

FRANKIE'S
NEIGHBORHOOD

“**W**ith age comes wisdom.”

Having said that, an afternoon at the Seniors was what it was: a bunch of old sinners set in their ways, each able to see through the other like an x-ray through bone. The trick was to ignore the diagnosis. That’s where the wisdom came in.

Still.

Frankie P. left feeling a little wiser than usual. He’d seen Valerie and they’d had their first real conversation since the break-up. It went pretty well. Cordial. Okay, really. They even laughed once, like old times. He probed a bit, just enough to tell she was as screwed-up as ever. He came away feeling like a kid in June with the whole summer before him like a lazy mare he could ride forever.

On the way back Frankie stopped at his mailbox, one of thirty in a stacked rack plunked down on a little peninsula that jutted into the parking lot. His box was jammed tight. Two ads, a bill. The rest all begging letters. It was like his charities had started mating with each other. It was getting out of hand.

When he got to the condo he found a white sheet of paper stuck in the screen door. That was bad. The “NO SOLICITING” sign out front was for real. They’d had some break-ins, so the board voted to call the cops if anyone tried it.

Frankie yanked out the flyer with an irritated flick of his wrist. He saw a child’s handwriting and green paw prints drawn neatly across the top.

DOG WALKING!

DATES: JULY 24 & JULY 25

WE WILL WALK ONLY FRIENDLY DOGS!

NO EXCEPTIONS!

COST: \$3.00 PER DOG

NO MEAN DOGS!

There was a phone number and more paw prints across the bottom. “NO MEAN DOGS!” was underlined, as were the number and the price.

His neighbor—a B. Delmar, who after four months Frankie still hadn’t met—had one, too. He went out to the sidewalk and looked up the row. Everyone had one.

Still.

It was hot. He was bored. So, never mind the fact he didn’t own a dog, not since Skippy, the Kerry Blue they’d had when Jesse was young, Frankie trotted in, dropped his mail on the counter and rang up the young entrepreneurs.

What the hell!

He knew people with dogs. Had to. Somebody. Somewhere.

On the fifth ring a man answered. Yeah, who is it. He sounded *disgruntled*, to put it mildly. Frankie recognized the voice. It was the one you got after ten or twelve lite beers, where you weren’t exactly drunk—at least, not according to your definition—but you were a long way from sober, too. Just sodden, like you’d been working outside all day in a steady rain. You dragged your carcass around like it weighed a thousand pounds. Usually there was a couch involved, and a television with nothing on. Yelling and hitting were options. Frankie knew all about it. He was a sober man now, lo, these sixteen years.

So a casual inquiry made a U-turn into a guarded cul-de-sac. He was all business. “I’m calling about the dog walking?”

“What?” There was a leaden pause followed by, “What the fuck do you want?”

Now when someone begins a conversation with, “What the fuck do you want?” there are very few good places it can go. Nine out of ten times Frankie would have said, “Wrong number,” and hung up. Or on a given day, “Wrong number, asshole!” and slammed the phone down.

But this was different. He knew there was a kid involved. So he hung in there. Played dumb.

“I received a flyer advertising a dog walking service.” Frankie’s tone

was conciliatory, just two guys, working it out. “Is there anyone there who *might* be walking dogs?”

This, to give the guy’s few functioning brain cells a helpful clue.

“What?”

There was a pause as the clue was missed.

“Who *is* this?”

It was worse than Frankie thought. It was lizard brain time. So he started in like he was teaching a baby to talk.

“I GOT A FLYER. SOMEONE THERE WANTS TO MAKE MONEY. MAKE MONEY WALKING DOGS.”

He gave it a few seconds, but there was only a befuddled silence. He swore he could smell alcohol coming through the phone line.

“DO YOU HAVE A KID THAT’S WALKING DOGS?”

“Uh...yeah. Wait a minute.”

The hostility was gone. Forgotten apparently. Frankie remembered that, too.

“KARIN! PHONE!”

Frankie heard some mumbling in the background, the words “dog walking” then a child’s voice came on the line. She was timid at first. Talking to an adult. World of commerce. All of that. But the timidity didn’t last long. It was clear she was a spunky kid. Right away he got one question answered: the dates. Was she only going into business for two days?

“No! Of course not! That’s just for registration!”

She made Frankie sound like an idiot. And her friend Katy was coming, too. They were doing it together. They did everything together. Was his dog mean? Cause they wouldn’t walk a mean dog. And it had to be in the afternoon. They had science camp in the morning.

When it was Frankie’s turn he said Fido was a wonderful dog. Loved to play. Loved other dogs. Might lick you to death was the only problem. And the afternoon would be fine. He was free tomorrow. So in a minute, it was settled. Frankie was registered. Why he’d gotten registered he had

no idea. Well, maybe a vague idea. Maybe even a plan, but he didn't want to push it by *godforbid* thinking too much. The good news was he had until two-thirty the next day to find a dog that wasn't mean and wouldn't pull two little girls like a sled in the Iditarod.

And borrow the dog. And rename him Fido.



For dinner Frankie had a nice plate of spaghetti. He always made his own sauce by combining a can of Muir Glen organic crushed tomatoes with a can of their tomato sauce. He added fresh basil, black pepper and a little of the forbidden fruit: salt. He shook plenty of parmesan on top. Sorbet for dessert, right now chocolate was his favorite. Then it was time to get to work. He put on *Jeopardy!* turned the sound low and got out his address book. He made six calls.

“Unfuckingbelievable!”

The book was useless. Half had moved. The rest were dead. Frankie decided to call Jesse. He was young and in the game. He'd know someone with a dog. Jesse was divorced now and living with someone. Thirties. No kids. He and Frankie used to get together every couple of weeks. Now it was more like every couple of months.

Still.

The girl answered. She sounded nice. Slow and easygoing. Frankie hoped this one would pan out. Jesse needed someone nice.

Hell, I do too.

“Dad, I've been meaning to call.”

“How you doing?”

“Okay.”

“Work good?”

“Yeah, it's all right.”

Silence descended. Frankie wondered how long it would last if he didn't break it. “You got any new jobs lined up?” Jesse had been worried

about work.

“Yeah.”

“Big?”

“Couple of months.”

The conversation dried up completely. Frankie wanted to ask him about the girl, but she was probably standing there. The project interested him, too. Jesse had made himself an expert in Japanese joinery. Fancy hand saws, chisels that cost a mint. Frankie wanted to know more, but he wouldn't ask. It was like pulling teeth. And Jesse never asked about him.

Youth, thought Frankie, but it bothered him.

Jesse did give his father great gifts. The Maui Jim's. A radial arm saw. New tires for the Lincoln last Father's Day. The silence was now officially uncomfortable, so Frankie moved on to the dog. That got a rise.

“What!”

“A dog. Not too big. I just need him for a few hours.”

“Pop, guys don't lend their dogs.”

“Just for tomorrow. A couple of hours. In the afternoon.”

“Pop, are you having some kind of problem?”

“No.” Frankie laughed. “Some neighborhood kids started a dog walking business. That's all.”

“Okay. I'll ask around.”

Jesse's voice said he doubted it, said he thought his old man might be losing it, but Frankie knew he would ask around. Jesse was dependable.

Still.

Frankie was feeling slightly ridiculous. Not a huge problem. Or enough to make him to change his mind.

“A small dog. Something a kid could handle.”

“Okay, I'll ask.”

“All you can do.”

