

# Your Tiny Problem

Oh, I'm sorry. Do my little dogs make you uncomfortable?

By Mike Kessler

## YEAH, I'M A SMALL-DOG

owner with a beef. And why shouldn't I be? I live in Colorado, where below-average-size canines aren't entirely welcome—where small dogs pose a threat to the \$35,000-pickup-truck-driving, hoppy-ale-swilling status quo. In the 38th state, small dogs aren't noble enough. Here, little pooches make men feel like they just saw outtakes from *Brokeback Mountain*. To some Coloradans, small dogs are downright unacceptable. The owners of all those Dakotas and Juneaus and Chacos—they'll have none of the Fifis or Tootsies or Tammys.

I know what they're thinking: Diminutive dogs—a teacup Chihuahua, a Min-pin—are the mascots of people who tote the little yappers from the Botox clinic to the best table at North. How do I know? Because for the last seven years I've been subjected to the ill-conceived insults and insipid remarks of canine "sizeists"—those who have cast the dark shadow over small dogs. These are the people who respond to small-dog encounters with such creative zingers as, "Is that a rat?" Or, talking to their own dog, "Look, Kenai, lunch!" Or, my personal favorite—I call it the passive-approval remark—usually uttered when my dogs and I are well above 11,000 feet: "Those little dogs aren't supposed to be up here—they act like big dogs."

You know who you are, small-dog bashers. And what you really mean is this: Get a *real* dog.

Some history: Felicia was nine



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pounds and humping a mangy cocker spaniel when we met on that crisp February day in 1999. The venue was the Santa Fe, New Mexico, animal shelter, where we stood on opposite sides of a chain-link gate, the screams of terrified dogs ricocheting off concrete and cinderblock. Hours before, in a room full of roaring clippers and floating hairballs, someone had given Felicia, a

stray from a nearby casino town, the world's most vile set of pom-poms on her legs, head, and tail. They were trying to make her look fancy and adoptable. But she looked like hell; no one had expressed interest in Felicia since she'd arrived 11 days earlier. Her dark eyes locked in on mine. The gyrations stopped. Her whole body wiggled until her butt practically gave her a concussion.

On Felicia's insistence, I agreed to call her Rita. I fattened her up by six pounds, took her hiking and mountain-biking, showed her the world. She's 10 now, and has always has been, despite her size and penchant for eating the crotches out of women's underwear, a "real" dog. Along the way, around spring of '02 in Los Angeles, three teenage girls on the street gave me an orange, snaggle-toothed terrier-Chihuahua concoction. They'd found him in a rough part of town, where he was licking up taco scraps and looking for someone—or something—to romance. His name was Penny, but he and I agreed on "Kenny." It was official. I was no longer

a guy who happened to have a small dog; I was an unapologetic small-dog guy.

I've caught a lot of hell for it—as if all small dogs are ankle-biting brats, which they're not. (Just as all big dogs aren't fanged killers.) But even if the canine sizeists were correct—well, why should they care? More to the point: What's the difference between the small dog riding a purse through the Cherry Creek mall and the husky that's atrophying in the Hummer with the window cracked halfway? There's no difference—the dog is just an accessory.

Yes, despite the love we shower upon our pooches, despite our noblest intentions of providing a raw-food diet or a daily trail run, dogs are, ultimately, extensions of our personalities. Like a car or a wardrobe or a book collection on display, our dogs help us tell the world what kind of people we are, and how we wish to be seen. It's no coincidence that Travis the rafting guide has the water-romping Chesapeake Bay retriever. Mr. LoDo-Stiff-Hair's brindle boxer sure goes well with his prizefighter abs. Ditto the woman with a primped mini poodle and a Joan Rivers eye job. And good for all of them, as long as no one's getting hurt. We're lucky to have the privilege of expressing ourselves through dogs, no matter how ridiculous it makes us appear.

