

The Kingdom of Dog – 1 – Behavior Modification

Rochester nudged my knee as I was trying to write a press release. “What’s the matter, boy? You need to go out?”

I looked down at the golden retriever by my side. But instead of jumping up, he flopped down and rolled on his back, wagging his paws in the air like a stranded beetle.

“I don’t have time to play. I have work to do. Somebody has to pay for your kibbles and bits.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Rochester immediately hopped up and looked at me with big brown eyes. “Fine. One treat. Then you go lay down.”

He shook his head again, but I handed him the treat anyway. I kept a vacuum-sealed jar on my office desk, filled with tiny treats in the shape of T-bone steaks. He gobbled the tidbit, then trotted across the room, where he sprawled in front of the French doors and rested his head on his paws, staring at me.

We were both new at this full-time job business. When Rochester first came to live with me, I was working as an adjunct in the English department at Eastern College, my alma mater, and struggling to develop a freelance writing business. Rochester had gotten accustomed to hanging around me, and I’d come to appreciate his presence. When I was offered this job, I agreed to take it only if I could bring him to work with me.

He may be a golden retriever, but I think of him as a Velcro dog. He likes to stick to me. Maybe it’s because his first owner, my next-door-neighbor, was murdered, and he’s afraid that I might leave him, too.

Mike MacCormac, the director of alumni relations, agreed to my request because he was a dog lover himself, and because it wasn’t easy to find someone with my unique combination of writing skills and computer ability who was willing to work short-term for a not-quite-so-generous salary and some reasonable health benefits.

In two days, Eastern was going to launch a \$500 million capital campaign to fund new construction, scholarships, and faculty chairs. Though my public relations job was only temporary, for the winter term, I was hoping to move into a permanent position with the campaign if Mike liked my work.

As I was finishing the press release, Mike stuck his head in my office door, holding a cup of coffee. "Hey Steve, did you get back the proofs for the program yet?"

Mike typified the no-neck monster stereotype of college athletes. He was thick-set and muscular, with dark hair and a heavy five o'clock shadow, even early in the morning. At thirty-five, he was seven years younger than I was, though shorter and stockier.

"Just came in from the printer," I said. "They misspelled President Babson's name, but I already called and had them correct it."

On his way to my desk, he stopped to scratch behind Rochester's ears. "My Rottweilers would eat you up, Rochester," he said. "You're too sweet."

I was jealous to see Rochester look up at him with doggy adoration. But I knew that the moment I called the dog to me, he'd be all over me, slobbering on my slacks, shedding on my chair, and keeping me from getting any work done.

I watched Mike read the page proofs, waiting for him to reach the section on the keynote speaker. He lifted the cup to his lips and I said, "Don't!"

He looked up at me, then back down at the page proofs, then burst into laughter. "Keynote speaker: President John William Baboon?" He laughed so hard that the coffee in his cup threatened to spill over as his hand shook.

"Thought you'd want to see them misspell Babson yourself," I said. "I couldn't let you get some coffee in your mouth, though."

"Appreciate that."

Mike had been a football star at Eastern, then assistant coach, then director of athletics. He'd only been the chief fund-raiser for a year or two, and I knew he was depending on the success of the fund-raising campaign to keep his job. I had a lot at stake,

too; I needed a permanent gig, if only to keep a roof over my head and Rochester's and food on my table and in his bowl.

Mike returned the page proofs to my desk. "I need a favor. Can you run down to the printers and pick these up? We're going to need them at four to start stuffing packets. We're setting up an assembly line in the ballroom."

Each guest was to receive a folder with information on Eastern and the capital campaign. I had written a series of flyers on critical areas in need of funding—the science labs, the music building, and so on. Every guest would receive a no-skid pad for the back of a cell phone, embossed with the Eastern logo, along with contribution forms and a host of other materials.

"Sure. I'll head down there around 3:30 and pick them up."

He stopped by the door on his way out. "With winter break this place is pretty empty, but I've rounded up every kid I could find and commandeered every staff member who didn't have a good excuse. I've even got campus security roped in."

Mike's mention of campus security reminded me of my own past with law enforcement, as so many things did.

