

When Pigs Fly ...

By Judith LeRoy

They say that a dog's crate is his castle ... that wee, naïve, impressionable puppies bond with their tiny prisons and retain an appreciation for small cubicles all the days of their lives. They assert that canines relish the quiet time spent in the dark, claustrophobic boxes they call their own.

Yeah, sure. And pigs fly.

Sadly, I should have gained a better appreciation for the joys of crate life when I was a puppy, because I'm an adolescent now, and there's a very good possibility that I may be in one for quite a while. I might be here forever, if truth be told.

I'm sitting in one now, staring through the little aluminum bars that, yes, my prison makes. I'm crated. I'm hot. I'm unhappy. I'm in the lock-up, and it's my own fault.

I look at Packer, lying on the cool tile floor about ten feet away. Packer's my older brother. He's a Bearded Collie like me, only he's black and I'm brown, and he thinks that makes him superior. He's flat on his back, all relaxed, his long rear legs frogging happily, stretching clear back to Texas. There's a pleasant current of fresh air blowing in from an open window ... right on his bare belly. Ahhh ... that's bliss.

And here comes ancient Madoc. Madoc was born in Wales and was named for an old Welsh prince who supposedly discovered America before Christopher Columbus. Madoc never lets us forget his royal ties. As he passes my crate, I suffer a fit of piqué and call him a doddering old fool. He squints at me through the bars and reminds me that *he's* the Beardie who will soon be lying on the comfy sofa in the family room with a pillow under his head, and *I'm* the Beardie locked in a crate. "And who's the fool in present company?" Madoc wonders out loud. Touché!

Arghhh! How did I get here?

Actually, it started early this morning. Pretty innocuously, really. We woke our Mistress, Judy, at the usual time—6 a.m. Sure, I tried her at 5:00 with a slobbery lick on her kisser and a nibble on her nose but she turned over and put the pillow over her head. I checked again at 5:30. Her foot was peeking out of the covers, and I gnawed a bit at a big toe before she yelped a "Leo, No!" at me. It was okay, though. The polish smelled like paint remover and I hadn't an inclination to taste any more of it.

At 6 a.m. when Packer stood on her chest, she acquiesced. We all raced out of the bedroom, barking and bouncing. Helter-skelter, we jostled our way down the stairs. Judy says it's amazing that no one has ever broken a leg or a neck before reaching bottom. You'd think Madoc, being elderly, would be last to reach bottom, wouldn't you? That's never the case because he's very canny on stairs—fully occupying each step so younger dogs can't get past him no matter how hard they nudge and shove. He's like a rock, a boulder ... unmovable. Packer and I have discussed it often, trying to figure out his technique; Packer thinks it might be Celtic magic. Packer's from Colorado and I'm from Nottingham—both pretty staid places not known for the occult.

Anyway, I digress. We hit the tile floor at the base of the stairs and raced toward the glass sliding door that exits to the backyard. On this occasion, like every other morning, we had to wait for Judy, who's much slower on the stairs even if she doesn't have Madoc to block her progress. We dance from paw to paw as she unlatches the dog door for later use and slides open the glass door to let us tumble out en masse for our somewhat-maniacal morning romp through the dandelions and sweet-smelling green grass.

After a couple of high-speed circuits of the half-acre yard—once around for Madoc and twice for Packer and me—we settled down to do the regular morning dog things. Madoc moseyed over to the pine tree and lifted a leg. Out of the corner of his eye, Packer saw him piddle and hurried over to pee on just the very same spot. Madoc sauntered back and peed on Packer's pee and frowned at Packer. I could see by Packer's squint that he was trying to work up another drop or two to retaliate, but then Misty, the neighbor's Samoyed, trotted up to the chain link fence and looked at Packer from under her long white eyelashes. Packer, who considers himself quite the lady's man, ended the piddle-contest and sidled across the yard to exude manly charm.

Judy was propped against the rail of our elevated deck waiting for us. Her eyes were closed, and she probably was dreaming. Considering her somnolescent state, this might be the ideal moment to check out that swallow's nest under the deck. Last time I sneaked a peek there were three gawky chicks vying for room in a dusty, dried mud nest. By now their sleek little wings should be almost ready to launch in wobbly flight toward destinations outside our yard. I'd like to see that. I like the way swallows fly—they swoop and dart and plunge—nothing like those boring old robins that just flap, flap, flap their dreary wings and toil from tree to tree.

