

Poor Little Rich Dog

Ernie is healthy, wealthy, and abused.

By Jon Katz

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Ernie, a fluffy, 10-week-old golden retriever with heart-melting eyes, was originally a birthday present. The lucky recipient was Danielle, a pony-tailed 11-year-old living in an affluent Westchester, N.Y., suburb.

Danielle's passions for some time had been soccer, Justin Timberlake, and instant messaging, but her parents wanted to give her a different kind of birthday gift, "something that you didn't plug in or watch, something that would give her a sense of responsibility." She'd often said she'd love a puppy and vowed to take care of it.

Girl and dog, growing up together—what parent hasn't pictured it? Her folks envisioned long family walks around the neighborhood, Ernie frolicking on the lawn while they gardened. They could see him riding along to soccer games.

Acquiring a dog completed the portrait that had been taking shape for several years, beginning with the family's move to the suburbs from Brooklyn. The package included a four-bedroom colonial, a lawn edged with flowering shrubs, a busy sports schedule, a Volvo wagon and a Subaru Outback to ferry the kids around. A dog—a big, beautiful hunting breed—came with the rest of it, increasingly as much a part of the American dream as the picket fence or the car with high safety ratings.

So Danielle's parents found a breeder online with lots of awards, cooed over the adorable pictures, and mailed off a deposit on a pup. They drove to Connecticut and returned to surprise Danielle on her birthday, just hours before her friends were due for a celebratory sleepover.

It was love at first sight. Danielle and her friends spent hours passing the adorable puppy from one lap to another. Ernie slept with her that night. Over the next two or three weeks, she spent hours cuddling with him, playing tug of war, and tossing balls while her parents took photos.

But the dog did not spark greater love of the outdoors or diminish her interest in television, iPod, computer, and cell phone. Nor did his arrival slow down Danielle's demanding athletic schedule; with practices, games, and victory celebrations, soccer season took up three or four afternoons a week. Anyway, she didn't find the shedding, slobbering, chewing, and maturing Ernie quite as cute as the new-puppy version.

Both of Danielle's parents worked in the city and rarely got home before 7 p.m. on weekdays. The household relied on a nanny/housekeeper from Nicaragua who wasn't especially drawn to dogs and viewed Ernie as stupid, messy, and, as he grew larger and more restive, mildly frightening.

Because nobody was home during the day, he wasn't housebroken for nearly two months and even then, not completely. No single person was responsible for him; nobody had the time, will, or skill to train him.

As he went through the normal stages of retriever development—teething, mouthing, racing frantically around the house, peeing when excited, offering items the family didn't want retrieved, eating strange objects and then vomiting them up—the casualties mounted. Rugs got stained, shoes chewed, mail devoured, table legs gnawed. The family rejected the use of a crate or kennel—a valuable calming tool for young and energetic dogs—as cruel. Instead, they let the puppy get into all sorts of trouble, then scolded and resented him for it. He was "hyper," they complained, "wild," "rambunctious." The notion of him as annoying and difficult became fixed in their minds; perhaps in his as well.

A practiced trainer would have seen, instead, a golden retriever that was confused, under-exercised, and untrained—an ironic fate for a dog bred for centuries to be calm and responsive to humans.

Ernie did not attach to anybody in particular—an essential element in training a dog. Because he never quite understood the rules, he became increasingly anxious. He was reprimanded constantly for jumping on residents and visitors, for pulling and jerking on the leash when walked. Increasingly, he was isolated when company came or the family was gathered. He was big enough to drag Danielle into the street by now, so her parents and the housekeeper reluctantly took over. His walks grew brief: outside, down the block until he did his business, then home. He never got to run much.

Complaining that he was out of control, the family tried fencing the back yard and putting Ernie outside during meals to keep him from bothering them. The nanny stuck him there most of the day as well, because he messed up the house. Allowed inside at night, he was largely confined to the kitchen, sealed off by child gates.

The abandonment and abuse of dogs is an enormous issue in the animal rights movement, and quite properly. There are, by U.S. Humane Society estimates, as many as 10 million dogs languishing in shelters; the majority will be euthanized. But Ernie is an abused dog, too.

Nobody is likely to talk much about Ernie, the kind of dog I saw frequently while researching several books. His abusers aren't lowlifes who mercilessly beat, starve, or tether animals. Quite the opposite: His owners are affluent, educated people who consider themselves humanistic and moral. But they've been cruel nonetheless, through their lack of responsibility, their neglect, their poor training, and their inattention.

I've seen Ernie numerous times over the past two years. I've watched him become more detached, neurotic, and unresponsive. I've seen the soul drain from the dog's eyes.

He's affectionate and unthreatening, but he doesn't really know how to behave—not around his family or other people, not around other animals, not around me or my dogs. He lunges and barks almost continuously when anyone comes near, so few of us do. Increasingly, he gets confined to his back yard, out of sight and mind.

This family was shocked and outraged when I suggested that the dog was suffering from a kind of abuse and might be better off in a different home. "Nobody hits that dog," sputtered Danielle's father. "He gets the best dog food, he gets all his shots." All true.

But he lacks what is perhaps the most essential ingredient in a dog's life: a human who will take emotional responsibility for him.

Sadly, I see dogs like Ernie all the time, victims of a new, uniquely American kind of abuse, animals without advocates. Dogs like Flash, a Westchester border collie who spent her days chasing invisible sheep beyond a chain link fence, and Reg, an enormous black Lab in Atlanta who, like Ernie, was untrained, grew neurotic and rambunctious, and eventually was confined to the family playroom day and night. He leaves that room for several brief walks each day.

Who knows how many Ernies and Regs there are in urban apartments and suburban backyards? Few media outlets or animals rights groups would classify a \$1,200 purebred as a candidate for rescue. In fact, I've contacted rescue groups to see if they could help; they were sympathetic, but they felt more comfortable with traditional kinds of abuse. A situation like this—emotional mistreatment is not illegal—was beyond their purview.

I understand, but Ernie haunts me. He may be the most abused dog I know.

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Jon Katz's next book, The Dogs of Bedlam Farm: An adventure with three dogs, sixteen sheep, two donkeys and me will be published in October.

Illustration by Nina Frenkel.