

These Things That Save Us

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After seven years of marriage, the only thing my wife and I owned in common was a dachshund named Weasel. The dog was our pride and joy, a tri-color dapple with gray spotted patches and brown ears. He had his own room on the second floor of our townhouse, a closet stocked with toys, special food prepared by a butcher, and a pet-nanny for when we were on vacation. He had it easy, but he earned his luxuries by making things simpler for me and my wife.

Weasel was the reason I looked forward to coming home most nights. We enjoyed long walks, the dog and I, while Sharon snacked on caramel corn and watched television alone. Before we left for the park each night, as a sort of kitsch joke, I'd lean in to kiss my wife's forehead where the skin had been tweezed raw around the eyebrows. I'd say, "Love you, honey," and she'd reply, "Have fun, boys," as we walked out the door.

Sharon was a big blond woman, but not really fat. She was tall with full breasts and hips, a small paunch. She looked athletic in a way, but my wife was no athlete. "She's lazy," I'd grumble to our friends at dinner parties, emphasizing her faults. Sharon had empathetic blue eyes and could be a wonderful kisser after some wine, but I never told anyone about these things. I stuck to my well-rehearsed punch lines when talking about my wife. How she planned monthly "mental health days" from her morning radio show at a Top 40 station; that she spent little time grooming herself during the week, which is common for morning radio hosts; and that she wasted most of her time wrapped in her grandmother's quilt, curled into the elbow of our leather sectional. This was what I talked about when I talked about my wife.

It wasn't quite as bad between us as I liked to make it sound, but it was close. We were in our mid-thirties then and had been married for seven years. We didn't have kids, we didn't have a mortgage, we leased our cars. We ate dinner separately, off paper plates, and only begrudged a visit to each other's families in odd-numbered years. In even years we vacationed to peninsular Mexico during the holidays. It's safe to say that we valued our privacy above all else. That's just how we lived.

Sharon, Weasel and I rented a historic townhouse in a revitalized urban district, a nice gentrified neighborhood near a city park. Because the area had been declared blighted, our landlords made a killing remodeling old railroad houses into hip new digs for young professionals and childless couples. The wood floors and antique bathroom fixtures were a real boon to our self-confidence. And despite the air stream that blew through them, the single-paned, oak latticed windows were breathtaking against the backdrop of a white hot Nebraska thunderstorm.

I loved our neighborhood in those days. A park was just down the street and a new shopping center, complete with ethnic groceries and fashion boutiques, was around the block. The park was spectacular when in season, sugar maples and red oaks blooming up with color against a deep fall sky. There were tennis courts and jogging paths, a thru road on which the Mexicans and WT who lived just beyond the park sped through.

It was a nice place to walk, which was what Weasel and I were doing on a late October evening several years ago when everything changed, a Friday just minutes after I'd returned home from tedious business meetings in North Carolina. I worked for a venture capital firm that specialized in agribusiness and genetically enhanced corn. The sun was starting to set as we started off, but it was still warm enough to be in traveling



clothes, a polo shirt and slacks. There had been a lot of cool rain that season. The grass shivered in the mud when the northern breeze moved over it.

Walking the dog allowed me a kind of privacy, which is also why I enjoyed traveling so much. I yearned for the bustling lonesomeness of airport white noise, the freedom to be secluded in public—to appear deeply pensive without someone asking, “Whatcha thinking?” This is also why I liked to walk, to indulge in the secret adventures of a man and his dog, cruising down the sidewalk with nothing in particular owed to anyone. Just a man and his dachshund. We were free to look in our neighbors’ windows from the sidewalk, their domestic projections lit up incandescent. We could kick and sniff at garbage left at the curb. A man walking his dog has a right to be there.

Weasel bounced next to me and smiled a wide-jowled dog grin, exhilarated by the cool breeze and its unsolved odor. Sharon had him under the quilt for most of the week, I could tell, putting him outside only when the rug was in imminent danger. A dog like Weasel loved to be outside. He needed to run and smell dirty things in the park, crunching cast-off chicken bones when he could find them. There was fresh air and sniffing out dead birds.

