Katie
Up and Down the Hall
The True Story of How One Dog Turned Five Neighbors into a Family

Glenn Plaskin
Praise for Glenn Plaskin’s

KATIE

UP AND DOWN THE HALL

“Katie is a dream come true to the various families living on her floor in a New York apartment. Her heart is so big that she adopts them all, making you wish you were one of them.”

—Mary Tyler Moore

“I picked up this book to glance through it and suddenly found myself unable to put it down. This warm, touching, tender, and loving memoir is probably the best book I’ve ever read about a dog. Glenn pulls you in to this moving story instantly. Even people who are not crazy about dogs will love this tale.”

—Barbara Taylor Bradford

“God can appear in many disguises—even as a dog—bringing people together in a spirit of love. All I can say is that I felt ‘really good’ after reading Glenn’s superb book—there can be no higher endorsement.”

—Wayne Dyer, New York Times bestselling author

“I hate to brag on Glenn Plaskin because he is a famous fan of yours truly. But, I have no choice! His book on Katie just zeros in to touch your heart. I am a dog lover myself and something of a dachshund specialist but now, I’m thinking, if I had a cocker spaniel, maybe I’d get one like Katie. Don’t miss this book!”

—Liz Smith

“Glenn’s book is a perfect reflection of the man who wrote it—engaging, open-hearted, and very warm. His story proves that the true and small pleasures in life—friendship, loyalty, and trust—are the ones that matter most.”

—Calvin Klein

“It is not surprising that Glenn Plaskin’s innate talents—his insight and human touch—are wonderfully brought to the forefront in his new book KATIE UP AND DOWN THE HALL. It’s a significant story well worth reading—Glenn has done a terrific job.”

—Donald J. Trump

“KATIE UP AND DOWN THE HALL runs up and down your heart on four little
darling, padded golden feet. This story is for dog lovers, New Yorkers, for those who have a family, and those who wish to. A celebration of love—it’s for everyone.”

—Valerie Harper

“The healing energy of Katie the dog and pure love and friendship in this book will melt your heart.”

—Bernadette Peters

“Glenn has done a masterful job in telling this love story. I raced through it when I was traveling, and got teary eyed. Katie is a great neighbor and the true definition of a New Yorker—intelligent, adventurous, assertive, protective, warm, loving, kind, generous —and a joy to know.”

—Ivana Trump

“KATIE is an emotion-packed story that will keep you reading to the very end. This is no ordinary dog.”

—Michael Imperioli

“Plaskin’s engaging narration and Katie’s ability to make a community will endear this book to readers.”

—Publishers Weekly

“It’s been said that the family you come from isn’t as important as the family you’re going to have—and Plaskin’s heartwarming story brings that truth to life. Plaskin and Katie leave you with a roadmap for life.”

—Irene Pepperberg, PhD, bestselling author of Alex & Me, professor of Animal Cognition at Harvard and Brandeis Universities

“KATIE was a joy to read from start to finish. Plaskin brings to life his many adventures with this mischievous and loveable dog, and the family that she helped bring together. All dog lovers should put this one on their must-read list!”

—Billy Rafferty, author of Happy Dog: Caring for Your Dog’s Body, Mind and Spirit
Also by Glenn Plaskin:

Horowitz: A Biography of Vladimir Horowitz
Turning Point: Pivotal Moments in the Lives of America’s Celebrities
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To Mom, Dad, and to my sister Debby—
with much love and gratitude for always being there.
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People often say that writing is a lonely, isolating profession.
And it can be, though I’ve never really experienced it that way.
I guess it’s because I’m always bouncing ideas (and multiple drafts) off of my patient circle of friends, family, and colleagues, and of course, my editor.
In this, the most personal book I’ve ever written, I was lucky to have so many wise souls on my side—and on the other end of the phone.
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Battery Park City

Tucked away at the southernmost tip of Manhattan is a little town built on water.

Many New Yorkers are only vaguely aware of it, while tourists often pass it by. In fact, the charm of the place is that it’s so hidden away, though impossible to leave once you’ve discovered it.

