The Bad Blood

Joan Graham*

*Iowa State University

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Something had struck me hard on the shoulder. The sharp pain made me bite my lower lip as tears welled up in my eyes. In my surprise, I had dropped the pails of ground corn I was carrying. I rubbed my bruised arm, blinked the wetness away, and looked around. There was no one to be seen. Yet, lying on the ground a few feet away was a rock the size of a golf ball.

"Come on, David, quit it. Come and help me with the chores." No answer. Nothing moved except the steers milling by the gate ahead.

If I could just see him. The eerie way that he sneaked around unnerved me. He had already hidden the little red wagon from me, forcing me to carry the heavy buckets of corn. I uprighted the pails, scooped up the spilled corn with my hands and threw it back with the rest of it.

Mom was talking with our neighbor-lady. "You know, Agnes, I worry about David. When he was just a baby, he'd put his hand on the hot stove. I'd pull it away and he'd determinedly put it right back. Just like he was proving he had some power over the stove. And just the other day, I caught him drowning a kitten out in the cattle tank. I don't know what to do with him."

"Come Bossie, come Bossie." I had reached the gate and opened it. As I pushed my way through the crowded steers, they stuck their heads in the buckets and gulped down the corn, making the pails heavier, and pushing and butting each other around, knocked against me, throwing me off balance.

"Hayeh! Move it! Hee ahh!" At last I reached the feed bunk and set down the pails. I chased the steers away and quickly picked up a pail and spread its contents the length of the bunk; the second one I managed less successfully because their heads were crowded together as they ate. I did as well as I
could and then returned to the barn for more corn to repeat the process.

"Shame on you, Jill. How can you say you hate your own brother? He's your own flesh and blood. How would you feel if he got killed or something? Nothing should ever come between you. Nothing. Ever."

I finished filling the pails, picked them up and headed for the steer pen. As I came around the corner of the barn, I saw all twenty steers grazing hungrily in the lawn. The gate that I had so carefully secured stood open! David.

I stomped into the pen and dumped the corn. None of the steers followed me. They wouldn't when they had grass to eat.

Angrily, I ran back to the barn, filled the buckets again, then dumped them in the feed bunk. That done, I could start getting the steers in. I whistled for my dog. No answer. He had been with me a short time ago.

"Amigo! Here boy! Come on." There was still nothing. There was no time to lose. I had to get the steers in before they headed down the road.

"Heah!" I ran at the nearest calf. It trotted a few steps, turned and ran past me. I circled behind them all and tried to chase them as a herd. They started moving toward the gate then and I ran frantically back and forth, keeping them together. Suddenly, one broke and ran straight at me. I jumped out of the way just in time. The others scattered and doubled back. I tried over and over and over again, and got the same results each time.

"David! Help me! David!" I screamed as loud as I could. The pressure and frustration was more than I could take. My legs turned to water and I sank to the ground and sobbed hysterically.

When no more tears would come, I looked up. My eyes were puffy and red and my throat ached. The steers had disappeared. Probably down the road.

I thought I heard whining somewhere. "Amigo! Here boy! Come on. Amigo!" My voice was raspy now, but carried a flicker of hope. "Amigo!"

There was whining somewhere, and it sounded like it was
coming from the shed behind the house. I ran and unlocked the door. Amigo shot out and jumped on me, happy to be freed. “Okay, okay boy. We’ve got some work to do.”

We found the steers across the road in our neighbor’s yard. No one was home, but together, Amigo and I had the calves in their pen in a short time. “Good boy.” I praised him as the last steer ran in and I closed the gate. I kneeled down and pulled Amigo’s head to my chest and hugged him tightly. He pushed against me to bury his head even deeper in my embrace.

“Did you see what David did?” My little brother, Steven, was looking at me with awe-stricken eyes. “He argued with mother until she cried and then while he hugged her and patted her on the back, he grinned at me over her shoulder and winked. Then he told her that he loved her and that he didn’t mean to be bad.”

