



# The Poodle Assassin

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Reminiscing about my childhood is as enjoyable as dashing into a Starbucks in desperate need of the bathroom and realizing there is a long line of people waiting to release their post-venti-latte enemas. In an attempt to abate the g-force of nauseating guilt that has been pinning me down since I was a wee lass, I must exhume my furriest of skeletons.

My grandmother loved two things: making beautiful crafts and her pets. Our many cramped apartments (we moved once every three months) housed cats, dogs, rabbits, finches and even baby chickens. Her prized possessions, however, were her two miniature poodles.

My grandmother had sequestered Mama Dog from an ungrateful neighbor in a heated argument that forced us to move for the fourth time that year. Grandma, the megalomaniac that she was, named the dog after herself. Martha gave birth to five puppies in our kitchen, and the litter was dispersed among family members. We kept Martha, the mama pup, and Carolina, the only girl in the litter.

Carolina was a nefarious, anorexic pain-in-the-ass who despised me. That poodle made my life hell. She aggravated my asthma, nipped at my ankles and pissed on my Holly Hobby sheets every chance she got.

Once a month Grandma would be whisked away by my grandfather, the proud owner of a Cuban cafeteria, for a night of drinking and gambling in Atlantic City. Times were especially strenuous, as my mom had been diagnosed with cancer. So this stint of repose was necessary to keep my grandmother's frayed nerves from snapping.

On this particular Friday night I felt a throbbing in my belly. It might have been a premonition or a stomach cramp from eating one too many butterscotch crumpets.

Grandma left my cousin, Chachy, in charge of Valentine's—the final and most successful florist shop

she would own. I was on babysitting duty in the back of the shop with my newborn cousin. My mom was upstairs in our three-bedroom apartment trying to hold down solid foods and honing in on her needlepoint skills. Cancer makes people do the darndest things. She used to smoke cigarettes and listen to Prince.

We lived above the flower shop in a not-so-safe part of town. We never used the front door entrance to the apartment. When the gate was secured and the lights were turned off, we headed to the staircase that lead to our humble home. Those stairs were a source of many childhood nightmares. I often dreamt I would slip and fall, shattering into pieces like something made of porcelain.

The steps were infinite stacks of uneven concrete. Jagged, steep, and at least a one-story drop. The light switch was at the bottom. Looking down from the windowless incline was like looking into an abyss with a bone-shattering pit at its bottom. The banister, if you could call it that, was a splintered piece of wood that ran the length of this impending deathtrap. One faulty step and you could fall to your death, meet your maker and feel like a jackass for doing it in such a ridiculous fashion.

That night, there was a terrible accident. I would like to state for the record that what transpired on that fated night in October was not intentional, despite popular belief. In fact, I cannot recount this tale without blubbering like a ninny.

After Chachy cleaned up we locked the shop and headed for the stairs. I was carrying my little cousin's walker in one hand and his diaper bag in the other. Carolina was vexingly galloping beside me. Suddenly, my arm went limp and I lost my grip on the walker. I wobbled sideways, knocking into the dog, subsequently pushing her off the top step. She landed on her head and let out a muffled whimper. Chachy had already made it upstairs and when she heard my blood-curdling cries

she ran to see what had happened. Aghast, she squealed, "Matastes la perra!"

For those of you lucky enough to grow up without the need for Spanish, that translates to, "You killed the dog."

I was shaking, crying hysterically, and Mama Dog was barking at me with such venom I thought my brain would hemorrhage. My mother arrived at the scene clutching her robe, languidly looking down at the pup in disbelief. Chachy wrapped Carolina in a towel and we quickly embarked on a stealth mission to find an animal hospital. We drove around North Jersey for hours. Carolina's head was now the size of a watermelon in my lap, her little eyes crossed and her legs twitching against my pant leg.

I was terrified and panicked. My grandmother would be home soon and she would surely give me the belt that was reserved for extreme naughtiness. I prayed for the slipper that was used for minor infractions. I was already riddled with guilt after an accident earlier that day. While in high pursuit of a much-longed-for Dukes of Hazard lunchbox at Woolworth's, I had knocked off my mother's wig, revealing the effects of her chemotherapy. This was a pretty tough day for my fragile eight-year-old psyche to digest.

I looked into the death's-door eyes of what was left of my now former nemesis and begged her to live. I knew she wouldn't. I did something that I hadn't done in a very long time. I prayed to a god who had recently sentenced my mother to death. I hated him but I prayed for the life of this little creature.

We found a veterinary hospital somewhere in Belleville. The doctor said that Carolina had suffered irreparable brain damage. I kissed her little paws, ambivalent to hives and an asthma attack. I didn't care. I forgave her for peeing in my bed and I know she felt it. She lovingly licked my face and I said goodbye.

By the time we got home, my grandmother had returned and though she didn't beat me, I knew she wanted to. Lucky for me, she had cleaned up at the casino that night. Two weeks later, Mama Dog, completely

debased, went to sleep and never woke. Carolina's little brother, Crest, who my aunt fed with a spoon like a baby, was run over in the driveway by my drunk uncle. I can't help but feel that perhaps I set off some sort of poodle demolition sequence.

It's sad when a pet dies. It's even sadder when you have to go through life's family gatherings where no one believes your cries of innocence. (Even my drunk uncle was shriven.) Although my self-reproach has somewhat subsided, I still cross the street when I see an on-coming poodle. And I long for the day when I can once again look those furry mammals in the eye.