

STEVEN GULLION

STRAY DOGS

MUCK LAY IN HIS BED in the predawn darkness, listening to them whimper beneath the floorboards of his room. The house was quiet as a coffin. The wind that most nights whistled and wailed through the clapboards and around the windows, lay still.

He didn't want to get out of bed. His quilt-cave was warm but his ears were cold, and he didn't want to put his feet on those cold slabs of floorboard. So he lay still, not creaking the box springs or rustling his bedding. The whimpers were weak and ghostly, but he if breathed quietly enough, he could hear them.

After some time the whimpers stopped. *Their mamma's back*, he thought. He imagined the litter suckling at the mother dog's fat warm belly, scrumming for position, somehow finding her teats even though their eyes were not yet open. He pictured her lying on her side in the cool damp dirt of the crawlspace, lifting her head to watch them nurse.

The corners of his room grew visible as the sun rose. The two twin beds and cherry chest of drawers took up most of the space. Junior's bed was empty, its worn, gray-striped mattress unsheeted. Muck stared at the bare light bulb in its white ceramic fixture and the rubber-coated wire that ran from the light across the ceiling and down the wall. A string tied to the light's beaded pull-chain terminated in a hand-noose low enough for Muck to reach.

He heard Edgar and Jewel stirring in the room next to his. Stretching, he rubbed the grit from his eyes. Soon, Jewel would knock on his door on her way to the kitchen. *Might as well get out of bed.* He pushed himself upright and swung his feet over the side, letting them dangle for just one more minute.

Tap tap tap. "Muck, time to get up."

He held his breath and slid to the floor—*God it's cold*—then heel-walked over to the chest of drawers and got some clothes: wool socks, britches, a blue flannel shirt that had belonged to Junior. The chest smelled of camphor. He dressed, peed, and went to the kitchen.

Jewel scooped lard out of a can and dropped it into a black iron skillet. The lump of lard slid like an iceberg across the hot surface. Muck saw Edgar through the back door, scattering feed for the chickens. A dozen hens followed, bobbing and pecking at his feet.

"Ya'll hear them puppies?" Muck said.

Jewel cut him a glance but didn't say anything at first. She cracked an egg into the melting lard, and then added another. "What puppies?"

"Heard puppies cryin' under the house this morning," he said. "Under my room."

She slid a pan of biscuits into the oven. "Must be one of them strays. Crawled up under the house and whelped her litter." Sighing, she wiped her hands on a tattered dishtowel. "Your daddy'll have to get up under there and fetch 'em out."

Edgar clomped up the back steps, knocking mud off his boots, and came into the kitchen, the screen door banging against the doorframe behind him. He was breathing hard. A person might have thought him to be any age between thirty and sixty. He had been born forty-two years ago, in 1920, but farming, factory work and war age a man faster than the calendar. What hair he had was graying; what teeth remained were bad. His fingers were blunt as sausages.

Jewel looked over her shoulder at Edgar. "Muck says we got puppies under the house."

He looked at her, then at Muck. "Goddamn," he said. "Gotta do somethin' about them strays."

Edgar and Muck sat at opposite ends of the dinette table under the window. Jewel set plates laden with peppery soft-fried eggs, sausage patties and lumpy buttered biscuits in front of them. She poured coffee from a dented pot for Edgar and herself, milk for the boy. Finally she sat down between them and bowed her head. "God is great, God is good, let us thank him for this food. Amen." Muck bowed his head while she prayed but kept his eyes open, watching Edgar pulp his food with a fork.

They ate without speaking. When the last drop of egg yolk was sopped from his plate with a piece of biscuit, Edgar lit a Lucky Strike, inhaled and blew a stream of blue smoke out his nose. "Found two dead chickens today," he said. "Dogs got a hold of 'em."

"Maybe it was a wolf," Muck said. "Or a fox."

"Mm-hmm, could be. More'n likely, just a stray."

Jewel stacked their plates on hers and took them to the sink. "Ed, you gonna get them puppies out from under the house before you go to work?"

Muck held his breath. *Please wait until I get home. Please let me play with them first.*

Edgar took a drag from his cigarette and looked out the window. "No, they'll keep 'til this evenin'," he said. "I'll get 'em when I come home."

"Thanks," Muck said.

Edgar blew smoke out the corner of his mouth and dropped the butt into his coffee cup. "What for?"

"Thanks for waitin', that's all."

