

THE DOG LADY

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IT WAS THE kid at the door, but I was on the phone with my lawyer and just motioned him to come in. I could do that with him. I knew him that well, my dogs knew him that well.

I watched him walk in. He was wearing the same clothes that he wore when I last saw him, two days before. They were more wrinkly and they had a few stains on them. His shoes were falling apart. He needed a hair cut. But you could still see that the kid was handsome.

Kid. I say kid, but he really wasn't a kid at all. He was just young enough to be my kid. I'm not going to tell you how old I am. So that's why in my mind I called him 'a kid' or 'the kid' to remind myself that he was old enough to be called 'son.'

I just said to myself, Diane, you have the motherly breasts. That's all there is between you two. What you feel is the mother part, that's it. He feels the son part.

I read once, somewhere, about the Oedipal syndrome. How it just didn't occur in isolated, whacked-out families. This article that I read said that every family, every offspring experiences some form of Oedipal syndrome. I just couldn't get over how crazy that sounded to me. All that business about screwing your mother and killing your father. Every child goes through those feelings? But then I thought it made sense. I mean, look at how screwed up the world is today.

The kid pets the dogs, Lady, Missy, and Sno-ball. The dogs seem to really like him. The cats do too, and the cats are feral. I have two feral cats. Two feral cats and three semi-feral dogs. Let's get that straight. I rescued them all from Mexico, a terrible place to be if you're an animal. Found them, smuggled them back here to California. I smuggled a lot more than just the ones I have here. It's just the ones I have here were more the 'problem' cases.

Take Suerte, the three-legged orange cat. I'd had him for thirteen years and he never let me pet him once! One goddamned time! I found him as a kitten in Guadalajara. The stump of his right front leg festering, Suerte nearly delusional. It took me three weeks to catch him.

I staked the alley-way out where I first discovered him and just waited. I tried food. I set traps. Nothing worked. Twenty-one days I spent in a dusty alley in the slums of Guadalajara while my friends were at the beach, then at the mountains, then they had gone home but, I was still there. Still in that filthy alley waiting for my chance to catch that goddamned three-legged cat. *Suerte*, Spanish for lucky.

But, I was still on the phone, and the kid was looking at me. What the hell did he want? I'm on the phone with my lawyer, I told him, and he just grinned. Didn't he know that meant I wanted to be left alone? That I was in the middle of some private business? He just grinned like he thought I was joking or something. He was waiting to hear the conversation, but there was none. My lawyer had put me on hold.

There was silence on both sides of my ears. I wished they were at least playing some Muzak so I could do a little dance, or maybe sing along so I could prove to the kid that I wasn't just listening to the dial tone. I could see it in his eyes while he lounged on my white couch in his dirty clothes mocking me.

"You're on the phone with you lawyer again, Diane? On hold again? How long has this lawsuit been goin' on for? Umm . . . yeah, five years is too long."

Then my lawyer came back from leaving me on hold for nearly twenty minutes, of course by that time the kid had left the room. I was so infuriated with my lawyer for humiliating me in front of the kid like that. I told him I wasn't going to pay for this call. I told him I didn't appreciate being kept on hold for this long. I told him that my case was valuable. That my case alone was going to bring in more money than he's ever going to see in his life. He didn't say shit. How can you argue with five million dollars? He was nice after that. He told me that the case was going well.

"When are we going to get those assholes in court?" I asked him.

It was hard to say, he told me. Could be next week,

could be six months from now. These things take time.

I was devastated . . . angry . . . speechless. Time was something that made no sense to me, just the waiting for it to pass by. I felt tears coming to my eyes. I forgot how to speak. I could hear my lawyer in the background still going on about how difficult this case was, how hard it was to really nail down, as I let the phone slip off my shoulder. It hit the floor and I just left it there.

I stood there for a long time looking at the phone on the ground. I looked at it for so long that it began to change shape. It wasn't a phone any more it was my check book with my special check writing pen slipping out of it. It was two Memorex tapes lying side by side, slightly askew.

When I stopped looking at the phone, I realized I felt much better. I went outside to where the kid was. I lit a cigarette, and he took one from my pack. That angered me a little bit. Those were my cigarettes, not his. I picked the pack up and hid them inside.

The kid was growing some pot in my backyard. For me. Yeah, well, see, I had this idea. Everyone likes to get high, right? Not just purple-haired teenagers and hardcore junkies. I mean, my generation pretty much invented getting high. At least you owed us this, we made it cool. But, my generation was older and buying our dope on the streets just wasn't an option any more. So, I thought that I'd provide a service for people in that boat. I'd be their dealer. Someone their own age who they could trust. Someone who spoke their language.

I was sure that this was going to be a very big thing for me. I wasn't worried, like about the cops or anything. I knew most of them from around the neighborhood, they were nice guys, I even dated one of them, but generally not too bright.

The kid was growing the pot for me, so my overhead would be low. I would have to give him a cut of what we harvested. That was his only stipulation, and I gave in even though I didn't want to.

