

# You Can Smell a Yankee a Mile Away

*by* Mathew Paust

I will always blame myself a little for Gramps's dying when he did. I know my guilt is not clearly rational, because I was only eleven and I thought at the time what I was doing was for the greater good. I still believed it when I stood at his coffin — “box”, as the adults called it — in the funeral home and said my final goodbye.

People said he looked so peaceful in the coffin and he did, even though Ma said he died of a broken heart. I wasn't sure what that meant, but looking at him now in the muted, indirect lighting of the small viewing alcove, despite the grotesquely rouged and powdered face surrounded by the coffin's pale blue feminine satin interior, I could make out the old smile wrinkles around his closed eyes, spidery remnants of life that helped relieve the memory I carried of a different look in the last weeks, an uncertain cast that spoke more of sadness and defeat than its usual mischievous poise.

That sparkling poise had been Gramps's pilot light. Unless he was already *on*, you couldn't size up his potential to entertain you from any angle but in front, looking at his face. Just standing or sitting, he looked like anybody else. You had to see those playful crinkles fanning out at the corners of his eyes. From behind or either side, you saw no coiled eagerness in the shoulders or quick movements of head or limbs, nothing that emitted the pulsing energy that could clue you to the personality, which, once focused upon you, was encompassing in a way that made you feel suddenly as if you were the only person in the world he cared about. He could be half asleep, sitting on a sofa or leaning in a doorway, but if you saw his face, even at a distance so far you couldn't make out the actual crinkles and laugh creases that reached down to the corners of his mouth, the way light reflected off his facial contours created this illusion of irrepressible joy, that the man was simply happy at his core no

matter what was going on with or around him, and in minutes of being in his presence you knew it was more than illusion.

“Hey, Bubby, still exercisin' your fingers on that ol' computer thing? *heh heh*” This would be a typical greeting when Gramps entered a room where I was sitting on the floor with my laptop, where people would usually find me. Some may have thought the ubiquitous *heh heh* with which he punctuated everything he said, or every time he paused to take a breath, was a nervous tic, and maybe it was. But it never struck me that way, the way some people end every thought with *don'tcha know* or *yuh yuh*, as if their brain is dieseling, or begin every sentence with *ya know* or *I mean* or *ahhh*, as if choking the engine to get it started. Nope. Not Gramps. His *heh heh*, barely audible, as if to himself, came straight from that core reminding him and anyone else who cared that most everything has an amusing side to it and it's best to remember this because sometimes just remembering it is enough to keep life tolerable.

Even when Gramps admonished me for something, as he was doing when he caught me with my laptop, a fairly common occurrence in our house, he spoke in so confiding a tone and with words so friendly it was as if he were inviting me to something special instead of trying to nag me away from a habit he and Ma found worrisome.

Ours was a three-generational household, with Gramps, Ma and my sister, Fish, living in the stately old redbrick house Gramps had been born in. I say “stately” more out of respect than literally, as the house, well over a hundred years old, grudgingly revealed its age if you zoomed your focus in from the first impression it presented passersby on the road it faced about a mile from Gramps's store.

My father had kept up the house when he was home, always doing something - patching the roof, painting inside and out, fixing whatever needed fixing. I remember him as handy and energetic, a slim, athletic, quiet man who seemed more comfortable working than not. He was lost when the scallop trawler on which he was first mate sank mysteriously in the Chesapeake Bay. Rumors in our community had it that a submerged submarine snagged the Miss

Esther and pulled her under with all hands aboard. There was evidence on the wreck, after a salvage company eventually recovered it, that something had punctured the hull from underneath, but the Navy denied it had any vessels in the vicinity at the time. This sank any hope of finding out what had happened and enabled the tepid investigation to peter out with a plausible shrug. Whatever did happen happened at night during a storm, and the bodies were never found. This was seven years before the economic storm that helped kill Gramps.

We never had a television in the house, but I learned about the coming crunch anyway, mainly from Internet chatter and from hearing Ma and Gramps worry about it. The Internet chatter was just that, something happening *out there*, of no importance to an eleven-year-old. It came home when I heard part of a rare argument between Ma and Gramps.

“You can't sell the store, Pa! What would we live on?” It was the note of alarm in Ma's voice that got my attention. She was a gentle, soft-spoken woman. I cannot recall hearing her address another creature so stridently, not even one of our three cats or Mickey, the German Shepherd. Ma and Gramps were in the kitchen and I was in my usual spot sitting cross-legged on the rug, my laptop braced between my knees. After Ma's outburst their two voices settled to a level too low for me to hear what either was saying, although I picked up enough to sense the pace was faster than ordinary and Gramps's voice sounded more animated, moving up and down as it would when his heart was in something. The *heh hehs* seemed merry as ever.

