

A WALK IN THE PARK

Or how
James Knight
bought a puppy
and unleashed
a new outlook
on life

The man I met in the park summed it up nicely: "This is therapeutic for both me and her."

It was late afternoon on a winter's day, and chilly enough to have convinced many a soul to stay cocooned in the warmth of their homes. Yet here he was, content to

**Love at first bite:
dogs and owners
make new friends
at the local park**

dawdle in the stinging air, each step a distraction from his work and life's other pressures.

A few paw prints ahead of him, Tilly, a saliva-flinging carpet of chocolate hair, darted in circles trying her best to prevent her shaggy-flag ears being swung on by her chaser. That happened to be Tango – *my* Tango: a lithe, russet-gold shimmer of sleekness with all the energy of a full party balloon let loose without a knot.

Tilly versus Tango: just one of numerous contests underway at the dog-friendly Tunks Park in Sydney, where all kinds of breeds run leash-free and their owners, just as significantly, let their minds and feet wander.



As a mate suggested, “Dogs one day, diapers the next!”

But until that day (potentially) arrives, we have become a contented family of three whose outings to the park allow Tango, Clare and me to wind up at dawn and down at dusk. Of course, we mainly do it to keep our hyperactive hound from bouncing off walls at home while announcing in her soupy-eyed way, *Come and play! Come and play now!*

On one visit to the park, a woman hurling tennis balls for her two prodigal collies told me, “Exercise is the love you give your dogs.”

And that love enriches the owners too. When Clare and I first went to

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Dogs do us the world of good. If you're in any doubt, spend a few moments at a dog park and just watch. Look: there's a young brother and sister sprinting side by side with a pirate-patched terrier; a mother waves at all who pass her as she pushes her sleeping baby in a pram while her pug, full of self-importance, runs shotgun with a stiff-legged stride. I smile at the sight of two retrievers, one always immaculate and the other swaggering along with a coat matted in mud while the man at its side shakes his head with a grin. There's the collie that proves a devil to catch as it skims over the grass looking skywards. It's hoping in that eternally optimistic dog way that the model aeroplane it's

chasing will eventually land and not be quick enough to avoid the swipe of a paw.

At my park on any given day you'll see poodles, groodies, spoodles and oodles of other canines, chasing, flopping, flouncing, bouncing and doing all else that makes them happy. And you'll see each owner musing to others in the know, “What on earth did I do before I had Angel?” (Or Millie or Stella or Alf or Luey or Lilley or Tango...)

Ah, yes: Tango. My wife, Clare, and I first saw her last November, when she was six weeks old: paws like gumboots, her body a concertina of loose skin, her little blue-eyed face a maze of wrinkles that were at their deepest when she flopped down in the sun and

“DOGS ONE DAY, DIAPERS THE NEXT”

shovelled her nose into the dirt.

“Aaaaaw!” was all Clare could say.

A month later, we collected her from the vizsla breeder and, within weeks, the first pet we've owned together had grown into a bra-munching, hole-digging, shoe-sniffing, book-eating, sleep-depriving, dinner-stealing wrecker of \$50 computer cables. But didn't we love her!

We'd decided to get a dog for a few reasons. Clare thought it might be a tonic for my depression, an illness that occasionally sends me spiralling into a hole for weeks on end. And although she said she wanted a pet simply for fun and company, too, I suspected it was also a trial run for something significantly more life-changing.

PHOTOS: KRISTIAN PORM





The energetic Tango has helped James and Clare expand their social circle

the park, we were so focused on keeping Tango from leaping out of sight or up on children, we barely took notice of other dog-walkers. But since we've gained the confidence to let Tango off her leash to explore, we've discovered dogs aren't the only packs in the park.

"It's a wonderful social activity," says Suzie, a single mum who bought a groodle (a retriever-poodle cross) to "make the family feel complete". Suzie and Biscuit, who is Tango's favourite grumble-rumble partner, often join Clare and me in an eclectic group of owner-cum-ambles who discuss anything from Ricky Ponting's captaincy to the state of the economy, country roads, or even the colour of Gabon's flag. Invitations for dinners and trivia nights are extended,

friendships are formed, and a relationship is developing. (Shhh, keep this a secret because it's early days.)

From wedding-car drivers to pilots and landscape gardeners; from those recuperating from radiotherapy to others with arthritis-riddled shoulders. There are kids, babies, teenagers, shift workers, retirees. Some of our meetings are fleeting. On other occasions, we walk together for an hour or more: two, three, four, eight people and still some; all have cheerful stories about what differences the hairy, slobbering reasons they come to the park have made to them.

Tango has certainly brightened life for Clare and me. We are spending greater time together; we are talking, smiling, laughing more. Of course our floppy-eared tornado can also annoy us beyond belief, but how can we stay angry for too long at a beautiful lady who just tries so hard to please us?

Not so long ago, I returned home after a dreadful day at work. When I opened the front door and heard the hurried ticker-ticker of claws on floorboards, I looked down to see Tango wagging her tail with enough force to strike out a set of bowling pins. In her mouth was a note I'd left earlier for my wife. It read: "Loving You."

That first man in the park was right. Therapeutic indeed. ■

Has owning a dog – or another pet – had an impact on your life or outlook? Write to editor@readersdigest.com.au or via readersdigest.com.au/contribute.