The Farmer's Dogs

I am driving slowly down a dusty windswept gravel road, surrounded on all sides by sashaying corn fields. The vast fields are symmetrically planted in dehydrated green rows with yellow tassels on top, the stalks stand seven feet high and rustle in the wind above the rich dark soil.

I crack the window so as to hear the whispering of the corn leaves, and smell the scent of the ears as they evaporate their moisture in the hot sun. It is September and it will be time to harvest in another 20 to 30 days.

I remember frosty October mornings on the tractor hauling the ears from the corn picker to the farm yard in highly side-boarded wagons. And then elevating the corn up and into circled stacked snow fence cribs that looked like yellow wedding cakes when full.

The old place appears on the horizon as I reach the top of the next hill and I accelerate slightly. I reach the lane into the farm, the dented rusty mail box is lying in the ditch, and I follow the rutted path up to the buildings. They are deserted and decaying; gray and rotting from the summer sun and winter cold. Yet each structure is enough intact that I visualize when the buildings were bright red with white trim, surrounded by a manicured yard. I park near the house wishing Tippy the second dog would come running out to meet me from under the porch.

I worry about a flat tire.

Guardedly I step from the car determined to explore the old place. I make my way toward the house, the back gate is lying in the trash and weeds, and the walkway to the house is gone. The back porch is rotten, paint less, and falling apart. The back door to the kitchen is standing open. I stare inside.

My first vivid memory is of the father standing with his back to the kitchen door, defensive arms

in the air, while the mother flails at him with a high heel shoe.

I carefully traverse the porch, remembering the pail of water for the dog that sat by the back door. I can't remember most of the names.

I squeeze into the kitchen.

The faded yellow paint and cracked plaster in the kitchen is the same as it was when I sat at the supper table holding my breath wondering who would be the first to cause the father to erupt.

Usually it was the brother pushing food onto his fork with his fingers, or eating too fast. Sometimes it was the incessant questions by the bewildered mother, unanswered by the discontented laconic father.

Perhaps the prolonged animosity played out in the room sucked the brightness from the yellow paint; did the violence crack the plaster? I don't remember.

On the north wall is the chimney opening where the old cob burner sat adjacent to the General Electric stove. In the winter it beckoned to all who entered, perhaps the only warm welcome in the house. The east wall is bare to the plaster lath, all of the metal cabinets and the sink are gone, but the cracked window that is above the location of the sink is intact and I remember the optimistic sun that shined through it on summer mornings.

I kick at a mason jar that is lying on the floor and it shatters against the hearth, I think of the mother.

She often said that when she was young she had wanted to be a WAC or a school teacher. She was teaching at a country school when she got pregnant. The farmer was the father. At that time he had an Indian motorcycle that she loved.

The air in the house is stale yet familiar and cautions me of my emerging memories.

Sometimes, the mother actually made an effort to cook, but most nights she simply 'threw something together'. She didn't like to cook, and was usually in such a state of distress that she couldn't.

It is apparent now that it was depression and schizophrenia that plagued her, but it was not an acceptable diagnosis when I was growing up.

She had two large cast iron frying pans and a crock of bacon fat and used them both to repeatedly decimate potatoes, meat, and eggs. I hated her stew; pork, potatoes, and cabbage boiled to oblivion and floating in unseasoned broth as if we should bob for our supper.

Some nights the father just made 'lick dob' and toast.

The freezer, the pantry, the storm cellar and the garden at various times of the year were all full of wholesome ingredients but the mother just couldn't create anything edible from them. She hated to cook, can or make preserves and had presumed to buy groceries, canned and packaged that would minimize her work and satisfy the family. The father wanted meat and potatoes and she wanted Chef Boyardee.

The father wouldn't even allow her to go to the grocery alone, to him it was a waste of money with all the staples that were on hand. He was so tightfisted he didn't allow paper towels, napkins, or toilet paper. The outhouse, actually had, an old Sears's catalogue for wiping one's butt.

I walk into the dining room which was rarely used for dining. I remember the salads of lettuce with half a pear and a dollop of cottage cheese served on very special occasions. Occasions when the extended family was present, and always contentious.

There are shadows on the wall where disingenuous pictures once hung.