And that was that. *Jeopardy!* was showing a video question so Frankie turned up the sound. “With more than sixty known tombs, the Valley of the Kings was part of this ancient capital city the Greeks

called Diaskalos.”

Frankie guessed, “Athens.”

Wrong. It was Thebes. He couldn’t understand this thing with Jess. True, he and Sally had had their share of problems, but they’d loved each other and they’d raised him right. She’d been gone eight years now. Frankie had gone out with a few women since she had passed. Bea. Valerie, of course. *Was that it?* The problem? Cause there *was* one.

Then it hit him—

“Cuddles!”

The Yorkie terror hound. Wouldn’t knock down the kids. It only weighed two pounds. Of course, there was the biting thing. The dog hated white people. But it was a dog, it was small, and Evaline’s number was still in his cell.

She answered on the second ring. Frankie could hear Alex Trebek in the background.

“Evaline. Frankie. Did you get the ancient city?”

“Frankie! I didn’t.” She pronounced it, “dit-int,” which for some reason he found adorable. “Did you?”

“I had what-the-fuckopolis, but it only had fifty-nine tombs.”

She laughed, a sexy chuckle that made him grin. “Oh, Frankie, I miss you. We’ve gone through three parking attendants since you left.”

“Left” was nice. “Left” was polite. Frankie had gotten fired after spitting on the bodyguard of one of the bank’s biggest depositors, a young rap star named Def-Mo. Of course, the bodyguard had taken some shots at him and, as Frankie always pointed out, “He spit on me first.”

Evaline had more news than the *New York Times*. Walter T. Johnson was putting the moves on her; him: married, with three kids under ten. Def-Mo was coming out with a new CD called “Boi King Killa”; her “babies” were all fine—the pigeons she fed, flying fucking rats—and Starbucks had gotten rid of the big chairs.”

“Never a dull moment,” said Frankie.

“Are you working now?” asked Evaline. There was a hopeful note

in her voice that alarmed him.

“Well..”

Frankie was seventy-one, tall, gaunt and gray. He had the kind of grizzled look that made decent clothes a requisite. A few rips in the shirt, some stains on the pants; he looked homeless. Which *did* happen, the stains, the rips. He'd been given a dollar once in front of a Food Emporium. As for working, his working days should have been over. He only took that entry-level, piece-of-shit job in the bank because his union put the pension fund in Enron.

So now he told Evaline, “Actually, I'm not working at present. I'm seeking a career opportunity that fits my unique talents and lifestyle.”

“Fwankie... You don't wanna come back to us?”

There it was!

A jocular plea, but Frankie had a feeling she would actually put in a word with Walter T. Johnson if asked.

“Evaline, I *hated* that job. I'd rather eat snails than work at that bank again!” He heard her bubbling laugh and his voice took on a solemn tone, like a preacher with the rent due. “Evaline, I'd work for the *government*—I'd work for fucking *Enron* before I went back to that bank.”

“Frankie, stop. I'm gonna pee.”

Alex Trebek was back, and not a moment too soon. Frankie watched them set up *Final Jeopardy!* while Evaline settled down. Then it was time for business.

“Honey, I need to borrow Cuddles.”

The laugh again. “Frankie! Cuddles hates you! He bit you twice, remember?”

“Evaline, there's something wrong with that dog. It's got a fucked-up Weltanschauung if I've ever seen one.”

“Fwankie, Cuddles is compwicated. You don't understand how his widdle mind works.”

“Sure, I do. See the finger. Bite the finger.”

She laughed. “Oh, Frankie. I wish you'd come back to the bank. It's

so boring since you left.”

“Seriously Evaline, I need him.”

He told her about the flyer, the dog walking, the two little kids. He left out the drunk on the phone. It wasn't a hard sell. Evaline hated to leave the dog home by himself. So, it was a deal. Then, like the successful loan officer she was, she nailed down a few points.

“I'll have to drop him off before seven-thirty and I probably won't be able to pick him up till six. It's okay for the girls to walk him, just make sure they're responsible. Don't let him out of the house under any circumstances. And Frankie, you have to be nice to him. Cuddles is sensitive.”

Frankie studied his thumb and the back of his hand where the sensitive little hound had practiced his phlebotomy skills.

“Of course, I'll take care of the little chappie. He'll be as right as rain.”

“I mean it, Frankie.”

“See you in the morning.”

“Frankie...”

“Don't worry, Evaline. I'll treat him like a king. I'll feed him steak. If he gets bored I'll read him Penthouse letters.”

“Oh, don't do that. He humps the pillow constantly as it is.”

She sounded impressed.

“Oh, Evaline...”

“Yes, Frankie.”

“Bring a pillow along, will you?”



Old age has its perks. True, the body doesn't work like it used to, what with aches and pains, gaps and lacks. Behavior can head south pretty quickly, too. The good news is society's expectations decline right along with senescent skills.

Which was why Frankie didn't set his alarm clock. He thought about

it, said something along the lines of, “Fuck-it-I’ll-get-up,” and was, in consequence, fast asleep when Evaline arrived the next morning.

Frankie at seven-fifteen, before coffee, before shower, before shave and natty attire, was a sight to behold. Joints creaked like an old ship. He was tottery, grizzled and frizzled with a smell slightly reminiscent of laundry left too long damp.

But Evaline didn’t register all this. Not until later. She rushed in, said, “Hi-Frankie-where’s-the-bathroom?” dropped a straw bag and a paper bag on the couch and disappeared, closing the door emphatically behind her.

Frankie yawned, ran a hand through his fine, gray hair, cracked a few bones and *Hey presto!* recalled something. A small detail about women and bathrooms. So he shouted through the door.

“It’s jelly!”

“What?” Evaline asked, pretending not to know what he was talking about.

“The disgusting stuff on the floor. It’s only grape jelly.” Feeling a bit more information might be needed he added, “I had a sandwich.”

“Thank you, Frankie,” Evaline said politely. She’d already promised herself she would pee outside before she’d ever use his bathroom again.

Frankie started the coffee and went out to search for his morning paper. When he got back, Evaline was taking a tiny champagne-colored fluff ball out of the straw bag. Shiny black eyes. A little red collar. The dog was tiny, *maybe* two pounds. It clung to her neck like a bat.

“C’mon, Cuddles. C’mon, sweetness. Uncle Fwankie wants to see his widdle fwiend.”

The little Yorkie smiled Frankie’s way, showing off its needle-sharp canines. Frankie put his hands behind his back.

“’lo, Cuddles. Long time, no bite.”

Evaline didn’t ask him to pet the hound. In any case, he wouldn’t. Cuddles did bite. Cuddles bit Frankie. Cuddles bit white people. The rest of humanity he maintained on a need-to-bite basis. Evaline bustled

around creating his “widdle doggie house” by turning the straw bag on its side. From the paper bag she removed his water dish, leash, food, toys and treats along with his current *pillow d’amour*.

Cuddles’ new home was a real charmer. Off the beaten track, in a corner near the sliding glass door, it commanded a nice view across the terrace. The door was there to provide a breeze, if needed. Cuddles seemed content. And, *ta-ta*, Evaline was off. Bye, Frankie. See you at six.

Ta-fucking-ta, thought Frankie, but in his heart he knew the truth: Evaline was like a breath of fresh air. It was obvious to him. Her visit was the proof. He needed a girlfriend. Something. Anything.

The morning passed. For the most part Cuddles remained in his fortress, making periodic forays to pillage the food bowl and rape the pillow. After each session he shook himself, threatened Frankie with a tiny, fierce growl and disappeared back into the straw bag in a champagne-colored flash. Frankie could see why Evaline had so much admiration for the dog’s libido. Cuddles was—in a tiny little nutshell—insatiable.