Armies of gardeners maintain the winding trails, manicured parks, and gardens splashed with flowers of every color.

Here there are playgrounds decorated with fanciful sculptures, playing fields brimming with Little Leaguers, expansive lawns for sunbathing, duck ponds with waterfalls, and restaurants perched along the water.

Then there are the plazas for outdoor concerts, the marina filled with motorboats and yachts, and the spectacular Winter Garden, a glass-enclosed pavilion featuring sixteen palm trees overlooking the Hudson.

And best of all, day or night, it’s the water lapping up against the shore that you hear, not sirens or cars, a fact appreciated by us writers.

The idea for it all began in the late 1960s with the construction of the World Trade Center. The excavation for those soaring 110-story Twin Towers produced a gargantuan amount of earth. And like chefs not wasting any of their leftover ingredients, construction crews saved tons of the dirt, rocks, and sand for a greater purpose.

It took six years to complete, but ingenious engineers devised a way to use this material as landfill, filling in the Hudson to create a brand-new town. Water was pumped out, new earth was put in, and the boundary line of the river was pushed westward—creating a ninety-two-acre oasis thereafter known as Battery Park City.

The result is a sleek virtual city—with sparkling sand-colored high-rises flanked by office towers, hotels, museums, movie theaters, public schools, and a shopping arcade, all of it set on thirty-six leafy acres of open space.

And it’s in this place—a fledgling waterfront town—that our story begins.

I moved here twenty-five years ago, seduced by the spectacular views of New York Harbor, historic Ellis Island, and New Jersey’s “gold coast,” though people questioned my migrating to a “wilderness” that was little more than a sandy beachhead.

Getting to the local subway station required what amounted to aerobic exercise. One uptown friend joked he’d need a passport, a bike, or a jogging suit to visit. True, we were inconvenient to get to and had exactly one supermarket, one drug store, one
dry cleaner, one bank, and a half-finished garden and pool.

But to me the Hudson River sunsets, up-close views of the Statue of Liberty, and the never-ending parade of boats made it all worth it. After all, I’d come from a dark walk-up apartment overlooking an airshaft!

Compared to that, my new Battery Park City home seemed utterly sublime. It was filled with sunlight and perched so low to the water that I felt as if I was living on a riverboat. I had my own honey locust tree that pushed up against the living room window, enveloping the entire space and creating a tree house effect.

And being a pioneer in Battery Park City had other advantages too. Since my neighbors and I were isolated on the same little block of land, we were constantly bumping into each other, unavoidably so.

In a notoriously brusque city of eight million, where neighbors typically keep their distance, our community of 9,000 was an unusually open one— with people mingling at neighborhood block parties, outdoor picnics, pick-up basketball games, and sailboat outings—happy to be living in what amounts to an idyllic resort town.

The backbone of it all is a magnificent tree-lined Esplanade, a 1.2-mile promenade winding its way around the entire length of the Battery. All the buildings and outdoor spaces here are set along this expansive walkway like pearls on a string.

In the warm days of early fall, the grand English oaks, river birches, and weeping willows sway in the wind. As I bike through the pathways, I’m shaded by a lush umbrella of trees, an ideal backdrop for lunchtime strollers. In the evening, the purple lanterns set close to the water glow as residents and visitors dine at candlelit tables.

In winter, though, living here becomes a grueling marathon, a regimen of ice, wind, and snow. Blustery high winds seep through our windows. Snow floating down on the Statue of Liberty turns it into a snow globe. And I’m always mesmerized by the jagged ice chunks traveling downriver, their edges catching the sun as the current moves them briskly along.

Then, with the arrival of spring, the neighborhood perks up once again. Cherry blossoms and silver lindens perfume the air with their heady sweetness. Eighty species of birds flutter amid the lion’s tails, roses, azaleas, anemones, toad lilies, and lavender hydrangeas. And hopeful fishermen cast their lines into the Hudson for local specialties like bluefish, white perch, winter flounder, and tomcod.

