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ILLUSION

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DOG

by Joel Curtis Graves

Billy learns about Dog from Grandpa Sam

Circa 1880

“We always called him Dog. He answered to Dog and nothin’ else. Sizewise, he was average, scruffy lookin’, long-legged. Not much to look at. Mostly light gray with some white on the belly and about the ears, a little on his muzzle, hair about one to two inches long all around. His ears hung down but could perk up quite high if alert to somethin’. He lived with Grandpa Sam and Grandma Anne right here in Apple Creek Hollow. Grandpa said he didn’t do anything special to take care of him. Treated him like any other dog on the place. Other dogs came and went, but as time went by, Dog was just always there.”

I was puzzled. When I asked about this peculiar pet, all he would say was, “Dog has special talents.”

One day I asked, “Where did Dog come from?”

Grandpa Sam pondered the question for a bit, his mouth quirked sideways like when he was deep in thought. “Don’t rightly know, Billy.” He sat watching the chickens work their way across the yard, looking for stray feed and bugs.

I sat quietly. I knew from experience there was more to the story, if I didn't interrupt. Grandpa had a faraway look in his eyes, as if searching through long past memories.

"He's not like any dog I've ever had and we've had a few." Grandpa Sam looked up at the fat clouds. "I must've been about your age, seven or eight or so. That would make it what—1820 or thereabouts? Even then, Dog had been around. I remember it was autumn, because the leaves had just started to turn. One Sunday after church and the usual family lunch followin', we were sittin' on the back porch of this old house. It was old even back then, when we heard a desperate yap. Dog shot off the porch like a bullet out of a gun. Then Biskit, the youngest coon hound, come runnin' into the yard, a mountain lion dead on her tail just reachin' for her. We had lions around these parts back then. Dog, he run straight at the lion and plowed into it full speed. Over and over they went, ass over tea kettle, all fur and teeth and elbows flyin'. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, 'cause I figured Dog was done for, what with a lion so fearless it would run into a yard full a people on purpose. But no. When the dust settled, the lion lay on the ground, pantin', tongue hangin' out and Dog stood over him, nose almost touchin' his cheek. They were like that for a long time, and no one moved, 'cept Uncle Jess, puffin' away on his pipe. We looked on. Presently, Dog stepped aside and that big ole cat got up, shook itself and slinked off into the woods. Never heard from him again."

Johnny learns about Dog from Grandpa Bill

Circa 1940

After the story, I studied Grandpa Bill with unbridled doubt. "So, this is that same dog?" The disbelief in my tone made Grandpa look up at me. Even at eight, I knew dogs didn't live longer than ten to fifteen years, maybe a bit more in some cases.

Grandpa gave me the hard eye, and I knew I had crossed that unspoken line and quickly pulled the smart-ass look off my face. I studied my bare toes. "Sorry. Didn't mean to suggest you were lying. It's just, well, that makes Dog awfully old for a regular dog."

Grandpa's face softened some, as he saw my confusion. "Rightly spoken, that is, boy. And somethin' to ponder on as we sit here come an evenin'. Like you, Johnny, when I was young, Grandpa Sam spoke of Dog with a sort of reverence. My great, great grandfather's family was the first to settle this area and he told how Dog saved them from raidin' Indians one summer. Another time, he woke the family to put out a fire in the front room. When the British Red Coats marched through here, they reported how a dog visited their commander in his tent and they turned north instead of south like they planned, so they avoided this area completely. Confederate soldiers told of a dog that warned them of an ambush up ahead, so they turned away. Stories like that, as if he was their guardian angel, lookin' out for the family as lived in this house and those as happened to be nearby. Because, although family and folks came and went, Dog would not depart this old place. I don't know what would happen to him if the place got torn down. I reckon he'd just sit in the field where it once stood—don't know."

I spent my summers with Grandpa Bill and Grandma Sarah. Dog and I would wander the forest and fields, catching bugs for my insect collection or tadpoles for the watering trough, exploring, hiking, camping. As long as Dog was with me, they didn't worry a bit, and rightly so.

We were sitting on the porch one hot summer day when a young fellow came walking up the drive. Dog began a low growl and moved in front of us, to the head of the stairs.

He looked like a city dude: hair slicked back, shiny black shoes, baggy tan pants, short-sleeved white shirt, Lucky Strike cigarettes rolled up in the right sleeve, outline of a Zippo lighter in his right front pants pocket.

And Dog with that slow rumble going on.

Must've been at least a hundred degrees—felt like more. Sweet tea on ice and Sunday ice cream weather—all sitting on the north side of the wrap-around porch, the seldom used front of the house—big front door and all. Mostly we lived on the south side, when the sun wasn't baking it like an oven. The front driveway was off Balsam Road. You had to park by the barn, if you used that route, and walk up. While the back drive was off Old Highway 49, the main road around these parts. Most folks drove in from the highway, so they could come up the driveway there and park by the back door.

Mr. Slick, as I was already calling him in my mind, was walking in from Balsam Road. He sauntered up and put his right foot on the bottom step, a big toothy smile on his face, but his dark eyes were shifty, looking the place over.

Dog leaned forward, staring intently and growled a little louder.

