

asked for a dog, and the universe sent me a macho shithhead. The full weight of the truism "Be careful what you ask for, you might get it" has never felt quite so heavy as it does when I think about Henry. This has been the best time of my life.

Henry came into my life a week after Valentine's Day. I had come down from New York City to visit some friends and saw him sitting on the sidewalk on Charles Street. He was scrawny, collarless, and covered with dirt and bite marks. I was utterly captivated. He crawled into my lap, and I looked into his chocolate eyes. He licked my chin. We fell madly in love.

I did not know at that moment that Henry was going to be living with me. I did know, however, that he was not going to remain on

him to someone else.

Somewhat panic-stricken, I called the woman to put a hold on Henry. Although only a few hours had passed, I was sure she already had found someone who couldn't possibly love him as much as I would but wanted him as a work dog to do harsh chores on a dismal farm somewhere. No, she assured me, he was still unclaimed. He had eaten voraciously, soiled the corner of her rug, and gotten his nose clawed open by one of her cats. Other than that he was fine. I fretted about infection.

From that moment I have embarked on a prolonged extravagant fantasy in which I pretend that Henry is a delicate child in need of

1992

What Difference  
Did It Make?

rogue strain that shows up in the blocky shape of his head, his long skinny legs, his flawless comic timing. Theories on what mated with a Labrador in order to produce Henry include Rottweiler, pit bull, Weimaraner, and circus clown.) Even as I pretend otherwise, Henry constantly reminds me that he is not my child. For starters, he openly licks his penis in my presence. I know that actual progeny of mine would not do this.

Another disturbance in my maternal fantasy came a few months after I got him back to New York. This was an idyllic time. Henry and I were getting to know each other. He was housebroken in two weeks. He tore apart the garbage a few times and ate a pair of sandals, but other than that he was a perfect angel. We spent many happy hours trotting over to the dog run in Washington Square Park, where he gamboled with other dogs. I would exchange wry, rueful tales with the other mommies and daddies, pretending to be annoyed by the playful tics our dogs displayed, reporting with barely concealed pride how much weight our dogs gained, sputtering self-righteously when one of the dogs got aggressive. In short, we happily put all our neuroses onto our pets. It's a New York thing to do.

Then one day the unthinkable happened. I returned from my first weekend away without Henry, and the baby-sitter reported that he had gotten into a fight at the playground. I flat out did not believe her. The next morn-

ing, however, Henry charged at a huge Great Dane. They fought with a ferocity and a violence that I have never witnessed before in my life. Lunging and snapping, they crashed thunderously, emitting the most terrifying, throat-wrenching snarls. I was stunned to see Henry transformed from a gentle angel into an enraged warrior. I didn't recognize him and that scared me.

It seemed there was one culprit—well two, actually. Henry's balls. He had reached puberty, about 10 months, and his body had become a Molotov cocktail of testosterone. A male dog was the lighted match that touched off an explosion. The most effective way to remove the aggression would be to remove his balls. I did not want to accept this and spent a long hot summer of denial, punctuated by violent outbursts. My conversation with myself went like this: Henry is not aggressive. He is protecting himself from mean dogs. He will grow out of it. I just have to keep him away from dogs who are not fixed. Okay, he can be around only female dogs. Why is this happening to me? I am too well mannered to have a dog that fights. I am the wrong human for him.

Eventually, I accepted the simple truth that my son is a macho shithhead, intent on dominating all dogs. But I still could not bring myself to have him fixed. What bothered me about it was euphemisms such as "fixed." He wasn't broken, so why should he be "fixed"? There was a reason no one called the procedure by its proper name, "castration," which is that no one wanted to be honest about what they were doing to their pet. If it weren't so

# Henry's Balls

BY CONSTANCE ADLER

the sidewalk. I delivered him into the care of a woman who had volunteered to find him a home. Later that evening it suddenly struck me that this was my dog. *My dog.* The dog I had been dreaming of. And I had just given

my tender care. He has in fact grown to be a 90-pound bruiser in need of his own country estate. (Henry's parentage is uncertain. One side of his family appears to be aristocratic black Labrador retrievers. But he possesses a



horrible, people wouldn't need euphemisms to talk about it. I could not bear the thought of his innocent body being cut. To me it was mutilation. I knew if Henry could talk he would object.

And finally I didn't want to fix Henry because I loved his balls. They were like great clanging church bells. I loved their heavy ripe swing as he walked, and I would miss them.

Meanwhile, we were becoming increasingly unpopular at the dog run. Every time a male dog came along, he and Henry would go through this primitive guy ritual. First there was the cautious approach, the butt sniff, the frozen stance and direct eye contact, which in dog language is like sneering. "Your mama!" The other dog might mount his backside.

(Males do this to each other. It looks sexual, but it's not. It's actually an overt challenge to a dog's macho, an attempt to establish dominance. You either fight or look like a wuss. Henry hates to look like a wuss.) If that happened, Henry's lip would curl, the fur on his neck would rise, and then he'd whirl around and clobber the guy.

