

Milo

by Larry Strattnr

Milo

I call him a Staffordshire terrier. You call him a pit bull. Some people say he's lovable. Other people say he'll bite your face off without thinking too hard. I suppose both opinions are logical. Let me tell you a little about him and you can draw your own conclusions.

After popping a few deserving members of the human race for Mel and his employers I felt a little tensed up. One day at the dentist I'm reading Ladies Home Journal to take my mind off the sounds of the drill down the hall and to keep me from looking at the horse-faced lady sitting across the waiting room who may be waiting to be fitted for a bridle.

In Ladies Home Journal is an article about all these goofy looking dogs. They call them hybrids or designer dogs; a mix of two breeds combining the best genes of each. Since the breeder can control copulation but not DNA helixes they don't mention the result can be a guard dog poodle who smells like a wet Labrador, but that's another discussion.

What gets my attention is a line in the Journal article claiming, 'Petting a dog can lower your blood pressure more than ten points.' Holy shit! Ten points! Between trying to shake my gambling addiction and dealing with Mel and his 'targets' I'm on edge all the time. The edginess no doubt helps my writing career. It hasn't been helping my teeth. I grind them at night while I sleep. I ground a cap off which is why I'm in the dentist's office. The doc will fix my tooth and fit me with one of those NFL things you bite on so I won't screw my teeth up when I grind them. I bet the whole thing will cost a grand. Now I have money I have dental insurance too, so what the fuck.

The blood pressure thing about dogs gets me thinking. As a kid I always wanted a dog. A dog was a big 'no' at my house. Seven kids in my family kept my dad hopping before we blew apart. While he was still around dad said to me, ' If you want a fucking dog, play with your brother Eddie.' So, no dog for me; although dad, half right as usual, pegged my brother Eddie as an animal.

Now I'm on my own, free and clear. Do what I want. Even better The Ladies' Home Journal gives me a medical reason. On the spot I decide, dog time.

The dental appointment goes OK. I have to say the guy never hurt me. What with my addictive —compulsive personality I wonder why I never got addicted to pain killers. Good thing I hate drugs. They make me feel out of control. My problem with gambling; I always felt in control, even when I clearly wasn't. I guess this all would indicate I'm a little delusional too. The delusion problem helps me with writing.

After the dentist I haul—ass down to the animal shelter to get a dog. I choose the shelter because my sister got a dog and she told me the shelter is the way. Save somebody. Fair's fair I thought. Just as somebody saved me, much as I am unsure of Mel as a fit parent.

Toward the end of the movie 'Apocalypse Now' Marlon Brando speaks a line, "...the horror, the horror." I don't remember the words exactly. But the line, in tone and mood and underlying implications, sums up how the animal shelter hits me. So few will survive. So many undeserved deaths. So much heartache and pain. Despair. I resolve to save at least one of them. I will be like the kid throwing stranded starfish back in the ocean who, when told by an adult his efforts wouldn't matter to the hundreds of starfish stranded on the beach, threw another to safety in the waves and said, ' I guess it matters to him. '

Too many dogs are in the shelter. Too many older ones seem to know they are past cuteness. Too many lost and hoping to be found. All in all, heart rending. I will do some good. My eyes light on a squirming pile of puppies. All various combinations of black and white, sticking together, nipping, wiggling and pushing. Milo is in the midst of the pile. The white top of his head matches his chest, his tail tip and his paws. The rest of him, jet black. He could grow up to be a headwaiter. He seems assertive and proud, yet relaxed and ready to play. I like him.

“I’ll take the one in the middle.” I say to the shelter guy, Marvin, who opens the cage door and scoops him up.

I didn't know his name was Milo when I got him. I still don't know if his specific, intended name is Milo. When we got back to the front of the shelter arranging and confirming all the inoculations and procedures, the woman at the desk said, “The little girl with the people who dropped these puppies off was upset. She named all of them at birth. She gave me a list to give to whoever adopted.”

She hands me a piece of yellow lined paper. Eight names, block printed about third-grade size in a column. I thought I had counted seven puppies. The woman must have seen me counting. “One didn't survive,” the woman says. The list reads. Flo, Agnes, Rose, Millie, Jack, Buddha, Milo and Ely. Since I'm holding a boy puppy, four names are out. Of the four boy names I like Milo and Ely best. Ely sounds a bit biblical for me, so Milo gets his name. A gift from the sad little girl.

“Let's go Milo,” I say.