MUCK STOOD ON THE BLACKTOP in front of his house waiting for Jimmy Musser and Mike Blevins, boys from down the road. Four dogs were already waiting with him. Some days there might be just a couple. Other days, twenty. The dogs always followed the boys to school, rubbing up against them, chasing, jumping. Sometimes a dog would rear up, embrace a boy's leg and start humping with earnest affection. The other boys would laugh and laugh as the victim tried to free himself. Nobody owned those dogs. They had run away or been dumped by the side of the road. Once the men

got together and rounded the strays up and took them away in their trucks. The boys told each other the dogs had been driven to Wythe County and dumped by the side of someone else's road, but they wondered. The men never talked about it and the boys knew not to ask. For a week or two after the roundup the walk to school had been solemn. But a new pack soon formed, showing up one by one, emerging from the woods or the fields or the roadside. A couple of dogs from the old pack showed up again, having retraced God knows how many miles to get there. The strays made a motley gang. Many bore signs of hunting blood: beagles, retrievers, blue-tick hounds, dogs that seemed a natural part of those little farms and the hills around them. But the boys saw other breeds in the faces and carriage of the mutts: boxers, dachshunds, Pekingese, terriers, shepherds, chows, bulldogs, each a distant cousin of some sleek, purebred show dog. The boys' favorite of the current bunch appeared to be half Great Dane, half Basset Hound. They called him Frankenstein.

Jimmy and Mike straggled out of their little white houses and the three of them headed for the elementary school a mile away and across the railroad tracks, the dogs gamboling about them. The boys threw sticks for the dogs to chase, rubbed their heads, whistled them back from their sidelong runs through the fields. The bunch of them made a joyous pack.

That day, like many, a freight train was stopped on the tracks where they crossed to get to school. At nine, Jimmy was the oldest and tallest. He stepped between two boxcars, put his foot on the hitch, and boosted himself up and over, dropping to the ground on the other side of the train. The Blevins boy stooped low and scuttled beneath one of the boxcars to the other side. Muck followed him, but midway he heard the train jerk, the cars hammering against their hitches one by one as the locomotive began to move out, taking up slack. He saw the boxcar above him begin to shift, its massive iron wheels creaking against the rails. He dove through to the other side and rolled down the rock-covered grade to where Jimmy and Mike stood waiting. They hoisted him by his armpits and knocked the dust off him. The dogs barked and whined from the other side of the train, but as the boys resumed their trek the strays did not follow.

MUCK RAN HOME FROM SCHOOL that afternoon by himself. He knew he would have an hour before Edgar got home from his job at the furniture factory, toting his gray lunch pail, or Jewel climbed out of Mrs. Atkins' DeSoto, dropped off from her shift running a sewing machine at Holston Mills. For October, it

was warm, and he peeled off his navy wool jacket as he ran. The house was never locked. When he reached it he went straight to his room and pressed his ear to a crack between two floorboards. At first, there was no sound. Muck thought that maybe she had moved the litter, carried them off by their scruffs to some safer place in the woods, some place away from people. But then he heard a whimper, and then another.

He went outside and knelt in the straw-colored grass beneath the window of his room, peering through the whitewashed latticework that screened the crawlspace. He cupped his hands around his eyes, but it was too dark to see anything but little diamonds of daylight shaped by the lattice on the far side of the house. He saw a break the momma dog could have crawled through and tried to muster the courage to crawl through the gap himself and get to the puppies, but the fear of that dark, clammy dirt and the spiders that clung to the beams stopped him. He would climb apple trees until Edgar came home.

An hour later, he heard Edgar's pickup rattling over the railroad tracks and crunching down the gravel driveway next to the house. Swinging his legs from a tree branch, he waited, listening to Edgar go in through the front door and clunk around inside. Minutes later, the DeSoto stopped in front of the house and Jewel got out. She was wearing town clothes: a white short-sleeved blouse, a cotton skirt that stopped just below her knees, a faded blue cardigan sweater, black pumps. Her makeup had been recently freshened, her home-permanent hair brushed. Muck jumped from the tree and ran to greet her. "You're home," he said.

As she walked toward the house, he danced an orbit around her, bouncing and jumping like one of the strays, but staying just out of reach. He was too big for hugs and pats, and he made sure she knew it. She went up the front steps and across the wooden porch. He scrambled onto the porch railing and walked it like a balance beam to the end, where he jumped off and ran around back to wait for them.

After some time they came out the back door, the screen door creaking loudly, then slamming behind them. Jewel had changed out of her town clothes into a plain cotton shift, but Edgar wore the same dusty things he had worn all day. He carried a long metal flashlight and a wicker basket lined with one of Muck's old baby blankets: checkered, light blue. Muck imagined himself swaddled in that blanket.