But best of all, the Hudson River is overflowing with sailboats, private yachts, tour boats, Jet Skis, and kayaks—plus barges, water taxis, and commuter ferries—a blur of nautical movement creating a wild dance across the water.

Most dramatic are the mammoth cruise ships that glide southward to the ocean as people stand on shore and wave. The only thing I haven’t seen on the Hudson is somebody floating by in a bathtub.

On land, the Esplanade is jam-packed with bikers, joggers, rollerbladers, skateboarders, picnickers, volleyball and soccer players, and a cavalcade of baby carriages. This is Kid Central, with toddlers and elementary school kids everywhere— their bikes, skateboards, frisbees, and kites filling the neighborhood with action.

And that’s not to mention the dogs—hundreds of them in every shape and size. Majestic Great Danes rub noses with pint-sized pugs and Shih Tzus. Golden retrievers and Labs race by the river, pulling their owners, trailing behind bikes, or staying ahead of Baby Jogger strollers. German shepherds, Labradoodles, Westies, beagles, and
Puggles parade along the water, sniffing under trees and reveling in the sun. At the nearby dog run, boxers, Yorkies, poodles, Boston terriers, Wheatens, and bulldogs chase balls and one other, or splash in the dunking pool.

It’s a circus and a dog show rolled up in one. And it’s perfect employment for the neighborhood’s dog walkers, exercising their troops from dawn to dusk.

But to say that the neighborhood is dog friendly would be an understatement. At Halloween, canine residents compete in the neighborhood’s annual costume contest and dog parade. Contestants have included a Batman whippet, a Wizard of Oz cowardly lion Bernese mountain dog, a Cinderella Chihuahua, a Minnie Mouse pug, and a Madonna Lhasa apso, all strutting their stuff.

They competed against creatively attired Rhodesian ridgebacks, Australian shepherds, dalmatians, Havaneses, Border collies, Scottish terriers, and, of course, an army of mutts. (One year, the champion was Santiago, a one-year-old pit bull “biker”—in a leather jacket, leather cap, white T-shirt, and blue jeans.)

It was in this dog-friendly world that my own cocker spaniel, Katie, found a home. Over a period of nearly fifteen years (via more than 20,000 walks) my curiously intelligent dog explored every inch of Battery Park City.

I can see her now—trotting along the Hudson, racing for tennis balls in the park, chasing squirrels, snoozing under a willow tree, stealing nacho chips at our local Mexican restaurant, taking sunset cruises on a local sailboat, greedily licking my pistachio ice-cream cone on a hot summer night, and, like all dogs, searching for the best smells and tastiest treats available to her.

But this is not just a story about a precocious dog. It’s about how that dog had the power to turn five neighbors into a real family—racing up and down a 120-foot hallway between apartments, pushing doors in with her paws, herding her “pack” together, and trotting outside along the Hudson, her spirit a magnet to all.

Through her soulful eyes, we witness antics and family adventures spanning everything from Hollywood high times to the terrors of 9/11, one dog creating a family circle that embraced and transformed each of its members, including me.

Of course, none of what I’m about to tell you was planned—or expected. In fact, I sometimes ask myself: What if I had never moved to Battery Park City at all? Was everything that happened just an accident, coincidence, or luck?

Or was it fate and destiny?

I can tell you I definitely believe in the power of proximity, for who we’re physically near is so often who we wind up being close to.

And so, I now invite you to enter my little world in a town built on water.

Like one of those online maps that allows you to zoom into any city, then zero in on the neighborhood, street, and building, come on down to Battery Park City… and find out what happened—up and down the hall.

New York
May 2010
CHAPTER ONE

Faux-Paws

As a kid, I was never a “dog person,” to say the least.

In fact, I was terrified of dogs.

It all began with “Strippy”—a menacing black-and-white spotted English pointer, who was always barking furiously at the top of his lungs in our neighbor’s yard.

There he was, all seventy pounds of him, nervously pacing back and forth on a long metal chain, or sitting ominously on top of his green-and-white doghouse, surveying his kingdom from above.

