

Dog's Fate

Summer should have been over. So far, early fall was warm and pleasant, with no hint that winter would be coming soon. At least I hoped it wouldn't. Mild October almost seemed like summer. I never knew what to expect from the weather anymore, whether due to climate change, global warming, or greenhouse effect. Since I wasn't qualified to decide the cause, I could only express ignorant opinions, like everyone else. One benefit was that the longer it stayed warm, the longer I would be able to do my silent clown show outdoors at Central Park West and 72nd Street, where I earned almost as much money as teaching drama at Gotham University. On the other hand, if winter came, the inviting thighs of my attractive female students would soon be covered against the cold. The fall semester had been a test of my self-discipline. Fortunately, the liberal application of my mantra, 'Don't Look. Don't Look', had kept me out of entangling alliances. The other assistance had been the annual 'running of the calves' by the third year lesbians, nicknamed the 'junior misses'; followed by their predatory swoop on the succulent freshman girls, which diverted interest from adjunct professors.

This was my easiest semester so far to resist temptation, since I still had M.J. Someone once said: 'happiness is fleeting', yet we were still together after six months and our relationship seemed to get better daily. Mary Jane Kowalski, née Marguerite Janice van Doerner Kowalski, was the daughter of a new money father and a Philadelphia main line mother. Her need to escape the constricting demands of her family was curiously similar to mine, although I hadn't told her about my imposing family. MJ's grandparents intended her to marry some blueblood scion of an old house and purge the taint of the

Polish invasion. She had other ideas and a strong will to match, so to my good fortune, she went off to New York City to be an artist, where we met.

MJ had come to adore my dog Pard almost as much as I did, another bond between us. I had to smile sometimes at the girl who raised pedigreed dogs, completely won over by the clever mutt. She wasn't even turned off by his sexual urges, which I had not yet been able to find a way to satisfy, despite trying everything from want ads to internet searches for a willing female. I wondered for a moment if there was a doggie phone sex service. When we were still in the early stages of our relationship I had exaggerated Pard's abilities, but she hadn't yet discovered his limitations. She laughed when I described taking Pard to Gotham U., using the blind man with his seeing-eye-dog routine to get past the underpaid security guards, who were expected to risk life and limb to protect the offspring of the wealthy. She loved my nickname for my drama department chairman, Ernest the 'emoter'. She really cracked up when I described the competition with my students to out-act Pard, particularly Juno Franklin, a highly aggressive lesbian and her defeat by a dog using 'ears of dejection'.

MJ had been spending more and more time at my 6th floor walk-up apartment on East 9th street, between avenues B and C. She even started keeping clothes and personal items at my place, much to the delight of Pard, who had little trouble persuading her to take him out with us and provide treats regularly. I tried to explain that he was a wonderful animal, but a shameless manipulator. It was too late. She had already been beguiled. I had bigger concerns. It seemed that MJ was coming close to moving in with me. She was a great girl, the best I ever had, but I never lived with a woman before. No one else actually, except my family in their musty mansion in Boston. How would

bathroom protocol work? What about privacy? But one look at MJ and I forgot my worries. She even joined my crusade for sex for Pard, something every one else found repellant. How could I turn down a girl like that?

MJ taught art in the morning at a pre-school program in an all-Hispanic high school on the Upper West Side, and painted every afternoon at her loft. She set up a desk space for me, where I worked on the first draft of my full length play, 'Unravelings', while she painted. Pard was happy with the arrangement, since MJ kept him liberally supplied with tidbits from the refrigerator, and he could keep an eye on both of us while pretending to sleep. MJ felt very secure with us there at a time when she found more and more satisfaction in her painting.

During the day, her artist friends dropped in and they happily babbled away together about surface techniques and other esoterica. Some of them started to discuss her work in art circles, which led to her getting a painting selected for a group show, at a respectable Chelsea Gallery. Not only was this her first exhibition in a gallery, but the painting sold on opening night for \$600.00. She got \$400.00 for her first sale. She asked the gallery owner for the buyer's name and address so she could visit the painting from time to time. He thought she was joking and distracted her nicely by offering her a one person show when she was ready.