I'm known as a canine wildlife enthusiast in these parts. When I dug out a baby skunk (two, actually) from a burrow under our deck and brought them inside to play this spring, my Mistress suspected I had a previously unexpressed obsession regarding small creatures. That was confirmed after I collected a baby ground squirrel and a few baby bunnies—well, then everyone realized I wasn't just a typical herding dog with a narrow interest in smelly old sheep.

Judy liberated my collection, of course. The skunks went back to their den, Momma Ground Squirrel recovered her tot, and the baby bunnies were replanted in their crowded burrow under the pine tree. I miss them all, but I'm pleased to say that we're still friends. Momma Ground Squirrel holds a grudge, but her two sons and I converse on a regular basis, and ditto for the skunks and bunnies.

I walked under the deck and looked up. The underside of the deck's surface was about six feet up, giving the swallows enough room to dart and zoom. Let's see now. That swallow nest I was monitoring was j-u-s-t about here ... I peered up, squinting in the relative gloom. Ah! There it was. I inched closer.

Oh, Oh! Mother Swallow was balanced on the beam next to the nest. She saw me. She wasn't smiling. It's true that smiles are hard to detect on beaked creatures, but the look in her eyes assured me her beak wasn't smiling. I cautiously inched backward, hoping that might assuage her, but she soared off her perch and dive-bombed straight at me. I don't mind getting stunk-up by a mother skunk, but I met a sharp beak belonging to one of these son-of-a-pterodactyls once before and, let me tell you, they pack a nasty peck.

I hurriedly backed out, turned, and galloped toward the ramp that leads up to our deck, looking for safe haven. Much to my chagrin, Father Swallow had joined Mother Swallow, and

they were reinforced by a flock of aunts and uncles. Did you never notice that about swallows? They are not Lone Rangers. Those birds can coordinate a group exercise that could rival a German Luftwaffe attack. I glanced over my shoulder and turned on my afterburners as the mini-jets soared, swooped, and dove above my flying ears.

A quick glance told me that Packer was avidly watching the drama unfold, Misty forgotten. Even dopey old Madoc looked up from some ancient-dog reverie or another and stared at the sky. His jaw dropped when he saw the winged flotilla above my head. Alfred Hitchcock couldn't have orchestrated the scene any better. Why are Packer and Madoc always around to notice my most embarrassing moments?

I zoomed across the backyard and reached the ramp. Judy was 15 feet away, still leaning on the deck's railing. Her eyes and mouth opened wide as she watched me roar up the ramp and onto the deck. I skidded past her, followed by my winged flock. I pounded through the dog door and I heard Judy shrieking.

Oh, oh! Judy's way too big to fit through the dog door and not fast enough to escape any other way. "Oh, drat! Damn! Get away!!" I heard her yell.

The door flew open, and she stomped in, which is hard to do in soft-soled bedroom slippers. A wide-eyed Packer was in perfect heel position on her left side, looking very concerned. Packer always tries to make Judy feel better when bad things happen by heeling. Ironically, he never manages to be that obliging during his occasional excursions into an obedience ring.

I saw with great relief that, though the birds were still swooping angrily outside the door and windows, none of them had violated the sanctity of our family room.

Madoc, who had followed Judy and Packer in, looked like he'd just returned from an alternate universe. He stared out the sliding glass door, watching the junior F-16s wheel into the stratosphere. "What was that?" Madoc asked. "Where did they come from?" "Where did they go?" Packer and I ignored him and stared at Judy. Oh, dear!

David, husband of the house, otherwise known as our Master, walked into the room. His hair was tousled and eyes bleary—obviously, he had just gotten out of bed. Despite his somewhat befuddled state, he stopped, peered at Judy and said, "What's that in your hair??"

"Bird poop!" she wailed.

Ah, an irate swallow's revenge.

Later.

After Judy's shower, she fixed our breakfasts. Then Packer and Madoc went back to bed while I, being young and foolish, looked for further adventure. I went through the contents of the waste basket in the study and licked the flavor off all the old gum wrappers. I found a wad of bubble gum wrapped in one of the wrappers and I chewed it a bit, but it didn't dissolve between my teeth like kibble does. I dropped it on my paw to take a closer look, and it disappeared in the hair of my right front foot.

Oh, oh. Last time she had to cut some pine sap out of that very same paw she almost wept. “At this rate I won’t be able to show you until you’re 13!” she moaned. I know, I know. All the dogs in this household “show” at some time or other in their lives. It’s just that I’ve been “such a handful” in my training classes, she hasn’t had the courage to send in a show entry for me yet. If I keep acting up long enough, she may give up her show ring ambitions and allow me to become the wildlife curator I aspire to be.

