

Wild Dogs

Here's something that most people don't know: A few months ago there was a pack of feral dogs running the streets of downtown Birmingham. This isn't the kind of thing that gets in the newspaper, at least, not if the authorities can help it. It just plain looks bad for the city. But it was true, and anyone who was out and about after midnight, and happened to be in the right place at the right time, would see a pack of 8 or 9 or a dozen dogs, ghostly and silver in the night light, moved silently across the street and down an alley.

Late one night, coming back from a party I was walking down 20th street and I saw them. They made no sound, no barking or baying, just the barely audible pad of pads on concrete. As they passed, cutting across the median, they looked at me, with eyes like coal until the light hit them just right, and made them shine. They were all about the same size and color, all a non-descript grayish brown, and could easily have been mistaken for coyotes, but they were dogs. They were larger than coyotes, heavier in the bone and broader across the head and jaw, and here and there you could see the traces of a recognizable breed – a whippet slenderness, the thick coat of the chow, the trace markings of the German Shepherd. They were dogs, all right. But they had reverted to the pack, prompting Harvey to compare them to Jack London dogs, or, as he put it, "It's like the Call of the Wild out there."

"You mean the book," I asked.

"Hell no," he said, "I mean the movie."

He was in a bad mood because when he came in to unlock and set up the diner in the morning, about 4:30am, they were still out on the street. He'd seen them. He'd actually 'had words with them', as he put it, by which he meant that they'd come closer to him than he liked.

"Did they try to bite you, Harv?" I asked.

"No, they was just too close," he answered.

"You're not afraid of dogs, are you?"

"No, just respectful," he snapped. "Don't you have some work to do somewhere?"

As it happened, I did. I left the diner and drove over to the art supply place, thinking about wild dogs, and what a mural of wild dogs on the side of one of the bank buildings would look like, or maybe a metal sculpture of the pack in front of the new federal building, done by a really talented sculptor who could make the faces of the dogs faintly resemble the faces of the local politicians cowering up to each other, sniffing butts and doing all the things that dogs and politicians have in common. Then I got to the supply house and stopped thinking about it.

The next day I heard from my upstairs neighbor Miss Eula, a kindly woman in her seventies who, they said, had been a radical socialist in her youth. She said that the dogs had been all around our building the last couple of nights. She was unperturbed, which seems natural if in fact she'd spent her youth facing down company thugs on the picket line, or distributing incendiary leaflets to the corporate hogs on the downtown sidewalks. What would a few fleecy street dogs mean to her? She said they were kenneled up somewhere in the vacant building across the alley behind us, as she'd seen them from

her back window slip through the fence and nose their way past the flimsy plywood partially tacked to the frame of the back door. She wanted to know if I'd buy her a 50 pound bag of dog food when I went to the store, so she could start feeding them. I told her I'd be glad to buy her anything she wanted, but asked her was she sure she wanted to start feeding wild animals.

"Oh, they aren't wild," she said.

"How do you know that?"

"I looked them right in the eye and I could see they're good dogs, every one of them," she said, looking up at me with her serene blue eyes.

Miss Eula wasn't over 5 feet tall and wispy, though the force of her character was clearly visible in her face when she talked. She was going to get what she wanted. Which she did. That afternoon I stopped by the market and got her bag of dog food, and carried it up the stairs into her tidy apartment. I stowed the bag in the pantry, and noticed about a dozen metal bowls, suitable for feeding feral animals.

"Is that what you're going to feed them in?"

"Yes," she said, scooping the feed from the bag to the bowls.

"You're sure this is a good idea?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll take care of them, and they'll take care of me."

"Okay," I said.

The next day I stopped by Harvey's, and over coffee asked him if the dogs had molested him again.

"No, I didn't see them this morning," he said. "I hope they're gone for good."

"Me too," I said, though I suspected I knew where they were. I had an image of twelve shiny bowls lined up in the alley behind my studio with twelve good-hearted dogs chowing down while Miss Eula looked on, smiling her faint ethereal smile.

When I got home the twelve shiny bowls were empty and scattered through the alley but there was no sign of the dogs, and when I went upstairs and knocked on Miss Eula's door, there was no sign of her either. There was no answer to my knocks or calls, and no sound from within. I was not alarmed, as she sometimes leaves in the morning and is gone for the day, making the rounds of the public library, the Episcopalian bookstore and, before they closed it, the government printing office outlet, all on foot, stopping for tea or coffee at one of the tiny restaurants tucked in between the storefronts on the back streets of downtown. So I was not alarmed, and was eventually distracted by some work I was doing, a large casting in concrete of a man's hand with a hammer in it, which provided all kinds of interesting technical problems. And so I passed the rest of the day and most of the evening, and went right to bed.

But when I woke up early the next morning I was thinking of Miss Eula and the dogs. I looked out the back window and the bowls were still there, just where they'd been before. No sign of the dogs. I waited until the sun was up and went upstairs, but again no answer, and I had the start of a bad idea, the kind of macabre thought that, when proved wrong, makes you feel like a jackass. But I couldn't shake it, and when at midmorning there was still no Eula, I crossed the alley and took a crowbar to the plywood on the back door. Then, flashlight in one hand and pistol in the other, I crept through the rooms of the abandoned building, hoping I would not find anything.

No one had lived there for a long time. The rooms were damp and dusty, and as I approached the center of the building, rank with the smell of dog urine and droppings. I

stepped carefully through a large high ceiled room, pausing every few steps to listen for growls or the scuff of paw on grimed wood floor, but heard nothing but muffled traffic noise from the street. One by one I went into the several side rooms that joined the main chamber, watching for the dull charcoal glow of animal eyes in the gloom. Finally, where the odor of dog was strongest, I found the mounds of rags and cloth, and a torn gray mattress that the pack slept on. But there were no dogs, and no grisly evidence of that macabre thought I kept having. I went slowly through the rest of the rooms and found nothing.

I waited until dark to call the police, just to be sure the old lady wasn't just off for the day. The police opened up her apartment and it was empty. I called a few of the people who knew her, but she had not been seen, and the next day I walked the downtown grid, stopping in the places she went to. No one had seen her.

That night I listened, hoping for the sound of her foot on the floor above me, but it was still. Early, very early the next morning I looked out my back window into the alley. There were only a few of the bowls left now, the others picked up by straggling vagrants from Linn park who sometimes cut through on their way somewhere. And there were no dogs, or signs of dogs except a moment, just before the sun came up when I heard a faint howling, far away, that lasted ten or fifteen seconds, just long enough to listen to carefully. It was not the yelping of coyotes, but the howl of a dog pack somewhere else in the city.

Miss Eula was not seen again, and neither were the dogs. I know that the worst happened, that it happened somewhere else in the neighborhood, even though no remains were ever found. But I like to think that she went off roaming with them, shepherd to the good dogs, caring for them, and they caring for her, finding a life somewhere in some other city, or in the country, on a tidy serene farm. At least I like to think that's what happened.