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Phil Luciano

NEWS

COLUMNIST

Saturday, January 21, 2006

In a flash of gnashing teeth, Little Bit vanished into the night.

Early Tuesday, two large, loose dogs barged into a Creve Coeur home and ripped the chubby chihuahua from the arms of its owner. The dogs loped away, one clutching Little Bit in its jaws as the tiny pooch vainly yelped for help.

"He was trying to protect me," says Little Bit's tearful owner, Pam Swanson.

Swanson, 51, lives in a small, cluttered apartment. Unemployed, she gets by on disability benefits.

"I have manic depression and I have a lot of medical problems," she says.

Her two adult sons live elsewhere. She has been divorced since 1989.

Eleven years ago, Swanson got Little Bit as a puppy. Since then, the 10-pound pooch has been her closest companion.

"He's the only thing I've had since the divorce," she says.

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Edit the Editors
Nobody's perfect, right? Well, the Journal Star strives to be. Do you see misspelled words,

Her first-floor apartment opens to the rear of an eight-unit complex. A narrow back yard stretches alongside a thicket of woods.

Typically at Little Bit's potty time, Swanson would let the dog outside unleashed for a few moments in the back yard. Then the dog would dart back inside.

At 2 a.m. Tuesday, Little Bit wanted to go outside to do his business. As Swanson cracked open the door, Little Bit sniffed hard, then began to growl.

Swanson didn't understand the reaction from her mild-mannered dog. A moment later, she realized the reason for his alarm: two big dogs in the back yard, just a few yards away and bearing down on her door.

"I'd never seen them until that night," she says.

The two dogs - a German shepherd and a mixed-breed black Lab - surged toward the open doorway. Little Bit tried to charge outside to ward off the intruders.

Swanson grabbed her dog by the torso to hold him back. But with Little Bit struggling to get out, Swanson couldn't shut her door.

The canine interlopers burst inside the doorway, targeting Little Bit.

"They reached through and grabbed him by the neck," Swanson says, crying. "I tried to hold on. But they got him by his throat."

The German shepherd yanked Little Bit from Swanson and pulled away, the chihuahua held tightly in its jaws. Swanson watched helplessly as the shepherd and Lab dashed off with Little Bit.

"He was yelping the whole way," Swanson says.

After his cries quickly died in the darkness, Swanson spent the next several pre-dawn hours hoping in vain for any sign or sound of Little Bit. Since then, she's periodically searched her back yard and the adjacent woods.

"I've been up and down here ever since, looking for him and calling," she says.

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incorrect grammar, things that don't make sense? Do you have questions about why we covered a specific event in a certain way? Do you have a news tip, or a question about this story we didn't cover? Or would you like to write a letter to the editor? We want to know what you think.

The day of the attack, Swanson phoned police, who contacted Tazewell County Animal Control. On Thursday, animal control captured a German shepherd and mixed-breed Lab.

That night, their owner, who lives down the street from Swanson, paid a \$50 village fine for letting the dogs run loose. He returned the animals to his house. Though the home is surrounded by a wooden fence, the dogs apparently can get out through a busted plank.

On Thursday, police did not file any charges, because they did not know if they had the right dogs. Their owner (whom I couldn't reach for comment) had had no prior run-ins with police. And at the time, Swanson wasn't sure of the breeds of the dogs who'd grabbed her pet.

"You have to give (their owner) the benefit of the doubt," says Police Chief Mike Button.

As I arrived to interview Swanson at her home, a German Shepherd and black Lab ran through the front parking lot, then down the road. Two hours later, long after I'd gone, the two dogs returned to Swanson's door. She called 911, and the dogs were captured by Button and Animal Control.

"They were really very friendly to us," Button says.

However, neighbors told him that the dogs had snapped at one woman and chased another resident. Moreover, a witness reported having seen the same dogs near Swanson's apartment the night Little Bit disappeared.

According to the village's escalating fine system, the owner will be fined \$100 this time, then \$250 for any subsequent loose-dog violations. Further, Button says he will ask the Tazewell County State's Attorney's Office to charge the owner with the only applicable offense: criminal damage to property, a misdemeanor.

"My biggest concern is if these dogs are going into residences and snatching things," Button says. "You wonder what would happen if there were kids inside there."

Swanson still holds out hope that Little Bit is all right somewhere out there. She asks anyone with information to call her at 232-0984.

"He was my little baby," she says, sobbing. "He never did anything bad, except chewing up Kleenex.

"I don't know what I'm gonna do."

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