

## The Story of Shadow the Invisible Therapy Dog

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Who has ever considered the advantages of owning an invisible therapy dog? Not many, I guess. The idea had not occurred to me until I exchanged letters with a former student who was living in the Windy City.

My name is Bjorn Clugston, and I am currently a professor of Deconstructionist theory. I was teaching at the New Madrid Fault State University at Quincy, Illinois. My career was undistinguished, mediocre at best, until I became a born-again Deconstructionist. I caught fire, so to speak, by publishing a series of essays on the absence of presence or the presence of absence. These essays gained me an international reputation, a small following in France, Germany, India, the Ukraine, and Russia. They also caught the attention of Professor Orville Korkoff at Heliotrope University, who vowed he would lure me to his university.

Professor Korkoff succeeded in persuading me to join him by telling me that together we would start a scholarly journal promoting Deconstructionist philosophy. Life suddenly was turning up rainbows and seashells except for one problem, and it was a big one. My wife Dionysia didn't want to move. I understood her unwillingness to leave Quincy because we had moved so many times in our married life we were beginning to feel like gypsies or nomads.

Finally, Dionysia agreed to the move on two conditions: first, that we would buy a new house and she could furnish it exactly the way she wanted; and, second, that I would not importune her to have a dog. The latter was very difficult for me to accept because I had always enjoyed the companionship of a dog. But as Richard Widmark said to Gregory Peck in the movie *Yellow Sky*, "The deal is not exactly what we want, but you [sic] can't have everything."

I resigned myself to living without man's best friend, and I informed our human friends of our new address. When I wrote to Nettie George, one of my favorite former students living in the Windy City, and she did not answer, I sent a crispy letter to her with the threat that if I didn't hear from her, I would shoot her dog. Imagine my fond alarm when she informed me that she had an invisible dog and that I was welcome to try to shoot it. Then she went on to explain that she was a White Sox fan and that the Cubs fans were guilty of trashy behavior.

What a revelation! An invisible dog! I was so intrigued that I phoned her immediately to find out more information. I ignored an impulse to defend the Cubs, and I asked about the invisible dog. I wanted to know where she got it. She quickly spilled the beans, "I purchased the dog from a man named Dewey Rose, who runs a pet shop in Boise, Idaho, called Paws, Fins, and Feathers. His prices are reasonable, and he might have another invisible dog. Then she gave me his address and phone number.

Later that day, I called Dewey Rose and asked him if he had an invisible dog for sale. He answered that indeed he had such a dog, but he advised me against buying it. "The dog's name is Shadow, and he has some little peccadilloes that are embarrassing," Dewey said.

I found it curious that Dewey would be unwilling to make a sale when he had such a willing customer, so I said, "I really want an invisible dog."

Still Dewey was reluctant. "Look, why don't you consider another pet. I have a carp that can float upside down, a parrot that can speak 10 languages fluently, and a centipede that can tap dance and do

the Texas Stomp. I am expecting an octopus that can do card tricks and, best of all, a Russian car fox.”

“But I still want the invisible dog,” I told him. “Could you tell me what is wrong with Shadow?”

“All right, I will speak clearly so that even a small child could understand. Shadow is oversexed. He is aroused when pulchritudinous nubile human females come into the shop.”

“What? Now how do you know that?” I asked.

“Believe me, I know it. One day I took Shadow to the beach to give him some exercise. I threw a little blue ball in the surf and yelled ‘Fetch.’ Shadow came running back with a bikini top. I barely escaped with my life. Do you realize how embarrassing it is to be standing on a beach with a bikini top in your hand? No, I’m sure you don’t. Please take my word for it.”

“But I live in Central Illinois, and there is no beach in the area. But I wouldn’t go to the beach anyway. I remember the Charles Atlas advertisements. The beach is full of 300, 400, and 500 pound heavily-muscled bullies who want to knock you on your gnastus, kick sand in your face, and steal your girl.”

Dewey Rose began to see that I was determined to buy Shadow, so he said, “The dog is yours for \$9.99. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I told him not to cheat himself. I would give him \$10.00 for Shadow. He agreed to ship Shadow to me, but said I could return him if I was dissatisfied with him.

