

"Gee Whiz"



by Michael Finley
(c) 2001 by Michael Finley

My poodle Beau and I are visiting the dog park behind the airport in Minneapolis. It's a huge field owned by the airport commission, and they let dog owners use it as a place where dogs can run free.

My dog is mixing it up with the other dogs. It's a warm summer night, and all the dogs are grinning broadly. I'm stopping to pat a schnauzer on the head, when a big young Rottweiler circles round me, lifts a hind leg, and urinates all over my back and pantleg.

Time stops. Several other humans stop and point mutely. One person appears to laugh nervously, but no sound comes out. I look behind me. At first I doubt the dog has hit me -- he *must* be peeing on the grass behind me.

Then I feel the warmth seeping through my shirt. I feel the looping shape of the stream, like a signature hastily scribbled on my back. To paraphrase the epitaph on Keats' grave: "Here lies one whose name was writ in urine."

My smile freezes and fades. The warm feeling turns cold. The Rottweiler gives no sign that what he has done is anything out of the ordinary, or in need of forgiving, and shambles merrily away.

I feel less merry. The collegiality that marked the intra-species gathering only a minute before has dissipated, and I cast about, looking from face to face, seeking to know whose dog did this to me.

Someone informs me the dog's name is Cain, and he is a nice enough of a dog, about two years old.

I can feel my heartbeat, which informs me I am in a low level of panic. How does one handle a situation like this? Do I get accusatory? Do I demand an apology? Do I falsely laugh it all off, as if it were water off a duck's back? Or do I tuck tail and run, home to my agitator and spin cycle?

The owner, a young man who does not look like the type who trains dogs to pee on people, squints at me, and realizes something out of the ordinary has occurred. "You dog just peed all over me," I say dubiously.

"Oh wow," he says. "I'm really sorry." What else could he say?

I get to my feet, stretch and let my soaked shirt flop against me. "I think I'm going to go home and clean up," I say.

People nod like that was probably the most sensible thing to do. Even Beau goes along with the withdrawal, despite it cutting short his evening revelries.

So I'm standing in my basement, plopping my clothes into the washer, with Beau watching from the doorway, and me wondering what I did to bring that on myself, and what lessons I might learn for the future.

And I decide that by kneeling to pay the schnauzer, I had signaled that I was not a person of consequence. A person of no great consequence was of the same order as a lilac bush or a fire hydrant. In a way, by coming down to the dogs' level, I had asked for it.

I decided thenceforward to insist on slightly greater dignity for myself and greater distance between me and dogs. To be more

animated, and less treelike. To speak frequently, and without ambiguity.

And to avoid in future insofar as possible the indelible mark of Cain.