The Black Dog
Written by Jim McAmis

Back in the 1920s, folks in the South didn’t have big department stores or malls where they could buy the things they needed. At best, they had a general store near by, maybe a town with some larger stores, and, of course, there were always the mail order catalogs.

Another source of goods was the “rolling store.” It was usually a good sized truck loaded down with about everything you could imagine. They’d come rolling into town and set up where folks could come, look and buy. It wasn’t unusual for them to pull right up in somebody’s driveway and open up.

In Kentucky, there were lots of coal mining company towns. If a rolling store passed through there, the company got their cut. You couldn’t compete with the company store and not ante up something.

Earl had a rolling store that he drove through the deep, rural hills of eastern Kentucky. He didn’t make great money, and he missed his family now and again. But on the open road, he was generally happy and free.

One day, as it was getting on towards dark, Earl was out looking for a place to pull over and spend the night. You see, some rolling stores had a little compartment in the back of the truck that the driver would sleep in. Sort of a 1920’s version of an RV.

It was then that he saw something standing still in the road up ahead of him. He wasn’t sure what it was at first. Then it turned and looked at him, its eyes glowing in the headlights. It was a black dog - looked more wolf than dog - blacker than any dog Earl had ever seen. Earl eased to a stop, but the dog showed no sign of moving.

“Hey!” Earl hollered out the window. “Wanna get run over?”

The dog just looked at him. Earl blew his horn, but the dog never budged.

“Well I’ll be...”

When Earl stepped out of the truck, the dog suddenly got up and ambled down the road. “Now where’re you going?” Earl called after him.

Earl got back in the truck and started it up. He couldn’t pass the dog, because the dog was walking down the middle of the road. Calling it a road was being benevolent, for it was more like a trail, with ruts and a big ditch on either side. And Earl sure didn’t want to run over this strange dog.

Up ahead, he saw a nice flat place by the crossroads. There was plenty of room for the truck, and a good stream was running right by the road. The dog went over and lay in the grass. Earl pulled
over, got out, stretched a bit and gathered some wood for a fire. He cooked a little supper and even offered to share it with the dog. But the dog kept his distance.

Just as the moon came up, the dog stirred. He acted like he wanted Earl to come with him. For some reason, Earl felt compelled to go. He followed the dog down the moonlit road. Not too far away was a sharp right hand curve. Just as they got there the dog suddenly turned, looked at Earl and leaped into the hillside.

Just like that, the dog disappeared.

Dumbfounded, Earl just stood there and stared at the hillside for the longest time. Finally, he went on back to the camp, but he did not sleep well that night.

The next morning, Earl went on his way, pulling into the next coal mining company town. This whole area of eastern Kentucky was company town country. The mining company would come in and build houses for their workers. Every company town looked just like another - rows of cookie-cutter, clapboard houses, with the only distinguishing feature being the color. Some folks used store-bought paint to paint their houses in bright colors, while others used whitewash. Still others would mix a little color in the whitewash and use that, and some just left the house unpainted.

Salesmen never knew how good they’d do in company towns. A lot depended on the company, and how much of a cut they took. Earl did fairly well that day, even with the company cut.

It was getting dusky dark as Earl headed out of town back towards the crossroads. Then, lo and behold, in the road ahead he spotted the mystery dog again, just standing in the road. It would walk ahead a little ways and then turn to look at Earl, wanting him to follow. When the dog got to the same sharp curve in the road that Earl had visited before, it turned, looked at Earl, then leaped into the hillside, vanishing without a trace.

By this point, Earl was thoroughly shaken, but he drove on to the crossroads to spend the night. He determined that he’d hit the next town and then clear out of these parts. Life on the road could be strange enough without disappearing dogs.

The following morning, as he pulled into the next company town, he knew something was wrong. It seemed everybody in town was all dressed up - and it wasn’t even Sunday. They were gathered around the yards and porches of several of the houses.

At the first house, Earl found out there had been a cave-in at one of the coal mines. Shaft #3 had caved in, killing all of the miners inside except for one, who was still missing. The townspeople figured that the lone miner was most likely still buried under tons of coal and rock. Earl figured he wouldn’t be selling anything during the funeral, so he headed out of town, almost relieved to be getting away.

Slowly, he drove by house after house. Sad-faced, black frocked women sat on the porches clutching pictures of loved ones. Other women, relatives, and friends tried to comfort them. The yards were full of men, not saying much, just standing around uneasily, not really knowing what
As Earl was about to turn out of town, he saw something that made the hair on the back of his neck stand straight up. On one of the porches stood a woman holding a picture of a big burly coal miner, hard hat and carbide lamp on his head, covered in coal dust. Only his eyes and toothy grin shone out of the blackness.

Striking though the miner was, it was the other image that had caused Earl to stop - a large, coal black dog, more wolf than dog. THE dog from the road - or at least its twin. Earl started to get out of the truck, but the somber, unfriendly looks from the men in the yard made him figure it was time to go.

