

A Tree in the Forest

By Judith LeRoy

I come to Cooper. Actually, that's not true. I don't come at all—unless something really good is at the other end of the invitation. Notice, I said “really good.” Rewards are relative, after all, and I don't want to engender false hope among the humans I live with. Or high expectations. I'm only a little over a year old, and I run the risk of blowing a truckload of terrific treats throughout my lifetime if my humans get the idea I'll respond to a simple summons like “Come.”

I may not come to my name, but I like it. It's a good name for a brown Bearded Collie. Actually, I was named for a Beach Boy song, Little Deuce Coupe—which certainly dates my humans, doesn't it? But there are worse things to be named after than a 1932 Ford, venerated in a 60's surf song. For example, my housemate, Truman. I think he was named after that short, pudgy American President from Missouri with a daughter who reputedly sang off-key (my Grandpa's complaint) and wrote bad mysteries (my Grandma's opinion). I like my name better than Tru's, except when Mom gets cute and calls me “Super Duper Cooper-Pooper.” Ugly!

Truman, the dog, is a state-of-the-art Bearded Collie. Slate gray and pristine white, graceful, always polite, perky, and perfect in every way. Does he come? Oh brother, does he come! It's absolutely disgusting. Standing in the farthest corner of the yard, he can hear his name whispered from the kitchen—over the sound of the dishwasher, yet. And then he bounds to the door, big smile on his face, shouting, “Here I am! Cooperative, companion dog par excellence! Nothing like that cloddy, sloppy, brown younger brother of mine!!!” In other words, Truman's a real pain in the butt.

Tru and I have a complex relationship. I grant you; he's been an OK older brother on occasion. He showed me around the house when I got here. He shared his toys ... the old ones, at least. He pointed out which shoes and hairbrushes shouldn't be chewed unless the chewer was willing to risk a holy terror of a scene. But I'd appreciate Truman a lot more if he didn't roll his eyes at everything I do, say, or think. The main advantage of being the elder, I guess, is being able to deprecate the actions of the younger; and, while I'm not expecting him to completely forgo this simple pleasure, I wish he'd be more tolerant while indulging himself.

What bugs me most, though, is that he's so damn neat. Neat meaning tidy. I've never once seen his feet muddy or ears dirty. I've never seen his whiskers wet, even after he drains the water bowl. His hair is never in his eyes—*without a barrette or a rubber band, for God's sake!!* Actually, never have I seen a hair awry on his whole body and that's really saying something for a hairy breed like ours.

But sometimes it saddens me to think that he's missing so many pleasures of life by staying tidy. I've seen him detour five feet to avoid a damp spot in the grass. He scowls at dust bunnies under the bed. He cringes if I shake anywhere near him after an invigorating plunge in Mom's lily pond. I call him Mr. Clean, sometimes, and he calls me Pig Pen or Mr. Piggy, depending on the imagined infraction. I don't consider this a specie's slur because I saw the DVD of “Babe” last week, and pigs seem to be pretty unpretentious and friendly guys. Not compulsive-obsessive neato-freakniks like some dogs I know.

Mom's fair, though. She seems to like me just as much as Mr. Perfect, although she frequently holds him up as an example to emulate. But she walks me, feeds me, pets me, baby talks me, and spoils me as much as she does Tru. The truth is, Mom's a softie. She carried me

around under her arm until I was three months old, weighed twenty pounds and was too heavy to tote. She pulled me in my little red wagon when she and Tru went for walks. She still feeds Tru and me human baby food as an occasional treat. That's a mixed blessing. We like the macaroni and beef and the bananas, but the strained peas and carrots really suck. Truman and I have at least two things in common. We hate peas and carrots and love Mom just the soft-hearted way she is.

Mom is also very artistic. She paints cute little lambs, bunnies, flowers, and chickies on mailboxes and stuff. This must have species-specific gender appeal, because most female humans that see one of Mom's painted mailboxes want one. And, perhaps related to the painting of lambs and bunnies, Mom also likes to "re-decorate" rooms in our house. The family room has been at least three different colors in my short tenure here and Tru says this was a fairly slow re-decorating year. My personal preference would be a house decorated in earth tones or, better yet, solid mud brown. I'd get in a lot less trouble.

