

**SHE HAS
A STORY FOR
EVERYTHING**

by
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PREFACE

During my 68 years I've had many experiences. Some were the mundane incidents we all encounter such as flat tires, backed up toilets, or unwelcome critters in the house or yard. Others involved people's reactions to things a little less mundane like white-water rafting, motorcycling or an area's politics. However, for a variety of reasons most of these experiences turned out a lot different than expected for someone living a mundane life.

I have a good memory and a sense of humor. Throughout the years my stories have brought laughter. More often, however, my stories have helped people understand that how you react to a situation is often more important than the situation. Where others might have responded with anger or sadness, might have become depressed or discouraged, I found the funny and the hope. Even in death, laughter can make things easier.

After a while, when I joined a group, I'd hear, "She has a story for everything." When they stopped laughing, someone inevitably would say, "You should write a book." Some even said, "With all that's happened, you could write two."

So I did.

This is number one.

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THE SWEET SMELL OF SKUNKS

(or Coping With The Wilderness In The Big City)

San Diego, California, 1982

I never thought about skunks except when I passed areas where they had signaled their presence. Consequently, when I moved back to my home in 1982 and my old tenant mentioned seeing skunks in the back yard, I was not worried. Phil, who rented a room from me, installed bricks and chicken wire along the back fence. We assumed the barriers combined with my house being two streets from the canyon's edge would eliminate any problems with our odoriferous friend. We also proved the old saying, 'Ignorance is bliss.'

In the second week, late at night, I heard my dog, Penny, growling in the back yard. As I let her into the house, I noticed she smelled a little ripe. The pungent aroma spread, rousing Phil from his second floor room. Racing down the stairs, he asked who had died. Recognizing the odor's source, he went to the local Safeway for help. Tomato juice was recommended. Penny's white coat turned a distinct shade of pink, eliciting many curious stares when we took her for her daily run.

Reinforcing our barricades, we assured each other there would not be a second occurrence. Stupidity reigned supreme. Two weeks later, Penny was hit again. So was Safeway.

Deciding that neither my house, my renter, my two boys, my dog nor my nose could take a third onslaught, I called the Wildlife Center for help. The lady asked why I wanted to remove the skunk. When I pointed out the damage, I was scolded.

"Why do you want to harm that poor, innocent creature?"

"But," I protested, "it keeps spraying my dog."

She responded, "Then keep your dog inside. The skunk was there first."

Realizing I was headed in the wrong direction, I called the County Animal Shelter. They would furnish a cage for twenty dollars and, when I had captured the skunk, they would remove it. Being the

thrifty sort, and considering my sons were in Boy Scouts, I decided to save money and put their training to use.

All day Sunday, they sawed, nailed, glued and tested. The skunk trap was ready. Hot dogs were carefully prepared for bait. (They suggested steak but I vetoed the idea. We may live in a higher income area but I didn't feel the skunk had acquired tastes that expensive.) The trap was set, night arrived. We waited for the sweet sound of the falling lid. And fall it did. A black and white creature sat entrapped within the cage's confines. Unfortunately, it was our cat. Dutifully, the trap was re-baited and reset. After two hours with no results, we all said the hell with it and went to bed.

The next morning we checked to see if the bait had been taken. It had. Of course, the trap door had not fallen but the bait was gone. At least we knew it liked hot dogs.

The trap was left out, baited, denuded of its bait, reset, retested, kicked a few times then relegated to the garbage. I called the Animal Shelter again, resigned to paying the twenty dollars. This call brought a new suggestion. Why not try the old mothball trick? I was assured that people who liberally sprinkled mothballs around their yards had been spared further visits by the striped devil. At least, said the Shelter Lady, they never called back. Considering the smell of mothballs, I wondered if the lack of calls was due to success or that the people had simply been asphyxiated.

Before I could stock up on ammunition, we went to the Del Mar Fair. The day stretched into early evening when I suddenly remembered. Penny was outdoors. Rushing back to the house, I prayed Luck was on our side. Hearing Penny's shrill bark, I realized Luck was somewhere else. As I ran out the back door, I also realized I needed more than Luck.

Penny was a wire-haired fox terrier. A big wire-haired fox terrier, two feet tall and weighing twenty-five pounds. She was charging an animal that, by my estimate, could have taken on a bobcat and won. The skunk, with its tail pointed directly at her head, was at least half again as big as Penny.

Penny charged, was rebuffed and charged again. I screamed at her to come at me. Since her response to my commands had always been minimal, if non-existent, I have no idea why I expected instant

learning under such conditions. I finally grabbed her tail and dragged her away, but not before I was a party to the action. At least I had Penny and the skunk had a chance to leave.

I immediately went to Safeway, cleaned out their mothball shelves and added some cans of tomato juice. As I stood in the checkout, amid politely gasping shoppers, the bagger looked at the fifteen boxes of mothballs and four cans of tomato juice then loudly observed, "Oh, now I know where that stink came from when you came into the store." I thanked her for her astute observation.

