

Big Brother Blues ...

By Judith LeRoy and Shag

Everyone told me so. They said this would happen.

"Shag," said my friend Alphie who shows with me in the conformation ring, "your family is a member of an endangered species—a single-dog show family. Pet people can have a one-and-only dog. But when the show bug hits, no way. Value this quality time—your days as an only dog are numbered."

"Shag," said my friend Pepper who goes to obedience trials with me, "watch out. Pretty soon your mistress, who once was overjoyed when you sat when she asked you to, will decide she needs a really talented obedience dog. And it's not you. She needs 'a new dog to train right.' Enjoy your single life—you won't have it very long."

I should have listened.

It was a rainy Saturday morning, and She Who Feeds Me and He Who Walks Me were having a leisurely third cup of coffee. He was reading a newspaper, She was reading the AKC Gazette. I've noted that her reading habits have changed drastically over the past couple years—from Bon Appetit, Town and Country, and Cosmopolitan to The Beardie Bulletin, Dog Fancy, and The AKC Gazette.

As I lay on my back under the ceiling fan with the gentle breeze hitting exactly the right spot on my tummy, She Who Feeds Me said to He Who Walks Me, "Poor old Shag!" My ears levitated, but I kept my eyes closed so she wouldn't know I was interested.

"What do you mean, 'Poor Old Shag'?" muttered He Who Walks Me, still engrossed in the newspaper. The Red Sox were two games out of first place, the season was ending, and he was getting nervous.

"It's just that he's so bored. Look at him, lying there on his back. He's bored out of his mind!!"

Excuse me??? I spent two years perfecting this position under the fan, and I was enjoying every minute of it. In fact, I was having a blast!! And what was this about 'old' stuff?? I just had my fourth birthday and I certainly wasn't a candidate for Pedigree Advanced Years Formula yet. I had all my teeth and I chased as mean a tennis ball as I ever did. What was going on, here?

Uh-oh. She had that look on her face. Something was up.

He Who Walks Me knew it too. He was still staring at the newspaper, but he wasn't worrying about the Red Sox anymore. He articulated the next words very carefully.

"I don't think Shag's bored. He goes to conformation class once a week, obedience class once a week, agility once a week, and now you're talking about herding. He gets carted around more than a six-year-old girl who has a star-struck stage mother. How can he be bored?"

"I meant here at home. He's got nothing to do all day. You're at work, and since I started that half-time job, he's all by himself. All ... alone"

She stretched out the words, mournfully, woefully, sad-voiced—making it sound like I was a newly-orphaned waif. Give me a break! Those three-and-a half hours in the afternoon are coma time, whether she's home or gone. That's Shag's Shut-Eye Zone. Everybody knows that.

He Who Walks Me was getting tenser by the moment, waiting for the other shoe to drop. So was I. The shoe hit the pavement with a loud splat.

"I think Shag needs some company. Everybody knows that all animals do better in twos. Shag needs a puppy. A puppy to keep him young and active. A puppy to look after and love."

He put his newspaper down, frowning. "A puppy? Just when Shag has stopped eating my socks and roaring through the house like a freight train? A puppy?"

"But now I know so much more about raising dogs," she reasoned. "I wouldn't make the same mistakes and the puppy would be less trouble. You've got two hands, so you can walk Shag and the puppy together. And Shag would love him and teach him to be good, wouldn't you, Shaggy Bear?"

I couldn't control my rolling eyes and twitches.

"What's wrong with Shag?" asked He Who Walks Me, alarmed. "Looks like he's having some sort of a seizure!"

"No, he's just having a dream, that's all. Probably dreaming about puppies."

My eyes were wide open by now. I got up and gagged, put my tail between my legs and walked into the living room to bite the sofa.

Fait accompli. My single, uncomplicated life was over.

She started calling Beardie friends and acquaintances, looking for a "litter." An appropriate term, I think dourly. Consider the associations: "kitty litter," "litterbug," "\$5,000 fine for littering"

At least she was getting the right breed—another Bearded Collie. Pepper told me I was lucky it wasn't a Border Collie or Golden Retriever, because that's what the real obedience fanatics want to bring home. Pepper said it was really hard to live with 1) all that intensity, or 2) all those vacuous grins.

It wasn't an easy time around the house. When she was hot on a trail, she was excited. When something didn't pan out, she was depressed. She was, reportedly, "being picky." She said she wanted another brown dog with good shoulders and nice temperament, just like Shag. I suspected that she was trying to butter me up.

Doomsday! She found one!! Not only had she found one, she reported exuberantly to He Who Walks Me that the pup was "already on the ground." I would certainly hope so. Since when can Beardies fly?? If it could, would I really want it in my house?

