

THE DOG SITTER



A NOVELLA BY

J. ARCHER AVARY

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Cover design by Moxie
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Published digitally by The Daily Drunk Press



*dedicated with love to my wife Claire,
who believed I had a book in me
and encouraged me to get it out to the world*

• CHAPTER ONE •

Despite working three part-time jobs, Evan Barlow was perpetually broke. He managed to pay the rent, and with some creative juggling of his finances avoided having the phone and utilities disconnected. He stashed away a few bucks when he could, but anytime there was any money left over at the end of the month a crisis would arise, leaving him worse off than when he started. He felt as if he was stuck on a treadmill, putting one foot in front of the other but never getting anywhere.

The constant economic pressure manifested itself in hair loss. If Evan had access to health care, a board certified specialist would've informed him the circular bald patches on the sides of his head were Alopecia Aerata, most likely triggered by stress. In lieu of such a professional medical opinion, he theorised that a civilisation of tiny extraterrestrial beings were responsible for the crop circles in the wheat fields of his blonde hair.

Evan donned a baseball cap to hide his embarrassing baldness and headed out the door to his primary workplace. It was early spring in Milwaukee, warm for the season but still cool enough to necessitate a

robust fleece pullover for the short walk to Trovato's Deli, where he worked the cash register. He made a point to arrive at least twenty minutes before his shift so he could help himself to a free double espresso from the deli's vintage LaPavoni machine, and have a leisurely browse of the newspaper before clocking in.

The pay wasn't great, but it wasn't a bad place to work. Three brothers, Giuseppe, Silvano, and Umberto founded Trovato's in the 1920's. It became a neighbourhood mainstay on the strength of its Italian sausage, made by hand from a centuries-old family recipe. The brothers kept the business going even as the demographics of the neighbourhood changed. An influx of affluent mostly-white professional types had pushed out the working class Polish and Italian families who'd been there for generations. Around the same time, Giuseppe and Umberto succumbed in quick succession to heart attacks, leaving an ageing Silvano to run the business by himself.

Silvano was the most free-spirited of the three brothers. He showed a special fondness for Evan, who came to appreciate the old man's quick wit and encyclopaedic knowledge of avant-garde jazz, their common bonding interest. Silvano never considered himself a businessman,

preferring to engage in hands-on work, making cannoli for instance, rather than the day-to-day operations. He delegated what he saw as the mundane aspects of running a deli to outside managers who, taking advantage of his hands-off approach, siphoned money for themselves.

What Silvano lacked in business savvy, he made up for in passionate devotion to his racing pigeons, who lived in an elaborate coop on the roof of the Deli. When the Osterholm Grocery Group approached him with an offer to buy out the business, Silvano accepted on the condition that he be allowed to come and go as he please, and that his precious racing pigeons would remain undisturbed on the rooftop until his passing.

Barry Osterholm installed his twenty-two year old daughter Tessa as store manager and she set to work transforming the deli to meet the upscale epicurean tastes of the newly gentrified neighbourhood. An antipasto bar was installed, featuring artichoke hearts pickled in truffle oil brine and thirty-one varieties of artisan olives. Shipments of exotic produce were flown in daily from fair trade farms in Central America, and seven types of imported caviar were stocked in a specialty cooler. The Italian sausage and cannoli were still made fresh daily from the original family recipes, the last tenuous links to the old Trovato's. Silvano lived out

his golden years, listening to his vintage Ornette Coleman vinyl LPs and doting on his racing pigeons while the Osterholm Grocery Group held its collective breath, waiting for the old man to die so they could complete the rebranding of his life's work.

Tessa was smoking a cigarette at the kitchen door when Evan arrived. She looked frazzled.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said. “I need to ask you a favour.”

“I thought you quit smoking?”

“I did, but I started this new crash diet,” she took a long drag of her menthol. “I can’t have any carbs or meat but I’m allowed as much guava juice as I can drink, plus up to ten cigarettes a day. If I can stick with it they say I’ll lose five pounds in five days.”

“That’s the most insane thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Being a woman is hard work these days. We’re supposed to balance a fulfilling career with our family lives, starving ourselves all the while so we can project an image of success.”

“That is tough,” said Evan. “What about this favour?”

“I’m supposed to go on a Caribbean cruise with my girlfriends from college next week, and my regular dog sitter just backed out on me,” she

said, pausing to exhale a blueish cloud of mentholated smoke. “Considering how well you get on with Bentley, I was wondering if you might be able to feed and walk him while I’m out of town.”

Bentley was Tessa’s chocolate labradoodle. Evan was fond of him, but taking care of a dog was a serious responsibility, even if it was only for a week.

“He’s super easy to look after,” said Tessa, sensing his apprehension. “I thought I’d ask you first because you live so close. All you need to do is pop over in the mornings to give him breakfast and a short walk, and once again in the evening for dinner and a longer walk. He’s completely crate trained. When you leave, you just put him back in his crate and that’s that.”

“Crate trained?”

“Bentley’s crate is like his bedroom. He feels safe in there, all locked up.”

Locking a dog inside a crate for hours at a time seemed cruel to Evan. He fidgeted with his keys. “I’m not sure about this...”

“I’m prepared to pay a hundred and fifty dollars for the week, for just a few minutes out of your day. I promise, it will be the easiest money you earn all year.”

“Let me think it over,” he said. “I’ll let you know before we close up shop.”

Tessa’s offer was intriguing. Evan weighed the pros and cons as he stocked the deli case with free-range quail eggs and mascarpone cheese. He certainly could use the money, but he harboured reservations. Walking a dog seemed easy enough, but what if something went wrong? Something out of the ordinary. What if Bentley found a chicken bone on a walk and choked to death? What if the leash broke and Bentley darted off into traffic and got ran over by a city bus? These were far-fetched scenarios, but still within the realm of possibility. If anything happened to Tessa’s precious labradoodle, she would fire him and spend the rest of her life hating him and possibly plotting a gory revenge.

