Peaceful Struggle

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Tobb stood in the thick dust of the corral. The toe of his scuffed, thin-soled boot jabbed unconsciously at a pile of dung. Black flies hovered over it, buzzing irritably at their interruption. He peered at his father from the shade of a sweat-stained straw hat. His father squinted at the yellow, withering fields of corn surrounding, suffocating, the lonely buildings of the Nebraska farm. An August sun sent shimmering heat waves up from the powder-dry dirt. Dust and pollen hung motionless in the heavy air.

"I don't have to shoot her, do I, Pa?" He looked at the dog lying by his feet. Her head lay comfortably on her paws. A little cloud of dust rose around her tail as it wagged in appreciation of the attention. A mongrel, mostly collie. A good worker with cattle when she wasn't in heat. Her pup lay in the dust a short distance away, his head up, alert, watching the busy chickens scratch in the dung. By some choice of nature, more of a collie than she. Bigger and stronger. She taught him her knowledge of cattle, and he learned more.

Andy looked at the slender frame of his son. "When you decided to keep that pup, I told you you'd have to get rid of the bitch. We can't afford 'em both." He was a heavy, slow, methodical man, who placed a high value on responsibility and expected his son to do the same.

Tobb squinted his moist eyes. Sweat, mixed with dust, formed lines across his tanned forehead. He remembered the promise made so long ago. Now the promise was real. He brushed a bead of sweat from his sharp, bony nose. "Will you do it, Pa?"

"She's your dog. You're the one to do it." Andy balanced a hammer in a calloused hand. His left hand opened and
closed on a spike, soon to be driven into the warped, sagging, corral fence.

“We could give her away,” Tobb said hopefully. His eyes widened with the thought of that possibility.

“None of the farmers around here’d have her—you know that.” Andy’s face hardened beneath the gray and black stubble of whiskers.

Tobb shoved his hands into the pockets of his faded blue overalls and kicked violently at the dust. He knew he was losing. His father was a stern man when it came to promises. He was right about nobody wanting the bitch. And he was right about not being able to feed both of them. Tobb looked down at the dust rising from his feet. “I wish we’d never kept that darn pup.”

“Go on, son. Get your rifle and take her off where your sister can’t hear. Take a shovel if you want to bury her. Go on.” Andy put his big hand on the boy’s shoulder. The roughness was gone from his voice. “The pup’s a better dog.”

Tobb shuffled across the dusty corral. The words of his father rang in his ears. The pup is a better dog. That’s why he chose him from the litter and destroyed the rest. His grandfather had said that would be a good pup. How many litters had they destroyed? Tobb had helped his father. The furry, sticky-eyed pups were easily killed. He hated killing them, made him sick at first; but it was best—they’d just roam the countryside, cold and hungry, killing poultry. Couldn’t have her spayed. Costs too much; times are tough. First the drought and then, when it broke, the hail.

The boy passed through the corral gate and walked slowly toward a shabby, unpainted shed. The pup bounded ahead, clearing a path through the angry, squawking hens. The old dog walked placidly at Tobb’s heel. She panted from the August heat. Why hadn’t Pa forgotten the promise? Damn it, why?

Tobb pulled a shovel from between two nails in the leaning tool-shed. He called the wiggling, bouncing pup into the dark, dirt-floored building, stepped out and slammed the sagging door closed. He dropped the smooth
peg through the staple, in front of the hasp. “Stay in there, ya-son-of-a-bitch,” he muttered. Tears worked their way through the dust and fuzz of his sharp face.

He shuffled across the hard, packed dirt of the yard. A few clumps of weeds grew close to the crumbling foundation of the squat, four-room house. Dried, warped siding sagged from the torturous weather of the Nebraska seasons. Thin, blue smoke rolled slowly out of the brick chimney. Mom is baking, Tobb thought, as he creaked across the open porch. In the square, white, oak-floored kitchen, his mother bent over a pan of moist dough. A small, graying woman in a neat, print dress. Tobb resembled his mother, thin, sharp-faced, high cheek bones, freckles across a hooked protruding nose, a small mouth capable of sharp criticism. He always felt more comfortable with her than with his father, but he tried to avoid her eyes as he crossed in front of the black, bulging range and pulled a rusty barreled, .22 caliber rifle from the rack. He sniffled as he stuffed a handful of cartridges into a pocket of his bibbed overalls.

