

Phillip Gardner

Skippy, the *Lite* Fandango

I never should have put the iguana in the freezer. Or maybe finding it in a Tupperware container is what set my wife off. Maybe if I'd just wrapped Spike in some Saran Wrap, Molly would have come to her discovery in a series of rapid intellectual moments. Something like this: "No, that's not a piece of fish; Maybe—no--not smoked sausage either; I wonder if it's that pork tenderloin I've buried in here somewhere. Why, no. It's Harrison's iguana. Why of course. What was I thinking?" But instead, Molly had cracked open the frozen plastic lid and taken in its contents all at once. Spike had died with his eyes open.

Spike belonged to our son. Harrison was eight. The only thing worse than not getting him a pet, I'd thought, was getting him a dog that would sooner rather than later bloody a bumper on the busy streets that border our house. A cat was out of the question. Molly is allergic.

And Molly already had Skippy, the Hollywood Chihuahua that came with our marriage. Skippy, she said, was far too high strung to ever accept another dog in the house. She was right. The first week after Harrison was born, Skippy sulked and refused to eat. He still carried the alpha-male complex, an attitude indulged by my wife.

Harrison is a gentle, quiet boy. He complains rarely, never demands. But he deserved a pet. I bought a fish tank and your basic start-up variety of die-on-contact guppies.

“Dad, if it don’t eat or crap,” Harrison said, the blue light of the aquarium reflecting off his soft face as he watched the most recent floaters, “how can it be a pet?”

We converted the aquarium and purchased Spike.

It was coincidental that most of Skippy’s photo shoots that summer were on Saturdays. We’d sit on the sofa, Harrison nestled under my arm, and watch Braves baseball while Spike curled up in his lap. We were a family. We didn’t exclude Molly, but the bond between the four of us just wasn’t there.

“How’d it go?” I said to my wife. Andruw Jones had just hit a triple to put us ahead. Harrison and Spike and I exchanged high-fives.

“Great,” Molly said. She was wearing that red skirt I like, and her eyes were bright green. Molly is still a knockout. “There was an *agent* there, Joe. A *real agent*. From Atlanta.” She smiled down at Skippy, whose giant bug eyes always made me nervous. I’d heard stories about Chihuahuas as fractious as Skippy getting so wound up their eyeballs popped out. He wore a red cowboy hat with matching handkerchief around his neck, and six-guns at his side.

“We have an audition in Charlotte next week, don’t we?” she said to the dog.

“For what?” I said, not taking my eyes from the game.

“A hotdog commercial, one that’s going national.”

“Going national” was an expression Molly often used when she responded to newspaper reporters from Marion or Dillon or Latta, papers with a circulation you could count on two hands.

“Skippy will look cute in a hotdog bun,” Harrison said, trying to join the conversation.

“Nobody’s putting my baby in a hotdog bun,” she said, nodding to reassure Skippy, who for the first time really seemed to understand English and to reason the final destination of dogs in buns. “We’re going national,” she said, smiling at the rat-faced K-9.

Skippy’s career had begun soon after Molly got the Christmas pictures back, nine years ago. She’d given me a camera, and I’d snapped a photo of Skippy the day she’d bought him. I was just trying to learn something about lenses, lighting, and shutter speeds. I’d placed the docile, shivering pup in different settings for effect. “Oh, that’s precious!” Molly said when she saw the shot of tiny Skippy in the teacup. That’s the photo that catapulted him into local fame, the one that got him a spot as the dancing dog in Darlington’s Southern 500 Labor Day parade that first year. It was my least favorite of the series, which included a shot of Skippy inching toward a giant rat trap, one of him swimming in the toilet (I included my hand on the lever in the shot), and one of him standing in a saucer of water sniffing the open socket of the coffee table lamp. My favorite, the one that resulted in Molly’s temporarily postponing our engagement, was the one of Skippy in the blender. But it was Skippy in the teacup that made the papers.

And for most of the next decade, Skippy was a holiday staple, appearing in the local newspaper wearing a black and white pilgrim’s cap and shouldering a

musket at Thanksgiving, sporting a white beard and red cap at Christmas, decked out in a set of bat's wings for Halloween, and holding miniature roses and wearing a tux for Valentine's Day. We have an 8 X 10 glossy of Skippy with thick black sideburns and a guitar hanging from his neck to celebrate January 8th, Elvis's birthday. Molly even gave Channel 11 in Florence permission to superimpose Skippy's face over President Clinton's on President's Day. In this part of South Carolina, that picture was so famous it ended up on Myrtle Beach tee shirts.

