

Bobby and Max

By Judith LeRoy

My name is Bobby. Bobby the Bearded Collie. Sounds like something from a children's book written by a novice author, doesn't it? Why Bobby? Before my Mistress acquired me, a puppy from the UK, she learned a bit—I should say *very wee* bit—about the Bearded Collie's Scottish ancestry. Then she named me for the poet, Robert Burns. But the truth of the matter: I was born in North Wales ... had she really been true to my ancestry, I would be named Dafydd, Owain, or Madoc. I've even heard of a Welsh Beardie named Ddraig Goch which, I was told, is Red Dragon in Welsh. So, I guess it could be worse. I'd really be regretful if she had stumbled on Sir Walter Scott before she got to Bobby Burns and named me Ivanhoe. One of my littermates lives with people just as whimsical as mine, and he got named Riley. You know, because Ireland is close to Scotland on the map, and Riley "sounds sort of Celtic."

Mom and Dad met Riley's Mistress and Master at my breeder's house in the UK when they arrived the same day to collect their puppies. I don't know how Riley got to his new home, but I got stuck in a big old box with a wire door, and I got carried out of my breeder's house to a waiting black cab that took us to the airport. My box had a lot of newspapers on the bottom—which I appreciated. I love to shred newspapers. Before, I always had to share the shredding fun with my littermates, but these newspapers were all mine and I couldn't wait to dig in. So, the box was entertaining, and it was also comfortable. It was big enough for me to roll over and stand up, and I could look out the door to see all kinds of interesting things I'd never seen before. I had no complaints. And I had my bossy sister Leia's blue fuzzy dolly along to keep me company, so I wasn't lonesome. I'd snatched dolly when I left my breeder's house and hidden her under the newspapers. I was amazed that my subterfuge worked, and I felt deliciously naughty about it. I've always loved blue dolly, but Leia would never share. Now I've got blue dolly, and I hope Leia misses her a lot.

The box, blue dolly, and I arrived in a very noisy place with lots of people, all scurrying around, hauling suitcases and queuing up in endless lines that seemed to go nowhere. My new owners, Mom and Dad, gave me a drink of water, and then some nice people talked to me and carried me and my box to a very dark place that also was very noisy. I was tired, though, so I snuggled up in the shredded newspaper, which made a very cozy nest, and blue dolly and I slept.

I was in that big box a long time. Eventually, the door opened, and blue dolly and I got out of the box in a whole new land. I don't know how blue dolly felt about it, but I was seriously concerned because I couldn't understand a word people were saying. Nothing. Nada. I could tell my new people liked me ... at least I thought they liked me. They petted me, they scratched me, they fed me, they talked to me. That first week I listened carefully for words I knew like "tea" and "biscuits" but heard nothing that remotely resembled them. My new owner, Mom, told someone that I was a Rearded Bollie. What the heck is a Rearded Bollie? I thought I was a dog. I also heard that I now lived in a place called Pissagan.

As time went by, I became better at interpreting the language. I now know I'm a Bearded Collie dog who lives in Michigan, but I was very confused until I caught on to the unfamiliar

lingo. (Lingo is an American word for ... well, something.) Eventually, I adjusted. I learned that my new owners were kind, loving, and easy to manipulate—a very good quality in a Bearded Collie owner. They fed me well, petted me a lot, and groomed me before I needed it. Dad took me on long rambling walks every evening, and he told me about his day—office gossip, the price of gasoline (petrol), what's for dinner ... you know, guy talk.

