

Saving SHILOH

by

PHYLLIS
REYNOLDS
NAYLOR

ATHENEUM BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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Thanks to our friends, the Maddens,
of Friendly, West Virginia

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To anyone who ever tried
to make a difference

One

There's one last thing to say about Shiloh before the story's over. I guess a dog's story ain't— isn't—ever over, even after he dies, 'cause if you lose a pet, you still go on loving him. But I couldn't bring myself to tell this part until now; of all the stuff that's happened, this was the scariest, and just thinking on it starts my hands to sweat.

When I first tried to get Shiloh from Judd Travers, who was treating that dog meaner than mud, at least there was a chance that if I couldn't have him for my own, Judd would let him live.

And even after Judd turns his beagle over to me, then starts drinkin' and talkin' ugly, there's hope he never meant it. But sometimes hope seems out of human hands entirely, and when the third thing happened . . . well, here's all that's left to tell.

Next to Christmas, I guess, Halloween is big in West

Virginia—out where we live, anyway, which is the little community of Shiloh, up the winding road from Friendly there on the Ohio River. It's because I first saw the little dog here in Shiloh that I named him what I did.

To get to our house, you go through this place called Little—you'll know it by the church—and you keep going along Middle Island Creek, wide as a river, till you see this old falling-down gristmill. It's right by this rusty bridge, and just over the bridge, you'll see the old Shiloh schoolhouse. SHILOH SCHOOL—1920–1957, reads a sign above the door, like a gravestone or something. I seen plenty of buildings got the date on them when they were built, but I never seen a building got the date when it died.

We live on the side of the creek near the mill, up the lane in a two-bedroom house. You sit out on the steps of an evening, don't move even your little finger, and pretty soon a buck will step out of the trees, a doe or two behind him, and parade across your field just as grand as you please. Now you tell me how many sixth-grade boys in the United States of America got somethin' like that to look on!

"What you going to be for Halloween next year, Marty?" asks Dara Lynn at supper. Halloween is over and gone, see, and already my skinny seven-year-old sister is thinkin' about the next. With her there's never no question. She dresses up like a witch every single year just so Ma can paint her fingernails black.

"I don't know," I tell her. "A ghoul, maybe."

"What's a ghoul?" asks Becky, who's three.

"Halfway between a ghost and a zombie," I say.

"Like a vampire?" asks Dara Lynn. Dara Lynn's big on vampires.

"Naw. Its skin is green, and it don't suck blood," I say.

"Marty!" Ma scolds, nodding toward my littlest sister.

We're having biscuits with sausage gravy for dinner, and there's nothing in the world I love more than sausage gravy. Except Shiloh, of course. And Shiloh loves that gravy, too, 'cause all through supper he's sittin' beside my chair with his muzzle on my leg, just waiting for me to finish up and pass that plate down to him so's he can lick up every last bit.

"I'm going to be a bunny," says Becky.

"Bunnies don't scare no one!" says Dara Lynn. "Why don't you be a pirate or something?"

"I don't *want* to scare no one," says Becky.

I guess there are *two* things I love more than sausage gravy: Shiloh and Becky.

Dad's washing up at the sink. We wait for him if we can, but sometimes his mail route takes longer than he thinks, and Becky gets hungry, so we eat.

"Passed by Sweeneys' house on the way home, and two of those straw men they rigged up on their porch have fallen over and been dragged out in the yard by their dogs," Dad says, sitting down at the table. "Look like a couple of drunks keeled over on the grass."

"Those straw men in overalls don't scare nobody," says Dara Lynn. "I want a dead man on our porch next Halloween with a face as white as flour."

"What's Shiloh going to be?" chirps Becky.

"He ain't going to be anything but his own self," I tell her. "Nobody messing with my dog."

"All this talk of Halloween, when Thanksgiving's right around the corner!" says Ma.

I guess there isn't that much to holler about where we live, so when a special day comes along, you want to hang on to it—keep Halloween stuff around till Christmas, and

Christmas lights goin' till Easter. I'm thinking how Ma wouldn't let us go trick-or-treating this year, though—not by ourselves.

"Houses too far apart for you kids to be walking out on the road," she'd said.

