

Higgledy-Piggledy

By Wendy Wright

Hot Dog

About this time of year, about the time when the red and pink hollyhocks start swishing their petaled ballgowns up and down the flower stalks, around this hollyhock time, that's when a good detective knows to polish the spy gear.

And when this detective sees those hollyhocks sway beside the heavy-minded sunflowers, the detective then knows: it's time to peer through the farmhouse kitchen window.

And...when this peering process does begin, if the detective sees Mrs. Fieldjoy baking peanut butter cookies, especially if the detective sees a birthday gift with a big purple bow and this gift is sitting on the counter while peanut butter cookies are in the oven, then this detective certainly knows: it's time to activate the moo-honk-baaa warning system.

Furthermore, if during this investigation, the detective witnesses a second batch of peanut butter cookies being baked, the situation may be determined severe enough for the howl-whinny-snort-cock-a-doodle-doo siren to be sounded. Whatever the case, the appropriate warning system will be initiated.

And, most importantly—when this alarm is triggered, be assured, a midnight barn meeting will be held that same night, a secret critter caucus, held to discuss the most unfavorable, kiss-a-weasel-on-the-lips despicable, upcoming event.

You see, peanut butter cookies + a birthday gift with a purple bow = Isie, the granddaughter—she's coming—to the Fieldjoy Farm.

However, this summer, just when the farm's hound dog Dilbert (actually, he likes to be called Detective Dilbert) just when the farm's hound dog Detective Dilbert is about to trigger the alert, Mrs. Fieldjoy takes out that dreadful and most offensive suitcase of hers. To make matters worse, Detective Dilbert sees she plans to put her container of peanut butter cookies inside this maleficent contraption. That low-down, no-good, wicked suitcase, it's a banged-up, old blue thing with patterns of sparkly stars and silvery moons all

over it. Yea, I know—sounds pretty, but it's not. Not to the animals. They hate it.

It had a sorrowful impact on them the last time they saw it, the way it was bopptydiddling the Fieldjoys off the property, dragging them away by the hand, nowhere to be found for three whole days. Gave the animals an awful feeling, that blue suitcase did.

Took some trouble, but they did get over it, mostly. Especially seeing how Mrs. Fieldjoy broke off her friendship with the thing. At least they figured she had since they hadn't seen it all this while.

Obviously, the Fieldjoys haven't traveled much, but when they have, that blasted moon-covered suitcase has always appeared. And whenever that suitcase is out in the open, sticking its moon and stars into the animals' business, then Mrs. Fieldjoy always says something about traveling "once in a blue moon." After that, she always giggles. Guess she thinks blue moons are funny. Well, Dilbert doesn't, and if he ever sees the moon turn blue, he'll shame it red with that fiery howl of his. He will.

So, what do you get if you add peanut butter cookies + a birthday gift with a purple bow + a wicked, blue-moon suitcase? Well, you don't have to be brilliant to sum that equation up. It doesn't mean Isie is coming to the farm—it means the Fieldjoys are going to Isie's.

And sad to say, the farm animals got their kahoodles turned inside out because of it. The farm's goat has figured out what's going on, and ever since, he's been gnawing on the truck's tire. The pigs know what's up, and they've got their snouts dug so deeply into the sludge they don't see the grub in their pen. The cows comprehend, and they're refusing to chew their cud. In fact, they're so perplexed they aren't moving at all. Why, flippity-flop-it, the flies are holding Sunday church up and down their cow backsides. They're twirling their antennae like they're hallelujah handkerchiefs; they're fly-spitting their manure-breathed praise-be's, but the cows are too news-stunned to even notice. Besides that, the crows aren't crowing; the hens aren't clucking; the geese aren't honking; the horse isn't neighing—the horse—the one and singular Fieldjoy horse, the only horse on this planet with the name: Thester. Heard of him?