Strippy was the king of the mountain—and I was his prey, frightened by his incessant barking and growling. We might as well have been living next door to a lion, for to me it amounted to the same thing.

On hot summer days on Bondcroft Drive, a quiet street in a suburb of Buffalo, New York, my sister Joanne and I would race through the sprinkler or splash in a small wading pool. But we weren’t entirely carefree, always keeping a wary eye on this seemingly dangerous animal, just thirty feet away.

I would later understand that the source of Strippy’s frustration was being chained up all day. After all, pointers are full of energy and go-power, tireless as hard-driving hunting dogs. They love to gallop and roam.

So it was no wonder that Strippy was so high-strung, lacking freedom and exercise. His owners kept him restrained, they said, to prevent him from running away.

One day, when I was about four years old, I was playing in the hedges behind our house with my sister, then six. In a flash, out of nowhere, Strippy suddenly broke loose and tore out of his yard and into ours, racing over the hedges and straight toward us.

Strippy pushed us down to the ground with his huge paws, bouncing on top of us, though not actually scratching or hurting us in any way. In hindsight, he was probably just being friendly and knocked us down by accident. But tell that to two petrified kids.

My heart was pounding furiously as I felt the horrible weight of that dog on top of me before he raced away from the yard.

My mom saw it all from the bedroom window, and by the time she came rushing outside, we were cowering in the bushes, crying and hysterical. I escaped into a large cardboard box that was nearby on the lawn, shivering inside it, while my sister huddled in Mom’s arms.

This traumatic event would stay with us for years. Thereafter, any time a friendly neighborhood dog trotted by, we froze in our tracks, like statues, paralyzed by fear.
But by the time I was ten, this fear of dogs had miraculously faded away, thanks to “Lady,” a vivacious beagle who became our neighborhood mascot. I never can forget her adorable face, those floppy brown ears, and expressive brown eyes that literally sparkled. True, she was a little chubby, but that didn’t stop her from being the spunkiest dog I’d ever seen.

She’d race us around the yard—her long tail waving back and forth like a windshield wiper—chasing balls, leaping into the air, tagging behind me on bike rides, fetching branches, begging for snacks, and snooping into everything—overjoyed to play with the neighborhood kids and stealing kisses with her long tongue. I loved it when she’d roll over, desperate to have her stomach rubbed.

It wasn’t long before I wanted a dog of my own. But Mom was firmly opposed to it. By now, I had another sister, Debby, and Mom said that raising three kids was enough work—that we weren’t meant to have a dog.

Yet, as a girl, Mom had treasured a white poodle named Sadie, and later, a German shepherd named Duke. Her father, our Papa, was a great dog lover and lobbied on my behalf. The arguments went on for weeks. But the answer was still no.

Not to be dissuaded, my stubborn grandfather forged ahead, and one morning simply showed up at our house with a miniature schnauzer.

Mom was furious. By the time I got home from school, the black puppy, named Herman, was tied to the swing set in the backyard, looking up at me with a plaintive expression that said: “Keep me.”

But inside, Mom and Papa were having a heated “discussion.”

Much as I begged, Mom wouldn’t allow him to stay. Papa took the dog away—and that was it for me and dogs for decades.

Well into adulthood, though, I always kept a to-do list tucked into my date book. It had life goals (and trivia) written out on it: work objectives, hobby ideas, good restaurants, a list of friends and phone numbers, and for twenty-five years running, a three-word note to self: GET A DOG.

I somehow sensed that having a four-legged companion would turn out to be one of the secrets to contentment (and sometimes easier to find than a two-legged one).

Meanwhile, also on my to-do list was the goal of upgrading my living situation. After six years, I couldn’t stand the claustrophobic, dark apartment on the Upper East Side—a cross between a cave and a prison. I was desperate for something better.

In the spring of 1985, after weeks of looking at outrageously priced high-rise apartments, just as an afterthought, my realtor suggested that I check out a brand-new building in Battery Park City. It had unobstructed Hudson River views, a swimming pool, gardens, restaurants, and stores. If it was too good to be true—and a real bargain—that was because not many people back then wanted to live at the southern tip of Manhattan, so far from midtown.