I felt very comfortable working on 'Unravelings' while she painted. It didn't even distract me when she'd mumble analyses of her work in the perspective of art history, or babble away with her fellow artists. My play was definitely progressing and act three was nearing completion, so I began to think about a reading. MJ kept asking to read acts one and two, but I put her off with all kinds of excuses, not willing to admit I was

superstitious and didn't want to jinx my computer by letting her read it before the play was finished. She insisted I tell her about it and I finally gave in.

My brief description of an upper class family's internal decomposition, leaving them isolated strangers from each other, adrift in a changing, confusing society, provoked an unexpected response from MJ.

"Who gave you the right to write about my family?" she demanded indignantly.

"What are you talking about?"

"I told you about the van Doerners as part of our personal relationship. I didn't expect them to become a subject for drama, exposing their flaws to the world."

She stared at me intently, torn between hurt and anger, building towards our first fight.

"MJ," I said loudly, which startled her. "I was writing about my family.... Not yours."

It took a few moments for my statement to sink in, then she awkwardly stumbled through an apology. "I'm so sorry. I thought.... I assumed.... I jumped to a dumb conclusion and made a fool of myself. Can you forgive me?"

I exaggeratedly crinkled my face and rubbed my chin, considering a reply. Then I looked her up and down suggestively.

"There is one way...."

"I know what you want, you filthy brute. Tell me about your family, then I'll give you whatever you want."

"Around ze world, baby?"

"Anything."

Pard had gotten up, concerned by the tension between us. Now he walked to my side, leaned against me and gave me that knowing doggie look, 'don't ruin a good thing, boss.' Then he went to MJ, who petted him and scratched 'the spot' behind his ears. He started to wrap his paws around her leg, prior to mounting her, but she pushed him away and said gently:

"Sorry, Pard. Only one dirty dog at a time."

He went back to his mat, lay down, put his head on his paws and pretended to sleep, but I knew that one eye was open a fraction, monitoring his realm. MJ looked at me expectantly, so I started with granddad's favorite story.

"My grandfather, Arthur Hayes Kensington, IV, nicknamed 'Fourth', told me about my ancestors all the time." I imitated his dry, nasal patrician tone: 'You're many times removed from the first American Kensington, who explained his late arrival on the next ship after the Mayflower, due to missing the boat while tending to a patient.'

This greatly amused MJ who urged me to continue.

"Way before the founding of the republic it was our family tradition that the eldest son become a doctor and the next son a lawyer. Our house in Boston is a sterile monument to prosperous generations of Kensingtons who fulfilled their family obligations. I grew up with all kinds of luxuries, beach house, boats, European travel, but it all seemed oppressive, as if we were part of a touring museum exhibition, inevitably ending up in the constricting walls of home. I was never allowed to have fun and was always expected to behave properly. My parents were mortified when I renounced the law and left them for a life of shame in the theater. If they knew I performed as a silent

clown, they'd sink into a glob of amber. Their remaining hope is that sanity will prevail someday and I'll return to the fold and take my rightful place in the hierarchy."

"This is so weird," MJ muttered. "It almost sounds like my family.... That's probably why we get along so well. We're both escaped rebels."

"More like exiles in a strange land."

"Now I can't wait to read your play. When do you think you'll finish it?"

"If all goes well and there are no problems with the end of act three, a month or so."

"What then?"

"I'm thinking about a reading...."

"That's great. You should have an audience. We can do it at an artist friend's loft. He has an open space that'll be perfect. I'll invite the artists who stop by and see my work. They all wonder what you're doing and how you can concentrate so intently while we're babbling away about texture and sub-surface imagery."

"Hold on, MJ. I don't know if I want to start with a big event. I had something smaller in mind."

"It's a wonderful opportunity to get audience feedback. If there's one thing artists like, it's to show off how bright they are by explaining everything about anything."

"I'll think about it."

"You do that, grumpy. Now, to make up for my bad behavior, I'll take you to dinner at Vaselka.. Do you like Polish food?"

