

Dogs, Demons and Me

(stories of doggedness)



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Concrete Days

Monday, April 11th. The sirens were the first sign that something was wrong. I was relaxing on the “Pet Couch” waiting for the cement contractors to get started outside. Our kennel was closed for five days while the oil-slicked dirt and concrete that had been an auto body junkyard was removed and repaved.

I parted the curtains. A crowd of neighborhood guys had gathered in front of my driveway arguing with Mike Foley, the tall, burly Irishman who owned Foley Construction Co. Two police cars had angled onto the sidewalk and three cops I recognized from the local precinct were talking to the group.

I sat down with a queasy stomach, pulse racing. I recognized some in the crowd as members of the local ‘family’. I had been avoiding them trying to go about my business quietly and yet, I knew they were watching me — a stranger on their turf.

There was no choice but to go outside and find out what was happening. I took a few deep breaths before walking into the April

sunshine. Some sort of agreement seemed to have been reached but the men were still standing around with their hard stares, cigarettes dangling from their lips.

“What’s wrong, Mike?”

“Ach, you’re not goin’ ta believe this. These guys are accusin’ me a stealin’ their trailer.”

“What trailer?”

“That one, over there — the one I use for me Bobcat.”

“Why do they think that’s their trailer?”

“They say they filed a stolen property report on a trailer exactly like this. The cops say I have to prove where I got it.”

“Can you do that?”

“Aye. I bought it at auction upstate. I’ve got me papers somewhere, I just have ta go home and find ‘em. Don’t worry none,” he added, “these guys is just harassin’ me. I been through this kinda bullshit before. I could tell ya some stories. It’ll just set the work back a few hours that’s all.”

I knew he was steaming but he smiled and patted my shoulder.

“I’ll be back soon. Once the coppers see me papers we’ll be all set.”

He jumped into his pickup and roared down the street narrowly missing the boys standing in the gutter. They laughed and poked one another. This was all a big joke. I stared at them a minute — Brooklyn's best with their greasy baseball jackets and peaked caps. A bunch of middle-aged 'wanna-bes' with nothing to do, still marking their turf, just like male dogs.

I turned back to the kennel. Danny, Mike's foreman, was standing guard in the driveway, his arms folded across his chest. He had slung a length of steel links casually around his neck. "Don't worry," he said kindly. "Mike's been through much worse than this. It'll be fine."

I forced a weak smile. "What if you can't go ahead with the work? We can't keep the place closed for very long. We'll lose too much money."

"Nah, this is nothin'. These guys are fulla shit. They're just buggin' us cause we're Irish that's all."

I went inside, turned up the classical music and lay down on the Pet Couch. Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* was playing on the classical music station. I could smell our dog Jessie as I buried my head in the cushions, her favorite spot. I wished I had brought her

along with me today but I hadn't been planning on staying very long. We had only been open four months but it seemed like four years as the short time had been filled with every crisis imaginable. Now this. It wasn't the first time I felt like an unwilling actor in a B grade movie.

In the weeks before our December '95 opening, I spent all my time at the site of my new business trying to exert some control over the chaos that our contractors created. Bill and Rick, or Dumb and Dumber as my husband would later refer to them, couldn't draw a straight line...a major handicap if you're a contractor. At first I wondered why Rick always wore mirrored sunglasses, even after dark, inside. I figured it was some misguided sense of macho style until I watched in horror as he threw a pile of lumber onto three 8' boxes of clearly labeled fluorescent light tubes. Then it dawned on me - the guy couldn't see a damn thing.

I began to watch him more closely. He was like Pigpen in the Peanuts comic strip —trailing a cloud wherever he went. Only his cloud was chaos not dirt. One morning Rick took off in his beat-up Dodge Ram to get copper plumbing pipes from Home Depot. I was out

front trying to calculate the size for our new sign when he roared around the corner. It looked as if he was about to drive past our building but then suddenly he jammed on the brakes. I watched in amazement as a thin 6' pipe smashed through his windshield and jettisoned out onto the street.