In the end, and against his better judgement, Evan agreed to the dog sitting arrangement.

“You are a superstar,” she said, throwing her arms around him and kissing his cheeks. “You don’t even know what a weight this is off my shoulders.”

“It’s no big deal, really.”

“It’s the biggest deal in the world. Bentley is like a child to me. I wouldn’t be able to relax and enjoy myself on this cruise if I had any doubts about his care. You are an absolute life saver, and I owe you big time.”

• CHAPTER TWO •

Evan stopped by Tessa's on the eve of her cruise. Bentley greeted him with boisterous affection, jumping up with a slobbery tongue to the face. Sixty-five pounds of surging dog knocked him to the hardwood floor in a puddle of laughter.

“See? I told you he really likes you,” said Tessa.

Evan climbed to his feet, still rubbing Bentley's fluffy face. “I can see that, but you forgot to tell him I normally don't do tongue stuff until the third date.”

“Is that so?” she laughed. “You're such a prude.”

He'd seen her tidy Milwaukee bungalow from the street but had never been inside. The living room was immaculate, with a comfortable-looking leather sofa and love seat combo, a solid-oak coffee table with stained glass inlays, and matching accent tables. It opened to a study, decked out with an expensive-looking oriental rug, built-in floor-to-ceiling bookcases stuffed with leather-bound classics, and a vintage chaise lounge.

“This place is awesome.”

“You haven’t even seen the best part,” she said, lifting the northern hemisphere from a free-standing globe to reveal a liquor cabinet. “Help yourself to a drink and get comfortable while I go get changed. Then I’ll show you where I keep Bentley’s things.”

Evan poured himself two fingers of Scotch and settled into the leather sofa. He’d never heard of this particular brand of single malt, but it looked expensive. Bentley sat at his feet, wagging his nub of a tail and staring intently through the mop of curly fringe that framed his glassy brown eyes.

“Who’s a good boy?” he asked in a falsetto he reserved only for interactions with pets and other people’s children.

Bentley’s pink tongue lolled out of his mouth and dangled there, as if to say, “I’m a good boy, I’m the best boy there ever was.”

Evan swirled the auburn liquid in the glass and took an exploratory sip. It exploded on his tongue with notes of smoky peat and toasted chocolate. Did he detect a dried fig finish? Such a fine whisky, nothing at all like the gasoline-tasting Old Crow he was used to. He made a silent toast to his good fortune and drained the glass. Maybe he would treat himself to a bottle of this stuff with his dog sitting money.

Tessa emerged, as if out of nowhere, dressed in a black triangle-top bikini. Evan almost choked on his whisky. There was a lot of skin on display.

“Does it look that bad?” she said, feigning embarrassment. “I have so many swimsuits I don’t know which ones to take. Since you’re already here, I was hoping you might help me decide which ones are most flattering to my figure. Tell me the truth, how do I look?”

Evan was instantly uncomfortable. Tessa hardly acted like it, but she was his boss and there would always be a power dynamic at play. He’d never considered her outside the confines of their professional relationship, never seen her wearing anything besides the faded blue jeans, Trovato’s polo shirts, and red and white striped aprons she wore at work.

Evan looked her up and down. She didn’t immediately strike him as his type. Her dull, grey eyes were droopy, almost mournful, set too close together. A delicate and slightly upturned nose presided over a deep and pronounced philtrum, giving her upper lip a buoyant appearance as it struggled to contain her oversized front teeth. Her skin was clean and unblemished, simultaneously radiating youth and warmth, which diverted one’s attention from her shrinking chin and chubby cheeks. Her hair was a

salon-engineered shade of polished mahogany, tempered with a swatch of complementary highlights and lowlights that were very much in vogue at the moment.

Her body was something else entirely. A juxtaposition of elegant curves and daring angles gave an impression of luxury excess, yet she retained a degree of accessible innocence. She was fine art, a sculptor's master work, lithe and bronze, exuding tangible sensuality like an aromatic mist. In contradiction of classical standards, she derived her beauty - if it could be called that - from the many asymmetries that distinguished her from other women. Evan found himself in a trance, drinking it all in, without the vocabulary to express his appreciation.

Tessa waved a hand in his face to break the spell. "So what do you think? I'm not sure if black is the best colour for the Caribbean."

"It looks great," he said, trying to sound confident. "I mean, you look great."

"Way to sound totally unconvincing," she said. "Have another drink if you like, and I'll go change into something that might inspire a little more enthusiasm."

The whisky took the edge off Evan's initial discomfort, but the events of the evening still seemed surreal. He wondered if she was coming onto him, or if she harboured a genuine, platonic interest in his male assessment of her swimwear choices. He considered himself a smart guy and never understood why he had so much trouble picking up social cues, especially from members of the opposite sex. Maybe that was the reason he hadn't had a proper girlfriend, or even a casual hookup, in more than a year.

Evan concluded that she was not coming onto him. It was a logical decision, based on his scant knowledge of workplace romance. He'd heard the old adage, "don't dip your pen in the company ink," which seemed to provide all the information he needed to know. Even if she was winding him up, he was pretty sure he had the inner fortitude to resist her advances. It's been a long time since he'd been with a woman, but not long enough to push him into desperation.

The parade of bikini options continued. Tessa posed for him in red bikinis, green bikinis, blue bikinis with tiny pink polka-dots, yellow striped bikinis with fringy tops, elegant one-piece racing suits in slinky gold lamé, black and white houndstooth bikinis with dangly golden doodads, and

multicoloured neon bikinis that looked like a flashback to the worst of the eighties.