When Riley's Mistress and my Mom met at our breeder's house in the UK, they promised to exchange emails and send pictures of their brown Beardie brothers. So, once a fortnight (every two weeks in Americanese), Mom gets an email from Sylvia and Riley. Mom smiles, giggles, laughs out loud, and, eventually, she reads it to me. Mom loves to get those emails and she spends a lot of time sending emails back to Riley's folks. I know that for a fact, because she's always taking photos of me with her cell phone "for Riley." I doubt Riley gives a hoot, though—Lord knows, I don't choose to spend my leisure moments looking at a flat dog on a computer screen and I don't think Riley does either. Now if the photos came with dog scent or sounds—it might be different. I will admit, though, that I worry about what Mom is telling Sylvia. I hope she doesn't exaggerate the stories about my mistakes and misdeeds the way she sometimes does with Dad when he comes home from work and asks about our day. After all, Riley's people are almost total strangers to us, and every family is entitled to its secrets.

Every now and then, a particularly relevant message comes our way. The most pertinent one so far was one that arrived in December when Sylvia told Mom she was getting my brother a cat for Christmas. She said it was to keep "Riley-Bear" company so he didn't get lonely when she volunteered at the animal rescue shelter a few afternoons each week—just like Mom does here in Michigan. A live cat? For Riley? As a Christmas present?? Poor Riley. That's a really pathetic Christmas gift, and I felt very sorry for him.

"Isn't that a great idea?" Mom enthused over Saturday breakfast when she told Dad about the email and Riley's Christmas cat. Dad, reading the sports section of the daily paper, wisely took preemptive action and replied, "Umff. Wouldn't work here. I'm allergic to cats. Remember how I broke out in a rash when we visited your sister last March?" Mom and I both doubted it was her sister's cat who caused the rash, but I wasn't about to say so. I was very relieved about Dad's no-cat sentiment, and I needed to support him. Mom finished buttering her toast and looked disappointed. Whew! A close call, to my way of thinking.

Christmas came and went. I got a new blue fuzzy doll, but I liked my old one better. We've been through a lot together and stealing her was the most audacious thing I've ever done. I guess you could call her a trophy toy or something. I also got a new collar, a tennis ball that squeaks—well it used to squeak—a big Nylabone, and a new bed. And, thank God, no cat.

After New Year's Day, we got another email from Sylvia. "Listen to your brother's exploits," Mom chuckled. Exploits? The email made me shudder. Nothing but Trouble, which happens to be the name of Riley's new cat. Poor Riley was obviously going through hell. I can only imagine.

End of story, right? Well, not quite, though it took a while for the other shoe to drop. (I know, it's an American saying that's pretty bizarre, but I've always had a predilection for shoes,

so I like to quote it. I love their wonderful leathery smell and removable tongues. And sometimes they have shoelaces that are as much fun to chew as bra straps.)

Anyway, one day in early March Mom came home from an animal shelter volunteer meeting disgustingly cheerful. She chirped and pattered around the kitchen—usually she just collapses on the sofa when she gets home or walks into the study to fool with her computer. But not today. She was full of vim and vigor, and she bustled around the kitchen, “neatening things up,” in her words. I’d been hanging out in the kitchen, bemused by her aberrant behavior but hoping to cadge a tidbit of cheddar cheese—I’m an absolute cheese hound, and I always arrange to be near the refrigerator when someone’s in the kitchen—just in case, mind you. Then she took me by complete surprise, abruptly sitting on the floor next to me ... very out of character for her. She leaned toward me, scratched my ears, and kissed my nose—softening me up for the kill? What kill? I pondered possible unpleasant surprises that might be lurking in my future.

“Oh, Bobby-Boy, wait ‘til you see what I’ve got for you!” she beamed. Alarm bells went off in my canine brain. I had a very bad feeling about this surprise, given Mom’s weird behavior. I’d bet blue dolly I wasn’t going to like whatever it was. Fact of the matter, I’d probably hate it. I fervently hoped to be proven wrong, but I knew that was probably futile.

And it was.

Two days later, Mom hustled into the house after her stint at the shelter. “Got your surprise, Bobby! Come see it!!” She put down her purse, trotted back to the car and returned with my old airplane crate—the box in which blue dolly and I had flown from the UK to Michigan. She maneuvered it through the doorway, through the living room, through the dining room, and into the kitchen. Huh! I knew I should be wary, but I’m a complete sucker when my curiosity gets aroused. Curiosity, according to legend, kills cats, but I’ve never heard that it harms dogs so, gullible me, I followed Mom right down the proverbial garden path.