But after I saw the Hudson River rolling by what would be my new living room window, I didn’t care how far out of the way it was.

Once I was settled into Battery Park City, though, my sunny new apartment seemed awfully quiet—and once again, the impulse to get a dog came and went.
That impulse to get a dog was amped up by the sheer power of suggestion. In our complex of 1,720 apartments (spread out in six cement-and-glass buildings, including a trio of thirty-five-story high rises), we had more than 300 dogs. The Esplanade and dog run were more jam-packed than the LA freeways. So why was I still tooling along alone? Admittedly, I’d always been consumed with work and work alone, focused on a career that had often become a blinding obsession.

Two years earlier, I’d had my first book published, a comprehensive biography of Vladimir Horowitz that took three years to write; and after that, between freelancing at a women’s magazine and working a full-time job at a men’s lifestyle publication, I’d found my leisure time limited. And the little of it that I had was somewhat empty.

No matter how much surface excitement I felt meeting celebrity interview subjects—or covering stories like the America’s Cup in Bermuda, a rodeo in Denver, or a Christmas chat at the White House with Nancy Reagan—there was, just underneath, a pervasive sense of loneliness. And nothing could chase it away.

Admittedly, I wasn’t great at establishing intimate relationships—though I did have a wide circle of close friends. Yet it seemed to me that creating a stronger domestic life was key to creating a happier life. Could the prime part of that new life be a canine companion?

Over the next two years, every time I was tempted to get a dog, I pulled back, distracted by yet more work or anxious at confronting a new learning curve. After all, what did I know about owning a dog? What breed to buy? How to train it?

All of it seemed overwhelming—until 1987, when I finally took the plunge. One hot summer day, I was out shopping for clothes with a longtime friend, Michael, an architect and designer who had moved into our apartment building on my suggestion. He had an unerring eye and had helped me get my Battery Park City apartment in order.

That humid day, as we browsed around in Bloomingdale’s, I was looking for bathing suits—not puppies. But afterward, as we were taking a walk up Lexington Avenue, we came upon a pet store on East 77th Street. The front windows were filled with frolicking pups. “Oh, look!” Michael exclaimed, spotting just the one he liked. “There’s an incredibly cute pug.”

In the front was a tiny tan dog with a wrinkly face and a pushed-in nose, contentedly biting a toy mouse. I was only half-listening to Michael as he went on: “I love all the Chinese dogs,” he said (perhaps viewing them as much as décor-enhancers as pets). “There are the Pekingeses, the Japanese chins, Shih tzus, Chinese cresteds…. And having accessorized rooms with dogs in sculptural form, he joked, “And they make wonderful porcelains too.”

Yikes. I was beginning to get worried by that excited smile on Michael’s face. I’d seen it before, when he’d suggested buying a dining table that was well beyond my means.

So, staring at the little pug, I muttered, “He’s cute.” Michael practically yanked me into the store, and the rest of what happened is a blur.

Within fifteen minutes of being down on the floor playing inside a metal pen with
the pug, Michael, no stranger to high-end retail, announced to the clerk, “Wrap him up… we’ll take him,” as if we were buying a couch. We, of course, meant me.

I pulled out my credit card to cover the price, which didn’t include his crate, toys, pillows, food and water bowls, blankets, deodorizers, shampoo, conditioner, and baby gate.

The taxi ride home was surreal, me holding my shopping bags, Michael holding “Baby,” the name he’d instantly given the pug.

Back at my apartment, we set up the puppy’s new headquarters in my kitchen, and I can still see Michael dancing with him, holding Baby up by his front paws while the back paws strutted away. Well, at least they were happy.

A few hours later Michael said good night and went back upstairs to the twenty-third floor. There I was, left alone on the third floor with my purchase.

Baby was in his crate, snoring away in the kitchen, and I was lying in my crate in a panic, nearly hyperventilating—sweating and anxious. I felt trapped by the consequences of my rash decision. It reminded me of the time I got arrested for speeding. I started calling up friends, “I’ve made a real mistake… what was I thinking?”