In my case, the dog-as-ego idea means I'm a combination of athletic and affectionate and a little bit barky, but ulti-

mately kind of a wimp—that's Rita. The Kenny part? Flexible, carefree, and affectionate in a not-for-church sort of way. And both of them, of course, are eminently lovable. Having small dogs is also my way of flipping the bird at the world, announcing that I'm unique—even if I haven't reported from Chechnya and don't have any Sherpas in my speed-dial. It's no coincidence that I, too, have always been subaverage in stature—about 5 feet 7 inches. Not mini or



counterparts. They tend to jump on laps, but I'll take that to the clumsy big dog that knocks over everything with his cudgel of a tail.

Don't get me wrong. I like big dogs and medium dogs, too. I like the Wash Park Lab running next to the baby stroller. I like the barking Dalmation with his head out the Subaru window, the swimming Portuguese water dog with Jeff Goldblum hair. I even like the golden retriever with a tennis ball in its mouth and rocks in its head. (And they all have

of a doggie fashion show for an animal-rights group fundraiser. Onstage, bedecked in a red tutu and tiara, Rita voluntarily stood on her hind legs, spun a pirouette, and then sauntered off to the dressing area. I left with the phone number of a woman who owned a big dog.

Maybe she gave me her digits because she saw in Rita the characteristics she wanted in a mate. Or perhaps she handed me that slip of paper because she recognized that I went about small-dog ownership not with embarrassment, but with pride.

A Denver friend recently told me that he harbors no shame for owning a trio of Chihuahuas—his "Chihuarmy"—that adds up to a scant 20 pounds. "You get over it," he said. "You make peace, and then you resent the fact that you ever apologized for having small dogs in the first place."

I know how he feels. If people can't like a featherweight dog, they're the ones with a Cujo-size problem. In fact, the only ones who should apologize are the contemptuous canine sizeists. To these poor souls it will never occur that most every dog has four legs and bad breath and the same damn DNA—that they have no control over their height or girth, and will generally be as cool or as lame as their owners. If only they knew that at the end of the hike or the shopping trip or the barbecue or the bike ride, a dog is a dog is a dog.

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teacup, but small, like my dogs; we represent equivalent human-canine size classes.

Non-philosophically speaking, the big attraction about small dogs is that they're hilarious. You can put them on their backs and spin them, and they love it. You can carry one under each arm, pretend you're Al Pacino in the shootout scene in *Scarface*, and shout, "Say hello to my little friends!" Small dogs are less graceful, yes. But is that a bad thing? Not when they're hamming it up for a dinner-party crowd or wrestling with a 60-pound pit bull. If they get aggressive, they're usually far less dangerous than their giant

rocks in their heads; just ask my friend Pete, whose golden, Luther, chased an errant tennis ball off the cliffs atop Boulder's Mt. Sanitas, falling 20 feet and breaking his leg.)

But how can you beat the small-dog hilarity I've experienced? Like the time in 2000, while on a hike in L.A.'s Santa Monica Mountains, when Rita was discovered by a fashion photographer in search of models for a dog-clothing catalog shoot. My leggy little sidekick made a canine wedding gown look like something right off the rack of Vera Wang's studio. Later, the clothier asked Rita to stroll the catwalk

### HOW WE MET



## Moishe, 6-year-old Old English sheepdog & Martie Bombel, auto-industry consultant

"At age 49 I just couldn't cope with a puppy, so I put my name on an Old English rescue list. The dog I got was named Mikey; he had not been neutered, had been bitten by a rattlesnake, and would be put to sleep if he wasn't placed. My friend, the veterinarian and comedian Kevin Fitzgerald, who looks like a sheepdog, said, "This poor dog was wandering around, and finally a nice Jewish woman rescues him. I think we should call him Moishe," which means "wandering Jew" in Hebrew. Moishe's a great Colorado dog. Although, he doesn't like to camp. He feels his people camped for 40 years—he prefers a Holiday Inn."