The crate was on the floor. I peeked through the wire door and, from the depths of the crate, there was a vicious, deep-throated growl that would have done a tiger proud. I stepped back, ready to retreat. But a self-respecting dog should stick around to protect his mistress, right? Mom leaned over and opened the crate door.

Out staggered the ugliest creature I have ever laid eyes on. He was less than a foot tall and hadn’t any hair that I could detect. His huge eyes bulged. One ear flopped over his left eye; the other ear stood straight up—seemingly taller than he was. His feet were coin-sized, and each pointed in a different direction. His teeth protruded in about as many directions as his feet.

“This is Max!!” Mom told me. “He’s a Chihuahua! Chihuahuas come from Mexico,” she added.

A Who Wah-wah? Well, I’ll tell you what. Whatever he was, he smelled like dog poop mixed with a little vomit. Mom explained, “Max had some problems on the way home, didn’t you, Max?”

No shit, Red Ryder. It would take a quart of dog shampoo and a hearty dose of Dad's aftershave lotion to fix Max's problems.

Max wobbled over, stood beside me and looked up. Way up. He tried to focus his eyes—one of which seemed to wander—and said, "Be thar two of ye ugly critters?"

I was speechless.

So was Dad, when he got home.

"Well, we agreed no cat," said Mom defensively, "and Bobby needs another animal to bond with."

"I don't see much bonding going on," Dad astutely observed. I was hiding behind a chair in the living room, and I wasn't coming out. Eventually, Mom carried my food bowl from the kitchen to entice me, but I couldn't be bought. I watched Max swagger through the house. He was probably checking out my toys. Good thing I hid blue fuzzy dolly.

But, life goes on. Eventually, I got hungry and wandered out from behind the chair.

I tried to ignore the little sucker in coming days, but it was impossible. Everywhere I turned, he was underfoot. And being knee-high to a grasshopper (another American-ism), I often didn't see him when I made a quick turn to bark at the postman, the FedEx truck, a passing dog, the refuse truck. I'd tumble head over tea kettle while Max simply hunkered down and stood his ground.

The first few weeks, his language, when intelligible, consisted mainly of swear words he said he'd learned from a parrot. He told me that his previous owner was a pirate, with whom he lived on a sloop, sailing the high seas. Given his propensity for carsickness in the backseat of a non-moving motor vehicle, I doubted this story.

Mom explained him thusly: he had been at the shelter for three months after his 100-year old spinster owner died. She had no relatives and had outlived most of her friends. She'd owned Max and a parrot named Frank, who had already gone home with another foolhardy shelter volunteer. Max was ten years old, not very attractive (to say the least) and wasn't likely to be adopted. Mom can't resist a sob story, and since Max wasn't a cat, she brought him home. No, there were no pirates in his history. That was an outright lie. Max was, I quickly discovered, an unabashed, unembarrassed liar. If he said red, it was likely to be blue. Left was right and up was down.

His language improved when he gave up the pirate ruse, but his tall tales never ceased. I listened to his wild stories despite my better judgment simply because they were so outrageous. It was like living with my own reality TV channel. Max is a major conspiracy geek. Gossip-central. Added to his already long list of character flaws, Max is a consummate eavesdropper. Not only does he listen to news anchors on TV and phone conversations; he listens to Mom and Dad's conversations at breakfast, lunch, and dinner ... when they're watching TV or when they're getting undressed for bed. There's no such thing as private pillow

talk with Max around, because he'll reveal all he's heard to anyone who'll listen. Last week I caught him telling a squirrel in the back yard that Mom gets annoyed with Dad because he won't throw away his holey underwear and wears mismatched socks. I kid you not!! There are no secrets when Max is around.

