

A Madness to Her Method

There's something about a good, sweaty workout that makes me crave chocolate. Maybe it's a drop in blood sugar or the need to reward myself after punishing my body for an hour, but I can't wait to bolt out of the gym and race to the nearest convenience store for a candy bar or two. That's exactly what happened to me one godawfully hot summer evening after a particularly strenuous session on the weight training circuit.

Perhaps I overdid it because I was burning off some nervous energy brought on by an utterly mind numbing conference call with my superiors in Washington DC, or maybe I was just working out some buried frustration over my banishment to the moral wasteland of Las Vegas for the indefinite future on an assignment I couldn't quite understand. At any rate, I was still dripping with sweat as I drove home even though I had taken a cold shower before leaving the gym and the air conditioning in my Tercel was cranked to maximum. With one hand, I popped the cover on the plastic teat of my water bottle and guzzled greedily, all the while craving something sweet and crunchy. Like a beckoning mirage, a familiar sign of green, orange, and red shimmered in the desert heat from a mile or so distant. To an ancient Bedouin, this would have been quite a distance to travel, but to a Toyota on a paved road, this was only a minute away.

Convenience stores are one of the most amazing developments of the last 100 years. The revolving stream of customers allows for adequate parking day or night, so you can pull right up to the store front and enter the climate-controlled world of instant gratification. To your left, racks of trashy magazines catering to every fetish from cars to fashion to porn. On your right, every known form of artificially enhanced and preserved pastry in colorful packaging. Hot coffee and icy soft drinks are available on demand, and a burrito or hot dog is only microwaveable seconds away. None of these temptations were my prey, however. I traveled deeper into the interior of the store for the hidden racks of chocolate confections. I zeroed in on two of my favorites: Mars bar for the almonds and Kit Kat for the crunch. Having landed my catch for the day, I paid the taciturn teenage boy at the register and retreated, sensing his sullen eyes on my spandex-clad ass as I stepped outside.

Call me a pig if you like, but I could not wait to get home before ingesting my chocolate fix, and I hate trying to drive and eat at the same time, so I simply began to devour my Kit Kat bar in the parking lot as I leaned against the driver's side door of my car. I could feel the sense of comfort wash over me as I chewed on the crackery filling and felt the first bits of melting chocolate slide down my throat. The nagging edge flowed from my body with each bite. So enraptured in chocolate ecstasy was I that I barely noticed the scruffy mutt poking around the dumpster on the side of the building.

Normally, I wouldn't give this sight much consideration save for a twinkling of sympathy for the well-being of a feral animal, but this dog looked familiar. I could tell from the uneven length of the dog's coat and its mottled coloring that it was my upstairs neighbor's pooch. Not that I'm much of a dog person, but this medium-sized canine appeared to be part terrier of some kind with maybe dachshund or corgi mixed in. He padded around the trash at the base of the

dumpster on delicate paws that looked more like deer hooves, and his snout wiggled furiously through the piles seeking some form of nourishment, although by his stout frame he had clearly been fed regularly.

“Hey fella’,” I called to him. “What are you doing so far away from home?”

The dog stopped and looked up at me with tiny brown eyes. Seeing the half-eaten candy bar in my fist, he took a few steps closer to me and licked his muzzle.

“Oh no,” I said. “You can’t have this. Dogs can’t eat chocolate. I know that much.”

He took another step forward and released a quick yap. I knew in that instant that this was my neighbor’s dog. I had heard that incessant bark at all hours of the night along with strange banging sounds and odd muttering from the crazy old lady who owned him. At times I thought she was torturing the poor beast, but he never appeared to have any wounds. All the same, I had been tempted on several occasions to strangle both the neighbor and the dog just so I could get a good night’s sleep in jail.

The scraggly mutt licked his muzzle and yawned, like a child who really wants something but pretends to be disinterested, but like most children, the façade dropped a second later and he again barked insistently.

“No, you can’t have this,” I restated. “This is not good for dogs. This is a Kit Kat.”

The following few seconds were a blur of action, but the dog’s demeanor took a distinct turn for the worst. His once wagging tail stood erect, his lips peeled back to reveal stiletto-like fangs, and his well-muscled frame constricted into a tiny ball before unleashing all its energy in a forward leap toward my face. Instinctively, I tossed my candy bars to the ground and raised my

hands to fend off the attack. Slapping my palms together, I swung at the lunging beast like my arms were a baseball bat and smacked him to the asphalt before his teeth could reach my neck.