I knew that if I told Molly Spike had died, she would have just tossed the little fellow in the trash. Harrison was away, spending the week fishing with my father, "the old man," who is a widower. It's something they've done together since Harrison was five.

I'd like to say that Spike's death was more of a shock to me. But there had always been bad blood between Spike and Skippy, a kind of anti-multicultural, anti-diversity sentiment between the two of them. You could just see it. And if Skippy was anything, he was an opportunist. More than once I'd come into Harrison's room and seen the two rivals going eye to eye. Literally. If you think about it, it's hard even for an iguana or a Betty Davis to compete with the eyes of a Chihuahua.

I didn't find any teeth marks on Spike; but when I lifted his remains from the aquarium, none other than Mr. Hollywood himself was right there, tail

wagging, teeth shining, doing his little Fred Astaire number, leading the way to the kitchen.

The image of Harrison hearing the news sent me into a quandary. I wanted to spare him the news, which was impossible. In the end, I decided he needed the finality of seeing that Spike wasn't coming back. I was prepared to preserve Spike in Tupperware for as long as was necessary to help Harrison make the adjustment, but of course that plan went out the window when Molly discovered the plastic cryonics chamber unexpectedly.

Naturally I wanted to strike back at Fate for taking Spike from Harrison, and from me, to tell you the truth. But fate is an illusive target. Skippy on the other hand--. Some days, while Molly was at work or out shopping, I'd take out my favorite photos of Skippy and pin them up where he'd see them. Skippy-in-the-blender went over his doggie bowl.

This next part gets to me. Harrison took the news without a tear, at least in front of Molly and me. He sucked in his lips and blinked at about a hundred RPMs, but he didn't shed a tear. Then without a word, he lowered his head and drifted back to his room. I tried the door, but he'd locked it. I could hear him crying into his pillow.

"What's that music?" Harrison said. I was carrying the canvas bat bag, Harrison his glove and a bag of baseballs. We were home from afternoon Tee-Ball practice. The singing was loud enough to hear from the garage. Molly, it

appeared, was back from the Charlotte audition. We left the balls and bats in the garage.

The tutu was a pink one and the tiny bra was a tinsel thing that shimmered as Skippy held up his paws and did the boogie-woogie. Barbara Streisand sang “A Star is Born” at the top of her lungs. Molly sat on the sofa with both hands covering her mouth and a joyous trail of mascara webbing her cheeks.

I want to be fair to Molly. She is my wife and I love her. She is still a beautiful woman, and her attachment to Skippy may have, in a way, been good for our marriage, though no question it brought hardship into our home. Molly is petite, short and blonde, with a cute little nose, and enormous, delicious breasts. I mean really. Molly is also an only child, and probably the most striking genetic anomaly ever to come from Pageland, South Carolina, the watermelon capital of the South. When she was young, Molly won every pageant in upper South Carolina and wore nearly every crown.

Her friends told her she was marrying way below her station when she accepted my proposal, insisting she was marrying on the rebound, which is partly true.

Talent scouts at the Miss South Carolina pageant had swarmed to her after the bathing suit competition, and though she didn't place because she dropped her baton three times, she was offered opportunities to audition for talent and modeling agencies. She was too short and busty to model with her clothes on, and she's not the kind of woman to model naked. Her undoing in all other categories was her beyond-repair-accent, thick and nasal, plus a rising

inflection when she gets really nervous or upset? Soon there were no other offers, only me, Joe, with his arms open and a shoulder to cry on.

Molly was also haunted by the success of another dog, one named Stubby from Dovesville, not ten miles from where we live. Stubby was famous for climbing trees and had even appeared on The Johnny Carson Show. Molly saw the same potential in Skippy, who could dance the fandango and shimmy with the best of them.

Inside, it was impossible to talk over the power of Ms. Streisand's vocals or to compete with the birth of a star. Harrison sat in the recliner and unlaced his rubber cleats. Molly lifted her head, wiped the black tears from her face, and looked up with a pleading smile. "We made it," she whispered. "We finally, finally made it."

Harrison rose from the chair, gave Molly a little hug, and padded down to his room with his shoes in his hand. He was looking down into the empty aquarium when I walked in. He turned and spoke matter-of-factly.

"Things die," he said. "They are here, and then they aren't."

"Harrison," I said, putting my hands on both his shoulders, going down on a knee.