Whoever in the world needed that many swimsuits? He never could've imagined there were so many cuts and styles to choose from. They all looked good to him, but what did he know? To him, a swimsuit was like a picture frame, existing primarily to complement the artwork it surrounded. The fashion show continued until Evan was pleasantly buzzed on unpronounceable top shelf Scotch and Tessa had selected seven days worth of swimwear for the cruise.

“You really are a superstar for helping me out,” she said.

He looked away. “It was actually kind of fun, believe it or not.”

“I thought you might enjoy it. Just promise me you won’t do anything creepy in here while I’m away. I don’t need any perverts digging through my laundry to sniff my panties, you know.”

“I think I can agree to those terms.”

“You better,” she said, flipping her hair. “Before I forget, let me give you the spare keys and show you where I keep Bentley’s food and treats.”

• CHAPTER THREE •

For the most part, Bentley was good-natured and easy to deal with. From the instant he heard the key in the tumbler, he panted with excitement in his crate, trembling with delight at the prospect of a bowl of kibble and a brisk jaunt around the neighbourhood. When Evan opened the crate he dashed out with gleeful abandon, sprinting laps around the living room and study before lavishing his temporary caretaker with outlandish amounts of affection.

Evan grew up in a household with cats. They were overweight and lazy, never so much as batting an eyelid at his presence when he walked into a room. Beautiful animals they were, but fiercely independent, doling out affection in small doses and only when it was advantageous to their desires, like when their food dish was empty or their litter-boxes needed scooping out. With cats, love is a transactional affair. Not so with dogs, who seemed to give their love freely and without precondition.

Having spent time with Bentley, Evan was beginning to understand why so many of his single friends owned dogs. They made you feel important when you walked into the room, they made you feel necessary,

they made you feel adored. It was simple. If true love is elusive, the next best thing is a fuzzy-wuzzy bundle of fur.

Bentley scarfed down his breakfast of fair-trade organic dog food. Evan noted the price sticker, sixty-five dollars for a twenty pound bag. The ingredients included deboned free-range chicken, brown rice, barley, oatmeal, peas, dried tomato, potatoes, carrots, dried alfalfa meal and chicory root. No wonder Bentley had so much energy, his dog food was packed with more nutrition than Evan's dietary staples of out-of-date white bread and canned sardines.

“Who’s a lucky boy?” he said in falsetto. “If you were my dog, you’d be eating the cheap stuff made of lips and assholes.”

Bentley scarfed down his meal and bounded to the backdoor. He sat down and held the position with much effort, wagging his nub and pointing with his eyes at the braided blue and grey leash hanging from a hook on the door frame. When Evan didn’t react immediately to his signal, he barked sharply, as if to tell his new friend to get with the programme.

“Alright, then,” he said, clipping the lead onto Bentley’s collar. “If you want to go for a walk, then we’ll go for a walk.”

Evan's inexperience at dog walking showed. Bentley pulled harshly on the lead, almost dragging him along at times as he rushed to smell every new blade of sprouting grass in the still-brown front lawns. If he shortened up the lead to take control, Bentley whimpered pathetically as if he were being tortured. Evan had seen a few episodes of the Dog Whisperer, and was vaguely aware that he should assert himself as pack leader, but it was clear that Bentley was calling the shots in this lopsided relationship.

They'd been around the block twice and Bentley still hadn't found a suitable patch of grass in which to defecate. Evan looked at his watch impatiently, wondering if this battle of wits was par for the course in the complex canine/human dynamic. Any more of this battle of wits and he'd be late for his shift at Trovato's.

"Who's a good boy?" he said. "You'll feel so much better after a dump."

Bentley looked at him, flashed a mischievous smile, and tugged Evan further up the block to investigate a fire hydrant he'd already spent ten minutes sniffing.

“Don’t make me beg, you chocolatey little bundle of fluff,” he pleaded. “If you do your business like a good boy I’ll give you a treat.”

That was the magic word. The dog was smarter than he looked.

Bentley sniffed at the grass with a new sense of urgency. He looked both ways as if to ensure no looky-loos were encroaching on his privacy, squatted low to the ground, and uncoiled about two pounds of dog turd into a tidy little pile. When he was finished, he sprinted away, almost pulling Evan’s arm out of the socket.

“Where’s your manners,” he said, holding his nose to the stench. “We can’t just leave that in somebody’s front yard.”

That’s when Evan realised he forgot to bring a plastic bag, the most essential of dog walking accessories. This was a new kind of moral quandary. As a dog walker, there was a certain code of conduct to adhere to, and that included the common decency of cleaning up after one’s animal. Like anyone else, he’d stepped in dog poo a fair few times in his life and knew how unpleasant it could be, walking around with the telltale stench emanating from between the treads of a favourite pair of shoes. But by virtue of sharing in that universal experience of stepping in dog crap, he drew a reasonable conclusion that a certain percentage of dog

walkers didn't bother to pick up after their pets, giving him the ethical cover he needed to turn and walk away from the scene of the poo.

“Not so fast, pal!” called an angry voice from behind him.

Evan was busted. This little walk around the block was quickly turning into the worst-case scenario. He turned to the face the angry man and shrugged involuntarily.

“You can't just let your dog pinch a loaf in my yard and leave it for the flies,” he said. “I want you to pick that shit up right now and apologise.”

“It's not my dog, sir. I'm dog sitting for a friend of mine who lives up the street,” said Evan, putting on the same customer-pleasing tone of voice he used behind the register at Trovato's. “It's my first day, and on my way out the door I forgot to grab poo bags. It's an honest mistake and I'm dreadfully sorry.”

The angry man folded his arms across his chest in silence.

