

The Big Apple gent who bit a piece out of my heart

Chris Stephen, who was brought up on the Suburb, did his very first reporting work for Suburb News, he graduated to the Hendon Times and eventually became a reporter of various wars and a writer living in Romania and the Balkans before moving to Moscow and now New York where he reports on the UN. He has written occasional pieces for Suburb News. This is the story he told to a rapt Fellowship audience in April.

I went to New York for love. And I found it. But hardly in the way I expected.

The love I was supposed to find was that of an ex-girlfriend called Pat. We first knew each other in Romania, way back when. She was a student. I was a cub reporter. Then I went off to

be a war reporter and she went to America. She founded a thriving business and went through two marriages. I went through seven wars and moved to Moscow. We were both looking for a change, so we got back together and I moved to New York.

In the summer of 2007 we went to Romania, visiting the home of her late uncle in a village in the rolling hills and forests of northern Transylvania. And that is where I met Shadow.

Shadow is a Border Collie mix – black on top, brown underneath with a little white patch around the mouth, the same size and shape as a fox. For the first four years of his life Shadow had been her late uncle's watchdog, tied to a chain in his backyard with a leaky kennel as the only shelter from the fierce

Transylvanian winters. When the uncle died, the neighbours let him off his chain and he was free to roam.

I never thought much about dogs until I met him. Pat had an aging Doberman in New York who would snap if you came too close. So it was a revelation when, on Day Two of our stay, Shadow came up as I sat on the back porch, put his head down and invited affection.

From then on we were inseparable. He would follow me around the village. I took him on walks in the hills, and he got to sleep in the house for the first time.

We thought it would be a fine idea for me to have a dog. We would be like a family. After a mountain of paperwork, Shadow secured the region's first pet passport, a device so new, owing to Romania's recent entry to the European Union, that the bureaucrats had to consult the lawbooks. All he needed was a name. Unable to decide, we registered him as Charlie.

Back home, we finally came up with a name. Because he followed me around the apartment, keeping me always in sight, we called him Shadow. And it was soon clear that New York was his kind of place. The people here are always in a hurry. But they always have time to pet a gregarious little dog. Shadow was also my introduction to one of the city's best-kept secrets: the dog run. Every park has one, a fenced-off enclosure where dog owners can sit and talk while the dogs do their thing. Each run is a little community, New York's equivalent of the parish pump.

As the bond with Shadow grew, the relationship with my girlfriend disintegrated. In the summer of 2008 it ended. She moved out and took her dog. I stayed in the apartment with mine.

For a year we kept in a loose kind of contact. I moved to the East Village, New York's answer to Hampstead, circa 1960. When I went away, I left Shadow with her and her parents, whom she had brought over from Romania. Pat found a new boyfriend and got pregnant, which provided a sort of full stop on any thoughts of once more rekindling of our relationship.

I went away to London for vacation in the summer of 2009. When I got back, instead of Shadow, there was an email saying she was keeping him.

There are greetings cards you have probably seen that state "you know it is love when..." The shock of losing Shadow supplied one more variant. You know it is love when the pain of separation is physical. In my case, a vague cramp somewhere around the stomach. Without Shadow the days suddenly lacked focus. My apartment was tiny, but it had never seemed more empty. Six o'clock, the time the local dog run would open each evening, came and went and there was suddenly nothing to do.

Six weeks of phone calls and emails to Pat went unanswered. I went to the police. They told me that as I had given him to her of my own accord, only a court could settle it.

So that is what I did. Being on a budget, I represented myself, filing a case at the Manhattan Civil Court. She had money, and hired a lawyer. But I had a trump card: dog owners. Shadow is a popular and much-loved dog. So owners at the local run came forward to be witnesses, to sign a petition and one offered free legal advice.

Hoping to prevent my now 'ex' from moving Shadow to Romania, I filed an application for a temporary restraining order. "Can't be done," said the legal

clerk. A passing judge told me the same thing. TROs, she explained, are granted only in cases of some sort of danger, such as child custody cases. Not for dogs.

My lawyer friends told me to go back and try. And, miracle of miracles, a judge granted it. Shadow had made a tiny piece of legal history.

The case is in the balance. Pat still has the dog licence, and the pet passport. I have the 13 months that I had him and the verbal agreement with Pat, which I can't prove, that he is my dog.

Why she took him I don't know and she won't say. The temporary restraining order revealed that she does not actually have him. Instead, she has left him with her parents.

When I told my story to a sympathetic audience at the Fellowship, someone asked me if the battle for Shadow had become an obsession. The answer is yes. The bigger answer is that this is surely what love is. Love a child, love a lover, love a dog.

The trial is coming. The nerves are jangling. The documents, witness statements, legal rulings and court papers have expanded to fill two case files.

I dream of Shadow. I think of him often. How friendly and how mischievous. And that independent nature, always treating my call to come as a request rather than an order. And the way he would pirouette in the air to catch his favourite red ball.

That ball was chewed to bits one day by another dog in the run. The owner, mortified, searched the pet shops to find an identical ball. By the time she found one, Shadow had been dognapped. She is now one of my trial witnesses and keeps the ball still. And tells me she will give it to Shadow one day. The day I get him back.

LETTERS

Kingsley Way, NW11

Sir,
Thank you for the excellent publicity you have given to the bridge at Norrice Lea Synagogue.
Suburb News is, as usual, a joy to read.

Yours
Marion and Ronald Silverblatt

The Orchard, NW11 6YN

Sir,
The Orchard Housing Society is in the process of upgrading its common areas and, in conjunction with this, we intend to expand our archive records.

We wondered if any Suburb residents have old photographs or documents relating to the Orchard which they would be willing to donate to us.

If so, please could they drop them in at the Orchard for the attention of Mike Harbottle.

Thank you.

Yours
Mike Harbottle

25 The Orchard, NW11

Sir,
In the last issue of our invaluable Suburb News, Deborah Warland interviewed Michael Clerizo.

He said he would like to Time Travel back to the night in 1780 when an anti-Catholic mob was foiled in its plan to burn down Kenwood House.

If he did he would discover that the owner of the house was not a Catholic at all, as he thinks, but that great liberal Lord Chief Justice William Murray, Earl of Mansfield.

Yours
Rona Wood



Point, v. to finish or repair the joints of (brickwork, masonry, etc.) with mortar or cement. Sp. in **Hampstead Garden Suburb** - only to be undertaken with tlc and after unbiased advice.

Is there any point in repointing?

Very often the answer is – probably not. Surveyors automatically suggest it, builders love to charge you for it, but the fact is most Suburb houses are built with fine handmade bricks, well laid by craftsmen. The mortar, usually made with lime is there to keep the bricks apart – not to stick them together.

Pointing may be needed on chimney stacks, exposed corners or water damaged walls. Lime mortar should be used.

It is flexible, moves with the house and if it cracks, will seal itself again, looking just right.

Any alterations to houses on the Suburb must be approved by the Trust and Barnet. Pointing needs Trust consent and we are happy to give impartial advice, free.



(Unpointed wall) Soft lime mortar weathers naturally, doesn't damage the bricks and has an open texture that allows them to dry out after the rain.



(Badly pointed wall) Modern cement is stronger and rigid, cannot be removed without damaging the bricks and causes frost damage



(Unpointed wall) Soft mortar encourages drying out, enhances the beauty of the bricks and makes them less liable to damage when a wet wall freezes

HAMPSTEAD - GARDEN - SUBURB - TRUST

862 Finchley Road, Hampstead Garden Suburb, London NW11 6AB · 8455 1066 · mail@hgstrust.org · www.hgstrust.org