

Curse of the Grand Dogs

By David R. Altman

One of the great joys of life is having grandchildren. They give you a chance to truly enjoy small children - something many of us missed along the way while we were raising ours. No nightly battles, no having to say 'no' and not being saddled with attending nightly baseball games, tennis matches or swim meets.

But along with those good times with the grandkids comes another distraction. It's as if the good Lord knows that grandparents can't be given a full free pass when it comes to babysitting. In fact, you knew in your heart that it couldn't be as simple as just watching the kids. With the blessing of the grandkids also comes a curse - and it comes in the form of the "grand dogs".

We have two grand kids and three grand dogs (seems like there is something wrong with that equation). The dogs, whom we will call Lucy, Libby and Hazel (since those are their real names, forget about protecting their identity). These dogs, like their sibling humans, are always excited to arrive at the house. It is new territory for each of them - somewhere new to play, new foods to eat, new floors to sniff and, well, you get the picture.

All three grand dogs were rescue dogs, and, except for Libby, the border collie, they are generally unidentifiable as a breed.

Lucy suffers from multiple anxiety disorders, including separation anxiety. It's not the grandkids who cry when our daughter drops them off - it's the dog! Lucy, a small, constantly shedding yellow lab knockoff, is always wanting to jump-up on any guest. She is incredibly needy (almost like a canine Woody Allen) - a dog with zero confidence. We always pray for good weather when Lucy visits, as her storm anxiety is extraordinary. She heads for the darkest spot of the house (a windowless downstairs bathroom) and curls up in the corner, shivering and cowling (much like I do after she leaves). Even xanax won't help (don't ask how we know).

Her 'instincts' of other animals are incredibly sharp. If she's on our cabin deck and senses a bear or turkey on Sassafras Mountain (even a mile away from Burnt Mountain), her hair stands up like a lion's mane. She is a dog who is constantly on the move and leaving her wiry white fur scattered over every room she enters. But she is wonderful around her 'brother and sister' (a.k.a. our grand children) and they can jump on her like she's My Friend Flicka and she won't utter a sound.

She is joined in the mix by Libby, the aforementioned border collie. Libby, who is exceptionally beautiful, is an extraordinary sweet dog around people. However, around other dogs she becomes a cross between Cujo and Lizzie Borden. Let's just say she has had several biting episodes that make us all worry that the next one might be one of us (although she seems to love most all two-legged creatures). Libby has soft, flowing hair and sometimes snarls and barks at the air - as though she is practicing for her next canine encounter. She is so bad that she has to be kept in an isolation cell when she is being boarded.

At our house, her favorite activity is to watch the 'outside' cats through a glass storm door. Like all herders, she sits quietly, almost rigid, for up to 15 minutes at a time before she can no



Libby's favorite activity is to watch the 'outside' cats before plunging like Hannibal Lector at the glass door.

longer help herself, suddenly lunging like Hannibal Lector at the glass door and then harmlessly bouncing off. The cats love this, staying just far enough back from the door to haunt poor Libby.

The third grand dog, who belongs to our youngest daughter, is the smallest and perhaps strangest of the three is Hazel.

Slightly overweight with reddish long hair, she seems to be a mix of Welsh Corgi and Chow, appearing almost Fox-like, especially when she runs with her tail flying straight out in back.

Hazel, who is literally afraid of her own shadow, has solidly built short legs that allow her to dig massive holes near my wife's hostas in less than thirty seconds. Our backyard is full of little bunker holes, appearing like a moonscape from our upstairs window.

Sweet Hazel is afraid of peo-

ple. When you approach her you must sit down, cross-legged, and hold out your hand. Our aging grandparent joints creak at all the bending. Hazel will surely have my wife and I seeking knee replacements within two years. She is also a sweet dog, the rescued product of a hoarder household, where there were many other animals that clearly contributed to her psychoses. The only time Hazel is not afraid is when you pick her up at night and put her at the foot of the bed - she is content to lie there on her zebra-patterned blanket, giving her anxiety-ridden soul a rest for the evening.

As cousins, they don't do particularly well. Little Hazel seems to get along well with both Lucy and Libby, but getting the two larger dogs together is an unpleasant (and unsafe) experience. Three Thanksgivings ago, Libby bit a hole in Lucy's ear while fighting over a dog bone.

Yes, all dogs (like all dog owners) have their idiosyncrasies. But these grand dogs are in another class (Caesar Milan, where are you?).

None of these dogs will ever make it to the Westminster. Sometimes, they can't even make it to the yard. Yet, they are cared for (and spoiled rotten) just like the grandkids. And we wouldn't have it any other way.

[Free-lance writer and dog lover Dave Altman is a part-time resident of Jasper. He and his wife Lisa live on Sassafras Mountain and are the 'parents' of two intelligent and low-maintenance cats, Elsie and Blackie.]

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