Rick jumped out. "What the fuck!" he yelled. Bill came running from the yard.

"Jesus Christ! Didn't you tie the goddamn pipes down? Now we gotta get a new windshield, you asshole!" The Keystone Cops had nothing on these two.

The accomplishments of the blind contractor continued to pile up. I couldn't wait to use our newly constructed handicapped bathroom only to discover that I couldn't get out. Rick had put the door handle on backwards.

Our front lock never worked properly so I called a locksmith.

"I don't know who installed this for you lady, but the sits pins are just laying here in the tumbler, see?"

I had no clue what sits pins were but I bent down and peered into the narrow opening. Sure enough some screws were just laying inside, attached to nothing.

“This guy must have been on drugs. Was it a locksmith?”

“No, a blind contractor.”

He laughed. “That’s a good one. Who was it, really?”

Bill and Rick had come to us through my landlord Sal. Being a native New Yorker I should have known better than to trust a landlord but in the early days of our relationship he seemed pleasant enough and professed such concern for the buildings his father had constructed that I trusted he would recommend someone competent and reliable to work on his property. I could not have been more wrong.

I first met Sal on a swelteringly hot day in July 1995 — at 9 am the temperature was already a humid 96 degrees. My husband Bob and I walked the mile and a half from our apartment to a nearby neighborhood full of anticipation at meeting the local real estate agent. She had two properties to show us that might be good locations for a kennel.

After two years of planning this career change, I had resigned from Chemical Bank ending my 23 years in corporate marketing. I was scared, excited and very anxious to get started. Finding the right property that conformed to New York City's complicated zoning rules was the first major hurdle. For whatever reason, kennels came under the classification of an M1 Zone, a category that accommodated light manufacturing as well as residential buildings.

Connie Losardo was a long time Brooklyn resident and realtor. She wore thick rhinestone glasses, a short muumuu style shift and walked quickly in high-heeled gold sling backs. Her head was pitched forward and her shoulders hunched as if she was anticipating a blow from behind. She fired comments at us as we struggled to keep up.

“I got a place on Smith Street, nice and big. It's a turnkey deal, ready to go. The bus from Park Slope stops right in front. It's easy for people to get to.”

The commercial garage she showed us was huge with a two-bedroom apartment built on top. Bob and I marveled at the cavernous 4,000 sq. ft. space. The property was spic and span and had wonderful possibilities. And, there were no immediate neighbors, a big plus for a

city kennel. The rent was a little higher than we were planning but we could always lease the apartment.

“What’s the outdoor space like?” I asked.

Connie looked at us blankly. “There is no outside space. This is it.”

Bob and I frowned. Damn. The place was so great.

“We really want to have outdoor space for the dogs to play,” I said.

“A lot of the kennels in Manhattan are indoor facilities and we want to offer something better.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. This is such a good deal. But the other place I have has lots of outside space. Let’s go.”

A quick four-block walk south brought us to Sal and his two adjoining garages on Green Street. Sal was 30-something with heavily lidded eyes and a lazy smile under his thick black mustache. He wore greasy Texaco overalls that didn’t quite fit and switched his Marlboro to his left thumb and forefinger so he could offer us a handshake. His grip was strong and calloused.

“So Connie says you guys wanna open a kennel for cats and dogs. That’s a great idea. Wish I had thought of it. This neighborhood is perfect for that. I see people with their dogs here all the time.”

We walked into his garage and immediately I was overwhelmed by the contrast with the property we had just seen. This was a filthy auto body shop that radiated chaos and neglect. An old van was jacked up in the middle of the floor surrounded by tools that looked like they hadn't been touched in years. Apparently Sal let his two junkyard Shepherds stay in the garage at night and there was dried dog shit all over the greasy concrete. A nice complement to the "Bull Shit" someone had scrolled across the cinder block wall in black spray paint.

