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Sunday in the Park with Homer



by C.Flisi

We were standing at the entrance to the Parco del Ticino (the park that follows the Ticino River north of Milan) some years ago, reading a sign that said — among a whole list of prohibitions — “No dogs allowed.” And



there we were, my husband, myself, and our large and not-in-the-least-inconspicuous Weimaraner, Homer.

In typical Italian fashion, my husband said, “What kind of park would put up a restriction like that? Ignore it.” I was glad there was almost no one else around. The parking lot was practically empty; we didn’t see a soul along the trail.

We had barely proceeded two steps into the park when hubby suggested, “Let Homer off the leash. We are all alone.” I hesitated, not because I thought my dog would run off and disappear: I knew him too well for that. But rather because there might have been some other dog loose and running around, a canine not as good-hearted as mine.

This had been Homer’s birthday present, a week early. It was paradise for him. A gravelly stretch along the Ticino riverbank, then a long leafy trail through the woods. A few walkers here

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and there, almost no one really. Homer covered three times the distance we did, with all his comings and goings, bounding ahead and then retracing his steps.

After 75 minutes of walking, we decided to turn back and I snapped his leash back on. By then more people were appearing on the trail, and more dogs too. So much for prohibitions. Most of the pets were on leash but . . . who could be sure? I strained to check ahead to see what was moving toward us so that we wouldn't be caught unawares. I spotted a leashed dog in time to rein Homer in, and was very glad to have done so when we passed the animal, a Staffordshire bull terrier. "It's a first cousin to a pit bull," I explained to my spouse.

"That's a mean-looking mother," was his reaction. "It's all head and ugly too." His observation was a matter of personal taste but understandable, since his canine preferences had been shaped by proximity to our

Weimaraner, a perfectly-proportioned exemplaire of a supremely elegant breed.

I was equally alert when I saw two human-looking blobs in the distance holding leashes attached to two canine-shaped forms. The large forms and the leashed shapes turned right, off the path we were walking by the canal. I had an uneasy feeling, and held Homer on tight leash. He was completely absorbed in scenting out some animal trail or other and was oblivious to everything else when we passed our fellow travelers. The humans were two 30-something muscular men holding, respectively, a large, alert, handsome German Shepherd and a Doberman, perhaps the largest Dobe I'd ever seen, a magnificent, deep-chested animal with (regrettably) the pointed ears that used to be the norm with this breed. The Shepherd was watching all of us, my husband, myself, my dog, AND his master. He was tuned to all our movements but leaned to his master,

waiting for THE signal from his voice of authority.

The Dobe instead was watching only Homer. Every hair on his body seemed to “homer in.” Although my dog was still unaware, lost in wild game scents that were manna for him, the Dobe was tense, poised, waiting. Without warning, he emitted a deep-voiced growl, followed by a short bark and a lunge from his leash. Thank goodness his master reacted quickly, and held him back, albeit with effort.

I was grateful that Homer was also leashed. Had he been roused from his scent fixation, he would have gone bounding over . . . and it would not have ended well for my physically-outmatched animal.

Three dogs and three completely different fulcra, I thought as we returned to our car. My palms were still a little sweaty from my grip on Homer’s leash. A hunting dog is driven by his nose, a German Shepherd by his

master, a Doberman by his prey. If we understood better what motivates our dogs, and what motivates us as human beings, including — in Italy at least — an almost universal disregard for posted signs, wouldn't all our Sundays in the park be more pleasant?

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