

# Blessing the Dog

*Brian Evenson*

HE WAITED, but the dog didn't come.

He went back into the house. His wife was strapping on her brassiere, skin spilling over where the strap was tight.

"Seen the dog?" he said.

"Haen't my dog," she said, grunting, closing the hooks.

He drew open the curtains, stared down into the dirt yard. He did not see the dog. He turned. His wife had clapped a shirt over her chest, was asking him didn't he care if the whole world saw her bare.

No, he did not. But he didn't say.

He went out. He went into the yard, called the dog by name. He whistled. He went into the kitchen, moved through it touching the pans and out, into the living room. His wife sat at the foot of the stairs, wriggling on her socks.

He went out before she saw him.

He looked behind the house, looked in the shed. He looked inside the barn.

He found her in the shadow of the corner of the barn, crouched and sad-eyed. He went to stroke her. She whined, backed into the hay. He came closer. She scabbled her feet in the dirt, tried to run past him. He lunged, had her by the scruff of the neck, lifting her forepaws off the ground to push air.

He forced the dog to look into his eyes. The dog's eyes, he saw, were dark, crusted, waxing over. Pulling back the flap of the ear, he looked in. He grabbed hold of the dog's bottom jaw, forced it down, looked down the dark throat. He let the dog loose. She slunk back into the corner, curling her back away from him.

He went to the end of the drive, saw Morrison coming down the road, limping and huffing, his heavy bag on his shoulder. He went out to meet him, his wife on the porch behind, arms crossed, watching him.

Morrison saw him come, dropped the bag off his shoulder, waited for him. The other man took up the bag, Morrison following him as he car-

ried it to the barn.

"Nice to see you, Karl," said Morrison.

"Where's the truck?" said Karl.

"Truck?" said Morrison. "Dead," he said.

Karl spat. "Mine too," he said.

"That a fact," said Morrison.

Karl dropped Morrison's bag and entered the barn. He pointed to the corner. Squinting, Morrison moved forward until he saw the glints of the dog's eyes.

"Had I known it was the dog I'd have brought the smaller bag," said Morrison.

Karl shrugged.

"Had I known it was a stinking dog I probably wouldn't have bothered to come at all."

"Should have asked," said Karl.

Morrison nodded. He rolled up his sleeves, moved into the corner. The dog snapped once at his legs. He darted in and when the dog opened his mouth and came at his leg, he hammered it atop the head with his fist. The dog stutterstepped, woozed.

He reached around and grabbed the dog by the scruff of the neck, lifting it off the ground, crushing it against his chest. Looking into the eyes, he shook his head. He looked into the ears. He pried apart the jaws, moved the dog until a shaft of light through the rooftrap struck down into the throat.

"Stay away from the mouth," he said.

"Why is that?" said Karl.

"Common sense. You don't want to come down with it, do you?" said Morrison.

He turned the dog over and pulled the hind legs wide, found the skinflap of the thigh thick with red blots and pussing over. He let the dog drop. It crawled back into the corner, tail between its legs.

"What she have?" said Karl.

"Hell, I don't know," said Morrison. "Probably something new."

"That good or bad?"

Morrison flattened his lips.

"Few days, he'll be okay. Or he'll be dead."

"She," said Karl.

Morrison went outside, picked up his bag. He took Karl's money. He heaved the bag onto his shoulder, made his way down the road.

Karl went back onto the porch, sat beside his wife.

"What Morrison want?" she said.

"Dog was sick," he said.

"You called Morrison over a sick dog?" she said.

"It's my money," he said.

"What Morrison do for her?" she said.

"Didn't do nothing," he said. "Not a damn thing."

She stiffened and glared, then stormed into the house without a word. He waited a minute, then followed her in.

"What is it?" he said to her back.

"You know how I feel about cursing," she said.

"I didn't mean nothing by it," he said.

She shook her head, hugged herself in her own broad arms, leaning her body backward toward him. He did not move forward to meet her. He went out onto the porch. He went into the barn, sat down as close to the dog as the dog would let him.

He heard his wife at the door, saw the light flicker as she crossed the opening and moved into the barn.

"What she have?" she said.

He shrugged. "Sick," he said.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

"Thought I'd bless her," he said.

"Bless it?" she said. "The dog? Lay hands?"

"She's sick, haen't she?" he said.

"It's a dog," she said.

"Don't make no different," he said. "God's creature, like us all."

"You never blessed me," she said.

"You never needed it," he said.