I don't comprehend Mom's bizarre painting passion any more than I do Truman's need for cleanliness and order. Humans ... ah, bless them. Can't live with them, can't live without them. I certainly don't mean to be perverse but, well, take right now. It's seven o'clock in the evening, a wonderful sunset is coloring the sky, and a cool breeze is stirring the summer-green maple leaves. The robins are chirping goodnight from cozy nests high above harm's way, the squirrels are cracking the last hickory nuts of the day for bed-time snacks, and the frogs in the marsh across the road are croaking nocturnal good-mornings from plushy lily pads between the undulating cattails. Ah, sheer poetry. A perfect night to be out and about.

And what are the humans doing?

They're huddled in a small, hot dining room, sitting around a littered table, clinking wine glasses and clattering silverware. There are four other human visitors with Mom and Dad, and the room is filled with laughing, chattering, and occasionally exclaiming voices. They're missing the sunset because they're having "a dinner party."

Dinner parties are dumb. Even Truman agrees with me on that score. A dinner party is supertime stretched to a seemingly infinite time frame. Humans can't seem to understand that dinner is something you eat swiftly so the critter eating next to you doesn't have time to stick his face in your bowl. Dinner seems pretty uncomplicated to me. You eat it fast and gallop out into the beautiful sunset where you lie on the chilly earth with cool breezes wafting through your coat as you nibble tasty maple branches for dessert. At least, that's what I do. Ah, bliss.

Dog dinners are easier, too. One bowl. That's all you need to lick out. None of this fork, spoon, knife, bread plate, salad plate, dessert plate nonsense. What a production! Human food takes three times longer to prepare than it does to eat. Maybe that's why they make a party out of it—to celebrate that it's finally cooked? If I had to wait that long for my food, I'd probably take a bite out of Tru. I guess, since human dinners take so long to prepare, the diners really can't gobble them fast—it would make all that peeling, paring, baking, roasting, frying, boiling, and baking an inexcusable waste of time, wouldn't it?

And cleaning up after a dinner party takes forever. Almost as long as the cooking part. The only good thing about cleaning up is that resident dogs may get some quick licks of the meat platter before it hits the dishwasher. My humans wouldn't need that noisy appliance if they just put the dishes and silver on the floor and let me at them. I'll bet even Tidy Truman might help out—especially on the dessert plates. Mr. Perfect has a sweet tooth that cannot be denied.

But, back to the moment. Dad “entertains” the company while Mom dashes back and forth from the kitchen. Dad is being very charming, laughing and smiling at everything the woman next to him says—unusual, because he usually mutters and grunts his way through a typical meal. And I know, for a fact, he calls that very same woman “a perfect ditz” when she’s not around. Mom is laughing and talking, too, but her hair is a bit untidy, her cheeks are rosy, and it doesn’t look like she’s having a grand old time. Party my foot. If it’s a party, invite the dogs. Lord knows, despite all the pre-party grooming, bathing, nail clipping, and ear plucking, the guests haven’t noticed us since they walked in the door.

Good grief, I’m bored. Guess I’ll go into the family room to see if anyone left the TV on.

I discover that Tru’s already there, lying in his favorite spot behind Dad’s chair. He keeps his best toys there, too. “Hey, Tru,” I say. “Want to watch ‘Babe’ again?”

“Don’t be silly. We can’t turn on the video by ourselves. We don’t have thumbs. Even if we did, it wouldn’t matter because Dad hid the new remote after you chewed the last one.” Ah, don’t remind me, Tru. There was a nasty scene over that minor indiscretion. Tru finished with, “Besides, Mom wants us to be quiet and stay out of the way.”

“She never told me that.” At least, I don’t think she did.

“It’s understood.” Tru puts his head down on his paws and pretends to doze off. I can almost see the halo hovering around his holier-than-thou head.

The TV’s on, with the sound muted. I watch awhile to check out the plot. I don’t mind a good war flick now and then, especially the airplane parts. And I like to look at the horses and cattle in Westerns. But all I see are some really boring headshots of men and women talking at each other ... talking, talking, and talking some more. What a bore. I could catch that same kind of action in our dining room right now and maybe filch a crumb or two to boot.

Our family room is right next to the living room. I peek inside. We don’t get to go in the living room, the room Mom calls her Big Mistake Room. The carpet is off-white, the sofa is off-white, the chairs are off-white, the pillows are off-white—she says she’ll never read *Architectural Digest* again because it drives her to “unreasonable acts.”

All-seeing, all-knowing Tru appears behind me.

“Don’t go in there, Pig Pen. You’ll get in trouble. Reeeeaally big trouble.” He drags out the word “really” until it’s almost obscene. Clearly, Tru doesn’t have a lot of confidence in my better judgment.

