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FINDING A REASON TO LIVE: THE STORY OF PUPPY DOE, KIYA (PART ONE)

By Sally and Jonathan Sauer

1. DECEMBER 31, 2016. DAN, THE GENERAL CONTRACTOR, SITS AT HIS DESK, LATE IN THE AFTERNOON.

It rumbled with thunder outside some and Dan could hear it raining. Like cats and dogs. The sky weeping tears for reasons maybe only it best understood. Was the sky sad to see the old year end? Or, was it sad to think that a new year was going to begin?

“So, tomorrow is gonna be New Year's Day and 2016 is *finally* done with. Thank God!” he thought to himself, sipping a cold coffee, fortified, just the way the Bishop likes it.

Dan's general contracting business, like 2016. was probably done for, too. Liabilities *way* outnumbered assets and there weren't *any* retained earnings. In the way of those who were beginning to feel no pain, he thought that outside right now, the sky was doing better than he was. Because, it had liquidity. His business, on the other hand, had nothing but *ill*-liquidity. If that is even a word.

Another sip. Mulling over his options, he thought that if he were that kind of guy, he might take some of that money due his subs and keep it. Maybe just leave, turn the lights out and close and lock the doors and head for the hills. But, he wasn't that kinda guy. And, besides, he remembered that that is what he had done last month. Taken a wee bit of a loan from his subs.

Dan almost couldn't help it. He didn't used to think this way but these days, he thought that he kinda didn't like most of his subs. But, nowhere *near* as much as he hated architects. After all, a guy's gotta have his priorities, right? But, subs had this annoying habit of wanting to get paid. Every month, even.

“Bah, humbug!” he snickered to himself, those two unfamiliar words kinda feeling good to say. As those guys on Chopped would say, saying those words had a good *mouth feel*. And, if that expression was good enough for Scrooge, it was good enough for him. He wondered, though. Scrooge had had all of that money. Dan wondered. Did that mean he was an *owner*? And, is an owner even more despicable than an architect? Or, is an owner only despicable *because* of an architect? He realized that the answer to these questions was above his pay grade. This assuming that he had a pay grade. Other than his current one which was, unfortunately, near zero.

Dan's hand lingered in a kind of lazy way over the gun he found in his center desk drawer. A Sig Sauer. Maybe some company that lawyer had something to do with. Then again, probably not. If he could do something useful, such as making guns, then why would he want to be a lawyer?

Dan had always thought of guns as *good* things. Something with which to protect his business and his family. The business *was* his family, in some ways. At least, it *had* been. Some of the guys had been with him since day one. They had put up with a lot of difficult circumstances, when things hadn't gone so good, especially in the beginning. Like not getting paid some weeks and then their having to go home and try to explain *that* to the missus. And, where would his family be without the money his business had provided? They say that money is the root of all evil. He had looked that up in the Bible and there it had said that it was the *love* of money that was the root of all evil. Practically speaking, though, and especially for this last eight years, Dan thought it was probably the *lack* of money that was the root of all evil. Without money, what happens to the family? To either of them: his guys during the day time and his family all of the time.

Just a few hours earlier, one of his better subcontractors, Carl, had been sitting across from him, looking for a check. Almost whining about needing money. Hey, fella, get in line! Of course, Carl probably didn't think of himself as being whiny. Thinking back on it, Dan

hadn't thought of him as being whiny some years back. In fact, he had *liked* Carl. They used to ride motorcycles together to rallies. And, gone fishing every now and again. What had changed? Three words. The Great Recession. And, besides, other than subs, he owed the bank. And, of course, he owed the bonding company or would if this group of subs went to it. He also owed those humorless blood-suckers at the IRS, who were the worst of all.

Funny how things were with the Feds. They had just *let* the Great Recession happen. They *knew* all about the sub-prime mortgages, the Jamaican cab-drivers with the six houses, how the whole thing was nothing but smoke and mirrors and very little of either. Those mortgage brokers made snake oil salesmen selling out the back of covered wagons look reputable.

That money guy the Feds had all worshipped. Greenspan? This is what he had he said to some congressional committee: "Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders' equity, myself included, are in a state of shocked disbelief." Do those words make any sense? Kind of like many bid books he had been reading lately. The 'cutting and pasting' endemic to bid books these days, just another thing which made construction so enjoyable. You're supposed to cut and patch drywall, not cut and paste specs.

He took another sip. Contemplating. Greenspan sort of *sounded* like an architect. Wasn't being the head honcho of the Fed bad enough? At least he had admitted that 'he had put too much faith in the self-correcting power of free markets and had failed to anticipate the self-destructive power of wanton mortgage lending.' *Duh!* More empty words. Dumb words.