We mothballed the fence, the yard, the deck and the dog. A day went by, a week, a month. It appeared our problem child was gone. We all heaved a sigh of relief. Victory at last.

Hah!

Penny was a show dog and we wanted her to have puppies. Along with a graphic description of how Penny would be bred, which was of great interest to my fifteen-year-old son, the breeder mentioned that they used a woman's personal cleanser as an antidote for skunk spray. No stain, pleasant smell, and anything left over could be used for other purposes. We returned home with the smug self-assurance we would never need to use it.

The winter rains hit and Penny was confined to the house. On good days, we would leave her out as long as possible. Unfortunately, one day was too long.

The sun had long set, I was busy and Penny started to bark. I raced to the door. Too late. Since the stores were closed, I called my 72-year-old mother, explained the problem, and asked if she would bring some feminine cleanser the next day. She agreed although somewhat confused. I locked Penny in the garage and went to bed.

That incident taught me one valuable thing about skunk smell. It can penetrate doors, closed windows and walls. The next morning I let Penny outdoors (rain or not, she wasn't coming into the house) and went to my office at the shipyard. As I entered the office, people greeted me warmly. Their warmth soon turned to wrinkled noses and questions such as, "What the hell is that smell?" My coat and scarf that had been hanging on a chair near the garage had absorbed the skunk odor.

Not wanting to slowly suffocate ten people, I sprayed the offending clothing with room deodorizer (industrial strength) and hung them outdoors. Since they were cleaning the chemical toilets at the time, I wasn't sure the new smell would be much improvement over the old.

Returning to the office, where everyone had opened windows and moved desks to “give Flo more room to work,” I sat down and my long hair swung into my face. I instantly realized the skunk odor had transferred from my scarf to my hair. Gasping, I grabbed the industrial deodorizer and gave my hair a liberal shot. At that moment, my boss entered the office. For some reason, for the rest of the day he relayed messages to me through my clerical staff.

That night, my mother greeted me with her little black purse, her sturdy shoes, her sparkle-framed glasses and four cans of feminine cleanser.

“I wasn't certain how much you needed,” she said, “so I got four just to be on the safe side.” She paused then looked at me with a curious expression. “The check-out lady asked if I was expecting to have a good time this weekend. Now what do you suppose she meant by that?”

The next day, I asked my 10-year old son, Josh, to use the feminine cleanser and wash the rugs Penny had slept on. I heard the sound of running water and a low, sing-song murmur from the front yard. Glancing out the window, I noticed women and men walking by with very offended looks on their faces. Curious, I opened the door to hear Josh's little ditty. “This is the way we douche the rug, douche the rug...”

We re-mothballed and re-barricaded the yard. Phil moved out and was replaced by Joe, a used-car salesman with questionable connections. I didn't realize how questionable until the night we spied the skunk under the backyard deck.

“Hey, Joe,” Josh called, “come see our skunk.”

“It's out there, eh?” Joe responded, “Well, I'll get the little s.o.b.”

Glancing up from the deck, I instantly took in Joe and the unmistakable gun in his hand. Now, guns are all right in their place, but brandishing them in the house is not it. Joe immediately recognized my discomfort when I let out a scream that brought on the next-door neighbor's lights. Evidently, the skunk

didn't like guns either, because it instantly scooted out a previously unknown hole in the fence. After that, Joe kept the gun at work.

Things remained quiet for a few months. Joe moved out and Sean moved in. Sean was a displaced lawyer from Vancouver with no office, rich, foreign 'clients' and an expensive wardrobe. One night, Sean was in the kitchen when John, my fifteen-year old, took out the garbage. This rather pedestrian chore quickly became a night to remember.

The garbage cans are along my neighbor's five-foot brick wall that the previous owner built to contain the rats she said were feeding on my garbage. (After ten years in my area, I have seen dogs, cats, coyotes, snakes and, obviously, skunks, but never a rat. Perhaps she had found a new substitute for pink elephants.) In any case, nothing can get over that wall.

John was gone about thirty seconds when I heard pounding feet (John is 6 '4"). He burst through the front door.

“The skunk is at the garbage cans. Where's my spear gun? I'm going to get that bleep this time.”

Grabbing his spear gun, John raced back out the door, closely followed by Josh. Well, maybe not that close. Within seconds, I heard the zing of the spear gun, a cry of “I got him,” then the pounding feet. Again John burst through the front door. Followed by Josh.

“Where's the shovel? I think I only stunned him. Now, I'll finish him off for good.”

Grabbing the shovel, he ran back out the door, with Josh a respectable distance behind.

The following sounds drifted through the open door.

‘Whomp, whomp.’ Crashing of cans. ‘Whomp.’ Ringing of a shovel on the driveway. John's voice.

“Where is he? There he is. Head him off, Josh.”

“Head him off?” Josh cried, incredulously. “Are you crazy? You head him off.”