He's a pretty good mimic, too. He's got Dad's voice down to a T. And sometimes, if you didn't see his ugly puss, you'd swear the voice coming out of him was James Cagney's or John Wayne's—he's heard them on TV movies. His Oprah Winfrey is particularly inspiring. I end up listening to his outlandish tales and voices mostly for entertainment but also to marvel at the flagrancy of his lies.

His bed is next to mine in the master bedroom. After the lights went out one night, he said to me, "Mom told Dad she'd heard, at the shelter, about a test for dogs to prove they're good citizens. And she's going get you tested next Saturday."

Huh? Who needs a test? Everyone knows canines are loyal, friendly, protective, smart ... why wouldn't we be good citizens?

Max expounded further. "It's called a Canine Good Citizen test. Dogs take it to show how well they've adapted to living in a human world. There are a bunch of things they get tested on ... like sitting and meeting other dogs and waiting and stuff like that."

I only believe half of what Max tells me, but I had a niggling suspicion this might be true. It was too weird for Max to invent.

"Aren't you going to take the test?" I asked Max. "Nah," said Max, waxing creative. "I passed it two years ago." I knew he was lying because his wandering eye kept roaming, a sure sign that Max isn't telling the truth. Of course, he never passed it, I told myself ... a dog whose brain is no bigger than a pea and who has the morals of a tapole isn't likely to pass any test, much less a Good Citizen's test.

But Max wasn't finished. "If you pass, you get a piece of paper saying you're a Good Citizen."

"What happens if you don't pass?" I foolishly inquired.

"Well," Max warmed to the subject, eager to deliver the coup de grace. "I was watching TV the other night—a bunch of guys with poufy hair were on, and Dad said it was a program about politics—they all started talking about something called immigration. Just before Dad changed channels, one guy got all hot and bothered ... he said that people who weren't born in the United States and aren't citizens shouldn't be here. And he said that there are people that work for the government who find them and deport them."

Max was silent a while. Then he said, speculatively, "You weren't born in the United States, were you, Bobby?"

I sat up in my bed. "Wait a minute. What are you implying?"

"I'm only telling you what I heard," Max snuffled indignantly. "But another guy on the program said that people not born here can become citizens by taking a test. I guess it would be a Good Citizen test." Max let that sink in. "Maybe that's why Mom signed you up."

I got right to the heart of the matter. "You're saying that if I flunk a Good Citizen test, I could get deported?" I was incensed and, I'll admit, a bit worried. "Deported to where?"

"Most likely South America, if the TV news guys are right. You know, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, maybe even Mexico" Here his tone dropped portentously as he assumed a voice that sounded much like a BBC newsreader's, "Some Border Patrol guys from a place called I.C.E. come and arrest you, put you on a bus, and send you out of the country."

"Stop!" I yelled. "I can't go to South America or Mexico. I can't speak the language. I barely understand American-English, how can I learn South American? Mexican? I don't like guacamole, and salsa burns my tongue!" Now I was really getting agitated. "What else did Mom and Dad say?" I hated to be so needy around Max, because I knew I'd live to regret it. But these were desperate times.

"Dad wondered if there was a Canine Good Citizen's class—like your conformation class. Dad said he didn't think it was a good idea to go into a test cold—you know, without preparation. But Mom said the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen test isn't like obedience or agility. You don't need a class, maybe just a little practice. She said the two of you could pass it blindfolded."

Oh, no. Mom can't do anything blindfolded. She can't get from the bedroom to the bathroom without her glasses. And when she gets overconfident, things get really scary. I'm looking at deportation, here ... and I'm way too big to fit in the box I arrived in.