As he drove out of town, he tried to think about where he would go next, but he could not shake that picture from his mind. Then, before he knew it, he came upon the dog again. The animal looked straight at Earl, turned and jumped into the hillside, vanishing without a trace.

It was then that Earl changed his mind. In a big cloud of dust, he turned around and headed back down the road toward the last town as fast as he dared. He had to go back and tell the townspeople what he had seen.

Earl pulled up in front of the house where he had seen the woman with the picture. All of the women were still on the front porch and the men, in their Sunday best, filled the front yard. From the porch, he could hear the women humming the old time hymn “Precious Memories,” keeping time by rocking in their rocking chairs and fluttering their funeral home fans. The men were in several clusters, most smoking their cigarettes or pipes. They shifted uneasily as they stood around, tugging at the unfamiliar tightness of a starched collar.

Earl jumped out of his truck and started up the walk to the house. A couple of grim-faced men stepped in front of him.

“You best be getting on down the road, Peddler Man, this ain’t got nothing to do with you. Ain’t nobody buying today.”

Ignoring them, Earl leaned around and called out to the woman he’d spotted earlier. “Ma’am, I’ve got to talk to you. It’s about the dog. The dog in that picture.”

“What about the dog?” growled the larger of the men.

“I’ve seen the dog.”

The woman on the porch stood up. “You’ve seen Shuck?”

“If that’s the dog’s name, yes, Ma’am”

The yard suddenly fell silent. All of the men within earshot turned and looked. The men blocking his way took a couple of steps back.
The large man glared at Earl and said, “Peddler Man, if this is some kind of joke.”

The woman shushed the large man and turned back toward Earl. “What do you mean you saw the dog?” she asked. “He’s lost in the mine with my husband, Jack. Shuck went down in the mine every day just like a regular miner. Jack said he worked harder than some down there. He always said Shuck was good luck. Now, speak your peace.”

Earl told them the entire story of the black dog he’d seen on the road.

The woman clutched the picture ever closer and closed her eyes to hold back the tears.

“Mister,” said one of the men, “I don’t know what you saw, or why you’re here, but I think it’s time you were getting along. You ain’t helping.”

It was then that an ancient, wrinkled man, whose every pore seemed to be filled with coal dust, stepped out of the crowd and said, “You all hear what this feller just told? Don’t you realize where he’s talking about?”

“Wait a minute,” another man said, “that’s right there at the Devil’s Mouth.”

“What do you mean? What’s the Devil’s Mouth?” asked Earl.

The old man spoke. “The company called it Shaft #1. It was the richest coal vein and the biggest, deepest, blackest shaft anybody ever saw. Dug before any type of power drills or any other machinery. Dug by hand. Why, when you started down that shaft, seemed like it went on forever. Seemed like she wouldn’t bottom out this side of Perdition. So all the folks around here took to calling her the Devil’s Mouth. When the vein played out they dynamited her shut and built the road along there.”

“I wonder if it still connects to #3?” someone wondered aloud.

Suddenly, men from the surrounding houses began to fill the yard, hearing what was going on. The old man stepped up on the porch and addressed the crowd.

“The burying’s just gonna have to wait. We’ve got work to do. Shuck’s showed the way and Jack may just be in there. Alive or dead, we’ve got to get him out.”

The crowd evaporated, only to reappear moments later in work clothes and carrying picks, shovels, drills, hardhats, and carbide lamps. Everybody piled into trucks and off they went.

When they reached the Devil’s Mouth, everybody piled out and started digging. They moved tons of earth in what seemed like minutes. On into the night they dug. Anxious women waited at the edge of the light. Youngguns peeked out from behind their skirt tails. Miners worked in shifts, digging and shoring up the shaft they were making in the hillside - reopening the Devil’s Mouth.

Finally there came a shout: “We’ve broke through!”
The crowd surged forward, looking and listening for any sign that they had found the lost miner.

“He’s alive!”

The words flew like lightning through the crowd.

“He’s alive! Oh thank heaven, he’s alive!”

They found Shuck too, just a little bit away. He was dead - crushed by a fallen timber.

When Jack was carried out, he was exhausted and hungry but, aside from a broken leg, he was okay.

Jack then told his story: “When the tremblin’ started, me and Shuck lit out. Ran as fast as we could. I was hopin’ the shafts still connected. And I was hopin’ I remembered how to get there. When the back end there fell in, Shuck got caught and my leg got broke. I crawled over to him, but he was gone. I been setting here for three days wonderin’ if I’d ever see the light of day again. Been awful dark since my carbide run out.”

“But, you know,” said Jack, “the strangest thing was that sometimes it felt like Shuck was right here by my side. Nuzzling up to me just like always. Keepin’ me company. He was a good dog. I’ll miss him.”

Jack didn’t know how good a dog he really was. For somehow, even in death, Shuck had come to his master’s rescue.

And that’s the story of the Black Dog.

- THE END -