Frankie lingered over the paper to give the insane commuters time to get to wherever the fuck they were going in such a goddamned hurry, then made a foray of his own. He pillaged the Food Emporium scoring a nice London broil, on sale of course in keeping with his post-Enron austerity. He also bought dozen rolls of toilet paper, green beans, the bakery bread he was addicted to and two bottles of Soft Scrub and one of 409 which, just maybe, were the real reason for the whole excursion.

Because it *was* disgusting, the bathroom. He’d put on his glasses and looked. The tub was grayish-brown with scum. Sprinkles from shaving peppered the sink. The toilet was a scuz-fest. Frankie’s aim was worse than a Little League shortstop. The grape jelly blobs on the floor completed the look. His bathroom had all the charm of a Superfund site.

Frankie spent the remainder of the morning and part of the afternoon scrubbing and scouring, even the shower curtain got a wash. Finally, it was done. To celebrate he had a sandwich and napped until

two-fifteen. And then it was showtime.

The doorbell rang. Out of habit he looked through the small, diamond-shaped, security window. And had to laugh. Only by putting nose to glass could he see the top of their heads—Karin and Katy—waiting patiently for the client to open the door and their new lives of entrepreneurship to begin. They looked tiny. Like ants.

“Hello, Mr. P. I’m Karin and this is Katy.” The child breezed in, taking charge. “Is Fido ready for his walk?”

Young Karin had left the power suit at home, choosing instead a Powerpuff t-shirt with apple-red shorts and strawberry-red sneakers. She looked about ten, with quick brown eyes and a sandy blonde braid someone obviously had spent a bit of time on. She reminded Frankie of an older Shirley Temple, minus the gag factor. Her sidekick, Katy, was dressed identically. Frankie got it. It was a uniform! Which was a hopeful sign. Their mothers must shop together, or at least be friends.

Support, thought Frankie. *You gotta have it!*

Frankie took a moment to explain that while “Fido” was the dog’s official AKC name, he really liked to be called “Cuddles.”

“Cuddles!” they squealed. It was a winner.

And now came the tricky part: Cuddles himself. If he savaged the girls the whole deal was off. Frankie wondered if he should have slipped the little fucker some Tamazepam.

Karin ran right up to the straw bag in the corner. “Fido! Cuddles! Here, boy!” She scooped him up. “Look, Katy. He’s beautiful!”

The little Yorkie growled and snapped at her face. Karin whacked him in the head.

“Cuddles! NO!”

The dog gave Karin a heartfelt, apologetic look. A look that said, “Was *that* wrong? The biting the face thing? Cause nobody told me and hey, I’m sorry as heck about it.”

At this point the rapprochement of girl and hound was well underway. It only remained for Karin to give the dog a kiss and say,

“That’s a good boy, Cuddles!” for the little Yorkie to begin licking like Beckham.

“Problem solved,” said Frankie, with a twinkle Cuddles’ way.

Abso-fucking-lutely!

In a trice the Powerpuffs were ready, leash attached, and they were off. Frankie too, of course. Part of the plan. Plus, he wouldn’t have missed it for the world. The pageantry. The hoopla. The fucking with people. They went through the neighborhood like a harvester through a cornfield.

Cuddles led the way. Next came Karin and Katy, getting just a wee bit testy about whose turn it was to hold the leash. Then there was Frankie. Shambling, ambling; drinking it up, and soaking it in. Frankie loved a parade.

Karin and Katy must have done a fair amount of babysitting, because they treated Cuddles like a rambunctious baby brother. At the first intersection it was Karin.

“Cuddles? Do you see this? This is a street. A street. You must never cross this by yourself. Okay?” She shook a finger under his nose.

“Never Cross The Street By Yourself?”

When it was her turn, Katy explained the crosswalk.

“Here, Cuddles. Look. You stay in here, between these two lines. See?” They zigzagged from side to side so Cuddles could observe both lines. Katy ended her lesson with a chilling observation.

“In here cars aren’t allowed to hit you.”

Frankie bit his tongue. It was the kids’ show. He’d fill her in later.

After mastering basic safety, Cuddles learned about mailboxes, hedges, certain trees that might be a maples, a crack in the sidewalk that *should* be fixed, an ant, what not to do to other dog’s poo; in general, all the rules that must be followed if one is to be a “Good Dog.”

Cuddles was an excellent student. He paid attention and took extensive notes, mostly by nose, all the while keeping a sharp eye out for anything he could hump or eat.

The walk took an hour, which meant Frankie was out three bucks. He gave the girls a dollar tip, the psychological equivalent of Donald Trump fixing the ice-skating rink at Rockefeller Center. Frankie was happy, too. He'd gotten his money's worth. Three blocks from his condo, on a shady, tree-lined street, they'd passed a Colonial on a nice piece of property. It had a big lawn out front, unfortunately going to seed. The white trim around the windows and doors was cracked and peeling. Broken toys and dog shit dotted the lawn and an old Toyota Camry with a cracked tail light sat in the driveway.

"That's my house," said Karin.

Frankie looked it over and said, "Let's stop in and say hi," just to watch a shadow cross her face. He got, "We-can't-now-my-father-is-sleeping." The kid hardly missed a beat. Karin.

Still.

Back at his condo he took the leash and said he'd call when Cuddles needed another walk. The two girls hugged and kissed the little dog like he was going off to war. At the door they chanted goodbye to Frankie. He gave them a wave. Frankie had a lot to think about.

"That's the place," he told Cuddles when they were back inside and comfortable; him, sipping his weak and watery coffee, the dog nestled inside its straw fortress.

"That's the place, Cuddles." Frankie took another sip. "And what the fuck *do* I want?"

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On the other side of Frankie's sliding glass door was a good-sized terrace with a nice view. Down the hill was another row of condos. There was a mall off to the right and a water tower on the horizon, but it still was mostly trees as far as the eye could see. Which was pretty far, it was miles to the distant hills. Here, lying on his chaise lounge, Frankie explained his plan to Cuddles.

Maybe it was the walk with Karin and Katy, maybe it was the turkey bacon tossed his way, but the dog had emerged from the straw bag to lie on the carpet in the evening summer sun and listen to Frankie. Except for breaks to sexually abuse his pillow, the little Yorkie was a good listener. As for the plan, Cuddles could see no flaws in it. And he seemed willing to do his part, whatever that turned out to be.

Evaline didn't arrive until after seven. An unexpected meeting. Traffic. Frankie and Cuddles were on the couch watching *Jeopardy!* He'd left the door ajar. She came up the stairs and plopped down on the couch. Another day at the office. She was pooped.

"You want anything? I got spaghetti."

"Not today, Frankie. I'll just watch a little *Jeopardy!* and go home and collapse."

She took off a shoe and began to flex and point her perfect little toes. Still fire engine red. Frankie could see Walter T. Johnson's point.

"Collapse here," he wanted to say. But he didn't. It just didn't feel right. Not yet, anyway.



The next day, bright and early for Frankie, around ten-thirty, he went out for a walk. The destination? A Colonial on a quiet, shady street about three blocks away. It was a beautiful morning, still cool. It was just him and the gardeners. Frankie'd say hello if he spoke fucking Spanish, or Greek, or Portuguesa, or whatever-the-fuck. As it was, he gave a wave here and there and got a few shy smiles in return.