"I prefer the Kiev."

"Don't be contrary. Are you hungry?"

Before I could answer, Pard was up and fetching his leash.

"How does he know what I said?" she asked.

"I told you how smart he is."

"There was an article in the science section of the 'Times' a while back, about a dog that knew over a thousand words. How many does Pard know?"

"Feel free to test him as long as he's willing. I saw that article. Some professor with nothing better to do spent six or seven hours a day training his dog. If I put in that kind of time, Pard would learn Macbeth in three weeks."

"Braggart. It's still warm enough to sit outside. Let's take Pard."

"As long as you promise to watch him every moment."

"You're always going on about how bad he is. I think you're making it up. He's always an angel with me."

Pard gazed at her adoringly and I didn't bother to respond. The sly dog really had her wrapped around his paw, so out we went. The walk to Second Avenue and East 9th Street was pleasant. Pard was bright eyed, bushy-tailed and eager for action.

The restaurant was crowded and we had to wait to get a table where Pard wouldn't be in the middle of the sidewalk. Just as we sat down, a large group arrived that included my ex-girlfriend, Anitra, a boney, opinionated, pretentious artist, and her employer, a renowned artist whose art consisted of covering nature's grandeur with plastic. I had nicknamed him 'Sophisto', the master of plastic, but Anitra never appreciated my sarcastic comments about him. Somehow we had remained friends, probably because we never had sex.

Anitra saw me and waved and I waved back. She whispered something to 'Sophisto', then came to our table.

"Hello, Ken," and offered her cheek for a kiss.

This was a new type of greeting. I assumed it was because I was with another woman, so I complied.

"Hi, Anitra. This is MJ."

"You're Anitra Blavatsky," MJ said. "I know your work. Some friends took me to your studio a while back. You're doing exciting things."

Anitra inflated visibly at the flattery and smiled warmly. "I thought you looked familiar. Are you an artist?"

"Yes."

"What are you working on?"

As they immersed themselves in shop talk I noticed that Anitra was still carrying her tea cup Maltese, Buckminster Fuller, a gift from 'Sophisto', in a shoulder bag, draped across her boney chest. The dog was obviously still tranked on behavior modification tranquilizers. He was wearing a thick gold necklace that these days could have paid for a lavish production of my play.

"That's quite a piece of hardware old Bucky's sporting," I remarked casually.

"A gift from my grateful employer."

I wondered why he didn't give it to her rather than the dog, but before I could make a smart-ass remark, MJ blurted:

"Who do you work for?"

And Anitra said the despised name, then: "Would you like to meet him?"

"I'd love to," MJ gushed.

"You wait here, Ken," Anitra ordered in her chilly way. "I don't think you would appreciate meeting him, especially now that we're planning our new project."

She looked at me expectantly, so I asked:

"What is it this time? Are you going to wrap Scotland with Scotchgard?"

She shook her head pityingly. "Nothing so commercial. We're going to cover part of the Amazon River to symbolize preserving the Rain Forest."

'Right. Preserve it by wrapping it in plastic.' MJ was there, or I would have told Anitra about the headhunter who would shrink her head, if there were headhunters in Brazil. I just nodded noncommittally.

MJ looked at me curiously, shrugged, and eagerly followed Anitra, leaving me alone, somehow feeling betrayed. Then, to add insult to injury, the man at the table next to us pointed and said:

"Look who's there. It's...."

And again I heard the despised name.

"Let's go get his autograph."

The man and his companion went inside, and Pard, before I could stop him, hopped up on the man's chair, lapped some water from his glass, snatched a large chunk of what looked like stuffed cabbage from his plate, wolfed it down, and returned to his place next to our table. His raid was so quick and efficient that no one noticed. He looked so innocent I knew MJ would never believe me if I told her. I did get a twinge of satisfaction at Pard's violation of the man's dinner, though I wouldn't acknowledge it when he returned.

MJ came back glowing from her meeting with the despised one. A friend of hers was in the entourage and had said nice things about her work, which made 'Sophisto' hint of a royal visit to her studio. I politely asked to be informed so I could work at home that day, which annoyed MJ.

