



### OLGA, MAMA AND MUGSEY

The neighborhood was known as Fulton Ferry although the ferry stopped running when the bridge was built a hundred years before. I lived in a loft there, under the Brooklyn Bridge and just across the street from the East River. Most of my space was used as a studio where I did portfolios for models and entertainers and any other photography jobs that came my way.

Back then, in the seventies, what later became known as DUMBO was a gritty waterfront district. The Brooklyn piers were still active and loud with longshoremen and trucks lining up, waiting to load and unload and there was a metal recycling facility just about where the River Café would eventually open. Most of the buildings were run-down warehouses and small factories built in the nineteenth century and the people living there were musicians and artists in illegal lofts like I was. The whole area was buzzing with activity during the day but quiet at night and on weekends. Chances were that anyone you saw on the street at those times lived there, and since so few of us did live there we all got to know one another. We were like pioneers staking our claim on an unsettled corner of Brooklyn.

Olga Bloom was one of my neighbors. She lived on an old coffee barge. She got it for a song, refurbished its interior with recycled and donated materials and had it towed to a dilapidated pier at the foot of Fulton Street. A small section of her barge was reserved for living space leaving the rest for her chamber music recitals. Sometimes at night I would go to the pier to look at the river and the

downtown Manhattan skyline. I could hear, through the steel walls of the barge, Olga playing her violin. She had a scruffy but cute dog named Mama who would come out to play when someone was on the pier. One night Mama wasn't there but another dog was. He looked something like a German Sheppard but not quite and with no collar I figured he was a stray. He poked my hand with his snout a few times until I got the message and scratched his ears. It didn't end there, because he followed me across the street to the door of my building and looked at me sadly as I started to go in. I supposed it wouldn't hurt if I took him home for some fresh water and scrounged up something for him to eat. I had half of a chicken cutlet sandwich in the fridge and supplemented that with Wheaties and milk. He was well behaved and ate politely although clearly very hungry. When he finished eating, he circled my welcome mat a few times then lay down and went to sleep. Seeing that, I decided to let him spend the night and would send him on his way in the morning.

I awoke the next day with him standing beside my bed nudging me with his wet nose. It was time to let him go but I knew I couldn't just put him back out on his own. I walked him and then started calling friends to see if any of them wanted a dog. I gave him a big build up and all I got in return were a few who said, "Let me think about it." A bath would make him more appealing, I thought, so I got him into the tub. He must have been on the street for a long time. He was filthy but after a few washes, rinses and repeats, he looked good enough for the Westminster Dog Show. He felt better too and seemed really happy to be clean, wildly running from one end of my loft to the other, jumping and chasing his tail. After he settled down I took him shopping. We got a leash, collar and enough dog food for the few days I'd have to wait to see if any of my friends wanted him. Then I thought of Olga. She had plenty of room and already had one dog so maybe she'd like another. We went down to the pier and found Olga on deck doing some gardening.

She noticed him immediately and said, "Hey, when did you get a dog?"

"He's a stray I found here last night. He followed me home and ..." then I went on about what a great dog he was.

As I was making my pitch, Mama came out and she and Mugsey started to play.

I took advantage of this and asked, "Don't you think he'd be a perfect companion for Mama? Look at how well they get along."

"No thanks." Olga replied, "One is enough."

As she was petting him she said, "So what did you name him?"

"I didn't name him. He's not my dog."

“Well, I think he’s your dog, at least for a little while. He needs a name.”

We were looking him over trying to come up with something suggested by his appearance when Olga said, “I guess he’s kind of a street urchin so how about Mugsey? You remember, one of the East Side Kids from the old movies?”

I had been resisting naming him but I couldn’t resist ‘Mugsey.’ It suited him perfectly. So now I had a dog, “at least for a little while,” named Mugsey.

When none of my friends who had to “think about it,” came through, I decided Mugsey would be my dog permanently. Living with him became a real adventure. He couldn’t keep from chasing garbage trucks and snapping at their rear tires. He loved to sniff the cinnamon residue on the vent outside a spice grinding factory just make himself sneeze. Whenever I had him out at night he’d track down a waterfront rat. The first time it took some sparing before Mugsey got the upper hand. After that, when he got better at it, there’d be a brief standoff ending with him grabbing the rat by the back of the neck and killing it with a quick shake. Then he’d proudly come back to me for a “good boy” and pat on the head. He was so friendly and entertaining that my customers all liked him. I’d often set up shots of elegantly dressed models against rough industrial backgrounds in the local streets and truck chasing, cinnamon sniffing, rat killing Mugsey would accompany us. His friend Mama would sometimes come along too.

As I was photographing a dancer in a graceful pose against a rugged masonry wall, her eyes widened and her dramatic expression gave way to a smile as she pointed to what was happening behind me. Mugsey and Mama were mating and there wasn’t anything I could do to stop them. It never occurred to me that something like that would happen. I didn’t know how old Mama was but I thought of her as elderly. She had grey whiskers and with a name like Mama I imagined her as being senior to Mugsey and not sexually appealing to him. I was mistaken. They finally ended their very long embrace, rolled around on their backs, stretched a bit and then continued playing as if nothing had happened. The look on that dancer’s face for those remaining photos could never be duplicated.

Afraid she’d think I should have known better and paid more attention to Mama and Mugsey when they were with me, I dreaded having to face Olga and tell her what happened. But she took it calmly and said she thought Mama was probably too old to get pregnant even if she did have sex.

She said, “Let’s not worry about it and see what happens.”

I was embarrassed and felt guilty about the whole thing but put at ease by Olga being so calm and understanding. She was wrong about Mama. About eight weeks later Olga asked me to come on board to show me something in her

closet. Mama must have been a lot younger than we thought because amidst a pile of shoes, she was nursing six pups, all looking an awful lot like their father. I had already made a visit to the vet with Mugsey for a serious discussion about family planning and then to help with child support I supplied Olga with puppy chow until all six were adopted.

Not long after that, as the area became more popular, I had to move out of my loft because of a rent increase I couldn't afford. I gave up photography and decided to get a real job and a real apartment; unfortunately it was one that didn't allow dogs. By then a nearby warehouse had been converted into luxurious legal apartments and a young couple who moved in agreed to take Mugsey. I knew I'd miss him but was glad he wouldn't have to leave his home on the waterfront where he could catch rats, sniff cinnamon and hang out with his old girl-friend Mama.