

Four Walls a Prison Make

By Judith LeRoy

My name is Harry. I'm a two-year-old Bearded Collie who, as a young pup, migrated from Wales, UK to Florida, USA. I suspect that every gale-filled winter night, fellow Welshmen envy my tropical climate and my proximity to Disneyworld. Considering my eventual destination, my breeder thought I needed a registered name that sounded "American," so she named me Breaksea Houdini after Harry Houdini, the American magician famous for escape tricks. I don't indulge in the noble art of escapery, though I may wander a bit. But I'd never escape. Where would I go? Or better yet, why would I go? I get food of my choosing, walks when I want them (and even in the direction I want to go!), car rides for no reason at all, and squeaky toys and treats galore. I have my owners wrapped around my front paws. It's a good life, and I see no reason to leave ... even when my older brothers give me grief. Packer is from Colorado and rather provincial, and Leo is an Englishman from Nottingham, so how much can you expect?

My Mistress says I should have been named after a circus act like the Flying Wallendas instead of Houdini because I have a penchant for high places and derring-do. You've never seen a dog sitting on the top of a refrigerator before? I'll tell you what, it really freaks the humans out. It's easy to do. Two short hops—one from the floor to the kitchen counter, another to the top of the refrigerator, and voila! You're there. The only hazard is that anything on the top of the refrigerator will get knocked off. Chances are you won't get in much trouble because the stuff is there only because your humans didn't know where else to put it and have long since forgotten about it.

The circus. Yes, I'd like to be a trapeze artist. My canine teeth would nimbly grab that flying stick ... I'd feel the breeze swishing through my luxurious freshly-washed coat as I soared through the air—wow! What a rush that would be!! Even better than the one I get while jumping over our five-foot fence into the neighbor's back yard. If I were a circus performer, people would applaud my magnificent leaps; they'd even pay to see them, and my high flying hops and bounds wouldn't get me in trouble. In my current situation, no one's charging admission, and there have been, I'll reluctantly admit, a few complaints. The neighbor lady says she's getting tired really of calling the Mistress to say, "Harry's here. Please come and get him."

It's true I leap before I look. When I was a puppy—a ten-month old puppy who should have known better—I leaped right into a trash bin. Actually, I didn't really leap, I just sort of fell in. It certainly wasn't premeditated. I was lying, full-length, on top of the sofa's backrest—a precarious perch, admittedly but, because of the sofa's location dividing the family room and the kitchen, it gave me a panoramic view of the household. Instead of admiring the view, I found myself glancing down behind the sofa. I realized, from that perch, I could see right to the very bottom of the almost four-foot high trash can that sits behind the sofa—the Mistress likes it handy when she sorts through junk mail and unwanted magazines to find what she wants to put in her recycling bin.

There, on top of a discarded Time Magazine, was an empty potato chip wrapper. Hmm. There was and is absolutely no diversion that pleases me more than licking the salt and grease from those packages. I enjoy it so much I can spend the better part of an hour on one ... slurping away until there's not a vestige, not a trace, not a hint of salt, potato, or grease left.

And there it was, that delectable wrapper, beckoning, calling to me ... delivering an unmistakable "come hither, Harry" invitation that was hard to ignore. Mmmm ... I could almost feel that wonderful sharp prick of salt on my tongue ... I could almost taste the inimitable flavor of deep-fried potato and lovely grease that would burst in my mouth after one little lick.

So, how could I get that wrapper? The physics were complicated, since the trash bin was very narrow—not much more than 18 inches across—and, as I said previously, it was very deep. Reaching the bottom would be a "sticky wicket," as Grandpop often says, which makes no sense but, I gather, suggests we're talking about something that's really hard to do.

"Just resist," I told myself, "It's probably a bad idea."

To curb my injudicious longings and divert my attention, I hopped off the sofa and wandered into the kitchen. Maybe some cool, refreshing water would take my mind off the potato chips. But the water in the bowl was murky, and there were two brown leaves and some withered blades of grass floating on its surface. Pretty yucky, even to an open-minded liquid consumer such as myself. Sure, I'll partake from the toilet bowl if someone leaves the lid up. And what beats a nice earthy slurp from a puddle in the back yard after a summer rain? Nothing truly offensive about either of those, is there? The only negatives I can see is that both will get your owners' knickers in a twist. Don't know what that means, but I heard the neighbor say it, and then everybody laughed.

Back to the water bowl. I don't like alien objects in my water bowl. A guy needs some standards. Admittedly, I probably wasn't an innocent bystander in the befouling of the water bowl, because I distinctly recall an hour ago, after an exhilarating dig on a fearsome hole in the backyard, I really needed a drink. I must have shed some debris from my muzzle into the water bowl. Apparently, Mistress hadn't gotten around to dumping and refilling, and it was currently an unappetizing mess. I left with unquenched thirst.