“You got a cold, Tobb?” asked the high, tired voice of his mother.

Tobb looked at his sister playing an imaginary mother in the parlor. He held back a sob by pushing his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “No,” he choked out. As he hurriedly crossed the room, he coughed to insinuate a lie. He passed through the door without seeing the tears in his mother’s eyes.

The old dog moved out of the shade of a quiet elm tree and fell in at heel as Tobb walked across the open pasture. The smooth, wooden shovel handle dug painfully into his bony shoulder. The rifle lay loosely in the crook of his arm as it had on so many occasions. This time, it felt heavier and awkward. A sad procession across the stubble of brown grass toward the dark timber. A quiet dog. A tear-stained face.


Tobb felt it. For the good of all, destroy a few. Man or animals. Destroy to save. His father knew it. And his grandfather. Animals believed it—accepted it. Survival. Survival for all, death for a few. Tobb stood before it. Shivered in its path. He remembered the sweet music from the phonograph. The delicate poetry from the soft-leather book. He recalled the disgust on his father's face when he found his wife reading poetry, the boy sitting at his mother's feet listening intently to the rhythmical words. He recalled how he had vomited in the dirt when he helped, for the first time, castrate pigs. Sweat, dust, dung. Bleeding, wiggling, squealing porkers. His father had sworn and made him work in his own vomit. He cried himself to sleep that night. He wanted his father to be proud of him. So he learned about survival. For his father.

The dog felt the heavy August heat lift from the long hair on her body. She ran ahead of Tobb sniffing, searching, pretending to be a beagle, pointer, spaniel. The sharp claws of a squirrel lifted him up the rough bark of a maple seconds before the dog could pounce. A debate began between the chattering squirrel on a limb and the frenzied dog. Tobb dropped the shovel, automatically loaded the rifle, automatically saw the furry head of the squirrel in the notch of the open sight. He squeezed the trigger; heard the warm body thump on the matted grass. They ran between the trees, through the brush, looking for another squirrel, another target. Tobb ran as quietly as he could beneath the weight of the shovel and gun. The tail of the dead squirrel protruding from his baggy hip-pocket whipped furiously, almost as if the small animal was still alive. The boy felt the cool wind through his sweat-damp shirt, his mouth sagged from the exhausting pace. Then the dog treed another chattering squirrel. An accurate, deadly bullet found its mark. A good team, hunter and dog. Then there was another squirrel, another careful aim, another thump on the matted grass. It was a wonderful game his father had
taught him—the hunter and the hunted. His father had taught him well how to kill.

And then the fire went out. The fire of the hunt that drives men to kill for sport. Tobb sat in the cool grass with his back against a tree. There was a confused look in his pale blue eyes. A shock of straw-yellow hair fell on his freckled forehead as he pushed the tattered hat back on his head. He thought about survival and sport. Could men believe in both? Could men believe in the survival of the fittest and, rifle in hand, shoot down an animal in the name of sport? Could men believe in survival of the fittest? Could destruction be good?

The dog panted up to him. Stretched out on the grass and laid her head on his leg. He fondled the head, the warm, knowing head.

He looked back at his school work. Nothing about survival there, only the good, the beautiful, the tangible. The poetry mentioned flowers, valleys, moons, gods and love. Nothing about hate and death. The music was for all to enjoy—or was it for the survivors? Then he was a man. A tall, straight, handsome man in a blue suit. He was gentle like his mother. He went to New York, Paris, Rome, London—read poetry and played a big piano in front of a hundred-piece orchestra—a thousand people sat in the audience listening to his graceful hands fly over the white keys. And he told everyone that every living thing should be allowed to live. They listened to him; believed him, because he had a million dollars and was gentle. Then he was on the farm walking in the dust behind torn-eared mules and he couldn't breathe—butterflies, rabbits, birds, cows, dogs, and people were crowded about him—as far as the eye could see people, animals, insects and birds were packed together forming a sea of movement and color. The field he was discing shrank and shrank and shrank and suddenly there was only enough room for him to stand.