It was nerve-racking and dangerous since I was the one who had to wade into the flying fur and teeth to break it up. Now I can read the slightest change in his temperature and intervene before the fight starts, but back then I never knew when he was going to explode at another dog. It was uncanny. One second he'd be Henry Fonda, the next Henry the Serial Killer. And yet I believed that the good Henry and his balls could be preserved. I was going to find a way around the brutal practice of behavior modification through castration.

I began by seeking advice from everyone I encountered. It became my only topic of conversation for several months. The dog owners in my neighborhood said, "Lop 'em off. Don't be a jerk." My therapist thought that I didn't want to fix Henry because his balls represented my own desire for power in the world. My psychic said that Henry is overly exuberant in expressing his joy and unwittingly frightens other dogs. "He's a little bit of a dummy that way," she said.

I consulted an animal behaviorist who specializes in problem correction in house pets. I explained my problem to him, and before he could say a word I let him know that I did not want to get Henry fixed. There was a long silence before he said that dogs with their balls intact give off an odor that provokes other dogs to fight. "So he probably smells really nasty ... not to you of course," the doctor added hurriedly.

One friend suggested that Henry fights because I have blond hair. He said all dogs want to go home with the blonde, and so Henry has to fight to protect me from being kidnapped by another dog. My friend stated further that if I went back to my real color, none of these fights would be happening. I stated this was typical Blame the Victim reasoning.

Joe, who coparents a greyhound/Labrador mutt named Virgil, often marveled that our dogs could wrestle vigorously without ever crossing over into a real fight. Henry would let Virgil do anything to him, including some of the most provocative mounting moves that ordinarily would spark rage in Henry. Joe

thought that maybe the reason Henry and Virgil never fought is that although Virgil does a lot of things to make Henry angry, Henry displaces this emotion and acts out his rage with other dogs. I suggested to Joe that maybe he was projecting a little.

It was with great relief that I talked to a dog trainer who works in my veterinarian's office. The first thing she said was "He's getting picked on, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is!" I said with motherly indignation rising in my breast. At last, someone who understood.


Once I had collected enough opinions, I looked at what I could do. I could keep Henry isolated from other dogs, only walking him on the street. This would be extremely frustrating for both of us, and he would not get the exercise he needs. Or I could find him a nice family in the suburbs with a big fenced-in yard. It was only when I seriously considered this second option that I began to see how important Henry is to me. I began to look at how much I have learned from him and what a difference he has made in my life. He gives daily lessons in being spontaneous and emotionally available, enjoying nice weather, asking for what you want, relaxing about dirt and slobber. He has shown me that aggression is neither good nor bad but simply a trait that exists in all of us. I have learned what it feels like to love someone so much I could forget myself.

So it was finally that simple. Either Henry got to keep his balls or I got to keep Henry. I called the vet and made the appointment.

It may have been simple but it was not easy. My objections to castration did not disappear.

They simply took a backseat to my new considerations. When I brought him to the doctor's office, they asked me to sign a waiver stating that I gave the surgeon permission to perform other unforeseen procedures that might appear necessary during surgery. I instantly decided this meant they wanted permission to put Henry to sleep in case he was brain-damaged from the anesthesia. I began to cry uncontrollably. They took my dog away from me and told me to go home and wait. Three hours later, the vet's assistant called to say it was over; Henry was awake and fine. He was still groggy, and they wanted to keep him there until the evening. An hour later, she called again and asked me to come get my dog. He was barking hysterically and incessantly. My son, I was grateful to hear, was still living up to his obnoxious reputation.




The first few days his scrotum flapped empty and looked like a sun-dried tomato. Then it shrank up and now resembles a little purse for holding subway tokens. His behavior did not change immediately. It took several months for him to calm down. Now he is far less prone to attack other dogs, although he will mix it up occasionally. His essential macho nature is intact, but the edge, the blood lust has been taken off. Yes, now that Henry's church bells are silent, our life together is more peaceful. But I do miss them now and then. ■







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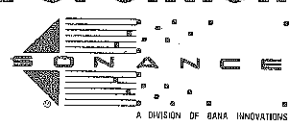





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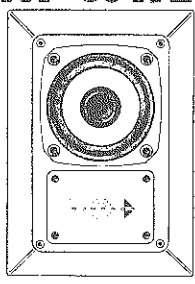




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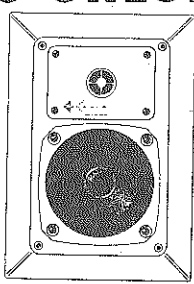
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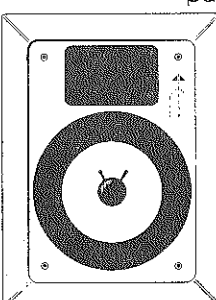
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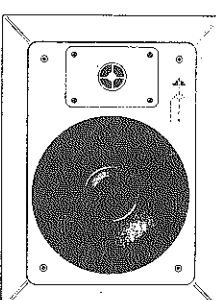
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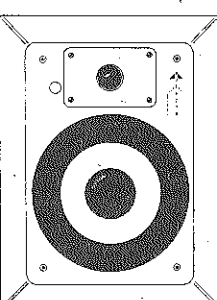
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