

Adventures at the dog run

BY RISA C. DOHERTY

Our miniature dachshund, Milton, was not much of a sociable dog, belligerently barking at any four-legged creature within view. Weighing in at a scant nine pounds, he would experience the Napoleon complex that many small dogs face. He seemed content with the humans in his life and the companionship we offered him seemed adequate.

So, my 11-year-old daughter, Melissa, Miltie and I drove to the local dog run at Christopher Morley Park in Manhasset. It has recently been christened the "Gissing Commemorative Dog Run" after Christopher Morley's favorite dog from his 1922 Novel entitled "Where The Blue Begins."

Since I was an uninitiated dog run visitor, I was in for an entertaining interlude. As we approached the dog run, I realized that there was an outside gate and an inside gate; ostensibly to prevent escapees from successfully exiting when people entered. It reminded me of the double hatch on the Jupiter 2, from *Lost in Space*.

I slowly opened the outside gate, and noticed that we were already drawing a crowd. It seems as if dog run etiquette requires all the current canine visitors to cease all other ongoing activities and report to the gate to greet the newcomers. Consequently, they all ran to line up beside the inside gate, tails wagging, and spit flying, with a controlled level of excitement. They were varying sizes, from very big to relatively small, but all of them exceeded Miltie in size and stature. He wasn't fazed in the least by their showing of hospitality, and to my great relief, no growling emanated from any of the participants.

My diminutive 11-year-old ran for cover behind me, as we approached the seemingly friendly, motley crew of greeters. I cautiously lifted the bar on the second gate, gaining access to the inner

sanctum and releasing our little Miltie into the crowd. After an interval of communal sniffing, several of the hosts proceeded to trot alongside Milton, while he checked out his new environs. As Milton made his way along the entire perimeter of the enclosed area, many of his groupies trailed off, distracted by other people, toys, or newcomers who amused them.

There was one golden retriever, hell-bent on making Milton his friend, and Milton was less than interested. Ziggy was exuberant, lively and playful and pursued Milton relentlessly. Finally, Milton halted in the middle of his yard survey, turned around, and let out a long-repressed growl. Ziggy quickly made himself scarce.

Melissa and I had found an adequate perch on a wooden bench in the shade, seemingly out of the mainstream of dog traffic. As Milton approached me, I looked down at our little dachsie, who seemed to be taking the whole experience in stride, and noticed a four-inch

long, thick layer of spit atop his narrow, extended back. I examined the filmy substance with disgust; it resembled some sort of adhesive material. I dared not dab the blob of sputum with a tissue, and reconciled myself to the fact that my shorthaired, normally meticulously self-groomed dog would just have to be bathed when we got home.

Melissa and I spoke with some of the regulars of the human variety. They take great pride in their dog run and have organized a "Dog Run Club." Although it is located in a County park, it is partially maintained by private funds. In fact, donations originally financed cedar wood chips, a two-tiered dog/human water fountain, and a teakwood bench with a memorial plaque dedicated to a beloved former club member, a spokesman for the club, Sal Vivo, a.k.a. "The Mayor of the Dog Run," told me. They would bring a small inflatable pool for the dogs in summer and celebrate dog birthdays in style with goody bags for canines and humans alike.

Pet owners bring their own snacks and drinking water for their pets, but

many of the pooches prefer to pilfer the treats from the bowls of the others. Many people knew each other. This was no different from any other local watering hole, really. The regulars have become good friends and took over three rows in the theater at a recent showing of *Marley and Me*.

Milton wandered a little more, followed by Melissa. She came running back to me with a sense of urgency, indicating that Milton had deposited a small souvenir in the corner of the dog run. As a veteran dog owner, I handed her a baggy with aplomb. I must have looked somewhat surprised when a helpful bystander suggested that we utilize the official dog run shovel. Did he notice the actual size of my dog? A teaspoon would have been more appropriate!

One dog kept bringing us his spit covered tennis ball, hoping for a game of catch. I complied and threw the ball for him to fetch a few times, but eventually was forced to deflect his eager, dribbling snout and bring our merriment to an end.

Unfortunately, one of the dogs felt so incredibly comfortable near us, that he lifted his long leg and relieved himself on my sneakers and the side of my jeans as I sat on the end of the bench. I couldn't understand it: did my leg resemble a pole? Was it a visually impaired dog? I don't think that was the case, because a short time later, Melissa let out a shriek as another dog did the same to her pant leg. Perhaps it was some kind of initiation practice? Perhaps we were being marked as part of their territory. In any event, we were less than appreciative and tried to stay in good spirits, lest Milton be black-listed at the dog run.

At that point, we decided we had had just enough fun for one day and rounded up Milton, who was also ready to leave. Melissa snapped on his leash and we proceeded towards the gates. I was careful not to open the inner latch until the area was clear, and hurried my little group into the holding pen in order to secure the inner gate and comply with the local rules and regulations. Having passed safely through the outer gate, we looked back, only to observe the line-up of now familiar suspects, sitting in a row, with their swishing tails and barks of farewell.

