

## Fritter

This morning had been rough. After getting up at five a.m., stumbling through the pasture dodging cow piles, and finding the cows, some of them decided they didn't want to leave the rich, moist grass. What normally took me 30 minutes, took nearly an hour. And to top it off, I lost my favorite Kansas City Chiefs cap when I was jumping the creek. I knew I could find it, but it would be on the hind side of supper, after the milking was done, before I would have time to fetch it.

By the time I got the cows herded to the barn, the sun was sneaking over Eldon Mountain. Once the cows were in the holding lot, I went inside the barn and gathered the green, plastic five-gallon buckets I used to haul the feed from the bin to the trough. The smell of fresh manure, wet cows, and fly killer hung in the air. I flipped the latch up on the back door, walked around the wooden deck to the feed bin, and froze. There, under the gnarled arms of the pin oak tree that provided shade for the barn, and was the favorite route of squirrels to the feed bin, lay the meanest looking dog I had ever seen. Its belly poached out like a pregnant heifer.

The crimson fur ball looked like he was part chow, but he was no pureblood. Only his tail, neck, and tongue were chow, the rest of him was pure mutt. His sleek coat glistened in the sunlight as he finished off what looked to be an armadillo, what Texans call possum on the half shell. When he saw me he stood up, his tail hung between his legs, his teeth escaping from under his lips. The noise out of his throat made the hair on my neck stand straight up and sent a wave of goose bumps scrambling all the way down to my toes.

"Whoa, there boy," I said easing backward to the door. "I won't hurt you."

He didn't seem too concerned about me hurting him. The devil dog stopped growling but was still showing me his teeth. They looked plenty sharp. "You go ahead and finish eating. I'll come back later." I jumped back into the barn and slammed the door shut.

"James, where's the feed?" Gramps shouted from the milking room. "Hurry up before these heifers start bawlin' their heads off."

"Sorry, Gramps, but there's a big red dog out back and he don't seem none too friendly!" I hollered back.

"He won't bother you none as long as you don't bother him."

I opened the door just wide enough to peek out. The dog was gone. Only the shell remained of the armadillo. I opened the door wider and eased out onto the wooden deck. I grabbed the two buckets and filled them to the top with sweet smelling corn feed, stopping several times to make sure the dog wasn't sneaking up on me.

"Whose dog is he?" I asked Gramps as I hauled the feed to the trough and dumped it. The cows mooing their gratitude almost drowned out Gramps answer.

"He's nobody's dog. He just showed up here one day about a month ago. I reckon somebody dumped him." Gramps was bent over hooking up the milkers to a Jersey's udders. "You leave that dog be. He don't want anything to do with humans." Gramps moved on to the next cow and began washing the dirt off her udders with a wet rag. "I've been trying to make friends with him since he showed up and he won't let me get within ten yards of him. I even tried to coax him with a wienie. He wouldn't have any of it. He musta been treated bad by somebody." Gramps hooked the milkers to the cow and then rose up and patted the cow on the rear. "That dog just don't like people." He seemed to notice my bare head for the first time. "Where's your hat?"

“Ahh, that big old sycamore down by the creek snagged it when I jumped across this mornin’,” I said setting the buckets down by the back door. “I didn’t wanna take time trying to find it in the dark, so I left it. I’ll go get it after lunch.” Gramps laughed and told me to bring in the next batch of cows from the holding lot.

Altogether we milked nearly a hundred cows twice a day, once early in the morning and again late in the evening. When we weren’t milking cows, there were fences to mend, hay to cut, bale and haul, and a thousand others things to ensure we wouldn’t get bored. This was my grandparents’ dairy farm. Every summer, since I was a kid, I went to live with them. It’s what I looked forward to all year long. The work was hard, but I also got to fish, hunt, and explore the Cherokee Hills that grew up around Eldon Valley.

