

Picasso, the Dog They Couldn't Kill

And Other Stories from the Life of an Animal Doctor

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From Chapter 8, Picasso, the Dog They Couldn't Kill

Passing through my waiting room, headed for an examination, I stopped and stared impolitely at her. Mrs. Walsh and a few waiting clients, equally impolite, were also gawking. Maybe excusable? After all, how many women wore a full-length, flowing cloak in the early morning, especially one of a glowing, satin-like royal purple? Her dress was a blinding bright red, her shoes the highest-heeled patent leather. The long, dark hair, the large hoop earrings, the huge golden necklace somehow spelled Gypsy.

It turned out she was Violetta DeMazia, famous in the world of fine art as a teacher, an author, and a director of the fabulous Barnes Foundation fine arts museum in nearby Merion. A striking and impressive figure, she used her arms, hands, and body in a theatrical manner. Her voice was in the low, measured tones of an experienced lecturer. Yes, she was an aristocratic, handsome eye-catcher and well aware of the impression she made. Certainly an atypical Main Liner; no mink coats or tennis shoes for her.

According to my secretary-detective, Violetta was more than a foundation director, teacher, and art advisor to the wealthy Dr. Barnes. She was also "you know what" to him. The term mistress was too indelicate for Mrs. Walsh. "Of course, you know how the Main Line gossips," she whispered. I did indeed.

Violetta's choice of pets, a miniature Italian greyhound named Picasso, was, in the canine sense, equally elegant and impressive. He was fine-boned, chiseled, and fragile-looking. At first glance, one's impression was that a strong wind would carry him away like Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*, but looks can be deceiving. He was nearly indestructible, as I learned on three occasions.

Picasso was first presented to me as a three-month-old pup. He grew nicely, with no health problems. Personality-wise, he was aloof and dignified but not unfriendly. Like his owner, he made a statement even when he sat still. However, he had one character defect that caused a long hospital stay when he was about fourteen months old.

I learned that he was an "escape artist." If anyone left the front door open, he would take off. The back door led to a walled garden, so no escape was possible there. The little guy was determined to escape and see the world, though, and was creative in his efforts to run. Violetta rationalized his bad habit as a desire to hunt. Unlike its large relatives, greyhounds and whippets, though, Picasso's breed is usually considered more ornamental and companionable.

Violetta dearly loved her companion and took every precaution to prevent his escape. But "Where there is a will, there is a way" could have been written for our little Houdini. One day when he escaped, he met the irresistible force in the form of a large refuse collection truck, and the results were nearly disastrous. He was a pathetic sight. Stretched out on the exam table on a white blanket that appeared to hold more blood than his body did, he was in deep shock. The massive bleeding and the pale oral mucous membranes spelled a dreadful prognosis. It was obvious without X-rays or palpation that the distorted front legs were broken. He was unconscious. Skull injuries? Very likely, with the large, gaping wound above his eyes. His very shallow, irregular respirations were also ominous. It looked like Houdini was about to perform his final escape act. I was disheartened. I had buried too many like him.

Violetta, though trembling and distraught, showed her breeding in her admirable control. "Is there any chance he can be saved?" she asked quietly.

I thought he would last at best a half-hour, the damage was so massive. "Please go home," I told her. "I have to get

to work on him immediately. I'll call you. There's always a chance while he's alive." Her sense of dignity was as great as her little dog's, but at that moment she looked so forlorn I did something one shouldn't do to a woman client (very elderly women excepted)—I hugged her. "Go home, Ms. DeMazia, I'll call."

To everyone's amazement, especially mine, after blood typing and a transfusion from one of our resident donors, Picasso responded within nine hours. There was still a serious concussion and the multiple fractures to contend with, but he was alive. Within the next twenty-four hours, his vital signs were almost stable. Hallelujah!