I remember the night the sister tried to plug a tweezers into the electrical outlet in the room.

The result was shocking.

I smile but am unable to laugh.

There was a couch in the dining room and a black and white television that was only watched from seven to nine in the evening. It offered; Have Gun will Travel, Wanted Dead or Alive, and other period shows. I particularly liked the irony of Father Knows Best. When Bonanza premiered in the sixties, in color, we did chores and milking early and would watch the show at the neighbor's house.
They had a color television.

The neighbors became best friends but unfortunately the father and the wife of the color TV eventually had an affair. It was complicated. Her husband was the milk man and came to the farm every day to pick up cans of milk. The father and the milkman were supposed to be best friends. The milkman eventually drank himself to death and the father and the color TV mistress got married, but many years later.

The oversized living room is adjacent to the dining room, it was for adult company only, and hence was never used; except for the family Christmas. It had nice furniture and lamps, and more properly staged family pictures on the walls, most that I wasn't in. Even some rugs.

I remember several Christmas's when the mother just cried while we children crabbily opened unappreciated, unwanted presents.

Off the living room is the parents' bedroom and it was off-limits. I look inside and it is dark, empty, and cold; just the same as it was when they occupied it. I always marveled at the mother when she came from within nicely dressed and made up; and pretty; but mostly she just came out downtrodden, despondent, and walking bull legged.

When I was young I often wondered what it would be like to be pretty.

Sometimes after a fight with the father she took the daughter and disappeared for a few days. The father reassured us boys she would be back. While she was gone he made 'lick dob'. The routine remained the same.

The rest of the bedrooms are upstairs and had only a stove pipe to heat them during the winter. The brother and I slept in a room together and the sister in a room of her own. During the cold it was necessary to pile the beds high with blankets and grandma's colorful quilts, and crawl under the piles before you froze.

There are three other rooms and the attic on the second floor and they are all haunted.

Regardless of the time of year the father came to our room at four o'clock in the morning, turned on the light, and grumbled: "let's go!" I don't remember a time ever when he said 'good morning boys'.

When I return down stairs I remember that there is another room off the dining room and push the doors open and walk inside. It is dark, the windows are mostly covered with rotting curtains, but the old upright piano that the mother flecked silver and that the sister played is there, leaning against the wall where it always was. I tap a few keys and it groans and gasps what seems like its last breath. I think of all the garish crafts the mother made in this room and am surprised there isn't some example lying on the floor or hanging from the light fixture.

I pull the doors shut and walk across the dining room and out onto the front porch.

There was a large chest freezer on the porch that was always full of pork, beef and chickens and I remember the time it was empty and the parents debated whether the lite really went off when the lid was closed. I watched with interest when the father suggested the mother get inside, and then he would

close the lid. I was disappointed when the mother refused and seriously said she didn't trust her husband to let her out.

The door to the yard is stuck and I pry it open. The glass breaks. The steps crumble when I put my weight on them and I almost lose my balance. I think of Tippy again. The trees in the yard are all huge now, much larger than I imagined, except the elms are dead. I remember mowing the yard on summer days with the push mower, I guess it was about an acre.

As I near the driveway I think about Tobey.

Tobey was a mixed breed puppy the mother brought home a few days after we moved to the farm, he was our first dog and therefore very special, but he was purposely run over by a feed truck a couple days after he arrived. He had drifted into the road and it was rumored that the driver of the truck had hit him on purpose. The father was greatly relieved by the death because Tobey wasn't a cow dog.

We children were inconsolable.

The barn is across the driveway, made of tin rather than wood, only the doors and window frames are faded red. It is looming over me as oppressive as it ever was. I think of all the hours I spent working inside. In the winter when the air was heavy with evaporated/condensed urine it would saturate your clothing as soon as you entered. At school all the farm boys smelled the same. In the summer the flies swarmed throughout the milking parlor and the rafters were thickly hung with fly paper covered with dead insects, you needed to dodge the paper as you worked. I remember a summer when the flies were so thick in the barn they were like a blizzard of black snow. The only insecticide was DDT.

The fly infestation was the second summer. The summer when Tippy came to the farm.