I served a short prison sentence in California for computer hacking, which led in no small part to the failure of my marriage. When I was discharged on parole, I returned to my hometown, Stewart's Crossing, just down the Delaware River from Eastern.

I moved into a townhouse my late father had left to me and met my next-door neighbor, Caroline Kelly, and her golden retriever, Rochester. She was killed while walking Rochester, and my high school friend Rick Stemper was the investigating detective in her case. As a favor I agreed to take care of Rochester for a few days after her death.

He quickly won me over, and he and I helped the police figure out who killed Caroline. My ex-wife and I had tried twice to have a child, but she miscarried both times. A psychologist might have said that I was replacing those two lost children with Rochester, but all I knew was that I liked having the big, goofy guy around.

After I checked my press release one more time, then emailed it to my list of media contacts, I walked over to where Rochester dozed, and sat down cross-legged next to him. He leaned up and put his big golden head in my lap. I scratched under his chin and behind his ears, and he wiggled around and stretched his legs.

"Who's a good boy?" I asked, leaning down to bury my head in the soft fur of his neck. "Who's Daddy's good boy?"

He sat up and put his front paws on my shoulders, licking my face, as I laughed and tried to wiggle away.

"Hate to interrupt your love fest, but we need to talk about Bob Moran." I looked up and saw Mike in my doorway again, accompanied by Sally Marston, the assistant director of admissions.

"Sorry," I said, jumping up in embarrassment. "Just taking a puppy break. What can I do for you?"

Mike and Sally came in and sat down across from my desk. She was a slim twenty-four-year-old, the kind of girl who'd looked like she had played field hockey in high school and college. Her normal attire was a Fair Isle sweater and a kilt with a big safety pin in the side.

"Bob Moran is a wealthy alum I have targeted for a major gift for the campaign," Mike said. "He's a continuous giver with a strong connection to Eastern."

He looked over at Sally.

"He also has a seventeen-year-old son who applied for early decision," she said. "A legacy kid like Marty who has a decent background gets right in, but his SAT scores are way down on the chart, and he's barely breaking a C average at his prep school. So Joe turned him down for early decision and moved him into the regular applicant pool, where he has even less chance of getting in."

Joe Dagorian was the director of admissions, Sally's boss. "There's the problem," Mike said. "Joe refuses to admit Marty, which is going to kill any chance we have of getting a gift from his father."

"You have to understand Joe's position," Sally said. "I've met Marty. He's sullen and uncommunicative and there may even be something wrong with him mentally. He just doesn't belong here."

"But his father is determined that he go here," Mike said. "He even offered to make a \$100,000 donation to kick off the capital campaign if Marty gets an acceptance letter." He turned to Sally. "Can you do an end run around him and send out the acceptance letter yourself?"

"You know I can't do that," Sally said. "He's my boss. I'd lose my job."

"Is Moran on your RSVP list for the party?" Mike asked me.

I flipped through the list. "Yup."

"Well, it would be great if we could announce that hundred-grand gift. " He looked at me. "You have a good relationship with Joe, Steve. Can you talk to him?"

That was not something I wanted to do, but Mike was my boss. "Sure. I'll go look for him right now." I gave Rochester a treat and told him to stay put, and walked down the hall to Joe's office.

Joe was, in large part, the reason I'd gone to Eastern. When I was a high school senior, years before, and he was the director of admissions, he had convinced me to come to Eastern over the other schools where I could have gone. I had always appreciated the interest he took in me.

But working with him was a different story. He was only a step away from retirement, and he was as set in his ways as if his feet had been encased in concrete. He was a short, stubby man with iron-gray hair and a stomach that entered a room long before the rest of him. Yet he was as much a part of Eastern as the broad lawn in front of Fields

Hall, the Victorian stone mansion that had once been the home of Eastern's founder. His devotion to the school overshadowed everything else.

He was sitting in his office staring at his computer screen. "Biggest mistake we ever made, going to online applications," he said to me as I walked in. "Nothing beats having a piece of paper in front of you when it comes to evaluating an applicant."