What with a dry mouth and unfulfilled longing for a salty potato chip wrapper, I REALLY needed a diversion. Packer was outside, sleeping under his favorite lilac bush, and he'd be really cranky if I woke him. I sauntered past my other brother, Leo, who was napping in the family room and casually stepped on his tail to see if I could rouse him. When he grumpily opened one eye, I suggested a race to the dog door to see who could get out first. He grumbled, closed his eyes even tighter and told me to go chew my paw. I

guessed that was a no, so I moseyed into the study to see what was happening with the humans in there.

The answer: nothing. My Mistress was at her computer and didn't even look at my stuffed frog when I dropped it on her foot. And my Master was at his, frowning darkly at what he called a computer program "bug," but I saw no sign of webs, wings, or antenna to prove it. I didn't even try the frog on him. He'd probably complain, being in bad humor and all. Isn't it amazing how those computing machines can cause your humans unspeakable frustration and anguish? I know it's possible to turn them off, I've seen humans do it. Seems to me they'd be a happier species altogether if they never turned them on in the morning.

But no one's asking me. I looked at both my humans and thought to myself, "No fun, here."

I trotted back to the family room, got on the sofa, and leaned over its backrest. Sure enough, that potato chip wrapper was still there, and now it was really talking to me. "Hi, Harry. Where've you been? Don't you want a little lick of my salty, buttery, potatoey flavor? Come and get me, Harry!" I licked my lips and considered responding, but a reasonable, rational dog does NOT carry on a conversation with a potato chip wrapper.

I lowered my head over the trash can, straining for another potent whiff of potato and grease. Aah! Wouldn't you know it?? It was my absolute favorite flavor. I breathed deeper and leaned a little further. A little bit closer and I'd catch the vinegary overtones that are so wisely added to this particular flavor of chip. I put my paws over the sofa backrest, got my shoulders above the bin, and I inhaled again. Oh, my. Ecstasy! Yes. The piercing aroma of vinegar tickled my nostrils. Leo hates vinegar—won't come near the stuff—but I like it in moderation, especially on salty, greasy potato chips. Oh, yum!! I leaned a little closer and the wrapper's pungent aroma zoomed right past "simply tantalizing" to absolutely "gotta have it!" I reached my right front paw into the trash bin to see just how close it might get ... I stretched and stretched ... and whoops! I started slipping.

Once gravity took hold, I slid right down into the trash bin— front paws, head, and shoulders first. It felt even deeper than it looked! The potato chip wrapper was now within muzzle range, but I had a serious problem. The narrowness of the trash bin held me in a perfect handstand. My rear legs were sticking straight up, my white rear toes protruded from the top of the trash bin, and there wasn't enough room for me to lower them, get turned around and hop out.

Hmm. A dilemma. I pondered possible solutions, but with all the blood rushing to my head, it was hard to sort one thought from another. I wobbled back and forth, right paw to left paw, trying to rock my enclosure enough to topple it. Then I could easily back out and escape with potato chip wrapper grasped between my jaws. But the trash bin was weighted on the bottom to prevent that exact sort of topple. Did the trash bin producers have no foresight? Didn't they realize a hapless creature could get trapped inside? Well,

maybe not. How many hapless creatures waltzing around the confines of the average American home are likely to fall in a trash bin? Even with my brain in an altered state from the surplus blood supply, I couldn't in good conscience blame my predicament on the trash bin's manufacturers.

My scritchng and scratching inside the bin must have interrupted Leo's nap. I heard the pitter-pat of dog nails moving toward me. The pawsteps stopped. Obviously, he'd come to investigate.

"Dumb-ass, is what I call a stunt like that."

Yeah, that's Leo all right.

"What do you think—what *did* you think—you were doing?"

I didn't want to share the salty wrapper, so I had to fib. "I thought I saw one of your tennis balls inside the trash can, and I was trying to get it out for you." Leo loves his tennis balls. Indeed, he loves them so much that I am never allowed to touch them.

"Naw," said Leo. "I was sleeping on all four of them, so I know there's none in the trash can." Leo often keeps his precious belongings away from me by hiding them under his brown hairy body. He could sleep on a bed of nails and not notice any puncture wounds. And he would, too, if that would deprive me of something I really wanted.

"Just help me out, OK?"

"What do you suggest, Einstein? I haven't any thumbs, remember?"

"Well, can you jump on the side of the can and knock it over?"

"And why should I help you out of the ridiculous situation that you foolishly got yourself into?"

I had no polite answer to that question. Anyway, arguing with the only help in sight was probably ill-advised. I certainly shouldn't antagonize him, or my near future would be spent upside down in a plastic trash can. I hadn't a clue how he could help me out of my predicament, and I knew that if he did, I'd never hear the end of it. But I needed help. Anybody's help. And Leo was the closest anybody at the moment. How should I handle this? Take the high road, Harry, my wiser self-advised. "Explain the situation, tell him what you were after and offer to share the wrapper." My devious self said, "Bribery, maybe?" I decided to go with the latter.

