

Erebus

{air'-i-buhs - Deep blackness, shadow. }

This is the original treatment for the story, "Shadow."

I brought my family here many years ago, and bought this worn out 30 acre farm. Our first week here, my daughter Hannah's kitten disappeared. Here one minute, gone the next. Just like that. Nine year old Hannah called and called for him all day. Together with Gabriel, her older brother, we walked across the fields and into the woods, yelling out for the cat all afternoon and into the evening. Returning from the strangely gloomy woods as the sun slipped behind the dark blue mountain that rose beyond the farm house, we found a huge black dog standing in our side yard, licking his chops. Gabriel told me later he thought he heard the dog burp.

Erebus is a giant, like a steamer trunk with 4 legs. He has an immense head with a large mouth full of long, sharp teeth. We have always called him a "black Lab," but the animal is really more feral looking than a pet, with a greater intelligence behind his eyes than any dog I've ever seen. He appears relaxed, not friendly, but courteous. That's the word I'd use to describe his demeanor. Not loveable, certainly, the dog reminds me of a dutiful servant who does not owe me friendship, but is willing to perform his employment. He scares me.

Erebus has always lived here. It has taken some time for me to realize that, but now I'm sure he has always inhabited this moldering farm house. For all I know, he stood guard up here on the hill long before the carpenters arrived on the scene and built the house with logs from the nearby forest of chestnut and pine trees.

"I think Erebus lives in the barn," my wife, Ruth, said the morning after we discovered him, or he discovered us.

"I didn't know its name," I said. "How did you?" She was sure either I or the kids had told her. Gabriel and Hannah thought they'd heard the name from me. We couldn't spell it, only sound the three syllables. A trip to

the library provided the pronunciation and a hint of fear. Erebus, son of chaos, lord of darkness. I don't go near the animal, and I approached him only once. Neither have I been back in the woods in the years since the day we searched for the kitten. Gabriel goes there often, however. He's evidently comfortable in the gloom.

Erebus eventually came to live in the house, but stayed exclusively in the kitchen. He never bothered anyone of us nor any guest who occasionally dropped by. The Presbyterian minister in town came out to visit us and Erebus acted extremely distant to him. The dog wasn't aggressive, but he stood nearby with his tail up, on full alert. When the minister's wife arrived with an apple pie a few days later, the dog surprised me and took to her as an old friend. The woman couldn't keep her hands off Erebus, petting him and stroking his back and hind quarters in a way that ... I'm embarrassed to say it ... was almost erotic. The pastor's wife was quite attractive, with a tawny and lustrous skin, and I couldn't keep my eyes from straying in her direction. When we all gathered in the kitchen to share the pie, I moved to the opposite end of the table from her, as one might move back from a hot stove. Something about her was too warm. Now, years later, I remember her as a dark and lusty woman, but Ruth always described her as prudish looking, with pale, wrinkled skin. My wife never liked the woman.

The old widow from whom we bought this house died soon after the sale and never retrieved much of her stored items from the attic and basement. Eventually, I sorted through it all, taking most of the stuff to the dump, feeling like I was throwing someone's life out on the garbage heap. I found old snapshots, taken by the widow and her husband in years past, and still older photographs given to them by an earlier family who had worked the farm in the 1930's. Erebus was in most of the photos.

I sat on the attic floor, my heart pounding, trying to convince myself that I could not be looking at the same dog in all of these photos spanning a time frame of more than 80 years. The huge animal now sitting in the kitchen, who had become my son's closest friend had to be almost a century old. The dog in the photos was definitely him, not a descendent. Scratched over a view of the house on one of the sepia toned prints was the phrase. "This is Erebus' house." I have never believed otherwise.

Gabriel and Erebus became very close and I seldom saw them apart. To say they were inseparable understated their bond. Erebus could have been the brother Ruth and I didn't provide. Whenever Gabriel had to be away from the farm, Erebus turned his constant attention from the woods to the lane that runs up to our house. During the school year, Erebus spent most of his day on the front porch, in any kind of weather, staring down the road, waiting for the school bus to arrive.

