

Barnyard 1961

by Phillis Ideal

The boy heard loud barks and squeals, climbed on a chair, and looked out the window at the barnyard and the faded blood red barn. Four dogs were bringing down a struggling hog, nipping at the hog until it collapsed in terror. Its rear was raw meat, and its ears and nose were chewed. The dogs tore a hole in the hog's side, and guts were sticking out and extended.

The boy's father picked up a rifle, looked over his shoulder as he hustled out the back door, and told the boy to stay in the house. The boy ignored him and ran alongside his father. The farmer dispersed the pack of wild dogs, snarling and barking, resistant to abandoning their prey, and maneuvered the hog into the barn. The farmer and his son stood side by side in the darkened barn with striped light streaming through weathered slats. The hog stood in shocked silence. He aimed at the hog and wavered, having trouble pulling the trigger. He had many times told his son the importance of not letting an animal suffer, yet even in this extreme situation, he hesitated. He was a farmer, not a killer. The pack of wild dogs had arrived, and lived under his barn for two weeks, feeding off mice and wild life until they turned toward the hogs for food. He had locked up the piglets and was keeping an eye on the dogs, convincing himself that they would soon move on.

Behind his back, the neighboring farmers called the boy's father "a character", always ignoring the rules. This farm community was built upon generations of respect for rigid conformity and suspicion of diversity. They agreed that nature should be under strict control, compulsively mowing their side ditches and yards in competition with one another for the cleanest property, as well as, starting to mow the adjoining woods. The farmer was the only beekeeper in the area and had to drive his bees two hundred miles to find wildflower pollen.

The farmer didn't care about appearances and let the farm repairs slide. He gave his energy to cultivating a better feed product, experimenting with adding vetch and barley to the usual mix of soybeans, corn, and winter wheat, which were the standard three crops the other farmers had raised for generations. But to his neighbors' frustration and his children's embarrassment, his neglected fences freed his livestock to wander and create road hazards; and his bee keeping sent swarms of bees across the land. In the eyes of his farm community, allowing feral dogs to live under his barn was just one more example of his eccentricity.

Word traveled and the neighbors feared that their livestock would be the next victims of the wild dogs. They organized a posse, armed with twenty-twos and shotguns, tracked down, and killed eight dogs. The boy noticed that a trio of strangers with high-powered sniper rifles had joined the farmers. They had nothing at stake, but came to kill for the sport, seizing the opportunity to shoot dogs. They got the thrill they came for, and took off as mysteriously as they had shown up.

After the mayhem settled down, the farmer found that one of the feral dogs had given birth to a litter of pups; and they had hidden for weeks beneath the barn. Two pups survived: one was red and one was black. The mother disappeared as soon as the pups were old enough to make it on their own; and a few months later, the black one disappeared. The farmer put out water and food for the red one, but the pup never came near people or the family dogs. He would wait till the farmer filled his food bowl, and was ten feet away before eating. The boy soon gave up on the idea that this new pup would be his friend.

The pup grew to be a full-grown dog and was inseparable from the hogs. He was a hog in a dog's body, and the family called him "the hog dog". He lived among them and was true to his pack. He used his natural qualities to guard the hogs morning and night. He roamed with them, slept with them in the barn, and lay with them in the mud. When the hogs were shipped, he was right there. When a hog would die, the hog dog would guard the body for days, never

leaving its side, ignoring his own need for food and water. He protected the piglets; they were his pups. None of the other dogs mixed with him. If they tried to chase the hogs, they had to contend with the hog dog. He lived with the hogs for several years, and then one day he disappeared. No one knew why, but the family conjectured that the hog dog had lost his job when the farmer swapped hogs for beef, and had moved to a farm where there were still hogs to protect.

The now teenage son of the farmer stood and looked out the window to survey the all too familiar landscape. His fist clenched when he heard a tractor and the *chinka, chinka* of the mechanical knives of a sickle bar mower and knew his neighbor across the road was again clipping his side ditch grass to golf course standards. He noticed that the rabbits and birds had been forced to flee their natural habitat and had slowly disappeared. His balled fist only relaxed when his mind wandered to images of shining cities and fascinating people that he had seen on TV. He was filled with a lust for adventure.

The day after high school graduation, he left the farm forever.