After lunch, I excused myself from the table, grabbed my .22 and headed down the hill towards the creek. The sun was at its peak, and the thick June air caused my t-shirt to grip my back like a clammy fist. I made it to the shade of the oak tree and the coolness of the creek as fast as I could. Somewhere along the bank, I would find my cap. I wasn’t a big Chiefs fan but Gramps was, and he gave it to me last year for my eleventh birthday. I sat down under a large oak tree to rest, looking first to make sure there was no poison ivy.

This was one of my favorite places to come and just relax. Soft, green grass made the perfect sleeping pad while moss-covered roots from the oak tree provided the perfect pillow. The serene noise of the creek flowing over sleek, white sand stones was the ultimate lullaby. Songbirds sang their familiar songs while feisty squirrels played in the canopy above me. I lay my head down on the blanket of moss and closed my eyes.

Just as I nodded off, I heard something rustling in the brush down the creek away. It was the devil dog. He had a rabbit in his mouth and was crossing the creek when he saw me. He froze and then after a few seconds continued across about 30 yards from me.

“Hey boy, how you doin’ boy?” I said trying to hide my fear. “Whatcha got there, lunch?” The dog dropped the rabbit and walked forward a few steps until he was standing right over it. He didn’t growl, but he definitely wasn’t going to invite me to join him. “Hey I was just leavin’. You enjoy your lunch and I’ll be seein’ you.” I backed away from him, turned, and started walking slowly back to the house, tensing my back muscles, expecting an attack. When I was almost back to the house I got up enough courage to look back. He was gone. I sighed with relief and walked through the front yard. Gramps was sitting in his favorite rocker on the front porch.

“Where’s your hat?” I thought you was going lookin’ for it?”

“I was, then I figured I better get that pole on the holdin’ corral fixed so the cows won’t get out,” I said embarrassed that I was afraid of a stupid old dog.

“Well, that’s a fine idea. You can look for that ole hat anytime.” I could tell Gramps knew something was wrong and was letting me off easy.

I went in the house and headed towards my room. The smell from Grandma’s kitchen changed my mind. Those fancy pastry chefs in Europe couldn’t hold a candle to the heavenly smell coming from the big pot on the stove. Grandma stood over the pot, her bowl of batter next to her, dipping apple slices into the batter and then into the hot oil. The finished product was the best tasting apple fritters in the county.

“Why James, I didn’t know you was here,” she said wiping her forehead with the tail of her apron. “Gramps said you was off lookin’ for your hat.”

“I was, but then I decided I better fix the holdin’ corral.”

“Well, take some fritters with you to give you energy.”

“Thanks, Grandma, I will.” I grabbed a paper bag from under the counter and loaded it with fritters covered in powdered sugar while Grandma stood with her mouth hanging open. I don’t think she planned on me taking the whole batch. I ran out of the house and down to the milk barn. I walked through the front door, out to the feed bin and then to the holding pen. I didn’t think it would take long to fix the corral so I set the paper bag full of fritters on the corral post and walked across the barnyard to the woodshed. When I came back, that darn dog was laying on the ground, his whole head stuffed in the paper sack. I was so mad, I forgot I was afraid of him. “Git! You sorry excuse for a dog!” Startled, the thieving dog jerked his head out of the bag, and faced me. His whole muzzle was covered with powdered sugar and a grin spread across it. I ran at him yelling and cursing and chunking anything I could get my hands on at him. He just lay there scratching his ear with his hind foot. Halfway across the barnyard I tripped over a rock and went down on my face. I swear I heard that fritter stealing dog laugh. I grabbed a fist-sized rock and threw it at him. I missed, but it was close enough to let him know I wasn’t playing. He slowly got to his feet, stretched his legs, and trotted away. “Darn dog!” I hollered after him.

When I made it over to the bag, I knew that dad burn dog had eaten my whole bag of fritters. I picked up the torn sack and threw it in the trash barrel. “I’ll get you back you stupid dog!” I muttered under my breath and then gathered up my tools and finished fixing the holding pen fence.