"A world famous artist wants to see my work and this offends you? What do you have against him?"

I tried to put her off, saying it wasn't tactful to discuss it here, with other people listening, but she was insistent, until I said:

"I don't want to embarrass Anitra in front of her boss. If you really want to know, I'll explain later."

The atmosphere was definitely cool for the rest of our meal and even the sight of the autograph hound drinking from his water glass didn't amuse me. We stopped at Tompkins Square Park on the way home for Pard to get his exercise and do his doggie business. Some of the regulars were there and though they eyed me suspiciously, aware of how I abetted my dog's sex urges, they smiled at MJ, pleased to see her, since Pard was always on his best behavior with her. Pard pretended to be a normal, sociable dog and sniffed around the bitches, but the watchful parents were much too alert, so he just played doggie games with them. I idly wondered what would happen when MJ discovered the true nature of the beast.

Later I tried to explain why I felt so strongly about the master of plastic who smothered nature in the name of art, but MJ couldn't accept that. We discussed it until it was obvious we were at an impasse. We went to bed that night and for the first time

didn't make love. The plastic serpent had entered paradise and I had invited him in. Me and my big mouth.

I didn't see MJ for the next few days, whether by design or coincidence I did not know. I left messages on her cell phone, until she finally called back apologetically, explaining that she was called to Philadelphia for a family emergency. The one thing I did know was that unlike previous girl friends, who departed without my caring very much. I didn't want to lose MJ, especially over a difference of opinion about 'Sophisto', the master of plastic. I guess it was time to take a maturity pill, or do something to curb my impulsive tendency to make sarcastic remarks.

Pard was as aware of her absence as I was. He frequently rushed to the door expectantly, then returned to his mat dejectedly when it was only a neighbor coming home, not MJ. It took me a while to realize that his dash to the door wasn't followed by ferocious barking in defense of the hearth, his usual ploy that would entitle him to a reward for protective services rendered. Her absence was becoming serious.

I was just about to tell him to get his leash and we'd go to her studio, when he raced to the door wagging furiously. A moment later I heard a knock over his excited barking and I went to the door. It was MJ. Pard leapt up and down, showering her with doggie kisses and yelping happily. He didn't even try to mount her leg for doggie humping. I had never gotten a greeting of that magnitude, but I had never been away for more than half a day.

"I hope you're as happy to see me," she whispered, followed by a sweet kiss.

"Can't you see me wagging?" I quipped.

"I'm used to that thing pointing at me whenever I'm near," she said humorously. "I'm sorry I didn't call you sooner. I kept thinking it would only take a few hours, but it got more and more involved and I sort of got caught up with the family crisis."

Part of me was hurt that she hadn't called right away, but I was so glad to see her that I pushed it out of my mind.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"That's very sweet of you. Let's go to bed first, then I'll tell you."

"If Pard'll let us."

She laughed, went to the refrigerator, took out a meatball and gave it to Pard, who contentedly returned to his mat. She took my hand and led me to the bed, caressing me.

"As you see, I have a way with beasts."

Later she told me about the family crisis, when Dads refused to support what he called Mums demented plan to build a new opera house in Philadelphia. The entire van Doerner clan lined up against the Polish intruder for his lack of enthusiasm for high culture and callous disregard of civic virtue. Mums called MJ in desperation when divorce was mentioned. MJ had managed to temporarily calm things down, but she would have to go back to solidify the truce. I didn't mention that the Kensingtons were too laid back to fight about anything, especially culture.

"How about coming with me?" she asked.

The idea of parachuting into a family feud was not appealing. Before I could find a tactful way to decline, she added:

"We can bring Pard. He'd love to romp with our dogs."

Pard was instantly at the bed, his traveling chew toy in his mouth, ready to go.

"How does he know?" she asked, then leaned over so he could slobber her face with kisses. "You're such a smart dog."

They both looked at me expectantly and I didn't dare refuse. It was early Tuesday evening and my next classes weren't until Thursday.