At conformation class, when I told Alphie the news, Alphie said I had to take a firm hand. "When that puppy walks into the room the first time, put your tail up, squint your eyes, and let him know who's in charge. When he tries to eat out of your bowl, knock him over—puppies can't stand up very well. When he tries to lie down in your favorite spot, sit on top of him. Make a puddle and when your mistress walks into the room, stare at him sadly and shake your head. Anything's fair when you're training a puppy. Just don't bare your teeth or growl, and she won't have a clue. When she's watching, act solicitous. She'll even think you're being helpful."

At obedience class, Pepper told me that I should do ostentatious sits and downs whenever the puppy was barreling around the room knocking over furniture.

"Look amused but superior," counseled Pepper. "When he tries to take a toy from you, go get another one and give it to him. Then get him a third and a fourth. Then take the first one back. Keep up that sort of thing and you'll drive him crazy. The stupid puppy won't know which one to play with and your mistress will think you're being sweet and generous. Then nip his butt when she isn't looking. Keep him guessing all the time, and you'll be all right. Well, as all right as anyone can be when you get a new puppy at your house."

Didn't sound good to me. I went home and hid my chewy bones.

The next day she was all a-smile and a-bustle. When she came home from work, she was carrying a bag that held a dog cushion just like mine, a bunch of new squeaky toys, and a little blue bowl. I went out in the back yard to stay out of harm's way.

Duke, the Dobe next door, got a new puppy a year ago. His puppy doesn't wipe his nose unless Duke tells him to. I reported my woes to Duke through the chain link fence.

"Just remember," Duke cautioned. "All puppies are born stupid. Credulous little furry bundles waiting to be shaped by a strong hand. They are naive, innocent, and gullible. They'll believe everything you tell them. Make that work for you, Shag!"

The first glimmer of hope since all this puppy stuff began

Our conversation was interrupted when She Who Feeds Me called me into the house.

"Hurry, Shag! I'm off. It's time to pick up the puppy at the airport. In less than an hour your baby brother will be here. Aren't you excited??"

Excited?! Oh, I'm absolutely thrilled to bits. I slunk off to sit in my favorite chair in the TV room, and I pondered the inequities of life.

The car rolled down the driveway and backed out onto the street. I knew my minutes were numbered. I remembered what Duke said and I began practicing.

"Hello, young man. Things will be just fine around here as soon as you learn your place. So, start learning. Breakfast's at 7 am and it's your turn to get her up tomorrow. The blue fuzzy

dolly is mine so keep your tiny toothless jaws away from her. Oh, and by the way, you can call me 'Sir.'"

There. It sounded plausible. I practiced again, this time in a lower, more ominous voice, growling just a bit between "start learning" and "breakfast."

After I'd rehearsed it about a dozen times, I heard tires on the driveway. The car was back.

I pondered the question: Should I stay nonchalantly in my chair and let him come to me, or was that a position of weakness? Should I stride dogfully into the room and tower above him, staring down at his little insignificant self? Remember, Shag, I told myself. He's just a tiny puppy and very impressionable.

They say indecision kills, and it came pretty close. By the time I decided to go and meet him, he was already prancing down the hall. No time to lose

I took a deep breath to make my chest puff out and found it's hard to talk that way. I coughed a few times and discovered I'd forgotten my well-rehearsed speech. So, I improvised: "Hello. My name is 'Sir.' Welcome to *my* home. I hope you like it here. We'll get along fine if you just remember a few rules."

Not bad, I thought to myself.

"Hey man! What's happenin'? Cool place you got here. Not!!"

I stared at the strange creature. This was one tough little turkey! And what was he saying? Was he an import or something? If so, where from—Juvenile Hall? Alcatraz? I looked up at She Who Feeds Me, befuddled.

"Oh Shag, isn't he an adorable puppsy-wuppsy?? Sweet little thing! Absolutely adorable," she cooed.

"Hey Dude," said The Thing, "I'm talkin' to you! Where are we anyway? Sure ain't nothing like my pad in L.A." He headed right over for my blue fuzzy dolly.

This crude little exile from an old James Dean movie is NOT what I had hoped for. I beat a retreat to the bedroom and crawled under the bed. It was a really tight fit—I hadn't been there since I was about nine months old, and even then I needed help getting out. But I scrunched down flat and inched my way under because I needed a safe haven. I intended never to leave. I'd become a recluse dog. My other option was to run away, but that's like ceding the house to that obscene little creature. No, I'd stay here and die under this bed ten years from now, and everybody would be sorry. "Remember the nice dog who lived under this bed? Didn't say much after that stupid puppy arrived, but"

He Who Walks Me came home. He called me. I ignored him. She Who Feeds Me stuck her head under the bed and tried to entice me out for dinner. I've got my pride. I didn't go.

Puppsy-Wuppsy sauntered into the room and peered at me. "Hey, what's up, Big Guy? C'mon out and let's boogie." He was mouthing my blue fuzzy dolly. I ignored him and his minute attention span lapsed. He blinked and left.