When I went back to the house, Gramps was sitting on the front porch eating apple fritters and drinking milk. Grandma sat next to him hulling beans. I told them about that stinking dog eating my fritters. Gramps laughed so hard milk went up his nose and all down the bib of his overalls. “That stupid, thievin’, no account, fritter stealin’ dog is going to get his though,” I said promised. “You just wait and see. Next time I get him in the sites of my .22, I’m going to send him to the Promised Land.”

“You leave that dog alone,” Gramps said when he finally quit laughing. “You shouldn’t have taken that whole batch of fritters any way. And ‘sides, Fritter was just doing what comes natural.”

“Fritter! Now you’ve gone and named him Fritter?” I couldn’t believe it. That darn dog stole from me, and now Gramps is making light of me by naming him, Fritter! “All that darn dog does is steal. I’m goin’ to put an end to his stealin’ ways. Those will be the last apple fritters that dog ever swipes from me.”

“You’ll do no such thing!” Grandma said as she broke open a shell and dropped the brown beans into her bowl. “Fritter may be a thief but since he’s been around, those wild dogs haven’t killed uh one of my chickens. He’s earned his keep.” Grandma gave me the look all grandmothers seem to pass on down to their daughters: that you-better-listen-to-me-or-I’m-going-to-set-the-rear-end-of-your-pants-afire look.

“All right Grandma, I won’t shoot him but dadgummit why do we have to keep him around?” I asked backing down from Grandma’s stern stare. “He’ll steal everything I’ve got.

For the next month, I tried to make friends with Fritter. I figured he would be better to have him as a friend than an enemy, especially since Grandma wouldn’t let me shoot him. The only problem was Fritter didn’t want me getting close and I think maybe that dumb dog was smarter than me. The closest I got to Fritter was when I had an apple fritter in my hand. I coaxed and sweet-talked him ‘til he was within a few feet. But even an apple fritter has limited

power. Fritter wouldn't get any closer. I started to walk toward him, and he backed up. "Fine, if you don't want it, you don't have to have it." I acted like I was eating it, but he was no fool. After weeks of trying to be Fritter's friend, I finally gave up. I wanted him to hunt and play in the creek with me like most dogs would, but if he wouldn't, he wouldn't.

At the same time, I was trying to be Fritter's friend, I also kept looking for my cap. It was nowhere to be found. I looked all around the creek; it was gone. I didn't want Gramps to be mad at me so I kept looking for it. One time I started to go look for it, and Gramps caught me going out the back door. "Where you goin'?"

Tired of trying to keep the secret, I told him about the hat. He didn't have much to say other than to be careful. The pack of wild dogs that had been stealing all over the valley was getting braver. They had killed two of Mr. Rawlings' finest coon dogs just the other night.

"Take your gun with you just in case you see 'um."

"All right." I usually took my .22 any way.

"Be back before evening milking. I may need you to start the milking."

"How come?"

"We got a calf missing. I'm afraid them dogs mighta killed it. I'm gonna go see if I can find it."

I left Gramps reading the paper and hiked to the creek. After a couple of hours searching for my cap, I sat down by the old oak tree and watched two squirrels fight over an acorn like two kids fighting over a Hershey bar. Suddenly Fritter came plunging through the brush, dragging his hind legs behind him, my Kansas City Chiefs cap in his mouth. I eased around the big oak tree and put the strong, gray trunk between us. I don't think he saw me. He lay on the bank near the water, his breathing ragged. I crawled toward the bank above where Fritter lay. As I peered over the edge, I heard Fritter whimper. I could see why. His whole right side was covered in blood. His hind leg was nearly torn off at the hip. I slid down the gravel bank and crept up on him. He raised his head and showed me his teeth; a soft growl came from deep within. "It's okay boy. I won't hurt you," I whispered as I edged closer.