He's pretty well-known. And that's the way Thester likes it—days packed with gleeful attention and giant scoops of excitement. But if he can't get any of

these favorites, he'll settle for hearing his name hollered. And holler it they do, what with all the pranks this creature pulls.

Thester, dear Thester, he's typically causing trouble of some kind. In fact, just wait 'till Mrs. Fieldjoy opens up that blue-moon suitcase of hers and sees what Thester tucked in there the last time she got home from a trip; I believe even he has forgotten this suitcase "prank" he played so long ago.

And naturally, the farm's trouble-maker would be best pals with the farm's number one detective. Of course, makes total sense. Don't need a cop if you don't have a criminal; don't need a toothbrush if you don't have plaque; don't need a clown if you don't have a dull, overly serious rule abider.

But back to the hens not clucking and the geese not honking stuff—to make matters worse, Thester isn't even pranking. And that just doesn't feel right.

Everything feels out-a-whack on the Fieldjoy Farm.

"Hey, why don't you let me give those things a try?" Thester sticks his long horse face into Dilbert's doghouse and tries to snatch the eyeglasses out of the dog's paw. Detective Dilbert turns away. "No way," the dog protectively hunches over the spy glasses; he begins polishing the glass with his long, floppy ear. "Just got these; too powerful for you," Dilbert mutters as he turns his back to Thester and continues to examine his sleuthing specs.

"What do ya mean—too powerful for me?" Thester snorts; his ears stiffen a bit. He stretches his neck out further so that his head is hovering over Dilbert's. Looking down at the hound dog, he forces his eyes to open wider so the whites of his eyeballs show.

"Knock it off, Thester," Dilbert barely moves his lips. He doesn't even bother looking at Thester, doesn't have to. By now he can see Thester's expressions through the back of his skull.

The horse sighs, his lips rattling as he does. This dog-sad feeling Dilbert's got is no good; he's got to get it gone. He moves to Dilbert's side and lowers his head, giving him a little nudge. "Come on, Dilbert. Let's go spy on Mrs. Fieldjoy."

"Don't have to," he answers, his voice sounding like a closed book. "I know what she's doing." His words tumble out his mouth the way a wet string mop hits the dirty floor. He slurps up the string of spit that's oozed from his

mouth. Thester glances downward and sees his pal's tail; it looks kind of dead, kind of heavy, like a sun-baked rubber hose.

"Yea, I know—they're leaving. But maybe we can think of a way to stop 'em if we..." Thester stops mid-sentence and gawks at the eyeglasses a little more closely. "Those spy glasses look familiar... Aren't those Mrs. Fieldjoy's old pair? I'm not sure you should..."

"Are you kidding?" Dilbert whips around to look at Thester, the droopy, saggy skin on his jowls tightly twisted and rolled like an old tube of toothpaste.

Thester works to hold back his smile.

"These are XR360 Zipstream Lensometers!" Dilbert yelps.

The animals stare at each other. No one talks. Must be a stare out. Two quiet seconds... Three... Four... Thester looks away first. His eyes scan the old hubcaps, rusty wrenches, and other gizmos Dilbert has piled here and there inside his doghouse, or detective agency, or crime lab. Only Dilbert's closest friends know what to call the place at any given time. And they only know after Dilbert corrects them.

"They give you X-ray vision," the detective explains as he slips on the eyeglasses. He squints, trying to adjust his eyes to the glasses, but when he looks through them, all he can see is a stretched-out, massive Thester face, the horse's rubber-raft lips curled outward, his hideous horse smile full of giant, scum-covered teeth. Thester's giant face seems like it's sitting on the end of Dilbert's snout. Yikes! Dilbert jerks backward. The sudden movement causes two devilish Thester faces to loom in and out of the eyeglass. Instinctively, Dilbert's upper body dives forward. Again, there's just one Thester face that he sees. But it's massive, a monstrous Thester-style pumpkin head with lawnmower teeth. The image blurs right then left. Dilbert holds his paw to his forehead. Everything's swaying back and forth inside his skull, really wavy like, a wet-beach-towel-flapping-in-the-wind kind of wavy.

