

~~Bob & Rusty~~

Bob and Bonnie were old friends of my parents, and we saw quite a lot of them during the 1970s. They had three daughters, who joined forces with my two sisters to make playtime activities rather girl-centric. Luckily the middle daughter was a bit of a tomboy, with an imagination similar to mine, so I wasn't entirely excluded. But I do remember that I seemed to always end up playing the role of the bad guy in our bouts of play-acting.

Bob fascinated me. He was small and wiry, but possessed a deep and powerful voice. I liked to sit nearby and listen when he and my father were swapping stories—even though Bob had a habit of looking directly at me with an intensity that made me shrink in my chair with embarrassment.

Bob received a measure of respect and obedience from his children that my own parents could only dream of. When visiting at our house the grownups usually sat around a dining room table littered with coffee cups and ashtrays, laughing and shouting in friendly arguments, while us kids played down in the basement.

When it was time to leave, Bob had only to stand at the top of the stairs and rap out one single word: “GIRLS!” All toys were instantly dropped, and with a breathless “Bye!” the daughters scampered off like little rabbits. In contrast, whenever my parents took me visiting anywhere, they usually had to holler for a good half hour with increasing severity before I finally came slouching into view.

Behind Bob's house was a large barn and stockyard where a local farmer kept a herd of heifers. I liked to lean over the gate and toss handfuls of grass to the animals as they crowded around. When the farmer dehorned them I would scrounge around and collect the discarded horns. One day the heifers got loose and trampled the flower beds of the little old lady who lived in a trailer next door. I have a vivid memory of Bob's middle daughter standing in the back yard, yelling reassurance to the flustered woman:

“Don't worry, Bessie! We'll chase them out of your garden!”

She was the most diminutive of girls, who could have easily ducked beneath any one of the heifers, but she was ready to take on the whole herd. I applauded her fearlessness—from my safe vantage point at the very top of the outside staircase of the house, far above the reach of any marauding cows.

Bob and my father shared several interests and hobbies over the years. They both kept multiple aquariums at one time. My father's “fish room” was a simple bare-bones array of plain tanks, but Bob had lights and plants adorning his aquariums. Although my memory is fuzzy on the actual number of fish tanks Bob had, I still vividly recall the fantasy-like atmosphere of that cozy little back room: the rows of tanks with their colorful fish, the bubbling pumps and warm humid air, and the greenish light and dancing reflections of water on the walls and ceiling.

Both men took up woodcarving for a while, and their workshops were cluttered with shavings and drawers full of knives and chisels. My father specialized in carving hunting dogs. These tended to get played with as toys by various children, and sadly most of them ended up being broken. Bob's work was more varied and elaborate, though in later years I think he focused mainly on lathe-turned wooden bowls. One of Bob's pieces still sits on a shelf at my parent's house, with his name and the year “1975” etched on the back.

I even tried my hand at it, and attempted to carve an owl out of a block of wood. Proud of my work, I showed it to my sister for her appraisal:

“It looks like a cat.”

“It’s an owl.”

“Being eaten by a cat?”

“No, it’s just an owl.”

“It looks like a cat.”

This ended my woodcarving career.

My father raised rabbits for a year or so, building an extension behind our backyard shed and filling it with cages of New Zealand Whites. Bob didn’t go the rabbit route, but he did keep a flock of pigeons. I still cringe with shame when I remember the day Bob was showing us his pigeon coop, and I stepped on a nest and broke the eggs mere seconds after my father cautioned me: “Be careful not to step on the eggs.”

Bob and Bonnie had a little neurotic Chihuahua named Buttons who apparently considered every visitor to the house an unwelcome intruder, to be routed with snarling fangs and dreadful claws. She took this job seriously, but was frustrated in the performance of her duties by her Lilliputian size. Being only a few inches high, she had to settle for scuttling anxiously from room to room on bandy legs, glaring sidelong from her big pop-eyes, and muttering resentful imprecations under her breath.

I tried to be friends with Buttons, and almost succeeded on a few occasions. I felt a sense of victory every time I managed to get close enough to pet her head. I would say that she tolerated more than enjoyed this, but it was a start. Unfortunately my next visit might be several months later, by which time the little dog had entirely forgotten my friendly overtures and once more regarded me as a terrible threat to the peace and security of her household.

