

Jewel's Friends

I have never hurt or killed an animal just to see it suffer. That's as honest as I can be about it. I have never wanted to be cruel to any living thing, though I know every living thing is cruel to other living things. That's the way of the world. It is the order of things. To keep living, all animals must kill and eat other living things; it is a necessity of life.

My Dad liked the idea that killing, butchering, and eating animals are natural acts. He set traps to snare rabbits, squirrels, or groundhogs, and he didn't always keep what he caught; sometimes he just killed it and threw the body into the bushes. He enjoyed hurting and killing animals. He thought he was tough, a mountain man; other people thought he was wise in the ways of the world. I thought he was mean.

We lived in a cabin made of yellow pine and lodge-pole pine timbers. The place smelled of pine all the time and Dad told people he built it. He told them he cut the timbers and hauled them into place all by himself. No one believed him; I didn't either.

My Mom died when I was four or five years old; I'm not exactly sure how old I was, I just know that's when Dad got even meaner.

The day after Mom's funeral, Dad burned her Bible, smashed her crucifix, and cursed the sky. He said he was sending God a message, putting God on notice. Dad wasn't going to do anything God wanted him to do. Dad was angry with God and God had better watch out, because Dad would get even with Him someday.

I hid for most of that day. In the evening, I listened to my Dad cry himself to sleep. Sometime during the night, I heard him asking, "What am I going to do with a worthless little girl? The animals will get her or something."

I was awake all night wondering what kind of animals would get me and where they would take me.

My Dad kept me at home until I was seven years old. Then one day, the Sheriff came to the cabin and told him I had to go to school. Dad told the Sheriff he was home schooling me. He had told that lie to everyone for more than a year.

The Sheriff asked to see the books Dad was using. Dad got mad, but he didn't let the Sheriff see how mad he was—he just whipped me after the Sheriff left. Dad couldn't read or write, I couldn't read or write, and neither of us owned a book. Dad knew that when I showed up at school, everyone would know he was an ignorant man.

When I was ten years old, my Dad's sister came to visit us and for a few days, Dad did not shout at me or hit me. He called me his "little Jewel," and helped me gather firewood and on one night, he even washed the dishes and swept the kitchen.

I thought he had changed, but after my aunt left, he went on a drinking binge. He came back two days later, still drunk and cursing the world. He scarred his cheek the first night he was back. He tried to use a burning stick to light a cigar. He missed the cigar and pressed the fiery end of the stick against his cheek. At the time, he laughed, dropped the stick on the floor, and slapped his cheek. Later, when he sobered up and saw his face, he began throwing things

and accusing me of burning him in his sleep. I ran out of the cabin and stayed gone for the rest of the day.

My Dad and I never had good times together, just a few times that were less bad. I never knew when he was going to start yelling and throwing things, or just sit in his chair and cry all night. On most days, he was mad at the world and I just happened to be in it; on other days, he was mad at me, specifically—those were bad days, they were terrible days.

If I had to pick a day that changed my life, it would be my twelfth birthday, the day I burned supper.

I had gone to school that day, so I knew it was the first day of May. We read stories about May Day and we sang a song about springtime and little animals being born and flowers blooming.

When I got home from school, Dad had a piece of meat on the counter—cow meat: a roast. At first, I thought he had remembered my birthday, but it turned out that someone had brought it by for us. Maybe someone else had remembered my birthday.

Dad told me to cook the meat and wake him when dinner was ready. I started the fire in the stove and put the meat into a pan. I kneaded dough to make biscuits and put some green beans in a small bowl. I guess I was trying to do too much and I was thinking too much about my life, my future. I shouldn't have been doing all that and thinking, too. I lost track of time.

I had thought I had enough wood for the stove. I didn't. I had never seen a piece of meat so big. The fire started to die down before the meat started to brown, so I went out to get more wood. Dad woke up and started shouting for his dinner. He had been drinking and his eyesight wasn't very good, either. He tried to pick up one of the raw biscuits on the tray on the counter. He got mad because the biscuit was raw and he threw the tray on the floor. He started

shouting for me. When I came back into the kitchen with the wood, he wanted to know why I hadn't started dinner yet. I knew I needed to be careful. I told him the roast was almost ready, I just needed more wood in the stove.

Sometimes when he was very hungry, he would leave me alone. I think he knew that if he started hitting me I couldn't fix dinner at the same time.