We stopped to wrestle in a mound of leaves. I let him bite my hands and squeezed his muscular hocks. Then we walked towards a squash court near the far end of the park, where the thru road entered. On cool nights like that one, I let Weasel unburden himself by the court if no one was around. He took such pleasure in it, which was understandable. It’s sometimes nice to know that others will see your shit.



As Weasel backed into a crouch an SUV came speeding over the hill at the far end of the park. Its wheels went out from under it as it jumped the apex. Its tires barked an unsure cadence as it returned to the pavement. It was going to crash. I saw this. The SUV tipped and screeched on its side across the street.

Weasel jumped towards the noise, he ran out to the length of his leash and yelped at the vehicle as it lay askew against the papery bark of a sycamore tree. Weasel and I ran towards the overturned Bronco. We crunched through leaves as fast as we could, the jingle of his tags marking our stride.

We stopped on the sidewalk across the street and observed the sweat-suited tennis players that were gathering around the vehicle. The Bronco's airborne wheels still spun, ripped sod trailing its path to the sycamore. "Get me out of here," the driver cried. The tennis players surrounded the Bronco, hopping on the balls of their feet, but they weren't helping him. Weasel yelped in a frenzy towards the car's undercarriage, its muffler, oil pan, and fuel tank—the grime-stained internal organs of a car—jumping on two legs at the end of his leash. After searching for somewhere to tie up Weasel, I slid the hand loop at the end of his leash over a bench post and ran towards the crash. This wasn't something I'd thought through, of course, running towards the wreck. It was a corporeal action that just needed to be done. I felt its insistence in that moment and my body was propelled by blind instinct.

The tennis players looked through the windshield at the young man trapped inside, telling him to remain calm. "Jesus Christ," he screamed from inside the vehicle. "Will somebody help me?"

I leveraged myself on the top of the Bronco, crawled across the dusty front fender and leaned into the window to ask the driver if he was okay. He was little more than a

boy, seat-belted into the cockeyed vehicle wearing a camouflage jacket and blue jeans. He had a dirty mustache and greasy, hand-swept hair.

“Can you unbuckle yourself?” I asked, checking to make sure he was alone, but the kid just screamed.

The tennis players began pleading with the kid to turn off the engine. His stereo still played crackling rock. The motor wasn't running, but the carburetor could be feeding gas onto a hot manifold if the ignition were still engaged.

“You're going to catch fire,” one of them yelled.

The boy seemed to come to his senses then. He unbuckled himself, wormed his way upright in the small cabin of his Bronco, and reached for my hands.

“The keys,” I shouted, directing him to pull them from the steering column. “Get the keys.”

The kid stumbled off the top of his cab after I pulled him out, tripping into the arms of the tennis players. The neighbors crowded around us and a few of them came to ask if I was okay too, grabbing at my arms, because I must have looked unsettled. I stumbled through the crowd and sat in the root-crook of a large burr oak, collapsing into a wind-gathered pile of dry leaves. The kid who crashed his car crouched in the group of tennis players, gasping thank yous.

Within the minute, police and fire crews sped onto the scene, lights and sirens blaring, their tires screeching as they arrived. They checked out the Bronco, made certain that it wasn't a danger to those who'd gathered there, and began marching off distances for their report. The paramedics put the kid on a stretcher and eased him towards an ambulance as they checked for spinal injury and broken bones.

A young cop approached me. “Are you the one who pulled him out?”



He scratched notes in a leather-bound pad as I told him what happened. I explained that I'd recently come back to town, having been away on business. He asked where I lived, and I told him, "Around the corner. It's a townhouse."

"What's your name?"

"Gerry Martini."

"What were you doing here?"