In 1973 my father bought a pedigree coon hound named Rusty. I remember the winter day he arrived. My father and Uncle Gary carried the big shipping crate down into our basement and let the dog out. He carefully padded around the concrete floor, sniffing at the unfamiliar surroundings and trembling a little with nervousness. The men attempted to figure out what his name was. They both tried out a series of possible names, while my father flipped through the paperwork:

“Here Red! C’mon boy, here Tracker! Here Towser! Here Bowser! Come here, uh, . . . I don’t know, c’mere Champ! Here Big Chief! Haven’t you found that pedigree yet?”

“I’m looking, I’m looking. It’s got to be here somewhere. Try out some more names.”

“Come here, Buddy! Here, Bugle! Come on old, um . . . come on old Cornmeal!”

“*Cornmeal?* What kind of name is that?”

Uncle Gary’s best lines were always given under his breath to whoever was standing closest. I was the lucky recipient this time. He leaned my way and muttered:

“They probably just called him Dog.”

My father overheard this. “They’re not going to give a pure-blooded hunting hound the name Dog. He’s got a proper name, I just can’t find it in all this stuff.”

Another muttered aside to me from Uncle Gary:

“Might as well ask *him* what his name is.”

“Ask who, the *dog*?!”

Rusty settled in quickly and became a welcome part of the family. I remember him as a friendly good-natured hound who spent his days dozing in the sunshine. But at night he was a hunting machine. His prowess at tracking and treeing raccoons became legendary, and the local coon population trembled at the sound of his mighty voice echoing through the woods. I have photos displaying impressive lines of coon pelts stretching across the front of the shed, with Rusty standing nearby yawning lazily. It was all in a night’s work to him.

Stories of Rusty’s exploits verged on the incredible. There was the time a raccoon climbed far out on a tree limb overhanging Keg Creek. Rusty guessed what his game was and silently slipped into the cold water, swam across, and was waiting for the coon when it leaped from the limb onto the opposite shore.

And there was the time he beat the infamous Railroad Coon at his own game. This wily old boar coon would lead trailing hounds along corn fields and fence rows to the “Hojack” railroad line and run the iron rails, where his scent was difficult to follow. He left many a hound snuffing in confusion and disappointment while he made his escape a good 100 yards away.

But Rusty figured out the trick. He kept his nose in the air so the creosoted wooden ties and metal rails wouldn’t interfere with the scent. He detected where the Railroad Coon sprang from the tracks into a tangle of wild grape vines, and treed him easily in the top of an old snag.

In 1974 the strain of raising four children apparently got the better of my parents, so they abandoned their family and fled to Texas for a Christmas vacation. Us kids were packed off to Clarence Center to spend the holidays with relatives, while Rusty went to stay with Bob and Bonnie.

Upon my parents’ return home, it’s notable that my father’s first priority was to call Bob and make plans to retrieve his prize hound. The kids could wait another day or two.

So I was unfortunately not a witness to the conversation that took place between Bob and my father; but it would amuse me to think that it went something along these lines:

“Bob! I’m home from Texas.”

“Oh no . . . I mean, oh, that’s great, Ray.”

“I can’t wait to take Rusty out hunting. How is he?”

“H-how is he? Well . . . he’s . . . he’s at rest.”

“That’s good to hear. So he didn’t give you any trouble?”

“No, no trouble, no trouble at all . . . at least, not any more.”

“Great! I’ll be right over to pick him up.”

“Pick him up? Oh . . . uh, yeah, pick him up. It’s funny you should put it that way. Because—well, I’ll tell you what, Ray. You see . . .”

But Bob always struck me as a pretty straightforward guy, and no doubt my conjecture here is entirely wrong. More than likely the exchange was simple, direct and honest:

“How’s the dog?”

“Dead.”

It must have been an awkward moment, no matter how the actual conversation ran. But by no means was Bob or anyone else to blame for the untimely demise of Rusty. It was discovered that he had a diseased heart and would have died no matter where he was. It was a shame to lose such a majestic hound, but my father took it in stride. He had a new hound within a few months, and went on to own several hunting dogs over the next fifteen years or so. Some of them were very fine hounds, but none ever quite reached the heights of Rusty.

I don’t recall that Bob was much of an outdoorsman, though I know he and my father went coon hunting together a few times. There was, of course, absolutely no ill feeling between them over Rusty; but it does seem a strange coincidence that, no matter how often they went hunting afterward, it was somehow always Bob’s turn to shin up the trees and shake out the furious snarling raccoons.