

BUSTER

I'm not going to win any prize for saying this, but life's funny. You never know what's going to happen next. Maybe something good. It's a reason to stay around. Know what I mean? Just in case. Let me tell you about my friend Stanley. He's 38 years old and finally last November finds a girlfriend. Seriously, he's 38 and she's his first girlfriend. Helene. So it's damp and cold in Dorchester, but for Stanley the sun is shining, birds are chirping. (Yeah, we got birds.) The sky is blue, but out of the blue Helene ups and leaves him, calls it quits. Lasted just one month.

I guess a friend would've asked him why she left. I maybe forgot to ask, or maybe figured he'd tell me. Don't really remember, but remember this: Talk about prizes. You ask me Helene should win one for staying with Stanley a month.

So, anyway, he's real real down – no surprise – and wants to pack it all in. Not real original, but you can't find a duck much stranger than Stanley. He takes books out of the library on how to kill yourself. Goes back a couple of times. Maybe you'd think a librarian would notice and get worried, but they only notice if you raise your voice.

So he's going for a merit badge in suicide and it's distracting him at work. Work is doing data entry at some accounting company for more than minimum wage, but not much more. Part of his job is changing the toner cartridge in the copier. How to is printed on the inside of the cover you open to get to the toner, and there's clear pictures. Also a motherly secretary takes pity and shows him how the first time.

But Stanley's distracted with how he's going to off himself and it doesn't occur not to hang on to the machine when he leans over backwards to lower himself so he can see the stuff inside. The machine falls on him and breaks his leg. On the way to the hospital he sees an ad on a bus. Some lawyer says Injured? Call me. Stanley says the phone number over and over to himself; has it memorized by the time he's at the hospital.

To make a short story short the judge – the one the call-me lawyer angled for – said it was the fault of the accounting company for not training him. Stanley said the accounting lawyer spent most of the hearing rolling his eyes. Stanley's call-me lawyer asked the eye-roller if anyone told Stanley not to lean over backwards. The guy answered something that insulted Stanley and upset the judge.

Bottom line: Stanley has to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair when anyone's watching. The judge said the company was negligent. That's what he probably said. I wasn't there, and Stanley couldn't remember for sure.

So Stanley gets a nice check every month for being disabled from an accident on the job and for negligence. Sure, it's no fun being in a wheelchair, but it's more fun than being dead. Just a little before, he was going to kill himself, and now Stanley can stay home and do whatever he wants. Pretty funny. Life.

By the way, for a couple of weeks after he was sitting pretty – manner of speaking – he tried calling Helene. Bunch of times. Finally she answered, told him she was sorry for his accident but she had a new boyfriend. Might've been true. Fell right off Stanley's back like water off a strange duck. He asked me to return his books to the library. His attitude had changed. I'll say it again. Life is pretty funny.

Well that's sort of how it was with Buster. Kind of like an accident. Didn't see it coming.

I was feeling kind of down. Not like I was taking those books out of the library – though it would've been fun to see the librarian's face. Just that every week was like every other week. Same. Same. Same. I felt like I was suffocated by same. It was creepy thinking nothing was going to change. I figured maybe part of it was I didn't have many friends. In fact, Stanley was the only one, and I didn't see him much anymore. The wheelchair bothered me. Not that he needed it. What bothered me was he didn't.

So I decide to get a cat. This time I'm going to do it right, get a good one, not like the mistake I made at the animal shelter two years ago when I picked up Stinky. But when I get to the pet store I see Buster. I'm not going to lie and say I knew how special he was right off. Wouldn't be completely true, but I *did* notice him right off.

The pet store has a big window on the street, and they put the puppies in little bins right up against the window. I guess the pet store people think someone will be walking by and say "Hey, I'm gonna get me a puppy," the way they wouldn't need a big plan just to buy a donut. People did look at the puppies, and the puppies looked at the people. Even more.

This next part is going to make me seem stupid, so let me just push it right out there and get it over with. I'm thinking Buster had his face all pushed in from pressing his nose against the window. The pet store owner, a nice woman, tells me Buster is a bulldog puppy and that's the way he's supposed to look.

I'm trying hard to concentrate on cats, but every time I look back to the front of the store I see Buster. He's not looking out of the window anymore. He's looking into the store, and he's staring at me with that cute pushed-in face. I never had a chance.