“Look,” said Evan. “If it makes you feel any better, I can double-back here with a bag and pick it up after I drop off the dog. I reckon it'll be gone and out of your way in less than fifteen minutes.”

“You do that,” said the angry man. “Next time I won’t be so agreeable, so do yourself a favour and keep that goddamn dog away from my lawn.”

• CHAPTER FOUR •

Evening walks with Bentley were more enjoyable. Without employment-related time constraints, Evan and his canine companion were free to explore beyond the placid, tree-lined streets of Tessa's neighbourhood. He put on his favourite pair of distressed jeans, a thrift store leather jacket he got for seven dollars, blue suede Pumas also from the thrift store, and a stylish tweed newsboy cap to hide his bald patches, which had gotten worse for an unknown reason that Evan was unenthusiastic to explore. He had more important concerns on this promising Friday night than his follicular impotence.

Evan had formulated a hypothesis he was eager to test. He believed that men with dogs were perceived as more attractive than men without dogs, that men with dogs seemed inherently kind and caring, exactly the sort of person that would be lighthearted and fun to be with. His recent forays into the bar scene to meet women were abject failures. He stood around, smiling like the village idiot, nursing the one seven dollar cocktail he could afford while enduring the grating din of other people's dross conversations. In these moments he wondered if he was actually invisible

or if he was just so inconsequential that no-one noticed him taking up space.

Evan led Bentley towards the business district. Spring was finally in the air and the neighbourhood's many bars and restaurants had opened their outdoor patios for the season. He looked through the windows at the beautiful people, mouths wide-open to show off unnaturally white teeth as they laughed along with their friends' unbelievable witticisms.

He burned with irrational jealousy. He knew these people were hollow, engaged in pointless, vapid conversation, but perceived as much better than him by virtue of their seemingly infinite disposable incomes. If he only had more money, he could join the beautiful people in that lavish lifestyle, with their stock portfolios and designer watches, their casual nights out with artisan-inspired cocktails and truffle oil infused tater-tots served in raspberry remoulade reductions, with taxicabs on standby to take them back to their refurbished craftsman bungalows and panoramic lake views.

Bentley squatted on the sidewalk to evacuate his bowels. Evan was impressed with how far the two of them had come. In just a few days, he'd transformed himself from a clueless outsider to the legitimate pack

leader. He even remembered to bring along poo bags this time around. When Bentley finished his dump, Evan stooped to pick up the steaming turd. It felt warm and mushy in his hand through the thin layer of plastic. He removed his hand, turned the bag inside out and tied it with a knot, tossed it into a garbage bin, and sniffed his fingers. Surprisingly, they smelled clean.

With that out of the way, Evan could finally test his hypothesis in a real world laboratory. At the end of the street was Varsity Blues, a popular watering hole for young professionals that featured ping-pong tables, shuffleboard, and an outdoor patio. Its massive blue neon sign glowed in the twilight. He led Bentley into the spacious patio area, where groups of people were huddled in small cliques around wooden picnic tables.

An attractive waitress approached him with a small clipboard. The drinks menu.

“Oh my God, I am absolutely in love with labradoodles,” she said in an valley girl accent so exaggerated it could only be real. She kneeled down into a bed of wood chips to tousle Bentley’s fluffy mop. “He is the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen in my life. I just want to hold him and squeeze him and shower him with kisses and never let him go.”

“That would be alright with him. His name’s Bentley.”

“You’re so sweet I can barely even stand it, Mr. Bentley,” she stood and gestured to an unoccupied table in the back. “Have a seat and I’ll be there in just a minute to bring this adorable pooch some water and take your drink order.”

Evan tied Bentley’s lead around a table leg and sat down, angling himself for a view of the other tables. Several couples populated the patio, out for Friday night dinner dates. A group of dudes with crossfit beards and tight pants shared a pitcher of beer to his left, presumably pre-drinking in advance of a long night of carousing. To his right, three women in denim jackets and Converse shoes were hoisting vegan burritos and drinking margaritas, a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead. If the three of them walked into a bar together, all they needed was a priest or a rabbi to round out the ingredients for a terrible joke.

The waitress appeared with a silver doggie dish, taking a knee to lavish Bentley with affection as she delivered it. He took advantage of the situation, licking her neck and face until she fell backwards onto her round and ample bum.

“He’s so precious!” she laughed and wiped the dog slobber from her face. “Have you decided what you want to drink?”

Evan glanced at the menu. A bunch of microbrews he’d never heard of. All of them priced at seven dollars a pint or higher. He could only afford one, so he better make it count.

“I’ll try the Spouting Geyser IPA.”

“Excellent choice,” she said, scrawling his order in her little blue notebook. “Hand crafted in Wyoming using organic Apollo Hops grown on fair-trade subsistence farms by a commune of talkative monks who quit organised religion to devote their lives to craft brewing. It packs a wallop at seven-point-five percent alcohol.”

Evan smiled and watched as the waitress headed off. Her generous bum sort of jiggled as she walked, creating a hypnotising effect. He stared lightheadedly at those wobbling globes until she disappeared into the restaurant. Such a breathtaking view almost justified the seven dollar beer by itself.

“Excuse me,” it was one of the denim jacket girls, the brunette, heavily freckled. “Do you mind if I pet your dog? I grew up with labradoodles, they’re the absolute best dogs ever.”

“He’s great. The name’s Bentley.”

She smiled, sticking out her hand for Bentley to sniff. “Great to meet you, Bentley. Wait, is that your name or the dog’s name?”

He felt the warmth of embarrassment rising from within. “I mean, he’s Bentley, my name’s Evan. And my pleasure. Meeting you, that is.”

“What a gorgeous fluffball,” she laughed as Bentley gave her freckled face a tongue bath. “Reminds me of my dog, Charlie. He passed away last summer.”