Hours passed. I heard She Who Feeds Me tuck Puppsy-Wuppsy into his new bed next to mine in the corner of the bedroom. I thought about that soft warm cushion as the hard, cold floor pressed against my ribs. The bedsprings squeaked above me as She and He got into bed. The lights went off.

Stealthily, I inched my way out from under the bed. My limbs were almost paralyzed from all those hours of enforced inactivity in that claustrophobic environment, and I had to shake my paws a couple of times before they'd support my body. Once I was able to move, I silently crawled onto my nice soft cushion, curled up in my usual doughnut slumber-shape and ...

"Eoooww ..."

I beg your pardon?

"Yeowwww ... eh, eh, eh. Oooooohhhh!! EOOOOOWWWLLLL ...!!!"

Strange noises erupted from the cushion next to me. He really must be a foreigner, after all—I'd never heard howls like those before. I listened, transfixed. Swamp Creature from the Deep Lagoon ... Night of the Walking Dead? This far surpassed *anything* I'd ever heard on TV!!

"Dear, is that the puppy?" said He.

"I think so, Darling," said She.

Like I told you earlier, my humans are not rocket scientists. Who else would be caterwauling from Puppsy-Wuppsy's cushion in the corner of the bedroom? It sure wasn't my blue fuzzy dolly, and the crickets have been particularly silent this summer.

"YEEOOWWWGGGGHHHH!! Eh, eh, eh. OOOOOOWWWLLLL!!!"

"Shouldn't we do something, Dear?" said He.

"The puppy book says that we must be firm and not give in to his demands. Just be pleasant, positive, and confident, and he'll learn what we want from him," She asserted authoritatively.

"Does that book say we shouldn't sleep all night tonight, too, Dear??"

"Don't get sarcastic, Darling. Put the pillow over your head."

"It is, Dear."

Oh, oh. Voices were getting a bit tense. When all those "Dears" and "Darlings" start to fly, there's trouble ahead. What did they have to complain about, anyhow? They were way over there in the bed, and I was right there next to the amplified ghetto blaster. And I had the distinct impression that he was just warming up.

But silence reigned.

I suddenly felt hot puppy breath on my nose. Two little brown eyes peered out from under a shock of dark brown hair. Two little tears slid down a short little brown and white muzzle. Oh, God-of-all-Dogs-and-Humans, give me strength. I tried to ignore him until I got the uncomfortable hunch that he was starting to warm up his vocal cords again.

"What do you want?"

"It's really dark in here," he said, conversationally.

"No kidding, Squirt." I noted that he could talk like a reasonable dog when he wanted to, but my patience had already worn thin.

"Eh, eh, eh ..." he started to tune up again. I tried to divert him. My ears were still ringing from that last aria.

"Yes, it's dark in here. So what?"

"Well. Always, when it's dark, I used to snuggle up to my mom and my sisters and brothers. Then it didn't seem so dark."

"You're afraid of the dark, Squirt?" I queried incredulously.

"Only a little, Shag," announced Squirt in a very small voice.

"My name is Sir, to you." I was beginning to feel a bit more confident.

"Do you think, maybe ...? Uhmm—would you consider the possibility—ahh ..."

"Spit it out, Squirt. What do you want?"

"Do you ever snuggle, Sir?"

Give me strength. I'd rather snuggle with a toad. But wait a minute, here. At least he's calling me "Sir." I've got to be smart and play my cards right. If I'm clever—maybe, just maybe, I can, as Duke said, "make this work for me."

"O.K. Squirt. Here's how it is: A little snuggle—just tonight—and you promise to leave my blue fuzzy dolly alone. Absolutely alone! The newest yellow tennis ball is mine; you hear? Don't touch it. And it's your job to wake She Who Feeds Us tomorrow for breakfast."

"She Who Feeds Us?" It's come to this?? Before I can ponder that question too long, Squirt is babbling at me.

"Yes, Sir. No, Sir. Yes, Sir." He clambered onto my cushion and snuggled.

"And what's more, no more of this 'Cool Dude talk.' We natives don't like it."

"O.K., Sir. My Uncle told me that's what Small Town Beardies expect from us Big City Boys. But if you don't like it ..."

"I don't. And furthermore, you're out of here at 6 am before anyone sees us and starts that 'Oh, look at Shag and Puppsy-Wuppsy, aren't they darling, adorable, sweet' crap—or I'll eat your ears. You hear me??"

But Squirt was already asleep, hiccupping gently. I sighed, deeply. It looks like it's gonna' be a real long life, training this one. At least he was calling me "Sir." And tomorrow, to make sure he's really learned his place, I'd tell him to chew the leg on the new coffee table and piddle on the expensive carpet under the dining room table just to see if he is as stupid as Duke suggested.

I closed my eyes, pondering more ways to get Puppsy-Wuppsy in the hot seat. I decided that I just might live through this puppy after all. And I just might even learn to enjoy it—just a little.

To Be Continued ...