I'm not good at buying stuff. My mother always said the swindlers could see me coming a mile off. When she was in one of her good moods she'd say it's cause I'm trusting. Usually she wasn't in a good mood and she'd say I'm gullible. I liked that word better than the one she used when she was in one of her really bad moods.

Anyway, I try to be careful not to get taken in, so I play it cool when I ask about pets. I want to kind of keep it to myself I really want that puppy. The lady I talked to seemed real nice, but I guess that's what makes the best swindlers. I pretend the question about Buster was just curiosity, and I'm here to look over cats. Then I waste about a half hour of her time pretending to be interested in cats. You know, asking questions. How much does this one shed? Is that one good with kids? I kind of feel bad about my pretending, and feel even worse cause she was probly seeing I'm phony cause I wasn't good at it. But she liked talking about the cats, so it wasn't so bad.

Finally, I tell the nice lady none of the cats appeals to me though they all seem good (I didn't want to insult her.) Then, cool as I can, I say maybe I should consider another kind of pet. She plays right into my hand when she says how about a puppy. And, still acting not real interested, I say,

"Hmmm. A puppy? Like, just for example, how much is that puppy with the pushed in face?"

She says \$800, and I am definitely no longer cool when I repeat the cost very very loud and kind of embarrass her. I apologize of course.

She tells me \$800 is a real bargain for a pure bred English bulldog. According to the lady, Buster was marked down from \$1200 (I almost shout again) cause English bulldogs were not the hot items right then. Some other kind of dog was drawing all the business cause that kind of dog was on a TV show. So this month everyone's trying to buy that kind, and every other kind is sort of on sale. I check later and find out it's true; \$800 is a bargain. And Buster has papers. Up till then I don't know what this means, having papers. Turns out papers list his parents, grandparents, great grandparents and more, maybe back to the dog Adam and Eve kicked around with. What's funny I only know back to my grandparents. Of course, his name isn't Buster on those papers, it's "Rollingbrooke's Captain Stavro." But I call him Buster, and right from the beginning he likes the name. No mistaking it.

There I was. I really wanted Buster, but I was not crazy. I can't spend more on a dog than I spent on my car. The lady sees I'm worried about the money, and she tells me Buster's an investment. I can use him as a stud dog. She explains to me what that means, and I

am kind of embarrassed. Anyway, that's how I let myself spend \$800 on a dog. He's not a pet; he's an investment.

No surprise, I didn't have \$800. I call my sister and tell her about my investment in a stud dog. I have to hold the phone away from my ear cause she's yelling so loud. I could hear words like gullible. At least that's what I hope I heard from the held-out phone. Anyway, she caved in. But it involved a long lecture on responsibility and making wise choices. I can't really remember the details.

Long story short, a few days later I am walking out of that pet store with my new investment and almost \$100 in dog odds and ends, and the book *You and Your New Bulldog*.

I never was sorry for a moment that I went into hock to my sister for a bundle. Buster made me so happy. He was a great friend (like the bulldog book said), and I went a little bit overboard in the pride department. When people stopped me on the street to say how cute, I would show them Buster's papers.

That was the simple start but then life turns funny up a notch.

A guy comes to the door, respectable looking guy. He's selling raffle tickets, tells me he's from the police, and he says the profits go to widows and orphans of cops killed on the job. I figure (probably like everyone else) this is a good cause, and if I buy a \$10 ticket I get a sticker for my car bumper. I'm no dummy. I figure the sticker might be worth a lot more than \$10 if I'm trying to talk my way out of a traffic ticket, maybe cause my car stalls on the highway again.

So, I'm scrounging in my wallet for \$10 and Buster begins to threaten. He was kind of growling in the back of his throat soon's I open the door, but now starts in like he's going to rip the guy's heart out. The guy takes off, with me yelling after him I'm sorry. But later, I'm watching TV and there is this news there's a bunch of scammers selling fake raffle tickets and saying they're from the police.

Did Buster know the guy was lying? Was my new best friend an animal lie detector? I had to check this out, so we went to visit Stanley. A couple of years ago, Stanley had borrowed my Dremel tool to put his name on some of his stuff. I take Buster over to meet Stanley and I'm going to ask for my Dremel back. When I do this Stanley tells me he already returned it and I just forgot. He adds details, you know? The way people do when they are good liars. Stanley says stuff like "Don't you remember? You were in a rush when I came over to return it, and you were having trouble with your car." Stanley

isn't going out on any limb with the car trouble, and though he's doing a good job of it, I suspect he's lying. Then I look over at Buster. Sure enough, Buster has a scowl. He's not barking like with the raffle guy but I figure he's just too polite to bark at a "friend." And Buster's expression was a *real* clear scowl. No mistaking it. But Stanley doesn't have a clue, and it was sort of sad. Stanley took a real shine to Buster. You could almost see what was going through Stanley's head: "I should have Buster."

