



DOG SHELTER BLUES

A Novel

Mark Conkling



SANTA FE



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I dedicate *Dog Shelter Blues*
to my life-mate Patricia Marie,
who also happens to be my wife.
Lucky me.

*G*radually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts.

—Alexander Solschenizyn

*T*he last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason.

—T. S. Eliot

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Dogs bring mysterious things out of people, strong things that push back the edge of darkness so light can break through. Cats and horses can do the same thing, and so can other critters. A steady, robust push makes a bright light in the beginning and then flickers, dims, and goes out at the end. But it's hard to know how long the light will last, because it might go out in a few days or shine for years.

Norma Jean Lawson sat alone in her green Lexus parked in William Redfield's driveway, her hands clenched on the steering wheel. The full moon settled on the horizon, and the rising sun flashed in her clean, red hair, making tiny rainbows in her tears as she looked away from the dark bedroom window and stared at the SOLD sign by the driveway. It was July 28, 2003—probably the start of her new push.

Danny Sandoval's light dimmed and faded away last December 7, in 2002, along with, of all things, a dead, infected rabbit. The darkness stretched out from there, a shadowy vector dragging bad memories, like burned-out party lanterns bobbing on a steel wire snaked through his life. He never imagined his fight with Norma Jean would cost him his job, his sobriety, and after that night, maybe even his woman—all for the love of a few animals.

His demise was in the words before the story broke. That day, his boss at the Albuquerque Animal Humane Center waved the newspaper in Danny's face. "You idiot, the Mayor called, and you've screwed up our funding for sure. You're laid off for three weeks—don't come back 'til after Christmas."

"Laid off?"

“Yes, laid off. Why did you say you represented the Animal Humane Center?”

Danny put his hands on his hips. “You just don’t get it, do you?”

“Here’s what I get. Keep your mouth shut or I’ll lay you off for good.”

Danny had worked four years as a Vet Tech alongside Dr. Virgil Hummel, the veterinarian for the Center. Dr. Hummel had put his hand on Danny’s shoulder. “I’ll do what I can to support you here, but you’ve pretty much stepped in it.”

Danny slammed his fist on the table. “Norma Jean’s so-called Safe Sanctuary spreads disease—it should be called Sick Sanctuary.”

A large man, 6 feet 4 inches, and weighing 220 pounds, Virgil looked down at Danny over his reading glasses. “These folks are powerful, more than you imagine. It’s probably better to go gentle into this good night. Call me before you say anything else, okay?” He smiled with his mouth open; a smile people said looked like a happy Labrador, full of life.

Danny marched to the door. “I’ll be at home.”

His boss wrote a note. “Sandoval laid off—December 7, 2002.”

Later that day, Danny sat in a lawn chair in his backyard, picked at a hole in his tee shirt, and pushed on a knot in his stomach, just below his heart. A new lantern flickered on the end of the wire, the bright red tip of Danny’s second joint, held between his thumb and forefinger. He put his dog Lucky up on his lap. Lucky was a thirty-five pound beagle terrier cross, Danny’s best friend for the past nine years. A roadrunner scurried along the adobe wall, snapped up a lizard, and turned toward Danny, looking surprised. Roadrunners always look surprised. Danny’s deep blue eyes moistened. He sucked in a deep hit and gazed at the Sandia Mountains through gray, leafless cottonwood branches. A single raven soared overhead.

Danny had turned 35 in August, sworn off drugs years ago, and Lord knows he couldn’t drink, because that would surely be the end. He couldn’t quiet his mind even long enough to pray—all he could feel was his own loneliness—so, if not a couple of joints, then what? Screw it. He took another drag, feeling a mellow pink cloud slowly surround him—*one slip in five years—not too bad*. Lights twinkled in his mind:

blue, red, pink and yellow. His thoughts retraced the events, lantern by lantern.

Last night at Starbucks, Ida Corley, his fiancée, told him she might lose her job at Presbyterian Hospital because of him. They accused her of leaking medical records, a serious offense for an ICU nurse.

“You shouldn’t have talked about Stevie. You know medical records are private, and now the Human Resource office says I could be fired for a HIPAA violation. It’s also a ten-thousand-dollar fine. Why do you have to be so intense? The newspaper? Jesus, Danny, your attack was over the top.”

“Stevie’s the proof. Don’t you see? That puppy’s the link to Safe Sanctuary. For Christ sake, that’s what started it all.”