I was so absorbed with assimilating what was happening in the kitchen — mainly trying to understand what could have aroused Ma to such a level of alarm, as her words alone hadn't sunk in yet — that I was oblivious to Fish entering the living room. I yelped in surprise when I looked up and saw her standing nearby. She held up a hand to shush me, also intent on the kitchen conversation. I had no idea how long she'd been in the room or what she might have heard.

“Fish,” I whispered as loud as I could without breaking into voice. The hand flapped me quiet, but she turned just enough to give me one of her patented smiles and then snapped her attention back to the kitchen.

One of Fish's smiles could keep me going all day. It was her charm of charms. The others were derivative, the confidence, the friendliness, coming easier to her because of the feedback she invariably got from her smile, which was a solar spotlight that warmed and brightened everyone she aimed it at. It was clear she got her face from Gramps. Personality, too. I got Ma's bland face and shy ways.

Fish had to grow into the face for it to work so consistently for her. In elementary school it was a bully magnet, when her too-wide mouth attracted the attention of Anthony, an older boy who took to calling her “Fish Face.” This was unbeknownst to me at the time, as Fish had never mentioned it to anyone, and Anthony only did it once in front of others. Anthony had his own name problem. New in the school, he'd told the teacher to introduce him as “Butch,” but the teacher either forgot or was feeling mean that day and announced to the class that the chubby new kid with the buck teeth was “Anthony.” The kid had tried to correct her, mumbling that his name was “Butch,” but his new classmates immediately smelled blood and homed in. “Hey, Anthony!” from the more aggressive boys, and then the girls' singsong *Anthony Anthony Anthony...* when they saw he wasn't going to fight.

I learned all of this later, after Fish knocked him down and kissed him on the mouth in front of his classmates. I remember how hot it was. It happened on the playground during lunch hour, at time when we weren't segregated by grade. The older kids were clotted over by one of the jungle gyms. I saw Fish among them. As always she was with a group. Others gravitated to her. There was quick motion and suddenly everyone was looking at the ground and voices rose. I ran over to see what was up.

Without articulating it in my head I reacted to the possibility something might have happened to Fish. I scanned the group and

didn't see her among those who were standing, but on the ground I spotted her dirty blonde pageboy whip back and forth. Moving closer I saw she was straddling somebody, Anthony, who was on his back, writhing in the gravel beneath her and squeaking repeatedly, "Get off me." I was close enough to see both their faces. Fish was still smiling, but now it had a fierce cast. Anthony's face, upside down, was twisted in terror, skin so red I thought he might be bloody. Fish was holding his wrists, pinning his arms away from his body. She scootched up until her knees pinned his arms. Her hands freed, she arched her back and began slapping his face. He was crying hysterically now and the group of onlookers circling around them began shrieking with excitement, egging Fish on, some urging her to "Beat the shit out of him!"

I stared, fascinated, never having seen Fish so violent. Being my older sister and more outgoing she looked out for me and I always felt safe with her, but I never thought of her as dangerous. Watching Anthony's wincing tear-streaked face being smacked hard back and forth brought an awakening. One of the slaps whacked his nose, sending a spray of blood that scattered the crowding onlookers back in amazement as they gawked and picked at the ruby droplets on themselves, then, re-energized with blood lust, they surged forward demanding harsher, crueler punishment for the victim. The spray hit me full on, getting blood on my face, T-shirt and arms.

Fish must have felt me staring at her. She looked up and our eyes met and locked. She stopped the slapping and the passion gradually drained out of her face as we stared at each other, although the smile, looking strangely wicked now, remained. This is when she leaned forward and grabbed Anthony by his ears, pulling his head up toward hers. She stared intently into his face, covered with rivulets of blood streaming down his chin and onto his shirt. His crying had diminished to whimpers interrupted by occasional noisy inhaleds of bloody snot. She held his head like this for what seemed hours, just staring at him with her awful smile. Perhaps she was waiting for the onlookers to stop their chattering. They did, pretty much, and when she knew her voice could be heard by most of them

Fish leaned even closer to her victim until their faces were only inches apart and said, in a voice that came out almost as a cackle, "Kiss me."

Anthony's whimpering sputtered to silence, but his mouth remained agape. "Kiss me, Anthony," Fish said, louder, "Kiss me! On the lips!" She pulled him closer, tugging on his ears until he squeezed his eyes shut in pain. But he didn't cry out. When he opened his eyes he saw her lips so close to his he must have smelled her breath, which, he'd said earlier triggering the beating he was now getting, "Proibly smells just like a dead old fish."