"That's progress, Joe," I said, sitting down across from him. I was still having a little trouble calling him by his first name, after four college years of calling him Mr. Dagorian. "Every other college has gone that way. If we didn't kids wouldn't bother to apply."

"So they say," Joe said. "What can I do for you, Steve?"

"Mike asked me to talk to you about Marty Moran."

"Admission at Eastern College is not for sale. Every student competes on his or her own merits."

Joe had been able to keep admissions standards high and he'd been able to prevent anyone from tampering with the way he did his job, because the applications kept rolling in from the nation's best and brightest. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," was his favorite saying.

"I agree. But every student is unique, right? I remember when you took me under your wing when I was graduating from high school. I didn't know anything about applying to college, and you helped me through it all. I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for you."

"You had the academic qualifications to be an Eastern student. Marty Moran does not."

"We don't know that for sure," I said. "Sure, he hasn't tested well, and he hasn't performed well in high school. But it could be that he just needs someone to take an interest in him, the way you did with me."

He shook his head. "You do have the gift of gab, Steve Levitan. I'll give you that. But you're not going to convince me."

"Have you met his father? Bob Moran?"

"Many times. The man's an egotistical bully."

"Exactly my point. How can a kid blossom with a father like that? He needs a nurturing environment, the kind that Eastern provides."

Joe frowned at me. "Your affection for this kid wouldn't have anything to do with the hundred grand his father has promised Mike's foolish campaign, would it?"

"Of course it would, Joe. Think of what that money could do for Eastern. I love this college just as much as you do, but I recognize we have problems. Have you been in the science labs lately? They're still using equipment from the 1970s. And the dorms could use some refurbishing. I could write you a list of things we could use that money for. Hell, I *have* written those lists."

"No promises." Joe frowned. "But I'll look over his application once more."

"That's all I can ask. Thanks, Joe."

I did like Joe, even though he was the kind of old dinosaur who lumbers around complaining about how different things are and getting in the way of change. A lot of people don't like that, particularly if they're pushing to have things changed. But as I had told him, I recognized the affection he had for Eastern, and saw the same thing in myself.

If anything, the only thing I cared about more than Eastern, and keeping my job there, was Rochester. When I got back to my office he was so glad to see me that I felt warmth creeping through my body, despite the cold weather outside and the cool temperatures inside Fields Hall. The fact that he was jumping all over me helped with that, too.

It was 3:30 by then, and I wrestled Rochester into submission long enough to fasten his leash. It was a sunny February day with just a few clouds scattering the light blue sky, and he was excited to get outdoors. We got into my old BMW sedan and I drove down the hill into Leighville, the small town that clusters around the base of the college.

The north-south streets, the ones that parallel the Delaware River, are named for trees, while the east-west ones are named after generals of the Revolutionary War. E-Z Quick Printers was located at the corner of Beech and Howe, in a run-down neighborhood at

the north end of town. I parked in front of the office and left the windows down a bit for Rochester.

I began ferrying boxes out of the printer's to the trunk of the BMW, leaving it propped open. I was getting the last of the five boxes from the clerk when I heard Rochester barking his head off. I grabbed the box and hurried outside.

A disheveled man was standing behind the BMW staring at the boxes in the trunk. He had an electric screwdriver with the back panel off so I could see there was no battery inside, and he kept putting it up to his head and listening, as if he thought it was a cell phone.

"Just paper," I said. "Nothing worth stealing."

"Wasn't going to steal it." The screwdriver slipped in his hand so he was holding it straight ahead of him in a menacing gesture.

I took in his posture, the way he gripped that screwdriver like a weapon, the empty look in his eyes. In a heartbeat, I was back in prison again, standing in the exercise yard. I had learned fast not to show any fear or vulnerability, because that would make me a target. Neither did I want to seem too aggressive, making promises with my mouth that my body couldn't follow through on.

Most important was that I had to learn how to act, rather than react. I couldn't stand there and wait to see if this guy became a threat to me or to Rochester.

"Away from the car. Now," I said, in my most commanding voice, one I had begun using in prison and polished in the classroom. Rochester was still barking like mad, so I added, "Or I'll sic the dog on you."