Around this time I get a call from the nice lady at the pet shop. She says there are some people who want to breed their English bulldog "bitch." (I learned this word is OK, but it still embarrasses me.) The pet lady asks if I am interested. I still owe my sister \$580, so yeah, I'm interested. The pet store lady sets up a meeting, and she doesn't charge any money for it. Like I said, nice lady. The people who want Buster's help are going to come to visit me to see Buster's papers and everything.

At first, I'm excited about this. Sure the money would be nice, but it's not only the money. I keep thinking Buster's going on a date. Cause, you know, that's sort of what it is, right? Sort of. They're dogs, so it's kind of different, but it's also kind of the same. I remember getting ready for the junior prom in high school. (I didn't go to the senior prom.) I remember getting all dressed up, and how nervous I was, and how I didn't know how to behave and what to do. Didn't have a clue. That was around 15 years ago, but I still remembered. I had a kind of lousy time. Probably it's not going to be anything like that for Buster, what with him being a dog, but who knows. Anyway, it took some of the edge off me feeling so good about this.

More edge comes off on the weekend. The Highsmiths drop by to talk about Buster and their lady English bulldog. They come on a weekend, cause I have to work on weekdays. He says he works from home. I'm polite, so don't say anything, but if you're at home, you're not at work. Anyway, they seem nice, if great clothes mean nice. They are a married couple. I keep wondering if he married her so they could breed. Shows how much my mind was locked onto this stud breeding thing. Of course, I don't say anything, even accidentally. It's important to be polite.

They keep looking around and saying things like "charming," but I can tell what they're thinking. What I'm thinking is it wasn't a great idea to meet them at my place. That isn't the important thing though. No, the deal breaker is Buster. He doesn't like them. He's way too polite to bark or scowl, but he doesn't like them. I think they know it cause there's no mistaking it. Anyway, I never hear from them again.

It was the junior prom all over again.

After a while, I had Buster figured out. You wouldn't guess it, but I like watching science shows on TV. A couple of years ago there was this program "partnership of man and dog." Why do dogs and people get along together so well? Good question, right? These scientists had it figured out. Dogs started out as wolves who would hang out around human places. They would eat scraps and garbage and that kind of thing. Not dining at the Ritz, but better than having to take down a dinosaur. While they're hanging around eating scraps, the boy wolves who are good with people meet up with girl wolves who are good with people, and they raise puppies who are *real* good with people.

Now I get to the important part. Good with people means you can read them. Dogs can tell when people are sad, when people want to play, when people want to be left alone. Then the dog does just the right thing. The dog cuddles up with his sad human, goes and fetches a stick when his human wants to fool around. And if his human wants to be left alone, the dog leaves him alone. (Dogs still aren't perfect at this.) This is what dogs *do* for a living; they figure out how people are feeling. It's their job. And Buster was a pro. If dogs had a company, Buster would be president.

I won't kid you. I was disappointed about the stud thing not working out and I wouldn't be getting the money I was sort of counting on. But I knew Buster was special. Special was really something, but how do you turn special into money?

I thought on it for a couple of days, and then it hits me when I'm *not* thinking about it: poker. Poker's a game of figuring out what the other guy is thinking, right? Is he bluffing? If I've got real good cards will a big bet scare off the other guy? Well, Buster would know what the other guy is thinking! Not only that, but I was a pretty good poker player. We played a lot in high school, and I made more money from that than delivering groceries. (I did that for a while, but got fired. It wasn't fair, but that's another story.)

I got the idea on Tuesday night, not too late, maybe 8 o'clock. When I thought of it I was so excited I never got to sleep that night. Buster knew something was up. I was real excited cause this was such a great idea, and people thought I didn't have great ideas. Like when I had the business idea of finding parking spaces for people. But I needed people to work with me, and I couldn't even get Stanley to join up. (That was way before the wheelchair of course.) This was going to be different. Details are important and I wasn't going to screw it up by rushing and getting the details wrong.

I was going to be real careful, and take it step by step. The first step was I had to check out the idea. I needed to bring Buster to a poker game.