There was nothing to do about the gum short of using my teeth and chewing it off—also a no-no—so I went upstairs and looked around for some other socially acceptable diversion. I found a bottle of Aqua-Fina water on the bed side table next to the clock radio. Aren’t humans amazing? Instead of lapping up the closest puddle or savoring the flavor of “eau de toilet-bowl” or even pouring themselves a cooling bowl of water from the kitchen tap, they go to the grocery store and buy the stuff in little bottles. Crazy, that’s what it is.

The only good excuse I can find for the existence of these bottles is for my own personal use. I love plastic, and I really enjoy chewing off the plastic caps from the used-up water bottles. I grabbed the Aqua-Fina bottle and jumped on the bed. I held the bottle between my paws and set to work. Hmm. This bottle was heavier and less maneuverable than most. Maybe because it was still full of water and I usually only get to work with empties?

There. I’ve got it now. One more little chew ... eww! Water all over my paws. Maybe it’ll loosen the bubble gum? But there was also water on the pillows and on the bed. I don’t think Judy will like this much.

She didn’t. I don’t know how she knew I was the guilty party, but ten minutes later she came right for me.

“Leo! What did you do???”

Oh, for God’s sake, if you don’t know what I did why are you shaking your finger at me?

“Leo, you got the bed all wet!!”

I gave her that “No comprende” look and hoped for the best.

She sighed deeply, probably reminding herself that good dog trainers only reprimand dogs for mischief they find them in the act of committing. According to the idiot savants who write dog training books, dogs have no sense of history. If the bad act happened more than five seconds ago, the poor dense animal won’t associate the scolding with the misbehavior.

In other words, we’ve really got them buffaloed. Packer laughs about it all the time. He says, “Just get that old ‘dumb dog’ expression—the ‘lost sheep’ look—and you can get away with almost anything.”

Judy’s indignation overcame textbook dog training theory, though, and she re-launched her scold. I had no recourse except to follow Packer’s maxim. I tried to look completely baffled, then genuinely hopeful that she would eventually explain herself in language I could understand. Next, I shook my head sorrowfully and waltzed away. She groaned and changed the bed.

I went into the family room. Packer got off the sofa, walked over and discretely lifted his leg on the leg of the coffee table. Oh, well now, if it's going to be that way ... I walked over and lifted mine. too.

"Leo!" I heard from the top of the stairs. My Mistress, holding the wet sheets, had caught me in the act. She put all her angst and frustration about the wet bed into a diatribe about the peed-upon coffee table.

"Bad dog!" she said with great gusto. "No!" "Outside!!"

Oh, for Cripe's sake. Couldn't we communicate in complete sentences here?? What does she think I am, a two-year-old human?

"Okay, you caught me fair and square," I said to her. "How shall we handle this?"

Instead of a lucid response, she grabbed my collar—awwwk!—and towed me toward the door, uttering things like. "You do that outside!" "Bad dog." "Shame on you!"

Packer, a dog who can never resist an open door, came outside with me. I eyed him morosely. "I was only doing what you did!" I said petulantly.

"No, you didn't, Dude," said PacMan. "The whole point of marking furniture is to just leave your scent, so everyone knows you were there. Just mark it. You're not supposed to leave a puddle. That's way too obvious. And you never, never, ever mark anything when someone is there to see you do it."

So why didn't he mention those little details before?

By now I'm a little fried and still bored. I sprawled on the deck and surveyed the back yard. A little bit of plastic might make me feel better. My eyes light on the plastic sprinkler, attached to the water hose. Judy's trying to grow a patch of grass in a spot where I like to dig, so there's a lot of grass seed and water involved. The plastic sprinkler is kind of fun. I like to watch it work. It has four little plastic arms on a plastic stem-thing, and the arms twirl around, spraying water in big circles. You can get dizzy if you watch it long enough.

I got up and walked down the ramp, over to the sprinkler. Hmm. I gave it a trial chomp and it tasted pretty decent. Plasticky, but sort of citrusy, too. Or maybe it was just the yellow color that made me think of lemons.

Okay, I thought. This might work. I could chew those little arms right off if I applied myself. Since it was a rather hot day, I looked around for a shady spot for my labors. There really wasn't any shade in the yard except under the deck, and I didn't think I should test the swallows' patience again. The deck itself was raised about six feet off the ground. Might the elevation lift the deck high enough for a cooling breeze? Maybe. It was worth a shot, anyway.