“Jeez, that sucks. I’m sorry to hear it.”

She sighed. “I miss him every day, I really do. He lived a long time, and was in a lot of pain by the end. At least Charlie doesn’t have to suffer anymore now that he’s gone to the rainbow bridge.”

A moment of silence passed. Talking about someone’s dead pet is the worst possible icebreaker. Evan was afraid he’d lose her interest if he didn’t say something to advance the conversation before the momentum fizzled.

“I didn’t catch your name?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping her hand on her pant-leg before extending it for a polite shake. Her nails were long and painted chartreuse. “Annabelle.”

“What do you do?” he regretted his banal question immediately. “If you’ll excuse my totally boring line of inquiry.”

“No worries,” she said, taking a seat across the picnic table. “Grad student at the University. The humanities. I’m kind of regretting the decision...”

The waitress interrupted to deliver Evan’s beer.

“Spouting Geyser IPA. Can I get either of you anything else?”

Annabelle’s eyes widened. “Is that the one made by the talkative monks? Can you bring me one of those please?”

Evan ignored the waitress and her incredible bum as she wiggled back to the bar, focusing on Annabelle. Freckles had been a dealbreaker for him in the past, but they paid many complements to her mossy hazel eyes. He felt butterflies in his chest, the earliest warning signs of a brewing infatuation. Bentley may have lured her in, but it was up to Evan and his shining personality to win her over. By the end of the night, Annabelle’s

number was burning a hole in the pocket of his distressed jeans, indicating that his hypothesis was plausible if not wholly proven.

• CHAPTER FIVE •

Spring is not a given in Milwaukee. A late-season cold front pushed its way into Wisconsin from the Alberta plains, bringing with it subzero temperatures and four inches of snow. The TV weathermen gave ample warning during hours of breathless wall-to-wall coverage, but Evan didn't want to believe it. He hated shovelling the sidewalk outside his apartment, hated trudging through snow to get to work, hated suffering in wet socks after snow and slush penetrated his inadequate winter footwear.

So much had changed since childhood, when a fresh snowfall was something to celebrate. He used to play in it all day long, building elaborate forts with the other neighbourhood kids and throwing snowballs until he could barely feel his fingertips through his mittens. Now that he'd graduated into adulthood, with rent hanging over his head and bills to pay, the snow was just another nuisance.

Evan downed a cup of instant coffee as he mustered the motivation to leave the apartment. Bentley was cooped up in his crate, waiting for him, eager for breakfast, eager to go outside and explore the winter wonderland. The full weight of responsibility was dragging him down. He

cursed his economic misfortune. If he wasn't so desperate for extra cash he never would've agreed to watch Tessa's dog in the first place.

He slipped out of his bathrobe and into a pair of jeans. He straightened out the pockets and came across a crumpled strip of paper. Annabelle's phone number.

Evan held it in his hand and studied its looping numerals. Her handwriting had a childlike innocence. He sniffed the paper, trying to detect any traces of Annabelle's lingering essence. He imagined he'd encounter the perfume of her aura, a medley of jasmine flowers and sweet persimmon, but the paper just smelled like an old McDonald's receipt left to languish in a jeans pocket at the bottom of the hamper for two excruciating days.

It was Sunday morning, two days since their first meeting. If he called too soon he would risk coming across as desperate and needy, a red flag that would almost certainly chase her away. On the other hand, he didn't want to be so aloof that she couldn't remember meeting him in the first place. Why did courtship etiquette have to be so complicated? If he was interested in Annabelle, and judging by his indigestion and obsessive

overthinking of the scenario, he was, then why couldn't he be upfront and honest about it?

Evan's heart pounded in his chest as he held the receiver to his ear. One ring passed, then two and three. Maybe she was at brunch with her denim-jacketed girlfriends, the blonde and the redhead, or worse, out sledding with some other guy she met on Friday night, one who had the brass cojones to ring her up instead of hemming and hawing in agony wondering if the time was right. The thought of her frolicking in the snow with someone else burnt him up. He had to do it, now or never.

She answered just as he was about to slam the phone back into its cradle.

He tried to sound calm as he introduced himself. To his amazement, she remembered him. After some perfunctory chit-chat about the crap weather, Evan made his pivot.

“How about we grab a cup of coffee somewhere?” he suggested. “I’ll bring Bentley along and the two of us can walk him together in the park.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she said. “I’ll meet you at Atomic Cafe in about an hour.”

Evan rushed to make himself presentable. A cup of coffee hardly constituted a proper date, but the prospect of spending time with the beautiful and intriguing Annabelle had him moving with a new sense of urgency. He showered, shaved, and applied a generous amount of aftershave to his baby-smooth face before slipping back into his distressed jeans and a clean shirt.

He examined what was left of his hair in front of the mirror and scowled. The tiny aliens must've returned overnight in their armada of tiny spaceships, leaving him with even more crop circles than he had the day before. He covered his head with a knit beanie from the thrift store and headed out to get Bentley before his rendezvous with Annabelle.

• CHAPTER SIX •

The stench overpowered Evan as soon as he opened the door. It was the unmistakable odour of dog crap, sickly sweet and pungent, thick enough to choke a man. It was obvious that something terrible had happened in his absence. He heard Bentley in the other room, panting excitedly, claws scratching against the plastic floor of the crate.

“Did someone have an accident?” he said in falsetto.

Evan draped his thrift store jacket over the leather sofa and covered his nose. He picked up Bentley’s poo all week without incident. How bad could it be? With nervous apprehension he poked his head into the study.

The scene waiting for him was beyond his wildest imagination, a vision plucked from a dog sitter’s most horrific nightmares. Bentley sat proudly in a half-inch of stagnant diarrhoea, tongue dangling out as if he was the happiest dog in the universe, wagging his nub back and forth in the frothy mess like a windscreen wiper.

