

## “National Secret”

By Joanne Steel Yordanou

He begins by telling me how his family’s dogs were trained; Pavlovian style. As chance would have it, I commanded my dog Shaq to sit as this man was (changing a tire?) on his driveway. My seven-month puppy performs the command and waits. And waits. I listen to the man explain treat rewards, which is partially how I train my pup. That and praise. Positive reinforcement, I say, confirming his idea and closing out the conversation: we have many more sit-commands to perfect before the obedience class tonight. The man puts down his lug wrench and sits back on the driveway. It’s the same way I trained my girlfriends, he says. I misheard. Your girlfriends, did you say? I laugh. Yes, when they do something nice for me, I reward them. I feel this conversation go awry and my face must show it. He explains: for example, when I’ve had a bad day, my girlfriend might make me a cappuccino. For that, I buy her jewelry. I chuckle again. Well, I say, if I tell all the neighborhood women this, you’ll have many cappuccinos at your door. I’m not a gossip; I just say this to mock his Pavlovian training of women. He reconsiders, and says, well if I’m out, I may think of the nice thing she did and I may see something to buy her, like jewelry. That’s Pavlovian training. I think he’s got it backwards — his girlfriends have him trained.

Continuing on Pavlov, he explains that his father trained him the SAS way. *Qui audet adipiscitur*. Who dares, wins. I’m not sure if he’s telling me about dog training or how he picks up women. I soon learn. He says, flight or fight; that’s the instinct we have when something or someone surprises us. He says he was trained to wait 3 minutes (I’m thinking that’s a long time to wait if you’re being robbed or attacked) and just breath, then he’d be ready to act. I say with doubt; you must have been trained at CSIS or by the SAS. He just nods. Then he says, when I meet a woman, I say to her, *¿Cómo estás hoy Mika?* He explains to me the women usually don’t know Spanish or Japanese; the Spanish being *¿Cómo estás hoy* — I know, I say— and *Mika*, Japanese for beauty flower and in English, is lost in translation. I picture Bill Murray here. I don’t like the movie. It apparently works, I say, — given he currently has girlfriends. Yes, it did, he replies.

He tells me his father was in the SAS and used to interrogate Nazis, then tells me a distasteful joke his father’s told him about torturing Nazis. Also, that his father died when he was five years old. This doesn’t add up to me. But before he died, he says, he trained me in these ways (at five?) and divulged a national secret that could bring down governments today and that only the queen will reveal it in 2030, if she were alive. Yes, I say, if. Her being, what 91 or 92? She’d have to pass the secret on to Charles, or whoever. I find myself boggled, but at the same time, intrigued. Yes, well, I’m not concerned with that, he says and goes on: I have friends who says they’re retired Marines, but I told them they will always be Marines. They’re motto is *Semper fidelis*: always faithful.

My puppy is whining now, still sitting. I say, okay, to release him and he goes sniffing the grass. The man is still speaking, saying something about what his Marine friends say to him. They call him Dave. I feel I’ve missed some sort of good advice bestowed on Dave. And then he asks me my name. I tell him and say, and your name is Dave. Well, I say, I may see you again on our walks. Wish us luck! I leave, commanding my puppy to heal and think I may take another route next time. I realize he may have mental health issues, but I also suspect he was also trying to pick me up in the weirdest way that I’ve ever experienced. Or was it simply pleasant chit-chat?