

# OF DOGS AND CONSEQUENCES

## (from “The Chronicles of Stewart Lambert”)

In a way, Stewart Lambert’s friendship with Curtis Washington began almost a quarter century before they met.

Stewart was still in high school - and still going by “Stew” - when he, Matt Lippman, and Jim Salowitz decided to spend a September Saturday walking the Illinois Prairie Path from Glen Ellyn to Aurora, a distance of some 20 miles. They met on the crushed limestone trail at six-thirty on a cool, clear morning. The sun was just rising, tinting a couple of stray clouds in an otherwise pale pearl blue sky with careless brushstrokes of pink and orange. They started out at a brisk pace down the former Chicago, Aurora and Elgin Railroad right-of-way with their lunches in their backpacks and their canteens on their belts, the sun at their backs and a breeze in their faces.

Chicago’s urban landscapes had not yet overrun the suburbs in 1968, so once they had crossed the Wheaton city limits, the three friends soon found themselves in unincorporated areas with plenty of fields, meadows, woods and streams. Southwest of Warrenville, they even encountered open farmland. And here is where it happened.

Stew never really knew where the dog came from. He would joke later that it was probably a farm dog that had become bored playing solitaire and smoking cigarettes behind the shed. So when three teen-aged boys, singing Steppenwolf’s “Born to Be Wild”, appeared at the far end of the soybean field, the dog decided this threat needed to be met swiftly and decisively. Thus, just as Stew, Matt and Jim were bellowing, “Like a true nature’s child, we were born, born to be wild!” a dirty yellow blur burst from the beans.

They were too startled to run; too startled even to look at each other. For one stuttering heartbeat, each imagined teeth at his throat. Then, more from fear than from anything else, Stew opened his mouth – and *roared*. A rich, full-throated, stentorian blast of anger and terror, it was possibly the only thing that could take his friends’ minds off their own imminent disembowelment. It was also the only thing the dog hadn’t expected. Faced with this sudden development, he tried desperately to backpedal. Instead, his paws slid out from under him as he hit the limestone chips at the edge of the path, and he tumbled and rolled and cartwheeled clear across the trail and into a patch of burdock on the other side. With a yelp, he regained his footing. Shying away from these strange creatures, his hide stinging from a dozen scrapes and scratches and mottled with burs, he limped as quickly as he could back across the trail and into the safety of his soybeans.

The rest of the hike was anticlimactic. Matt and Jim hailed Stew as a hero, and Stew nursed a sore throat for the next three days. And, until they graduated and went their separate collegiate ways, the three joked about the day Stew saved them from the Attack of the Barnyard Dog.

Some 24 years and 2100 miles later, Stewart Lambert was enjoying the soft air of another September morning, this one in Berkeley, California. A long way from his high school buddies and his high school dreams, Stewart was married with a son and a daughter in high school themselves and a small, successful business. Lately, however, his surfer-blond hair was beginning to show hints of silver in certain lights, and his wiry, athletic frame to pick up a little excess flesh around the middle, so he had added a morning jog to his routine.

On this particular morning, Stewart was taking advantage of his new habit to explore one of the older Berkeley neighborhoods. The sun was coloring the upper floors of the tall brownstones and filtering through the dense leaves of the old oaks and maples as he turned up an alley and found himself on a single lane of worn pavement through which the original paving bricks peeped at intervals, jogging between two lines of wooden fences encasing small, neat yards.

He slowed to a walk, using this break from the traffic to take a bit of a breather. The street noise faded behind him, and he could hear snatches of birdsong. He was listening intently to the gentle cooing of a mourning dove when a cacophony of barks, growls and snarls erupted almost at his elbow.

A few deep breaths restored his heart to its proper pace, and Stewart cautiously peeped over the saw-toothed top of the quivering old fence. A young pit bull was dashing itself against the rotting boards,

trying his best to get at the juicy leg it just *knew* was waiting on the other side. Stewart smiled and “woofed” quietly. The dog looked up, startled, and then decided to try to launch itself over the fence. At this point, Stewart decided that not only was discretion the better part of valor, but retreat was the better part of survival. He quickly backed away and continued walking down the alley, leaving the dog to its own schemes.

About three houses further along, the vocalizations of the pit bull were joined by another, more terrifying sound: the splintering of wood. He glanced back. The dog had found a weak spot in the fence and was forcing its way through. Stewart looked around, suddenly anxious. The end of the alley was still far away, and the lines of fences on the sides seemed unbroken. He wondered if he could outrun a pit bull, but before he could even turn, the last splinter of fence gave way and the dog shot out.

Stewart stared as madness on four paws bulleted toward him. Something about the situation seemed naggingly familiar. Instinctively, he opened his mouth, took a deep breath and roared.

It worked. For one brief moment, it actually worked. The dog skidded to a halt some twenty feet away and stared at him. Then it showed its teeth and rumbled deep in its chest, and Stewart knew he was dead.

There was no time to plan, only to act. Stewart whirled and grabbed the top of the wooden fence behind him. He swung his legs up in a move he had no idea he could execute. He thought he could feel hot, moist breath on his lower ankle. Then he was over the fence and sprawling on a small, newborn compost heap.

He was on his feet almost without pause, feeling deep satisfaction at having bested so formidable an opponent. The dog raged at him from the alley as Stewart strutted back and forth along the other side of the barrier, chanting, “*Who da man? Who da man?*”

“I assume you ‘da man?’”

Stewart stopped in mid-strut and slowly turned. The voice was soft, yet powerful enough to carry over the frantic ravaging of the pit bull, and bore such an imprint of culture and dignity that he was totally unprepared for a tall black man with silver hair and a football player’s build, dressed in boxers and undershirt, and carrying a plastic garbage bag.