A friend of the father knew he didn't have a dog, so he told the father of another friend who had a collie that was full grown and needed a home. The father not wanting to spend any money on a dog went with the friend to see the dog and was interested. After some consideration the father brought the dog home and informed us children that his name was Tippy, and he would be our dog from then on. Tippy was a classic collie like Lassie with a wonderful disposition and a good mind. A beautiful dog really. Unfortunately Tippy only chased the cows for fun not for the famer. Then he started eating eggs and the farmer became circumspect and angry.

It was the time of year when the father bought baby chicks to replace his laying hens. He had a brooder house where he kept the chicks and as they grew and spilled from the small house the father let them out during the day so they could feed, scrounge, and peck. It was very important to close them in at night because there were predators who would kill them. The father didn't trust the children to close the brooder house so he always did it himself at dusk when the young hens were roosting. He was very conscientious about it.

One Saturday evening the farmer went to town with the family for groceries and socializing and when we were in town the father remembered that he had left the brooder house open; it was already dark.

I was happy that he had made a mistake.

He fretted while we did the shopping and hurried home afterward hoping that nothing had happened. When we reached the driveway to the farm and pulled in the headlights shown on the brooder house, and scattered all around it in the cars bright lights were dead chickens. Standing in the middle of the chickens was Tippy the collie and the father was outraged. He jumped from the car and screamed at the dog, then ran to the brooder house and looked inside; the remaining chickens were

piled in the corner dead; they had been so frightened they had smothered. Only a few had survived. The father walked back to the car cursing the dog, he was certain it was responsible for the carnage.

The next morning the father told me to catch Tippy, who was afraid of the farmer, and tie him to the gate into the cow yard. The farmer went to the house for his rifle and shot Tippy in the head twice while we children watched. An hour later the rendering truck came and Tippy was gone forever.

I walk over to the gate, it is still there where the dog was tied. I remember the blood on the ground after the shots and scuff the dirt where it pooled. I loved Tippy.

I walk back and into the barn, it is full of cobwebs, dead insects, mice, and rats. I brush the cobwebs aside and walk down the corridor between the pens and the milking parlor.

One of the pens was full of Black Angus beef calves that we fed milk with nipple pails. These were gallon pails with a plastic 4 inch nipple on the side. The calves vigorously sucked on them, and fingers, and anything else that was offered.

On the other side of the corridor is the abandoned hoses to the milking machines, hanging from rusty hooks by the stanchions, I handled them thousands of times; and I felt those same hoses sting my legs and buttocks numerous times when the farmer lost his temper and wanted to 'get the boys attention'. No one ever saw the welts.

I think of the one cat that survived for a while in the barn.

I climb up the ladder to the hay loft. We had a pet raccoon that lived here for one winter. There are still a few bales of rotted hay lying around, I think about the hazard of putting wet hay in the barn. It ferments causing heat that could start a fire.

Hanging from the steel track at the peak of the loft are the hay knives which were used to pull hay up a pulley system and drop it in the loft. They are rusty now but when they were used regularly I

remember they shined like swords. I enjoyed stabbing them into the hay and watching it ascend. In the winter the hay bales were piled to the rafters and had to be individually thrown down to feed the livestock.

When I climb down I'm in the corridor again I think of the farmer's third dog Bailey.

The father couldn't accept a farm without a dog and so he brought home another collie puppy to everyone's surprise. The puppy was a joy to us children even though we were apprehensive. This collie grew into a magnificent herding dog and went to the field to get the cows alone and drove them to the barn morning and night. The only concern that the farmer had was that the collie nipped the heels of the cattle whenever he drove them. Naturally the cows tried to kick him.

I took a chance and allowed myself to care about this dog.

One Saturday morning we were milking, Bailey was always there in the milking parlor. He got too close to the rear end of a very skittish Holstein whose heels he had often bitten and she kicked him right in the face. It broke Bailey's jaw and gave him a concussion. The farmer would not take Bailey to the veterinarian, the vet was for livestock only. He told us children we could try to nurse him back to health, but the farmer knew he would die. We put him in some straw in the barn corridor and took him bread soaked in milk and water. He improved but he couldn't stand or walk, and sometimes had convulsions.

Several days went by and we children were discouraged. When we were at school the farmer carried the dog outside by the gate where Tippy had died and cut his throat. He had a lot of experience butchering animals. He washed away the blood this time and called the rendering truck.