Edgar knelt at the opening and shined the flashlight under the house. Muck peered through the latticework and watched as the yellow beam swept across the dirt. He saw a glint and then the light stopped on the

momma dog, her eyes reflecting bright red. Muck thought she was a retriever mix, sandy brown in color, good-sized. Then Edgar panned the light down and to the side and Muck saw the litter, eight swarming balls of fat, covered in a patina of velvety golden hair. To his surprise, he saw that most had their eyes open. They were at least a week old. They stumbled over top of one another, nibbling and nuzzling.

Edgar crawled into the darkness. Muck could see only the glare of the flashlight followed by Edgar's faint silhouette and the glowing ember of the cigarette held between his lips. Edgar crawled on his elbows and knees toward the dogs, dragging the basket behind him, brushing cobwebs away with the flashlight. Upon reaching them, he lifted the puppies one by one by their napes and placed them in the basket. The mother dog got to her feet and snuffled Edgar, moving between him and the puppies. When they were all collected, he backed out, dragging the basket, careful not to rap his head on a beam. When he finally emerged, feet first, his face was red and covered with sweat. He sat back against the stoop and, only now, took the cigarette from his mouth.

Muck carried the basket out into the sunlight, where he picked up a puppy in both hands and nuzzled it. It licked the underside of his nose. He sat on the ground, put the puppy on its back in the corral of his folded legs, and rubbed its distended belly while it nipped at his fingers. Jewel knelt by the basket and stroked one of the puppies, feeling its clean downy fur. She stood and cupped her palm over the mother dog's head, lingering for a moment before she turned and went inside.

As the other pups climbed out of the basket, Muck added them to the pile in his lap and they squirmed and crawled on him. He lay back in the grass and they attacked him, standing on his stomach, licking his ears, pulling his hair and shirtsleeves, nuzzling his belly. He giggled hard, tears running down his cheeks. He gasped for breath. The mother dog joined them, licking his eyes and face. Muck was happy.

He played with them, rolling in the grass, chasing, kissing, until the sun's rays began to filter through the treetops and cast long shadows across the yard. He felt the time slipping away. He wanted the sun to catch in the branches, to just, for one day in his life, stop and hold back the night, for one more hour, for one more minute.

Edgar came toward them from the barn. He looked at the ground as he walked, his hands busy tugging at a piece of rope, a burlap sack under his arm. He stood silently for a moment next to Muck and the puppies, pulling the rope, testing it again and again. Muck rubbed a puppy's

head, looking at Edgar's cracked brown boots. Edgar said, "It's time." Muck stood to the side as Edgar gathered the puppies, one by one, and placed them in the sack. Muck heard them mewling, yipping squeakily from inside the bag, and thought, *They're too big. It should've been done before their eyes were open.* But it couldn't be helped. Edgar lowered the last puppy into the bag and cinched the top. Muck could see the shape of their heads and bellies against the burlap, their baby paws pushing out. Edgar looped the rope around the top of the bag three times and tied it in a knot. He pulled the ends hard. The mother dog snuffled the bag and wagged her tail, pushing at the sack with her nose.

Edgar began to carry the sack away from the house, toward the field beyond the barn and the creek that marked the edge of the property, the mother dog alongside. Muck followed, a dozen paces behind. "Go on back to the house," Edgar told him. "Go on back." But Muck followed. They walked alongside the electric fence that kept the cattle penned, flanked by yellow, waist-high weeds. The sun was nearly gone by the time they could hear the water of the creek bubbling over the cool brown stones of the shallow crossover and tumbling into the pool downstream. Leafless trees leaned from the muddy bank, hanging starkly over the water, their black, silhouetted branches reaching, reaching. Muck felt cold. He hugged himself against the autumn chill and the wind that was beginning to stir. Edgar stood on the bank, holding the sack. Muck stood a few paces behind. Edgar turned toward him, but did not raise his eyes. "Go on back to the house, now."

"It's all right," Muck said, his voice quiet as a bedtime prayer. "It's all right."

Edgar looked up slowly and for just a moment met his eyes. Then he turned back to the creek and walked in, the water rushing up around his boots. He moved downstream until he was wet to his knees. The mother dog nervously stepped back and forth on the bank, an articulated whine rising from her throat. Edgar slowly lowered the sack into the stream, letting the frigid water soak through the burlap. The bag shifted as the puppies tumbled and struggled within. Edgar pushed the bag beneath the surface of the water and held it down. Muck thought about how cold Edgar's hands must be, how numb his fingers must be in that icy pool. He put his head back and saw a full moon. The sky was clear, and at that perfect moment the last rays of sunlight traced an orange border along the western horizon and blended smoothly across all the shades of blue-black to the east, where night was rising.

Muck looked at the sky until he heard Edgar wading out of the creek.

He was empty-handed. The mother dog ran along the creek bank, her nose to the ground, crying. Father and son walked back through the field, toward the light in the kitchen window. They did not speak. There was nothing to say.