When did everyone stop cutting their own lawns? These people were making a living—a *living?*—they were buying fucking houses cutting grass! What would be next? Paperboys driving Maseratis?

Frankie ran over a few options for the upcoming fiesta. Not too many, he didn't like to overthink things. He hadn't brought a gun and he wondered if that was a mistake. Nah, it was too soon for a gun. Just

stay loose and enjoy. Let it come to you. He was pretty sure science camp would be in full swing. He was counting on that.

He dodged a few toys on the stoop and rang the bell. Which didn't work. *What else?* Frankie made a fist and gave the door a few blows, just enough to loosen the frame and wake up any dead people inside. One more blow and he heard a thump, some grumbling and lo! the man of the house threw open the door. Frankie got ready for anything.

"Yeah?"

"Good morning," said Frankie affably. "I'm here to hire Karin to walk my dog."

"She's not here. She doesn't get home till one."

The speaker was a young man to Frankie, early forties, with a nice head of black hair. He was a little shorter than the older man and a little stockier. His clothes were okay, a wrinkled t-shirt over rumples shorts, and Frankie had to admit—he was vertical. But that's where the good news ended.

His eyes were bloodshot and lined with black like a mummy in a horror movie. His complexion was so pasty that his five-day growth of beard looked blue. He smelled like stale beer and cigarettes. The house smelled like stale beer, cigarettes, and dog shit. Frankie snuck a peek. The guy's hands were shaking like a nervous flyer on the space shuttle.

"Fine," said Frankie. "I'll leave my number." He patted his pockets, a planned, fruitless search. "Got a pen?"

The man looked at the doorjamb. It was obvious he was dying to get rid of Frankie so he could get to it. Frankie saw him sneak a look at the time. And knew what he was thinking.

Christ. Ten forty-five. Still pretty early.

"A pen," said Frankie. "I'm Frankie P. What's your name?"

"Jeff. Yeah. Wait here."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"Huh?"

Jeff stopped and stared into space. Thinking about a pen, walking

and trying to answer Frankie's question had caused a complete shutdown.

"I'm retired," said Frankie, taking a step into a spacious, destroyed living room. "Electrician. Union." He tacked on, "Those fucks!" under his breath.

"Who?" said Jeff. He was still dazed, but apparently unfazed by Frankie being in the house.

Frankie tried again. "What do you do for a living?"

"Computer programmer. But I got laid off."

No shit, thought Frankie.

"That's too bad," he said.

"Yeah, boom and bust. I guess I busted. You want a beer?"

"No thanks." Frankie waved graciously like Queen Elizabeth in a carriage. "You go ahead, though."

He followed Jeff through the dining room. There was a nice walnut table, with the leaves it probably served twelve. Now it was serving ash trays, newspapers, junk mail, stacks of dishes crusted with food, toys, a mound of kid's clothes fresh out of the dryer, an open Bible and a stack of magazines half spilled on to the floor. Frankie saw a *Computer World*. In the corner of the room a Total Gym rested, covered in dust.

And then they were in the kitchen. Which was like the dining room, only with more rotten food. Jeff casually opened the fridge, popped a Bud Light and said, "Sure you won't have one?"

He started to drink before Frankie could respond.

Computer World, thought Frankie.

"No thanks, I'm good."

Jeff had forgotten why Frankie was there. He took another long pull. "Ah, that's good." He remembered. "A pen, right?"

"Bingo," said Frankie. "What kind of stuff did you do?"

Jeff finished the beer and reached for another. He was starting to come into his own. "First I designed web sites. HTML. JavaScript. Then I learned Java and wound up writing servlets for ATM machines." He got a wistful look. "I really liked NetBeans."

“That’s nice,” said Frankie, who had read about websites in the newspaper. “When did you start drinking yourself to death?” he did not ask.

Jeff opened a drawer and came up with a dried-out felt tip and a pencil that had never been sharpened. He handed them to Frankie and said, “It’s gonna be a hot one.” He finished the second beer and circumnavigated Frankie to grab another. As he popped the top he said, “I only drink beer in the summer.”

Frankie took it all in. The rotting food. The dog shit. The empties. And laughed. What else could you do?

“Where’s the missus?”

Frankie couldn’t wait to meet *that* piece of work.

“Helen died when Karin was seven.” Jeff shrugged and took a sip. A sip. He was slowing down and feeling the love. “It’s okay. I’m over it.”

Suddenly Frankie heard a grunting, snorting and wheezing coming from the dining room.

“Roast Beef,” said Jeff. “You’re up!”

Frankie turned to look and shouted, “Mother! Fucker!”

It was some kind of bull dog. Huge. One seventy-five easy. Its lower jaw jutted out a good inch. One massive canine pointed straight up, the other one was gone. This caused the dog’s lower lip to curl down in a deranged sneer and sent a string of drool to the floor. Its body was twisted and gnarled and, as it hobbled towards them, Frankie could see scrofulous skin hanging in folds. It was by far the ugliest dog he’d ever seen and that included dead and bloated dogs in the war. As it got closer he could smell it, like a giant pair of sweaty balls. Frankie failed to be polite. He pointed—

“What is *wrong* with it?”

Jeff laughed. “Nothing. Roast Beef’s just old. And it’s a her.” He bent down, patted his knees and yelled at the top of his lungs.

“C’mere, Roast Beef. C’mere, girl.”

The creature snorted its way over to Jeff who stooped to nuzzle its

massive head. Frankie fought a wave of nausea.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Jeff asked.

“Are you kidding?” said Frankie. “I wish I looked that good.”

But Jeff wasn’t listening. He was hugging his dog, scratching her ears, three beers into a new day he was feeling good and loving life. Frankie waited for a break in the love-fest.

“I’ll give you a call later. Figure out a schedule.”

“Schedule?”

“The dog walking. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Great. I’ll tell Karin. That kid loves dogs.”

“Easy to see who she gets it from,” said Frankie. Immediately he kicked himself, thinking of the dead wife. But it was okay. Jeff didn’t hear him. Jeff was on his way to the fridge, so Frankie let himself out.

The fresh air seemed even fresher after leaving that tomb. He rubbed his hands together, took a breath and got a whiff of cut grass, always a good sign. Now everything was getting clearer. The plan. Frankie was starting to feel good. And it was a relief, not needing the gun. When the time was right he wouldn’t need a thing.



Frankie knew that in any successful campaign the first requirement was to secure your supply lines. Which meant Cuddles. Which meant Evaline. It would probably be a slam dunk, but you could never tell. It was extra driving, extra time. Frankie knew the deal. He intended to play up the “poor, widdle, wonely dog” angle.

Still.

It wouldn’t hurt to soften Evaline up, so Frankie gave her a call and asked her out to lunch. She had to be up near two-twenty, so he knew she could eat. Plus, it would keep her from feeding the pigeons—*flying fucking rats*—her customary lunch hour foolishness.

But Evaline was busy. Loan officer of the month last month, she

was working straight through. It would be okay for tomorrow, though. Frankie named a place he thought she'd like and she did.

It was on.

He finished off the morning with a cup of coffee on his terrace. Read the paper, snoozed a bit. He made a nice lunch for himself, a can of chicken noodle soup with a few slices of fresh bread. For dessert he had seven or eight of the little chocolate chip cookies Paul Newman made. Frankie called them heart pills. After lunch it was back to the terrace. He stretched out on the chaise with the latest *New Yorker*. Retired.

What a life!

