

The Danger of Pug Shows, Part II

By Kim J. Gifford

Vacation? Who has the time? I'm in the middle of disaster preparedness planning for my fall excursion, October 12-15, 2011.

Yes, there have been no disaster warnings issued by the government, not even a widespread weather advisory as yet, but the annual Pug National Specialty Shows have proven to be days of infamy for me. Readers may recall my tale of woe several years ago as I made my sojourn with five dogs and two quarreling human companions to San Antonio during Hurricane Rita.

This year's show is in Warwick, R.I. and I am planning to attend with my novice show pup, Alfie, one of those two quarrelling human companions (enjoyable company without the second), and as many veteran show pugs as she chooses to stuff into the car.

Before I hear shouts of "Drama Queen," let me state that the 2005 Texas Specialty was not an isolated incident. In 2007, I braved the journey again, this time naively embarking to Harrisburg, Penn., again with my friend, Joan, and show pugs Miska and Lumpi. The drive this time was uneventful and we arrived at the Holiday Inn in high spirits. We were so relaxed that after surveying our hotel and settling the dogs in our room, Joan and I decided we might run some errands around town.

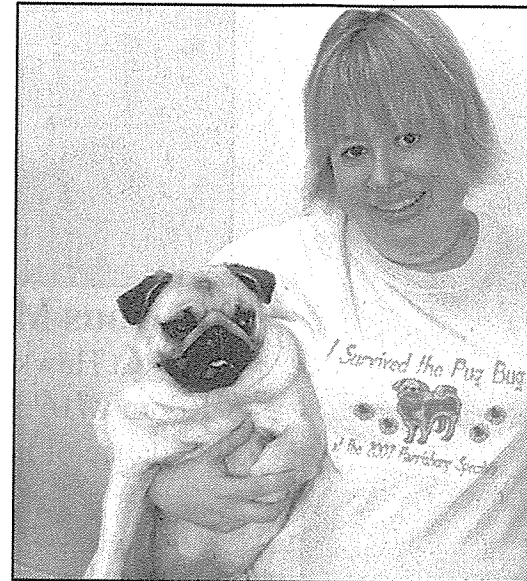
We visited a drug store, ate some fast food, and made the trek back up the hill to the hotel just as it was getting dark. No sooner had we made the turn onto the road that led to the Holiday Inn than we caught our first glimpse of flashing lights. Suddenly, two white vehicles, sirens blaring, sped past us so quickly I could barely make them out. Ambulances, I guessed, and it looked like they were headed for our hotel! We drove a little farther and then stopped at a police barricade.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to turn around, ma'am," a stern policeman told Joan.

"That's our hotel, what's going on?" she asked, nodding her heads toward the string of fire engines, police cars and ambulances that we could now see parked up ahead.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, you'll have to turn around," he reiterated.

"But our dogs are in there," I mustered. He nodded, but I saw his eyes roll, and as I watched other cars turning around I realized he had heard this all before. At least half of the hotel was filled



The author's first visit to the Pug National Specialty Shows coincided with Hurricane Rita. The second exposed her to the dreaded Pug Bug. What will the third one hold? (Provided)

with pug people and I had a feeling that he had already categorized us as "crazy."

He motioned for us to move and we complied, joining a growing group of vehicles in the parking lot at the end of the drive. People were already outside their cars talking. "The hotel's on fire," I heard one of them say.

Fire? But Lumpi and Miska were inside. I pictured the little pugs in their crates engulfed in smoke and flames. "Joan, we have to do something," I cried.

I was not alone in my opinion. Two stocky women in skirts and pumps were already climbing the steep, dirt embankment that led to the hotel. "Come on, they're going after the pugs," someone else said, scurrying to join them. Now several well-clad, middle-aged women crawled the hill like ants.

Ludicrous, you might think, but these were not mere pets trapped inside. These were show pugs worth several thousands of dollars, and even more when you considered their potential progeny. These people traveled the country in RVs, pooper-scoopers in hand just for a two-minute walk in a ring and a chance at a win. They were not going to let a disaster keep them from their prize.

I thought of joining them only to realize they were coming back down. A cop stood at the top of the hill, turning them away. Another woman stood next to him with a cell phone. "It's okay," she yelled to those below. "It's not a fire and someone inside is checking on the pugs, making sure they have water."

Not a fire? That's good, I thought until another white vehicle raced by. This time I caught a better look. It read "HAZMAT" on the side.

"They're taking out a body!" the woman yelled down. What was going on? A fleet of television vehicles had gathered in the parking lot and I played the only card I had up my sleeve.

I sauntered over to one of the cameramen and announced in a conspiratorial whisper, "I'm a journalist from Vermont, what's going on here?"

"They're under quarantine," he said. "Something biological, superbug, maybe?" he shrugged.

Thoughts of 9/11 and biological warfare came to mind...quarantine? Was I going to die? I rushed into the neighboring diner, asked for a phone and called home. "Dad, Mom, turn on the news. Are they saying anything? They quarantined our hotel, but we've been inside, do you think we're exposed?"

The news was silent. Oh no, even worse than I thought. They're keeping it under wraps; they don't want a panic.

Joan called me out to the car. "It's over," she said. "They're letting us back inside."

"What was it?" I asked. She still didn't know, but after we parked the car and walked into the building we were greeted by hotel staff who gave us a bottle of antibacterial hand sanitizer. "You're going to need this," they said.

The superbug turned out to be a highly contagious Norwalk virus that often affects people in close quarters like cruise ships and causes diarrhea, vomiting and other flu-like symptoms. The body was not a corpse, but a very dehydrated, elderly exhibitor who would survive to show another day.

Thirty-six guests contracted the illness, but Joan and I were not among them. Although our pugs earned no ribbons that year, we made it home with two t-shirts that read, "I Survived the Pug Bug at the 2007 Harrisburg Specialty."

They say the third time's a charm, but I'm preparing for anything Warwick may throw at me. Don't be surprised if you can't find any gas masks, fire extinguishers or first aid kits in Randolph over the next few months—I'm busy packing.