Well, the houses weren't any farther apart this year than last, and Dara Lynn and me went out then. But this time Dad drove us to the Halloween parade in Sistersville, and we had to do all our trick-or-treating there. I knew Ma was thinking of Judd Travers and the accident he'd had a month ago out on the road, drunk as he was. Knew she didn't want some other drunk to run his car into one of us.

Dara Lynn must have guessed what I'm thinking, 'cause she jokes, "We could always stuff Judd Travers and put him up on our porch. He'd scare off anybody."

"Hush," scolds Ma.

"There's enough talk going around about Judd Travers without you adding your two cents' worth," says Dad.

My ears prick up right quick. "What kind of talk?"

"None that makes one bit of sense," Dad tells me. "The man paid his fine for drunk driving, he busted up his leg and his truck besides, and as far as I can tell, he's trying to turn himself around. You'd think folks would want to help."

"I thought they were," I say. "Whelan's Garage fixed his truck up for him; people were takin' him groceries. . . ."

"That was when he was flat on his back, when he was really down. Now that he's on his feet again, there's the feeling around here that he got off way too easy. Heard Ed Sholt say as much down at the hardware store last week. Said we ought to keep Judd on the hot seat, let him know his kind wasn't wanted around here, and maybe he'd move somewhere else."

That sure would solve a lot of problems, I'm thinking. Ma wouldn't be so afraid for us kids out on the road, Dad wouldn't have to worry about Judd hunting up in our woods where a stray bullet could find its way down to our place, and I could rest easy that Judd wouldn't look for excuses to take Shiloh back; that he wouldn't hurt my dog out of spite, he ever got the chance. I think maybe I like the idea just fine.

"But what if he *doesn't* move?" says Ma. "What if everybody starts treatin' him worse'n dirt, and he stays right where he is?"

And suddenly I see a meaner Judd Travers than we ever saw before. Maddier, too. I think how he used to kick Shiloh—even took a shot at the log where Shiloh and me were sitting once. A meaner Judd than that?

"Way I look at it," Dad goes on, "is that Judd's doing fine so far, and we ought to wait and see what happens."

Dara Lynn's got a mouth on her, though. "Ha! He's still got his leg in a cast," she says. "Get that cast off, and he'll be just as bad as before."

"Well, I believe in giving a man a second chance," Dad tells her.

"Beginning now," says Ma, fixing her eyes on us. "Your dad and I have talked about it, and we're inviting Judd here for Thanksgiving dinner."

Dara Lynn rolls her eyes and falls back in her chair. "Good-bye turkey!" she says, meaning she won't have no appetite come the fourth Thursday in November. As for me, I lose my appetite that very minute and set my plate on the floor.

Two

On the school bus next day, I tell David Howard who's coming to our house for Thanksgiving.

"Judd *Travers*?" he yells, and David's got a mouth bigger than Dara Lynn's. Every last person on that bus takes notice. "Why?"

"'Cause he don't have no other place to go," I mumble. All the kids are looking at me now.

"He'll probably show up drunk and drive right into your porch," says Fred Niles.

"He'll bring his gun and shoot your dog," says Sarah Peters.

Michael Sholt says, "If it was us, my dad wouldn't let him in the house! Judd was the one who knocked over our mailbox when he was drinking. And it was Dad who caught his black-and-white dog when somebody turned Judd's loose. Said it was almost as mean as Judd."

"He's just coming for dinner," I say. "It ain't like he's movin' in." I wish I'd never said anything. David Howard's my best friend, but he sure is loud.

In school, we're learning far more about Pilgrims than I ever wanted to know. All our spelling words for the last two weeks have had something to do with Pilgrims, so I have to learn words like "treaty," "colonist," "religious," and "celebration."

What I do like, though, is learning about the two Indians, Samoset and Squanto, who taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn. And how, except for the Indians, every single person who lives in the United States is either an immigrant himself or his great-granddaddy, maybe, came from a foreign country. Us Prestons are mostly English, a little Scotch and Irish thrown in. Miss Talbot says a lot of the early colonists were convicts, people who had been in jail in England, and were deported to America. I'll bet you anything Judd's great-great-great-great-granddaddy was somebody who'd been in jail.