On an afternoon in May I planted beans down in the back garden while Erebus lay nearby, studying the woods, an

almost continuous pastime for him when he wasn't with my son. Occasionally, he would lunge his great mass off the ground and amble up to where Gabriel was throwing a basketball through the hoop mounted on the barn near the road. As if performing a security check, the dog turned his great head from side to side until he was evidently satisfied all was safe. Then he wandered back down near me, settling down on the ground as he resumed his staring into the woods. A car came speeding up our lane as the basketball bounced high off the backboard and flew toward the road. Gabriel ran hard toward the path of the coming car, his attention on only the ball. My heart jumped to my throat when I heard the screech of tires and glanced up to see my son sprinting into the road in front of the car. Suddenly Erebus was no longer near me. I saw the car veer around the dog as he stood with his four legs planted in the road where Gabriel should have been. Erebus had knocked the boy out of the car's path. But the dog had been standing next to me in the garden the moment the tires squealed. He had traveled 300 feet in an instant. Just like that.

The years went by and my daughter moved away to Greenbush with a man who stole her heart and gave her babies. My son stayed home. He obtained work in town, where he also found a young woman whom he married. She is Aether, the minister's daughter, and lives with us now on the farm. My wife did not like Gabriel's bride when he brought her home. "Pale and wrinkled," was how she described the girl. "That's what you said about her mother," I told Ruth. "It's as if she IS her mother," was Ruth's reply.

Aether treats my son well. When he is off to work, she and Erebus are inseparable. It's funny, but I never sit at the same end of the kitchen table with Aether and I avoid getting too close to her for my own comfort. She reminds me too much of her mother, a woman who no one ever talks about. Only once did I ask Aether about her mother, but she ignored me. When I said to Larry at the hardware store in town, "Whatever happened to the Pastor's wife?" he said he thought she was living at my house.

Once Aether had come to live with us, my wife Ruthie seemed to fade into woodwork and she often stayed in our bedroom for a good part of the day. I felt sorry for her. She was a wonderful woman who loved her family but I think she was intimidated by her daughter-in-law. I miss her terribly since that awful freak accident. She woke me up as I lay deep in my covers one night in the middle of February to say Erebus was barking up a storm downstairs in the kitchen. But Erebus never barks ... I don't know if he can ... so I rolled over and went back to sleep, thinking my son would take care of any problem and forgetting he and Aether often went out walking very late at night, no matter the weather. I guess I thought Ruth had dreamt the dog was barking. Given my lack of interest, she went downstairs to investigate. I found her the next morning with a broken neck at the foot of the stairs. The

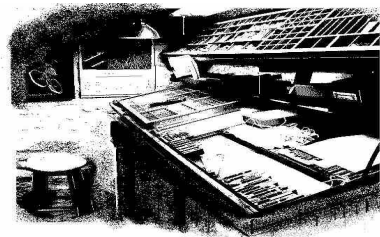
police thought she tripped on a number of small objects found on the stairs. There was a tennis ball, 2 or 3 rubber bones and hard rawhide dog toy.

Aether is now the woman of the house. Gabriel is the head of the little clan and calls the shots. Erebus is a silent sentinel. The three of them are like a family, but I cannot say they are my family. I've grown old. I sit out on the front porch most days in the summer, enjoying the warm weather before supper and the cool breezes at night. And, truth be told, to avoid the dog who still frightens me after all these years. Erebus keeps watch with my son and Aether. In the winter, I sit in the kitchen by the stove at night, when the cold and snow sweep down from the dark mountain that can be seen from my chair near the window. Erebus won't come near the fire ... or me, thank goodness ... but instead stays in the cold corner of the kitchen, content in his spot. From there he can see the woods through the back window.

He's still obsessed with the woods, but never enters them, not even with my son. Long ago, when Gabriel was late coming in for supper, I saw Erebus lay near the woods at the end of the pasture, waiting in vigilance for the boy. I walked out through the field, but as I approached the woods, Erebus stood and trotted toward me to block my way. I stood there, angry that a dog could order me about. I noticed a good size throwing rock on the ground near me. Erebus stood twenty feet from me and I could sense he was reading my thoughts. As I stooped to pick up the rock, he said simply, "Don't."

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