

What's in a Name?

By Judith LeRoy

I've had a very trying day. As I lie here in my little bed in my ex-pen in the dark of a winter's night, I ponder what the heck has happened to me. Scenes, visions—the characters that peopled my recent life—swirl through my overloaded small brain. Good God Almighty, I hope tomorrow brings some sanity and order to my pathetic existence. I am one confused puppy, and I probably couldn't survive another day like today.

Who am I? Why am I here? I don't know.

One thing I do know—I know I'm a dog. No, if you want absolute accuracy, I know I'm a puppy. I seem to be something called a Bearded Collie, though it could be Rearded Solly, if the truth be known. I only heard it once, listening to people talking on a telephone, and I wasn't really focused on the conversation. I was wondering how humans got their whole bodies in those little telephone gadgets. And why would they want to, anyway??

I'm sorry. I'm usually not this incoherent, but I recently moved to a new home “across the pond” as they say, and it's got my thoughts twaddled. (Or is the expression “my brain addled”??)

My old life in Wales, UK was simple. My Dog Mother fed me and my siblings and then she cleaned us. After a while, our Human Mother took over and fed and cleaned us. Different food, different methods of cleaning, but otherwise same-o, same-o. Afterward, we all played and then we slept. We all had the same name. “Puppy.” Now, how simple is that?

Since it rained, drizzled, sleeted, or hailed every day since my birth in late September, we couldn't go outside very much. When we did, I'd just get interested in some tempting smell in the garden and suddenly another cloud would roll over and wet stuff would come pelting from the sky. The wind would increase to gale force and our Human Mother would come bustling out of the house. She'd grab us one by one, towel us off, and put us back in that wire enclosure in the den that she called an exercise-pen.

The inclement weather meant we spent lots of time in that ex-pen, and we got so that we really loved it. It was home. It had food, toys, and companionship only a tail away. Newspapers lined the floor of our little home. Those newspapers were great recreation. You could chew them up, shred them, dig them into piles or poop on them. Nobody complained. They'd just exchange the newspapers for fresh ones when they got worn out or poopy, and the cycle would begin again.

Here in my new home, things are more complicated. I only live in an ex-pen at night, and when I'm in it, I'm all alone ... just me. No brothers to bite my ears, no sisters to sit on me. Oh, I've got stuffed toys, a soft little bed, a rawhide or two, and my ex-pen is parked right next to My Human's bed—but, still, I'm lonesome. My new older brothers, Leo and Packer, don't do ex-pen time. They're Wearded Follie dogs like me, so you'd think we'd have things in common. But every night after we eat our Good-night Cookie Bones, I invite Leo to help me play with the newspapers in my ex-pen, and he refuses. He shakes his head emphatically and says, “No way, José!” I wonder who this José character is, anyhow? Could it be me? There's so much I don't know. Who am I?

I could be “Good Dog” (or, conversely, “Bad Dog”), “Sweet-thing,” “Puppy-cakes,” “Hurry-up,” or a host of other things. Leo says my real name is “Stupid,” but since nobody else calls me that, it’s probably not true. In the past couple weeks since we became roommates, Leo has told me a bunch of things I know to be absolute fabrications. He says he can wiggle his teeth and that he’s half cat, but I haven’t seen any wiggles and I sure as heck haven’t heard any meows. “Liar, liar, Pants on Fire,” is Leo’s real name, I think.

The people I live with are nice people. Really nice people. But they are so, so strange. For one thing, they talk funny ... sometimes I need sub-titles to understand them. They don’t seem to understand what I say, either. I don’t think they know a jumper from a crisp.

But the language barrier doesn’t explain their weird fixation on puppy excrement—they are just plain obsessed with it! Now how crazy is that? “No, no! Puppies poop outside!” they’ll yell as I circle and squat. Then they grab me around my middle and run outside and put me down on the grass, depositing my still-warm, smelly small pile beside me. They point at it and say, “Good dog! Poop outside.”

I ask you: is there something strange about this scenario?

There are times I positively long for my newspaper. Just give me a newspaper, and I’ll poop on it. Then they can carry it outside, put it in the mailbox or stick it in the refrigerator for all I care. Just stop bothering me! I’ve got too many other things to worry about to be continually pestered by the where-and-why of puppy poop.

What do I have to worry about? Lots of things. What on earth am I doing here? What are the rules in this strange land? Sometimes I feel like I’ve been deported to an alien planet. The only thing that keeps me going is that, every now and then, there’s a faint ray of hope.