The next afternoon found him at Fritz's, in a corner booth, with Evaline. It was a trendy little place with bright colors and a Mexican flavor: serapes on the walls, tacos on the menu. Frankie ordered a burger, rare. They had good meat there. Fresh.

Evaline ordered a turkey club and a chef's salad which arrived in a bowl the size of a footbath. Her manners were as dainty as a daisy but her sandwich disappeared before Frankie got his onions on. By the time he'd taken a bite she was cruising through her salad like a lawnmower on high.

Digging her grave with her teeth, thought Frankie, sucking in his paunchy gut.

Sure enough, when Evaline finished she asked to see a dessert menu. She was considering the pie. The toll was rising. Frankie's budget was shot.

"Enron!" he muttered. "Those fucks!" *Still*. It was time to make his move. Frankie had it all worked out.

"Evaline, you know it gets lonely living by yourself..."

Her eyes flicked down toward the menu. She tapped a picture of the apple pie with a long, scarlet nail.

"We could put ice cream on that," said the waiter, a young Brad Pitt.

"Hmmm."

"So I'd like to borrow Cuddles again. I really like having the little

guy around.”

“Or you could have it on a brownie. We make them from scratch with Scharffenberger chocolate.”

“We had a great time the other day, Cuddles and me, you know, with the kids and all...”

Evaline’s beautiful skin gathered a few wrinkles over her brow.

Frankie hit the close. “So, Evaline? What do you say?”

She dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a spotless napkin. “I’ll have the apple pie with vanilla ice cream.” She gave the waiter a blinding smile. “And put the brownie on the side, please.”

“Evaline?”

“What, Frankie?”

“Cuddles. I need to borrow him again.”

“Frankie, I love the idea of getting him walked, but that drive...”

Her voice trailed off into “not possible” land.

Frankie caved. “Okay, I can pick him up.”

“Frankie, I don’t know.” Evaline caressed her face with two fingers and gazed towards the ceiling. “He’s really gotten used to being by himself. My neighbor says he never barks anymore.”

For some reason Frankie found himself noticing just how pretty Evaline was. And he knew how hard she worked at that bank. “Well, I guess I can bring him back, too. After the traffic dies down.”

Evaline smiled sweetly. “Oh, Frankie, you’re so good to little Cuddles.” She reached across the table to pat his hand. “Cuddles just wuvs being with his Uncle Fwankie.”



The best dog is like a wise and happy child. Take it on a walk, it runs free, inhaling the world with joy. From time to time it returns to your side overflowing with pure and spontaneous enthusiasm. A dog is too loyal, if that’s possible. A dog is always by your side. Wake it up at three

o'clock in the morning and it's ready for any adventure.

The best dog is a gift from God.

Cuddles was not that kind of dog. Cuddles was a sex-addicted, food-maddened, neurotic mess. Cuddles was a trip. Cuddles could have been Freud's best friend.

Of course, Karin and Katy were oblivious to any of his shortcomings for a simple reason: Cuddles was cute. He was as cute as a zoo-full of baby animals. Maybe even cuter. So genetically blessed was Cuddles that even cat people; nay, even curmudgeons—who when they smiled looked like their faces might crack—would stop and make over him. Talking in little squeaky voices, offering pats on the head and scratches behind the ears—even food if they happened to have any. That's how cute Cuddles was.

However.

Unmoved by these displays, Cuddles maintained strict Yorkie discipline and offered a standard response. He bit them.

The first walk was fine. They didn't meet anyone. On the second walk Cuddles bit three people. A nice old guy. A really nice old lady. And a kid. He bit them all, and he bit them hard. And even though he was only two pounds of demented Yorkie, he usually drew blood.

Frankie developed a standard response, big on *emoting*. He emphasized the *oddness* of the attack, its *mysterious* nature. Perhaps he and the unfortunate victim could get to the bottom of it.

This...this...*puzzle*.

Was it the hat? The sunglasses? Perhaps the little fellow was scared by the suddenness of your movement? Because...

“He's Never Done This Before!”

It was amazing. Frankie could perform this symphony of bullshit even if the dog just bit someone a block earlier. A part of him really wanted to scream—

“YOU’RE WHITE! HE HATES WHITE PEOPLE!”

But that wouldn’t do. Frankie was working hard to keep the lawyers from his door. The worst thing—and he knew, deep down inside he was probably going to hell for this—he was starting to enjoy it.

- The *cuteness!* The little girls in their matching Powerpuff t-shirts, apple-red shorts and strawberry-red sneakers.

- The *bait!* The happy little champagne-colored fluff ball with the big red bow Evaline insisted he wear.

- The *victim!* Unsuspecting. Surrendering common sense to the Sugar Pops moment.

- The *bite!* Oh, the horror! And then...

- The *bullshit!* It was Frankie-time.

So Frankie was going to need a copy of the shots. How was he going to get them without alerting Evaline? Maybe he’d forge them. Maybe the victims would just forget about it.

Still.

With the exception of the mayhem, it was a lovely walk. This made only the second time Frankie had walked around his own neighborhood in years. Dog or no dog, he was definitely going to make it a habit. They saw some great old houses, estates really, with high stone walls and gables and stables. Mostly it was older one-family homes with a sprinkling of newer duplexes. There were even some brand new condos going up. Frankie stopped to talk to a carpenter and found out they were being built on a shoestring with cardboard walls and cheap fixtures. He came away all the more grateful he bought when he did.

And there were plenty of gardeners, always plenty of gardeners. The girls taught him to say, “Buenos días!” and “Cómo estás?” and he made them giggle by saying it wrong to people who didn’t speak Spanish and frowned.

And Cuddles was happy. The girls. The attention. The biting. It was

just like he'd always hoped it would be.

The passing of an hour brought them to the large Colonial with the toy-strewn, straggly lawn. Not a coincidence, not at all. Frankie suggested stopping in. Karin was reluctant.

Still.

A plan's a plan. Even one that demonstrates the foresight and planning of a burp after six beers. So Frankie pressed on. Carefree. Sunny. He was *au courant*, *vis-à-vis* their *casa*. He declared, "I think Cuddles should meet Roast Beef. I think they'd be great friends."

And what could be said to that?

Karin said, "Wait here!"

She opened and closed the front door like a nun on Good Friday. Frankie and Katy dawdled on the stoop until she came back, clearly relieved.

So, it's not too bad then.

The spacious, destroyed living room was a little messier, if that were possible. Frankie saw not a thing. Jeff was there. The welcoming host.

"lo, Jeff. How's the computer world treating you..."

Partially fuddled, Jeff offered, Oh, he didn't know.

"Not as bad as the people in it?"

Jeff laughed. The ice was broken. Jeff was having company. Obviously not the usual afternoon fare. Frankie, Cuddles and the kids were having the impact of a Mardi Gras dropped into his living room. For a fleeting second Frankie thought he was going to offer them all a beer.

"We wanted Cuddles to meet Roast Beef."

Jeff looked down and noticed the little Yorkie.

"Cuddles! What a cute little guy."

"Dad, don't!" shouted Karin. "He bites!"

But Jeff was the father. He knew best.

"Aw! This cute little fellow?"

Two needle-sharp fangs sank deep into Jeff's hand. He gasped. His jaw actually dropped, a thing often spoken of, but rarely seen.

“Holy shit!” he yelled, forgetting the children were there. Jeff shook the hand, but couldn’t shake the dog. Cuddles hung on, whipping back and forth like a flag in a hurricane. Jeff made a fist with his other hand.