What I saw when I got closer almost made me sick. Fritter's throat was torn open, and his right leg was barely attached. His face had a long cut on it that ran from just below his eye to the tip of his nose. Thick red blood oozed from his throat and leg. I took off my shirt and dipped it in the water. I held the shirt above Fritter's mouth and gently squeezed. He lapped up the water like a calf who missed breakfast. His breathing was slow, and he seemed to be calming down.

"It's okay boy. You'll be all right," I lied. I knew there was nothing I could do for Fritter and I think he knew it too. I couldn't help him, and he would never survive the trip to Gramp's house.

Fritter whimpered and looked at me with sad eyes. I ran my hand along his smooth fur and scratched gently behind his ears. He nuzzled my other hand, raised his head to look me in the eyes and then lowered it. The last of his air escaped his lungs like air from a balloon. "What happened to you boy? What did this to you?" I said wiping my eyes dry on my sleeve.

I put my cap on, grabbed my .22 and ran to the house. Grandma was in the kitchen canning preserves; the pressure cooker hissed on the stove, Mason jars covered the table, and blocks of paraffin lay on the counter. The smell of strawberry preserves was so sweet it was almost sickening. Grandma looked at me and nearly fainted. Fritter's blood covered my overalls. "It's okay Grandma. It's not my blood, its Fritter's."

I spent the next few minutes telling her about finding Fritter. "I'm sorry about Fritter. I know you liked him," she said as she grabbed my hand and held it. "I see you found your hat."

"No, Fritter found it. Where's Gramps?" I said collapsing in the kitchen chair.

"He's still out looking for the calf. It seems like those wild dogs will never die. No matter how many times Gramps and the other farmers hunt them down and kill them, there's always more to take their place." Grandma reached into the fridge, pulled out a jug of milk and poured me a tall glass. "Seems like they're getting' braver too. They got Mr. Rawlings' coon dogs, and Millie Brinks told me they attacked her dogs right in their pen. Would uh killed 'em too if Paul hadn't come out of the house with his shotgun and killed one of 'em."

"How long has Gramps been gone?" I asked after downing the glass of milk.

"Since right after you left. Come to think of it. Mr. Rawlings shoulduh been back before now. I'm surprised you two didn't cross paths."

"I'll go look for him." I stood and gathered my cap and rifle.

"You be back before supper. And tell Gramps he still hasn't fixed my clothesline," She shouted as I went out the back door and headed down the hill.

I searched for what seemed like hours before I discovered any sign of Gramps. In the soft mud near a cow path, I found his footprints. Gramps always wore work boots with deep tread. There was no doubt these were his.

I followed the tracks to the far end of the hay meadow. About a hundred yards away, under the deep shade of a stand of oak trees, the cows were bunched facing the pond. The only time cows bunched like that were at night or for protection. I was starting to get scared, not for myself, but for Gramps. As fast as I could, I ran toward the cows. They heard me just before I got there. Some turned their heads toward me but seeing no danger they quickly turned back toward the pond.

"Gramps, you around here?" I hollered above the snorts and moos of the cows.

"Gramps! You better answer if you can hear me." The only answer was a calf crying.

"Grandma is mighty mad at you for not fixin' her clothesline. Gramps!" There was still no answer, so I started into the woods and had only gone about fifty feet when I heard the growls. At first, they were low and then grew louder and seemed to echo. Only it wasn't an echo. It was coming from another place. I chambered a round in my .22 and aimed toward the brush. "Get outta there! Hiyaa! Get!" The growls grew louder and seemed to multiply.

From the far side of the cows, I heard the bull snort and then charge. I heard a yelp and then saw a black and white ball of fur hit the bank of the pond and roll three times. When the wild dog stopped, it didn't move. Brush popping brought me back to my predicament. From the growling, it seemed the dogs had me surrounded. An ugly brown dog ran at me from the woods to my left. "Hiyaa!" I hollered as loud as I could. The dog stopped and looked at me in confusion. I confused him even more when I raised the rifle and shot him through the chest. From my right a big, powerful dog that looked like a German shepherd came at me. I cocked my lever action Henry and fired. My shot hit him but didn't slow him down. I ejected the shell and chambered another round. My second shot flew true and struck the dog in the mouth, dropping him in his tracks.