"Come and see the outside," Connie urged as she tried to navigate carefully around the obstacle course. This was no place for open-toed shoes. I remembered Bette Davis and her famous line, "What a dump!" That didn't even begin to capture what we saw before us.

Sal lifted a thick iron cross bar from the back door and we stepped out into a narrow pathway he had cleared between piles of old carburetors and defunct axles. The smell of grease and mildew permeated the heavy air.

I followed the path to the middle of the yard. It seemed big but it was hard to get a clear idea of just how big because auto body detritus filled every available space. Huge shipping containers ringed the yard

piled two high so that you couldn't see the 20' chain link fence that surrounded the property. We were prisoners in a fortress of rust.

“Do you know how big this is?” I asked Sal.

“Well, the property is 10,000 sq. ft. The two garages are 1,000 sq. ft. each so I guess you're lookin' at about 8,000 sq. ft. out here, give or take.”

Wow. That was so much more space than what I had hoped for. I thought about the upscale Manhattan kennels with their cramped indoor play corrals. I pictured energetic dogs playing ball and chasing each other in 8,000 sq. ft. of open space. People would be lining up to leave their pets with us.

I glanced at Bob; he didn't look too thrilled. But, despite the squalor, something inside me clicked. It would be so hard to find another outdoor space like this. And it was a great location — close to all the neighborhoods that we wanted to target. Plus it was right next to the Brooklyn Queens Expressway and the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. I could get into Manhattan for pickup and delivery in a flash. The place could be fixed up. It would take a lot but it could be done.

“Would you be willing to clean this all up if we wanted to rent it?”

“You mean the whole property, inside and out?” Sal seemed surprised.

“Yep. If we take it we’d want the whole place.”

He looked around as though calculating the enormous amount of effort it would take. “Well I guess so,” he said slowly. “You know this was my father’s place. I remember coming here as a kid when he was building it. Did a lot of the work by himself. He was a tough guy but he loved animals. He used to go over to the docks in Red Hook and rescue the birds that got stuck in the shipping containers. I bet he’d get a kick out of a pet business in his garage.”

I smiled and looked around for Connie but she was nowhere to be seen. Hopefully she hadn’t taken a header on those heels and fallen into a dumpster.

“My husband and I will talk about it tonight and give a call tomorrow.”

“Take your time,” he said. “I’m in no rush.” He walked us out to the front where Connie was sitting on the hood of an old ‘Caddie’ with one sandal off massaging the ball of her foot.

“Whaddya think?” she called.

“It looks good but we have a lot of things to talk about. Can we call you tomorrow?”

We discussed a few more details before she hurried off to another appointment. Bob and I decided to walk around the area before heading home. It was a little intimidating with a number of vacant lots and boarded up buildings but it was still very much an old Brooklyn neighborhood and I hoped it would be relatively safe. Fake brick facades and statues of the Virgin Mary were the predominant motif and older folk leaned on their stoops chatting in thick Italian accents. I remembered driving through this neighborhood in the 70s when rival ‘families’ had turned it into a war zone. It looked better now.

As we turned the corner I glanced back. Sal was leaning against his building taking long drags on a cigarette. I waved. He raised a hand in response. He was a good distance away but for some reason I thought I caught a look of amusement on his face.

That was our first encounter and I was hopeful that we could forge a good relationship. I didn’t trust myself to find a contractor for work I knew nothing about so I relied on Sal. He was a welder by trade and seemed to be knowledgeable about other aspects of construction.

“I gotta lot of friends in the business,” he told me confidently. “I’ll find you somebody good.”

I liked the first guy he recommended, Pete Fusco. He seemed smart and responsive to what we needed. But no sooner had he given us his bid than Sal had a fight with him and refused to give him access to the property.

“You don’t know what that guy did to me,” he fumed. “And not just to me, to my wife and daughter too. He left us out there on Long Island. We had no car and he just takes off and leaves us just like that. And he’s supposed to be my friend? He’s got no respect for me and my family. There’s no way he’s ever gonna step foot in this building again.”

