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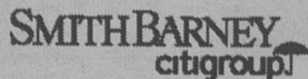
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Mitchell Rosengarten
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TONGUE IN CHEEK BY KEVIN ISOM

Ophelia Emboldened

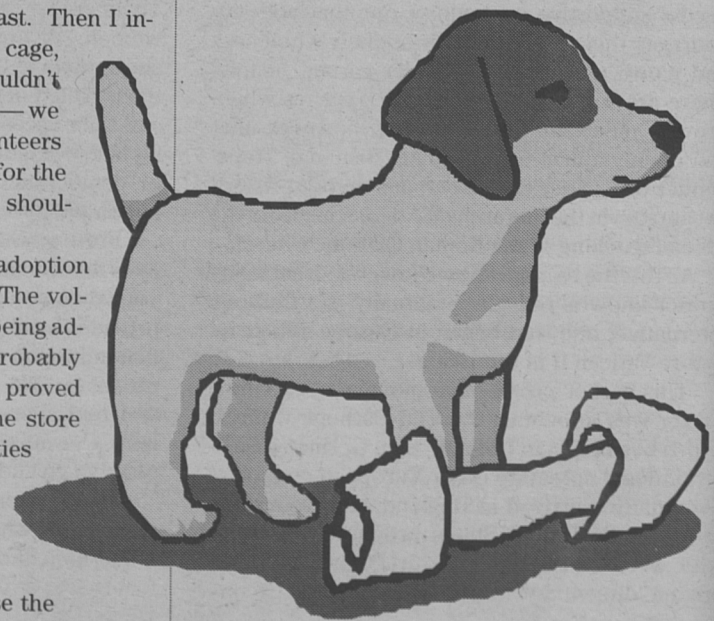
IT WAS LIKE I WAS LIVING A CHARLIE Brown Christmas, only I wasn't choosing the scraggiest, littlest Christmas tree — I was adding to our family. With the move to a house with an enclosed yard, I thought it was time to add a dog to our mix. Besides, the two cats had been asking for a pet for the past several Christmases, and I thought it was time that they got their wish. I had to sell this to my partner first, but I planned the negotiation well. I looked at dog shelters and rescue societies on the internet. Did you know that some of them actually post animals' photos beside captions like, "Endangered! Snowball's Last Day Alive is Friday"? I printed a couple of those and showed them to Derek over dinner. It was so horrific he actually teared up. The negotiation was over before it started. So we set out one Saturday to visit rescue societies holding adoptions at pet stores. At the first one, we didn't bond with any animals, and that is the most important part of choosing a new family member — they choose you, and not vice versa. At the second one, we saw a beautiful Papillon mix, a bold Labrador mix, and then, in the last cage, a mal-nourished, skin-and-bones little black and white Jack Russell Terrier and Chihuahua mix. Half her neck and chest fur was gone, and her broken front leg was in a cast.

She saw us coming. The rescue volunteers had taken pity on her and painted her cast a bright yellow, and her nails on the other three paws to match. She wagged her tail and tried to hop around as cutely as she could with her cast, never barking at all, and I was hooked. The volunteers explained she had been abused and abandoned. When they found her she had been hit by a car. And she was wearing a puppy collar too tight for a grown dog, which had rubbed off her neck fur. We looked at the other dogs again, as I looked over my shoulder at the yellow cast. Then I insisted that we take her out of her cage, despite Derek's protests that we couldn't take care of a special needs animal — we just didn't have the time. The volunteers took her out, and Derek held her for the first time. She put her head on his shoulder, and she let out a long sigh.

That was that. I filled out the adoption papers while Derek sat with her. The volunteers were thrilled that she was being adopted by two daddies who would probably treat her like a princess. And we proved them right, as we went around the store picking out the absolute necessities — like sensitive skin food, toys, treats, the faux-fur lined doggie bed, and the black leather rhinestone collar (for when her neck healed, of course). When we chose the

rhinestone collar, I looked at Derek and said, "You do realize how stereotypical this is, don't you?" He held it up to her scrawny neck and replied, "But look how good it will look on her! And she deserves it!" I tossed the collar into the cart. I wondered, as we left with our new family member, if I was drawn to her because of her needs, or if it was more because she was making the most of a tough situation and being the best-est, cutest dog she could be. Maybe as a gay person, I was more sensitive to that. We've got odds to overcome, too. Or maybe I saw potential in her, and I just wasn't going to overlook the scraggiest little Christmas tree. In any case, she's found her new home now, the cast is off, and her leg is fine, though she will always favor it a little. Her fur is slowly covering her bright pink skin again, and the cats are getting used to this strange waggy thing in their midst. She's even recovered her voice, and when someone rings the doorbell, she takes her duty to protect her new home seriously. She barks for a few seconds, and she stands by, keeping her front leg raised slightly, lest she need to jump in to protect us. Then Ophelia — she had to have a royal name, and we figured that this Ophelia would have a much happier end than that of Hamlet's — returns to her faux-fur bed, curls up, and sighs. ▼

"She put her head on his shoulder, and she let out a long sigh. That was that."



➔ Columnist Kevin Isom is the author of *It Only Hurts When I Polka and Tongue in Cheek and Other Places*, available at bookstores and online. He may be reached at isomonline@aol.com or KevinIsom.com.