The other dogs seemed to learn from their dead friends' mistakes. I could hear them walking and growling, but no target presented itself. I headed toward the pond. If nothing else, I could put the pond to my back and only have to face the wild dogs from three directions. Plus my mouth was as dry as a desert rattlesnake's belly. When I got to the pond, I bent down on one knee, cupped my hands and scooped up a handful of water. The water tasted like dead skunk,

but at least it was wet. While I was finishing the last of the water, I heard a moaning sound. I couldn't see what was making the noise, but it didn't sound like an animal. I levered another round in the chamber and crept toward the noise.

It was Gramps. He had dug a shallow hole in the pond bank and crawled inside. I ran to Gramps, lay my rifle next to him and shook his arm. "Gramps! Are you okay!?" There was no answer. "Gramps wake up. Wake up!" Gramps' head had a cut on it and sweat was soaking through his hat. I was reaching for his cap to get him some water when I noticed Gramps' left leg. It was twisted the wrong way and blood covered his pant leg. I took out my Old Timer pocketknife and cut the pants leg. I nearly gagged when I saw his leg. The bone had broken through the skin just below the knee and blood oozed out of the dirty opening. Gramps moaned again. "Wake up Gramps, wake up! You really done it to yourself good this time. I gotta get you some water and then get you outta here." I slid down the bank and filled the cap. I was just turning around when I saw a black streak running at me. It was a huge dog, with folded ears and brown splotches scattered all over him. I reached for my rifle, but it wasn't there. I forgot it back with Gramps. "Hiya!" I screamed hoping to scare it like I did that other dog. But he kept coming and was within 20 feet of me when I heard a shot. The dog flew sideways and lay still. I looked up the bank and saw Gramps sitting up, my rifle gripped loosely from his big hands.

"Gramps!" I hollered and started running to him.

"Don't forget that water, boy," he bellowed before I had gone five steps. I did a three sixty and grabbed the water-filled cap with both hands. Carrying the water like fragile eggs, I made it to Gramps and handed him the hat.

"Thanks, boy," Gramps said as he gulped down the water. He tried to sit up better and grimaced in pain when his bad leg moved. "My throat is dryer than a backseat Baptist's wallet at collection time." He drank the last of the water and asked me how I found him.

"Just luck. Them wild dogs almost had me surrounded. I killed a few and was able to make it to the pond. Then I heard you moaning."

"You best keep that rifle close by. Those dogs are after blood. I've never seen dogs act like this, even wild ones." Pain took over Gramps. It was a few minutes before he could talk and then it was through gritted teeth. "Usually they'd be too afraid to try to bring down a man."

"How'd you break your leg?"

"Them dogs done it. I came out here to find that Jersey calf. I found it over yonder on the other side of Bare Rock Hill. The dogs got it. I was just starting to head back when one of them crazy dogs came out of nowhere and knocked me down the hill. I musta broke my leg on that big rock. That wild dog was on me like flies on a horse biscuit. It probably would have had me if Fritter hadn't shown up."

"Fritter?"

"Yeah, that crazy Fritter came outta nowhere and lit into it. He had the dog by the throat and was popping him like a whip." Gramps' breathing was ragged; he needed a doctor bad. "After he finished that one he took off after the rest of the pack. Don't know if he found them or not. I crawled to the pond and dug me a hole for protection; then I guess I passed out."

"Fritter is dead, Gramps. I found him this morning. He was pretty torn up, but he let me try to doctor him and feed him water."

"That's too bad. Fritter was a good dog, mighty skittish around people, but he was a good dog. He saved my hide, that's for sure," Gramps sighed. "I need more water."

I ran down to the pond and filled my hat. When I came back, I told him about finding Fritter and what kind of shape he was in. "When I found him he had my cap," I said holding back tears.

"Well, I'll be dad gummed."

"What?"