I explained how the street leading into the park had a higher speed limit than it should have and pointed out the sudden drop on the park side of the hill that surprised drivers. But he only wanted the gritty details. The crash, pulling the kid out of the car. "I was walking—" I hesitated then, realizing what I was about to say. "My dog. I need to get my dog."

The cop followed me across the street and explained that they might need a further statement from me.

"That's fine," I said, rushing to the bench where I'd left Weasel, even though I could clearly see he was gone. The leash had been removed from the post. There was no sign of him. I dropped to my knees and dumbly searched through the leaves, my hands trembling.

"Have you seen a dachshund?" I asked a group of kids near the bench, but none of them had. I ran to the squash courts but they were empty, his abbreviated pile of shit lay in the dirt. The tennis players had returned to their games. I crouched and squinted, but there was no sign of Weasel anywhere in the park and my eyes couldn't seem to penetrate the hazy fall gloaming.



“Did you see somebody walk off with a little dog?” I ran from person to person in the thinning crowd, pleading with them to help me, but no one had seen anything like that.

“It’s a park, mister.” A lady in a blue fleece camisole leaned against a tree, smoking a cigarette. “Who would notice someone walking off with a dog when there’s a car rolled over?”

I searched for nearly an hour. The evening chill took hold after the sun set and the park was empty by the time I went home. The tennis courts were lit but quiet. The parking lot was abandoned. The wide lawns held only trees.

The whole time searching I was preoccupied by what I would tell my wife when I finally went home, convinced that there weren’t words which could explain what had happened.

A friend once asked me if I enjoyed being married.

“She drives the nicer car,” he pointed out. “You do most of the cooking and cleaning. You shovel the sidewalks when it snows. You do the laundry. You were the one to get a second job when money was short. And you are the one that has to travel for work every week.” I had complained a great deal to this friend about the many ways in which Sharon succeeded in driving me up a wall, so he had every reason to suspect I was genuinely unhappy in my marriage. “Tell me,” he asked, “why are you guys still together?”

“Isn’t it obvious,” I told him. “There’s a simple reason why it works. I get to leave town every week.”

Sharon and I met at a Jaycees meeting when we were in our late twenties. I was attracted to her on-air brashness, her blonde Amazon height. I wasn't exactly looking for a commitment at the time, neither of us were, I believe, but we were married within a few years anyway, in a large secular ceremony at the Alumni Center. We didn't really have long-term goals in those days. Sure, we saved for retirement, my employer provided a great 401(k), but as to kids, or a house, that just wasn't us. We found the perfect townhouse and were content to lease it. We were interested in the "is" phase of our lives. The middle-term investment of living year-to-year without letting things get complicated.

But we did concede to buying a dog, after a few summers, that was our idea of an acceptable responsibility. Sharon saw an ad in the newspaper for miniature dachshunds and we drove to this farm outside Weeping Water to have a look. Weasel was the last of the litter, the only one who hadn't yet been purchased. He was sleeping in the back of a small plastic kennel under a locust tree when we first saw him, curled into the warm belly of a bulldog puppy more than twice his size. The farm boy pulled him from the nest and held him out to us. They called him French Fry; they called all of their dachshunds French Fry for all we knew. His downy fur was grayish. He sort of rolled his sticky little tongue out of his mouth when he yawned, those whimsical puppy yawns that we couldn't help but swoon for. The whole way back into the city he slept nestled in Sharon's lap, crying only once, when one of us turned off the radio.

We couldn't talk about the fact that Weasel was gone in the weeks after he was lost. The details of how it happened were never brought up after my first feeble efforts to explain them. I had my theories—different varieties of thievery—and Sharon must have held her own, but we never discussed them. I was too guilty to even look at her.

I didn't understand at the time, but the way in which we'd lost Weasel didn't matter. What became important were the ways in which we grieved.

We put up flyers around the neighborhood advertising a lost dachshund, walking next to each other down the winding avenues. We placed increasingly emotional pleas in the classifieds and drove around nights after dinner, shining flashlight beams into sewer hatches and under park benches. Sharon even gave Weasel's description on her radio show, choking up as she recited his distinguishing marks, his overbite, the near almond shape of his eyes.

