

It was a chilly March day in 1989 on the James family farm, and the transition from winter to spring had begun. It was dinner time, which always brought the smell of warm food wafting throughout the house. Russell arrived home from work in his truck. He opened the door, got out, and threw it shut. The sound of metal on metal disrupted the sounds of nature for a brief moment. He walked inside and took his boots off. His wife Sue heard Russell's truck door and took up dinner, which she always had ready around five in the evening when Russell arrived home. He then walked into the kitchen, and his son Todd followed closely after.

Russell, Sue, and Todd sat at the kitchen table for family dinner. The three blessed the food and began eating. They had steaming hot chili; it was one of Sue's best dishes that she made. The meal had beans, onions, chili noodles, tomatoes, ground beef, and some herbs and spices. It was perfect for a brisk day such as this. While they ate, the three talked about their day. Russell was a hardworking man who had a factory job in the home appliance industry during the day. Sue stayed home to keep the house in order while Todd attended middle school. After dinner, the three went their separate ways, with Todd going to his room, Sue started cleaning up in the kitchen, and Russell walked to the front door. He put on and tied his boots and walked outside into the chill of the air.

Russell was on his way to the barn. He stopped at the base of the hill and looked up toward the crest. He took a deep breath and began the long journey to the rickety old barn he had built with his own hands. The James's lived in an old single-story farmhouse surrounded by four rolling hills. Three of these hills were covered with dense woods. The fourth was covered with tall grass, and atop it was where the barn stood. The setting sun was hidden behind the hills and trees. The light of day was slowly fading from the farm. Russell was the father of two boys, Todd and Travis. Together, the three of them raised tobacco on the family's land. On this day, Travis was away at work, and Russell was going to plow the tobacco fields with his tractor. He loved to work on the farm, and if it weren't his primary source of income, he couldn't have cared less about his job in the factory. While it wasn't currently the case, Russell knew that the farm could provide what was needed for his family. He just needed to get it going and stay consistent until it caught on.

Meanwhile, back at the house, Todd was in his room tinkering with his computer. He loved working on computers and other gadgets of sorts. Since a young age, Todd had an affinity for taking apart things to see how they work, then putting them back together. Todd had already finished his homework assignments, and his dad didn't need his help with farmwork this particular day. He had his computer taken apart in front of him. Todd was trying to install a new sound card so his programs could produce more than just beeps and boops.

At his core, Todd never really felt like he belonged in the remote countryside. He hated farming tobacco every year and never liked the idea of supporting the cigarette industry. This often

resulted in him and Russell being at odds. Russell strongly felt tobacco farming was the future, while Todd felt even more strongly that it was not. Todd enjoyed catch-and-release fishing, and for a time, he thought he would enjoy hunting as well, like the rest of the men in his family. Eventually, though, Todd came to the realization that he loved animals and couldn't stomach the thought of hurting them. Overall, he wanted nothing more than to escape Kentucky's rural life, but that's a tale for another time.

A chill was beginning to settle in the house. After cleaning up, Sue decided to grab some wood for the family's wood-burning stove. The stove was small and located in the house's living room; it was also the family's primary heat source. She opened the wooden front door, then the glass storm door, and walked outside onto the front porch into the cold evening air. The family had already gathered a bunch of wood for the winter back in the fall. Russell and his two boys spent every Saturday morning felling trees and cutting them up into small pieces suitable for firewood. They stored the wood against the front of the house by the front door.

Sue was about to start toward the wood when suddenly, a large, dark blur rounded the house's corner. She opened the door and tried to shut it back, but the creature's head wrestled its way in. Sue struggled for several seconds as the monster used its brute strength to gain access to the house. Slobber flew inside the house as it continued to try to squirm inside. Eventually, Sue was able to use her foot to shove the snarling head back outside. Then through the glass door, Sue could see that the beast was a dog the size of a mountain, its muscles bulged through its skin, and its veins popped out like they were ready to burst. Slobber drooled from the dog's jaw. It quickly lunged at the glass door, attempting to breakthrough. Sue quickly slammed the main front door shut.

