

NOT-SO-PASSIVE PARTNER

RELATIONS

The Kingston Humane society was packed to the rafters with oversized teenage dogs that barked en masse when I walked down the rows.

"What about this one?" My sister was squatting beside a cage behind me. A small red coated hound mutt with blonde eyebrows quaked at the back of her cage. I was in love.

"My little red head," I thought, and immediately named her Molly, as in Molly Maguire, the unsinkable Molly Brown or the protagonist of the seminal dyke coming-of-age novel Rubyfruit Jungle, Molly Bolt — take your pick.

My sister approved. "Look," she said when I took Molly for a test run on a rope leash around the humane society grounds. "She's submissive. That's what you want." Training her, I believed, would be a cinch.



KATE BARKER

In the first six months, Molly destroyed a sleeping bag, several futon covers, countless shoe laces and even my answering machine. I had to keep her food in a locked container to discourage kibble breaks.

But I couldn't really punish her. She was a traumatized puppy, in the chewing stage. This is what I told my parents when she mangled the custom-made blind on their back door.

Molly possesses a strength that belies her small stature. Walking, she yanked my arm from left to right and pulled me all the way, stopping only to bark vociferously at any passing dogs. I yelled. I tugged. I swore. And she never batted an eye. To her I was just a lowly litter mate. She had me wrapped around her paw, and she knew it.

My partner inherited the dog along with me. She was not impressed. Some people have a way with animals. I am not one of those people. I do not inspire canine respect. A dog sizes me up and — frankly — laughs. My partner, on the other hand, is a sort of dog whisperer. She eyed Molly up and down on moving in day and calmly claimed superiority over all four-legged beasts. Molly declared war.

As Molly had a habit of digging her sharp little toe nails into my partner's back in the night and pushing, hard, she was not welcome in our bed. An inviting dog bed was made at the foot of ours. Molly took this offensive arrangement personally, and knew who to blame.

The first day following her banishment from the bed, she slunk into the bedroom when we were out and daintily pissed all over my partner's side of the mattress.

Molly eventually lost the bed status tussle. Walking was next. We bought a halti and I watched in amazement the first time Molly walked calmly beside us with my partner on the other end of the leash. I was handed the leash. The second the dog sensed I was in control, she pulled maniacally to free herself.

Molly is a good dog now, thanks entirely to my partner. A simple hand signal will send her to another room. Yelling is not required. She comes when we call in a normal voice, when before I had to physically haul her in from outside. She sits and waits for "okay" when we serve up her kibble. She no longer barks at other dogs. She is a little angel.

But she still thinks of me as just another lowly dog. I took her out on a walk recently and she regressed to earlier behaviour, barking frothily at a tiny frou-frou thing on a leash with a bow. Frankly, I can't blame her. But I did as I was told, immediately punishing her. I grabbed her cheeks (yes, dogs have cheeks) and pulled her nose close to mine.

"No," I said firmly, with a little shake. The dog paused, looked at me, then barked even more furiously, right in my face. I gave up. But then, she always knew I would.

Relations is dedicated to exploring our many kinds of relationships. Send ideas to paul.gallant@xtra.ca.