I knew, instinctively, that Baby was the wrong dog for me. I didn’t want a breed this small, didn’t want a male, and didn’t want a dog that snored either. Other than that, Baby was perfect.


I called him at the crack of dawn the next day and said, “I can’t do it. The dog is going back…”

And off I went, back to the pet store. I felt really guilty about it as Baby had a rather worried expression on his face, maybe sensing that he was heading back to the store window. But because he was such a beautiful dog, I reasoned that someone would come along and buy him.

And so it was that Baby was in my life for less than twenty-four hours.

Bye-bye baby.

After that false start, a year passed, though I hadn’t given up on the idea of getting a dog. I was just stalled.

What I really needed and luckily found was a mentor, someone who could calmly and wisely lead me in the right dog direction.

Fortuitously, in the spring of 1988, I became friendly with Joe, an extroverted long-time resident of my building who worked as a bartender across the street at the Marriott Hotel. Loquacious and curious, Joe could talk to anybody—while he also had a great talent turning a house into a home with a beautiful apartment on the twenty-third floor. He was a meticulous caretaker as well, completely devoted to his three-year-old cocker spaniel named Dinah.

Like most classically groomed cocker spaniels, Dinah had a “full skirt,” long blond hair that flowed from her torso to the ground, which reminded me of a carpet sweeper. She had a plaintive oval face (a canine Modigliani), melancholy brown eyes, and a
submissive disposition—nothing like the lusty personality of Lady, but sweet and demure.

Joe was admittedly a tough taskmaster. He had trained Dinah to obey his every command—no pulling on the leash, no stealing treats from the table, no snooping on the ground (keeping her long ears clean), and no accidents on the carpet. She even had to face uphill when relieving herself, so that her fur would not get wet!

Joe would erupt with a harsh rebuke and a swat on Dinah’s butt if she committed any such infractions.

Because he was such a disciplinarian, Dinah, I noticed, seemed a little afraid of him, not wanting to disappoint. She’d look up at him with a worried nervous expression and I felt sorry for her. Like some dog owners (not the kind I turned out to be!), Joe was the commander, deeply caring but strict—and Dinah was his servant.

Joe could be affectionate too—kissing Dinah, rewarding her with treats, patting her on the head for excellent behavior, and grooming her to the nth degree.

I’d often find him showcasing his talents outside on the Esplanade, brushing out Dinah’s ears and expertly trimming her coat with an electric clipper as she sat perfectly still on a park bench.

One day, something stirred inside me as I watched Joe perfecting Dinah’s pendulous ears. I was so taken by those ears, which, in the end, turned out to be the key to moving forward.

Joe noticed. “You ought to get a cocker spaniel,” he told me, stroking Dinah’s back with a wiry brush and then putting the final touches on her coat with a portable hair dryer. “You’ve got to get one. It would be good for you.”
My mentor was turning out to be a true friend and a well-intentioned know-it-all. Joe loved taking me under his wing and giving advice on anything and everything—from dating and dining to shopping tips, family relationships, and social networking. And I was more than receptive to Joe’s guidance and friendship—as I had more time on my hands than I was used to.

A few years earlier, I had quit my full-time magazine job when the freelance work picked up, which included the strong prospect of collaborating with a pop star on his autobiography. But the book idea hadn’t panned out. And when my regular magazine gig dried up as well, I was actively looking for another full-time job while battling a sense of loneliness at home.

“You need some company—and getting a dog is a lot quicker than a dating service,” he joked, talking nonstop like a used car salesman for the next week about the virtues of cockers. “They’re so calm, friendly, easy to train—and pretty too. How many people do you know who are like that?!”

“And,” he exclaimed, without taking a breath, “a dog is a real magnet—you walk around with a cute one—and you’ll get one just like it.”