We children came home to discover we were dog less again. Disappointment and sadness were a way of life.

The next summer the farmer got a fourth dog, a grown English shepherd, and was very happy with it. It was a great cow dog and a happy attentive farm dog. It guarded the house and the buildings and protected the cattle. It went everywhere with the farmer, rode in the back of pickup, on the tractor, and even learned to climb into the hay loft.

The whole family loved the dog, except me, I was trying not to love anything, and named it Skipper. Of course they didn't let him in the house. The wife wouldn't allow any animals in the house. So Skipper slept in a dog house by the back porch. Actually the same place the other dogs had slept. Skipper made everyone happy.

It was about that time that I started wishing they would send me back to the orphanage.

Skipper was an integral part of the farm and the family, but I wasn't. I got my room and board for the work I did and little else.

One January night the temperature dropped far below zero, there was ice on everything, and the wind was so cold it would condense and freeze the air as it came from your mouth and nose. We stayed warm and cozy in their house with oil burner heat, and beds which were piled with blankets and quilts. The farmer said Skipper would be fine.

The next morning the father and the son bundled up and left for the barn. On the way out of the back door, the boy called for the dog but he didn't come. They finally looked for him and found him in the dog house frozen to death. I was already in the barn, when they told me I felt nothing. The rendering truck came later that day.

I go to the south Dutch door on the barn and open the top. Standing a little to the left of the well house is a tin grain bin that had shined bright when I was young, now it is rusted and dull.

The father had always put oats in it and I remember the fall when I and the brother were playing on the grain elevator that was set up to fill the bin from the top. We wanted the elevator to go higher so we could slide down it faster. The brother went to the elevation crank to raise it and when he released the crank it spun backwards and hit him in the eye. I could see the eye was badly injured, bleeding profusely; the mother was hysterical and begged that they rush him to the doctor. The father insisted that the eye was alright and all that was needed was to stop the bleeding. Which was accomplished but the eye was swollen and the eyeball was white. After a few days the farmer admitted that his son was blind in that eye.

From this same vantage point I notice the cow tank on the other side of the fence in the cow yard. It is huge and even now still full of water. When I was young it had some bullheads in it that I caught in the pasture creek.

My mood begins to spiral with more memories. I know I am dysfunctional and a diagnosed borderline personality. I take medication, but the visit is beginning to overwhelm me.

That fall the farmer brought home the fifth dog a collie/shepherd mix and stated that it was a cow dog and assured the family that it was what he had wanted from the start. They named her Maggie. The puppy grew and matured and as it turned out she was a good cow dog. She would herd the cattle when it was required and obeyed the farmer.

I kicked her whenever I could. She didn't like me and I didn't like her.

She was never spayed, no money, and so when she went in heat, a roving male bred her. There was great excitement among the children because she was going to have puppies, but no one actually knew the sire. The children couldn't wait and joyously anticipated the birth.

When Maggie birthed the puppies the farmer watched expectantly planning to sell them for a nice profit. But when the first puppy was born it was a greyhound. The children were ecstatic when they saw the puppy and of course named it Gray. The bitch birthed seven greyhound puppies; some were hideously mixed with the shepherd. The farmer was furious.

The next day we went to school as usual, but when they came home the puppies were gone and the father said that he had given them away. The other children were heart broken.

I was glad they were gone. I hated puppies.

Eventually the mother sadistically, but truthfully, told us that the farmer had drowned the puppies in the cow tank and buried them in the cow yard. Secretly we dug them up to prove that the mother had told the truth and that the father was evil.

I already knew what he was and I hated him.

Two months later Maggie ran away in the night. The farmer searched for her, even put an ad in the local paper, but she was never found.

No one mentioned the lost dog or the drowned puppies ever. It wasn't a secret but it was never remembered.

The next puppy got parvovirus and died before it was even 10 weeks old and the farmer was very discouraged. He didn't know that when it was really sick I had smothered it. He went without a dog for several months.

I open the door and step from the barn and walk toward the hog house. When I reach it I remember the summer the father wanted to clean the three outside feed floors which were each the size of a tennis court and six inches deep in sloppy pig manure and maggots, and were very slippery. The father insisted that there was no money to buy boots, except for him, and decided that we boys should

just go barefooted. There had been no further discussion. I threw up when I slipped and fell in the manure.