But, since the so-called end of the Great Recession, construction had not really come back. Not all the way. At least, not at his dollar volume. Margins for public work had all but disappeared. He knew of plenty of gc's who had just simply quit, when they saw jobs going for less than what he knew to be the actual cost of just the labor and materials going into a job.

His expenses hadn't gone down. This current bunch of crooks running the government looked like a bunch of armadillos. Anteaters. If there was something they didn't know how to handle – or, simply lacked the balls to do anything about – they'd just put their heads in the sand. Hey, if you didn't admit that there was such a thing as a 'radical Islamic terrorist', didn't that mean that they probably didn't exist? But, if they didn't exist, exactly who was it who kept blowing up buildings, killing people? Cutting peoples' heads off?

This current crop of politician losers would say: 'There is no inflation. Prices have been holding steady.' Well then, answer me this, he thought. Why had the price of almost everything he bought gone up? There was the price of one thing that hadn't gone up. That would be the price of jobs. For that, he was expected to take it on the chin. Again. Even as tough a man as Joe Frazier would fall down at some point. Shots to the head. Body blows. It all added up.

He took another sip. This cold coffee was tasting better and better! Especially after he had gotten rid of the objectionable part of it. That would be the coffee. He held up his cup to the light. Since when had they been making coffee that was colorless? Whiskey had color. But, then again, vodka and gin didn't.

Yet, even though one arm of the Fed Beast had allowed sub-prime mortgages to happen, which almost encouraged the Great Recession to occur as night follows day, *another* arm of the Fed Beast - the IRS – told him that he should promptly meet all of his tax obligations with not even half of the profit he used to make. Those a-holes had a guaranteed weekly check, benefits, even a pension. Two or three weeks paid vacation. What did they know about what life was like for guys who actually had to work for a living? And, he hadn't taken a vacation in almost ten years. The jobs didn't just build themselves.

The Great Recession had all but destroyed his company. So, now, he had to play all of these games with subs, most of whom were not bad guys at all. Games that in years gone by he hadn't had to play. Or, at least to this extent. Heck, increasingly, he was just trying to make it to another year. Sometimes, maybe, just to another month. Maybe just past this upcoming payday.

"Carl," Dan had said, a few hours ago. "As soon as the owner pays, you'll get your money." This excuse had worked well enough last month. Maybe lightning would strike again? But, Carl knew that he was lying. As he had last month. And as he would probably do next month. Some minutes passed. Carl replied evenly: "OK, Dan, I'll be back in a bit." Dan couldn't help but thinking that Carl wasn't so bad a guy. In fact, he was really one of the *good* guys. After all, he had to pay his guys, support his family. Truth be told, most of the other subs weren't bad guys either. They had to make a buck, just like he did. To meet payroll. Buy groceries.

And, for many, pay the alimony to the ex. Wasn't it Groucho Marx who had said that 'paying alimony is like feeding hay to a dead horse'? He allowed himself a small grin. Wondering, why would a dead horse be interested in more hay anyhow? The only thing he might think about is how to stay out of the glue factory.

Dan had watched Carl leave the office. It had been raining then, too. Rain, a bit unexpected for the last day of December, when it should be coming down as snow. He opened his desk drawer and picked up that half-empty bottle rolling around his drawer. Lucky it hadn't smashed itself against the gun. Now, there would have been a waste of good booze! The coffee all gone and with his not wanting to make another pot, he put his big boy pants on and took it straight from the bottle. He took a big gulp and sighed, feeling the heat working its way down. A man took his comfort however he found it, whether he was supposed to do it that way or not.

He flipped on the TV. Time for the news. The usual world troubles. His attention wandered. He took another swig, hearing the words tonelessly vomiting from the news anchor's mouth. Car accident after car accident. Suicide bomber after suicide bomber. Why didn't the news anchor just say something like this: 'Today's news is just about the same as yesterday's. Bad. But, thankfully, not much worse. There be nothing left to be said, I'm going home.' Then, break away to commercial. Maybe have that be just one long Lincoln Continental ad with that Texas guy in it, the guy with the last name that is hard to spell. A shame they didn't make Town Cars anymore. How can Lincoln, with a straight face, call MKC and MKZ cars *Lincolns*? At least the new Continental was a step in the right direction. A kind of Mickey Rooney version of a Town Car.