Lucky for me there was a friend I had, Arty, more a friend of Stanley's tell the truth. Arty had a poker game at his house every Friday night. I knew this cause he asked me to play once, but I had enough poker in high school and I might as well tell the whole truth, I'm nervous about meeting new people. But nervous wasn't going to stop me with this thing. So I call this guy, Arty. He remembers I'm Stanley's friend, and right off he guesses I'm calling about poker, so that was easy. The hard part was I had to get Buster in also. First I thought I'd make up some big story like I was partially blind and Buster was a partially seeing eye dog. One reason I didn't do it is cause Arty himself really was partially blind, so it wouldn't be polite. Also, Arty would know about blindness. He would know I was faking.

Anyhow, turns out getting Buster in was no problem. I just said Buster hated to be alone at night after being alone all day. Arty says sure, bring him. Arty seemed like a real good guy.

So on Friday night I show up at Arty's with Buster. Arty introduces me to the other guys. One is a real heavy guy named Marty. He was one of those heavy guys people call jolly, cause when he starts laughing his whole body shakes, and he has a lot of body. He thought it was funny we had Arty and Marty and says they should call me Smarty. I think maybe he heard me called 'slow' by someone, and I sure am not as you can tell from the way I figured out how dogs understand people. So calling me Smarty maybe was his way of insulting me and he would think I wouldn't know cause I'm slow. But I let it fall off my back. It wasn't a big deal.

It turns out smart-aleck Marty is a cop, and the reason he's extra large is he eats five or six meals a day at restaurants on his beat. He doesn't pay at the restaurants, but he tells us this was not cheating. The restaurants want him to eat there cause while he's there they feel protected. Marty says the restaurants are glad to feed him for free.

Arty himself was a bus driver, which is kind of strange cause of his partial blindness. I wondered if maybe his seeing wasn't so bad but when we played he kept the cards so close to his face they touched his nose. I didn't want to ask Arty how he could drive a bus. It wouldn't be polite; he might feel funny about it. I felt funny about it in a different way. I had to take the bus when my car was not working, which was most of the time. But I hoped Buster would make us enough money I could get a new car.

The third new guy I met was Len. He was a senior citizen. He was very senior, but he had a job as a bag boy working at FredMart, the supermarket on Central. He said he did it cause he wanted to get out and meet people. Arty told me later the company Len worked

at for 43 years didn't fill out the right paperwork, so Len retires after 43 years and finds he is getting pretty much nothing from Social Security. Sometimes life is not funny.

We get down to playing poker pretty soon, but I'm not paying good attention. Thinking too much about Buster. No real chance for him to do any of his mind-reading in the first few hands, but I can wait. I even lose a little money. Then there's this interesting round. We're playing six card Dakota, and I have a one-eyed jack in my hand. That was wild, cause I had a heart showing. With his wild cards, Len had a possible straight flush or maybe three pair, or maybe nothing. That's six card Dakota for you; you never know where a hand could go. But I had Buster, so I knew. Len raised by a dollar, which surprised the rest of us cause our limit is a quarter for raising. That could mean he was real bad with numbers and maybe he was a bag boy at FredMart cause he was busted from being a cashier, or maybe he was trying to scare us off with a bluff. Or maybe he was trying to act as if he was trying to scare us off with a bluff, so we'd think he wasn't trying to scare us off and we'd be scared off.

Buster was sitting very quiet. He could of wandered around acting casual and glanced at everyone's hand (except Arty's cause his cards were so close to his face). No one would know. But that would be cheating, right? And anyway that wasn't the idea at all. The idea was Buster was going to tell me what was going on in Len's head. That's not cheating, right?

It was amazing the way Buster studied Len's face without making it obvious to everyone. I mean you had to know what was going on to notice it, but there was no mistaking it. At least not to me. Buster was studying Len's face, and he had to let me know what he figured out. I was asking myself how he was going to do this. He couldn't just point his nose at Len and bark. Anyway so what he does is just look sideways at Len and give what you would maybe call a look of disapproval, like shame on you Len for lying. It was great the way Buster hid it, but there was no mistaking it.

And that's pretty much the way it went from then on. I would stay out of things when I didn't have pretty good cards, but I got it right whenever anyone was bluffing or had real good cards and was trying to bluff a bluff. Bottom line is I cleared more than \$30 and everyone said this was the record. No one had ever left with more than \$27. Arty thought this was kind of cool, but I got a feeling Marty didn't like it. Maybe he had the \$27 record. I guess I have some mean streak cause it made me feel good to make Marty feel bad.