Evan suppressed the urge to throw up. Bentley’s labradoodle curls were matted to his body, soaked through with liquified poo. As if it wasn’t enough to simply foul his crate, Bentley took the extra step of rolling

around in it like a hippopotamus at the Serengeti mud flats. He was coated with the stuff. There was no way Evan could get Bentley cleaned up in time to meet Annabelle.

The carnage wasn't contained to the crate. Tessa's entire study had been fouled by Bentley's accident. The expensive-looking oriental rug where Bentley's crate was placed was completely browned-out with poo. A wet dog's instinct is to shake off the excess moisture, and it was evident that Bentley had shaken himself like a Polaroid picture. Droplets of congealed poo were drying on the bookshelves and Tessa's extensive collection of leather-bound classics. Even the chaise lounge, several feet away from the crate, was speckled with an abstract expression of poo in the style of Jackson Pollock.

Evan admonished the culprit with a wag of his finger.

“Shame on you, you filthy animal. Look what you've done to this house! You're a bad dog, bad dog.”

Bentley lowered his eyes to the floor in guilt, seemingly in disbelief that Evan didn't share his appreciation of this defecatory masterwork.

“Shame on you.”

With cleaning chemicals and elbow grease it might be possible to restore the bookshelves and hardwood floors to their original condition, but it would require a professional cleaning crew to tackle the rug and the chaise lounge, if those items could be salvaged at all. The only saving grace, if it could be called that, was that Tessa's expensive scotch was protected from the shower of faeces under the liquor cabinet's domed lid. He contemplated a drink to calm the nerves but decided to wait until he figured out how to handle the immediate crisis.

How would he handle the Annabelle situation?

Evan didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Faced with stinging indecision from all sides he began to hyperventilate. He looked at his watch. Annabelle was probably en route to the Atomic Cafe already. He could look up the number in the phone book and ask a barista to tell a pretty brunette with big hazel eyes and freckles, possibly wearing a denim jacket, that a terrible emergency had happened, and that Evan would be in touch as soon as the shit-storm, no pun intended, had passed. He dismissed the idea as too dramatic for this stage of the relationship, on a first date that really wasn't a date at all. If he wanted a chance to see her again, he had to show up in person.

Bentley sulked in his crate, huffing impatiently at Evan.

“Look, this mess is all your fault,” he said. “You’ll get your kibble eventually, but we’re gonna have to clean you up before that can happen.”

Bentley rolled his eyes and collapsed in his own poo, a form of dirty protest.

• CHAPTER SEVEN •

Evan hustled up the snowy sidewalk to Atomic Cafe, a longstanding neighbourhood countercultural landmark. Its bright orange walls were festooned with old vinyl LPs, and spider plant tendrils dangled from the hanging baskets, giving the place an unfussy, eclectic vibe. It had a unique cross-generational appeal, where free-thinkers young and old played chess in the corner booths, where punks and hippies sat side-by-side in harmony at the coffee counter without conflict, finding common ground in their mutual love of caffeine and vintage Neil Young.

There was no sign of Annabelle. Evan stepped to the counter and ordered a black coffee from the barista, a moustachioed steampunk, heavyset and sporting a ridiculous copper monocle. He carried the cup gingerly across the cafe, so that the precious liquid wouldn't slosh out before he found a seat in the window with a view of the street. He watched for her arrival, disinterestedly flipping through the alternative weekly newspaper and wondering if she was the sort of person who was always fashionably late to everything. He imagined that she might be anxious about what to wear, trying on fifteen different outfits in front of a

full-length mirror before finally deciding which one worked best, hoping to impress him.

Evan was beginning to think he'd been stood up when he saw her come around the corner. She looked better than he remembered, stunning even, wearing a blue corduroy peacoat and jeans paired with oversized sunglasses and shiny red galoshes. He played it cool as she approached, feigning deep interest in the front-page think-piece about rampant corruption in city government until she caught his eye with a smile and wave through the glass.

He stood to greet her with a hug he hoped wasn't awkward.

Annabelle draped her peacoat over the back of her chair. "Where's Bentley? I thought we were all going for a walk?"

"It's kind of a long story," said Evan, puffing his cheeks to indicate mild frustration. "Why don't you get yourself cup of joe and I'll rundown the details."

He watched as she approached the counter, fidgeting with her sweater sleeves as she ordered. The barista made some sort of joke and Annabelle laughed politely, egging him on. Was that steampunk weirdo flirting with her? Evan was incensed. Couldn't he see that the lovely

Annabelle and her face of ten thousand freckles was there to meet him? Maybe that monocle of his was all steamed up from the espresso machine.

She glided gracefully across the cafe with her cappuccino. So much poise and balance, she would never have to worry about the contents of her cup sloshing out.

“What’s the deal with Bentley?” she said animatedly. “Is everything okay?”

“We had a bit of a situation this morning,” said Evan, pausing to sip his rapidly cooling brew. “I went to feed him and get him ready for our walk, but he had a massive accident in his crate so I couldn’t bring him.”

She gasped. “You keep him in a crate? That’s awful!”

“The crate wasn’t my decision,” he said defensively. “I’m just dog sitting for my boss while she’s out of town on a cruise. She says he’s completely crate trained.”

Annabelle squinted across the table at Evan and pursed her lips. He felt his cheeks growing warm with embarrassment. This was not how he wanted their non-date coffee afternoon to go.

“First of all, crate training is cruel. How would you like to be cramped up in a tiny box for hours and hours on end? That’s no way to

treat a living thing,” she realised she was raising her voice and paused to regain composure. “I thought Bentley was your dog, and now I find out that you’re using your employer’s dog as bait to lure in women. It’s so tacky and gross.”