I was mystified by the whole incident. Sal and Pete had been friends since second grade. Whatever it was, his reaction seemed way out of proportion. I called Pete.

“I’m sorry Betsy but I can’t do the job for you. When he gets like this there’s no way to fix it. It’s Sal, it’s the way he is.”

“But Pete we’ve agreed on everything. Couldn’t you try to talk to him? I only have two months to get this done. I don’t have time to look for another contractor.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just not gonna work. Good luck with your business. You’re gonna need it.”

This did not sound promising. We had had a lot of problems negotiating the lease with Sal but I had chalked that up to typical macho landlord mentality. Despite serious misgivings, I convinced myself that there was nothing to do but push forward. The lease was signed and we just had to keep going. Because I was so fearful about choosing a contractor, reluctantly I approached Sal for another recommendation.

“Yeah, I know some other guys who are great, much better than Pete. I’ll get them over to the shop. Why don’t you come over next Monday. We have to leave at 6, so you come at 5:30.”

“In the morning?”

“Yeah. That’s the only time I’ll be there.”

I struggled to get up at five and took a car service for the ten-minute ride. As I watched the darkened brownstones go rushing by on

silent streets, I felt nervous and queasy. My inner voices were wide-awake peppering me with doubts. Why are you jeopardizing everything you and Bob have worked for? You think you can pull this off? You don't know anything about contractors, about running a business. Who do you think you are?

I knocked on the steel door at Green Street but no one answered. The place was locked tight but I could hear laughing and music inside. I pounded louder — still no answer. I looked down the deserted street. This was the first time I had been here in the dark; it was not reassuring. The vacant lots between the shabby buildings sank into themselves like the dark sockets of a skull. Fitful sputters of pale orange light were the only sign that some street lamps existed. Shattered glass was strewn where cars should be parked. I was scared and wished I had asked the driver to wait until I was in the building. How was I going to survive in this neighborhood?

I pounded again as hard as I could and after a moment the door was pushed open. The strong, sweet smell of marijuana caught in my throat. The garage looked even worse in this light than it did during the

day. The harsh fluorescents only highlighted the years of neglect and filth. A rat scurried out of a hole in the corner.

Four faces looked at me expectantly. Sal and his friend Manny were stoned and grinning. Bill and Rick, my potential contractors, were sober as far as I could tell. Bill was a slight blond man with a pale, freckled face. He fidgeted constantly and looked like he needed more sleep and a better diet. Rick was taller and a little beefy. He wore a flack jacket, pointed boots and mirrored sunglasses. A wanna-be Ton Ton Macute. I spoke to both of them about my plans but it was Bill who did all the talking.

“We can definitely do this job for you. No problem.”

“When can you give me an estimate? We only have two months ‘til our opening date. Are you sure you can do it by then?”

“Absolutely. We’ll get you a bid by the end of the week and we can start right away.”

We talked details for a while and then I left. The sun was just starting to come up and I decided to take a quiet walk back to our apartment. I was encouraged. Bill and Rick seemed like okay guys. They were eager for the work. We signed the contract that week — it

was \$10,000 less than Pete's estimate. I was excited. Two months to our December 15th opening. We could do it.

At first I thought I was lucky because the contractors and their crew showed up every day. But their approach seemed chaotic, to say the least. They kept asking me to run out to hardware stores for supplies. I wondered why they weren't more prepared.

Then one day as they started to assemble materials for the Bowser Bath stalls, I saw a "how to" book lying on the floor. It was open to the section on building a masonry wall. My stomach did a roller coaster flip.

"Have you ever done this before?" I asked Bill.

"Oh sure, sure. It's no problem."

They were only half way into the second stall by the end of a week. Four and a half stalls to go. My frustration was slowly overtaken by panic. Sal showed up on one of his frequent visits and pulled me aside.

“You better fire these guys. They don’t know what the hell they’re doin’. Those walls are all wrong. You’re gonna have problems with drainage later on.”

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