Todd could hear some strange barks and growls coming from the front of the house. His family didn't have a dog, so Todd was quite perplexed. He stopped what he was doing and looked out his window to see if he could see what was causing the barking and growling sounds. Shortly after beginning his search, Todd could hear his mother calling for him. He walked to his door and met his mother right outside his room. She was in a panic with tears running down her face. "There is a giant dog outside, and it attacked me, and I'm afraid it's gonna go after your daddy!" Sue said in a part panic yell, part sob voice. Todd knew his mother was in no condition to handle the dog at this point. He could hear the barking circling the house. "It's gonna be ok Momma, let me see if I can scare it off," Todd said calmly to try to comfort his mother.

He walked around the house, looking through windows, trying to spot the dog. He finally spotted it through one of the living room windows. The dog was looking up into the air, furiously barking and snarling at the air. Sue watched as Todd opened the window and shouted, "Go on! Git!" The dog turned and ran toward the window, howling the whole way. Saliva flew from its

mouth as it ran. Todd shut the window, and the dog halted at the side of the house. It began to scratch at the window marking the glass up.

Todd's attitude completely changed. He knew this dog would most likely kill his dad. It was getting darker outside as Sue and Todd deliberated on what to do about the dog. Sue was still very shaken up after being attacked. Todd sighed, he didn't want it to come to this, but he knew he didn't have a choice. Todd grabbed Travis's Winchester .270 deer rifle, which was the largest gun in the house. Todd knew how to shoot a gun and even owned one himself, a small .22 rifle he used for target shooting. Todd had never fired his brother's gun, though, and was actually not even allowed to touch it. It was a dangerous weapon that had a powerful kickback when fired. He nervously loaded a single cartridge into the gun and took it to his bedroom. "Todd, please be careful," His mother said nervously. Todd opened his bedroom window, sat on his bed on his knees, and took aim. The gun was equipped with a powerful magnifying scope for long-distance shooting, but it was in the way of the close shot he needed to make. So he looked through its mounts, down the barrel, and waited.

The dog eventually circled around, still growling and barking at the wind. Todd lined up the shot, his heart racing. The dog turned and saw the opened window and ran for it. Todd had his finger ready to pull the trigger, but the thought of doing so weighed heavily on his heart, mind, and soul. He knew he had no other choice. Sweat dripped down his forehead. The dog was getting close to the window, and finally, Todd pulled the trigger and whispered, "I'm sorry." The gunshot kicked him back clean off his bed and into the wall behind him, sending him into a slight daze.

Russell had just wrapped up the fieldwork he had planned. It was getting too dark for him to see anything. He parked the tractor in the barn and started walking back to the house. He watched as the last bit of sunlight vanished from the farm. Farm work often ended after dark, so it was not too uncommon for Russell to walk home with nothing more than the moonlight to guide him. As he walked, he recapped the day's events -- he had gotten a lot of work done today. He was proud of himself.

He heard a loud gunshot as he approached the main slope of the hill. He was a little confused but shrugged it off as Sue picking off snakes on the creek bank near the house. Once he made it back to the house, he saw Todd and Sue standing on the porch. He was about to happily greet them when Todd pointed to the dog that was dead. The bullet had gone clean through its eye, killing it instantly. Russell couldn't believe it. The three talked, and Todd and Sue explained what had happened. Russell thanked Todd for saving his life and dragged the dog's body to the other side of the creek and away from the house so he could use the tractor to move it to a place that he could burn it the next day. The dog was simply too heavy for him to drag much farther by hand.

The three went inside the house. Russell ruffled Todd's hair and told him he was proud of him. Russell untied his boots and removed his farm workwear. Todd walked back to his room to resume his tinkering; Sue grabbed the wood she needed to light the wood-burning stove, and Russell decided to relax a bit in the living room. The family contemplated how lucky they were in this situation and went to sleep happy.

Later that night, Todd awoke with a start. He had been dreaming, but he knew that his dream had been real. His breaths came short and quick as he tried to calm himself down. Finally, he got up from the bed and tiptoed quietly to his window. The moon was bright enough that night to cover the ground and highlight the shadow of the beast lying beyond the nearby creek. Todd knew that what he had done would be something that he would have to learn to live with, and as horrible as it had made him feel, he realized losing his father would be that much worse.

He had learned the unfortunate part of life at a very young age that sometimes, there are no good choices, just best choices -- those that will help us grow and provide life experience. Even in the present day of March 2021, the family wonders where the dog came from. Todd thought it had rabies, and it had lost its mind. Sue and Russell wonder if it was a heavily mistreated guard dog from a nearby farm. Either way, they agree that the dog was beyond help, and it was too dangerous to be left roaming near their house.