As the week went by, I really started stressing out. It was only three days before the test, and we still hadn't practiced. Dad asked Mom about "Bobby's progress" several times during the week with no satisfactory response. Dad's a "plan ahead" kind of guy whereas Mom is more a "play it by ear" free spirit. Actually, when Dad gets really vexed, he says Mom's a "fly by the seat of her pants" kind of person, to which she strenuously objects. I haven't a clue what that all means except that Mom and Dad have very different approaches to life, including Canine Good Citizen tests.

When Dad asked her for the fourth time about preparations for the test, Mom told him that she'd found out there were only ten items on the test, and she didn't see a problem with any of them. She listed the test items to prove it.

"1) Accepting a friendly stranger—Bobby will ace that. He loves everybody. 2) Sitting politely for petting—Bobby loves to be petted. 3) Appearance and grooming—Bobby would let you brush him all day long. 4) Out for a walk on a loose lead—we do that all the time! 5) Walking through a crowd—Bobby's fine with crowds, he loves people. 6) Sit and down on command and stay in place—well, sometimes that's iffy, but if Bobby knows it's important, he'll do it for me. 7)

Coming when called—that shouldn't be a problem, especially if I have a treat in my pocket. 8) Reaction to another dog—Bobby loves other dogs; he never growls. 9) Reaction to distraction—I'll just have to keep him focused. 10) Supervised separation—Bobby is perfectly fine when the instructor takes his leash in conformation class. He knows I won't leave him, and he just waits for me to return."

"See! Piece of cake!!" she said exultantly. Dad appeared skeptical and shook his head, Max looked incredulous and chuckled meanly, and I felt absolutely nauseated.

Test Day arrived and we still hadn't practiced because Wednesday was "impossible," Thursday was a busy day at the shelter, and Friday, the refrigerator repairman tinkered in the kitchen most of the afternoon. So, we're going in, as Dad would say, cold. Mom's remarkably sanguine. "No problem," she reassured Dad before we left for the test. But she's not the one facing deportation, is she? She was born in the good old state of Michigan ... she never had to pass a Good Citizen's test, did she?

"Lots of luck," Dad told us, looking doubtful. Max was more forthright. "Not a chance, Dude!" he told me and guffawed.

We got to the city gymnasium where the test was being held, and wow, what a lot of canines! Who knew there were so many dogs who wanted to be Good Citizens? Or, more likely, dogs whose owners wanted them to be Good Citizens. Hard to believe there were so many owners who would risk having their dogs deported. I didn't have time to philosophize further because we got here late (par for the course) and the first dogs were already being tested.

I watched for a while, thinking I could pick up some pointers, but things got really boring. Like watching paint dry. True to form, Mom was talking to the lady next to her. Dad says Mom would talk to the devil himself, "Ah, Mr. Devil, is Hell really as hot as rumored?" I put my head on my paws and fell asleep until they called our names.

Later. Much later. The Head Evaluator read the names of the dogs that had passed the test. He didn't read my name. Not Bobby, nor even the more pretentious Beardsdale Forever Sterling. Mom looked chagrined. "Dad was right, Bobby. We should have practiced." And whose fault is it that we didn't? Then she looked a bit less gloomy, "Well, we did pass 'Accepting a friendly stranger,' 'Appearance and grooming,' and 'Coming when called,' though you shouldn't have jumped on me and knocked me down at the end of the recall."

I was simply trying to look enthusiastic—she usually likes it when I'm enthusiastic. OK, so I misjudged a little. And I have good reasons for the flunked items—yes, I shouldn't have gotten up and smelled the evaluator's crotch while 'Sitting politely for petting.' And I should have stayed on Mom's one side or the other when 'Walking on a loose lead' so I didn't trip her. 'Walking through a crowd' without greeting each person and 'Reacting to another dog' while showing a modicum of restraint are my nemeses—I may never pass those. And yes, I 'Reacted

to distraction.' Did she really expect me to focus, focus, focus when that jogger ran so temptingly in front of me, and the man wheeled a crate past us? Focus, focus, focus is so hard, hard, hard for me. Sigh. I'd better go home and pack blue fuzzy dolly for the trip south.