All of a sudden, I heard the hollow thud of a rock smashing into flesh. Amigo yelped with pain and pulled away. Fierce hatred that had been smoldering for years burned within me. “David! You God-damned bastard! You son-of-a-bitch!” I visualized him snickering to himself at my outburst. I had never won a fight with him, even though I was two years older. He had demon-like strength.

The sun had become a faint orange glow in the western sky. It was past time that chores should be finished. I went to the barn and snapped on the light switch. There was no response. David must have turned off the main power switch by the house. The back of my neck tingled as I thought I saw something move in the dark interior of a stall.

“David, is that you? Are you there?” Rather than force myself to see what it was, I went into the dark feed room to get some corn, gripping Amigo’s collar tightly. I groped along the wall until I found the shovel and buckets. Still holding tightly to Amigo, I scooped the corn into the pails. Having the dog there comforted and calmed me.

If you help me with chores, I'll make some cookies for you when we get in the house.”

In answer, the door slammed shut. The sharp noise shocked me; adrenalin rushed through my body. I whirled around, confused about what to do. My sluggish brain recorded the “clink” as the latch fell in place, but it took several moments to realize its significance. With no further call to action, the adrenalin faded and left me weak and shaking.

Locked in. I pushed against the door, gingerly at first, but then with more force. There was no way out. I would just have to remain until he was through playing with me, or the rest of the family got home.

“David, come on. I don’t appreciate your joke at all. Let me out! Please, David!” I heard no sounds beyond the door. He must have left.

I felt as if demonic faces were leering at me from the darkness. At any minute their eyes would glow and their cold boney fingers would clutch at the back of my neck. My scalp prickled and I trembled.

Something suddenly brushed against my leg! I screamed, turned and fled until I slammed into the wall and fell. The impact cleared my head. It had not been some unearthly hand that had reached for me. It had been Amigo. I had forgotten him in my fright.

Relieved, I propped myself up against the wall and held him in my lap. I had an ally now, and I felt safer.

As time passed, and nothing happened, I relaxed a bit. What could David do to me anyway? At worst I’d have to stay locked up until I was let out. That wasn’t so bad. I fondled and rubbed Amigo’s ears and patted his head.

“He wants to get you riled, Jill. Try ignoring him. All you two ever do is fight. I’ve never seen the like of it. In my day, if we would have argued like that, my dad would have taken the razor strap to all of us. He always said that it took two to tangle and one was just as guilty as the other.

“If your father or I hear you two at it again, we’re punishing both of you, no matter who starts it. He’s your brother, young lady, and I won’t have you bickering back and
Someday one of you is going to get mad enough to hurt the other. You must treat your brother with love. Is that clear?"

Straw rustling outside the feed room brought me back to my senses. I gripped Amigo and strained to listen. The noise stopped but I could feel that someone was there. Not able to take the silence any more, I broke it. "Come on, David. I know it's you. There's no use to pretend that it's not. Please let me out."

He was slowly lifting the latch on the door. I could feel the muscles in Amigo's body tense. I knew that his hackles were raised. The thought gave me a bit of courage.

The hinges creaked as the door slowly opened. I involuntarily shuddered but reassured myself that it had to be David.

It came in slowly, dragging its feet. Suddenly, I heard a "click" and its face glowed as if it had liquid fire in its mouth. It wasn't human! The eerie luminescence was concentrated around its cheeks, making the veins stand out clearly. Its staring eyes were opened wide, darkly shadowed from the glow beneath. It came at me, its fingers arched, ready to claw me. I backed against a corner and flattened into it. Amigo crouched in front of me, blocking the creature's path.

I screamed and cowered to the floor, covering my head with my arms as the monster growled and leaped forward.