I opened the oven door and pulled the roast out a little bit, so the aroma of the meat would fill the room. That should make him hungrier; it worked. He said he was going outside to smoke and he didn't want to be bothered.

As I picked up the biscuits, I realized they were too dirty to bake, so I started mixing another batch. I guess that's when I got distracted and didn't notice the fire had started to blaze and the oven was getting too hot. I was kneading the biscuit dough when I saw the smoke and smelled the meat burning.

I was pulling the roast out when Dad walked back into the kitchen. He saw the smoke and then he saw the meat burning. It made him mad. He started shouting about how I had ruined his dinner and how he never had anything good to eat. I had ruined it, but I wasn't going to waste it. I would eat it, every bite: in the yard, like a dog.

Using some kitchen rags to keep from burning my hands, I grabbed the roasting pan and ran out the back door. I knew if he got that meat first, he would throw it at me. He threw some things and then he slammed the door, still shouting; but I couldn't hear the words very clearly. I thought I'd just sleep by the back door. It was springtime. Maybe it wouldn't be too cold tonight. If it did get cold, I could sneak in later and get some more rags to keep me warm.

For a while, I could hear him cursing and throwing things. It got quiet, then it got noisy, then it got quiet again. I sat by the back door, listening as carefully as I could. Each noise let me know he was still up and making a mess.

He was probably trying to cook something. Maybe he was trying to eat the green beans. That would be funny; they still had the ends on them and I hadn't sorted out the bad ones.

Yeah, he tried to eat them, and then he threw the bowl across the kitchen. I would be outside all night.

I sat, leaning back against the wall and smelling the pine. I liked that smell. It was from the earth. There's something comforting about the smell of pine and dirt. It grows more intense as the day's light fades. Twilight is a wonderful time. It brings the promises of night; promises that he will pass out, fall asleep, or not be home at all.

The breeze shifted slightly and I smelled the aroma of the meat. It smelled wonderful. I pulled a small piece of fat from the roast and pressed it against my lips. It was good, very good. Burning had not hurt this meat; it had made it better.

I pulled off another piece, nibbled it, and then I began to worry. Would he smell the meat and demand to have it back? I began to eat faster, tearing off larger pieces and chewing as quickly as I could.

My hands were wet with the fat of the meat. My dress was dirty from the juices that ran down my chin. The world was dim, the land was silent, and then I saw her.

Forty or fifty feet away, a shadowy figure paused. I saw the profile of pointed ears against the pale light of the new moon. She moved silently, a big dog, perhaps a stray. I sat still, studying her. She must be able to smell the meat. She must be trying to decide when it would be safe to get closer.

I was afraid, but I wanted to see her, too. I would share this meat with her; maybe she is the animal that will take me away from this.

I pulled a small piece of meat from the roast and tossed it about halfway to her. Then I waited. I knew I could outwait her because I was going to be here all night.

It took a long time. The moon was higher in the night sky. The cabin was silent and a cold chill was descending on the land when I saw her emerge from the shadows. She approached cautiously, took the meat, and returned to the shadows. There wasn't enough light to tell what color she was, but she still looked big: a very big dog.

The remaining part of the roast was large enough to cover both of my hands. I tried to pull it into two pieces, but I could only pull off smaller chunks about the size of a small fist. I crawled across the ground and put one piece at about the same place the other piece had been. Then I put another piece halfway between that piece and me. I had a third piece that I would put at my feet. I wanted a friend.

I returned to the cabin and sat with my back against the wall, waiting.

Hours passed.

The moon was almost overhead when I saw her re-emerge from the shadows. She walked a bit faster, but she was still cautious. She grabbed the first piece of meat, bit at it two or three times, and then swallowed it quickly. She walked toward the second piece of meat, took a few steps, paused, took a few more steps, paused, and then laid down on the ground, looking at me.

I looked at her. I stared into her eyes as she gazed into mine. She was a special, magical dog. She was big, she was covered in a thick coat of hair, she had a beautiful long, bushy tail, and she had eyes the color of gold. For a few moments, I wondered if I was dreaming: *Could any dog be this beautiful?*

She nudged the piece of meat with her nose. "Go ahead," I whispered, "it's yours, take it." She bit down on the meat, turned, and ran back into the shadows.

I tried to stay awake all night. I sat up straight, with my back against the timbers. My head kept nodding and my eyes burned as I tried to keep from closing them. At sun-

rise, the breeze picked up and I heard Dad stirring around. The meat was still at my feet.