“I never said he was my dog.”

“You never said you were dog sitting, you just let me believe Bentley was your dog.”

“I didn’t think it mattered who’s dog it was.”

“It matters,” she said. “A dog is forever, a lifetime responsibility, not an accessory you can drag along to benefit your social life. You were using Bentley as a prop so you could talk to girls and get phone numbers. I can’t believe I was stupid enough to fall for it.”

“You’re reading way too much into this,” Evan protested. “My boss needed a favour, that’s all. She asked if I could help out because she was in a bind. I couldn’t say no to the extra cash.”

“How noble of you.”

“I was just trying to help.”

“Meanwhile, Bentley’s sitting at home in a crate all by himself in his own mess because you’re more interested with trying to get in my pants

than the welfare of an innocent animal. You shouldn't be taking care of a living thing when your own priorities are so screwed up."

"I didn't want to stand you up without explanation."

"What a gentleman," her words seethed with sarcasm. "It appears the reports of chivalry's death have been greatly exaggerated."

"I wasn't going to stay long. I've got to deal with the mess."

He tried to make eye contact but she looked away. Annabelle was about to give him the send-off. Her lip quivered as she organised her thoughts.

"You're a sick dude, Evan. There's really something wrong with you. I only hope someday you can get the help you need. I suppose I should be grateful that you showed your true colours so early on, but honestly, I'm just disgusted. Maybe you should go now and sort out whatever mess you got yourself into. That's what you get for keeping him in a crate like that."

"I think I'll go now."

"Fine," she folded her arms across her chest. "And please, never call me again."

• CHAPTER EIGHT •

Evan had faced rejection before, but never for such an asinine reason as masquerading as a dog owner. What difference did it make if he was just a dog sitter? Did that somehow make him less of an animal lover? The accusation that he used Bentley as an accessory was partially true, but not the nefarious ploy she made it out to be. Did she forget that she was the one who approached him? There he was, minding his own business, waiting for a seven dollar beer, an extravagance he really couldn't afford, when she encroached on his personal space to initiate conversation. This whole misunderstanding with Annabelle was so silly, he couldn't believe he was letting it get under his skin like this.

Evan paused in front of Tessa's house and drew a deep breath. He was painfully aware of what was waiting for him in the bungalow, and wasn't particularly eager to engage with it. The hardest part of any chore, he told himself, was getting started. There was nothing left to do but roll up his sleeves like a man and attend to his responsibilities.

He steeled himself against the odour and let himself in. Bentley was over the moon to see his temporary caretaker, the admonishment of

earlier that day having been long forgotten. He pawed at the crate door, wagging his nub and appealing with puppy dog eyes to be extricated from the mess of his own excrement.

How was he going to go about this without making it worse? Evan gathered Bentley's leash and some ratty looking towels from one of the bathrooms. He opened the crate and reached in, grabbing Bentley's collar with one hand and wrapping him in a towel with the other. He led the dog out of the crate, straddling him to keep him immobilised as he rubbed away as much poo as he could from his back and legs.

“Who’s ready for a bath?” he asked in falsetto.

Evan wrapped Bentley up like a mummy and led him slowly to the back door. His wet brown nose peeked out of the towels in a way that might be comical if it weren’t so disgusting. Evan turned the knob with his poo-smeared hands and the two of them bounded down the steps into the cold.

Evan tied Bentley to a fencepost and went back in for the crate. Miraculously, he managed to drag it into the backyard with minimal spillage. Bentley watched with curious interest as he tipped the crate on its side, fouling the pure white snow with diarrhoea sludge.

Evan located the spigot on the side of the house with a garden hose attached. He unravelled it, hoping the the pipes weren't frozen. He turned the knob and the hose filled with pressure, a good sign. He pointed the nozzle at the crate and sprayed it down until the runoff was clean. The snow around the crate was tinged with a disturbing shade of brown. He hoped the snow would melt soon so Tessa wouldn't see the evidence.

“Looks like you’re up next, Bentley.”

He glanced around to make sure no one was watching. The last thing he needed was some nosy neighbour reporting him to the authorities for animal abuse. Evan sensed another moral quandary. He supposed rinsing down a dog with icy cold water could be construed as animal cruelty, but on the other hand, allowing a dog to fester in unsanitary conditions for a prolonged period of time would also be considered abuse, or at the very least, neglect.

“I’m so sorry, buddy,” he said. “This will only take a couple minutes.”

Evan pointed the nozzle at Bentley, who sensed the unpleasantness to come and cowered in the snow, whimpering pathetically. What a terrible thing to do to an innocent creature. Maybe Annabelle was right, he had no

business tending to animals. How could he allow himself to do something like this?

Evan closed his eyes and pulled the trigger, unleashing a torrent of freezing water. Bentley yelped in agony, his body twisting and turning to avoid the icy spray before running out of room to manoeuvre. He crashed into the chain link fence, shivering uncontrollably as the high pressure water kicked up ribbons of frothy caramel spume.

“What in the actual fuck is this?”

Evan dropped the hose and turned around. Tessa charged into the backyard, dragging her suitcase of bikinis behind her and ferociously swinging a Prada handbag that was most likely genuine. He was confused, she wasn’t supposed to be home from her cruise until Tuesday night.

“Are you insane? You’re gonna give him hypothermia!”

Evan shielded himself with his forearms as the blows rained down. The designer handbag felt like it was laden with cannonballs.

“Take it easy,” he begged. “I can explain everything.”

She swatted him once more with the handbag. “You better start talking, creep.”

“Bentley had diarrhoea in his crate last night,” he said. “He was completely covered in poo when I got here this morning. It was horrifying, like a bomb made of dog shit exploded all over the house. I didn’t know what else to do, so I brought him outside to rinse him off.”