"I asked for it."

He shook his head. "You look okay to me now," he said. "You haen't dead. You didn't need it."

"I asked for it," she said. "The dog ask?"

He opened a cupboard. It was full of dishes, cracked plates. In the other room he heard his wife talking into the telephone. He closed the cupboard, opened another, found it packed with dried goods.

He heard his wife hang up the telephone.

"Where's the olive oil?" he called.

She came into the kitchen. "Don't have none," she said.

"What we got?" he said.

"Everything but oil," she said.

He shook his head, went out to the shed. He opened the cab of the truck, pulled the seat forward, groping behind it until he had hold of a can of thirty weight. He set the can on the floor, punctured it with a rusty nail.

He lay his hands on the can, prayed to consecrate it.

His wife opened the shed door.

"Telephone," she said.

He finished the prayer and carried the can of motor oil in, set it upon the table.

"Hello?" he said.

"Karl?" the voice said. "Bishop here."

"Bishop," he said. "Hello."

"Wife says you've taken it into your head to bless a dog," said the bishop.

"Could be," Karl said.

"Don't make light of the holy, Karl," said the bishop.

"I haen't," Karl said. "I am a believer."

"Exercise of your priesthood wrongly does more harm than good," said the bishop.

"Nothing's wrong with it," Karl said. "It's my priesthood."

"It is God's priesthood," said the bishop.

"It's my dog," said Karl.

"Now, Karl, that haen't true. It is God's dog. He just loaned it out for a while."

Karl didn't say anything.

"First thing, blessing dogs," said the bishop. "Next comes polygamy and blood sacrifice."

Karl hung up the phone. He went outside. His wife was on the porch.

"Where you going?" she said.

"To bless the damn dog."

"Haen't the bishop told you not to?" she said.

"Haen't his business," Karl said. "Haen't yours neither."

"Don't you support your spiritual leader?" she said.

"I support him," he said.

"You don't obey him," she said.

He shrugged. "I go to church," he said. "I'm a believer."

She shook her head, went inside. He saw her through the window, picking up the telephone.

He went into the barn. The dog had crawled in under the heaped straw and was buried but for her muzzle. He set the can of motor oil down beside her. He reached slowly out, clamped his hands around the muzzle. The dog shook her head and neck like a trapped snake. He dragged her out hairy with straw.

Speaking the consecration, he poured the motor oil over her crown, watching it glob thick on her fur, roll down. She started to whimper. He moved to straddle her body. Sitting upon her back, he pressed her down.

Very slowly, he let her muzzle go. He brought away his hands, brought them down upon her head. He started to bless her.

The dog was shaking its head, whimpering, wriggling out from un-

der him. He stated the dog's name, stated his priesthood, said to God he did what he did in the name of the Savior. The dog yelped, clawed the inside of his knee.

"Hell, hold still," he said, pushing her head to the ground with his palms.

She shook her head, roiled up dust. She wriggled out from under him until his hands were down between his legs, trying to hold onto her ears.

She turned her neck hard, bit his palm. He cursed, let her go.

She fled to the other side of the barn, stood there with her haunches shivering. He saw his palm begin to bleed. He wiped the palm against his pants, moved toward the dog.

The dog was skittish, keeping the distance it could between them. He lunged at it, caught its tail, was bit a second time, a third. He let go.

He cornered the dog, grabbed it by the back of the neck. He pulled the dog all the way off the ground, held it away from his body as it twisted and snapped. He lugged it out of the barn, across the dirt yard, to the porch.

His wife turned her eyes toward him. She had been crying, he knew.

"Hold her while I bless her," he said.

"I haen't gone to hold her," she said.

"Hell you wont," he said. "I'm the head of the house. What I say goes."

She stood, went into the house. He followed her in.

"Get that stinking dog out of here," she said.

"Hold her," he said.

She ran up the stairs, slipped into the bathroom, latched the door. He pounded on the bathroom door, called to her through it. The dog too was calling for something.

He looked, saw his palms slick with his blood. The dog twisted, bit him again.

He dropped the dog, saw her skitter across the floor, down the stairs.

He wiped his hands clean on the body of the door. He went into the bedroom. Opening the cabinet, he took out his shotgun. He broke open the barrels, loaded them. He closed the breech.

He went outside, the blood on his hands sticking to the stock of the gun. He squinted into the sunlight. He whistled.

He ducked his head, entered the barn. Cocking back the triggers, he called the dog by name.