I looked at all the dogs in the middle of the gymnasium floor as they waited for their pieces of paper saying they're Good Citizens. Me? I'm a failure. I guess that makes me either a Bad Citizen or not a citizen at all. How ignominious. And how ominous! I pondered that awhile. But, true to my recently exposed focus problem, my attention wandered to an elderly lady in a wheelchair across the room from me. I had first noticed her when my attention meandered during the 'Sit politely for petting' exercise—she was knitting away, occasionally looking up to smile at dogs in her vicinity. She had smiled at me and I had smiled right back.

Now, as I watched, she suddenly dropped her knitting needles, glanced around urgently, and shouted, "My purse! It's gone!! It was right next to me, right here!!" she pointed at the floor next to her wheelchair. I had earlier observed the large brown handbag, wondering if it contained any dog treats. Now I got further sidetracked (the test had already proven how distractible I am), and my eyes drifted around the crowded room.

Uh, oh. I spotted two teen-age boys strolling nonchalantly toward the door and one was carrying an unlikely brown handbag. I don't mean to be un-socially conscious (or would it be socially unconscious?), but you rarely see teenage boys sporting large, brown, grandmotherly handbags.

Mom had relaxed her hold on my leash. I leaped to my feet and raced toward the departing teens. I ran right through the field of Canine Good Citizens, and they set off a mighty howl, barking and lunging. "So much for all those Good Citizens," I thought as I sped through the mayhem. Their owners fought for control and their raised voices added to the din. There was so much bedlam the boys turned to see what was going on, and that gave speedy-me a chance to catch up. I sprinted toward them, soared into the air, grabbed the handle of the brown bag from one of the startled youths, and raced away with it in my jaws.

Two men who worked at the facility realized what was happening and stopped the youths, but I paid no attention. People tried to grab me as I headed back to the lady in the wheelchair. Evading their grasping hands, I charged on. Dudley Do-Right to the rescue. I channeled Batman, Superman, maybe even a little Wonder Woman (equal gender rights for Superheroes). I finally made it back to the silver-haired Granny, put my front paws on the arm of the wheelchair and plopped the handbag on her lap.

Stunned, she reached down and hugged me. "My purse!" She kissed my nose and told me, "You're a hero!" and kissed me again. I'm a sucker for nose kisses, so I stayed there awhile, and soon a photographer covering the Canine Good Citizen test for a "What's New" column in the local paper hustled up and took a picture of me and the nice lady.

Mom made her way across the crowded gymnasium to us. Her eyes were wide and uncomprehending. She was still processing whatever it was that just went on. Did her failed dog just redeem himself? If I might say so myself, you're rootin' tootin' right I did (another American-

ism). But I'm humble, so I just calmly waited for her and accepted the accolades from people nearby.

The Head Evaluator approached and told Mom that although I had flunked the "hypothetical" Canine Good Citizen's Test, I truly aced the real-world, practical one, and that she should be proud of me. Then he said, "Your dog may not be a great candidate for a Good Citizen award, but have you ever considered volunteering him for Criminal Justice work?"

Just a joke, I hope.

We went home and Mom's spirits varied between jubilant, ambivalent, and thoroughly confused. Was the day a failure or a success? Damned if I know, and she certainly didn't either. Dad asked how things went, and Mom said, "It was interesting." Can't wait to hear what Dad says when he sees my smiling mug on the front page of tomorrow's local newspaper. That's where the photographer said the photo would be—along with a "human interest" story that everyone will read.

I hope the I.C.E. guys from Border Patrol see it, and I hope it makes a difference when they think about deporting me for flunking the Good Citizens' test. Unfortunately, Max says from what he's heard on TV news, my heroics won't matter very much to them.

But I have a single demand, and it's not negotiable. If I go, Max goes with me. He's a Chihuahua and Chihuahuas come from Mexico. At least he'll be able to speak the language.