The bottle was nearly empty. His next to last sip. In three weeks, there would be a new President. As far as he was concerned, they couldn't get rid of the current guy fast enough. As The Donald had said: 'Vote for me. What do you have to lose?' Ronald Reagan had said the same thing but in a slightly different way: "Are you better off now than you were four years

ago?" That had worked for him, just like it had worked for The Donald. The American voter is angry? They simply have no idea. Washington should be happy that the whole damn country wasn't marching on it. It might come to that, yet.

"Hell's bells!" Dan muttered to himself, watching one bad scene from the newscast on TV be replaced by one that was even worse. "You can't bleed for the whole damn world. When was the last time the world bled for me? That would be, like, never."

They started to play that dog video again. Man, there sure are some sick S.O.B.'s out there, he told himself. They played that Puppy Doe video every time there was going to be a new court appearance on the animal abuse criminal case. "At least *I* haven't rummaged through my attic to find my medieval torture how-to book. Or, gone to Craig's List and get myself some pit bull puppy who I would then keep in a closet for months. Breaking practically every bone in its body. Almost drawing and quartering it. Splitting its tongue. Burning its nose. Stabbing it in the eye. And, almost starving it to death," he thought. Trials were simpler in the old days, especially out West. You needed only three things for justice: a rope, a tree and a horse.

Of course, this being America, the guy hadn't actually done these things. He had only *allegedly* done these things. Hadn't he read somewhere that the guy who did this was some kind of an illegal from some part of Europe? Now, wouldn't things have been better had we had The Wall? He grinned, sheepishly. Oh. That's right. Can't put a wall up against the Atlantic Ocean. If they could, then maybe Scituate wouldn't flood so much.

"At least I'm still a human being," he said, sighing, after the painful-to-watch video had ended. He angrily wiped some eye leakage from his cheek. He wasn't looking forward to telling his wife, Sue, tonight that maybe they were going to have to file for bankruptcy. What kind of a New Year's present would *that* be? She wasn't even his first wife. She was his second wife. And, it's not a good idea to piss off second wives. There are seldom third wives. By then, a man wouldn't have left a dollar that wasn't spoken for. And, by then, he'd probably have run out of interest, anyway. Besides, blue pills would just be something else that he would have trouble

paying for. But, did he really need them, though? “Yeah,” he thought. “I’d kind of probably need them.” He was a little pleased that no one was around to hear him say that.

"Let the bank have the house," he thought. "Maybe move down South where the rents aren't so high. Maybe start over." After a pause, “Again.”

Dan's hand again wandered in that center desk drawer, idly taking inventory of everything that was in it. He counted four pens. A couple of pencils. For some reason, he had saved some used staples. A few business cards from subcontractors he'd never used and would probably never use. Three quarters. Those he put right in his pocket. “Last money I’ll make this year,” he muttered.

He touched that gun again. The metal communicated a kind of alien quality. Cold. Lifeless. Which, maybe, he soon might be. He had that life insurance policy, he mused. It would probably pay out should he have an accident cleaning the gun. You know, an Ernest Hemingway-type thing. Not that Sue would ever forgive him for that. But, hell, he wouldn't be around to worry about that now, would he? Let her next husband put up with her! And, with her moods! Allowing himself a slight (drunken) grin, he thought, let *him* try to find a place in the closet to put *his* clothes. Amidst that collection of dozens and dozens of pairs of shoes. He looked down at his feet. He thought, "Yep, still just have two of them, same number as yesterday. So, I only need two shoes. And, besides. Isn't Imelda Marcos supposed to be dead? That shoe lady from the Phillipines?" Thinking about his second wife - his, maybe, soon to be first widow - he wondered if maybe there was such a thing as re-incarnation. Funny, he thought. Sue sure doesn't look Phillipino. He giggled. “Men don't giggle,” he said. “They chortle. Sometimes, they might even guffaw.” But, then he giggled some more.

2. DAN LOVES COUNTRY MUSIC. RANDY TRAVIS, ESPECIALLY.

It had settled into a fairly continuous rain. It was almost completely dark by now. So, he could hear it but could only just barely see it.

Dan was lost in thought. He loved country music, especially Randy Travis. But, even the great RT had had his share of being down and out. But, since country music was all about drunkenness, divorce, lost jobs, poverty and just plain bad luck, wasn't having some ups and downs, you know, good for the music?

Last time for Randy, in 2012, it was another DWI, as well as public intoxication. They said he had been found lying naked on the road, threatening an investigating officer. Woman troubles. Just like the rest of us, Dan thought. Randy had divorced his wife in 2010, the one he had moved in with when he was 18 and she was something like 36 and still married. Like, to someone else. Talk about your basic cougar! That wife had become Randy's first manager. She ended up divorcing her then-husband and she and Randy got married.