"KISS ME!" Fish shouted and jerked his head until their lips mashed together. She held him there long enough for everyone who could see to know what was happening and then she released him. His head fell back against the gravel with a crunchy thump and Fish pushed back and sprang to her feet. She looked down at him, her skinny, jean-clad legs cocked disdainfully and muttered something I couldn't make out. After spitting and kicking gravel on him with her red sneakers, she turned her head quickly to flash me a triumphant grin and pranced off amid her admirers toward the school entrance. I trudged after them, leaving Anthony seated in the gravel next to the jungle gym. A couple of his nerdy friends stood by watching him dab his bloody face with the bottom of his T-shirt.

Evidently no teacher saw what had happened, or, if any did, hadn't realized what was going on and didn't bother to investigate. Nor apparently did anybody tattle. Anthony would have been too ashamed to admit his humiliation. Anyway, no trouble came to Fish over the incident. Gramps and Ma heard Fish's heavily edited version when they asked why her friends and I had taken to calling her "Fish". The real version of this was my introduction to the phenomenon of irony. According to Fish her two best friends, who had witnessed the incident, started calling her "Fish" whenever Anthony was within earshot, the idea being, in their minds, to lull him into thinking she no longer minded and that he might try it again, of course with the same result as before. Anthony, however, was either too smart or too scared to make the same mistake twice,

but the name caught on with her friends and eventually the family.

Fish edged closer to the kitchen, cocking her head to one side to better hear what was being said. I remained on the floor with my laptop. Fish had less to worry about than I did getting caught eavesdropping. Not that Gramps or Ma would have gotten angry. Had they not wanted us to hear they would have gone somewhere more private. The problem for me was that I would have felt uncomfortable, been put on the spot. I wasn't good at conversation unless it involved topics I knew or cared about. Books I was reading topped the list. If Gramps asked me for input on whether to sell the store my mind would have blanked on anything worthwhile to contribute. I could have said I would miss the store, which was true, but he already knew that. I could have asked him questions about why he wanted to sell it, but I had a sense that wasn't my business. I would have loved to hear the conversation without having to be part of it. Fish was just the opposite. It wasn't long before she edged so close to the kitchen they saw her and she disappeared inside. And it wasn't long after that her voice rose above the others as she made her own feelings known in whatever the evidently important discussion was about.

"But Gramps, you love that store. We all love that store. How could you even think about selling it to some ol' yankees?" Clever girl, putting sentiment on the table and playing the yankee card. Even I knew Gramps could easily handle Ma's concern about the money. Times were tough, but so was Gramps. No yankees or anybody else could take him in a business deal. And I knew, too, that Ma wasn't really worried about the money. She just didn't want things to change, didn't want her dad hanging around the house all day. Not that he would. I knew that, too. Gramps might sell his store but that's where he'd spend most of his time anyway, even if some yankees owned it, maybe even especially if yankees owned it. Fish was right. He did love the store, and she was right that we all did.

I loved the ambience. Especially the aroma, a myriad mix it would take all day to parse through to its components under the predominant welcome of brewing coffee, sweet smokey tang of hot

beef barbecue, subtle reach of garden-fresh produce, hint of damp newspaper ink and the musk of old wood, in particular the creaky floorboards seasoned over half a century to a mahogany brown with oiled sweeping compound. Pulling open the heavy plate-glass door and stepping into Gramps's dimly lit Hosner's Market never failed to produce a friendly thrill the likes of which I've not experienced anywhere else.

Always people inside I knew. Usually men. The younger ones, those who worked on the water filling their deadrise workboats with crabs or oysters from daybreak to sunset, stopped by for coffee and barbecue before heading to work, and for cold drinks and fellowship when done for the day. The old men, retired after a hard life on the water, could be found in the store at any time. Many of them so conditioned to the working day they'd be there at sunup, too, but would stay behind when the next generation headed out to their boats. The mood among these men was always jolly, in a loud rough way, speaking to each other in voices grown harsh from shouting from boat to boat, but leavened with terms of affection — nicknames, or variations of the generic Bubba, Bub or Bubby. *Dahlin'* was a favorite among the men and women, no matter who was speaking to whom.

"Hey, Shorty, Leanne was in here lookin' fer you, dahlin'. You best be gittin' on home now. She had that look, you know? She cookin' sumpim'." Big smile from Mae, Gramps's manager and longtime mistress, who rarely came out from behind the wooden counter, preferring to sit on the straight-back chair with the foam seat pad next to the cash register. She'd be addressing one of the regulars, somebody she might well have grown up with, friends since kindergarten. Shorty, round face ruddy and whisker grizzled, would respond with a knowing grin, half of it buried in a tobacco-swollen cheek. He'd move slowly to the counter, grinning all the way as a couple of cronies, drinking colas from the upright cooler, needled him in language so private only they knew for sure what they said. He'd wait to speak until the two were face to face, mouths stretched on each wide enough to communicate an intimacy needing no

spoken words. He'd mumble something then, making her chuckle, reach out and pinch his cheek, and after a little banter he'd return to the others.