"No," he said. "It's okay, Dad. What I mean is that you were a boy like I am, I mean a long time ago. But now you're a grown-up. One day I won't be a boy. One day, the old man will be with Grandma. I will have gone away as a boy, but that's the way things are. I had a talk with the old man." He looked back

at the empty tank. "Maybe we can try again with fish," he said. "Maybe we'll have better luck."

I insisted that Harrison and I come along for the hotdog commercial shoot in Atlanta. I wanted to take him to a Braves game; I wanted him to see it from a box seat.

"Maybe not." Molly said, "You know how nervous Skippy gets when the four of us travel together. He'll need to feel at ease for the shoot. He knows this is going national." I'm not sure what look I gave her, but there was no more discussion of the question.

Molly has always had a knack for finding advantage in most any given situation. Years of sizing up the competition had heightened her senses and refined her skills. We were near Augusta when she launched the question, from the backseat with Skippy.

"No," I said. "Harrison and I are not taking Skippy to the game with us. Period."

"Please," Molly said.

"No."

"Look," she said, holding up a handful of pages she had downloaded.

"No. I'm driving."

"This place," Molly said, fanning the pages, "is called Dog Gone National, and this one Pet Paradise, and this one is only a few blocks from our hotel. It's called K-99."

“Forget it,” I said. “If you go shopping, you’ll need to take the dog to make sure everything fits.

“Are you kidding?” she whispered. “Oh, Joe, I want to *surprise* Skippy. Can you imagine how happy he’ll be?”

Sometimes it’s better just to keep your mouth shut. I had said all I had to say. My mind was set. Molly, having been a prom queen, misread my silence for weakness in resolve. She began rubbing the back of my neck. “What are you thinking, Joe?”

“Right that second?” I said.

“Yes,” she cooed.

“I was thinking puree.”

Molly sat back with her arms folded under her still lovely breasts. The car was silent except for Skippy’s snoring. You’d be astonished.

“If you think an iguana in the freezer has consequences, wait until you attempt to put a lizard in an icebox,” she hissed.

“It’s okay, Dad,” Harrison said. “I’ll just tuck ole Skippy into the pocket of my Braves’ jacket. We won’t even know he’s there.

Our seats were perfect, first base side, right behind the Braves’ dugout. For the first three innings, Harrison had called it. Skippy lay nearly comatose in his Braves’ jacket pocket. In the middle of the inning, Harrison looked down at him.

“Think he’s okay, Dad?” he said.

“He’s just sulking,” I said.

“His eyes look sort of like Spike’s before they started thawing out,”

Harrison said.

“Pay him no mind,” I said. We were playing the Mets and having a pretty good time, leading 4-0. I ordered us hotdogs and sodas. With a man on second, Piazza homered. Skippy began a slow, low growl that lasted until the Met’s catcher crossed the plate.

“That’s our little man,” Harrison said.

“He just wants your hot dog.”

As the next batter stepped up, I explained to Harrison about how in a close game, things change with every pitch, and that he could watch as the infielders made adjustments when the count favored the pitcher or when it shifted to the hitter. When we looked down, Skippy had eaten half of Harrison’s hotdog. For a split second I imagined gripping the dog’s throat, his eyeballs firing off like foul balls, and fan’s scrambling to catch them in the air, the lucky two holding them up like trophies. Instead, I ordered another hotdog while Harrison and I shared. Skippy chewed and grinned up at us.

When the Mets tied the game in the sixth, I ordered a lite beer for me and cotton candy for my son. They had loaded the bases with two out, and you-know-who was at the plate again. I drank between pitches. We both sat at the edge of our seats. When the Met’s catcher swung over an off-speed pitch for the third strike, Turner Field erupted. All 38,000 of us were on our feet. When I

looked over to high-five Harrison, I saw that Skippy had buried his head inside the cotton candy, which I suppose left the dog incredibly thirsty; because in the bottom of the inning after Andruw unloaded the bases for us by skying one into deep center field, Skippy's head was nearly at the bottom of my plastic beer cup. We were again on our feet. But this time Skippy was dancing a jig in Harrison's pocket, slamming back and forth between the competing walls of sugar and beer. This time we all three were high-fiving.

Skippy did the wave with us.

I ordered another lite beer for myself and another soda and hotdog for Harrison. The three of us shared.

By the time John Smoltz came on in the bottom of the ninth to shut the door on the Mets, Skippy lay back staring up at the cloudless, blue sky, sporting a wide grin and a zeppelin for a belly.

