

My Pink



KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI

Tombstone

POE BALLANTINE

In spring of 1988 I became the caretaker

of a twenty-acre plot my sister and her husband had bought as a prospective retirement location in the Black Forest of Colorado: elevation 8,200 feet. It was a great opportunity for me to write and reflect and rest up from the roaring hellfire on earth. The rent was free, and I got a little caretaking stipend because my sister and her husband were generous and understood that I wasn't doing well financially. My responsibilities were minimal: I had to make sure the worms didn't eat the trees, the roof of the old single-wide trailer didn't leak, the pipes didn't freeze, potential vandals didn't wander onto the property, and developers from California didn't come along and put up chain motels and plastic hamburger stands.

The locale was lonely and isolated, so my sister gave me a golden-retriever puppy to keep me company. I had been unhappy for a while and had recently thought of killing myself, but the dog changed all that: at first because she took up so much of my time, crapping and peeing all over the carpet in our little trailer and running off into the dark and towering woods; and later because I grew attached to her. I'd never been able to have a dog before, because I moved around a lot, and you can't take a dog on a bus or keep one in a rooming house or a residential motel.

My golden retriever was smaller than most, so I named her Shorty. She had a glossy reddish coat, a sweet disposition, and no ability at all to retrieve. Once, she swam after a stick I'd thrown into the middle of a lake, and she almost drowned. Another time, we got lost in the woods, and she was no help at all finding our way back home. I had a hunting dog that didn't retrieve, couldn't swim, and had no sense of direction. We were together constantly. I took her for two walks a day, three if you count the mile-long stroll down to the mailbox. I taught her to sit, stay, lie down, and come. I slept on the floor of the trailer, because my back gave me trouble and the bedroom was cold and haunted, and Shorty slept in the crook of my legs. She was keen on spaghetti, corn cakes, and popcorn. She loved snow. When it got down to thirty below and I was blowtorching the pipes under the trailer to thaw them, she trotted around out-

side as if it were noon of a summer's day. She was so eager to please that if I gave her a lamb chop she wouldn't eat it until I told her it was all right. I'd always thought it pitiful how dog owners gushed about their pets and blubbered when they died, but now I understood.

Being caretaker in the Black Forest was as close as I had come to paradise on earth, but after ten months my sister and her husband decided to sell the property. They wouldn't be retiring for at least thirty years, and Colorado real estate was in a tailspin. Paradise went *poof!*, just like in the books. But now that I had old Shorty, my elegant and noble companion, I felt I could face anything. I loaded up my sister's Mazda pickup with my few belongings, told my confused dog to hop on in, and we jostled down the long dirt drive and out of the Black Forest.

It was late March, and there was still snow on the ground in the foothills. I wasn't sure where to go. Everyone else was migrating west or south, so it felt right to go north and east. Except for the year and a half I'd lived in Niagara Falls, I'd spent little time in that part of the country.

The cities and freeways confused Shorty. At the motel where we spent the first night, she ran from the room and tried to get back in the truck. After a while, though, she got into the rhythm of traveling, and I believe she enjoyed the new experiences and scenery and smells. We stopped often to look over small towns that might have been good places to live. We had long talks, the lonely man and his dog. We stayed in motels and watched movies and ballgames and read the local papers. I couldn't bring her into a restaurant or a grocery store, and I didn't want to leave her alone in the car, so when it was time to eat, we often went to the drive-through at McDonald's. Every time old Shorty saw the golden arches, she began to pad her feet on the seat. She always ate her sandwiches the same way: bread first, then cheese, then meat. Outside of the ticks she picked up in Bardstown, Kentucky, which I squeezed as they rose like drops of blood from her coat, the only bad part of the trip was the vague fear that we would soon be separated.

