smiled. When I finished, I felt like a heavy burden had been lifted. It was just the beginning, but with Jade by my side I knew I'd be able to change. Following the camp, we met

up every month. We did things together, like cookery classes, and Jade was happy to listen whenever I needed her. Slowly, I realised how much I'd missed out on. Instead of feeling angry, I wanted to grasp opportunities with both hands. Watching me get my life back on track, Mum was so proud. It's hard to believe I'm the same person now. With Jade's support and encouragement, I'm back in school. I'm top of all my classes and I've even completed a make-up course. Jade showed me not to be ashamed of where I've come from. She has taught me to respect myself and that's something I'll never forget. I hope one day I'll be strong enough to help someone like me transform into a butterfly too. ● As told to Smita Mistry

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