I hate it when Tru throws down the gauntlet like that. I just can’t seem to resist. If he hadn’t said that I wouldn’t be boldly trotting into that scarily monochrome room right now.

Huh! When I get inside, it even smells off-white. Tru’s right. This room is nothing but trouble. It’s just that when Tru goads me like that ... a thinly veiled dare ... what am I supposed to do? I can’t just back away, can I?

I pad silently through the living room on carpet pile so luxurious that my short nails sink deep into it and walk over to the large picture window. The last rays of the sun are slowly sinking behind the pine trees, and the off-white room is all orange as it reflects the vivid color of the flamboyant sunset. Really neat! I rest my head on the cool, off-white marble windowsill and watch to see if that family of cute black rodents might wander through the yard tonight. Dad called them skunks. They have splashy white stripes down their backs—kind of like the white lines workmen put on the asphalt road in front of the house when they repaved it last month. Boy, did that asphalt stink! Come to think of it, so do those funny little guys that saunter through the yard. Maybe the smell goes with the white stripes?

I wish Mom had let me stay out longer tonight. I'm missing my usual bedtime snack—I'd be gnawing a delicious maple tree branch if I were outside. I chew one every night. Fresh, grassy, slightly sweet—there's nothing as tasty as a maple tree branch. I have several that have been gnawed to the perfect size—about two feet long. That way, they aren't cumbersome to maneuver but not so small that I lose them in the twilight. The memory of the tantalizing taste and odor fill my mouth and nose as I think about it. I love chewing sticks. I'd even gnaw an oak tree tonight, and they're not nearly as palatable. Maple is best. Mmmm

My eyes drift to the far corner of the living room. Huh! Never noticed it before—probably because I'm not allowed in the room—but there's a big off-white (of course) flowerpot in the far corner, and in it sits, by gum ... a tree! Yes, it's a small tree and it's certainly not a maple tree, because it doesn't have thick, sturdy branches and scalloped leaves. Instead, this tree has thin, droopy branches with long, narrow leaves. I walk over for a better look and a whiff. Huh! It smells sort of, well, fruity. Then it occurs to me that it smells just like the little plant on the coffee table in the family room that Mom calls her "little palm tree." Doesn't she call its branches "fronds?" Must be, because for the longest time I thought she was saying "friends" and while I like tree branches, they certainly don't rise to a relationship classification. But fronds or branches, this thing is still a tree, right?

And this tree in the off-white pot in the corner must be the Big Daddy of all palm trees. It's really tall, reaching more than halfway up to the ceiling—and the ceiling's almost twice as tall as Dad, who's six feet and a little more. Its branches—fronds—spread way out and arch down toward the floor. Despite its impressive height, the tree seems pretty flimsy. I reach over to sample the bark—it may, after all, be indigestible or taste really nasty. But the tree's strategic location between the chair and the sofa keeps me at a distance. I hate to be frustrated when I'm hot on a mission like this. I stare at the palm tree in the corner and ponder my approach.

"What are you looking at, Pig Pen?" a know-it-all voice behind me asks.

Oh, oh. It's Tru, of course. I should have expected it. I can't indulge in a single activity, no matter how trivial, without his surveillance and a verbal assessment of my intention, motivation, and commitment and, of course, a prediction about the outcome and my eventual punishment. Now he's standing with his head thrust through the doorway into the forbidden living room, but all four of his perfect, obedient feet are still planted firmly in the family room. He's not about to violate the "no dogs in the living room" rule, but he just can't keep his nosy self out of my business, can he?

I say, "I'm just looking at this tree," Seems pretty obvious to me.

"Why?"

"I was just wondering if it would taste like the maple tree out back."

"Yuck! You have the weirdest ideas. Why on earth would you eat a tree?"

I sigh. "I don't eat trees. I just like to chew their branches. Because they're there, and because they taste good."

"You brown dogs are really weird," says Tru. He's always picking on my color. "It's a dumb idea. Even if you tried, you couldn't eat that palm tree," he says scornfully. "To begin with, you couldn't get the tree out from between the chair and the sofa. Dad tried to move it across the room yesterday when Mom wanted to rearrange the living room, but the pot was so heavy, he hurt his back. That tree is in the corner to stay."

Yesterday, when Dad claimed to have "hurt his back," I think he said it because he was tired of moving Mom's furniture from one side of the room to the other. I've seen Dad play that game before. Mom was suspicious too, because she told him, "It's surprising your back hurts every time we move furniture, but you and Harry (our next-door neighbor) can go traipsing through the woods to go fly fishing the very same day without a problem."