Tessa approached Bentley, who was shivering in the snow. “He’s still filthy.”

“I can finish spraying him off...”

“Don’t you dare,” she snapped. “You’re lucky I don’t call the cops and have your dumb ass charged with animal cruelty.”

“I was just trying to be helpful.”

“You sure have a funny way of showing it,” she said, untying Bentley and draping her coat around him. “I can’t believe I trusted you to take care of him. Now get out of my sight before I do something I might regret.”

• CHAPTER NINE •

Evan was unable to sleep that night. The events of the previous twenty-four hours played on a loop in his brain, leading him down a rabbit hole of introspection and self-flagellation. He hated being poor, but being gullible was worse. He knew he wasn't cut out for dog sitting, but he allowed himself to be manipulated into it. He sat there smiling like a buffoon as Tessa flashed a bit of cash, poured expensive whisky down his throat, and gyrated before him hypnotically in a myriad of revealing swimsuits. He should've seen it for what it was, an act, but he was too much of a sucker.

One hundred and fifty dollars may have seemed like a lot of money to him, but it was a fart in the wind to someone like Tessa who owned her own home and could afford to jet away on a whim for Caribbean cruises with her college girlfriends. Quality service costs money. If she was genuinely concerned about Bentley's welfare, she should have coughed up whatever it cost to board him at a kennel.

Then there was the matter of Annabelle, so full of innocent charm, looking down her perfectly sculpted nose at him from her mighty high

horse. How presumptuous of her, to think she was qualified to pass judgement on his character.

What did it say about himself, that he should so easily become smitten with someone as vapid and shallow as Annabelle? Was he that desperate for female companionship? How could he could be so easily blinded by the startling combination of her big hazel eyes and literal constellations of pigment on her gorgeous cheekbones?

Evan didn't need that nonsense in his life. He'd been without a woman for more than a year, and he could survive another year alone standing on his head if he absolutely had to.

He seethed at his misfortune. All of it stemming from the failure of a stupid dog to control its bodily functions. The anger he felt towards Tessa and Annabelle was easy to justify, but how could he be upset with poor Bentley? Of all the players involved in this nauseating tragicomedy, himself included, Bentley was the only one who was truly innocent.

The need to evacuate one's bowels is a basic biological need. When nature calls, one must answer. If that call is urgent, one must drop everything and answer immediately. If Bentley wasn't locked in that tiny crate all day and night, maybe he would've managed to do his dirty

business in a corner of the house where it was out of the way. If his fancy organic kibble wasn't so rich in fibre, maybe Bentley wouldn't have crapped his crate.

Evan checked the time. The idea of going into work and coming face-to-face with Tessa after yesterday's debacle filled him with dread. Her house was ruined, and it happened on his watch. She was so unpredictable. Would she carry on with business as usual, pretending nothing happened? That would be the professional thing to do. She could also take punitive measures, suspending him from work without pay, or worse. He was already struggling. Losing his primary source of income in this perpetual recession of modern times would be a backbreaker.

Evan put on his work uniform and looked in the mirror. The bald spots had multiplied over the long sleepless night. He was beginning to look like he was masquerading as a leukaemia patient. If the tiny aliens returned they would struggle to find the real estate to leave any new crop circles. He put on his thrift store jacket, laced up his thrift store Pumas, and headed out the door towards his uncertain future.

Yesterday's snow, so white and so pure, now looked dingy and tired. Soon it would melt away into individual droplets, flowing anonymously

through the sewer system to join so many others in Lake Michigan, that vast body of water.

Evan rounded the corner and saw Trovato's in the distance. The lights were off, which was unusual. He got closer and noticed a large black bow on the door and a sign explaining that there had been a death in the family.

He felt the loss in the silent air around him. Evan didn't need to be told, it was Silvano.. The din of racing pigeons on the roof had ceased. What disrespect! The last of the founding brothers of Trovato's Deli had passed away, and the vultures of the Osterholm Grocery Group were so eager to strip the business of its history that they couldn't wait for the body to cool? He went around back and found the disassembled components of Silvano's pigeon coop stacked like matchsticks, ready to be hauled away for disposal.

Evan collapsed on the kitchen steps and let the tears flow. Silvano Trovato may have been a relic of another era, but he was a good man, a kind man, a prince of a man. Always with a smile, always ready to share a humorous anecdote, to argue about jazz records, or to dive headlong into a robust political discussion. How he relished playing the devil's advocate,

that stinker! Through it all, those racing pigeons were the pride and joy of Silvano's long and happy life. What did the Osterholms, those carrion crawlers, do with his pigeons?

Death is one thing. We live our lives with it hanging over our heads, so arrogant that we start to believe it will never come for us, yet there is no immunity. It comes for every man in due corse, just as it did for Silvano Trovato. Death is the only certain outcome and disrespect for the dead is the unforgivable sin.

As enjoyable as the job was, as much as he needed the money, Evan knew inaction over this injustice would equate to complicity. He couldn't stay at Trovato's, not after this. He sat on the kitchen steps for a moment, regaining his composure, then walked away.



author photo by Claire Avary

J. Archer Avary (he/him) is a former TV journalist, ocean conservationist, and champion lionfish hunter. He was born in Albuquerque NM and lived in several US cities including Omaha NE, Milwaukee WI, and Atlanta GA before moving to the Cayman Islands in 2014 where he met his wife Claire.

In 2019 he moved again, this time to a tiny island in the English Channel where he wrote this novella, his first.

He now resides in the Northeast of England with his wife, and is the founder and editor-in-chief of Sledgehammer Lit.

He's been told he makes a mean chili.

twitter: [@j_archer_avary](https://twitter.com/@j_archer_avary)