“I know, I know, but what I told you about Stevie’s case was private. You broke my confidence. This could end my career. You’re a sweet man, but you’re a loose cannon. Stay at your own house for a while. I need some time to sort this out.” Ida stood up, tossed her unfinished cup in the trash, and walked out. Danny stared as Ida walked away, a walk he loved to watch, probably the sweetest ass in Albuquerque. She claimed to love him, yet there she went.

That year before Thanksgiving, six-year-old Stevie and his mom Irene adopted the puppy, a beagle-terrier cross, in the mall parking lot from a man in a big, white van labeled SAFE SANCTUARY NO-KILL RESCUE CENTER. They gave him \$30, and he told them the puppy had all his shots. They chose him because he looked sleepy and lonely. Stevie kissed him on the nose and named him Happy, hoping to perk him up. Two days later, Happy died unexpectedly in the night. To cheer Stevie up, his mom took him to his favorite park, the Corley Prairie Dog Park out on Eubank, and bought him some popcorn. Within an hour, Stevie got sick, and threw up popcorn on the side of the trail. Later, a scampering male prairie dog ate a piece, kissed a couple of his females, and disease took over. Stevie went to the hospital and nearly died. Dozens of prairie dogs died. The New Mexico disease control officials said they found tularemia bacteria, and for fear of human illness, dropped cyanide pellets into all the prairie dog burrows, amid intense protests from local prairie dog defenders.

Stevie's puppy was dead, and so was a town of endangered Gunnison prairie dogs, all because that redheaded bitch Norma Jean Lawson did a sloppy job of running Safe Sanctuary. Danny claimed Norma Jean was a murderer through her neglect—he called it negligent homicide—and said as much in the interview in the *Westside Opinion*. He mentioned Stevie and his stay in the hospital, his near death, and other details that Ida had shared in confidence. Danny said Norma Jean Lawson should pay Stevie's hospital bills, and accused Safe Sanctuary of animal cruelty and bringing untold suffering and death to the prairie dogs. He told the reporter that Safe Sanctuary was a con, a menace in disguise, and the owners didn't give a damn for the dogs and cats. He called Norma Jean a "merchant of death," and said he was going to shut the place down, no matter what it took.

After two joints, Danny still paced and frowned. Earlier that day, after a noon AA meeting, two men came up to him in the parking lot and told him to find another meeting because of his outbursts.

"This is an AA meeting," one fellow said. "Remember? This is no place for politics—you're outaline."

"We need to stay sober," the other man said. "You went off for fifteen minutes about puppies and prairie dogs. Find a meeting somewhere else."

Hands shaking, Danny drove home, found his old emergency stash, and smoked a joint, knowing marijuana would end his five years of sobriety. *Hell with it, even those drunks don't understand.*

His two-bedroom green and white mobile home sat on two acres near the river, off Isleta Boulevard, in the south valley. Danny had built a large shed, and had fenced in a half-acre space with a gate and a makeshift holding pen with a one-way door. He put up a sign that said, STRAYS WELCOME, NO CHARGE. The holding pen featured shade, a big doghouse filled with straw and fresh water. He built a workbench where he checked over animals before taking them to the shelter or turning them loose in the yard. He often fed and tended six or eight resident dogs. Animal Control once cited him for dog hoarding, but exams showed that all his animals were healthy, and his steady rotation to the Humane Society proved useful to the neighborhood. Danny didn't

mind that neighbors called him the dog man. He scratched Lucky's ears and gazed out across the stubby alfalfa field. Leftover red penstemons leaned against the fence, as though worn out from blooming.

Danny had been a dedicated Vet Tech for the past four years. A year before that, a school principal at the zero-tolerance middle school had fired him for having alcohol on his breath, and the state revoked his teaching certificate in math and social studies. A friend took him to AA, and helped him get a job with the animal shelter, a job he loved the moment he helped Dr. Hummel with a spay surgery. As he softly petted a Collie when she awoke from anesthesia, something moved deep inside him, in his bones, and his path changed. He earned his Vet-Tech certificate over the next year at the community college. His quiet nature, deep blue eyes, innocent grin, and tousled dark hair attracted a number of women, but he had settled on Ida Corley last spring, and they lived together, mostly at her apartment. She loved his strong athletic body and the gentle way he made love to her. He felt safe with her, and loved her smell, often relaxing in her aroma from the anxiety that plagued his daily life. Danny believed that deep in his mind something vital was missing, some connection he couldn't make, a link that would turn his scattered thoughts into a new, brilliant pattern, like a kaleidoscope. It was as though unfinished synapses awaited a bolt of lightning that would settle the storm and help him rest.

