

My Dog Is Prettier Than Your Dog

BY KIM ZACHMAN

Since my English friend, Clare, got her puppy, she has gone off the deep end of doggie devotion. She worships her golden retriever with a religious fervor that smites the First Commandment — Thou shalt have no other gods besides Me. What's worse is her evangelism. She expects all of her friends to join her "Hugo the Most Handsome" cult. During my visit to England last fall, she actually wanted me to proclaim Hugo to be the most beautiful golden retriever in the world. Pleeese! Our golden, Harley, is much more handsome than Hugo.

After three years of mourning for their beloved black Lab, Clare and her husband, Anthony, finally decided to get another dog. I was thrilled when Clare e-mailed me the news of their impending parenthood, and I thought it was great that they had chosen a golden retriever. Because it was such an important event in their lives and because I needed a week away from the kids, I talked my husband into letting me go to England to take a puppy present in person.

I played the "auntie" role very well. I oohed and awwed at four photo albums of puppy pictures. Hugo and I played ball, tug, and wrestle. Hugo was indeed delightful.

The conflict didn't begin until the evening we went to Clare's parents' for dinner. Clare's mum, Margaret, politely asked about my children. I sat beside her on the sofa and eagerly pulled out a stack of photos. The fourth picture was of Harley, looking absolutely stunning. He was lying in bright, green grass that highlighted his rich, auburn coat, and he was smiling with his favorite ball between his front paws.

Margaret said, "Oh, that's a beautiful dog!"

With gracious pride, I thanked her and went on to the picture of our youngest daughter sitting in the dishwasher. Clare, however, couldn't stand for anyone to admire a golden

unless it was The Great Hugo. She made the snide comment, "Yes, Harley is a pretty dog, if you like that much red."

Quick to the defensive, I said, "His color is accepted by the American Kennel Club."

"In America maybe, but in England, Hugo's pale blond is the more accepted color." Clare reached over the arm of her chair and patted dozing Hugo's head.

I've been a friend with these Brits for more than 10 years and I know when I'm getting a subtle snub. My snubs, however, aren't so subtle.

"I've noticed in England that the people are generally pale and blond too. I guess that's because there's so little sunshine. It makes sense that bland-looking people would want bland-colored dogs." Clare glared at me. I smugly sat back and took a swig of my Chardonnay.

Clare's dad, Keith asked to see the pictures. He looked at Harley's photo and commented, "He looks very large. How much does he weigh?"

A proud mom, I answered, "He weighs 92 pounds. He's a big'un."

Anthony looked at sleeping Hugo and said, "Our vet doesn't think Hugo will ever be much more than 65 pounds. I wonder why there is such a difference in size."

"Everything is bigger in America." I said. "Hell, our refrigerator is bigger than your shower."

Clare's claws came out and she went for blood. "Harley is a pure golden, isn't he? Or does he have some Irish setter in him?" she asked slyly.

I felt my hackles rise. I was sensitive to this question because I didn't know for sure what Harley's breeding was. We'd adopted him and we'd been told that he was pure. I coolly lied, "Oh yes, at least he's pure through to his great-grandparents."

It seems to me that Brits never miss an opportunity to lord their lineage over us. Clare said in her best BBC voice, "In England, the breeders are very particular. Hugo's line is pure champion for 12 generations. England is most definitely NOT the 'Melting Pot'

that America is."

"We call that inbreeding." I murmured.

"Pardon me?" Clare asked.

"Well, how interesting." I said louder.

Keith saved the night by announcing dinner and refilling our wine glasses. Margaret switched the conversation to gardening and the weather. Clare and I mellowed and were soon laughing again.

On the walk home after dinner, Anthony and Hugo had run ahead. Clare and I walked together in silence until she asked me, "You do think Hugo is the most gorgeous golden in the world, don't you?"

I hesitated. I understood that in Clare's eyes, Hugo was the best. I also understood that she needed me, as one of her dearest friends, to agree with her. I didn't want our long friendship to be damaged over our dogs, but I couldn't lie either. I opted for compromise.

"Let me say without equivocation, that Hugo is indeed the most beautiful golden retriever in... England. But please don't ask me to say that he's more beautiful than Harley."

She smiled feebly, "OK. We'll say that Hugo is the most beautiful on this side of the Atlantic and Harley is the most beautiful on your side of the Atlantic. Deal?"

"Deal!"

When I arrived home in the United States, I was showing my husband, Dan, photos from the trip. He saw a picture I'd taken of Hugo. We'd gone for a ramble through some hay fields above the village one morning. Hugo was sitting watching some birds landing in the brambles. The dissipating fog in the valley diffused the sun's first rays creating a glowing dawn sky. Hugo's French vanilla coat appeared illuminated and his intelligent dark eyes shone with excitement.

Dan said, "Wow! Hugo is a beautiful dog. I think he's even prettier than Harley."

I growled, "Benedict Arnold." **DJK**

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