Thester sees the dazed, distracted look in Dilbert's eye, so he seizes the opportunity and dips his head into Dilbert's "spy trunk," which is actually a box stuffed with hats, jackets, ties—all types of disguises for when a Dilbert-investigation requires going incognito—a word that, according to Dilbert, is French for: "in a cognitive condition where dumb stuff seems neat." Nonetheless, snatching anything in this doghouse takes skill 'cause, let me tell you, any quick movement isn't so easy to do in Dilbert's lab—what with all the dryer tubing, or "scientific tubing" as Dilbert calls it, that's strung across the

room. And then there's the jam jar lids that couple as petri dishes which are tittering atop Dilbert's other CSI gadgets. So much stuff; so many thingamajigs. Nonetheless, Thester manages to untangle a curly, blond wig from the jumble in the trunk. He whips the wig up and into the air, scoops his head under it, curls back his rubbery horse lips, and gives Dilbert another one of his grotesque, toothy horse smiles—if you can call it a smile. The sight makes Dilbert jolt. Again.

“Knock it off, Thester. Stop trying to cheer me up.” Dilbert nearly barks as he takes the spy glasses off.

Of course, Thester ignores him and continues to make strange faces at Dilbert. “Look! I'm the bigwig now,” he teases, bobbing his head up and down, trying hard to look ridiculous. He says this knowing how Mrs. Fieldjoy likes to rub Dilbert on the head with her knuckles and tell him he's the farm's bigwig.

“We both know who the wiggy one is here.” Dilbert has the beginnings of a tiny smirk when he says this.

Thester's encouraged.

“Perhaps you prefer your birth name... Oscar Meyer?” Dagnabit! He told himself he wouldn't use that joke anymore. Dilbert really, really hates it. Thester regrets the words while he's saying them, but he goes ahead and grins, tipping his head to one side.

“How many times must I tell you!” Dilbert bellows, no sign of a smirk now. “I am not a wiener dog; I am not a hot dog; I am not squat, chubby and ready for barbecue; I am a...” the hound dog stops mid-sentence, like he's suddenly tired of hearing his own voice.

Thester continues to smile. “Go ahead; say it. You are a...” Thester coaxes.

Suddenly, it's as if Dilbert stops looking through Thester and actually sees him; he sees the gentle tucked into his horsey smile. “Oh,” Dilbert sighs, his long ears flattening, “you're teasing,” the detective's eyes soften; he turns away.

One ear twitch forward, two leaps back. There's got to be a way to cheer Dilbert up—or at least distract him.

“Hey, Dilbert!” Thester hopes he sounds a normal amount of worried. “What's wrong with your nose?”

“What?” In two seconds Dilbert's standing on his back paws and spinning to face Thester, his front paws knuckled and dug into his sides. “Nothings

wrong with my,” the detective doesn’t finish but begins touching his snout with his paw.

“And your whiskers are twirling all crazy like,” Thester zooms in toward Dilbert’s snout. His one eyeball has become a magnifying lens. Over and under, over and under: his eye makes figure eights, supposedly following the movement of Dilbert’s whiskers.

“No, they’re not!” Dilbert’s voice is the force of a butcher knife against a wooden chopping board. “That only happens when there’s an unusual scent to analyze,” Dilbert explains as if Thester were a stranger, “or when my built-in hounding device detects trace amounts of danger—and seeing that you’re the only negative within my radar’s reach...” Dilbert hints and then begins counting his whiskers to be sure they’re all there.

“Wouldn’t hurt to make sure your nose is okay,” Thester perseveres. “Try sniffing one of your flask thingamajigs and see if you can name the scent like you always do!” The horse uses his long face to motion toward the “scientific flasks” that line Dilbert’s table.

Dilbert just huffs.