Fish and I were always treated like royalty when we stopped in. Free soda or Popsicle, barbecue, whatever we wanted. Mae was like the grandma we never knew. If Gramps wasn't out front helping Mae or socializing with the customers he was in the back in his little office paying bills and "working on the books," as he always put it.

Evidently "the books" hadn't been looking too good lately, Fish told me after the kitchen conference broke up.

"It's the economy," she said. She'd taken me by the arm and guided me outside, suggesting we go for a walk, get some fresh air.

"Gramps looks tired, you know? He looks worn down. Everything costs so much now and a lot of his customers are having hard times. Can't always pay their bills. Gramps is too soft-hearted to turn anyone away, you know," she mused. I'd noticed he seemed distracted of late, not as enthusiastic generally as he normally was, but it didn't really register in my head that something might be wrong. One thing she said punched through the rest and stunned a part of me I hadn't realized was so unprotected: almost as an afterthought she noted the yankee buyers were probably more interested in the property, not the store. It occurred to me only later this could mean the store being torn down and replaced with something alien. I nodded as Fish talked. By the time our walk ended a shadow had begun descending over my mood. I had trouble sleeping that night as an odd notion struggled to free itself from my inner thinking, but by morning a fairly cogent idea had emerged. It had to do with the rusty flintlock musket in our attic. Gramps had seemed indifferent when as a child of five or six I asked about it. He dismissed my curiosity with his usual chuckle. "My grandpa, your great-great grandpa, took it off a dead yankee at Manassas. I wish he'da left it there. Damned yankee trash. One of these days I'll take it out in the jon boat and drop it in the Bay, *heh heh*," he said. Even at that age I could tell he wasn't being truthful, that there was something he was holding back. I brought it up again a couple of

years later with a similar reaction. He gave me a funny look when I pointed out it was unlikely soldiers in that war carried flintlocks, which were outdated technology then. He shrugged, his eyes bulged, face reddened and his manner became brusque. "Son, that's what he told me. Maybe that's why we kicked their ass at Manassas. Ever think of that? Huh?" His anger caught me by surprise, frightened me, but it was clear then that Gramps didn't want to talk about it at all. The flash of pique had vanished by the time he got to the "huh," and the smile and trailing *heh heh* were back in place.

You'd think I would have learned to back away for good from that topic. I did, each time for the time being, but my fascination for the old musket hung around in the root cellar of my brain, where it scrounged itself back into view one afternoon in school when the teacher assigned projects for our study of the American Revolution, which he called the American War for Independence. Whatever the war was called I decided Gramps's old smoke pole rusting away in our attic would finally earn its keep by helping me get an "A" on my project. I also decided not to say anything to Gramps about it. No need to get him upset. I knew the law or the school, or both, probably wouldn't allow me to bring the thing to my class, but that wouldn't be a problem. I could take photos of it, learn about it and present the photos and what I'd learned in a report that might include something about my ancestor, as well.

This is where my laptop devotion paid off. I typed Gramps's name with "American Revolution" after it into the Google search window. I knew "William Hosner" would include at least two or three ancestors, as that name had been passed down the generations. I got lucky. At least it seemed lucky at the time. And what's more, my apparent good fortune corresponded with the apparent ill-fortune Gramps was having with his store. It was this confluence of circumstances that kept me awake that night until I had figured out a course of action. That it was an action I would come to regret for the rest of my life eluded me then. It seemed most certain my discovery not only would snag me an "A" for my school project, but would save Gramps's store as well.

The discovery — a bombshell, really — was finding a website devoted to the Battle of Lexington, that brief skirmish on April 19, 1775, when a handful of colonial militiamen attempted to stop a force of 700 British soldiers from marching to Concord to seize a store of the colonists' military supplies. It was this battle in which the very first shot of the war was fired, the renowned “shot heard 'round the world.”

As I clicked open links on this site looking for signs of anyone named “Hosner,” I discovered that a “Willie Isaac Hosner” was indeed at Lexington that morning. What took my breath away was a theory, supported by depositions taken of participants and witnesses by a commission of inquiry after the battle, that it was Willie Isaac Hosner who fired that very first shot. He was not standing on the Lexington Green with the militia, but was outside a nearby tavern and fired his musket from that position. A later inquiry revealed that depositions pointing to the first shot coming from a colonial were not included in the final report, which was written to frame a British lieutenant as having pulled the fateful trigger.