Dad started shouting and I knew he was in a foul mood. I grabbed the piece of meat and threw it as far as I could. It landed near the trees where the dog had been. If Dad saw the meat, he would be angry that it was dirty or he'd start in on me for allowing it to burn. Maybe the dog would get it before Dad found it out there.

I cooked breakfast for Dad, cleaned up the kitchen, and swept up some broken glass. He had thrown a picture frame and the glass in it had broken. There were pieces of glass scattered all over the floor. It was the last picture frame we had that had glass in it. In some ways, I was glad. I had been waiting for this one. Now it too, had been broken, but the picture was all right. My aunt had given my Dad that picture. It was a picture of my Dad and Mom when they were happy, before I was born.

For the next few days, I watched for the dog. At night, when Dad was gone into town, I'd sit at the back door and watch the woods. I thought she was never coming back, but then one night, I saw her.

I didn't have any meat for her and Dad and I had only had cornmeal mush for dinner. I just sat and watched her moving slowly along the shadow line in among the trees and bushes near the forest.

I heard a knock at the front door, and that scared her away. I walked around the side of the cabin to see who was there.

"Is your Dad here?" the man asked.

"No, sir."

"Are you Jewel?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Reverend Webster from the All Saints Church. I'm

new to this area and I dropped by to see if you need anything.”

“No. We’re fine.”

“You don’t need any food or anything?”

“No, sir.”

“I’ll come back in a few days. If you need anything, let me know.”

“All right.”

“Miss?” the Reverend asked. “Are you alone?”

“No. I have a friend, out back.”

“Well, you two be careful. People are saying there’s a pack of wolves around here, somewhere close. A few days ago, Mr. Hollister lost a calf and people have been hearing wolves howling up at Garson’s Ridge; that’s only five miles from here. Be careful. Don’t leave your house at night and keep your doors and windows closed. You and your friend should stay inside until your dad gets home.”

“We will.”

I started walking back to my waiting place when I heard the Reverend talking to someone. My Dad was back. Now I knew I couldn’t bring the dog inside. If my Dad had been gone another hour he would usually be gone for the night. Now that helpless dog was going to be outside and the wolves might get her. I didn’t know what to do, but I knew I couldn’t do anything for her with my Dad around.

The two men talked for a while and then I heard my Dad calling for me. He sounded drunk and he sounded polite; the Reverend must still be in our front yard.

I walked around the side of the cabin and the two men were still talking. As I walked up to them, my Dad turned to me and said, “Jewel, you need some money for school clothes, don’t you?”

I nodded my head slowly. I wasn't sure if lying to a Reverend was a bigger sin than lying to my aunt. I did know my Dad was not going to tell this man that he wanted money so he could go back to the bar. Most people know how my Dad spends money: whiskey. However, the Reverend was new to town, so my Dad had a new source of booze money.

The Reverend reached into his pocket and handed my Dad some money, paper money, several pieces of paper money. I didn't know how much he gave him, but it looked like a lot of money. My Dad pushed the money into his pocket without looking at it.

"You are an unselfish man," the Reverend said as he nodded his head in approval, "thinking only of your daughter."

"Jewel is all I have," Dad said, sounding sincere. "We don't have much, but I couldn't stand to see her go without."

"I'll see if there's more we can do for you," the Reverend said. "Will we be seeing you in church on Sunday? Perhaps I could give you more then."

"Yes," Dad said. "We'll be there. We don't get to church as often as I would like, but we read the Good Book every morning and I make sure Jewel prays every night."

"A selfless, devoted parent," the Reverend said. "I am glad I met you."

The Reverend shook Dad's hand and left.

When the Reverend was out of sight, Dad turned to me and asked, "Where's your friend?"

"What?" I asked. "Who do you mean?"

"Are you calling the preacher a liar?"

"No!"

"He said you had a friend."

"I told him that when he asked if I was alone."

"There's no one else here?"

"No."

"I need to buy some things. If that preacher ever asks you, you tell him I bought you a new dress—a fancy dress—and you ripped it at school."

"I will."

"You will what?" Dad asked, sounding angrier.

"I'll tell him you got me a new dress and I ruined it."

"Right!"

He slapped me hard on the face.

"That's just a hint of what I'll do to you if you tell anyone I didn't get you a dress. Now get in the cabin, close the windows, and lock the doors. Don't let anyone in; I won't be back tonight."