With an echoing snarl, Amigo attacked. Their bodies met and crashed to the ground. Molten fire fell to the floor and illuminated the thrashing figures. The face no longer glowed. My frozen brain slowly realized that Amigo was tearing at David. My brother!

"Amigo!" The terrified shriek was my own. It stopped him as if he'd been shot. He slunk to the ground, tail between his legs.

David got unsteadily to his feet and leaned against the door jamb, breathing hard. Something made me keep my distance. The miniature flashlight that had fallen from his mouth lit the room dimly.

"God-damned dog ought to be shot." He reached out into the corridor and flicked the light switch on. This time the barn flooded with light.
His face was ashen white except for the vivid streak of blood Amigo's teeth had left across his cheek. He daubed at it with a finger and stared at it for a long time.

"Are you okay?" My voice faltered.

"Your God-damned fucking dog attacked me." He said it without variation, each word spoken in the same deliberate tone, each emphasized the same way. Slowly turning his head, he looked at me through slitted eyes.

"Ralph, call the hospital and tell them I'm bringing Steven in for stitches. David and he had a fight. You deal with your son while I'm gone. I don't want to hear another word about it when I get back. Steven's had enough punishment for his part in it this time."

He grinned at me now, taunting. "Dog like that's gotta be killed." He reached up on the wall and pulled down a pitchfork.

"Mommy." Steven was crying. "D-David killed my pigeon. It pecked h-him and he broke its n-neck. We caught it in the barn to make a p-pet for me and now it's dead!"

"No David! Don't! He didn't mean to hurt you. He was just protecting me." My voice held a desperate note. I moved to stand between them as I pleaded with him.

"Scared for your pooch, huh? Too bad, scaredy-cat. We'll just see how tough he really is. Now get out of my way." He shoved me hard and I stumbled backward and hit the wall. He swung out but only caught Amigo in the ribs with the broad side of the fork. Amigo yelped with pain and shot through the open door.

Something in me snapped. All I could think of was smashing his leering face. I wanted to kill. I jumped him and clawed at his face. He swung around, trying to slug me with the pitchfork. It caught on the wall and he lost his grip on it. It clattered to the floor.

He grabbed my hair and pulled it out by the roots. My eyes watered; things became blurry. I struck out blindly, smashing his face with my fist. We broke apart then and he jumped beyond my reach. "What's the matter, chicken? Don't
you even know how to fight? I'll have to teach you what a real fight feels like as soon as I take care of your mutt. Guess I'll have to get a gun and shoot him if he's going to run."

He started for the door. "No!" I tackled his legs. We were both down then, rolling and thrashing on the floor. Sometimes he was on top, biting, kicking, scratching; sometimes I was. Finally he got a hold on me, pinning me. Sitting on top, he grinned, showing his clenched teeth. Each time I struggled, he gripped my arms tighter, pinching them, making them ache. "You're just a weakling. I can do anything to you and you can't stop me." He spit in my face and laughed, taunting me.

I wrenched an arm free and struck out to stop the taunting. Warm blood dripped from his nose into my face. I reached up and smeared it across his face, scratching at his eyes. They no longer looked human; something smoldered in them.

It angered me and I lost all reason. With unbelievable strength I threw him off of me and jumped on him as he got up, smashing his head against the wall. My hands found a hold on his throat and I squeezed, watching his eyes bulge, his face turn red. His nostrils were enlarged, fighting for air where there was none. He clawed at my hands, ripping flesh from them, but I did not feel it. I wanted to squeeze that look from him.

He was really scared now, I could see that. The inhuman look had vanished from his eyes and had been replaced by terror.

"How do you like it, you God-damned bastard? How do you like to be scared?" I screamed it over and over again. At last he went limp. A great feeling of accomplishment swept over me.

"Shame on you, Jill. How can you say that you hate your own brother? He's your own flesh and blood. How would you feel if he got killed or something? Nothing should ever come between you. Ever. Treat him with love. . . . love . . . love . . ."

Art: Anony