"I reckon that dog knew he was dying and wanted to be close to you. I figure he really liked you. There was something in his past that wouldn't let him trust people. I 'magine you was the first person he liked." Gramps took another drink of water and then careful not to move his leg, lay down on his back. "I watched you with that dog. Every time he saw you his whole body wagged." Gramps stopped talking and rested for a moment. "You could see in his eyes that he wanted to run up to you and give you a good lickin'. He musta run across your cap on his way home. I reckon he kept it cause he wanted to die with your smell near him. That's probably as close to affection as he could get." The whole time Gramps talked I could hear the dogs circling closer and closer.

I was close to breaking down and bawling like a baby. Instead, I grabbed my rifle, chambered a round and ran into the woods, screaming curses at the dogs as loud as I could. With tear-flooded eyes, I shot as fast as I could aim and pull the trigger. I knocked down two dogs and would have hit another if my rifle hadn't jammed. I took out my pocket knife, dug the swollen spent shell out of the chamber, inserted another round and began searching for a new target. The dogs were gone.

I had to search under several trees before I found a stick sturdy enough for a crutch. Using the crutch and leaning on me, Gramps and I walked back to the house. Grandma saw us coming and ran out of the house to help me with Gramps. "You old fool, what did you do to yourself this time?" She sounded mad, but I could tell she was worried.

"Well old woman, I been teachin' young James here how to fight wild dogs and how to walk with a foolish old man hangin' on his shoulder. You got supper ready or did you already throw it out?" Gramps said trying to act just as mad.

"I shoulda thrown it out but I been keepin' it in the oven. First thing we gotta do is get you to town and to the doctor. That leg looks bad."

We took Gramps to town and got back home late that night. The doctor wanted to put Gramps in the hospital, but he wouldn't have it. He said there was too much work to do.

The next morning I got up early and rounded up the cows for milking. I took my rifle with me in case the dogs wanted to fight some more, but they didn't. I had to do my chores and Gramps' since he was laid up. It took me until noon to milk the cows, clean the barn and load the feed in the troughs for the evening milking. Gramps was sitting in his rocker on the porch when I got back to the house.

"Lunch is ready. Go on in and get yourself something to eat. You gotta be near starved by now."

"I'm all right. I want to go bury Fritter before the dogs or coyotes get to him," I said knocking the dust off my overalls with my cap.

"That's a fine idea. I wish I could go with you. That dog saved my bacon and I won't never forget it.

"I gotta go," I said and then turned to walk away.

“Take your rifle. Them dogs might come back.”

I went to my room to fetch my rifle. I also took the blanket off my bed; the one Grandma made for me when I was just a baby. When I walked by the kitchen, Grandma was making apple fritters. I walked in and without saying a word filled a sack with apple fritters and walked out of the house, carrying the blanket, my rifle, and the fritters. Next I went to the toolshed and got a shovel.

I was glad to see Fritter lay undisturbed. No varmints had tried to make a meal out of him. Maybe they had respect for a true warrior.

I laid my rifle and the shovel down, sat next to Fritter, and stroked his soft fur. “Fritter, I wanna thank you for savin’ Gramps. He’s an ornery ol’ cuss, but he’s the only Gramps I got.” I dipped a corner of the blanket in the creek and cleaned the blood off Fritter as much as I could. “I just want you to know you were a great dog. The finest dog in this county, and maybe in the country.” Tears swelled up in my eyes, and it was getting hard to talk without my voice breaking. “I don’t know why you were afraid to trust people, but I reckon you had your reasons. I brung you your favorite, apple fritters. Grandma made ‘em fresh today. I reckon they’ll keep you from getting’ too hungry on your trip to heaven. You take care of them angels up there.” Blinded by tears, I dug Fritter’s grave. When I was finished, I petted his head, wrapped him in my blanket, and lay him down gently in the hole. Then I took off my hat and laid it in the hole next to Fritter. “This is a fine spot.” I filled the hole with rich, black dirt and walked home.