I shot an email to the director of the research project named on the website, telling her about our musket and attaching a couple of the photos I had taken of it. She answered me within a couple of hours. She was enthusiastic: “Can we see the musket? Can we examine it? Do you have any letters or a diary your ancestor wrote then, especially something mentioning the battle?” I knew now I had to tell Gramps. This weighed heavily upon me, until I solved the dilemma during my restless night.

“What if it was him, Gramps? If they can prove it was him you could put that musket on the wall in your store and it would be a tourist attraction. The biggest tourist attraction in all of Virginia. You would be famous! You could keep the store!”

Gramps just stared at me, his mouth hanging open. His face was red and his eyes bulged out again. He started breathing funny. I thought telling him how he could keep the store would make it all right. I couldn't think of anything else to say. I was embarrassed now. Scared. He didn't say anything. And then finally he did, his

voice loud and low, slow, as angry as I had ever heard him speak, like the thunder in an approaching storm, rolling across the clouds, gaining in volume and aggression: "God damned yankee. That wasn't any relative of ours! There's lotsa Hosners. He was a yankee. I knew I shoulda dropped that God damned piece of junk in the Bay. God dammit, boy, why'dya hafta go and do that?"

My initial reaction was denial that he had said what I heard him say. I knew how he felt about the musket and about yankees but I also knew how much he loved his store. It had to be denial, that a hatred I didn't understand, that seemed so remote from us, from him and from me, could outweigh an unquestioned love that was central to our lives, our family, this had to be the reason I did something rare, for me, at that age of prepubescent awakening, which was to stay in the fight and not surrender the absolute conviction I had come to hold, albeit without overwhelming support of evidence but absolute nonetheless in my heart, that the old musket in our attic had in fact fired the historic shot heard 'round the world and that my great-great-great grandfather William Isaac Hosner had pointed it at the British troops on the Lexington Green and had pulled the trigger sending a deadly charge of lead into their midst.

"But Gramps!" I shouted it, surprising myself with the intensity of my squeaky croaking voice. "It's history! American history! It's *our* history, Gramps! Hosner history! We should be proud of him. *I'm* proud of him, Gramps. Why can't you be proud, too?"

He'd been staring coldly at me but now his head jerked up and he looked out the window of his office. He shook his head from side to side and I turned and saw Mae looking our way. She was standing. Still behind the counter but she'd gotten up from her chair and she was frowning with concern. It hadn't occurred to me my voice carried so far. My sense of righteousness began to dissolve as embarrassment tinged with panic leached in and I felt more alone than I could remember ever having felt before.

Gramps turned back to me and for the first time I saw something in his face that frightened me. It wasn't the bulged eyeballs. In retrospect those were rather comical as the bulging never lasted

more than a second or two. Same with the red face. It was rare that he showed anger and when he did it came and left like a breezy gust, leaving little trace. This was different. There was something quivery, yet rock hard in his lower face, his jaw. His teeth were clamped. It was no longer Gramps's face. It belonged to someone I didn't know, a stranger. It stared at me like a vampire in a movie and I feared that if its mouth opened many sharp, pointed teeth would grimace at me and a voice behind them would snarl. I watched closely as the mouth did open. The teeth looked normal but the voice was cruel.

"Go home, boy" the mouth said. It spoke in that low, rumble Gramps had used before. "You had no business telling anybody about that damned piece of yankee trash and giving our family name to those people. No business at all. If any of those people come down here and set one foot on our property I will have them arrested for trespassing. You pass that along to them on your damned computer, hear? There will be no more talk about that damned piece of yankee trash!" He stood up and turned his back to me.

Terrified, I turned and stumbled out of his office. I'd ridden my Schwinn Mountain Bike, the one Gramps had given me that Christmas. Now I wished I'd had instead the thin-wheeled, twelve-speed racing model. I wanted to get the hell out of there and down the road as fast as possible, and I did. I started crying about halfway home.

We never spoke to each other again, Less than three weeks later he was dead. Ma found him on the floor next to his bed. Coroner said heart attack. I knew what had caused it.

His funeral filled the United Methodist Church to overflowing. I recognized many of the faces, although in their suits and fancy dresses they all looked like strangers. People who knew Gramps over the years got up, one at a time, and told stories about him. Most of the stories were funny and set the congregation to laughing, probably a little too much. I didn't laugh, although I was relieved to see how popular and loved he was. I had all I could do to keep from getting sick. My stomach felt as if it had a burning baseball in it,

floating on a sea of sludge. Fish sat between me and Ma and patted me on the arm every so often, which made me feel better than I would have thought it could. Ma seemed to be in shock. Occasionally I saw a teardrop trickle down her cheek, and she would dab it with a tissue. But that was Ma. She usually kept her feelings bound up inside. Cool and collected, as Gramps would say.