Thanksgiving morning, I can smell the turkey roasting before I even open my eyes. We got a sixteen-pounder on sale, so Ma gets it in the oven early. I guess being hunkered down on a warm sofa, which is where I sleep, smelling turkey and knowing I don't have to go to school is about as close to heaven as I can get. Shiloh must think so, too. He's asleep against my feet, and every so often I can feel his paws twitch, like he's dreamin' of chasing rabbits.

Once Becky's awake, though, I don't sleep anymore, 'cause she'll come right over to the couch and stand with her face two inches from mine. She knows she's not sup-

posed to wake me, so what she does is just stand there, her hot breath warming my eyelids. If I don't wake up right off, she'll start blowin' real soft—short little puffs—and then I know that whatever sleep I ain't had yet, I'm not gonna get.

I scoot over to one side so Becky can climb up and watch cartoons on TV. This morning, though, she's not content just to blow, her breath smelling of Cheerios and sleep; she's got to tap me on the cheek with the edge of the cardboard Pilgrim Dara Lynn brought home. I'm beginning to wish I'd never heard of Thanksgiving or Pilgrims, either one.

My job is to crack the bag of walnuts somebody give us so Ma can make a walnut pie—we always have us a walnut pie and pumpkin both. As soon as I'm dressed and get some cinnamon toast in me, I begin. Dara Lynn's settin' the table, putting little toothpick and marshmallow turkeys she's made by each plate. Dad slides the extra leaf in the table so there's room for Judd, and Shiloh just hangs around the kitchen, smelling that turkey. He don't know who's coming for dinner, and it's just as well.

Usually Ma sings when she's feeling good, but I notice she's not singing today. There's a frown-line that shows up on her forehead, and she bites her bottom lip as she tests the pie.

About two o'clock Dad says, "Well, I better drive over there and pick up Judd. Marty, why don't you come along?"

There's no reason I can think of why I should, but when Dad says that, it's 'cause he's got something to say to me. So I get my jacket.

I climb in the back of the Jeep. Judd, with his left leg in a cast, is going to need room up front to stretch himself out. As soon as we start down the lane, Dad says, "Now Marty,

you being the oldest, Dara Lynn and Becky are going to take their cue from you. You treat Judd with respect, your sisters will learn a little something."

What's he think? I'm gonna start some kind of argument right there at the table? I don't respect Judd, but I can be polite.

"What I mean is," Dad goes on, "if he says something about Shiloh, don't go getting hot under the collar. Let's see if we can't get through this meal at least being good neighbors."

I want just as bad as anyone else to make peace with Judd, but there's one condition: "Long as you don't let him borrow Shiloh to go hunting," I say.

"Judd won't be doing any hunting this season, you can bet," says Dad. "He's got even more injuries besides that leg to heal up."

We reach the road, turn right a few yards, go around the big pothole that sent Judd's pickup truck rolling down the bank last month, then cross the bridge by the old mill. We turn right again and keep going till we get to the brown-and-white trailer where Judd lives.

He's already out in the yard, hobbling about on his cast and crutches. He's got brown hair, eyes that look smaller than they are on account of being so close together, and a mouth that don't seem to open as wide as it should, the words sliding out the corners when he speaks. Judd comes down the board walkway holding a gunnysack in one hand.

"Brought the missus a little somethin'," he says, sliding in after Dad leans over and opens the passenger door. He eases himself onto the seat—I'm wondering should I get out and help him—then pulls his crutches in after him, and rests the bag on his lap. Black walnuts, I figure.

"You seem to be getting around a little better," says Dad, making a U-turn and heading back toward the bridge.

"Doin' okay, but I'm still mighty sore," says Judd.

"How long you got to wear that cast?" I ask.

"Another month, I'm lucky. Longer, if I'm not."

I sure am glad to hear that—that he'll have that cast on all through deer season. There's only 'bout a week and a half of it left.

Middle Island Creek is on the other side of us now. Dad and Judd are talking about Judd's work at Whelan's Garage where he's a mechanic, and how wasn't it a good thing Whelan kept his job open for Judd while his bones heal—kept his job open and fixed up his truck, both. Then we're heading up the lane toward our house, and there's Shiloh standing out by the porch, tail going back and forth, his rear end doing this little welcoming dance.

But suddenly his dancing stops, tail goes between his legs, and he's up on the porch, whining to get in. Don't take no genius to know he's got a whiff or a look or both of Judd Travers, and is scared the man's come to take him back. I wouldn't let that dog go to save my life.