Showing no ill effects from the blow, he scrambled upright and proceeded to climb my body, using his front and hind dew claws to gain purchase on my flesh. I wrapped my hands around his solid torso and struggled to pull him off, all the while wagging my head from side to side to avoid his snapping maw. In the midst of the chaos, I spied a trio of teenagers watching the struggle from across the parking lot with detached bemusement. Perhaps they did not think I was in any real danger, or perhaps they were simply sociopathic, but they made no effort to help me.

With my body prone against the car door, the wild canine planted his hind paws into my stomach and took a vicious lunge for my throat. Unwilling to become his evening snack, I swung his body sideways and slammed him into the hood of the Tercel. The motion did not stun him, but put him in an awkward position where he could merely wriggle and snap randomly. Pinning his head to the hood with my left hand, I strained to reach the car door handle, but managed to flick the lever just enough to pop the door open. I pulled it wider with my foot, simultaneously grappling the dog's torso with my right hand. With a quick motion, I flung the crazed creature into the cabin and slammed the door shut.

The door window fogged with the hot breath of the barking dog as he jumped over the cushions and threw himself about the cabin in frustration. I simply stood and watched with my hands on my hips, struggling to regain air and a sense of composure.

“Sonovabitch,” I muttered, as the teenagers across the lot chuckled.

“You need the Dog Whisperer, girl!” one of them chided, and the rest laughed and high-fived each other.

Not interested in engaging with a group of stupid boys, I headed back inside the store for a bottle of chilled water and a chance to figure out my next move. I didn't waste any time taking several gulps from the water bottle after I removed it from the refrigerator case.

"You have to pay for that," the morose teen behind the counter warned, as if the thought had never occurred to me.

Offering him a sickly smile, I wandered through the store hoping to find something with which to restrain the canine. Living up to the miracle esteem I've always conveyed on convenience stores, I found a collection of dog leashes and harnesses hanging next to dog toys and food. I looked over the selection closely, wondering what might work best for restraining the thing in my car.

"Say," I called over to the teen. "Do you know which one of these things works best with dogs?"

He looked up from his mobile device, shrugged feebly, and went back to reading his text messages. It didn't really bother me; I would probably have given the same reaction if I had been in his shoes. I was just hoping he might have a dog of his own and could offer advice. The choke chain was out. Despite his ferocious behavior, his neck seemed awfully small and I didn't want to kill him. I opted for a nylon harness and a steel leash. The harness would hold him safely and the steel leash would offer strength if he fought me. Paying for the items, I took them back to my car.

Bracing myself for a tangle with a Tasmanian devil, I was shocked to find the mutt sitting contentedly on the passenger side seat, his head darting about in response to the movements of the people scurrying in and out of the store. He then looked at me and panted vigorously in a way

which almost suggested a smile. Cautiously, I opened the door and leaped in the cabin before he could jump out, not that he gave any indications of doing so. The inside of the car was boiling hot, and I felt guilty for leaving him in such a suffocating environment. Quickly, I started the car and turned the air conditioning to maximum. The dog was initially startled by the blast of cold air emanating from the dash vent, but soon leaned into it for relief.

“Okay, fella,” I said calmly. “I’m going to put this harness on you. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

He tilted his head slightly in that expression of bewilderment that dogs have. He looked so cute, I could hardly believe this was the wild maniac that attacked me just a few minutes earlier. Emboldened by his docile behavior, I carefully slipped the tangle of nylon strips around his forelegs and torso. He did not resist as I snapped the catch and adjusted the straps, simply panting and waving his head into the cool air.

“Okay, I’m taking you home now.” Tension gripped my arms and legs during the ride back to my apartment complex in North Las Vegas. Although the creature was calm for the moment, I was prone for the instant when he might decide to turn into Cujo again. Only when he slumped onto his belly and laid his head over the side of the seat did I think that perhaps he was truly relaxed.

My apartment complex looked like all the other apartment complexes in North Las Vegas. A cluster of hastily assembled buildings made from fiberboard and drywall with that generic tan stucco coating over top to hide its shoddy construction. With a shimmering blue swimming pool out front, it was neat and non-threatening and comfortable in a soul destroying

way. These accommodations had been chosen for me by my employer, but I would've had to settle for similar lodgings anyway since all these places used the same blueprint.

