

Thinking of Kristie

I did a bad thing,
but it all went back
to my childhood.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

I got to thinking about Kristie this Christmas season. Actually, I get to thinking about Kristie most Christmas seasons, but I have always kept those thoughts pretty much to myself because no one here who knew Kristie really wants to hear anymore about her, now.

Kristie was a purebred German shepherd with papers from the American Kennel Club—"she had papers," the Garage Sale Junkie used to sniff, "but she always used the rug"—and the poor dog sort of got smuggled into the family.

Well, not sort of smuggled, she was plain smuggled into our family. By me.

Yes, it was totally my idea to get a German shepherd puppy. I didn't think it was a dumb idea at the time, even though I had consulted with no one who lived in the house about how they might react to living in the house with a German shepherd puppy. A German shepherd puppy that was just cute as a bug's elbow and already had the jaws and the paws of an African lion.

I told myself that I wasn't consulting with anyone in advance because I wanted Kristie to be a surprise. A surprise! God, I look at that word in print before me and I shudder.

Actually, I didn't consult with anyone in advance because I knew in my heart of hearts that if I did consult, there would be no Kristie. Of course I knew that.

"Of course you knew that," Steady



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Eddy says. "No one ever said you were dumb. Just sneaky." I don't know if I like sneaky, but Steady says if the shoe fits, lace it up.

"Sneaky," he repeats. "It's like breaking the house rules. Sneaking a friend in past the concierge when she explicitly told you what the house rules were."

Well, the concierge at our place—my wife—never "explicitly" told me not to bring a German shepherd puppy onto the premises. "That might be" says Steady, "because you never explicitly told her what was in your little head. Most women can read the minds of men like fortune cookies, but there have to be few legible words in the cookie to begin with.

"I'll bet she sensed that you were up to something dumb. I'll bet she never left the house for fear you would do something dumb."

That was pretty true, I think. We were a young family with little kids, and yes, she never left the house much.

"You had little kids," Steady marveled, "and you were thinking of bringing home a Big Dog? Without telling anyone? What were you thinking of?"

It sounds criminal to say it now but Steady Eddy is right. I was thinking of bringing home a Big Dog. Actually, a little dog. A little dog that had a good chance of growing into a Big Dog rather quickly.

This might be a good time to explain why I was so taken with having a dog—a German shepherd puppy—in the house anyway. It all went back to my childhood.

When I was a very little boy, because of circumstances, I lived a lot with my maternal grandparents, Baba and Tata, in their little house with the big gardens and the chickens and the cats and the dog, Nellie.

Nellie was—surprise!—a German shepherd, a full-grown female. Jaws and paws like an African lion. The little house that Tata and Baba lived in was on a railroad spur that led into the Bucyrus-Erie plant. I remember standing by the side of the track with Nellie, and the engineer of the little yard engine would wave and toss pieces of spearmint gum down to us.

Tata remembered the time Nellie was barking so loudly he ran out of the house, and there I was on the tracks with the steam engine backing up. Tata said before he could get to me, Nellie clamped her jaws around my arm and pulled me off to the side. Tata said I was hitting Nellie all the way and pulling her hair but I don't remember that at all.

There were no children near Tata and Baba, so I played with Nellie. She had eyes like a wolf, Tata said, and after that I noticed that my father had those wolf eyes, too.

I was probably trying to go back to the days with Nellie when I got Kristie. Who knows? My wife was out of the house when I brought Kristie home. My wife was in the hospital having another of our children. I know. I did a terrible thing. Even worse was keeping the dog. The puppy grew into a really big dog.

"Every time she wagged her tail," my wife noted, "one of the kids went flying."

One fateful Christmas morning, the kids were lined up in the hall, waiting for the tree lights to be turned on in the living room, for a fire to be lighted in the fireplace, for carols to be playing on WHA and for the adults to get with the program.

It was fateful because the living room was a shambles, and the Christmas tree was lying flat as a windfall. Kristie was entangled, ensnarled, entrapped in the broken boughs and branches. There was a very heavy smell of ammonia, of urine saturating everything, especially Kristie.

When the kids found out, they ran to tell their mother Kristie had been bad. Their mother told me later she knew who the bad dog was. Their mother never forgave me, even after Kristie ran away or was stolen from the backyard. She says that getting that dog was one of the most insensitive things I ever did.

I think she's right, but I haven't really asked her about the others. There couldn't have been any more dogs involved.

"Unless we count you," Steady Eddy says. "and we have to." ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Saturdays at 8:30 p.m. on Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA (970 AM).