



Cruella de Vil, from *101 Dalmatians* in Real Life

Description

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Author's Memo

Many of us have in-laws and navigate a tricky set of relationships as a result. Some of the anthropological research literature on marriage and kinship, to which I've contributed, fails to illuminate the affective aspects of in-law relationships.

This short piece situates me in a set of sour in-law relationships that also involved the legal system. I wrote it as form of autoethnography, an attempt to dissolve the ugliness and highlight the sadness and humor of the experience—or rather to transcend the ugliness and sadness with humor. I imagined this piece as performance, on the Moth Radio Hour, perhaps, and hoped that my wife would finally laugh at the petty idiocy of her sisters—a hard transformation to make, and laughter eases that transformation; theory does not.

The various models of kinship and marriage illuminate structure and serve comparative purposes. An ethnographic, or autoethnographic description, by contrast, is situated in the immediacy of lived experience, and by its nature cannot easily be used comparatively. Anthropology exists at both extremes, the comparative and the unique; one takes all of humanity as its object, the other focuses on the here and now. This piece, an example of the latter approach, is part of a larger work in which I've abandoned theory for the sake of illuminating other aspects of shared experience. The trick, in my view, is to avoid self-indulgence.





Cruella de Vil, from 101 Dalmatians, in Real Life

Many of us have in-laws. Many of us wish we didn't. I'll tell you a little story of my own.

My sister-in-law's husband calls his wife Cruella, as in Cruella de Vil, from 101 Dalmatians. You know, evil, nasty, vain, self-centered. The name fits. Makes you wonder about him, but we'll go with that: Cruella. Cruella's twin sister, she looks just like Cruella, and after a lifetime of drink and drugs, is more than a bit brain-fried. The look-alike twins, now in their late sixties, fell in with a er-do-well attorney, whose motivation seemed to be family destruction. He, too, is something of a cartoon character, pudgy, whiny, manipulative, an annoying high squeaky voice. Real estate law is his expertise. Moral rectitude is not his strong suit. The sort of person you'd avoid on the street, thinking Lemony Snicket, thinking Run away! Run away!

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My wife, I'll call her Ferron, I want to keep her out of this tale, even though she is central to it. She tried to help her demented and dying father. Make note of that: demented, dying. He ended up in a nursing facility. He once set his cart on fire, one of those three-wheel motorized carts in nursing homes people drive around: he put his lit cigar in the front basket and the thing went whoosh! A basket full of used tissues up in flames. He then drove up to the nurses' station, his cart a ball of flame, asking for help. What a scene.

As I say, demented, dying, a life-long cigar smoker, his cart a flaming mess. The nurses put a stop to that. Afterwards, he had to sneak-smoke. He went out to his car, a Coupe DeVille, as it turns out (yeah, I know, Coupe DeVille, Cruella de Vil, can't make this shit up), anyway, near blind, he didn't drive, but he went to his car to sneak a smoke. Stinky Pete, I called that car. I hope it's been put out of its misery.

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In any case, my wife signed some sort of nondisclosure agreement. I didn't. I'm free to tell the story, even if I disguise the story with names of characters. But the real people are there, every nasty one of them. I'm related to them. That's my fate. Stinky Pete and demon in-laws from hell.

The twin sisters hate everyone except themselves. It's all quite petty, as small-scale family disputes tend to be. Dementia, greed, siblings, and a legal system gone awry. What more could you want? Flaming nursing home carts. Backstabbing lookalike twins. And a legal threat called an *In Terrorem* clause—the Latin means “into fear.” It was my wife they wanted to terrorize with that legal threat embedded in their dead father's trust. Take your crumbs or lose even those, she was told in legalese.

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Why use Latin? Why not simply say we are going to fucking terrorize you into legal submission and you can't do a damn thing about it. I can hear the evil twins cackling with joy.

So my wife, far from terrified, filed a lawsuit against her evil twin sisters. They had simply manipulated their demented father through his cartoonish attorney: more money to them, less to her. And we're not talking big money here, just a small slice of their father's remaining assets. Mr. Ne-re-Do-Well Attorney thought the *In Terrorem* clause would keep Ferron at bay, terrified at losing everything. I can hear his smug little whine of pleasure.

That terror clause goaded Ferron into legal action. Something of a packrat, she had years of records implicating Cruella and Twin-Sister-Brain-Fried, and in their own handwriting. If you are going to defraud your sister, for God's sake at least hide the evidence!

But the real people are there, every nasty one of them. I'm related to them. That's my fate. Stinky Pete and demon in-laws from hell.

As Ferron prepared her case, I would sing, “Cruella de Vil, Cruella de Vil, if she doesn't scare you, no evil thing will!” And Ferron would laugh. I was proud of her.

The legal wrangling, which took over a year, isn't important. Mr. Ne-re-Do-Well Attorney, himself terrified, turned tail and ran off. Ferron won; her sisters simply melted, their evil cackles silenced into senescence.

What happened at the end of the Disney film? Oh, yeah. Cruella de Vil wanted to make a fur coat out of 99 dalmatian puppies. She was driven to murderous insanity when her desires were thwarted.

I thought of that film as I prepared a small gift box for the mail, singing “Cruella de Vil, Cruella de Vil!”

Cruella will never know where it came from, but as my own act of in-law revenge, petty, spiteful, and oh, so satisfying, I sent her a chintzy full-length obviously fake dalmatian puppy fur coat, paid for out of the money she lost.

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