On a whim I veered north and went to Niagara Falls to see

some old friends, an old girlfriend in particular. I stayed with my former boss at the bar where I'd been a famous alcoholic bartender, but it snowed the whole time, and I got depressed because the old girlfriend was living with the guy she'd left me for. Money running out, I wrote a note ("It's snowin', so I'm blowin'") and headed down to Chestertown, Maryland, to visit my old best friend Stiff Cliff, who was losing his mind from booze, and his wife, Denise the Christian Shrew, who, apparently unable to contain the charity and grace of her faith, screamed at me whenever she got the chance. Later, powerless to resist that gushing conduit of love from God, she accused me of making a pass at her in the kitchen, and Stiff Cliff believed her. He and I haven't spoken civilly since. I suppose we were never really friends if he couldn't trust me. He also had an electric fence surrounding his house. Shorty got shocked a couple of times, and Stiff Cliff thought it was funny.

Before I managed to escape, the Christian Shrew lined me up a job with a friend of hers, a ship's captain in Camden, Maine. He was renovating a turn-of-the-century schooner and hoped to find a cook. I had cooked in a dozen or so kitchens. It looked to me like Paradise again (*careful, careful*), sailing around the islands of Penobscot Bay, whipping up fine cuisine in the galley, standing shirtless on the prow in my sailor pants with the wind parting my hair, scrambling up to the crow's nest to shout, "Land ho!"

I couldn't bring Shorty with me on a boat, so I decided to leave her with my sister. I'd be gone for only a few months, I explained to Shorty, and since I'd be at sea the whole time and unable to spend money, I would have saved enough cash by the fall for us to move back to the mountains or the forest. *You'll see*, I told her. Temporary separation wouldn't be so bad. She didn't seem to trust the idea, however, and stuck close to me the whole three-thousand-mile drive back to my sister's house in southern California. I had to move fast if I wanted the job, so I dropped off the truck and the dog with my sister, then grabbed a flight to Boston, got airsick on a small commuter plane to Portland, Maine (and here I was going to work on a *boat*), and arrived in cold gray Camden by bus, flat broke.

The aged schooner was in a shambles under its rough tarp. It essentially needed to be rebuilt in a little more than two months, as it was already booked for several weeklong cruises in June. My employer, Captain Toil, was a likable chap with thick glasses that distorted his eyes. I had no shipbuilding experience, so I was thrown into the general labor pool, which consisted mostly of kids who hoped to sail but had little chance of being selected. The captain would hire only five crew members: the first mate (a professional sailor, already hired), the cook (me, hopefully), the mess mate, and deckhands one and two.

We had our work cut out for us. Many of the old salts who came around to watch predicted that we wouldn't make the deadline. Captain Toil drove his team hard, with mandatory twelve- and sixteen-hour days toward the end, and no days off. Though the schooner was named the *Adventure*, I came to think of her as the *Juggernaut*, for her power to crush every last soul unfortunate enough to enlist under her banner.

After a couple of weeks I was penciled in as the cook. I had proved myself worthy by sanding, painting, planing, and heaving great timbers, some of which weighed four hundred pounds, and by being the only one of the many hopeful sailing candidates with any real cooking experience. I was eager to get into the galley. I've never been good with wood or tools, and, soft suburban lad that I am, I don't like breathing the fumes from a pot of paint thinner or feeling my right arm vibrate all night from ten hours of operating an electric sander. But before I could start cooking, we had a boat to finish.

More and more men came to work as the deadline to sail approached. Originally there had been seven or eight of us laboring on scaffoldings, or astride the great planer, or across the planks of the ruined decks, and three of us sleeping in the boathouse above the mighty *Juggernaut*. But as summer pressed in I could no longer count the number of carpenters, shipwrights, painters, and general laborers who'd become involved, twelve of whom eventually lived in the boathouse, packed in sleeping bags across the floor, waiting in line to use the one-and-only shower and the one-and-only microwave. I went to live in the tool trailer, where I could read by flashlight with no one's smelly feet in my face, and not have to worry about that mad bastard of a shipwright who came in drunk at four in the morning wanting to "fuck someone."

You may recall that Paradise is traditionally followed by the Fall. After many twelve-hour days lifting those four-hundred-pound timbers, working in cramped quarters, and inhaling dust and paint fumes, I developed a bad cough and began to lose weight. I can't count the number of times I cracked my head on the scaffolding and was literally knocked flat into the sawdust. But the thought of my reunion with Shorty sustained me. It would be only a few months. Time goes by. Why couldn't it go by faster?

(end of excerpt)