

John Brigham's Dog

by Denise Landis

Every day from my window I saw John Brigham's dog making its way across my field. The dog picked carefully through the shorn corn stubble taking the same route, I'm guessing, it took when the stalks made a shaded rustling forest. There is a narrow path there now. I see from the droppings and chewed leavings that the night creatures have found it and use it too.

I'd cut the corn late this year. It was to be fodder for my own Guernsey cow, who died while birthing on an oppressive day in early summer. The birth and death and wet suffocating heat were too much. I gave the calf to the vet, and weeks later, remembering the standing corn, offered it to my neighbor John Brigham as a kind of peace gesture. We had a ripening quarrel over my refusal to let him hunt on my land. And there was more. I had seen his daughter and her tiny brother with welts on their arms, and tried to chat with them on the dusty road by their tidy little cabin. John Brigham appeared out of the woods, silent as a wild creature. I was taken by surprise and felt a quick jab of fear. His wife stepped out onto the porch, her smooth arms crossed. Embarrassed by my suspicions, I stammered that I had come to offer the corn.

He didn't want the corn, and I left it uncut and drying until well after the cold set in, when John Brigham disappeared. The early chill seared the ground with frost. My tulip bulbs sat in the garage unplanted, while I waited for the weather to warm again. The temperature dropped further every day, and my footsteps rang loudly on the frozen driveway between the house and the empty barn.

The search for John Brigham continued. On market days I would pass his house, watch the children running in the yard. It occurred to me that I should visit their mother, see what I could do. I baked a pumpkin bread and walked the half mile through the woods in the direction of the Brighams'. As I neared the edge of the woods I heard laughing, the Brigham children and their mother. They were

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playing hide-and-seek, a giggling, wild game. I backed away through the stalks of naked birches, fairly holding my breath until I saw the blue curl of smoke from my own chimney.

The first snow was deep and drifting, laid on the bare ground overnight. In bathrobe and slippers I went out to the woodpile for kindling. There was John Brigham's dog crossing the field beyond, heading down toward the river. I whistled the piercing note I had learned from my brothers, but the dog was oblivious, or deaf, or the wind had carried the sound away. I dropped the kindling and dashed into the breezeway to throw on snow pants, boots, my heavy work coat. The dog was a yellow dot against the white. I hurried across the field, following the narrow path. The field sloped gently, then steeply, to the bank of the river. Birds fed here in the fall, and the deer came to drink. There was a small cove, hidden from view of the house. I sometimes found shell casings here, and once, a heavy hinged trap, oiled and waiting. John Brigham's dog was now on the ice well out on the river. The drifting snow had blown off the ice in patches. The dog chose its spot, and lay, and whimpered. It looked at me for the first time and moaned.

The sky was a thin clear gray. Flecks of snow skittered on the wind, then the flakes began to whirl and the air was white. In the spring the river would move again. With rain and drought the shoreline would rise and fall. The dog rose and shook itself. I made my way back up the slope to the field, hearing only my breathing and the squeak of my boots in the snow. At the top of the hill I turned to look for the dog, but there wasn't a living thing to be seen.