Milo grew fast. His papers say Staffordshire terrier they don't say pit bull. He doesn't have a pedigree but a few people tell me he looks purebred. A fun guy. I scratch his little belly. He jumps around

and does puppy stuff. For a while I think he might be fucked up because his head seems too big somehow. Then his body catches up. I treat-train him to heel and stay and not jump all over people. He gets a lot of love. While out walking, even as a puppy, people seem impressed by him. When we play in the park he tumbles like a little black bowling ball. I can roll him around, his hard body is like one of those polyester play balls. He gets bigger and I realize as a bowling ball in dog's clothing he could easily take down any ten-pin he aims at, including me.

I crate-train him. If he has to stay home alone during the day he is crated with his blanket and a pillow. When I'm sure he won't eat the furniture or my computer or any of my manuscripts while I'm out I leave the crate door open and he hangs out in the crate, cozy and familiar.

One day as we walk in the park we pass a swimming hole near the river. Someone has tied a rope to a tree branch, kids swinging out over the river and dropping off into the water. Milo studies the jumpers intently and then, when the rope swings back over the river bank, he charges, grabs the rope and runs off the bank and over the water, hanging on by his jaws and growling with joy all the way. The swimmers look on, amazed. When his arc shortens on the land side Milo releases the rope, plops to the ground, rests and gets in line for another turn. The kids give him every other swing. A small crowd gathers. Milo becomes a park legend.

To give him some exercise I try to ride my bicycle with him next to me on leash. He pulls me down three times before we even get off our block and I give up.

One day, on a whim, I buy a child buggy intended to pull kids behind a bicycle. A shoemaker I know rigs a harness. I strap the contraption onto Milo, cram myself into the kid buggy and cleverly say, "mush!" Milo promptly runs me across a sewer grate, up and

down a couple of concrete curbs and crashes me into a yard-gnome. Bruised yet undeterred I beef up the rig. With an ample supply of treats for good behavior Milo learns to run merrily around the back streets of our neighborhood pulling me. I wear his ass out.

I had not seen George or Mel, thank you God, since I Swiss-cheesed Irv Finnenberg who, as planned, resides all-fucked-up in minimum security prison and will remain so for a long, long time. The cops have video of the whole melee but never exactly figure out what happened. All the investment money Irv stole caused a big outcry to apprehend the rest of Irv's responsible cronies. I lay low, counting myself pretty damn lucky to have gotten through these Mel escapades with my ass in one piece and my balls still attached. Now I actively plot ways to get out. Perhaps Milo might help, I think. I could just have him bite Mel's fucking head off. But I know I'll have to come up with something better than this tempting solution.

As always, as soon as I think too hard about Mel he calls. 'Wednesday, noon, at George's' he says and hangs up. His no ID, no manners phone call habit is continuing to piss me off.

On Wednesday I bring Milo with me to George's. George is a hunter and outdoor guy. He loves dogs and dogs can tell. At least Milo can. Milo stands up and greets George with his paws on George's chest. A dominance move. George retaliates by scratching Milo's belly till he drops to the floor in ecstasy. Most people are frightened when Milo gets up on them. The dog books say you're not allowed to let a dog hover over you because it's a dominance trait and will make the dog think he's the pack leader instead of you. I let Milo get up on me anyway. There are plenty of other ways Milo has been trained not to have the upper hand. In addition I feed him every day which sends a powerful message to any dog. For meals he has to sit down and pay attention before I release him to eat. He's pretty attentive to my commands around these times of day.

Anyway, I like Milo and let him get away with all kinds of stuff but I never get the feeling he's not my protector and when push comes to shove you better not be on the wrong side of him.

George likes him too and encourages a lot of behavior not taught in puppy training class. George pats his chest as an invitation and then gives Milo a belly scratch again while he's up. The interesting thing is when Milo gets his paws up on someone he likes he puts no weight on them as he rests his front paws on their chest. He's balanced and light on his feet, like a dancer. If he didn't like you maybe it would be another story.

Having said hello and play-tussled with George, Milo sits down, cocks his head as George snaps open a Coors and hands the can to me. "What's up?" asks George.

"Mel. At noon."

"Oh." George goes back to loading shells like this was news to him. I never know what anyone knows, or doesn't know, in this crowd. So I sit back with my Coors. George works at his bench and I sip Coors until, about eleven fifty five, Milo's ears go up; a knock on the door and Mel enters with his occasional sidekick, Art, in tow.

"Afternoon men," says Mel. "You know Art. He's part of what we're discussing today."

"And that would be?" I say.

"A guy is running guns into Africa from a base in London. Most of his product goes to Somalia, some into the Sudan. He supplies pirates, murderers and warlords. A good number of his wares are resold into southern Pakistan and the best pieces get to Afghanistan. We are going to give him a lesson in the volatility of world markets."

“London? Christ, I’ve never been east of Long Island City, fucking London?”

“London loved your little old lady turn with Finnenberg.”