I walked up the steps to the front door, went inside, and locked the door behind me. At least now, I can help that dog; I'll save her from the wolves.

I waited about an hour before I went to the back door. Usually Dad stays gone, but sometimes he remembers something he wants and comes back for it. I wanted to be sure that he was not coming back tonight.

The cabin was dark and the night was very dark when I opened the back door. It creaked as I pushed it open. I propped a broom against it to keep it open.

I sat just inside the door watching for her. Twice I thought I saw her, and then she'd slip into the shadows. I didn't have anything for her. However, I could keep her safe inside.

I don't know what time it was when I saw her walking toward me. She trotted to the back door; I think she was happy. She paused at the step and sniffed. I talked gently—

almost in a whisper—and invited her in to the cabin. She walked through the door and sniffed me. She began at my legs and sometimes she made a snorting sound as she worked her way up. She nuzzled her snout against my thigh and I could tell she was afraid.

I stood up slowly and walked to a corner in the kitchen.

“I’ll make a bed for you for the night, right here,” I said.

I gathered up some kitchen towels and dropped them on the floor. I found bits of cloth, a hand towel, and the blanket from my bed, and made a soft place for her to lie down. She pawed at the materials and sniffed everything. She moved things into a bunch, pressed them down, and then bunched them up again. I tried to help, but she seemed too particular. Finally, she settled down. I sat down next to her.

I rubbed her hips and gently stroked her bushy tail. Slowly she became more relaxed. She stretched and yawned. I rested my hand on her belly and something moved. Something inside her moved! She was going to be a mother. Now I knew why she kept arranging the towels and the blanket.

I didn’t know how to help with puppies. I didn’t know what to do. I knew she couldn’t go back out there. She couldn’t have these puppies with wolves in the forest. I decided that no matter what Dad did to me, no matter how hard he beat me, I wasn’t going to let the wolves get her puppies.

Maybe Dad would be gone tomorrow. Maybe he had enough money to be gone for two or three days. It had happened before. When my Aunt left, he was gone for almost two days. If we had two days, maybe I could get that Reverend and he could help me find a home for her; a safe place for her to have her puppies.

Another dog stood in the doorway. He sniffed the air and made a short, yipping sound. She answered him and he trotted into the room. He stopped in his tracks when he saw

me. He studied me for a few seconds, and then he lowered his head and moved forward, toward me.

“You’re all right,” I said, quietly. “I won’t let anyone hurt you. Are you the daddy?”

He walked closer to me and sniffed me the same way the mother dog did, sniffing, and snorting all over my body. Then he began licking my hand as it rested on the mother dog.

I reached up and scratched the top of his head. He was also a very big dog. He had the same thick hair and long bushy tail. The mother dog began panting and I reached to scratch her head, too. She licked my hand and her tongue was very dry.

“You need water,” I said as I stood and walked to the sink. I filled a bowl with water and put it between the two dogs. They were very messy drinkers. They slobbered most of the water onto the floor, and then lapped it up.

Another dog was at the door. I think it was a girl dog, a young dog. She was smaller than the mother dog. She entered the room and walked to the far side. She sat down and watched for a few moments and then she ran out the door.

The mother dog made a soft, whimpering sound, and the towels and the blanket looked wet. I watched as a tiny puppy emerged from the mother and she began licking it hard. I thought she was licking too hard, but she must have needed to do that to get him cleaned up. I watched another and then another puppy come into the world.

Four tiny puppies were born in my kitchen that night. I don’t know how long it took. I don’t know what else happened, either. I didn’t touch the puppies. I didn’t want to hurt them. When the mother was finished, I gave her water. She was very thirsty.

After the last puppy was born, I realized I had left the back door open and a wolf could have gotten in, so I walked

to the door to close it. Outside there were five more dogs; just like the mother dog. Each one huge, with thick hair and a bushy tail, and each one had eyes the color of gold.

“Come on,” I called to them. “Get inside! I don’t want the wolves to get any of you.”

The smaller girl dog was first. She trotted into the kitchen and the others followed. When they were all inside, I locked the back door.

I don’t know how dogs talk to each other, but somehow they knew it was safe inside the cabin. Each dog walked by the mother dog and looked at the puppies.

I knew if my Dad came back, I would need to get the puppies outside quickly, so I found a basket that would hold them all and set it by the mother dog. I told her that if my Dad came back, we would need to run into the forest because he would hurt her babies. I think she understood.

We all lay down on the kitchen floor to sleep—seven big dogs, four tiny puppies, and me.