None of it worked though. Weasel had been irrecoverably lost.

There were times when that dog meant more to me than anything else in the world, but, until he was gone, I didn't realize how much he'd also meant to Sharon. She needed Weasel to cuddle with under blankets on the couch, caressing his velvet ears, feeling his cold black olive nose against her neck. Sharon had a strong desire to be soothed, for a soft couch and downy comforters. And for a small dog that liked to sleep inside her space, that burrowed under the blankets and nestled his head in the softness of her thighs. It was enviable, in some ways, what they shared. They had a common space, a drowsy comfort area. She needed to freak out with him at strange noises when I was away on business, the fur on the back of his neck mohawking into angry spikes. The only remedy to this nervousness was to scratch his puffed chest until it calmed him and her both.

For two weeks I changed my travel plans at work, concocting paper-thin lies for my boss so I could stay home and look for the dog every afternoon with Sharon after she came home from the radio show. It was a reversal of my former routine, now power-walking the neighborhood during daylight hours with Sharon and a sleeve of flyers,

searching out groups of kids to ask if they'd seen our dog. I'd avoided children before, because their rough fingers patted Weasel's back too stiffly and they asked stupid questions. "What is he? A dog-shund?"

Sharon cried on my shoulder when I finally had to leave for Raleigh-Durham. I kissed her on the top of her head and said I loved her. She cried harder when I told her this, her chest heaved, fists clinging to my jacket. It wasn't until I was in the car that I noticed my shirt was marked with her tears.

She called my cell phone throughout the first day in North Carolina but didn't leave messages. When I called her at lunch and in the evening she was tight-lipped. She didn't have anything specific to say, but she needed to call. Sitting alone in our house, she was compelled to press the buttons on her phone, to punch in my cell number. She needed to tell me that there was no news about Weasel.

"Do you think it's time to quit looking?" Her voice, the smoky tenor she spoke through on her radio show, had turned into the whiny voice of a teenage girl. "It's all I think about at work. Where could he be?"

"I've only been here one day." I sighed into the receiver at the hotel. "But I can come home if you need me to."

"Okay," she whimpered. "If you want to."

Driving home from the airport, I hoped that Weasel would be there when I walked in the door. Sharon had called three times while I was in the air but hadn't left messages. It was possible that she had found him, that she didn't want me to find out through voice mail, that she wanted to surprise me. It was possible that Weasel would be there, his leash on, waiting for me. This would be the first time I'd come home from a business trip without his yelping to greet me. I didn't want to believe it was happening.



The house was quiet when I pushed open the door, the living room lit softly with lamps, the television turned off. Sharon was in the room, I realized, on the couch with her head under a quilt. The quilt was black and yellow and cream, its squares stitched into a pattern of striking contrasts.

I thought to call out to my wife, to walk into the kitchen and yell her name across the house as if I didn't know she was laying there on the couch. I wanted her to stand up and greet me. I dropped my luggage to the floor and tossed my keys on the table. I pressed the door closed and flipped the dead bolt. I rattled the chain loudly into its lock. Sharon didn't move from under the quilt but I could hear her breathing, her stifled sobs that couldn't be concealed. Sharon could never stand to be looked at when we dealt with real things, if she might cry. She couldn't take that kind of open suffering, so she agonized in different ways.

I walked to the couch, sat by her legs, and rubbed her feet through the soft quilted fabric. For a long while I just sat there. The thought occurred to me that I could leave, that I could grab my jacket and head out for a walk in the park. It was another beautiful fall night. It wouldn't have been a strange thing for me to do.

But I lifted the quilt and crawled under with my wife instead of leaving. My body pressed against hers, our long legs mingled. We found each other's hands and breathed together. In the musty darkness I felt the cold wetness of her cheeks on my face, but we didn't kiss. We didn't talk either, but merely shared each other's air.