He watered the plants and then left. I smoked a joint and then got back on the Net. There was this chat room I used to like. Dedicated to maturely discussing the details and sorting through the evidence of the Jean Benet Ramsey case. Some of my chat-room buddies and I, we had solved the case. We had solved the case three times over with three different sets of clues. Once, in fact, we had solved the case with no clues at all.

I spent six hours in that chat room that night. I was exhausted when I logged off. There was this idiot from Massachusetts that kept insisting that the note found in the basement by John Ramsey was not written in the mother's handwriting. He also thought, of course, that the police in Boulder were doing everything they could.

We were chatting pretty exclusively for a while, and then it occurred to me that he was flirting with me. I got excited and thought about a movie I had recently seen where people had done something like this. I mean, at first we totally loathed each other. And now we were flirting.

I told him about my pets because I couldn't think of anything else to say besides that I was growing pot.

He asked me if I were single, I told him I was. He had a theory about single women with more than three pets. He told me, "You've heard of the 'dog lady' or the 'cat lady,' right? The crazy old woman that lives in an aging shack a few blocks away. The one that gets tormented every Halloween? I always felt sorry for her, I mean, she was just so lonely that she had to surround herself with a million animals. It wasn't because she was ugly, or stupid or impossibly fat. It was just that she wasn't capable of making a human connection. She couldn't have anything but the unconditional love of an animal. But that type of love was never enough, humans need something more complex. So she tried to fill the void with more and more animals."

I was shocked. That's who he thought I was? I swore at him several times. Don't feel sorry for me, I said. He claimed he had no idea he was going to insult me. I swore a few more times. I told him how wrong he was. I told him that I was going to sue him for harassment. I told him that people like him were the reason I had only animals as companions.

When I logged off it was only nine-thirty. It seemed much later than that to me. The house was hot still from the day, and I took the dogs out into the backyard so we could all cool off.

The dog lady! I was appalled. I was the one of this town! The town I grew up in New York had a cat lady. She lived down the street from us, two or three blocks. She was old, widowed, or never married, and kept about thirty cats. She was typical, called the cats her babies, her children. Her house had become overrun by the cats, it was filthy, unlivable. Neighbors complained, or rather talked about complaining, but just decided to "let the cat lady alone, after all she was just crazy." The cat lady lived down the block from us until she died. Actually, nobody is really sure when she died. She had been there for quite sometime until she was discovered, rotting, being eaten by her cats.

But to be that uniquely obsessive, schizophrenic pet person in one's town was something that I did not relish. I was not that person. I might have exhibited some of the characteristics, but so does anyone who loves their pets.

The next morning I went down to the coffee shop I always go to with the dogs, and we sat outside and pre-

tended like we were waiting for someone while I drank my coffee. I had three refills and had a couple of over-the-shoulder conversations with various faces I knew from around town.

There was dog hair on my white T-shirt. At first I thought the man, Jeff, who works at an Internet company, was staring at my breasts. I didn't mind, even though he kind of leered, his mouth agape while his gulped his latte. But it wasn't until after he left in his Volvo that I realized I had big clumps of dog hair clinging to my T-shirt.

I was not going to cry about this, I told myself. That was not really all that embarrassing. I mean, I had dogs. Dogs have hair. Hair sticks to things, like T-shirts. But I felt my face burning red. I began brushing the fur off me. Casually, at first. But the fur would not come off. I slapped at it with force, slapping my breasts, nearly knocking them out of my bra, but the fur just became more deeply embedded.

I picked each strand of hair out of my shirt with my finger nails during my third cup of coffee. Missy was watching me, she is a very curious dog.

"Mommy is grooming herself," I told her.

She made no response, so I kicked her.

I was just getting ready to leave when the kid's girlfriend came out and sat next to me. She works at the coffee shop three mornings a week.

"How's it going?" she asked me.

I told her I was fine. The girl then began lamenting about the sun, about how bright it was, how hot it was, and how generally annoying it was.

That's just because you haven't slept for the past three nights, I wanted to tell her. It was obvious. She was such a pretty girl too. Looked good with the kid. But they were always into drugs, and drugs can make you ugly.

Suddenly, I realized that I hated this girl, his girl. The way she smiled at me, crooked, like she knew something I didn't. I've been around, I wanted to tell her, I know your type. You'll never get very far after those breasts start sagging and your hips are three inches wider.

"How's it going," I mimicked her to myself. "Would you like whole milk or skim in that today, Diane." I laughed at her stupid Southern drawl. I'd bet the kid thought that it was cute! It was worse than that! It was fucking annoying!

But I pretended I was hip. I smoked a cigarette with her. I told her about the plants in my backyard, that they were getting big.

"I can't wait," she said and flipped purple hair out of her eyes.

AROUND THIS TIME I started working as a waitress at a local restaurant. Imagine that! Me, with my M.B.A.

working at a stupid dumpy restaurant for fifteen percent on a twenty dollar check! The kid had gotten me the job. He worked there part-time for some extra money.

Extra money was the only reason I was doing that lousy gig. I guess that you should know that I hadn't worked in nearly five years. I couldn't. I mean, I was scarred so bad from my last job that I just couldn't bring myself to work any more. Hence, the lawyer. I was suing their asses.