Tobb's body jerked as a prickly finger of fear moved up his back. The dog moved her head to a more comfortable spot on his thigh. Her belly lay flat on the cool ground. She slept. Tobb rubbed his cheeks and forehead with the grimy
heel of his hand. His face felt cold—damp cold. His eyes burnt, and when he touched the corners with a finger they filled with tears. He pulled the rifle through the grass; lifted the barrel up and across his thigh, the muzzle beside the shaggy head of the sleeping dog. This was better. No trembling hand or blurred vision to spoil the aim. Sure, quick, painless. It took a long time to force his hand down to the hammer. A sweaty, calloused thumb trembled on the black metal. The rasping click shattered the quiet. The old dog opened her eyes. Big brown eyes—full of love for her master.

The boy saw again the dog working the cattle toward the corral. Back and forth behind the heels of the herd. Nipping this one, that one. Ducking agilely away from the bone-crushing kicks. He saw her swimming with him in Johnson’s pond. Splashing, enjoying the coolness of the clean water. He again watched her work the cattle, this time with the pup. His first lesson. Wild, unmanageable, unruly. His father and he stood at the corral watching her patience. They talked about the neighbor who had been foreclosed and left with nothing and nowhere to go. “The big gobble up the little,” his father said. “Ya got to get big or be gobbled up. It’s the law of nature, son. Ya have to do unpleasant things sometimes, just so’s ya can stay ahead.”

Tobb inched his sweaty finger to the trigger. The rough bark bit into his back. The light penetrated the gloom and burnt his eyes. The pup’s a better dog. His neck ached from the weight of his head. We can’t afford ‘em both. His finger trembled on the trigger. We’ll get rid of the bitch when the pup’s big enough. Black, stifling darkness came before his eyes. You’re the one to do it, she’s your dog. Tears spilled down his cheeks. Dark stains on a blue shirt. You’re the one to do it.

The bullet crashed through the skull. Ripped, crushed its way to the other side—whined into the trees. Legs convulsed, pawed at the grass. Blood trickled through the brown fur; dripped on the faded overalls; round, dark stains of death, growing, growing. His burning eyes didn’t see; they were pushed into his wet, cold hands. Tobb’s chest heaved
with short quick sobs. The darkness pushed against his eyes, blinded him, filled his mouth, suffocated him. He tried to push the quivering corpse away. Warm blood stuck to his fingers. His body became rigid with fear. He struggled up, ran on stiff, faltering legs, tripped, fell, floundered in the brush. The darkness pushed against him and he lay quiet, breathing in quick spasms. The air came to his lungs and forced the darkness away.

He buried her in a shallow grave beneath the towering trees. As he walked through the screaming silent world it pressed heavily on his shoulders. The tears on his cheeks dried; his stomach settled and no longer threatened upheaval. Tobb thought of his father, his grandfather, and the weight lifted from his shoulders. He had found a place in the peaceful struggle. He saw the sun slanting over the farm buildings across the open field. His father would be waiting, his eyes warm and quiet. Nothing would be said. Nothing would need to be said.

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Remembering

The snow lay blue and quiet, and the tortured landscape of dirty streets and earth and cinders was united again. Fluffy blue cars swooshed by like big, slow-moving brooms. People walked with heads up, for there was no wind, and the mood of the night was strong.

Augie let his car roll to a stop in the deep snow next to the curb. He turned off the motor and then sat quite still in the sudden silence. Thick crystals of frost had begun to cover the windshield, and still he sat motionless. Suddenly, Augie was aware of the increasing chill inside the car, and he slipped the glove off his left hand. Deftly, he lit a cigarette and inhaled slowly. The smoke trickled from his nose and drifted up past his eyes.