After the burial in the cemetery behind the church and the reception in the basement, which I hated but which brought Ma out of her stupor, Herman, an old friend of Gramps who had brought us to the church, drove us home. Ma had slipped back into her private thoughts on the ride home. She spoke only once and that was to one in particular, although it sounded as if she were addressing Gramps in a wistful almost little-girlish voice: "What's going to happen to the store?"

"Mr. Robinson will handle it," Fish said soothingly. "Remember? He told us at the reception not to worry, that he would contact those men from Pennsylvania who wanted to buy it."

"You mean those yankees?" Ma said, sounding startled. "Pa said they'd run the business into the ground in a month. He said nobody here would buy from no yankees. I'm not goin' sell that store to no yankees." She turned around in the front seat and stared hard at both of us when she said that last, practically spitting out the words, then setting her jaw in a determined way that seemed to say the store and Gramps's will had now finally transferred to her. But Fish wasn't finished.

"Ma, Mr. Robinson said the store was already running a deficit. Gramps was in the hole. It was draining money. He was considering bankruptcy."

"Bankruptcy?" Ma's head jerked around again. "Pa never said nothin' about bankruptcy to me. Did Wendell Robinson tell you that?"

"He did, Ma. He said those men from Pennsylvania..."

"Yankees, girl! They was stinkin' damn yankees!"

“Yes, Ma. Those yankees told Gramps they wanted to build a brand new store there. A Chickin Lickin' restaurant. They wanted the two acres next to it, too, for more parking.”

“Chickin Lickin'? Oh my God! Gramps is fresh in his grave and you're talkin' 'bout tearin' down his store for a damn Chickin Lickin'?”

“Not me, Ma. The yankees. You don't hafta to sell, you know. But Mr. Robinson said if you do we'd come out pretty good. We might need the help in this economy...”

“No damn...”

“Ma! That's what Mr. Robinson said.”

The conversation sputtered to silence without a dollar figure being mentioned. Fish told me later, when we got home, the men from Pennsylvania had offered Gramps a million dollars for the store but that it depended on whether they could also buy the adjoining two acres. Fish didn't want to say in the car how much was offered. Everyone knew Herman would tell everybody he came across if he even had an idea how much it was. He might already have heard enough to take a stab at it and start a rumor that could queer the deal, Fish said.

We stayed outside, sat on the front porch on the swing so all Ma could hear of us was the *squeak squeak squeak* as the swing chains rubbed against the wood that held the swing in place. I could hear her fussing in the kitchen, getting dinner ready. Keeping busy was her way of dealing with stress. The sun was high, without a cloud between us and its merciless blazing glare. Not even a breeze to dry the sweat that broke out under my church clothes. Fish had looked uncomfortable in the flowered sun dress she wore to the funeral, but she must have appreciated its looseness now in the heavy afternoon heat.

“Not that I want to see the store torn down,” she said, surprising me, as she had seemed to be intrigued by the million-dollar offer. “You know, Bubby, I'm starting to think your idea of turning the store into a tourist attraction might be a good thing.”

"Oh, Fish, you shoulda seen the way Gramps looked at me. I thought he was gonna turn into one of those vampires with a million teeth. His face got purple he was so mad."

"I saw him like that one time..." She drifted into her own memories, shook her head and and looked at me and smiled. She reached up and gave my cheek a light slap, what we called a love tap. "Bubby, what do you think Gramps would hate worse, having some yankees tear down his store to put up a Chickin' Lickin' or having his store become a mecca for tourists?"

"I think he made that clear. He said he said if those people came down to look at the musket he'd call the sheriff and charge them with trespassing. He looked pretty serious to me."

"He felt like he was in a crossfire, I'll bet, Bubby. Yankees wanting his store and you making him face the truth that his great-grampa was a yankee. No matter how significant that might be. Gramps really really hated yankees. You could smell them a mile away, he always said."

"I wonder why."

"Who knows, Bubby. His pa was a Confederate. I think Gramps idolized him. Maybe that's where the hate started."

"But, Fish, he was gonna sell the store to those guys even if they were yankees. They were strangers and his great-grampa was blood. I don't understand it. Isn't blood supposed to be thicker than water?"

"Maybe not when it's bad blood, Bubby. Not when it meant him knowing that bad blood was in his own veins. But he's gone. It's up to Ma now."

"Whattaya think she wants to do?"

"When I tell her she can get a million dollars? She'll sell the store."

"You think that's what Gramps was gonna do?"

"I reckon. Don't you?"

"I think maybe he knew he had to but he didn't want to."

"I think you're right, Bubby. I think that's what wore him down. I think he just decided to give up living."