It's possible that you've heard of a company named Intel, and they make a product called a Pentium chip for computers. I worked for Intel, and I made the Pentium. I don't mean that I worked on the assembly line. I mean that I made that chip. It was mine. Mine, mine, mine. I remember the R&D meeting that I went to. I lectured about its work capacity. Put up the transparencies, showed them the schematics, cut the pie graphs.

Beautiful, great, well done, they said, sitting at a large, oval, oaken table. They smiled, shook my hand, praised me.

You really did it, Diane, they said.

Can you leave those charts with us, they asked. We'd like to go over them.

Six months later I was seeing the ad for the goddamned thing on TV, three weeks left to go on unemployment. Hence, the lawyer. Do you know how much money Intel has made off the Pentium series? I heard they had three of them out now. Did you ever hear of Intel before you heard the name Pentium? I made that chip like I made that company. I built those blue glass towers you see driving south on 101 through Santa Clara. They have their fancy buildings and a team of twenty-six lawyers, but they can't drag this lawsuit on forever. There was going to be a day of reckoning.

Until that day came there was the lousy restaurant and the pot plants. I quit the restaurant the day the kid cut down the plants for me and hung them in my garage.

"How many pounds do you think we'll get off of them?" I asked him.

"A lot," he said. "Maybe as much as five pounds."

"How much is five pounds worth?" I asked him.

"That depends on who you're talking to."

"Who is there to talk to?" I asked. He didn't say anything. I thought he was trying to be clever. I thought about it later that night and thought maybe he meant the cops, or somebody crooked. I didn't think that he meant me.

Well, then I had all this pot, and the kid did all the work for it. He let it hang in the garage, where two other feral cats lived, for two weeks. One day he came over with his little strung-out girl, she had a couple pairs of scissors.

"It's dry," he told me.

He laid down the entire *Sunday Chronicle* on the kitch-

en floor, and the two of them set to work trimming the pot from the rest of the plant. God! They were making such a mess! There were leaves and stalks everywhere.

"That's why we laid down the newspapers," she said.

It took them nearly four hours to clean it all. They kept getting up to go outside and smoke cigarettes.

"I could really use a beer," the kid said.

She left to go get some. God! They were taking their goddamned time!

They weighed out each freezer-caliber bag and labeled them #1, which I guess means one pound. There were seven and a half of them. They took one which left me with six and a half.

They took one whole pound! I almost said something, but I didn't. I mean, who did they think they were taking one pound of my pot without even asking me about it first! It wasn't like they grew it or anything. But I let it go deciding that it would be better just to be done with them. I didn't need them hanging around the house any more. I didn't want their kind of attention. I had work to do.

Two weeks later I still had six and a half freezer-caliber bags, minus what I had smoked, lying in the freezer. I hadn't sold a single sack. I dropped hints to people that I met at the coffee shop that I had some pot for sale, but either they were too stupid to know what I was talking about, or they didn't get high.

I said things like, "Yeah, I got this great thing, you know, that I use to relax every day. What about you?"

Finally, I broke down and called the kid to ask him if he knew of anyone that might want to buy some of my pot. I didn't have any money in the bank. The last check I got from the restaurant was for only thirty-four dollars. I was scraping up change to go buy my coffee every morning. There was no human food in the house. There were only two cans of dog food left in the cabinet. What would I feed the cats?

"Sure," he told me and said that he'd arrange for some people to meet me.

I met a couple of his friends and took a few orders. They wanted to come over to my place and pick it up, but I was like, no way. There is no way that I want traffic, especially from the kid's kind of friends at my house. I had neighbors, you know, and the dogs, well the dogs weren't very good with strangers.

The money was coming out of their pockets when I told them this, well, that I wouldn't let them come over. They all looked at the kid, the money still hidden, as to what to do. He shrugged, it was cool, he said.

The money came out. Almost five hundred dollars. I had to write down all the orders on a napkin. I walked back home limping from the obvious weight of money

in my pockets. I was so nervous, I was trying hard not to be noticeable. But, my legs shot out at all directions, a couple times I almost ran into telephone poles. I was having trouble breathing, and my head was getting numb. I waved to the lady who runs the bookstore.

Hi! I have dope money in my pocket!

I began waving to everyone! Stop doing this, I told myself and then I struck up a conversation with a guy who works at the tropical fish store. He had just sold an octopus, he told me.

I got home and pulled down the shades. I got out a freezer bag and several smaller sandwich bags. I began stuffing pot into baggies, and then it dawned on me that I had no idea what I was doing. How much was this amount, I asked myself. I didn't have a scale. I didn't really even want to sell them anything at all, I decided. It was my pot after all. It was mine.

I took half the money and placed it in the freezer with the pot. Then, I got into my car and drove to the grocery store. I filled up a basket, cases of dog food. The money came easily out of my pocket, and the cashier accepted it. I thought about the kid and his stupid friends sitting at the coffee shop waiting for me to come back with the pot.

"Yes," I told the cashier. "I do need help out."