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Betrayal came on four legs

I'm a dog person, but after being bitten by one, I no longer believe they're harmless

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FROM THURSDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
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Walter was a big, black bear of a dog, but when he ran into me — literally — early one May morning while I was jogging on the waterfront boardwalk near my home, he didn't make me the least bit nervous.

My first assumption was that he wanted to play. At this hour, just after sun-up, the beach seemed to belong to the four-legged set. Dogs were always bounding back and forth across the boardwalk, running through the sand and crashing into the water.

This one had to be pushing 80 pounds. A Briard; no, I thought, tapping into my spotty knowledge of dog breeds, it was a Bouvier, a herding dog originally from Flanders. He had jumped and bumped me with what I thought was a good-natured growl, but hadn't knocked me over. Maybe to him I looked like errant livestock. I stopped, intending to wait for the woman walking him to catch up. I had seen her running after the dog and could hear her calling his name, but Walter wasn't listening.

The dog, standing in front of me now, looked at me, panting. Then he growled and jumped again. Teeth met skin at my stomach, and I had the momentary sensation of being caught in a vise. Then Walter ran off again. Caught somewhere between fear and disbelief, I lifted my double-layered shirt with a shaky hand to inspect the damage.



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It was not a bad bite, but there were unmistakable puncture marks below my belly button beginning to show blood, and a nasty red welt from his nails. I started to cry. Not so much because it hurt, but more from the shock of it.

By now the woman walking Walter had given up her chase and come over to me. "Did he scratch you?" she asked.

"No, that was teeth," I said. I didn't think to ask for her address, or about rabies shots. This was my first dog bite. I didn't know the protocol. My only thought was to make sure Walter, now bounding gleefully in the distance, didn't come near me again. The woman apologized profusely and ran off after him.

After a few minutes, I gathered my wits and resumed my run, this time with a wary eye out for any dogs that came close, no longer trusting that they were harmless. I was angry too. I almost felt betrayed. I'm a dog person. I used to own three of them, two rescued from our local humane society. My current canine companion, a 12-year-old Lab mix, has been a pleasant presence in my life since I brought her home when she was 3.

I've tended to view dogs running free outside designated off-leash areas as more of a goofy nuisance than a potential danger, even though my husband is livid any time a dog gets away from its owner and starts dashing to and fro when our two small children are around.

My run-in with Walter forced my hand. It reminded me that no matter how well-trained they may be, dogs — whether through fear, malice or instinct gone awry — can sometimes act in unexpected ways. It's easy to forget that at times.

The natural instinct to fear large animals with teeth seems to have faded as dogs become increasingly important in people's lives. I live in a neighbourhood that, within a 12-block radius, boasts two doggie bakeries, a couple of doggie daycare centres, a spa for animals, plus a handful of veterinary clinics and dog groomers.

To me, the idea of putting my dog in daycare or shopping in high-end pet boutiques is just plain silly. Maybe I'm among the minority of pet owners, but I roll my eyes at the increasing popularity of expensive kibble containing "medicinal" ingredients such as shark cartilage, and I can't fathom the notion of shelling out thousands of dollars to keep my aging dog alive when walking becomes too difficult for her. She's lovely, and she's certainly a part of our family. But she is not a small person in a fur coat.

Walter came into our lives again a month after that first encounter. I had dutifully reported the bite to an animal control officer, who advised me to get the owner's information if I saw the dog again. This time, Walter went after my husband, who was jogging in the same area at the same time of day. Again, Walter was off his leash with his minder — his owner's girlfriend — in hot pursuit.

When my husband heard the name and saw the animal come at him, there was no doubt that it was the same dog. My husband managed to fend him off with a few kickboxing moves, and left with the owner's address. Walter would now have to be muzzled and leashed within the city limits — for the time being, at least.

At a hearing a few months later to determine whether Walter's freedom could be restored, he was ordered to undergo a behavioural assessment. Walter was not present, but his owner, who was clearly horrified at what his dog had done, offered to set up a meeting with Walter in a "safe" setting to help me get over my newfound nervousness around dogs.

I had a brief vision of Walter gently nuzzling my hand as the sun set behind us, but managed to shake it off before I started to laugh. I'll keep the fear, thanks. It may come in handy next time a dog runs into me while I'm jogging. Until then, I'll brush up on my kicks and sprints. They don't call it fight or flight for nothing.

Lara Mills lives in Toronto.

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