I pulled into my numbered parking space and attached the leash to the harness. This was not a confrontation I wanted. For weeks I had put up with my upstairs neighbor making horrendous noises all hours of the night while the little dog barked and scurried over the hardwood floors. On dozens of occasions, I wanted to stalk upstairs, bang on her door, and tell her to cut it out. Or even better, call the police on the crazy woman and press charges. The only thing holding me back was my job. In an undercover operation where even the local LVPD was not supposed to know of my existence, I couldn't afford to draw any attention to myself. So I stoically put up with the racket, hoping that someone else in the complex would call the cops, but it never happened. Perhaps the other tenants had their own little secrets they wanted to keep away from the eyes of the law.

This time, however, I had no choice. The dog had to be returned. My only options were how to handle it. Do I just hand him over and say good night, or do I give her a piece of my mind about her rude behavior and lack of responsible dog rearing skills? The oppressive summer heat and my low blood sugar were pushing me toward the latter.

"Who is it?" a shrill voice barked when I rang the doorbell of her apartment.

I glanced at the nameplate on the door before I spoke. "I have your dog, Ms. Gruden."

Some shuffling could be heard from the other side of the door. When it stopped, I imagined her staring at the dog and I through her peephole. Latches and deadbolts scraped and clattered before the door finally opened.

“He doesn’t have a collar, but I’m sure this is your dog,” I declared.

The old woman was a short, stocky person hidden under a flowing polyester tent dress of swirling greens. Her pale blue eyes squinted even in the pale light of the setting sun, as if she had not left the apartment in years. The stale smell wafting toward me confirmed that suspicion.

“Is this your dog?” I queried pointedly, wanting to unload my burden as quickly as possible and go home.

The mutt barked as if to answer the question for her. Ms. Gruden did not show the typical excitement you would expect from a woman who had just had her pet returned to her. In fact, she betrayed no emotion at all, but simply nodded.

I extended the leash to her. “You can keep the rig. Seems you might need it if this little guy is going to run off on you.”

With trepidation, the old woman took hold of the leash. “Thank you,” she said, although she didn’t sound like she meant it. Without saying goodbye, she turned her back to me and started to close the door.

The chemical imbalance in my system got the best of me. This woman’s callous attitude was just too much for me to bear. As the door swung toward my face, I extended my right arm stiffly. The old lady had already headed into her living room, so she was unaware that I had entered her home until I spoke up.

“Wait a minute,” I barked. “Is that all you have to say? That little beast attacked me!”

She turned abruptly in response to my words. A faint smile flickered across her face. Not the reaction I expected.

“What are you smiling about? That dog should receive some serious training.”

The woman’s smile spread to a grin. “He has, young lady. He has.”

“Well, while we’re talking, I have some complaints with you. What’s with all the noise during the night? You building a submarine up here? And that little beast barks and howls like a siren! You may not realize it, but these walls are paper thin, and some of us – “

As I ranted, my eyes adjusted to the faint interior light and details of the living room became apparent. A throw rug covered the center of the floor, but it wasn’t my grandmother’s oriental carpet. This rug had a star diagram on it like the constellation pictures we studied in elementary school. Lines connected the stars in the shape of a dog. On the wall to my right stood a tacky chrome, arching construct. At first glance, I assumed it was a discount store knick-knack rack, but upon closer inspection it was clearly devoid of shelves. It seemed to serve only as a decoration for the natural-gas-powered fireplace. The other walls were covered with random words and mathematic equations, scrawled haphazardly on the antique white walls in red crayon or paint or...

“What is all this?” I muttered, as much to myself as to the old lady.

“You should leave now,” she replied flatly.

My ire returned. “Not until you promise me there’ll be no more noise from this apartment after midnight.”

“I can make no such promise,” she said gruffly.

“You’re forcing me to call the police.”

The old woman shrugged. “That’s too bad.”

It was clear I was wasting my time. Something was wrong here, but a head-on confrontation was not going to get me anywhere. The police might just dismiss her as a senile senior citizen to be pitied rather than punished. I decided to leave, but planned to keep my eye on her behavior. As I turned, however, I sensed the woman moving toward me at a speed I did not think a person of her age would possess. Looking toward her, I saw a hypodermic needle plunge into my neck.