“Daaaaady!” shrieked Karin.

That did it. Cuddles released his prize and Jeff began the Cuddles’ dance. Hopping. Shaking. Cursing.

That should sober him up, thought Frankie. But he looked concerned. Troubled. He shook his head in stunned amazement.

“Jeff! He’s *never* done that before. I wonder what set the little guy off.” He gave Cuddles an appreciative nod.

“Maybe he smelled Roast Beef on my hands. Some dogs get really possessive about their owners.”

Jeff was a dog person. He understood.

“You could be right,” said Frankie. “Anyway, I’m sure it’ll never happen again.”

“Oh, I know,” said Jeff, looking a little pale. “I’m not worried.”

Frankie was off the hook. He removed four singles and paid off the tiny dog walkers. They took the money like two frogs snapping at a fly.

“Want a beer?” Jeff asked.

“No, I’m good,” said Frankie. “I’m not drinking much these days.”

“Yeah,” said Jeff, taking another pull. “I should cut back a little myself.”

Frankie nodded noncommittally. “I’d take a root beer.”

“Great.”

Jeff swung into action. Frankie followed. In the kitchen he noticed a full-sized, plastic garbage can he’d somehow missed before. It was completely filled with crushed Bud Light cans.

How do you know you’re drinking too much? When your recycler throws his back out.

Jeff mumbled and poked around in the fridge. Frankie saw a few cases in there, plus two more stacked in the corner of the room. Some lettuce and cheese. A carton of eggs. Looked like omelets were big. There

was half of one congealed in a skillet on the stove.

“There’s no root beer.”

Big surprise.

“Water’ll be fine,” said Frankie. “I’m just thirsty.”

Jeff rummaged around until he found a clean glass. He offered the tap water with a flourish. “Have some city gin.”

Frankie thanked him and they wandered out to the backyard. It was a great piece of property. Lush grass. Big trees. Went back seventy, eighty feet. But the grass was six inches high and going to seed like the front. The bushes were overgrown. A big dead limb, dropped during a winter storm, was sprouting lichen and offering habitat to the insect world.

Place could definitely could use a little cómo estás, thought Frankie.

There was a table and chairs under a green umbrella. The men sat. Frankie told Jeff about his last job. The bank. The heat. Walter T. Johnson and Evaline. The hedge he decided to turn into an office and the spitting beef that cost him an afternoon in jail.

Jeff told Frankie about his dot-com life. How Great It Was.

He was in at the beginning, options on a half a million shares, fully invested. The company planned on going public. He would’ve had it made. Bought this place back then. Thank god he’d put a lot down. The payments weren’t too bad.

Still.

The savings were almost gone.

Jeff left and came back with more water for Frankie and two beers for himself. He started to talk about Helen, the cancer. Which brought Frankie to Sally, the cancer. After that they backed away—it was the Mets and the weather—both doing great at the moment. And then it was quiet. Nice chairs. Two men sitting and staring at a perfect sky. Nice trees. Bursting with summer, greener than money. Insects whined. A few comments were served and volleyed. More quiet. Frankie let a long breath go. The girls came running out.

“Daddy! Come quick!”

The two men jumped up and ran into the house. Good timing. Two glasses of water and Frankie's bladder, as he always said, the size of a pea.

In a corner of the dining room they found Roast Beef, collapsed next to her bowl, snoring away like a rasp on pine. Towards the south, clamped on to a rear leg was Cuddles, humping like mad.

"Daaaady! We can't make him stop." Karin.

"When we tried he growled at us." Katy.

"What's he *doing*?" Karin.

Jeff looked at Frankie. Frankie said, "Cuddles is just trying to wake Roast Beef up."

"That's right," said Jeff. "He wants to play. Why don't you kids go out and play, too."

A fine idea. Bikes were at hand, money was available, and Slurpees were right up the street. Can we go, Dad? Okay, but be careful crossing at Center. Wait for the light. Walk your bikes.

And just like that, they were gone. Frankie walked over to the scene of passion, picked up the red leash and gave a tug.

"C'mon, boy."

Cuddles didn't hear. Or couldn't hear. He showed no sign of slowing down.

"Wait a minute," said Jeff. "I'm gonna get my camera. I've got to get a picture of this."

He returned in a moment with a Nikon CoolPix and began capturing the moment. The flashes seemed to rev Cuddles up even more. Roast Beef's snores went up in volume.

"This is the cutest thing I've ever seen," said Jeff, getting in a few final shots.

"You need to get out more," said Frankie, picking up the red leash. A brisk yank separated Cuddles from his *objet d'amour*. Even though he and his true love had parted, the little Yorkie continued to hump convulsively like a broken toy.

"He's really worked up," said Jeff.

Frankie looked at Cuddles, pulled at his lip with a forefinger and thumb and said, "We were out there for an hour."

"Wow."

The two men were silent. Jeff said, "It's been a while."

"You can say that again," said Frankie.

"Wow," said Jeff. He laughed. "I do have to get out more."

Frankie urged Cuddles to the door. Jeff didn't see them out, just gave a wave as he headed toward the kitchen.

"See you, Frankie."

"Bye, Jeff."

The little Yorkie was having trouble walking, so Frankie tucked him under an arm.

"C'mon champ. That's enough exercise for one day."



Alex Trebek was his usual unique combination of reserve and animation. The contestants were evenly matched, so at *Final Jeopardy!* everyone still had a shot. The category was Geography.

"It's the northernmost body of water with a major seaport."

"The North Sea," said Frankie, as the phone rang. It was Evaline.

"Evaline! Hey, what do you think? The North Sea?"

She was brief. "What-did-you-do-to-my-dog-Frankie?"

"What!" Frankie was indignant. "Nothing."

"He's just lying there." Her voice sharpened. "Did you give him drugs?"

"No, I swear. How about the Arctic Ocean?"

"Frankie..."

"Do they even have cities up there?"

"Frankie! What happened?"

"Nothing happened. The kids just walked him. Maybe he's just not in shape. He hasn't had too many cardio workouts, you know, staying

home all day.”

“I’m worried Frankie. He’s not moving. It’s like he’s dead.”

“He’s fine. He’s a workhorse, that little guy.”

“A workhorse?”

“I mean, he was leading the parade, prancing around. He interacted with a lot of people.”

“White people?”

Frankie backed out fast.

“Everyone loved him, Evaline. He’s just tired. You’ll see. Cuddles will be fine in the morning.”

“Frankie, I wuv my widdle Cuddles.” Her voice dropped an octave. “So he’d better be.”

“Don’t worry. He’s fine.”

“And it’s the Bering Sea!”

She hung up the phone.

“The Bering Sea! That bitch.”



Seniors was held in the Civic Center on Mondays from twelve to four. Everyone paid a dollar for refreshments: donuts, bagels and rolls served with coffee or tea. People paid another two bucks for the fifty-fifty, a drawing which split the pot between the lucky winner and the Senior’s Fund. It was not a trivial amount, always over a hundred dollars. Then came a meeting at one to plan trips. Elected officers. Robert’s Rules of Order. Very proper.

Frankie never helped with refreshments, never joined in the fifty-fifty and never planned a trip. He liked to show up around two when the card games got going. A couple of hours were usually enough for him to win a few bucks. Literally, a few bucks, only three ten-cent raises were allowed. An embarrassing truth: since Enron those small amounts had become important to him.

He'd think: Two-fifty. That's celery, a head of lettuce and a couple of bananas.