London? Loved? That’s enough. The little old lady body suit will be coming out all right but a lot sooner than London. A harmless looking little old lady is going to be trailing Mel around town and I’m going to find out who these assholes really are, or at least who some of them are. Once I do and can figure out how to steer clear of them, I’m down the road before something bad happens to me.

“I’m glad to hear,” I grin. “I’ve never been to London.”

“No problem,” says Mel. “They speak English.”

George laughs. George seldom laughs in these briefings. “You might call what they speak, English,” he says with a snort.

“So how do I figure in?” I ask. “A skinny geek from north Jersey?”
“As the little lady, of course. You noticed we didn’t come by and pick up the bodysuit and holster after Irv? Did you think we left the outfit for you to wear on Halloween? We want you to reprise your performance in London. This mark is guarded. Tough to get close. But he loves Harrod’s and shops at the store frequently. We have a little skit rigged up in the store to take him out. Kind of like the routine we did on Irv. The older woman trick ought to be good for about three outings. He’ll never see you coming. Like a lot of the gunrunner guys, his network is all in his head. We knock him out, the whole thing comes down.”

“Here’s a print of the ground floor plan for Harrod’s,” says Art, putting an eleven by fourteen sized floor plan on the bench. “The guy always stops here.” He points at a block labeled ‘Fine Jewelry and Watches.’

“He inevitably has a babe with him. A different babe each time. He buys them a trinket.” Next he points to a block across the aisle. “Right here, in handbags we're thinking some mature women will have a dispute over a marked-down bag. Some pushing and shoving will ensue. You can figure out the rest.”

Art is an asshole just like Mel.

“Maybe you can bring your attack dog along to take the guy out,” continues Art unwisely. Milo looks at Art and Art leans in toward Milo and laughing, yells, “Woof!” Milo promptly bites Art on his calf. “Ow, ow, ow, ow!” Art screams, falling over backward, Milo still clamped on his calf, savoring the asshole taste.

I grab Milo by his head and stick my hand in his nose. Grab his jaw. He smells me and releases Art's leg. Art reaches inside his jacket; we assume for a pistol and George hits him on the forearm with a rod he uses cleaning shotguns, Art yells ‘Ow!’ and curses, holding his leg, trying to favor his arm and giving us the evil eye. I look at his trouser leg. Milo has not even torn the fabric, although a Milo-mouth-sized drool mark spots his expensive slacks. He deserves worse.

“I wouldn't recommend dicking around with Milo.” I say. “He didn't even bite down hard. You're lucky, you dipshit.”

Mel's expression never changes. He has only stepped back a pace to stay out of the brief melee. “OK. OK. Let's stay on task here,” he says. *On fucking task?* He looks at me. He and Art both have a slightly different expression on their faces than the one they normally reserve for me. A bit more wary. I sense a turn in our relationship. I also sense how Milo weighed in on this particular turn. I decide to run with the ball.

“You know Mel, you call me up and act like some kind of dictator.

Shove me around and put me in front of some real dangerous people even though you told me at the beginning how much fun I'd be having. Turns out to be no fun at all and even though I've gotten the job done for you every time, even taken a bullet, you just get worse as time goes by. So, fuck you Mel, here's how it's going to be. I may or may not go to London. Remains to be seen. I will however be going to a bunch of book signings and I have released my publisher to put a big head and shoulders photo of me on my new book jacket. So now, Mel, you have recognition issues with me. You'll have to be a little more polite and careful, you cold-blooded twerp. Plus from now on Milo will always be with me and he smells bad intentions from a mile away. If you hassle me you might lose a leg or Milo might tear your fucking head off, or whatever. Are we clear?"

Mel actually smiles slightly. "I'd say so," he says. "Temperature's a little high today for the rest of this. But I understand completely. For a little skinny guy with stupid glasses you turned into quite the piece of work."

Takes another geek to know one you sanctimonious, quasi-intellectual dork. I think

"Let's go, Art." Mel says. He opens the door of the shed. "This seems to me to be a positive development," he says to me. "Keep that old lady suit pressed and ready to go."

The door to the shed closes and George says, "Christ. I thought that shit would kick off world war three. Are you nuts?"

"No more than you, George. No more than you. Besides, Art had it coming. These guys think they can do anything they want any time they want. They better start disabusing themselves that notion."

"Whoa!" says George, "disabusing! We are getting to be quite the Norman Mailer aren't we?"

"Thanks for the brew. I'll be in touch." I'll let George wonder who I really am for a while. I'm definitely getting to be someone else.

As we walk out the door I say to Milo, "Dude, that was life changing!" He gives me that cocked-head, "you bet your ass," look, wags his tail and barks, once.

"You probably need a treat. Let's go find one. I'm thinking maybe ice cream." Milo wags his tail. He knows those words.

On our way out of the yard Milo pauses to piss on a rosebush.