Turns out that the new wife had this dentist, who she liked a lot. Of course, it turns out that Randy liked the dentist's wife a whole lot more. So, Randy starts an affair with the dentist's wife, Mrs. Dentist. Then, the husband has an argument with Randy, and Randy ends up lying naked on a road. Something like that. Didn't make much sense, he thought. I guess you would have to be there.

In happier days, Dan thought, there was no one better than Randy. Randy could sing that song, "Amazing Grace", like no one else could. That song, which to the truly down and out appeared to be something like a life raft. To someone who was drowning from *life*. He remembered hearing in church the minister say that the guy who wrote that song had been, at one time, the captain of a slave-trading ship. He could only imagine what sights had been in front of that man's eyeballs each day. What sounds had passed over his ears, especially at night, when there wasn't a whole lot to do to keep busy.

The song. So simple. So beautiful. Maybe those who are closest to the bottom level of hell can most quickly find the nearest on ramp up and out. Down any further no longer being an option. Not something that even had to be considered.

But, Randy and his brother, Dave, were into more than booze. They say probably drugs, but, who knows? You can't believe everything you read. Randy had his first stroke in July, 2013, the same month Dave got arrested for having a meth lab in his home, if Dan remembered correctly, hopefully he was not misremembering as Brian Williams might have done once or twice.

Dan knew that there had been even more serious health problems. Even now, going on four years later, Randy was still recovering and, at times, it was still looking grim for him. So, when Randy went up on stage in October, 2016 at the Country Music Hall of Fame, getting ready to be inducted, he had with him his current wife, Mary. (In case you lost track, she was the ex-wife of the guy who had the dentist that everyone seemed to like, some his wife more.)

Stepping up to that microphone, no one sitting in the audience knew exactly what to expect. Maybe Randy wasn't entirely sure about what was going to happen. Dan had watched the YouTube video many times. (There not being that many active, paying jobs, he had *lots* of free time.) Dan thought again about how touching that video was. "Well," Dan sighed. "What can you do? You can't save the whole world. God Bless Randy and everyone around him and I hope he recovers and comes back to country music, hale and hardy, real soon."

Dan looked down at the empty bottle and at the loaded gun. The one empty of promise. The other, full of lies.

3. DAN PREPARES TO GO HOME.

Dan thought again about going home and talking to his wife about their troubles. This was not something he was in any hurry to do. He didn't move from his desk. His hand wandered again to the drawer holding the gun. His wife could make do with that money. His last act on Earth would be to provide for his family. Something that he didn't really seem able to do for them just now.

Dan pulled the drawer all of the way out. The decision had almost been made. But, not quite yet.

Then, he heard a kind of strange sound and he abruptly turned to his front door. At first, he thought that maybe someone had knocked on the door. Had Carl come back to argue with him? Maybe, to punch him out for not paying him? The knock was actually more like a skitter, kind of like a scratch. Not quite like fingernails across a chalk board. But, kind of similar. A bit eerie when it's dark and raining and you are alone in a dark building, all by yourself.

"Man," Dan thought. "Can this day get any worse? Now, I'm afraid to open my own damn door."

Dan moved to the door and opened it a crack. There sat a dog. Or, what looked like a dog. Half dead, she looked more like a pile of rags, kind of like a drowned rat. Whimpering, she lifted her head up and did something unexpected. She stood all the way up on her back legs and began licking Dan's face. Furiously. Tail wagging, every which way. Whoa! Where did this come from?

"Crap," he thought. "I didn't even know my face was dirty." Dan looked around outside, awkwardly stumbled over the dog and ran around his office building. Was somebody playing a joke on him, a prank? He didn't know anything about taking care of dogs. These days, he could hardly take care of himself. He looked at the dog's neck. No tags. Family pets were supposed to have tags. Was this dog all alone. Kind of like the way he was feeling?

"Oh, lovely," Dan thought, returning. "Now what am I going to do? Why me? How on Earth could this thing have shown up on a night like this. When I have so many other things to worry about. I don't need this. I don't need another mouth to feed." The complaints kept tumbling out of his mouth.

Dan sank to the ground, his head between his hands. He looked up into the dark, wet night sky.

"Why me? Why me, God? I don't deserve this! I don't need you to send me a dog. I just need for you to send me some help. A paying job or two would be really appreciated just about now."