I slept too long. I woke when I heard my Dad pounding on the front door. It was so loud and then he began shouting at me. He was scaring the puppies and the big dogs were mad. They growled and three of them started toward the door. I ran to the door and asked my Dad to stop hitting it. I begged him to stop. He kept pounding the door and telling me to unlock it. I told him I couldn’t. It made him madder.

I started to cry. The daddy dog ran into the room and pushed me away from the door, and I fell on the floor. Two dogs ran up and stood next to me, growling at the door. The hair on their backs stood up and they sounded very mean. My Dad kept pounding on the door. The daddy dog began jumping at the door and now five dogs were pawing and biting at the window. They had deep growls and loud barks, and they sounded very scary.

I kept screaming ‘no, no, no.’ I was afraid my Dad would

hurt the dogs.

I heard my Dad say, "Oh God! No!" and then he ran away.

I watched from the window as he ran down the road.

I ran back into the kitchen and the mother dog was standing in front of her babies.

"We need to go," I told her. She was afraid. She was growling deep and baring her teeth. I hugged her and told her she was all right, I wouldn't let anyone hurt her babies.

We put the puppies in the basket and I carried them into the forest. We walked for a long time; I don't know exactly how long. Some of the dogs ran ahead and some lagged behind us. The mother dog walked beside me and the daddy dog moved ahead and then behind.

I was the slowest one. I carried the four tiny puppies in the basket and I was being very careful. We walked until about noon and I knew the puppies must be hungry. We were deep in the woods and I was lost. The daddy dog found a small cave in a rocky slope leading down to a creek. All the dogs gathered around the entrance. Carrying the puppies, I crawled back into the cave, and the mother dog followed. She lay down on the moist earth and I gave her each of her babies and helped them get into a position to nurse from her.

I stayed with the mother dog that afternoon, but I was getting hungry and I knew I needed to get back. However, I didn't know how.

I told the mother dog "Goodbye," and told her to come see me when her babies were older. I crawled out of the cave and looked around. The sun was setting and twilight would soon be here. I listened but I couldn't hear any sounds. I started to walk down the hill toward the creek and the smaller girl dog walked up beside me and pushed me to my left.

“This way?” I asked. “Is this the way to go?”

The dog ran ahead of me, and then paused until I caught up with her. Then I noticed that all five of the dogs were with me—taking me back.

We made good time through the woods and the dogs would run ahead, wait for me, and then run ahead again.

Once, they stopped and cowered down and I got down on the ground too, and listened. I didn’t hear anything. I knew their hearing was better than mine was, so I waited with them.

It was late when I got back to the cabin; it was empty. As I walked toward the back door, the dogs all turned and ran into the shadows.

I laid down on the towels and blankets in the kitchen and fell asleep. Sometime later, I heard people in the yard and then the front door opened.

My Dad walked into the kitchen with the Sheriff and several other men. I thought I was in trouble.

My Dad looked at me and began shouting, “It’s her ghost. She’s come back to get me!”

The Sheriff walked toward me and asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” I said. “What’s wrong? Am I in trouble?”

“Did wolves attack you?” he asked, sounding confused.

“No,” I said.

The Sheriff looked at Dad.

“They got her!” he said. “They grabbed her and tore her apart, I heard her screaming! I tried to save her but there were too many of them—maybe ten or fifteen huge wolves tearing her apart.”

“It’s the whiskey,” the Sheriff said. “He is hallucinating. We’ve wasted an entire day searching the country side.”

"She's dead!" my Dad insisted. "I saw her die. I heard her screaming. This is a ghost. Don't believe what it tells you! Hit it! Get it out of here! Make it go away!"

"We need to take him to the county asylum," one man said.

"What about her?" another man asked.

"Jewel can stay with us," the Reverend said. "We'll take care of her until we can arrange something permanent."

"Wolves!" my Dad shouted as they escorted him from the cabin. "The wolves got Jewel. She's not real. Don't take her with you—she's not real—she's a ghost."

"Pathetic case," the Sheriff said. "I don't think he will ever be right in the head. He's sure he saw wolves. Can you believe it? Has anyone seen wolves around here?"

"I haven't seen any," I said.

"Jewel, you don't need to pack anything for now," the Reverend said. "My daughters have clothes that will fit you and I know they would like to share, and tomorrow we'll buy you a new dress."

"Do your daughters like puppies?" I asked as we walked out the door for the last time.