But gullible Tru fell hook, line, and sinker for Dad's pitiful excuse. Tru believes every word our humans utter, no matter how unlikely they may be. It's dangerous to be that naïve. Sometimes I wonder ... is that what humans expect of us, their faithful canine companions ... to unqualifiedly accept as gospel truth every word that leaves their lips? Maybe. And that's just another black mark beside my name, I guess. I'm way too skeptical to believe everything humans say.

But skeptical isn't the same as smart. I realize that sometimes I'm really NOT smart when dealing with Tru. Like now when I'm literally going bonkers because he told me I can't do something. Absolutely hate it when he does that. And when I get provoked like this, that's when I'm likely to get into a BIG mess. I know this, but I just can't help myself, and I see myself heading toward the same old rabbit hole. Prior experience suggests that, like Alice, I'm unstoppable once I start rolling toward the gap.

Right now, I have a powerful, unquenchable need to prove Tru wrong. I CAN move the palm tree. The rational part of my brain—which Tru says is underused—is feverishly searching for a good reason to do exactly what I want to do. An altruistic justification would be nice. How about, "It's a chance to do a good deed for Dad so he won't have to invent another lame excuse for not moving the palm tree?" Plausible. A big, strong dog like me could move it easily for Dad. And once it's moved, I'll have proved Tru wrong, I can snatch a piece of bark for my evening snack, and no one will be the wiser. Definitely a win-win scenario.

I edge up to the tree. Seems to me it's simply a matter of leverage. I jump on the sofa and my fluffy, party-clean feet leave little dents on the off-white sofa cushions. I lean over the arm of the sofa. Yep! I can reach a frond of the tree from here. I grab one in my teeth and the tree sways gently toward me. I let go and the tree snaps back, upright. Tru gasps and backs out of the doorway, pronto.

My confidence soars. Hey! I can do this. I grab the tree branch again and pull like the dickens. The tree leans in my direction. I back off the couch and keep pulling and, as I do, the tree in its round-bottomed pot, topples onto its side. The pot is still lodged in the corner between the sofa and chair, but the tree trunk and fronds extend at least six feet into the living room.

Hallelujah! Sometimes I don't know my own strength. Paul Bunyan, felling a giant oak. Or maybe Babe the Blue Ox is a more appropriate allusion. After all, Babe had four feet, like I do.

The problem is, the tree's down, but it's still in the pot, and the pot is wedged firmly between the chair and sofa. Well, if I can't remove pot and tree together, I'll do them separately. First, the tree. I'll get to the pot after I remove the tree. I need room to work in order to get that cumbersome pot out of the corner.

I stick my paw between the chair and sofa, and it lands in the dirt that's beginning to fall on the off-white Berber carpet from the toppled pot. Hmm. I didn't plan on that. When I put my paw down, a perfect black paw print is stenciled on the carpet. Oh, oh. Didn't plan on that, either.

This might be trouble. Maybe I should just slink on out of here and act shocked and amazed along with Tru when the felled tree and toppled pot are discovered? "Must have been the cat that did it!!" Would that work? My better judgment tells me that's an implausible explanation and no human in his or her right mind would buy it. The cat weighs seven pounds soaking wet. I can't blame this on Puss. And if I tried, Tru would rat me out. What'll I do?

Then again, nobody spends any time in the living room, so maybe no one will notice?

No, that's overly optimistic. The tree's sticking six feet out in the middle of the living room. It's hard to miss. The pot might be temporarily overlooked, but never the tree.

Think calmly, now, Cooper. First things first. Get the tree out of the living room, through the family room and kitchen, out the dog door, and into the backyard. They'll never notice one more tree out there in the yard.

Well, maybe they'll notice this one. Palm trees aren't indigenous to this part of North America. My mind races. I can enlarge the hole I dug by the fence earlier today, and I can bury the whole damn tree in it. Yes, it'll work. It's got to work.

I grab the top frond and pull. The freshly watered rich black soil releases from the toppled pot. I pull a little harder and, here it comes! The tree roots, with a substantial dirt ball clinging to them, emerge from the pot with a soggy, slurping, sucking sound. I note, with some consternation, that nasty, telltale black marks suddenly appear on the pristine off-white sofa and chair leg as the dirt ball brushes past them.

I pull a little harder and am aghast to see that a wide black streak begins to travel across the off-white Berber carpet as I back up, dragging the tree. Sort of like a Hansel and Gretel story gone awry? Breadcrumbs couldn't have been this much trouble.