"As long as we're back in time for my first class Thursday morning...."

"Great. I've got a car outside. Pack what you need and we'll be off. Pard's ready."

The sly mutt winked at me when she wasn't looking. Outnumbered and outgunned I threw some clothes and toiletries in a backpack, shut down my computer and headed for the door.

When we got downstairs, MJ had a gigantic SUV at the curb.

"Dads always insists I drive a big vehicle for protection," she explained.

I didn't own a car and I didn't drive much, so I didn't have the negative liberal view of huge gas guzzlers. And it was comfortable. Pard took up a position on the back seat, head out the window, eager for whatever came next. MJ got behind the wheel, started the engine with a roar and we were off. Rush hour was long over, so the streets were clear. We zipped to the Holland Tunnel to New Jersey, and MJ got through the maze of entrances that led to the New Jersey Turnpike, which we'd take south all the way to Philadelphia. The sameness of the highway, a weird American characteristic that makes us more secure when everything looks alike, put me into a trance-like doze and I woke up a few hours later to MJ's voice:

"We're here."

The Kowalski mansion was so similar to the Kensington's that it was scary. The butler, Billings, who greeted Miss Marguerite so warmly, was almost identical to my

family's butler, Anderson, except for the temperature difference. Anderson was as cold as New England granite in the winter. In my family mausoleum, musty ancestor paintings hung on the wall looking down doubtfully at their heirs, but proclaiming stability. Notable artists included pre-revolutionary portraits by the Peales, and one by an aging Robert Henri in the 1920's. The portraits from the 1930's to the present were by competent, but unknown artists, the more famous modern painters much too unruly for my staid family. The Kowalski establishment was adorned with paintings and prints of fox hunting scenes, dogs and horses. Some of the furnishings were modern, made out of glass and metal with colorful fabrics. As a contrast, Kensington Manor was mostly massive oak and teak. Even the sofas felt like they were carved out of wood.

Mrs. Kowalski greeted me aloofly and told Billings to take my creature to a kennel in the back. When I said I'd like him to stay with me, for which I got a grateful wag, she became very distant. I contemplated taking the train home, but before I could decide, she looked at me curiously and said:

"Your name is Kensington?"

"That's right."

"Are you related to the Boston Kensingtons?"

"That's right."

She stared intently. "Is your mother Eleanor Kensington?"

"That's right," which elicited a glare from MJ, that I ignored.

"Why didn't you say so, my dear," and she leaned over and kissed me warmly on the cheek. "El and I were roommates at Mrs. Fenton's school. I haven't talked to her in years. How is she? You must tell me all about her. You are very welcome."

Suddenly I was a feted guest. Mrs. K. insisted on showing me the kennel. Pard took one look at the half dozen yellow Labradors lounging around like cows in a pasture and his eyes almost popped out of his doggie head. There were four females, two males and they placidly accepted the city slicker, let loose among the rubes, already hoping to score one of the females. Mrs. K. mentioned that most of the dogs were at the farm, near Lancaster, and announced we would visit there tomorrow.

So for the rest of my stay, even though MJ and I slept in separate rooms, Mrs. K. doted on me, making sure I was well fed and saw everything worth seeing. At the same time, whenever Pard tried to mount one of the females, the other dogs moved close and forced him away, almost like musk oxen confronting their traditional predators. If he growled at them they closed ranks and growled back. If he tried to sneak up on a female during the night, doggie esp warned the others and they kept Pard away. I had to smile at Pard the wily, outsmarted by the country bumpkins.

MJ's presence only slightly relieved the family tensions and she was almost as frustrated as Pard when we left Wednesday night. She had to promise to come back soon and Mrs. K. urged me to accompany her. I could feel Pard's accusing gaze on my back during the ride back to New York City, as if it was my fault that he couldn't connect with a female. MJ let us off in front of my building, said she'd see us tomorrow and left to return the rental car. Pard stared at me woefully, still agitated from being sexually rebuffed.

"Don't look at me, pal. I did my best. You had the opportunity. Maybe you're just not meant to be a lover."

—*Gary Beck*