Ma opens the door for Shiloh, then comes out herself. "Happy Thanksgiving, Judd," she says, and when she smiles, she's got this dimple in one cheek. "I got dinner on the table. Hope you're hungry."

Judd thunks up the steps and hands Ma the gunnysack. "Brought you somethin'," he says.

Becky and Dara Lynn are hangin' back by the door, but they get wind there's a present, they're right out there, tryin' to see in the bag.

"Why, thank you, Judd," says Ma. She opens the sack and starts to put one hand in, then draws it out real quick.

"Eeeuuu!" cries Dara Lynn, getting herself a look. "What is it?"

"Squirrel," says Judd, mighty proud of himself. "They're already bled. Woulda skinned 'em, too, if I'd had the time, but I shot 'em not long before Ray come over."

I see now where the blood's stained one side of the gunnysack.

"Those'll make a fine-tasting stew," says Dad, and he takes the bag himself and sets it on the porch. "I'll skin these after dinner." And then, "Didn't know you could hunt with that leg like it is."

Judd laughs. "Not much hunting to it. I just picked those squirrels off while I was sittin' on my front steps." And he follows my folks inside.

I'm feeling sick at my stomach. I'm remembering how David Howard and me were over at Judd's once, before the accident, and saw him shoot a squirrel just for the pure mean joy of it. Didn't even cook it, just threw it to his dogs.

"Well," says Ma. "Guess we can all sit down at the table, if you're ready."

Becky takes the long way around the kitchen so she don't have to get within four feet of Judd. Shiloh's nowhere to be found; usually he'd have his nose right at the edge of the table, waiting for a piece of that turkey to stand up and walk his way.

It sure ain't—isn't—what you'd call a comfortable Thanksgiving. About the way the Pilgrims must have felt with Indians there. Or maybe the way Samoset and Squanto felt with the Pilgrims—everybody a little too polite.

Ma usually has us do somethin' special on Thanksgiving. Like last year, we each had to think up three things we were thankful for, and the year before that, we had to say some-

thing nice about the person on our right, except that Becky couldn't talk yet, and the person on my right was Dara Lynn. Only nice thing I could think to say about her was that she didn't look too bad with three teeth missin'.

This year, though, with Judd there, Dad offers the prayer he usually prays on Sundays. He thanks God for the food before us and says, "Bless it to nourish our good. Amen." Dara Lynn don't even bow her head, she's so afraid somebody's going to get the drumstick she's set her eye on.

Everyone smiles when the prayin's over, and Ma says, "Now Judd, you just help yourself to whatever you see before you, and we'll start the platters around. I've sliced some white meat and dark meat both." And the eatin' begins.

With all that food coming at me, I almost forget for a time that we got Judd to look at across the table, but once we get a little in our bellies, I can see the conversation isn't going very far.

First off, Judd's embarrassed. I think he likes the food, all right, but he don't especially like being at our table. It's like he owes us somethin' for finding him after his accident, and Judd don't like to owe nobody nothing. Guess he figured if he was to refuse our invitation, though, it'd be like a slap in the face. And bad as he is, even he's got a limit to rudeness. I look across at him, shoveling that food in like the sooner he gets it down the sooner he can leave, and I'm tryin' to think of a question to ask that'll give everybody a chance to say somethin'.

But right that minute Becky says, "What was the turkey's name?"

We all look at her.

"Only pet turkeys have names, Becky," Dad says. "We bought this turkey at the store."

That gives Judd something to talk about. "I got me a fine wild turkey last year. Bought one of those turkey callers, and after I got the hang of it, I bagged a thirteen-pounder."

Dara Lynn's thinkin' that over. "You make a call like a turkey, and when a real one shows up, you blow its head off?"

"That's about it," says Judd.

Ma never looks up—just goes on cutting her meat, her cheeks pink—but Becky stops chewing her turkey wing and she is glaring at Judd something awful. Boy, you get a three-year-old girl lookin' at you that way, she's got a scowl would stop a clock.

I'm just about to ask Ma to pass the sweet potatoes when I hear Becky say, "We'll blow *your* head off!" and suddenly there is quiet around that table you wouldn't believe.