“Fish, you're just sayin' that to make me feel better. You shoulda seen the look on his face when I told him those museum people wanted to see the musket. He was OK until that happened.”

“Oh, so now you're blaming yourself? You didn't kill Gramps, Bubby. Clean that right outta your head. Gramps just died. It wasn't your fault.”

She scrunched around on the swing seat and hugged me. I smelled the soap and shampoo she'd used that morning and a nearer minty whiff from one of those little candies she liked for her breath. Her affection comforted me but didn't ease the nagging doubts, which merely stepped out of the way and waited until they'd have me alone again. I wasn't willing to let Fish's sisterly gesture suffice as a panacea. I needed more from her.

“Thanks, Fish. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Bubby. And so did Gramps. You know, Gramps is at peace now.”

I couldn't think of anything to say. Fish rubbed her knuckles across the top of my head a couple of times, giving me a noogy. This usually worked to bring me out of whatever funk I might be in. Not this time. I looked up and tried to meet her gentle smile but I could tell she wasn't fooled, that she see my heart wasn't in it.

“C'mon, bro, let's get some of that blueberry pie Ma brought back from the reception. You hungry?” She lowered her feet to the porch and started to put her weight on them. Her energetic cheery manner would have fooled anybody who didn't know her, and maybe it was real. I just couldn't buy it, and she saw this right away. She stood, anyway, without the forced enthusiasm.

“Hey, Bubby. Let's walk.” This did the trick. I knew where this would lead. Our walks always ended at the pier where Pa had kept his boat. We'd sit on the rough planks and stare out over the creek mouth toward the bay, watching work boats and the occasional warship heading up the York, watching the gulls at play. Never talked much then. Didn't need to.

This time was different. I'd been trying to work something out in the back of my mind and Fish could tell. She poked it a little.

"You're cookin' sump'm, ain'tcha, Bubs." She said it gently. Ruffled my hair.

I didn't answer, she didn't press. We sat in our usual silence awhile.

"Ya know," she said finally, "Do you think Gramps would forgive us if we let those museum folks look at that old musket? Maybe find out our ancestor did start the Revolutionary War? Wouldn't that be cool, Bubby? We'd be part of history, like you told him?"

I stared between my knees at the water, its surface rippling occasionally from a bug or tadpole's movements. I could see an old crumpled Bud Lite can half buried in the cloudy weeds. My face, bending this way and that with the water's refracting ripples, looked up at me with what seemed to be disdain. It seemed a smaller, weaker version of the cold contempt I'd seen in Gramps's face when I tried to make the same argument to him.

Fish kept up her gentle pressure. "I think Gramps was caught between two bad choices, for him. It was the yankee thing made 'em both bad. You gave him a choice. He didn't want the complication at the time, but it was a good thing. He woulda come to see that. He just died, Bubby. Coulda been anything. He hated going to the doctor. You know that.

"Look at it this way. We sell the store. Doesn't matter who buys it or what they do to it. The store died with Gramps. It was already dying. Woulda died anyway. No way to save it. The changing times, the economy. Gramps knew that. So Ma sells it and we get enough money so we have no more worries. About money. We let the museum people look at the old musket. Maybe it's historic, maybe it's not, but at least we'll know. If it is, we'll have helped bring the truth to light about the birth of our country. Gramps would be proud."

"Gramps hated that musket," I said, more to myself than to Fish, but she picked it up.

"So why did he leave it in the attack then? If he hated it so much?"

"I don't know, Fish. Maybe he just didn't wanna think about it. Maybe he just tried to put it out of his mind. He just always got so mad whenever we mentioned it."

"Don'tcha think that was kind of selfish of him, Bubby? To keep that buried like that. Just because he was afraid our ancestors weren't all born in the South? Isn't that kind of silly?"

"Gramps wasn't afraid of anything, Fish." I knew it was a lame thing to say, but I had to say something while my mind toiled elsewhere.

"Hatred comes from fear, Bubby."

That got my full attention. "So what was Gramps afraid of then?"

"We'll probly never know. But it was a mighty dark thing for him, and all we saw was the end result."

"We have to honor that then," I said, hearing resolution grow in my voice.

"We can honor Gramps by honoring our family." I heard Fish's stubbornness set in.

The intimacy between us snapped apart with those last pronouncements. We sat awhile longer in silence.

