

THE MAN WHO LOVED HIS DOG

With a phone voice harsh and seductive, the dog healer insists of course she can help in cases like this. Frantic, reeling from recent life crises, with dreams of vengeance corroding my heart, I'm on the brink of doing things—committing unlawful acts-- I never would have imagined. I ask for her terms.

“Seventy dollars for thirty minutes,” she says. “It can be done over the phone.”

“Really?” I ask.

The healer says send her a picture of my Joey, then call. She'll diagnose through visual and aural clues. The process works through empathetic vibrations. She promises results.

“Do it now!” she demands. “It never fails. Be happy again!”

I was desperate. Joey had consoled me ever since MaryLou cleared out and dragged the kids and the bitter ruins of our marriage along with her. Late at night, after wrestling with black, hateful thoughts, alone in the solemn house, Joey was my lone companion. The phone turned to sweaty chalk in my hand.

“Time is crucial in these matters,” the healer says. “Don't wait too long.”

Over the rainy weekend that followed, I wrestled with my doubts. The healer's fee was a lot. Child support payments, a mortgage, a fragile job situation, all the usual challenges of our frantic, modern life, the costs added up. Joey nestled against my leg, dropped down onto my slippered foot, his

russet fur glistening in the fireplace light. It was in this room, a lifetime ago, that MaryLou had demonstrated her love for her secret lover. On that day, from my cubicle at work, I gazed through our home security camera and watched my wife and what's his name embrace. I'm tortured with hate for this man. But Joey doesn't care. His liquid, gray eyes meet mine. We sit there, Joey and me, warmed by a fire, as human beings and dogs have done for thousands of years. We need each other, that's all I know.

His name is Leonard Timms. Timms' Academy of Self-Defense is inside a weathered storefront at a mean end of town. Is this your Romeo's world, MaryLou? I'm on a stakeout. I freeze in my car. I grip the steering wheel and close my eyes. My mind rolls the tape of Timms and MaryLou, arms intertwined, hands searching. I step into the road, pass the center line and keep on going, fateful step after fateful step. At the door to Timms' Academy, I push and the door gives.

The entryway opens into a shadowy office with paint weeping off the ceiling. A back room pretends to be large with mirrors that drape the side walls. In a far corner, a boy, maybe thirteen or fourteen years old, is delivering staccato kicks to a padded mat, lost in dreams of violent triumph.

"Hey!" I shout, my voice smothered by the wall padding.

The boy turns.

"Yeah?" he says.

"Who're you?" I ask.

"Who're you?" he says.

"I'm looking for Mr. Timms."

"He's at lunch."

"What's your name?"



"Gino. Why?"

I close in on him and he braces, hands on his hips.

"Just asking," I say. "Are the classes any good?"

"Okay," Gino says.

"Mr. Timms a good teacher?"

"He's pretty good. He's a nice guy."

"I bet he's a little hard on you? Hard to please."

He straightens, wants to take my measure.

"No," he says. "He's not that tough. My dad's tough. Mr. Timms, he's okay."

"Coaches are tough. Sometimes...even mean."

"No, he....."

"When he shows you stuff, he has to hit you. Lay into you. He forgets you're just a kid and you have to beg him to stop. "

Gino squints.

"Like I said. He's okay. I gotta get back to my workout."

"Why are you lying to me, Gino?"

"What?"

"You're lying. You teach self-defense, you lay your hands on someone. Like this", I say and poke him in the chest. He pulls back, I step towards him, then brush his shoulder with the palm of my hand.

He moves backwards.

"He hits you. Doesn't he?" I say.



"No. I told you."

"Stop lying. Tell me the truth."

"You're crazy," Gino says.

"Does Timms have girl students? Young girls he...likes? Is there a shower room here?"

Gino's eyes widen. He retreats.

" You're asking crazy questions," Gino says. " Are you a cop?"

"No."

"You're a cop. You've got something against him, don't you?"

The question stops me. Do I have anything against him? Or is it gone?

"No," I say.

"You sound like you do," Gino says, but he's less defiant, there's a crack in his voice, he's unsure. It's then I notice he's a small-boned boy, face creased with youthful worries. He's here, kicking phantom kicks , steeling himself against the world.

" No, it's okay," I say, knowing I used this boy, maybe scared him. Who would do that? Who am I? The anger leaves me, only my confusion remains.

"Hey," Gino says. " Mr. Timms'll be back soon. Ask him your questions."

" I don't need to. I don't have any questions left," I say, and then, "Your kicks. They look good. Real good. "

I retreat from the room, glancing at my stooped reflection in the wall mirrors.

"You won't be sorry," the healer says.

She got the check, got the pictures of Joey, she knows what's wrong. It's arthritis. She recommends a dog chiropractor she knows.



“Be sure you use him, not just anyone,” she says. “And mention my name.”

Joey already seems better. The way he's standing, his posture. Is this woman a shill or a shaman? There are such things as shamans, there are things we don't understand. Everyone's searching these days, looking in different places, traveling to the tops of mountains, into remote jungles, always seeking answers, searching for truth.

I ask the healer if she does people, but I don't wait for her to say.

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