Len lives in the same direction as me, so we walk together for a while when we leave Arty's. I have Buster on his leash, cause that's the law, and I want Buster to respect the

law. So we're walking and I'm chatting with Len but in the back of my head I start feeling bad about the game. I start asking myself did I cheat cause Buster helped me? I can't make up my mind, so I try to get Len to take half my winnings. I figure I lifted at least 15 bucks from him, and I know Len needs it. Finally he agrees to take it, and that makes me feel good, so I don't worry any more about if I cheated.

So, anyway now I know my idea works. Poker is how Buster is going to make us rich. But now I need a big game. We're not going to get rich just taking \$30 from Arty's game every Friday night. I even have a lead on how to get into a bigger game. It was something Marty said. Marty talked about a lot of stuff. He was a talker. Most of the time with his mouth full. You would think cops would have interesting stories, shootouts with killer zombies kind of stuff, but not Marty. Restaurants seemed to be his specialty. But anyway, he mentioned there was a different poker game on Fridays. It's a poker game at the mayor's house, and the men who come there every Friday bring buckets of money.

I know you're probly wondering how Marty knows about this. Turns out Marty's married to the mayor's sister, so the mayor is his brother-in-law. I wondered why Marty plays with us instead of with the mayor, then I remembered Marty is a poor starving cop. (I'm joking about the starving part.) He can't take a chance on losing big in a high stakes game.

I was kind of surprised when Marty calls me. He was fake polite at Arty's poker game, unless you consider calling me Smarty is not polite. But he didn't seem to like me that much. And then he goes out of his way to do me a favor like this. He calls and asks if I'm interested in a bigger game. I pretend I'm not a little scared and I tell him sure I'm interested. Then another surprise, he tells me he already got me invited to the mayor's house for the next game. My guess: he thinks I'm going to lose my shirt at the big game and he'll laugh about it when he hears from the mayor (his brother-in-law). But I was going to win, so I'll be the one laughing.

Just when it was sounding too good to be true, Marty adds a little detail that makes it a whole lot less too good: I would have to put \$500 on the table at the start. Just 'to show I was serious. Marty and I both pretend this is not a big deal, but we don't fool each other.

I was so worried about how I would get the money I almost forgot the whole reason for everything: Buster. I had to figure out how to get Buster into the game. So I say to Marty \$500? No problem. But I won't play unless Buster can come along. Marty gets real upset about this and says the kind of things people say when they get real upset. But he says he'll see what he can do. It seems maybe he was a pretty nice guy after all, going

out of his way like that. Then I remember what he's probly up to. Anyway, it didn't take long. The next day he calls me and says it's all set up. The mayor loves dogs, and he thought it was cute I couldn't stand to be away from Buster.

So there you go. Except for the detail of coming up with \$500. The first thing I try I call my sister and explain by lending me the \$500 she'd get all of her money back quicker. I knew she was going to say no, and I was right. That left only Stanley. I know Stanley had a lot of wheelchair money stashed away, so I call him. "Hi. How's Buster?" It's the first thing he says after I say to him it's me calling. I tell him Buster's just fine. Thanks. And I tell him I need a little favor. It's \$500, but just for a few days. And I say please, please in so many words. But I guess when you have to sit in a wheelchair to earn your living you get kind of tight with cash. So he's quiet for a very long time.

I wonder if maybe he hung up, so I say, "Stanley?" He says, "Yeah, wow. That's a pretty big favor." I say again it's only for a while. I'll return it in a few days, but I really, really need it. He asks me why I don't sell something. I remind him I don't have anything worth \$500. But he says, "Oh yes, you do. Sell Buster. Sell him to me. I need a dog more than you." I'm so shocked I don't speak for a little while, and anyway Stanley's still talking. He knows I won't just shut up and sell him Buster, so he offers me a deal. He says he'll give me the \$500. I return it within a week everything's just like before, and I keep Buster. But I don't give the \$500 back in a week, he gets Buster.

I know I'm going to have lots of of money by Friday night, so I agree to the deal, and I pick up the cash from Stanley on Wednesday, after work. So tomorrow I take a taxi to the mayor's house and meet these rich guys. I can feel my luck is turning. And there's a good sign. I found the Dremel tool in the back of my closet.