For example, I’ve discovered that “No” means stop whatever I’m doing, pronto. (Pronto is a word I’ve learned from Leo. He says it means ASAP—although what ASAP means I haven’t a clue.) But every now and then I catch the word “No” in time to curry favor. Then I’m a “Good Dog!” (Or is it a Good Log?)

So, I’m beginning to “get a handle” (as Leo says) on a few things. I have a mild suspicion that when they say the word, “Harry,” it may apply to me. Overhearing human discussions, I know that my name with the Great Kennel Club on High (you know, the one on Clarges Street in London) is Houdini. I needed a “magic” name because my mother has one. Magic name, I mean.

Since the only skill I’ve demonstrated so far is disappearing and reappearing in strange places, everyone thought Houdini was a natural for me.

But you can’t call a dog “Houdini,” can you? My new owners thought not. I suspect they’d feel embarrassed standing on the back porch, bellowing, “Houdini, stop that racket!” So, in the past two weeks I’ve been “Hugh” (“a solid Welsh name”); and “Huey” (one of Donald Duck’s nephews according to Leo ... though God only knows why anyone would name me after a duck!). I’ve been “Hermes,” after the Greek God of thieves and messengers. (I come by the thievery honestly—my dad, on Christmas Eve and again on New Years’ Day, stole cooling hams from the kitchen counter in Wales. That’s a pretty high standard for a son to live up to.) But “Hermes” might be a bit lofty for a disheveled brown puppy like me, and “Zeus” also seemed inappropriate. What with his Thunderbolt and all, he was a pretty scary character, and there’s

absolutely nothing ominous about me. “Hamish” (Scottish) and “Finn” (Celtic) were tried, as was “Howie” and “Toby” (no reason, just “cute.”)

Leo says the current suggestion, “Harry,” is a no-brainer. Why? Because (duh!) that’s the magician Houdini’s first name. But My Humans may rue the day they named me Harry Houdini. To be named after the world’s greatest magician ... the human who could vanish from any inconvenient spot in which he found himself? It might mean that when my legs get a bit longer (and I can get a running start) the garden wall will be of no great inconvenience.

But is “Harry” final? I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I seem to be terminally confused.

I’m relieved to say that I’m not the only confused being in this household. The other Searded Rollie dogs appeared equally befuddled by my sudden appearance. Leo stared at me regretfully. “When the vet said I needed a pet, I thought a cat or a ferret would be perfect. Or a white bunny rabbit with pink ears,” Leo looked querulously at my bedraggled brown ones. “And I found a baby skunk once who would have been a perfect companion.”

Packer just glared at me and said, “Oh God, another puppy. Just what I don’t need at a time in my life when I’m pondering retirement in a nice little villa in the south of France.”

At which Leo snorted and said, 1) Packer has an over-active imagination or is hallucinating, 2) Packer is talking grandiosely because he likes to impress naïve, stupid creatures like me and, 3) Packer wouldn’t go to Southern France even if he could because he hates flying. Then Leo made some gagging sounds he claimed came from the bowels of Packer’s crate when the two flew from Chicago to Orlando. Yuck!

At this point in any Packer-Leo argument, Packer regally stomps off to the bedroom, leaps on the new king-sized bed bought primarily to accommodate him on chilly winter nights, and glares at Leo, daring him to jump up and disturb him. Me, I couldn’t manage the jump even if I had wings. And I’d need a parachute so that when Packer shoved me off the bed, I wouldn’t break my neck.

I try to be tactful at moments like these. I can’t afford to get involved in any ritual canine skirmishes. For one thing, both Packer and Leo outweigh me by a couple stone and for another, since I got to the U.S. my teeth have been dropping like acorns from an oak tree in a windstorm ... thus, I have absolutely no means of self-defense. I’m really worried about my failing teeth. I wonder if it’s something in the water? How will I eat my kibble if I lose all my teeth?

Leo wasn’t very sympathetic when I mentioned this worry. “Poop happens,” he said philosophically. “Maybe you’ll grow more teeth.” Then he added, with a hoot, “But if you don’t and you’re toothless, your Welsh-accent will sound pretty stupid. You’ll probably say ‘Wieuff, Wieuff,’ instead of ‘Ruff, Ruff.’”

Eieuuu! That’s like one of those silly Bitchin’ Frizzbees that lived next door in Wales. Whenever I saw them, they looked like drowned rats and smelled like mold and mildew. And yapping. Always yapping. ‘Wieuff, Wieuff, Wieuff!’ When I told Packer about them, he almost rolled off the king-size bed laughing. “You mean Bichon Frise, Squirt?” And he laughed some more.