From time to time, I’ve been put under anesthesia for dental work or minor surgeries, so I was used to that sensation of losing muscle control and releasing your will to the onslaught of unconsciousness. I expected to have the same sensation once the needle pierced my skin, but this was very different. I did lose muscle control momentarily, but no nagging tug of sleepiness gripped me. As my legs turned to rubber and I plunged to the floor, the constellation design on the rug turned into an actual starscape into which I plummeted.

I was floating in space, but obviously I wasn’t. Like a dream, I was flying at incredible speed. The largest star in the constellation grew to fill my view, exposing its orange glow. I turned away from the intense glare, and noticed the orbiting bodies around me. Meteors, asteroids, and planets drifted by. My stomach was in my throat. I had to will myself to breathe, so overwhelmed was I by the vast universe spreading before me. At first, I thought I was hurtling along aimlessly, but a planet loomed up to greet me, its swirling green and orange atmosphere dazzling me into stupefaction.

The remaining portion of my consciousness which still possessed logical thought informed me that I was about to burn up in the atmosphere. Never mind that I was already

existing in a vacuum, I couldn't shake the notion that my flesh would be incinerated within seconds. I closed my eyes, bracing for the searing heat I was about to experience, but instead I sensed ground beneath my feet. Where before I could smell nothing, now there was the distinct dryness of dust in my throat. Opening my eyes, I could see that I was in a desert, not unlike the desert surrounding Las Vegas. Was I in the Mojave? Or did I fall through the atmosphere of the alien planet and land on its surface? Or was I just stoned out of my mind and still standing in the old woman's living room? I so wanted to believe that I was merely hallucinating, but those slight fragments of sanity were slipping away from me.

"Where are you?" the old lady's voice carried to my ears, only it did not emanate from the woman herself. Instead, the voice came from a cube-shaped creature which stood before me. The side of the cube directly in front of me featured a face somewhat like the lady's countenance, but the skin was streaky shades of green like the tent dress she was wearing in the apartment. The creature hopped toward me on stubby feet, its spindly arms dangling at its sides in response to the bouncing.

"I don't – in a desert," I forced out.

"Do you like the desert?" she asked.

"No. I hate it," was my reply.

The blocky creature screwed up its fleshy face in an expression of confusion. The old lady's voice echoed from the blubbery lips, "Who am I?"

"I don't know," was my truthful answer. "You sound like the lady from upstairs, but you look like a Rubik's Cube with a face."

The folds around the ugly thing's eyes pulled back to reveal its onyx pupils. It was clearly surprised. "I knew he would send someone."

"Who sent whom?" I asked.

The creature snickered. "Playing dumb. I expected no less."

"This is no act, believe me."

"You can't fool me. If you were really stupid, you would never have found yourself here. You should have placed yourself in a blissful Eden of your own choosing. How did you channel this imagery?"

This was beginning to feel like one of those hopeless arguments I would have with my mother when I was a teenager. She would be mad at me for something I was not aware of, but she was certain I knew and would therefore never tell me. My instinct back then was to play along like I knew exactly why she was angry rather than argue that I did not. Eventually, I could bait her into revealing some clues as to the source of her anger and deal with it. That was my plan with the old-lady-turned-big-cube.

"Okay, I admit it," I cried. "I was sent here. What do you plan to do with me?"

"I guess I have to kill you," she replied, matter-of-factly, "but I don't know how. This hasn't come up before."

"If we're treading on new ground here, why don't we agree that killing people isn't an option."

"Mutilation then?"

“How about we take that off the table as well?”

“I have to make an example of you,” she barked at me. “He can’t send anymore of you.”

It was beginning to sink in that the old lady/cube creature was talking about The Colonel. After all, he was the one who sent me here, in a roundabout way. Maybe my job here was not simply to play online vixen to arms dealers. Perhaps he put me in my particular apartment so I could keep an eye on the old lady as well. I just didn’t know it yet.

I struggled to get to my feet, but some invisible force held me in place. As I pushed with all my might against the hot sand beneath my hands and feet, I watched almost passively as the cubed being walked away from me and toward a fire burning in the distance. Along the way, she picked up a branch that was lying on the ground and thrust the chunk of wood into the flames. Several minutes of struggle allowed me to rise to my knees where I sat back on my heels and attempted to catch my breath, all the while watching the creature slowly twirl the stick in the fire.

“What are you doing?” I wheezed, barely making any sound my throat was so dry.