"I think he just wanted an afternoon with the guys," Harrison said, as we walked back to our hotel.

When I opened the door to our room, Molly sat pensively on the edge of the bed with her fingertips in her mouth.

"Thank God you're *back*?" she said. I looked over at the clock.

"It's only four o'clock," I said.

"I know, but I worried every *second*? She took the bloated Skippy and cradled him in her arms. He smiled up vacantly into the imaginary stars. A little knight-in-shining-armor outfit lay on the bed beside her. "He seems so—*calm*?"

“He knows he’s going national,” I said. Tears came to Molly’s eyes. “Put on your swimsuit,” I said to Harrison. “Let’s go down to the pool.”

The shoot was scheduled at six in the CNN complex, which was also near our hotel. “You’ll need money for a cab,” I said to Molly. She was a nervous wreck. Cab fare was all I had to offer. She didn’t answer. I put a twenty on the nightstand. Skippy lay in her lap with his front and back legs spread wide, in a kind of do-me pose. I never knew Chihuahuas had so many teeth.

After an hour and a half of Marco Polo in the pool, I was feeling my age. Harrison swam over to me.

“Think mom’s back, yet?”

“I doubt it. These things can take forever.”

“Wanna play more Marco Polo?”

“Give me a minute,” I said.

Harrison tossed his arm up on my shoulder. “Let’s go upstairs and catch the highlights of the game and wait for mom,” he said.

On the elevator, he took my hand and looked at me. “Thanks, Dad,” he said.

A second after I opened the room door, I nearly shoved Harrison out into the hall. There was someone in the bathroom.

“Molly?” I said.

She didn't answer, but I recognized the crying. I opened the door. I can't describe the odor.

"I don't want you to see us like *this*?" she said between the tears.

"What happened?" I said.

"Don't *know*? Every time they brought out a *hot dog*? She nodded toward the bathtub.

I couldn't see the dog, could only hear the irregular sounds of a high compression spray.

"I think he must be *allergic*?" Molly said. Then she boo-hoed. I stepped in to comfort her, though the thought of confessing never entered my mind. She lifted her arm like a traffic cop, and I stopped in my tracks. And there was the smell.

I got up three times during the night. Molly sat on the lid of the toilet, staring into nothing. There wasn't a thing I could do, no comfort I could offer, no cross I could bear that would bring her out of her sad trance.

As I stood at the bathroom door just before dawn, I'd swear that ole Skippy blew the first three notes of *The Star Spangled Banner*.

Before leaving Atlanta, we stopped to buy a bag of kitty litter and a large plastic dishpan. Molly hadn't spoken.

"What's that spraying sound?" Harrison said.

"Roll down your window," I said, reaching for the radio.

"What's that sound?" Harrison said an hour later. Molly had fallen asleep.

"That's just Skippy being one of the guys," I said.

When we got to Augusta, Harrison said, "I don't hear it any more."

"Don't roll up your window," I said.

When we got to Darlington, Molly was still asleep.

Skippy was dead.

It didn't matter that Skippy was as cold and rigid as a doorstep, Molly had to hear it from her vet, a Doctor Hunter. While she went inside to call, I held Skippy at arm's length by his front legs and hosed him off. He looked like a Chihuahua on a magic carpet ride. I had dried him down pretty well by the time Molly got back to the car. Then we drove to Dr. Hunter's office.

Molly said she needed a little time alone. She wasn't being ugly about it when she said it either. So the three of us spent the weekend driving from Darlington to Charleston to Columbia. Harrison was in charge of the map and the list of taxidermists I had compiled. Skippy was in charge of the ice chest.

Whether it was the Forest Lake Taxidermist in Florence or the Wildlife Taxidermist in Camden, the story was always the same. It was gently explained that Skippy couldn't be petted anymore, that we could look at him but he couldn't be petted. We were encouraged to think about the good times. Harrison and I exchanged soft smiles. We were told that if against the advice of the taxidermists we still wanted Skippy stuffed, the cost would be \$500, provided that Skippy had not died of cancer, in which case the procedure couldn't be done because of damage to Skippy's hair.

We stopped in at the main library on the campus of the University of South Carolina to see what we could learn about pet cemeteries, only to discover that the only place such things are taken very seriously is Florida. As we were walking out to the car, I said, "Let's send your mom some flowers." She hadn't been answering the phone.

"Good idea," Harrison said.