Frankie knew he'd sunk pretty low, playing for produce, but poverty was teaching him new rules. He arrived just as the meeting was breaking up. He caught Jack Hanson's eye and they drifted toward the card room. Jack played well, too. He was Frankie's main rival. The others thought they were lucky. Frankie and Jack knew better.

"Bump it a dime."

The speaker was Arthur Robinson, a retired banker. Every time he had an ace in the hole he spent twice as much time looking at it and then acted totally disinterested, which was the way he was acting now. Frankie was out.

"That's it for me. Got to walk a dog."

"You got a dog, Frankie?" asked Jack. "I didn't know you were a dog lover."

"I just take him out for walks."

"Everybody needs something to love," said Hanson.

Bullshit!

This was Jack, being solicitous and sticking it to Frankie at the same time. They all knew Valerie had dumped him.

Jack was like that. A silver spoon up his ass, but a Navy flier. A successful businessman. He'd done a lot in his life.

Still.

Frankie couldn't stand him. So as he left he said, "Bet the ace, Jack."

Everyone laughed. Frankie was pretty sure he had one, too. Hanson was a good player, but he puffed up his chest a tiny, little bit when he was getting ready to make a move. Fight or flight. Hard to control.

In the car, Frankie was a picture. Waving his free hand like he was shaking off ants. Raving like a preacher on crack. He lost a grapefruit, a head of lettuce and two bunches of asparagus which, even though they were in season, still hurt.

He arrived at Evaline's—he'd given her a few days to cool off—and

felt the usual jaw-dropping amazement. Her place had more curb appeal than the Taj Mahal. It was a sweet old Victorian with a white wrap-around porch resting peacefully behind stately maples. Rocking chairs. Flower beds. Her big screen made his look like a postage stamp. Antique British prints on the walls. Beautiful hardwood floors scattered with tasteful Persians. It was stupid, Frankie knew better, but he never expected any black person to live in such luxury. And a woman to boot! But Evaline did, and from what he gathered, she'd earned it all herself.

And she didn't put it in fucking Enron.

He took off his shoes and left them on a rack by the door. Cuddles lived in the kitchen. His bed was a padded, kidney-shaped bit of heaven, covered in fake fur. His food, water, toys and pillow all lay within easy reach. There was a safety gate to keep him off the rugs and a doggie door that opened on to a nice yard. A cozy set-up for a young hound.

"C'mon, boy."

Cuddles sprang up, all two pounds of him, quivering with excitement. He now considered Frankie one of his oldest and dearest friends. The biting thing? Water over the dam, in Cuddles' opinion. An unfortunate lapse of comity. Now Cuddles *wuv*ed Frankie. Frankie had introduced him to Roast Beef. Frankie was a pal. Frankie was o-kay.

Cuddles was all recovered from his *afternoon d'amour*. Frankie had to promise Evaline he wouldn't let the girls walk him too fast. And no excessive fetching, a thing Frankie had never even seen the little dog do. They weren't to feed him. Cuddles had his own special food made by some organic outfit in Michigan. Shipped fresh every week. Frankie said yes to everything. He'd watch it.

Cuddles pranced to the car like a tiny Lipizzaner. He was hot to trot. Frankie wagged a finger in the little dog's face.

"It's not gonna happen, my friend," Frankie told the tiny Yorkie. "You're off the stuff."

Cuddles, lost in the spacious front seat of the Lincoln, looked dismayed and began licking his privates. Frankie replayed one bad hand

after another. Still upset. Jack Hanson had gotten the asparagus.

Karin and Katy received their new instructions with aplomb. As professional dog walkers they were used to dealing with difficult clients. It wasn't much different than handling meddlesome parents. That chore taken care of, they all went out to have some fun. The walk went much better. No one bitten. When Frankie saw people coming he made the parade cross the street. They finished up at Karin's house. She marched Cuddles right up to the door.

"Dad said he wants to see you."

Inside, it was the same mess. Frankie realized it didn't bother him as much as before and wondered if that meant there was something wrong with him. Jeff was in the garden, a hopeful term for a patch of weeds with a few falling-down cherry tomato plants and a thin row of spinach.

"Frankie! How was the walk?"

"Good."

Jeff looked puzzled. "I was wondering. How come you hire the girls to walk Cuddles and you always go along?"

Checking up on him. Frankie approved. "I don't always feel this good," he said truthfully.

Jeff nodded, got up, and slapped some dirt from his hands.

"I've got something I want to show you. You'll get a kick out of this."

Frankie followed Jeff to a back office. On a white architect's table were two laptops, a big, flat-panel monitor and a high-end printer.

"Nice set up," he said. Even though the laptops could be Paleolithic cooking implements for all Frankie knew. Jeff touched the keyboard and the external monitor lit up.

"Over here. Look!"

And there was a full-screen image of Cuddles abusing Roast Beef's hind leg. The little Yorkie's head was turned toward the camera. The look on his face was one of fierce determination mixed with a healthy dose of insanity. Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* meets Elmo of *Sesame Street*.

Frankie had to laugh. It was a great shot.

"I emailed the best ones to a friend of mine. He posted them on his blog."

"That's nice," said Frankie.

"It was amazing."

"Oh?"

"He got eight hundred thousand hits in a couple of days."

"What's a hit?" asked Frankie.

Jeff laughed. "That's when someone clicks on it. You know, takes a look."

Frankie stared at Jeff. "You mean eight hundred thousand people saw Cuddles humping Roast Beef's hind leg?"

"Yeah," said Jeff. "Amazing, isn't it?"

"Amazing," said Frankie, shaking his head. "Eight hundred thousand people. They pay anything for this?"

"No, it's all free." Jeff got a dreamy look on his face. "That's the beauty of the internet."

"People pay for some stuff," said Frankie. "I know that for a fact."

"Well, I hadn't thought about making it commercial," said Jeff.

"Well, think about it!" Frankie spoke slowly and clearly, the way he would to a child. "Eight hundred thousand people. A buck a pop."

"But how many of them would be willing to pay for it?" said Jeff. "It would make it almost like porn."

"Bingo," said Frankie. "I hear that's huge."

"Frankie, the shots have already been downloaded a ton of times for free."

"Then let's make it five bucks a pop," Frankie said. "For a full-length feature film."

"But..."

"I'll bring Cuddles over tomorrow. Get a pink dress for Roast Beef."

"That's sick!"

"And a video camera. You know how to do a web site, right?"

"Of course, but..."

Frankie put his hand on the younger man's shoulder.
 "This is America, Jeff. The people have spoken."



Summer left. Fall arrived. The season, as always, bursting with life before collapsing into its opposite. The foliage was incredible, painted on a canvas that stretched across mountains or fit in the palm of your hand. There were more apples in New York than cars. Fresh, wholesome, apple juice was being offered from stands on the side of the road.

And Frankie was feeling good.

It was a funny thing: when you were feeling good, things went good. Take at Seniors. When he needed a jack he got a jack. When he needed a heart he got a heart. As much as it was possible to make a killing playing three ten-cent raises, Frankie made it. He got a grapefruit. Two heads of lettuce. Two bunches of asparagus. And they were out of season!

Unfuckingbelievable!

His Senior pals called him a lucky bastard. They rode his ass mercilessly. They even shook their heads in admiration, the worst kind of jinx. It didn't matter. The cards kept coming. When Jack Hanson left early Frankie gave him a big fake smile and a gay wave.

"See you, Jack."

As he drove over to pick up Cuddles he was singing like Fred Astaire getting a blow job. This trip had nothing to do with dog walking. The pooch had a photo shoot.