But the main benefit of being a pet owner, he said, was the incomparable companionship from it, something he especially needed. While, by night, Joe tended bar, he was alone much of the day, just like me, so he understood the feeling of being isolated. His basic cure-all was the magic of owning a dog.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said carefully, always the cautious one. “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you loan Dinah out to me for an afternoon—so I can take her out for a test drive?”

“Like rent-a-dog?!” he laughed, game to try my scheme. “Exactly. Dinah will be my test-run dog.”

So I took her home with me, first for a long walk outside and then inside for a joint nap. Honestly, I had never had a dog in my bed (at least not a canine one) and having her lean against me as we snoozed was an incredible sensation. It was so relaxing, I later read that a dog’s presence can actually lower your heart rate and blood pressure. It certainly was doing something for me.

I napped in a way I rarely had, resting more deeply than usual, my breath following hers. Anyone who has ever slept with a dog knows exactly what I’m talking about. It was comforting and cozy. And I was touched by Dinah’s gentleness and by the way she drew next to me, putting her paws on my arm.

After a few more test naps, I was sold. And over the next few weeks, Joe began
giving me a crash course on how to prepare for a puppy of my own.

“Now you’re going to need a kennel....” he lectured, his intense blue eyes pinning
me with detailed instructions. “Your puppy is going to view this enclosed space as its
own little home. You put some soft towels on the bottom of it with a pillow and you’re
set. The beauty of it is that a puppy will never soil its pen if it can possibly avoid it.
You’ll put the crate in the kitchen, put up a baby fence, then leave the door of the crate
open with the floor of the kitchen covered in newspaper or wee-wee pads.”

“Wee-wee what?” I asked. “This sounds like more work than having a real baby.”

“Oh, it’s going to be,” Joe promised. “Just wait. Having a puppy is a full-time job.
Every two hours your dog needs to be picked up and taken outside so it gets the idea
that relieving itself in the house is not an option. The puppy needs to be close to you,
to be able to smell you, because it’s going to be missing its litter mates and mom.
You’re his new mom!”

One day, as he continued pressuring me about getting a dog, I blurted out, “You’re
driving me nuts!” With his typical acerbic wit, he answered, “Mmmmmm... not a very
far drive.”

Furthermore, Joe told me that, while he would be happy to support my efforts in
training a dog, there was an older woman living just a few doors down from me on the
third floor who was an experienced cocker spaniel owner as well. “She’s the perfect
person to talk to, and you should definitely meet,” he said.

“Her name is Pearl and her dog, Brandy, recently died. This would help both of
you. When I’m not around, you can go to her and she’ll give you great advice.”

Although I had lived in the building for three years, I had never exchanged
anything except for a casual “hello” with any of the seventeen tenants living along our
120-foot hallway. All that was about to change.

A few days later, Joe came over to my apartment and took me down the hall for an
introduction to his friend. This would turn out to be the most important thing that Joe
would ever do for me—and the kindest. I could never have guessed that this casual
little introduction would so completely change my life.

The door opened and there was Pearl, a solid-looking seventy-six-year-old with
military posture, a sparkle in her eye, and a majestic high forehead with a mane of
lustrous gray hair. There was something warm and homey about her, yet at the same
time, I noticed a no-nonsense quality that spelled impressive strength. Not the perfume
and jewelry type, Pearl was dressed in black pants and a gray cable-knit sweater, a
cake pan in her hands, her sweater smudged with flour.

Dinah led the way into the apartment, her tail wagging.

“Hello baby girl! How’s my little Dinah?” cooed Pearl, pulling a box of biscuits
she kept on hand for such occasions from a nearby bookcase. She bent down to give
one to Dinah, but the dog hesitated, tentatively looking up at Joe for the go-ahead.
With a nod of his head, Dinah gently pulled it from Pearl’s hand and trotted happily
away with it.

Pearl’s own cocker, Brandy, had died the year before at age twelve, and she greatly
missed her, though I would discover that Pearl was not one to reveal her emotions
easily. Stoic and private, she pushed aside her loss and now enjoyed Dinah’s company
whenever she came to visit.

“So, Joe, you smelled my plum tart and decided to come my way,” she laughed,