“Come on, please... Here.” Thester uses his rubbery horse lips to lift Dilbert’s long floppy ear in front of the hound’s eyes, “Don’t look at the writing on the flower vase,” the horse says, double checking that Dilbert can’t see the flask’s listed ingredients—written in a muddy paw-print code.

“You mean scientific flask, not flower vase,” the detective says without moving away.

“Yea, the flask doohickey—see if you can name the scent!”

“Of course I can; I am a professional detective, and this is a scientific flask, not a doohickey,” Dilbert woofs as he reaches up to hold his ear over his eyes so Thester can let go and select a flask. You wouldn’t know it by Dilbert’s serious expression, but the hound considers this scent test fun. Thester knows.

As Thester reaches over to nab a flask, Dilbert mutters “I’m a forensic detective actually. Now the forensic word comes from the Latin which means...”

The words blur in Thester’s ears. Forensic; foreign-sick: he doesn’t know why Dilbert is always talking about being in foreign places and getting sick. Or does he mean he’s sick in places of his body he doesn’t even know about? Doesn’t sound like a very polite thing to talk about.

Feeling the rim of the flask against his skin, Dilbert dips his snout into its narrow opening and takes a sniff. “Grass,” he states flatly.

“Come on, take a bigger whiff,” Thester says.

The detective inhales dramatically. This activates his hounding device; now his whiskers really are twirling, probing the scent molecules that rise from the substance at the base of the flask. Soon, his inner printer gives him a readout. The letters click across his eyeballs in a way that only Dilbert can see: g-r-a-s-s... m-u-d... h-o-r-s-e... s-a-l-i-v-a. Dilbert jolts. “Saliva?! Horse spit?! In my flask?! You’ve ruined another experiment!” Dilbert can’t stop barking; the safety lock on the hound dog’s emotions pops off. “I hate this!”

“What. Do you hate, Dilbert?” Thester's tone is creamy butter.

“I hate it when the Fieldjoys leave!” His words sting the doghouse air.

Thester is silent but moves his head up and down in agreement.

“Forget it!” Detective Dilbert recklessly turns to his spy trunk and flips it upside down, dumping everything out. A jumble of old shoes, hats, sweaters and a few unidentifiable objects fall to the floor. A ratty slipper is flung across the room and knocks over a rusty hubcap propped against the wall. It makes a whirling sound as it spins on the floor.

“What are you doing?” Thester neighs.

“I’m packing! I’m going with them and they can’t stop me!” the hound woofs.

Thester stands frozen, watching Dilbert pack the trunk with his most valuable tools: the secret listening device that’s shaped like a funnel, those spy glasses that give X-ray vision but look like Mrs. Fieldjoys old pair, a secret tape recorder that he can later tuck between his layers of flabby skin just below the jaw, a bone he dug up the other night.”

Suddenly, a scream shoots out of the farmhouse and into Dilbert’s lab. Not exactly a scream though, more of a gurgling explosion gag-like sound—kind of like GAANGLEUUGAAH! Followed by Mrs. Fieldjoy’s voice shouting “How did this get in here!?”

Dilbert doesn’t even seem to notice the alarming sounds coming from the farmhouse. He continues to pack.

Inside the house, Mrs. Fieldjoy is holding her hands over her mouth and nose. She stares at the moldy, slimy half sandwich in her blue-moon suitcase. Wiggly white worms are slithering across it.

Mrs. Fieldjoy's cries kick Thester's memory into gear: he suddenly remembers something about an open screen door, Mrs. Fieldjoy falling asleep at the kitchen table, a half-eaten sandwich, and that hated blue suitcase—just sitting there open, ready to be closed and put away. The memory is kinda blurry, a bit hazy, but he's pretty sure Mrs. Fieldjoy's scream has something to do with him.

"Me too!" Thester whinnies. "Think I'll pack too. See ya!" the horse says, bolting for the dark, safe barn.