Squirt? Is that another new name I might have to worry about? Argh!!!

I don't get any respect from the dogs in this house, and there aren't any other creatures with whom to commiserate. The goldfish don't talk. They keep opening and closing their mouths when I look at them in their bowl, but I can't hear a word they're saying. I surmised that maybe the water they were swimming in prevented us from communicating, so I put a paw into the bowl to help one onto the table top, but my new Human Mother got very excited and said many "No!"s.

Leo giggled and said, "She had a cow, didn't she?" But that isn't very logical. There's certainly not room in my ex-pen for a cow. Not even a little one.

I spend a lot of time in the garden while My Humans wait for me to poop on the ground, and I do see some other creatures out there. So far, they're not very impressive. Rather crude, most of them—although Packer says my British sensitivities are easily offended. I try to tell him I'm not British, I'm Welsh, but he won't listen. Neither will the squirrels.

The squirrels run aimlessly up and down the fence. They chatter, scold, and swear at me from high up in the live oak tree. "Hey there, fuzzy butt! Whatcha lookin' at, stupid? Go chase your #*%*# tail. Na-na, na-na boo, boo—can't catch us up here, can you, dog-face??"

Crude, wouldn't you say? Why would I want to associate with foul-mouthed creatures like them?

About the only real friend I have is a toad. He usually sits under the live oak tree, looking like a rock. The day we met, I wouldn't have noticed him, if it weren't for a long tongue that streaked past me as I nosed the ivy growing under the oak tree. The tongue scared the bejesus out of me (another Leo colloquialism). That tongue was as long as my tail! And since the toad's fly-catching aim wasn't very good—or maybe my unexpected presence startled him and spoiled it—the sticky tongue got caught in my ear hair and we were tangled for several seconds.

"Yike, yike, yike," I screamed and wriggled, and the toad yelled something like "Glunk, glunk, glunk. You're gonna de-tongue me, you mangy pup, if you don't stop squirming."

We were only stuck together a short while, but it was long enough to develop a mutual feeling that we had something in common. A bond, you might say. So, whenever I get shoved outside (hopefully to poop), My Human overseer sits on a lawn chair and reads a magazine and Toad and I converse a bit. About the weather, about the size of flies this year compared to last year, about the verbally abusive squirrels.

This afternoon, after I trotted over for our visit, Toad said it was time "to level" with me (which sounded like another Leo-ism to me). Toad confided that he was really in disguise, and he needed someone to kiss him so he could regain his true identity. As I've said, this is really a strange, strange place. And it's full of strange, strange characters. So, for all I knew, he could have been telling the truth.

"Someone kisses you? Then what?" I innocently asked.

"Then I'll turn into a Prince! I can leave this bug-infested garden where I compete with those damn lizards for the food supply. I can give up those nasty-tasting flies and skinny mosquitoes!! I can eat steak and drink champagne and listen to Beethoven whenever I want,

rather than when the old guy next door turns up his stereo because his hearing aid batteries have failed again."

"But who kisses you?" I inquired, thoroughly intrigued by the concept.

"Don't know." Toad looked downcast. Or at least I thought he looked downcast. It's hard to read emotions on a toad's face. "I only heard about this kiss-thing as I hopped past the library yesterday. But I distinctly heard 'toad,' 'kiss,' and 'prince' when a volunteer read a Fairy Tale book to a bunch of kids. And if you hear it at the library, it's got to be true."

"Who kisses you?" I persisted.

"Could be anybody," said Toadie. "Could even be you. Wanna' pucker up and give it a try?" he asked hopefully.

Kiss a toad?? There's nothing less appetizing I can think of than kissing a toad. But he's my only friend, and I didn't want to offend him.

"I think My Human is calling me," I equivocated. "I'd better go." But My Human was parked exactly where I left her, probably reading about global warming and Chelsea Clinton.

"Your human is busy," said Toad. "Besides, if you bother her, all she'll do is to tell you to poop." I've told him about my poop-woes, and he's heard the many poop urgings from My Humans' mouths firsthand. "C'mon," he urged. "Give a friend a kiss."

Yuck! But I puckered up.

Did anyone ever tell you that kissing a toad is a real slimy experience? The smell of swamp abused my sensitive nostrils and my kiss was more of a gasp than a smack.

I looked at Toad. Toad looked down at his webbed feet. Nothing happened. Well, something happened.

"Harry!" My Human bellowed. "Leave that toad alone. Toads are poisonous!"