The dog kind of walked over to Dan and laid her head on Dan's knee. After a bit, Dan realized that he had been petting the dog but had not been aware that he was doing this. Even though she was wet, he wondered if she might be thirsty. He looked around for some kind of dish to put water into. The coffee cup was empty. Why not use that? And, he remembered that someone had left half of a small meatball sub in the fridge in the break room. It had been there for a couple of days and was probably all dried up. And, since when had construction workers started eating small subs? Bad enough. But, having leftovers, too? How do you have left-overs from a small sub? "Only a guy who hadn't given me a good morning's work would have left-overs from a small sub," he thought. "Guilty conscience, maybe, affecting his appetite."

He wondered if, maybe, the dog might like it. The dog took one bit of the sub and then licked Dan's hand even harder. He suddenly realized that this dog was the only living creature in his world right now – at least at this very minute - who didn't actually *want* anything from him. Who wasn't interested in criticizing him. Or, like Sue's mom (behind his back), calling him a failure when she thought he couldn't hear her but he actually could. The only thing this dog seemed to want other than a brief drink and a small snack was the opportunity to lick his face and place her head on his knee. And, of course, wag her tail.

In a sense, having this dog lick his face was kind of gross. Who knew where that tongue had last been? He had a pretty good idea where that tongue might have been. But, strangely, he found it to be comforting nonetheless. It had been a couple of months since he had touched Sue. Or, she, him. When that kind of thing was going on – or, not going on - did it really matter who was the actor and who was the non-actor?

Dan smiled. He realized that it had been awhile since he had done that. He locked the center drawer of his desk, picked-up the dog and headed to his truck. It was still raining, although a bit less so. The dog was shivering some. Cold. He covered the dog with his jacket. "Guess I'll have to take you to the vet now," he told the dog. "You probably will need some shots, too."

He looked at her again, and then up at the sky. "God," he asked. "Just where do you think I'm going to get the money to pay a vet?" Even though he wasn't a Catholic, he remembered an old Catholic saying. Or, maybe, it was an old Irish saying. This being Boston, there probably wasn't that much of a difference. This is what he remembered. "With every baby, God sends with it a loaf of bread."

It was cold outside and now it was Dan who was shivering. Especially since he was no longer wearing his jacket for some reason.

He looked at the dog again. Who had perked up considerably after having had a drink and most of the remaining, stale meatball half-sandwich. The dog looked at the truck. Possibly wondering where they would be going. Possibly not at all caring.

The more he pet her, the faster she licked. By now, the tail was wagging at a pretty good clip. A regular rocket tail, he thought.

"I suppose I am going to have to give you a name," he told the dog. He remembered learning about that poor dog in the video, who had not deserved even one bit the shameful way she had been treated. A name came to mind.

"Kiya," he murmured. "Maybe, I'll call you Kiya," he said, petting her. "That name didn't do that other doggie much good, I'm afraid," he said, with a sigh. Petting her some more. "Maybe the second time around will be the charm."

4. A MAN AND HIS DOG.

He got in his truck with his dog sort of sitting on his lap. He couldn't get his seat belt on because he had this lump on his lap. Within a few minutes, the dog was asleep. The dog appeared to be smiling. Dan wondered, did dogs actually smile? He wasn't sure. He remembered that when babies appeared to be smiling, some of the time it was just gas. He smiled, though. Again. It seemed like this was getting to be a habit.

“Ah, heck,” he thought to himself. “Subcontractors aren’t so bad, after all.” Thinking about it some more. “Maybe I’ll call up Carl and ask him if he’d like to get a sandwich and a beer. I know he needs dough. Maybe we can work something out.”

The wipers were going at a pretty good clip. “I guess I can stand Sue. After all, most of the time, she seems like she can stand me. And, thankfully, her Mom doesn’t come to visit us all that often.” He laughed. “Even if I spend half my life tripping over all of her shoes.”

A bit more petting. Not much traffic yet. He figured that those who would be going out were probably still getting ready. It would be good to be inside on a cold and rainy night. Safer, too.

“Of course, I am never gonna feel any different about architects,” he pondered. “After all, a man’s gotta have his standards. There are, after all, certain eternal truths.”

On the way home, he thought he would surprise Sue with her favorite: a sausage, pepper, pepperoni, onion and mushroom pizza from Town Spa. Of course, he would have to stop at another place and pick up another meatball sub. A fresh one. And, this time, a *large* one.

After driving for another ten minutes or so, he realized that it had nearly stopped raining. The new year was not starting to look so bad, after all. And, maybe somewhere up in Heaven, a dog was smiling.

That would be Kiya. Happy at last.

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