"Leo, how about I give you my large bedtime Milk-Bone tonight if you knock over the trash can so I can get out?"

“Add your two little before-breakfast Milk-Bones tomorrow morning, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

All that for a stale potato chip package? But had I any other options?? None that I could think of, so I reluctantly agreed to his exorbitant terms and Leo grudgingly obliged. Or perhaps we should say he tried to oblige. But the seemingly simple activity of knocking over a trash can was harder than one might imagine. I find this really strange, because I’ve seen what a modest-sized raccoon can do to the big garbage bins that naïve humans put out the night before the refuse guys are scheduled to empty them. Maybe the raccoons just have a better technique than Leo? Granted, they’ve had more experience. Or perhaps the know-how just comes with their genes? Whatever the case, Leo, despite his not-insubstantial weight, couldn’t do more than move the bin, me in it, an inch or two away from the sofa.

“C’mon Leo, try it again. Really jump at it! Knock it down,” I encouraged. I was, frankly, desperate. I was beginning to understand the word “claustrophobic.” This was way worse than being in a crate—and I hate crates. At least in a crate, you’re on all fours.

I heard Leo’s feet, backing up. He was obviously getting a running start. I heard a grunt as he launched himself, left the ground, then I heard a loud crash. Silence.

“What’s happening out there, Leo?”

“You and your stupid-ass ideas,” he muttered. “I jumped too high and knocked the blasted lamp off the sofa table. And the table fell over, too. And what’s more, the god-dang lamp cord got snarled in my tail hair and I can’t get the damned thing loose!” I heard a moribundly slow tapping of dog’s nails on wood flooring and a dragging sound—must be the lamp following Leo as he skulked out of the room—sneaking away from the scene of the crime. Leo always tries to leave trouble before anyone finds it. I think his effort will prove futile in this instance, though. Like no one is going to notice a missing lamp, an overturned table, and a dog in the trash can???

What if they didn’t?

Then I was in here forever. That thought left me truly morose. Would my Mistress realize I was missing when it was time to feed me? At bedtime, how could I sleep standing on my front paws like this? Come to think of it, my front paws were getting numb. Dogs aren’t meant to stand on two legs, especially their two front ones. I eased myself down a bit, so I was resting on my forelegs and elbows, and that added a nasty crick-in-the-back to my discomfort. I was sort of L-shaped. Dogs aren’t supposed to be L-shaped.

What was I going to do???

I heard a noise in the adjoining room. I heard the refrigerator door open and close, and I heard the heavy tread of male human feet. My Master was in the kitchen. Was help

at hand? I whined. My whine has a nasty falsetto quality, so I try not to do it often. But if ever there were a whining time—this would be it.

“Harry?” a deep voice questioned. I whined again, this one ending in a distinct “woo-woo-woo.” Plaintive, you might say. “Harry?” the voice asked again. “Where are you, Harry?”

“I’m stuck in the damned trash bin!” I howled, but the human brain can’t translate dog-talk. I heard my Master’s footsteps moving in random patterns around the house. From kitchen to hall, to the living room, to the study. Up the stairs went the footfalls, then I heard them overhead. Dear, God, now I can’t even feel my feet. Any of them. All my blood is in my head and its blotting out rational thought. Oh, help!

After what seemed an interminable lapse of time, the footsteps came toward me, so I resumed full-throated singing. All I could see was the bottom of the trash can, but I assumed the Master was nearby because I couldn’t hear footsteps from any other part of the house. Then his voice boomed above me, echoing around the four walls of my prison, “Harry, how in Hades did you get yourself in a pickle like this? Judy! Judy!” He bellowed my Mistress’s name. “Get in here quick and see where Harry is!”

Oh, thanks a lot! And what does he mean, “get in here quick?” He thinks I might flee the scene if she doesn’t hurry to see the fruits of my misdeed? What misdeed? I hadn’t even done one yet. And if there were any danger of my quickly extricating myself and bolting the scene, wouldn’t I have done it already?

“Get me out of here!” I barked angrily, but the echo of my own voice nearly deafened me. I heard more footsteps, running this time. Obviously, it was Judy, hustling in to enjoy the entertainment. Loopy Harry, a dog so stupid he got stuck in a trash can?

Someone finally tipped my prison on its side, and I scrambled to my feet. I clutched the potato chip wrapper in my jaws because after this humiliation, I really needed some salt and vinegar solace. I gingerly backed out of the trash can on tingling feet and looked up into two idiotically grinning human faces. Yes, they were amused.

I hustled away with my potato chip wrapper while they were still in good humor.

I needed to be out of scolding range before they found Leo with the lamp cord tied around his tail. He’d blame me, for sure ...

Author's note: Yes, this really, truly happened to Harry. We had a photograph, but after we showed it to a few dozen people, "just for laughs," it disappeared. I think Harry ate it, but I have no proof.