

## Erebus

[air'-i-buhs]

- *Deep blackness, shadow. Son of Chaos, Daughter of darkness.*

Erebus has always lived here. It has taken some time for me to figure it out, but now I'm sure that he (or maybe she) has always inhabited this moldering farm house. For all I know, the dog stood guard up here on the hill long before the carpenters wrested the building materials from the nearby forest of chestnut and pine trees.

Erebus is large, like a steamer trunk with 4 legs and an immense head with a large mouth full of long, sharp teeth. We always called him a "black Lab," but the animal is really more feral looking than a pet, with much more intelligence behind his eyes than any dog I've met. Courteous is the word I'd use to describe him 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.

I brought my family here many years ago when I bought this worn out 30 acre farm. The first week our beagle-mix puppy disappeared. Here one minute, gone the next. Just like that. My nine year old daughter, Hannah, called and called for him all day. Together with her older brother, Herman, we walked across the fields and into the woods and yelled out for the mutt all afternoon and into the evening. Returning from the strangely dark woods as the sun was slipping

behind the dark blue mountain, we found a black dog standing in our side yard. I'm not sure how I could tell, but the dog seemed satisfied about something. Years later, Herman told me that in his memory of the encounter he heard the black dog burp.

The next morning, my wife, Ruth, said, "I think Erebus lives in the barn." Asking her to repeat herself, I discovered she was sure either the kids or myself had told her the dog's name was Erebus, a name we could only sound out and not spell until a trip to the library. I don't go near Erebus and, in fact have approached the dog only once. And I haven't been back in the woods in the years since that day. I've always sent my son, if necessary. He seems comfortable there.

Erebus eventually came to live in the house with us, although I was always uncomfortable with this arrangement. The Presbyterian minister in town came out to visit us and Erebus acted more distant than usual toward him. When the minister's wife arrived with an apple pie a few days later, the dog surprisingly took to her as an old friend. The woman couldn't keep her hands off the dog, petting him and stroking his back and hind quarters the entire length of her visit. The pastor's wife was quite handsome with dark lustrous skin and I couldn't keep my eyes from straying often in her direction. As we moved to the kitchen table to share the pie, I let pass the opportunity to sit next to her as I would sit back from a hot stove. Something was too warm. Now, years later, I remember her as a dark and lusty woman, but Ruth swore she had very light skin and was prudish looking and quite wrinkled. 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 and feeling like I was throwing someone's life out on the garbage heap. I did find a few treasures, including old photographs taken by the widow and her husband in years past, along with additional pictures given to them by the family before who had worked the small subsistence farm in the 1930's. Erebus was in most of the photos. I truly questioned my mental health and I felt like the world would never be the same the afternoon I sat on the attic floor and looked at photo after photo, going back some 80 years, of the dog who sat down in my kitchen. In fact, scratched over a view of the home on one of the sepia toned prints was the phrase. "This

is Erebus' house." No, I don't think it was a look-a-like. It was Erebus. I'm sure.

One afternoon in May a car sped up our road as my son threw his basketball through a hoop on the barn, out near the edge of the road. Bouncing high off the backboard, the ball flew toward the road, followed by Herman running hard toward the path of the coming car, his attention on only the ball. I was down back in the garden planting beans while Erebus stood near me, watching the woods. I looked up when I heard the screech of tires. I saw the car veer away from a dog that stood where Herman would have been had the dog not knocked him back off the road. It was Erebus. He was no longer with me down in the garden. Just like that.

I've seldom seen Herman without Erebus since that day. To say they're inseparable understates it. Erebus seems almost to be the brother Ruth and I didn't provide.

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 found work in town, where he also found a young woman whom he married. She is the minister's daughter. The two of them live here now with me on the farm. My wife did not like Herman's bride when he brought her home. "Pale and wrinkled," was how she described the girl. But to me she seems a lovely woman, dark and lusty, like her mother, who mysteriously left town many years ago and was never heard from again. Aether treats my son well, and when he is off to work in the daytime, she and Erebus appear inseparable.

I lost my wonderful wife not long ago in a freak and terrible 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 I could hear nothing, so I rolled over and went back to sleep, thinking my son could take care of it, but forgetting he and Aether were away for the weekend. Evidently, my wife had dreamt the dog was barking as if something were amiss down there ... possibly a stove fire, but who knows ... so given my lack of interest, she went downstairs to investigate. I found her the next morning at the foot of the stairs with a broken neck. The police thought she may have tripped on a number of small items that had somehow wound up on the stairs. There was a ball, 2 or 3 rubber bones and hard rawhide dog toy.

Aether is now the woman of the house. Herman is the head of the little clan and calls the shots. Erebus is still with us. The three of them are like a family. I'm an old man now and I sit out on the front porch most days in the summer, enjoying the warm weather and the cool breezes at night. And, truth be told, to avoid the dog who still frightens me after all these years. Erebus keeps busy indoors with my son and Aether. In the winter, I sit indoors by the stove at night when the cold and snow sweep down from the notch in the dark mountains that I can see from my window. Erebus won't come near the fire, for some reason, but instead stays over in the cold corner of the kitchen, seemingly content in his spot. On his throne, I sometimes think.

Erebus doesn't look a day older than the evening I met her, standing there between the house and the barn. Sorry, I meant to say "him." I did try to look down there between her hind legs, one morning years ago, to see if he was a god or goddess. He kept running away from me until I cornered him over there near his throne. As I bent to get a better look, he said simply, "Don't."

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