The sprinkler was still attached to the hose and the hose was attached to the water spigot on the side of the house. But the hose was one of those 100 footers, so there didn't seem to be any insurmountable problems as I considered the engineering project at hand.

I wrestled the hose up the ramp and onto the deck, but the deck was in full sunshine and my fond hope for a cooling breeze wasn't fulfilled. What this job needed was air-conditioned

comfort. How about the family room? With some effort, I dragged the sprinkler, with hose attached, through the dog door. I hauled it to the center of the fake Oriental carpet in the middle of the room, bared my fangs, and prepared to take the first bite on the nearest little sprinkler arm.

Packer, who had retreated to the cool comfort of the family room at least 10 minutes earlier—long enough for a catnap—woke up and said to me, “Leo. This is *not* a good idea. *You* are going to be in serious trouble.” I hate it when he gets self-righteous like that—so Dudley Do-Right, so Mr. Goody-Two-Shoes.

So, of course, I had to be a smart-ass. Devil may care. Bon vivant.

“So what?” I said inanely. I tried to think of something cleverer to say, but my mind drew an absolute blank. Now, I’m a smart dog. In fact, everyone says I’m too smart for my own good. So why can’t I be articulate in moments like these? I always think of the perfect response 10 minutes too late, when it really doesn’t matter anymore. I pondered other more verbally astute rejoinders, but then I heard Judy shout from her study to David, who was just going out the door.

“David, on your way out, please turn on the faucet to the hose in the back yard. My new grass needs watering.”

Packer and I looked at each other. Packer, being older and wiser, was aghast. I didn’t immediately grasp the significance of Judy’s request, so I lacked a full appreciation of the probable consequences.

But I soon found out. Suddenly, the piece of plastic between my paws gained a life of its own. I could hear the sound of gurgling water as it moved through the hose, closer, ever closer. The first blast hit the sprinkler with a gasp and a spurt, and the little arms started moving spastically—very, very slowly—first with a puny little squirt of water and then with a modest gush. I dropped the sprinkler like a hot potato and retreated.

Then common sense prevailed, and I realized that I had to haul the damn thing back out the dog door if I wanted to save my hide. But just as my jaws grabbed for the sprinkler again, the full fury of the building water pressure burst forth and the little arms of the sprinkler start twirling madly. Little robotic demons sprayed powerful jets of water methodically in all directions. The couch upon which Madoc snoozed was an early victim.

Madoc lifted his head and bellowed. “It’s raining. It’s raining in here! How the Hell can it be raining in here? I didn’t hear any thunder.” Now, Madoc has been too deaf to hear thunder for two years, but it wasn’t a good time to remind him.

What was I going to do?? The water was splattering against the front window and the postman, having just deposited the mail, stared in from the front walkway. He came closer to get a better look. I’ll just bet he’d never seen a downpour in a family room before. Droplets of water were now bouncing off the piano and streaming toward the dining room.

Packer, that yellow-bellied, chicken-livered stool pigeon, raced for the study, barking furiously. A Rottweiler couldn’t have managed a more alarmist uproar. Oh, shut up, Packer! Give me a minute to figure my way out of this mess.

Madoc was lying on the sofa, momentarily paralyzed by indecision. Then put his head back down and shut his eyes. "If it's not thundering, it'll stop in a minute," he muttered. "Nothing but a little shower."

Oh my God, what was I going to do??

I heard Judy's footsteps, the approach of Packer's staccato barks, and Madoc's snorts as the water got into his nostrils. David opened the door to tell Judy he'd complied with her bidding. They're converging from every direction.

I knew that I was soon going to be one sorry pooch.

Even later.

That's why I'm in the clink. Jailed. Kenneled. Crated.

I may never get out. You think I'm kidding, don't you? Don't be so sure.

How do I know that?

David and Judy rolled up the carpet and carried it outside to the deck to dry in the sunshine. David sopped up water from the family room floor, Judy wiped off all the furniture, and together they tried to dry the piano strings with a hair dryer. When they were as finished as they could be (Judy thought the drapes might take a couple days to dry), David asked her when she was going to let me out of my crate.

Her eyes sent daggers in my direction. Her lips grimaced. If humans growled ... well ... let's just say she didn't look like she was feeling very magnanimous. She turned to glare at David and replied icily, "When pigs fly."

That's exactly what she said.

Like I told you earlier, I'd better learn to love this crate. I might never see the light of day again.

Because I'm thinking hard, and I've never seen a pig fly.