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Civility on the Way Out? Add Dogs to That List

By BOB MORRIS



EVER since her bulldog bit a fox terrier in the elevator last spring, Liz Weston has been forced by her co-op board to use the freight elevator at her Sutton Place South building. She doesn't think that it's fair. After she apologized and paid the \$600 veterinary bill, she sent a note asking how the terrier's little tail was healing. She got back a letter from the co-op board's lawyer demanding she move out.

The dog fight at Sutton Place South is not an isolated incident. High-end hounds and pampered canines seem to be acting out everywhere these days, in doorman buildings, the gated homes of Los Angeles or on manicured Hamptons lawns. And like their tightly wound owners, they can be lightning rods for lawsuits and bad publicity.

Dogs in banks. Dogs in [yoga](#) classes. Dogs in wedding parties. They have even invaded luxury boutiques. At the Manhattan offices of Marchesa, the delicate gown line designed by Georgina Chapman and Keren Craig, office dogs are known to get into savage fights. "Sometimes it's funny, but other times it can get pretty violent," said Edward Chapman, the company's president, whose Yorkshire terrier, Lottie, is often the instigator.

But then, the life of cosseted canines can be harder than it appears. Snooty co-ops have etiquette rules about barking and dog-on-dog interactions in lobbies and elevators. Some buildings even require that dogs be carried on elevators and in lobbies. (Carrying dogs, according to experts, makes them more neurotic because they are happier on their feet, just as any person other than Liz Taylor in "Cleopatra" might be.)

In addition, second and third homes in the Hamptons or Sun Valley, Idaho, can be disorienting for older dogs that don't like learning new tricks, like finding the urine pad in a new mansion or not attacking the strangers who trim the privet.

A big domestic staff can make obedience confusing, too. At cocktail parties, canapés are a temptation, as are mink coats draped on couches and expensive shoes that look like toys.

No home, however stately, is immune. That includes the White House. The pit bull of [Theodore Roosevelt](#) was known for ripping the pants off a French ambassador. And although Bo, the Obamas' Portuguese water dog, is incident free for now, recent presidential dogs in the dog house included Buddy, the Clintons' cat-attacking Labrador retriever, and Barney, the Scottish terrier of George and [Laura Bush](#), who bit a journalist.

Size is also irrelevant. Small dogs, so often owned by the wealthy, do seem to cause big problems. A 2010 New York City Health Department survey shows 3,609 reported dog-bite incidents, with just as many involving Shih Tzus, Chihuahuas and miniature poodles as pit bulls and Rotweillers.

Breeding, especially the intense behavior of some purebreds, seems to make a difference, too, as the writer Martin Kihn learned the hard way. He adopted a giant Bernese mountain dog, a breed sometimes called “the Little Bear of Switzerland.” The dog “was a status symbol and harder to get from a breeder than getting into Yale,” Mr. Kihn said. But the dog, whose name was Hola, seemed hell-bent on wreaking havoc.

While walking past [Lincoln Center](#), Hola accosted a perfectly coiffed doyenne and left two big paw prints on a beautiful white dress. “That was the last time I took her to the opera,” said Mr. Kihn, whose new memoir, “Bad Dog: A Love Story,” offers a wry tale of canine rehabilitation. “I really got her because I wanted to be seen with her, that’s all.”

It’s a good thing Mr. Kihn wasn’t asked to bring Hola to his Riverside Drive co-op board before moving in. “We just lied and told them she was medium-size and mellow,” he said.

Others should have it so easy. To get past highly selective co-op boards, the desperate turn to Elena Gretch, founder of It’s a Dog’s Life, an upmarket training service. She usually requires six sessions (at about \$175 a session) to prep dogs for interviews.

While some slip dogs Valium, she keeps dogs sober, training them not to bark during the dreaded doorbell test and helping them understand that elevators and lobbies are not powder rooms. And, of course, an elaborate bath before the interview is de rigueur.

“Co-op boards are about controlling their environments, and they expect dogs to behave like well-trained little people,” said Ms. Gretch, who faces all kinds of challenges daily. Recent clients included an Upper East Side dermatologist who wants to train his feisty pug puppy to be calm in his office, a type-A lawyer turned fitness entrepreneur whose basset hound had to be prepared for a Hush Puppies shoot, and a financier who wanted his Chesapeake Bay retriever yacht-broken for a cruise to St. Bart’s.

But all of it that, she added, is nothing compared with the scrutiny of a high-strung co-op board. “When you have to charm so many people, it’s really intimidating,” she said.

It’s a good thing dogs don’t have to apply to private schools.