

## SHIH TZU

*Corey Mertes*

Our dog is plotting his escape. The rest of them, the kids and the wife, don't see what I see, a dog with a goal after so many years of indifference. Karen disagrees because it's my observation. The kids are older now and in tennis lessons, band, in heat, and oblivious to anything but their own raw impulses. I alone bear the burden of vigilance. Some mornings, early, upon tiptoeing downstairs for a Pimm's Cup or a Xanax, I have caught him awake before anyone else pacing in front of the door to the garage or closely examining the sills beneath the tall dining room windows. When he senses me, he will either lie down at once or else stand erect at the door as though he'd been serving all night there as our loyal protector. Once he pretended to chase after a phantom mouse, but I am nobody's fool. It isn't food he

wants. The dog doesn't sniff, he studies, like a structural engineer inspecting for fissures. Our Shih Tzu wants out.

We have provided him with a happy environment, we really have. Christ, the youngest used to make him birthday cards with paint-by-numbers kits. "Daddy, Morris needs a new rope toy," my daughter would say, and I would make it so. His food comes in parti-colored chunks infused with a bacon-y chemical plus real chives. He receives regular visits to the groomer, a CD of assorted family favorites that plays when he is left by himself, preventative medical care that includes vitamins and even a mini-treadmill. For years we could leave him on the porch without a leash and without fear of his bolting.

Those days are gone. The wanderlust began about a month ago. Sitting outside one day reading the obituaries, I was experimenting with something called an Atlas Cocktail (Tito's, Fino Sherry, St-Germaine Elderflower, Angostura Orange Bitters) when Morris came padding up the sidewalk, alone and untethered. He pawed the screen door, and I rose to let him in, he snuck a quick, last look down the street that took me briefly back to a teenage trauma; to the night I was compelled to leave a wild party early—one I was lucky to be invited to—in an overheating Ford driven by my devout, stone-faced mother. Inquiries revealed that no one knew Morris had been absent. We could only speculate as to the motives for his unprecedented withdrawal. Then a week later, he ran again, this time in

plain sight while the kids and I sprayed water at each other and at nesting birds in the backyard. The gate was open, a poodle and her master walked by, and Morris darted down the alley, stopping only briefly by the other dog, then around the corner in the direction of the park. My son and I ran after him. A bike cop who had found Morris was crouched down petting him when we got there, a pair of handcuffs connecting his wrist to the dog's collar. Morris's antics in the interim had been reported to the police and the pound by a woman whose cat he had chased into a slow-moving convertible. We'd arrived just in time to prevent the dog's detention.

It was then I began keeping him on a leash at all times. He is not the same Morris. Ever since that initial desertion, he will snap his head toward any door left ajar and any window letting in the sounds of summer. I can see in his eyes the same look in the eyes of my boyhood dog Buck in the weeks and days before he ran away and was tragically killed by a milk tank truck on a highway near our home.

There are other changes. Morris's enthusiasm for the gourmet food we switched him to is clearly feigned. He's a smart dog, but a poor actor. He is also horny again, more than ever. Neutered, of course, as a pup, and long short on libido, he acts as if able to feel again what was lost, like an amputee soldier with a vestigial urge to salute. Standing on his hind legs, he will wrap his forelegs around a calf of either me or my wife and look up at us

amorously, especially when our emotions have risen in some fashion, as when we are yelling, or slumping alone silently after the other has stormed off, or frozen in a penitent embrace. Nor are inanimate objects off limits. He has grown fond of the pedestal to the marble table in our breakfast nook. The young plum tree in the side yard has become a humping post and a source of embarrassment before our elderly neighbors. On our walks in the park, dogs big and small are the targets of feckless mounting.

We look at each other differently too. He knows that I know he is plotting his escape and eyes me warily. No longer master, I am a jailor instead. To me, he is no more just a source of start-up conversations with passersby on weekend walks, more than a diversionary, soft presence on the couch in front of *Dancing with the Stars*. He is my charge, and I have found new purpose in my duty to save him from himself and from a dangerous world.

At times I must take measures that to others must seem stern, some have even said criminal—and yet they are for the dog's own good. I have filled his half-dug holes near the fence with foodstuff laced with ipecac. A short, wire garden enclosure, barbed, now blocks the space that has formed over time between the grass and the gate's bottom edge. After discovering deep scratches in the living room windows, it fell upon me to rub the dog's nose into the panes, as I did into the carpet after potty training accidents

when he was young. “Is this right?” I will say, above his nose-crushed squeal. “Is this how happy dogs behave?”