Having few other options, I keep pulling and the tree follows me, shedding dirt clumps as it goes. Once I get through the living room and approach the family room doorway, I see Tru's gray eyes staring out from behind Dad's leather reclining chair.

"Are you going to get it!!" Tru hisses.

"They'll have to catch me first," I reply, with a show of false bravado.

I don't let Tru know it, but I'm really worried. Mom's likely to figure out that the paw prints on the carpet belong to me. Once I get to the back yard, maybe I can hide in the garden shed for a month or so ... long enough for her to forget and forgive.

I speed up my pace a bit after I enter the family room, because the glossy Solarian floor doesn't impede my progress like the thick, shaggy Berber carpet did. In fact, I start hauling my load too fast and inadvertently overturn an end table when I yank the tree past its legs. As the table crashes to the floor, I freeze, anticipating discovery, recriminations, and punishment. I close my eyes and cross my paws. Tru ducks further behind the chair, probably hoping a human, any human, will shortly intervene and lock me in a crate for the rest of my life.

Nothing. Luckily for me, the Solarian floor cushioned much of the sound and the humans' tiny, inefficient little upright ears failed to hear the toppling end table. Whew! I slow down to a safer speed, just in case, and maintain my steady trek toward deliverance through the still distant dog door.

Tru can't help himself. He leaves his sanctuary behind Dad's chair and gives me that look. You know the one—that "I told you so" look. It's a look that I truly despise. I haven't time for conversation, so I ignore him, and I keep on trucking. Tru demands, "Where do you think you're going?" but I don't respond, and he follows several feet behind the root ball to discover the answer. I can't help but notice that he's being very careful not to tread in the trail of black dirt the tree is leaving in its wake and I think to myself, "That's so Tidy Tru, isn't it, though?"

Puss, who only is awake fifteen minutes a day, snaps out of her usual fugue state. She gets off her cushion, squints at the curious spectacle, and follows Tru. I'm guessing she thinks this is just part of a catnip-induced bad dream. Maybe the goldfish can flop out of their bowl and join our ensemble. I feel like the Pied Piper, and I don't even have a Pied pipe. I do have a palm tree, though.

Our entourage snakes out of the family room, into the hall, and past the dining room doorway. My brain makes some swift calculations. I'm about ten feet from the kitchen, 16 feet from the dog door, 30 feet from salvation, and ... I hear the scraping of a chair against the dining room's hardwood floor. I hear Mom's voice saying, "Anyone for coffee? I've got a fresh pot brewing in the kitchen."

Oh, oh! We freeze as Mom appears in the doorway.

"Oh my God!" she says.

Tru, Puss, and I crouch ... paralyzed ... deer in the headlights.

I'm headed for the bathtub again. Dad and the guests are cleaning up, and I don't mean washing kitchen pots and pans.

Surprisingly, the humans responded better than I expected. After a few moments of outright shock and pure awe, there was a lot of groaning, moaning, and whining. But that was followed by some giggles, titters, and even a few puffaws.

Mom's a real peach—she took the blame herself.

"I knew that room was a mistake from the moment I finished decorating it! What on earth was I thinking? An off-white room in a houseful of dogs?" She's overstating here—I don't think two dogs constitute a houseful, even if we each weigh over 50 pounds, though I realize that's debatable.

"Honestly," she continues. "I must have been just plain out of my mind." Then she adds, "I've seen some great ideas in a new Architectural Challenge magazine that will work just fine in there. I'll recover the furniture in earth-toned prints, put in a laminate floor, and we can use the room again."

But the coup de grace happens just as she puts me in the bathtub. You know what she says to Dad?

"Cooper's just a puppy, so we've got to cut him some slack. But Truman is certainly old enough to know better!"

Truman is stunned. Shocked. Appalled. And thoroughly miffed. "It wasn't my idea!" he howls. I didn't do anything! I'm absolutely innocent! Look at me, I'm perfectly clean! I had nothing to do with any of it!! It's all Cooper's fault! I told him not to do it!!

It's true, of course. But Mom doesn't understand a word of Tru's protest, valid though it may be. She clucks a bit, carps about how hard it is to get the black dirt out of my white paws, and completely ignores Tru's outrage.

Hee-hee-hee. Would you believe it? How's that, Mr. Perfect? What do you think of them apples, Tidy Toes??

I know I'll pay for this. Truman will exact a dreadful revenge. But, right now, that "Truman should have known better!" compensates for future retaliation, no matter how severe. "Truman should have known better!" Har, har, har!"