“There he is,” John yelled, “now I've got him. No, he's headed for the front door. I'll get him now.”

Sean became very attentive. Although he had been drinking prior to arriving home, John's words led to instant sobriety.

“Is that skunk heading towards the house?” he asked.

“Sounds like it,” I replied, as I read the newspaper. Keeping up with the news is very important.

“What are you going to do?” he asked uneasily.

“I guess I'm going finish my newspaper,” I replied. “They're the ones chasing the skunk.”

“Oh, no,” he cried, “what if it gets in the house?”

“Well,” I suggested, “since you're closest to the door, maybe you'd better close it.”

Leaping from the chair, he ran to the door to see a black and white creature bearing down on him.

Slamming the door shut, he screamed at its blank face, “Don't chase it towards the door. Keep it away from the door.”

Dashing to the window overlooking the front step, he watched the skunk run under it, releasing its heavy perfume on the way by.

Turning to me, he yelled, “They're chasing it under the window. Why are they chasing it under the window?”

I calmly replied, “Probably because you told them not to chase it towards the door. Under the window is the only other place it can go.”

Returning his attention to the drama unfolding in the front yard, Sean screamed out the window, “Get it away from the house. Keep it away from the house.”

Turning to me again, he railed, “The smell is coming in the windows. What should we do?”

“Well,” I responded, “since you're standing at the windows, why don't you just close them?”

As he closed the windows, we heard a blood-curdling scream from the front yard. Within seconds, Josh exploded through the front door, proclaiming the news of the night.

“It got John, right in the face.”

We could hear water running from the outside hose and an undercurrent of words. It appeared John had a low opinion of skunks. When he staggered through the door, face dripping, his only comment was “I didn't know they could spray that far.”

The odor slowly filled up the kitchen. Sean looked at me and pleadingly asked, “What are you going to do?”

Rising from my chair, I picked up my purse and started for the door. “I’m going to do what I usually do. I’m going to Safeway.”

The ladies at Safeway had become old hands at this. As I moved through the checkout line with my six cans of tomato juice, the clerk's only remark was “Well, who'd it get this time?”

Arriving back home, I placed the tomato juice where John could reach it (from a distance, of course) and turned to Sean, who was still quivering in his chair.

“The smell,” he whispered, “the smell. What should I do? My clothes will smell. I can't see my clients with that smell on my clothes.”

Brightening, he sprang from his seat, ran to his room, and feverishly began to pack.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m going to put my clothes in my van and park it away from the house. That way the smell won't be on them.”

I wondered how he was going to keep the smell off his bed sheets, towels and hair but kept my questions to myself.

During the next hour, Sean paced from his room, to the door, through the living room and kitchen and back, muttering about the smell. Finally he turned to me and demanded, “What are you going to do about that smell?”

With an incredulous look, I asked, “What would you suggest?”

“Well,” he faltered, “can't you do something?”

I soothingly replied, “Aside from not breathing for the next three days, I sincerely doubt anything can be done. However, I do have one solution.”

“What's that?” he asked.

“I'm going to bed. It's not too bad up there and you're driving me crazy.”

When I reported John's absence from school, the Attendance Clerk asked the reason.

“He stinks,” I replied.

“He what?” she asked.

“He stinks,” I answered.

“Oh,” she responded, “he stinks.”

“Yes,” I continued, “he was sprayed by a skunk.”

“Oh,” she gasped, “tell John we all thank him for not coming to school and he can stay home as long as necessary.”

How the skunk escaped the spear gun and the shovel is beyond my understanding. Perhaps it had a survival instinct beyond that of mere mortals. Or, since we still received visits, maybe its ghost will haunt us forever. In either case, my encounter with the wilderness has left me with a deep appreciation of the resiliency of nature's children and the sweet smell of skunks.

Postscript:

Penny was bred and had two puppies that the breeder immediately determined were physically unsuitable for either show dogs or sale and was going to put down. Her contention was their jaws were under slung, they would eventually be unable to eat and they would starve. Neither I nor my sons found this acceptable so we took the puppies and bid her farewell. We sold one, kept the other and named him Gil.

Gil was not trainable nor was he amenable to coming when called. He had no problem eating. He also tended to dig holes where he disappeared and all the dirt went into our pool or Jacuzzi dependent on where he had decided to build his bomb shelter. So when I heard a ruckus one night and went out to investigate, it didn't surprise me to see Gil walking toward me with the leg of a skunk in his mouth. And not a drop of spray on his body.

A few days later I noticed the Jacuzzi was dirty so asked Josh to clean it. Josh went out, took one look then returned to the kitchen.

“No way am I cleaning that!” His eyes were dancing with laughter.

“Why, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“Take a look you’ll see what’s wrong.” He returned to the Jacuzzi with me and we both stared at the drowned skunk at the bottom.

“Well,” I said, “now we know why we haven’t had any visits lately.”

And that truly was the end of our skunks. They finally found something faster than they were.