Danny loved animals almost as much as he loved Ida—he'd do most anything to save them. Dogs liked him, and Danny's eyes became moist when he talked with them. They would sniff him and settle down, as though a mysterious scent arose from his skin, a scent known only by dogs, perhaps a spiritual aura that wafted across species. He had an uncanny ability to smell infection in their ears, smell digestive disorders in their breath, and feel their spiritual pain.

He often brushed away the gray clouds he saw on their backs when they suffered. Sometimes he pushed away clouds as he put their dead bodies into black garbage bags, the shrouds of euthanasia, as though he was adding love to what remained, and wishing them, and perhaps himself, a better life in whatever lay ahead.

Danny and Virgil Hummel had developed a spay-neuter program at the shelter, and Danny had recruited Albuquerque pet stores to provide gift certificates and advertising. Virgil shared statistics with Danny showing that each spay of a female dog actually prevented 900 puppies from her puppies over a ten-year period. Since about 80 percent of unwanted puppies are euthanized, Danny figured each spay saved 720 lives. He kept a notebook in his pocket and recorded spays and neuters, a sort of calculus of lives saved. He figured he and Virgil had saved 7,200 lives since the program began two months ago, plus the lives saved from neutering males, a number way too large to calculate. There were times he believed the unborn animal souls were grateful for being left in their spiritual habitat, a belief he had shared once with Virgil. “Do you think that’s crazy?” Danny asked.

Virgil smiled, raising an eyebrow. “Who knows? *If the Sun & Moon should doubt, They’d immediately Go out.* Blake.”

“Whatever. I just think they’re better off unborn instead of suffering and being killed.”

“We’re on the same wavelength. I hate to see animals suffer. I don’t think they’re afraid of death, but I do think they fear pain. That’s one reason I do this. They don’t need to live in fear.”

Danny’s attack on the Safe Sanctuary No-Kill Rescue Center struck a nerve in the Albuquerque animal-lover’s community. The next issue of *The Westside Opinion* set a record for the number of letters to the editor. In that issue, Norma Jean Lawson threatened a lawsuit and told a reporter that she would sue anyone who tried to stop her life’s work.

“Safe Sanctuary is the only non-profit no-kill sanctuary in New Mexico,” she said. “My professional work here is vital, and we save hundreds of dogs and cats from certain death. Danny Sandoval is ignorant and self-centered. He does not understand animal rescue.”

Danny took the last hit on the joint and realized he had probably screwed himself. With only \$1500 in the bank, at least he had his trailer and Lucky. He stroked Lucky’s back and watched a couple of yellow finches at the bird feeder as tears clouded his eyes. Three quail scratched

the ground and bobbed their heads, pecking at leftovers, oblivious to the weight of it all.

A strange Ford sedan drove up, and a little man in a wrinkled suit and a fedora hat got out. Danny pushed the joint into the dirt and watched him approach as the birds fluttered away.

“Are you Danny Sandoval?” the man asked.

“Yes.” Danny smelled the man’s sweaty clothes and sour vodka.

He shoved some papers in Danny’s face. “Consider yourself served.”

Danny squinted and looked at the papers. Norma Jean Lawson, owner of Safe Sanctuary No-Kill Rescue Center, LLC, had filed suit against him for libel and slander, asking for \$500,000 in damages and a restraining order to keep him off the property.

Those sonsabitches—where’s my shotgun? His flash of anger smoothed into sadness as his thoughts drifted to hundreds of dead prairie dogs at the Corley Prairie Dog Park and the sinister conditions at Safe Sanctuary—he had taken pictures during an anonymous tour, pictures that made him shudder. Puppies ran free in wooded areas and ate scat. Mothers nursed litters in filthy boxes filled with straw. Frightened dogs bit at their wire cages. He figured the beagle had gotten into a rabbit carcass, probably by digging around in the shallow pit where they tossed dead animals, a damp place in the willows with a pungent, acrid smell that shimmered with heat waves. Danny was angry that the *Westside Opinion* refused to use his photo of the pit. They said it would gross people out. He was not going to let this go. They hide their neglect behind phony compassion. They’re cruel, money-grubbing assholes. He’d make sure the sun shined on this dark place.

The lawsuit was specific, “libel, and slander.” This was serious. He felt flush, and rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. Lucky sat up, whined, and licked Danny’s face. “I know little buddy, I know. I’ll call my sponsor. Next thing you know I’ll be drunk and disorderly.”