"Slander!" shouted Toadie. He puffed up his chest and took a giant hop off his rock in My Human's direction to continue the defense of his character. "You, Madam, are mistaking me for an immigrant Cuban Buffo toad. I am a plain native-American garden variety toad, and I'm completely harmless!"

"Eeek!" She screamed to no one in particular. "There's a giant toad in the yard, and he's attacking! He's probably rabid."

"Toads don't get rabies!" countered Toad. "And who ever heard of an attack toad??" He was incensed by her anti-toad, political incorrectness. "I'm far less toxic than you are, you insensitive, uninformed, two-legged mammal, you!!" He took another hop in her direction.

Leo and Packer, hearing the commotion, came dashing out the dog door, expecting, no doubt, to see Mistress and me being savaged by the belligerent neighborhood squirrels. Packer stopped short, realizing his hopes for mayhem were unfounded. Nothing but a toad? He rolled his eyes and wandered inside, but Leo sat down to enjoy the action, however sparse it might be.

Toad, recognizing that discretion is the better part of valor, retreated.

My Human took one look at my slimy muzzle, muttered some incoherent thing about toad toxin, and grabbed me. She rushed us inside and down the hall to the nearest bathroom as Leo raced behind us, barking deliriously—Leo loves turmoil. My Mistress dumped me in the bathtub, and before I knew it, my mouth was being washed out with warm water and a fulsome measure of ugly anti-bacterial soap. Yuck! Oh Yuck! It tasted dreadful!! Help! I squirmed and writhed, and soon she was wetter than I was. Leo, with his nosy face as close as it could get to the bathtub, slipped, and fell on the water-slicked tile floor, ending up almost as wet as Mistress and me.

Mistress looked at my soap-sudsy muzzle and said, anxiously, “Oh, my God, is he frothing at the mouth?” I tried to explain it was only the gosh-darned soap, but any attempt at communication merely resulted in more bubbles from me and, thus, increased agitation from her. Packer got off the couch and trotted into the hallway to observe the drama, maintaining a safe distance. Despite my frantic state, I heard Packer’s snorts and guffaws.

Luckily, saner minds prevailed. Daughter-of-the-household, younger but wiser, peered into the bathroom and saw the tumult. She shook her head. “Mom. Mom!” She struggled to be heard over the sounds of splashing water. She tried to get Mom’s attention, but Mom was pretty distracted.

Daughter carefully maneuvered past the sprawled Leo, who was having trouble regaining his footing, precarious because of the soapy water flooding the bathroom floor. “There are no poison toads in this part of the country.” Daughter raised her voice. “Did you hear me? There are no poison toads within a thousand miles of here!! You’re thinking of Buffo toads. They don’t live this far north.”

I swallowed some detergent-induced bubbles and tried to appear rational, hoping that my Mistress would follow suit and listen to her daughter.

My Mistress looked dubious. Then she looked embarrassed. Then she got indignant. “In the future, young man,” she grabbed my muzzle and looked directly into my eyes, “do not ever, ever again put your tongue on a toad. Got that??”

“Young man?” Is that another new name, I wondered as she dried me off.

She took off her wet clothes and flung a bath towel over Leo, who had just left the bathroom and reached dry land. He glared at me over his shoulder and muttered, “See if I help you out of your stupid messes in the future.” I didn’t remind him he had been no darned help whatsoever, because I was focused on leaving the scene, too, hopefully escaping more derision from Packer and further remonstrations from my Mistress, who was still sopping up water on the bathroom floor.

Packer took pity. He just rolled his eyes again. And Leo, perhaps remembering some of his own puppy scrapes in years’ past, was willing to forget and forgive. He wanted to discuss the incident, though.

“What were you thinking, Dude?” he remonstrated.

So, I told him the whole sad story ... the library, the toad, the kiss, the prince.

Leo nodded sagaciously. "It only works if it's a frog. I've heard that Fairy Tale before, and I know it's got to be a frog. Your Toad has a case of mistaken identity."

Seems there's a lot of that going around these days.

So here I am ... Harry, aka José, Stupid, Squirt, Young Man, Whatever. Sitting in my ex-pen in the dark. Ruminating about what I know for sure. I'm a puppy. A Quearded Mollie puppy. Tomorrow I should poop outside, and I will never talk to that stupid toad again. I'm going to avoid frogs, and I'll stay away from princes, too, just to be on the safe side. You never know, they may revert to a previous life-form, and there comes that old frog-toad conundrum all over again.

Good grief and good night. I pray that tomorrow will be a better day. If it's not, I may have to turn in my green card and find a tramp steamer back to Wales, where I hope my ex-pen is still standing and the weather still inclement.