The thing ignored me, continuing to turn the stick. Finally, when the branch was aglow with fire, it turned and headed toward me. She thrust the business end of the branch forward in a menacing manner. Desperately, I struggled to rise, but my muscles were loath to respond. Every instinct in my body screamed, “*Run!*” Still, I was rooted to the spot, and the fiery branch was getting closer.

“Why the hell didn’t you own a kitty cat?” I muttered.

Then came a guttural rumble. In my drugged state, I wasn’t quite sure where it was coming from. Glancing around, I noticed a ball of wildly ragged fur just behind the cube

creature. Despite my confused state, I had a bit of an epiphany. Pieces of reality coalesced with the fantasy playing out before me. The fiery branch danced closer to my face. Taking a deep breath, I cried out, "*Kitty cat!*"

A grumbly roar echoed in my ears. The cube creature jolted back, its eyes going wide again. It was then that I saw it. The furry, feral looking beast was clinging to the back of the being with its fangs, the short legs of the thing dangling as it wriggled and writhed, making some instinctive yet futile effort to shake its prey to death. Waving the flaming stick about with one hand, the cube monster swung its other stubby appendage backward, trying in vain to reach the beast on its back.

I scurried away from the two, but scurry doesn't exactly describe my pathetic motion. This bizarre lethargy which gripped me prevented me from moving very quickly. Despite my best efforts, I could only move a few feet away from the mêlée. A personified lump of fatigue, I leaned back and watched the two gruesome beasts struggle with each other, the flames on the branch leaping off in every direction as the cube creature swung it about. As each lick of flame touched the ground, the desert began to catch fire. I knew this couldn't be happening, but the fire was indeed igniting the sands.

Deep down, I knew what I was watching was not entirely real, but there was a reality beneath this veneer of fantasy. The piercing heat from the flames encroaching upon me felt as real as it gets. Escape was the only option. Redoubling my efforts to move, I dragged my leaden body across the ground seeking some distance between me and the fire which grew in size and intensity. My palms scraped against the sand, or whatever I was sitting on, pushing inexorably

backward. I have no idea how long I driving my body away from the inferno, but my energy quickly flagged.

Then my back slammed against something hard. I couldn't see it, but there had to be a wall behind me. With all my energy spent and the flames growing closer, I could no longer work up any concern about my fate. I just wanted to sleep. I knew stopping was fatal, and it's never in nature to quit, but whatever drug the old lady pumped into my veins had a powerful hold on my will. I stared ahead, not even capable of turning my head. The cube creature was now obscured by the flames. Faint screams echoed in my ears, like the cries of a whale underwater.

But the furry creature survived. I could see it charging straight at me. I knew this was the end. Reluctantly, I closed my eyes and succumbed to the fatalistic urge within me.

When I regained consciousness, I felt chilled. A light breeze caressed my face, laced with the barest hint of mist. With an effort, I forced my eyes opened. Flashes of red, yellow, and white tinted my blurry view of the world. A fire engine stood in front of me, multiple hoses extending from its side and lacing their way across the parking lot of my apartment complex. I was resting against a light post, cold and damp except for a small spot of warmth against my right thigh. I looked down and saw the old lady's dog, resting contentedly by my side. Patting him lightly on the head, I closed my eyes again, sharing in his contentment. Then a siren shook my insides as an ambulance pulled up in front of me.

Aside from some cuts and bruises, the EMTs couldn't find anything seriously wrong with me. The police arrived and grilled me on the events of the night. I had to tread carefully since the local law enforcement was not aware of my uncover work. I kept it simple, saying that I smelled

smoke from my apartment and went upstairs to investigate. I tried to rescue the old woman, but must've become overwhelmed by the smoke. The dog led me to safety. In reality, I have no earthly idea how that little dog pulled me out of that apartment given my feeble condition. The police said they would take the dog to a shelter. I warned them not to say "kitty cat" around him, but I think they thought I was joking.

My landlord didn't buy my version of the strange events. He had heard complaints from other tenants about the old lady's behavior. From his point of view, I surely must've lost my patience and confronted the old lady, possibly causing the fire. He threw me out of my apartment.

I couldn't bring myself to talk of these events with The Colonel. Maybe he had sent me there for a reason, but the potential power of this strange woman froze my soul. I had a more immediate assignment that needed my attention. I can't deny that I was burying my head in the sand, but she was dead, so I couldn't see any point in pursuing it. The Colonel never mentioned it either.

I moved on, but I still think about that dog once in a while, I hope someone found him a good home.