“You folks are kinda off the beaten path out here, aren't you? I mean, the closest neighbor must be, what, three, four miles away?” As he spoke, he studied Grandpa's new Ford truck. The dude opened his mouth to say something else and stopped suddenly, mouth hanging open partway, staring at Dog.

I'm curious by nature, so I got up from the cane chair and stood beside Dog. Seemed like the two of them were locked in some kind of inner battle, eyes focused on each other. From the side, I noticed a bulge behind Mr. Slick's belt in back and stepped down the front stairs part

way. Yes, the handle of a revolver, like what Cousin Wilbur carries—the family sheriff way down in Wilcox County.

I walked around Mr. Slick and back up the steps.

All this time, Grandpa and Grandma sat there watching, like at the new movie theater. I suppose it was a show or something, happening right there on the porch.

As the sun passed behind a cloud, Mr. Slick stepped back and shook himself.

"Well, I'll be flogged. I can't remember why I walked up here. If you fine folks will excuse me, I'll be on my way." He gave a two-finger salute, did a snappy about face and marched off.

Grandpa Bill looked at me and nodded, then said, "Come here, Dog."

Tail wagging wildly, Dog turned and trotted up to Grandpa and buried his head in his lap. Absently scratching Dog behind the ears, he watched Mr. Slick disappear down the drive.

"You done good, Dog. Yep, you done real good."

Danny learns about Dog from Grandpa John

Present Day

Grandpa John looked over at me. "That was 1940."

I sat my Samsung phone on the porch railing and sighed. I knew the cell tower was only five miles away, but I still couldn't get one bar—something about this area. It was like passing through the woods took a person back thirty years in time. Grandpa sat in the old rocking chair, probably as old as the house itself. Despite the rocking motion, Dog had his head in Grandpa's lap, studying me with those big brown eyes. Grandpa was ninety-two now—me fifty-one. I had heard these stories before, but always with a dose of skepticism, even though I had known Dog since a toddler. Still, it just seemed impossible. I figured that over the centuries, this dog must

have had mistresses somewhere off in the woods and one of the puppies crept up here at different times to replace the family patriarch. In my modern, logical mind, that idea was more believable.

Grandpa John changed the rules about ten years ago after Grandma died. From the old highway, you couldn't just drive up to the house anymore unless you were invited and he opened the gate. If you were determined to visit, you had to park down by the main road and hike through the woods about three hundred yards. Grandpa didn't get many visitors, so I was surprised to see a man and woman walking up the drive. They were well-dressed and the woman carried a slim briefcase in the crook of her left arm. We watched them approach and Dog began a low growl.

I looked over at him and frowned. What was that about? They weren't even here yet and they looked perfectly harmless.

Well, except for the man. He looked like an old used-car salesman. Too perfect. Every dyed hair in place, not a wrinkle on the three-piece suit, shoes highly polished, manicured fingernails, expensive watch. The woman was the female version of him, down to her perfectly coiffured blonde wig.

"Good afternoon to y'all," the man called from twenty feet away. He had that accent like he was from New Jersey, while trying to sound all folksy like.

I stood from where I had been sitting on the railing.

Grandpa kept rocking, a quiet rhythmic squeak coming from the rocker or the floorboards, couldn't tell.

We didn't respond.

The man seemed undaunted, a too perfect bright smile on his face—implants or false teeth. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a business card and the woman produced a brochure.

“We are with Occidental Properties and are looking to develop this area into a community of homes and shops and enterprise. Why, this three-thousand acres would become a powerhouse in the local community and your home would be its beating heart.” The man and woman stopped at the base of the stairs.

He *was* a used car salesman.

Dog continued to growl and stepped to the top of the stairs, eyeing them intently.

“We are prepared to offer you...” The man and woman stared at Dog as if lost in a trance.

Now I understood the stories and studied Dog with wonder. What was he—really? Like in the story I’d just heard, I walked down the stairs and looked them over. I took the woman’s briefcase and opened it. Inside was a large architectural drawing of the property, as imagined by someone with the future in mind. I unfolded it and showed it to Grandpa.

I said, “Yep, they are planning to develop this whole area—houses, apartments, shopping centers, you name it. And here is a letter saying they will pay you top dollar, too.”

Grandpa kept rocking. “Likely, Danny.”

I put everything back as I found it and tucked the briefcase under the woman’s arm, then took a few pictures with my phone—at least that app worked. I grinned and nodded at Dog as I climbed the five steps and resumed my spot by the railing.

Suddenly, the man and woman shook themselves as if trying to get dry and blinked repeatedly. “Where was I?” he said, looking around. “Oh yeah, sorry to bother you. We’ll be on our way.” Both smiled absently, waved, and marched away.

As we watched them walk back down the drive, I sat on the top step next to Dog. “Come here you,” I said, putting my arm around him. Dog laid down with his head in my lap while I stroked him affectionately. “Emma and I were going to move to New Orleans in November, but what if we moved in here instead?” I had been talking to Dog but turned to Grandpa.

He continued to rock and winked and smiled. “House and land are in a trust already—in your name.”

“Of course, it is. Dog takes care of us, and we have an unspoken agreement to take care of Dog. And so it has been, for hundreds of years, and perhaps will be, for hundreds more.”

THE END