Harrison and I spent Saturday night with the old man in Cheraw. Skippy spent the night in the car, in the ice chest. After lunch on Sunday, I watched the game while Dad and Harrison wet a hook. From the time Harrison was a tiny baby, the two had shared an unexplainable connection. Dad had taught him to call him "the old man," and even Molly and I had taken it up. They came back two hours later with a nice string of fat bream.

I dialed again before Harrison and I started back home. Molly answered.

"Just do something with him," Molly said. She was cried out, and her voice was calm and steady. I explained what we'd learned, what appeared to be Skippy's options. There was a long pause, then tiny fissures in Molly's voice.

"Taxidermy is out," she said.

"He'd sort of still be around," I said. "And you've got so many of those cute little outfits. Harrison and I wouldn't mind, really." And now she was choking up a little.

"I love you, Joe," she said. "And Harrison. I love you both so much."

"Don't worry about the five hundred bucks," I said.

“No. You don’t understand,” Molly said. “The vet said there was cancer present. Just do what you think is right. I don’t want to know, not for a long time. Just do what you think is right—for all of us.”

“Dad,” Harrison said. We were on our way home. “Do you know what an oscar is?”

“An acting award,” I said.

“No. I mean a fish called an oscar. When I asked the old man if I could take a bream home and try him in Spike’s aquarium, he said there’s a fish that grows to about the same size called an oscar.”

I suggested to Molly that she see a doctor about anti-depressants, but she refused. She really is a strong woman down deep. We make fun of those beauty contestant types, but it takes a little steel in your backbone to take the risks they take, to know, as they all do, that the day comes quickly when no matter what you once had going for you, you don’t have it any more. The world spins faster for them than for us.

“I think I want to go to church,” Molly said. We weren’t what you’d call regulars.

The photos were Harrison’s idea.

I took out the camera and the lenses. Harrison selected the outfits. Skippy had gone out like a sphinx, which limited our fashion choices—no tinsel bras to show off his shimmying, or puffy fandango pants. But Skippy’s

permanent pose was fine for the variety of angles it offered. I found ways of getting in his smile without really drawing attention to his bulbous eyes. Harrison, as it turns out, has a knack for lighting, and we'd shot three rolls of film and cleaned the place up by the time Molly got home from Sunday services.

"The pictures will make a nice Christmas present," Harrison said. We were on our way to pick up some fried chicken.

"Christmas may be too soon," I said. "Maybe Easter."

The oscar was Molly's idea.

The next Sunday, after we'd changed back into our everyday clothes, Molly said, "When the mall opens, let's go pet shopping." As soon as we walked in, Harrison and I started over to the puppy cages, but Molly stopped at the counter. "I'm looking for a fish, an oscar," she said.

The cremation was my idea.

None of the funeral homes would do it. But the wife of another engineer where I work does ceramics. Turns out they're both big Braves' fans. I didn't tell Molly of course. And I didn't tell Harrison. He never asked what I'd done with Skippy. But somehow he knew.

He and Molly and I were having pizza after church.

"You missed my allowance last week, Dad," he said. I was standing in line to pay. "If you don't mind, I'd like this week's too," he said. Molly was waiting in the car. I handed over the six bucks. "I'm going to the bathroom," he said. "I'll meet you in the car."

On the drive home, I saw the glass container of crushed red pepper in the pocket of his Braves' jacket.

That night, Molly and I were having a beer. We have one on Sunday nights before bed. We were having this one at the kitchen table. She looked over at a spot beside the refrigerator.

"Thanks," she said, "for putting away everything." She meant Skippy's bed and toys. I didn't say anything. "It was very thoughtful of you," she said. Then she leaned forward and gave me a little kiss on the lips. "Let's tell Harrison goodnight," she said.

Harrison lay in the blue light of the aquarium. We both kissed him, then headed for the door. "Wait," he said softly. When we turned, he was holding out the glass container from the pizza place. Its contents were a smoky brown color.

"What is that?" Molly said.

"Fish food," Harrison said.

She shook a little on top of the water and Oscar slowly turned and made its way to the surface, then circled down. Molly and I were down on our knees, watching. Harrison lay in his bed beside us. The large fish rose a second time, then again slowly circled down, turning now and gliding almost motionless up to the glass, eye to eye with Molly, giving her a slow, emphatic fish kiss. She turned to Harrison and then to me. You could see the clinging, thick tears in the soft blue light.

"I think he likes me?" Molly said. She stroked Harrison's hand. "I think he really does."