Well, I needed a therapy dog, but I still had to persuade my wife. I explained that humans and dogs might have similar existential problems and that it was possible we could help each other. I took her hands in mine, looked into her eyes, and said, “Look, Dionysia, Dear Heart, Love of My Life, Perfect Main Squeeze, we only go around once in this life and we should grab for all the gusto we can. As a therapy dog, Shadow will restore that bright-eyed, bushy-tailed look in my eyes, a sprightliness in my step, and that James Earl Jones tone in my voice. With Shadow’s help I will become a new man.”

Dionysia was still skeptical, but she was willing to give me a chance. She did, however, issue ultimata: “I’m not going to pick up after that dog; one mess and he goes; and I am not taking him for walks. And if he wakes me up in the middle of the night with his barking, I will kill him.”

Dionysia’s harsh remarks were disappointing because, like Terri-Thomas in the movie *How to Murder Your Wife*, I am not given to delivering ultimata.

In that first week, the bonding with Shadow was almost immediate. He seemed to sense when I was melancholy, and he was there for me, as today’s college students are fond of saying. After two days, I felt the minor fears vanish, fears such as post-nasal drip, toenail fungus, erectile dysfunction, dandruff, irregularity, bad breath, second-hand pot smoke, and tired blood. Then I noticed that the major fears of existential angst and fin de siècle hysteria were losing their hold on me. I had that “boy and his dog” happiness feeling that life was good.

When Sunday came around, I announced that I was taking Shadow to church with us. Dionysia objected, saying that I should not need a therapy dog in church because church was a place of healing. I should have listened to her. Instead, I told her that I would put a leash on Shadow and keep a tight hold on it. I wanted his re-enforcement to assist the healing I received in church.

The sermon that day was really good. The title of Reverend Ishmael Goodman's sermon was adapted from a quotation by American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson: "Postmodern humans are lost in a spiritual kindergarten trying to spell G-O-D with the wrong blocks." He began by stating that people in today's world lack adequate concern for their temporal and eternal welfare. He said that Americans, especially, have become materialists in our belief that unless something can be held, weighed, and measured it either doesn't exist or is unimportant. He lamented our disdain for spiritual knowledge and our tendency to follow false messiahs such as Elvis, David Koresh, the Bhagwan in Oregon, and other examples of people who claimed to have all the answers to the big questions. He preached on the mystery of spiritual truth and the idea that unseen guardian angels are available to protect us as we go about our daily life. He said that God had assigned a guardian angel to every human being but that only people with a highly developed imagination and a respect for mystery could respond to the angel's guidance. He said that in every human life there are times of crisis, times when we have to make a choice that would set us in a direction and that if we would only reach out our hand our guardian angel would take it and guide us. As the reverend concluded, I reached down and patted Shadow on the head. "Shadow, you are the best therapy dog in the whole world," I whispered.

Then we sang my favorite hymn "He Touched Me." As we were concluding the singing, I felt Shadow brush against my knees. He was on the move. I grabbed to restrain him, but the clever dog had slipped the leash and was loose in the aisle. I reached for his collar but missed. A few seconds later, I heard May Wheat, a transfer student from Kansas, shriek and jump two feet in the air. Then I knew where Shadow was.

I leaped to my feet and rushed to May's side, pretending I wanted to help her. Actually, I wanted to catch Shadow before he caused more trouble. I was too late, for Paige Turner, an English major in the next pew, screamed and called for help. Again, I was too late. Shadow had bestowed his affections on Paige and rushed away. Only God knew where he was.

I didn't know what to do. I could not call out to Shadow because people would think I was involved in what some would call a demon infestation because Reverend Goodman's sermon was still ringing in our ears about the demons in postmodern life.

Before the congregation could vacate the church, I heard another young woman scream. After that, there were no people left in the church. I went from pew to pew calling Shadow's name, but the invisible dog did not respond. I searched the entire church, but to no avail. He was gone.

That night, as I sat in my study and became more and more melancholy, those old fears began to return, and once again I would have to do battle with post-nasal drip, irregularity, the heartbreak of psoriasis, bad breath, and toenail fungus. "Hello, my old friends," I muttered.

Then I had an epiphany. I realized that Shadow wanted what every living creature wants—freedom and the opportunity to assert one's own identity, to follow one's own dreams, to live one's own life and be happy. "Good luck, Shadow, my old friend," I sighed.

Then I went looking for Dionysia.