A photo shoot!

And to think, it was all due to technology!

"God bless the Internet!" Frankie shouted at the windshield.

Combine one demented, little, sex-crazed Yorkie (the talent) with a seemingly infinite group of demented, sick, perverted fucks (the demographic) and the results were pure magic.

Frankie was rich!

They called the site “PornHound!”

Not that Frankie thought of it as *porn*. It was just two dogs, doing what dogs do—one dog—if you want to get technical because Roast Beef, the Gary Cooper of dog sex, still continued to snore through all the action.

Not too many suckers downloaded the full length feature at four ninety-nine a pop. Some did though, which amazed Frankie no end. This revenue stream, a new term for Frankie, brought in just about enough to pay for the server, a professional web designer to make Jeff’s efforts look nicer, and some payola to bigger outfits to get listed and linked. So that whole bitch was a wash.

So how were they making their money?

Simple. Mugs and t-shirts.

“Unfuckingbelievable!”

That word was on Frankie’s lips a lot these days. He was waking up in the middle of the night saying it.

“Unfuckingbelievable!”

They’d sold twelve thousand mugs and eight thousand t-shirts. They made eight bucks on a mug, ten on a tee. Split two ways after expenses Frankie had banked over fifty-five g’s. They’d just ordered twenty thousand more of each. Got a huge price break.

“Unfuckingbelievable!”

Frankie’s life was headed for those green pastures the bible was always going on about.

“Cuddles! Here, boy!”

When Frankie opened the gate the little Yorkie flew into his arms and began to cover him with kisses. It was all Frankie could do to keep from kissing him back.

“C’mon, little guy! Wanna get your picture taken?”

All the mugs and tees sported the photo Jeff had taken the first day. It was their logo. But they’d recently made a corporate decision to expand Cuddles’ image. They wanted to show him humping a Rottweiler but

they couldn't get one. They'd had a Black Lab named Olive lined up but it turned out to be male, so Frankie said no. He didn't want Cuddles attracting the wrong kind of perv, from a marketing standpoint, of course. He wanted Cuddles positioned as a red-blooded, American fucker.

Jeff agreed. Straight was best for now. "That's where the market share demographic is pointing," was how he put it.

They talked like that now.

And the Bud Light? Fall had taken care of that, too. Fall and twenty-eight days. Happened when Frankie caught Jeff, just right, and told him how it was. The disease. The genetics. Voice of experience. All of that. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. But so far, knock on wood, it was working. The twenty-a-day diet was a thing of the past. After the shoot he and Jeff planned to drop off the dog and catch a meeting. Things were, oh, so good. Frankie couldn't stop himself from singing.

"Oh, happy day,
Oh, happy day,
When Jesus wore,
A PornHound tee."

"Unfuckingbelievable!"

+

Frankie eased the big Lincoln up to the curb in front of the Colonial on Grove Street. The lawn was cut and posting modest gains. No dog shit in sight, no scattered toys. The bushes were trimmed neater than Kenny Rogers' beard. It always amazed Frankie what sobriety could do. Jeff had gotten his citizenship back.

Karin and Katy were in school. Jeff was probably in the office,

which is where he spent most of his time. Frankie let himself in. He was family now.

“lo Jeff!”

“Back here.”

The office was clean and humming. Turned out Jeff was a stock guy too, so a second monitor was ablaze with colored lights and charts and bars. Frankie couldn't begin to figure it out. All he knew was, he gave Jeff twenty-five hundred to play with and it had grown to four grand.

Oh, happy day!

“This is great, Frankie. Look!” Jeff pointed at the confusing mishmash on the screen. “BHTR is up three cents.”

“Wow, three whole fucking cents.”

“We got a hundred thousand shares.”

Frankie was quiet while he worked that out.

“Not bad,” he said. “Let's do the mail.”

They'd rented a box. Jeff didn't think they need it, but they were averaging twenty, thirty letters a day. A hundred and ten one day in August. Frankie couldn't believe it.

PornHound.biz was all set up with a shopping cart, yet these idiots actually wrote real letters with real checks inside to buy a stupid mug or tee. And people were sending pictures, usually of their own dogs humping. Humping pillows. Humping their owner's legs, coffee table legs. It was getting out of hand. And the shipping had turned out to be real bitch, too. It got so bad they had to sub it out. Now they just bundled the orders and sent them to the shipper. And it was *still* a lot of work.

But was Frankie complaining? Was he turning into an old whining fuck like half of them in Seniors?

No siree, Bob!

Why? Because of the money! Frankie had a mutual fund. He had a fat bank account that made him prouder than a Harvard grad's grandmother. He no longer needed therapy after filling up the Lincoln and, best of all, he hadn't thought about Enron in weeks.

“Those fucks!”

Still.

It was the eleventh envelope. A fat one. With an official seal on the front.

“Hey, Jeff. What’s this?”

Jeff took the envelope and shook it from side to side.

“It’s a letter, not a bomb,” said Frankie. “Open it.”

“It’s from the State Attorney General’s Office,” said Jeff, in a hollow voice.

“Maybe it’s about taxes?”

Jeff opened it carefully, as if even preserving the envelope might be important.

“Oh, shit!”

“What?” said Frankie.

“Oh, fuck!”

“What?”

“It’s from Eliot Spitzer. He’s suing us.”

“Who the fuck is that?”

“Eliot Spitzer? You don’t know? He’s the State Attorney General. He fucking sued Wall Street for billions. He fucking sues everyone.”

“No!”

“He brought down huge companies. Huge.”

“What’s he suing us for? He can’t do that!”

Jeff rustled through the thick document. “I don’t know. Here. Wait. It says we don’t have a disclaimer. You know, ‘If you’re under eighteen you must leave this site.’”

“We don’t need that,” yelled Frankie.

“He says we do.”

“These are two dogs fucking,” shouted Frankie. “Is he insane?”

“He’s Eliot Spitzer. We’re fucked, Frankie.”

“No way.”

“Wait, here’s some numbers. Oh, shit! They’re gonna fine us ten

thousand dollars a day for every day we didn't have a disclaimer."

Frankie did the math. "That's over six hundred thousand bucks."

He snatched the lawsuit from Jeff's hands, tried reading it, and failed. It was incomprehensible arglebargle.

"Frankie, we need a lawyer."

Frankie's voice took on a piteous tone. "But Jeff, it's only two dogs fucking. It's not porn. It's just two dogs, doing what dogs do naturally."

"But we called it PornHound, Frankie. It's Eliot Spitzer. We're fucked."

"...one dog, really. Only one dog fucking. It's just a joke. Can't he take a joke?"

"Maybe we can settle."

"Why us, Jeff?" Frankie slammed a fist on the desk. "Why didn't he fucking go after fucking Enron?"



The winter winds were howling. Frankie's terrace was a smooth slice of vanilla pie. Windowpanes rattled. Even the whole condo shook sometimes. Frankie had a cup of his weak and watery coffee in front of him. He had a table full of papers, the phone, a long yellow notepad and the calculator he'd bought special to figure the whole thing out.

He called the calculator "Eliot."

Eliot was on the job. The fines. The lawyer. The condo. The gas. The lights. The Lincoln. The whole bitch. Eliot popped out a final number.

"Wow!"

It could work, but it was going to be tough. There was only one way, really. Frankie needed a roommate.

"A roommate!"

Unfuckingbelievable!

"At my age."

The next story is "Frankie's Roommate"