

Shorty, Master Escape Artist

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The week I was preparing to put my house on the market, I found a stray dog. When he emerged from the hedge along the sidewalk, I thought, "Who's little black cat is that?" But then he yapped. Though I didn't want a dog at that time in my life, I took him in anyway. I killed all his fleas and named him Shorty.

According to the vet, Shorty's breed was Pomeranian. You could have fooled most people. He had that silky Pomeranian hair on his head, but the rest of him was patchy baldness. His tail looked exactly like a rat's, except that it was continually whirling. Once, after a friend met Shorty, she called me on the phone. "Turn on the TV," she said. "I just saw Shorty on Animal Planet." It was a program about vampire bats. The resemblance was unnerving.

I sold the house and began the search for an apartment. Meanwhile Shorty ran in circles around the tragically dismantled rooms, occasionally piddling on the floors in delight. What did he care that I was miserable, or that most landlords wouldn't allow dogs?

Miraculously, I found Bill—a nice landlord who loved dogs. Bill said Shorty was "cute," and the fenced-in backyard was ours to do with as we pleased. You'd have thought Shorty would appreciate our good fortune. But no—Shorty was intent on escape.

First he squeezed under the fence and ran straight to the arms of a little girl playing in her front yard a half-mile away. Fortunately, he was wearing a tag: *Shorty*, and my phone number. When I went to retrieve him, the little girl cried. Her mother gave me a hard look. "He almost got hit by a car, you know," she said, shaking her head. "Cute little dog like that." Shorty licked the little girl's cheek. I had to wrench him from her arms.

Bill helped me fortify the fence with cinderblocks, but Shorty escaped again. The call came from the parking lot of Royal Farms. When I got there, Shorty was seated between two cooing teenage girls. They were feeding him a ham and cheese sandwich. He barely acknowledged my presence.

Later, I discovered the hole in the fence, behind the barberry bush. Bill repaired the hole, and all was well—for a week, until the UPS guy neglected to latch the gate.

When I discovered Shorty had run off again, I made a glass of iced tea and sat by the window. Yellow leaves were drifting from the trees, schoolchildren drifting along the sidewalk. It was one of those autumn afternoons so heavy with beauty that you can't help but feel mournful. I was homesick for the old house, the old life—husband, children, and assorted pets coming and going, but anchored always, to me. I decided I'd had it with Shorty and his fickle ways. Who needed a dog hell-bent on hitting the road?

An hour later the phone rang—a woman, the bartender at the Emerald Tavern. She had spotted Shorty running along Harford Road. "I called to him," she said, "and he came right in." I could picture it. He'd done some serious running. He was probably thirsty.

I drove to the tavern. When I stepped from daylight into the dim, smoky interior, the men at the bar turned in unison to look.

"Did you come to pick up your *cat*?" the guy in the Ravens shirt asked, and the others snickered.

"Hey Shorty!" called the guy at the end. "You better come on out. She's here."

The kitchen door opened and out came Shorty, followed by the bartender, an attractive woman with a nice smile. Shorty ran up to me and whirled his tail, turned about-face and ran back to the bartender.

"I gave him a little sliced turkey," the bartender said.

"And a Budweiser," Ravens Shirt said. The others laughed.

"What kind of dog *is* he?" the bartender asked. "So cute."

"Pomeranian," I answered grimly.

I got hold of Shorty and snapped on the leash. I expressed my gratitude to the bartender, several times, and headed for the door with Shorty under my arm.

"I bet that dog's worth something," Ravens Shirt said over his shoulder.

I thought he was joking, but then it hit me what he meant—that I should have given the bartender a reward. I should have, but I only had a couple dollars. And besides, my heart was sore.

Out at the car, Shorty scrambled into the passenger seat.

"I've had it," I yelled like a shrew. "Are you in this for the long haul or not?"

He yapped back, but wouldn't look me in the eye.

That was years ago. Though Shorty and I have moved, we've kept in touch with Bill.

"How's Shorty?" Bill asked the other day. "Still hanging out at the Emerald Tavern?"

I laughed, and took a quick look out the window. Shorty was in the backyard, spread-eagled on a pile of leaves. He had his eye on the gate, of course, hoping someone would get careless. Some dogs never do learn to stay.