That night, after Ma had gone to bed, I climbed out of mine, pulled on my jeans and T-shirt and carried my sneakers into the mud room where I put them on. I pulled down the ladder to the attic and climbed into the space where stuff from at least two centuries of Hosners was stored. There was only one light bulb, but it was bright enough so I could work around the stacks of cardboard boxes, old furniture and picture frames and God knew what all until I found the heavy trunk made of curved planks held together with steel bands. I'd always thought of it as a treasure chest, and indeed it was filled with treasures, family treasures that couldn't be replaced for any amount of money — scrapbooks, browned photos, little wood boxes that looked like they held jewelry, old clothing including a moth-eaten dirty gray coat that Gramps had said his grandfather wore in the Battle of Manassas. The trunk top was so heavy I could barely lift it. It creaked as I pushed it upright and clunked when its hinges

stopped it from moving any further. A gush of mothball fumes from within set me to coughing, which I quickly stifled.

I had brought a small flashlight along but didn't need it to find what I'd come for. The old musket stretched atop the other articles from end to end.

It lay there, dark brown and lethal looking with light from the bulb dancing off its metal parts, as if waiting dutifully to be carried once again into battle. I lifted up the barrel end, which was lightest. I knew from having taken photos of it several weeks before that it wasn't rusty at all, but darkened with the patina of age. Every inch of it, metal and wood, glistened with a light coat of oil. The odor was familiar, probably WD-40 or some other household lubricant. It took all of my strength to lift the old weapon out of the chest and set it on the attic floor, being extra careful not to make a thump that might awaken Ma or Fish. I scouted around the rest of the attic and soon found what I wanted. I lowered the musket down the ladder, resting the butt against my chest and supporting the rest of it with my hands to keep it from bumping the ladder. I carried it quietly out of the house to the faded green plastic wagon Ma used for her garden things. I was glad Ma kept the wagon wheels oiled, as they didn't squeak much on their way down the road from our house to the pier.

I left the wagon at the pier and carried the old musket down the wooden planks to Pa's old jon boat, which Gramps kept there for occasional conveyance to a couple of secret fingers in the creek where he knew the catfish like he knew the customers in his store.

No one else was around, and it wasn't until I reached the boat that I saw a shadowy figure on the gunwale. I almost dropped the musket, then just stood, staring, as the figure slowly moved until it revealed the grinning face of Fish.

"Hi, Bubby," she said softly. "Where you going with that thing?"

"Fish!" I blurted. "What are your doing here?"

"Couldn't get to sleep. Heard you bumbling around. Saw you with the wagon. Figured I could beat you here. Haha, I won!"

"Fish, dammit..."

"It's OK, Bubby. Here. Hand that damned yankee piece of trash over." She reached out and eased the musket into the bottom of the boat. I followed it aboard. She pulled the starter cord on the Evinrude outboard and soon had it smoothly putt-putting. I undid the mooring and she revved the engine and steered us away from the pier into the creek toward the York River's mouth. We didn't need to speak. Fish knew where to go, and we were in the Bay inside half an hour. Fish turned the motor off and nodded at me, and I picked up the cement-filled gallon paint can attached to a rope tied to a steel ring in the deck, and lowered the makeshift anchor over the side. Once the zip of the diving anchor's uncoiling rope had ceased we were bathed in near silence. All that remained were the occasional piercing cries of a gull and the rhythmic lapping of black water against the boat's hull.

A wafting breeze carried the mildly fetid familiar odors of deep water blackened in the dark, with rippling lighted paths from the full moon and the channel buoys we'd steered between. Fish had left our small red and green running lights on out of a habit all boat people develop for obvious reasons of safety. These lights sent thin streaks of opposite colors undulating on either side of our boat.

"Ready?" she asked softly. I nodded and reached for the musket. I'd wrapped an American flag from our attic around the old gun. Now I pulled another flag I'd stuck under my T-shirt. This was an old faded blue Virginia flag with its seal of the Commonwealth depicting the Roman figure Virtus with her foot upon the prostrate symbol of tyranny over the words *Sic semper tyrannis*. I wrapped this flag, on which the musket had been lying in the trunk, around the American flag and secured it with several lengths of twine. Fish and I lifted this odd bundle, one at each end, and set it upon the lapping water. It sank quickly out of sight, leaving in its wake a momentary froth of bubbles released from the flags.

"Bye bye, yankee trash," I said, staring at the water.

"Can't smell it now, can you," Fish said. I nodded. We sat there awhile longer and stared at the water, lost in our thoughts as the

boat gently rocked. At last she brought the Evinrude back to life, and we headed home.

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[Note: The story and all of its characters are fiction, figments of the author's imagination. History records do confirm, however, that a commission of inquiry, formed by the Massachusetts colonial government, took depositions from many participants and witnesses of the Battle of Lexington - both American and British - and deliberately excluded from its final report any statements indicating a British soldier might have fired the first shot of that historic skirmish. Source references for this story are contained in David Hackett Fischer's excellent history of the battles of Lexington and Concord, Paul Revere's Ride.]

