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## The Farmer's Dog

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## THE FARMER'S DOG

*Claire Slepicka*

She was a waif from the roadside – like so many others before her. Her ribs pronounced her desperate state. Only hunger forced her from the protective solitude of a clump of bare-branched trees and bushes. The damp chill of last night's rain trembled her lank, awkward frame as she rose from one dry, matted pile of leaves among the shiny, wet carpet of others which lifted slightly from the sweep of November wind.

Today, her muscles tightening, she'd risk the walk. She'd risk the menacing barks of other unknown dogs.

The old farmer found her cowering near the corner of the house, tail between her legs. He'd pull a bale twine from his denim pocket and put it around her thin neck – a sign of obligation. She wouldn't object. She'd walk where he led her.

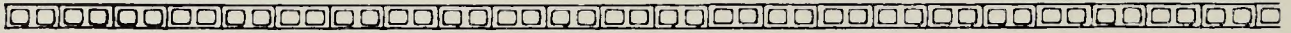
Her dinner of chunk dog food warmed by chicken broth soothed her sick belly and surged warmth to her long legs. The farmer lingered to watch her wolf and lap her food from a banged-up cooking pot. She finished with an appreciative look, tongue sweeping her chops. He extended warm fingers for her cold nose to sniff. Then he spoke a sentence, and the dog wouldn't forget the mellow sound of his voice. She breathed deeply to collect his human scent.

A cobwebbed calf pen in the barn became her new nest. Dry straw she prodded with her long nose and arranged with a digging motion till she circled twice and flopped with a thud into the golden mound. The old, fading smells of sweet hay and cow manure from another time spoke nothing profound to a simple brown dog, but the wind couldn't reach her now, and for that reason, she slept in a snug curl with her nose tucked in. Not a cat walked by. Not a barn mouse.

When a beam of soft sunlight angled from the window, highlighting strawdust in the air, the dog rustled and opened one eye. Her ears perked.

In the distance, the other dogs barked from their stations as a pick-up truck sloshed steadily along the mud driveway. Two doors banged in succession.

Then more trucks followed with the heavy sound of engines and doors banging. And intervals of voices. The ground reverberated with plodding footsteps. Still the distant dogs barked.



The new dog listened, but didn't — couldn't — bark. She was the outsider — seeking security, laying low, staying quiet. Her eyes, nervous and alert, darted at each sound while her head rested low on two extended paws. Her heart pounded.

The sounds increased all day till the voices became a din. Pairs of men shuffled into the doorway, at times, holding steaming styrofoam cups. One tossed a crumpled wrapper smelling of barbequed beef into a corner.

The other dogs quit barking. Now machinery churned. Metal jangled and clanked. One man made two trips into the barn to remove objects hanging on the barn walls.

The dog couldn't rest. She couldn't call for her breakfast. She posed motionless and uncomfortable — grasping for meaning, a tentative creature, disoriented.

Finally, the sounds divided into intervals again. The voices faded; the engines receded. The weary dog heaved a heavy sigh and napped. Then darkness brought a deep silence. Forgotten was her hunger. Forgotten, her new surroundings. She could sleep.

Her nose woke her in the pitch of dark, even before she could catch the sound of footsteps. From the distance, the welcome warm smell of chicken broth wafted to her nostrils. She stretched and felt an impulse in her tail. A flashlight now beamed into her nest, waving slightly with each slow, clomping step.

She caught the scent of the old farmer as she rose with a new-found thumping in her tail. The pot of food quite overcame her. She gulped and lapped. She hardly noticed when the farmer squatted down, his boots squeaking slightly.

A hand began to stroke her rhythmically. Somehow the warm tears that fell upon her back were as mellow as the sentence he didn't speak.