There were routinely baby pigs, cute and hopeful, the sows crushed some of them and some mysteriously died. They were bred for selling when they were fattened to butchering weight. They all had to be castrated so they would gain weight faster.

I remember the steaming pails of pig testicles and the squealing piglets.

The father and the grandfather sewed the scrotum on the larger pigs so they wouldn't bleed to death.

The testicles were then soaked, salted and breaded, and fried in butter. They made great sandwiches. The father liked to trick strangers into eating them.

Months passed.

Again the farmer brought home a sixth dog, a purebred black and white English shepherd puppy, which he had gotten for free. The dog grew into the finest cattle dog he had ever had and the farmer loved the dog, which he named Bob because he had a bobbed tail. He only had to tell Bob to go get the cows in the morning and evening and Bob would run to the pasture and drive the cattle cautiously to the barn for milking. Bob and the farmer were best friends and the dog went with the farmer everywhere.

I had wanted to kill Bob to make the farmer suffer, but I was afraid.

Unfortunately Bob was afraid too, of thunder, and tried to hide anywhere he could when it was storming. The farmer thought it was the fault of us children for shooting fireworks when Bob was a puppy. Anyway the farmer was plowing in the back forty acres and Bob was following him back and forth across the field. A storm blew in with terrible thunder and the dog was frightened to death. The farmer

carried him on the tractor for a while because Bob had run under the tractor trying to hide while it was in motion. He was so frightened Bob jumped from the tractor. Then Bob kept trying to hide in fox and badger holes around the field but couldn't fit. The father continued to plow in spite of the storm until he realized Bob was gone.

He searched for his dog, ran ads in the local paper and drove to look at every stray dog that had been found. He never found his beloved dog and finally concluded that Bob must have crawled in a badger hole and the farmer had unknowingly plowed over him burying him alive.

The son and the daughter loved Bob too and were devastated over the loss. They told the farmer that they didn't want any more dogs. I was happy for several months while the farmer grieved.

I walk out the back door of the hog house.

I remembers an old boar that the father borrowed to breed his sows. The father erected an electric fence to keep the boar confined in a small space with the sows. One day the boar was rooting around and accidently dropped his ear on the electric wire. It was a fierce shock and the boar scurried to the hog house and wouldn't come out to court the sows. The farmer had to get another boar.

I liked that.

I decided to urinate on the electric wire and watch the sparks fly.

There were no sparks but the shock knocked me on my butt.

The farmer then brought home a seventh dog, another female shepherd and she was a wonderful dog. She handled the cattle beautifully and the children again loved her. She had two litters of puppies that were English shepherds and perfectly marked and the farmer was able to sell them all. But then she was bred by a mongrel and had a litter of terrible mutt puppies which upset the farmer very

much. He wouldn't pay to have her spayed and he didn't want her to get pregnant again. He didn't want the puppies so he located a breeder, a puppy farmer, in a city miles away and took the bitch and the puppies to him. The bitch was well marked and desirable breeding stock so the breeder accepted her, and agreed to take the doomed puppies as compensation to the farmer. The farmer left them all and came home. When we children came home from school the wife was crying and took the daughter and left for several weeks.

Again there was no dog. I didn't care.

When I reach the oldest machine shed with rotting wood, flaking paint and a dirt floor I walk inside. The smell is musty but the air is damper and cooler than it was outside; there is a shroud of cobwebs hanging from the rafters that make it look like it is Halloween. A flock of pigeons escape. A rusty old combine sits in the middle of the space and I think of the neighbor who lost his hand in it. I walk around it to the back corner where I buried all the cats.

A friend had told me to find two cats and tie their tales tightly together, and then throw them over a clothesline. They would fight to the death. I had been fascinated watching them kill each other, but only when no one was around.

Fortunately for them there weren't very many cats on the farm because the father and grandfather snapped their necks whenever they could catch them, and threw them in the manure pile. Of course most of them died from distemper anyway.

I always buried them no matter where they died.

I kick at the dirt in the corner until a couple of skulls appear and some other cat bones and then I actually feel some remorse.