What we have between us then is a chess match. His evolutionary advantage is his ability to focus on unambiguous needs; mine is a bigger brain. I am always one step ahead. Recently, on my long commute to work I noticed by the gas gauge that it was Thursday, and remembered that it was the previous Thursday, as well as the one before that, that Karen had found the cushions somehow removed from their patio chairs in the yard and piled, in what at first blush appeared a haphazard arrangement, on the ground a few feet from the gate. We attributed it to the wind—there had been a storm the first time—and then realizing the unlikelihood of that, to some child’s game played by one of the kids refusing to confess. But that day on the road I recalled that Morris was left alone and outside on Thursdays while Karen visited her therapist Dr. Pecht and the kids were in various classes and camps—vegan cooking, Arabic, jujitsu, I think. I rushed home. When I arrived, sure enough, there it was again, a pile of cushions, only this time in an apparent attempt to stabilize the formation Morris had added to its base and to weak points among its layers a number of neglected items from the patio: empty ceramic pots, planks of wood from a broken chair, the barbecue’s tin ash-catcher. Together with the cushions he had guided them into a multi-tiered edifice that tapered near the top, like a giant wedding

cake made of domestic detritus, in what could have served the secondary purpose, in fact, of commemorating his anticipated union with the wild. I watched with fascination through a turned-up slat in the kitchen blinds as he assembled the remaining ingredients. To set the final element in place—a Frisbee that had sat in the yard for more than a year and was the last portable object available—he climbed unsteadily with it in his teeth to the summit only to find, and express in a pathetic whimper, what he and I already knew, that he would still be unable to breach our white plastic fence that might as well have been made of concrete. He gave it a try anyway—blessed evolution—first setting the Frisbee on top with such care that a bystander might have thought its accurate placement meant the difference between damnation and deliverance. And then, with a desperate leap!—but alas, he fell pathetically short, slapping against the fence and scattering the parts of his assemblage before badly hurting his leg in a foreseeable collapse into a bed of *impatiens*.

After that I was compelled to restrict the dog to his kennel for more time than I care to disclose. It pained me to do it, but his scheming is my devotion, the mother of sacrifice. One night I had been to The Tar Man for a couple of Smokin' Chokes (Applewood Smoked Four Roses, Cynar, Maple Syrup, Lemon & Orange Zest) and to contemplate Morris's next gambit in the company of Maya behind the bar. Afterward Karen and I had a more

tempestuous row than usual. She threw something at me, a thick, heavy candle as it turned out, which I later deduced from its unfamiliar position on the credenza she had set out beforehand with just that purpose in mind. Fortunately, her aim was terrible; it missed me wildly and instead broke a window near the dining room floor. The dog, who had witnessed the whole thing, immediately tried to seize the opportunity by sprinting toward the hole despite its uninviting contours of blackness and shards. I was only able to stop him because in reacting to avoid the projectile I whirled in his direction and stumbled, by the grace of God, directly into his path. He had to go without food for a while after that one, I'm afraid. I thought of the move later with Karen and tried to somehow replicate it as part of our rambunctious making-up intercourse, but failed.

Things have died down considerably since then. The jerky manner in which Morris shifts his head from side to side as he walks, however, which he never did before, suggests to me that he is both alert to the possibilities of flight and concerned about the likely repercussions of failure. I now keep a log book to help me anticipate his latest stratagem, tracking not only his attempted flights, but any of his behaviors that strike me as out of the ordinary. Shih Tzu, I have learned, is Chinese for lion dog. As part of my efforts to stay one step ahead, I have begun to research his pedigree. The Shih Tzu is a cross between the Lhasa Apso, originally bred in the great

monasteries of Tibet, and the royal Pekinese, a favorite for centuries of Chinese emperors in the Forbidden City. “Majestic” and “solitary” are two of the many highlighted descriptive terms in my log. I am also reading a book about China, another diversion from the joint venture contracts and oil and gas leases that otherwise dominate my waking life. My wife says I’m a reader. “You’re a reader,” she says, in one of her pleasanter moods. And the kids say dryly, “Dad’s a big reader.”

Have I mentioned I need help? One night I set aside the log and begin reading my big glossy book about China at the kitchen table with a glass of Malbec and a bowl of Neapolitan ice cream. The kids are in the living room laughing on the floor and playing with the dog. They are play-wrestling when I turn to a page with a large picture of a three-sail junk afloat in an exotic Asian harbor. It makes me think of the army for some reason, which is strange because I wasn’t in very long and have little memory of it. Maybe the reason is that a poster of clipper ships was on the wall of the brig I was in for a couple of weeks, about six months out of basic training. The mind is funny. I had gone AWOL for a night to attend a party in La Jolla with a young lady I’d met on leave, a contortionist with a cabaret passing through town called Teatro ZinZanni. The blemish on my record was like a small scar from a noble battle won. Her name was Zelda, like Fitzgerald’s wife. Of that night I remember every organic detail.

In any event, after that the cranberry necklace Maya was wearing the last time I saw her crosses my mind, how it complemented her grey dress and green eyes, and I smile as I get up to close the back door to keep out the chill air before setting down my wine. The kids are still laughing, which gives me a lot of joy. The dog, on the other hand, has backed off and is staring at me from a crouched position against the wall; his tail is no longer wagging. When I sit down again and stare back at him the same way, I cross my arms and stop smiling, serious about my responsibility as sentry and attentive to any detail that might help me anticipate his next maneuver. I have done my research. Inhibited by monks and eunuchs in his past, the lion dog by mid-life becomes obsessed with urges he can only injure himself attempting to satisfy. My diligence, I'm afraid, may be all that stands between him and his doom, and vice versa.

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