

The Horror of Hidden Falls



I love the fall. I love the crisp air and falling temperatures. What a great time to be out with a good dog, driving the late-model, fire engine red Taurus your mom bequeathed you when she went to winter with family in Kentucky the day before.

So I'm down at Hidden Falls with old Beauregard. He is looking sheepishly up at me, which is my signal that he needs to take a dump. So I stop walking, take out my plastic bag, and wait for him to execute his ablutions.

Poodles are, how do you say, fastidious about these matters. Beau's typical dump means finding the right spot, often after investigating three or four other spots. Or, maybe he's just waiting for the feeling back there to be just right.

Then, he squats in a very primitive shape -- Kodak moment -- and, as he does his thang, he rotates to the right, or counter clockwise. I don't know why he rotates this way -- again, maybe to keep an eye on what he's doing, and on any predators that might swoop down on him while bent to this task (poodle-snatching owls?), and make off with his curly blue bod.

In any event, all these things come to be, just as they have happened 2000 times before. But there's a disgusting hitch in the action, as Beau can't quite seem to shake completely free of the thing he's getting rid of.

[Pause to explain to readers The Poodle Problem]

You see, poodles are unlike most dogs in that their hair never stops growing. This is OK on their coats, because you can shave them. They catch more burrs when their coats are long, and that's a drag. I have spent many an afternoon picking elephant-ear burrs out of his \$600 coat.

But the deal is, poodle hair grows everywhere. Coat, ears, and yes, your hairy hindquarters. And today is the day his hair back there has grown to just the right length to obstruct the free flow of his poop.

So, hunched over like a hissing black cat, Beau looks back at his butt, at the offending poop, and then back again at me, eyes imploring me to intervene.

Then things go from bad to worse, as, still turning, he stumbles into a copse of burr bushes. As he turns, they spool onto his curly coat. Wherever they touch, they stick, like nature's Velcro. Within seconds he has seventy burrs stuck to every part of him including his ears, face, eyebrows, and paws.

"Oh, Beau!" I cry out in dismay. I am looking at two horrible jobs in need of simultaneous emergency action.

"You stupid, stupid, dog!"

[Early warning to the squeamish: things get even worse as this goes on.]

It is not that he or I enjoy intervening. He is shamed by it, and I naturally am repulsed. But it's a job that can't be done without using some sort of buddy system. And the way things are, I'm it.

Usually I have something like toilet paper handy with which to perform the procedure. Sometimes I have to improvise. I have used a decaying newspaper found in the woods, an empty McDonalds coffee cup, even a set of three check deposit slips with my name and address in the upper left-hand corner, fanned out to maximize their surface: deposit here.

I used a handful of fresh-fallen snow once. Beau crossed his eyes over that one.

But today, all I have is the plastic bag. I use it for a few seconds, then for some reason I don't want to keep using it, and the problem is still not solved, and all I got left is two twenties, which I don't feel like breaking.

Exasperated, I uproot a fistful of grass, and use that to midwife the birth in progress. It is a mess, but at least we succeed in getting the main elements out of the dog and into the world at large.

Beau is about to express gratitude to me. He is a vain creature generally, but he can be very touching when he is thankful about something.

So we're limping back to the car, him on the leash, his butt still rather badly blotched. I am damned if I am going to lead him through the woods in this ridiculous condition.

But then I remember: I'm driving my mother's new car. I see it ahead of me, gleaming brick red in the first rays of October sun, like in a commercial. What a beauty!

And I don't know everything about this cockamamie thing we call life, but this much I do know: My mom won't like it if I smear dog shit all over her upholstery.

So I open the trunk, take out a blanket I was saving for deep-winter survival, tuck it around the back seat. There isn't enough to cover the backrest part, just the seat cushion. So I leverage the dog, very slowly, onto the blanket and sit him down.

"Now you stay there!" I tell him sharply, climb into the front, start the car, and head up the 150-foot high hill leading back to the river road.

Almost immediately Beau stands up. I glance at the upholstery, at his butt, at him.

"Lie down!" I command in the rear view mirror.

He stares at me.

"Beau, you lie down right now!"

More stares.

"Goddamnit Beau, you get your ass on that blanket and lie down right now!"

He is paralyzed with uncertainty. Oh, we have only practiced the "lie down" command all of 10,000 times. But now he's frozen in the high beams of my fury, and he can't recall what it means. "Lie ... down ...?" Is that the one involving chicken? Where's the chicken?

"Lie down!"

Nothing.

I stop the car, put it in park, open the front door, get out of the car, open the back door, grab the dog by his neck and hindquarters and force him to his knees (and elbows).

"Now you LIE DOWN."

He lies down. And he stays that way, like a shitty-assed sphinx, all the way home. Whereupon I lead him inside, take him down in the basement, fill the laundry tub with warm water and soap and load the curly blue animal in, and spray, and sponge, and scrape, and brush, and then finally, both of us exhausted, I let him out.

He dashes up the stairs, shaking the water from his legs and butt, and makes a beeline for the studio couch. And I let him go.

I mean, I really do love the fall. I love the sense of the seasons gathering, and the crunch you feel when you step on dead leaves.

But I hate those elephant-ear burr plants. And I hate when the hair on a poodle's ass begins to cling.