

The Sheriff of Powder River

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There is still something endearing about the cussedness of Grandpa. Those less close to him described him as the meanest man that ever lived. His grandchildren, nephews, and nieces regarded him with a peculiar awe—for he was a teller of tall tales, a fighter of wicked Indians, and a gold mine prospector who knew the secret locations of a dozen mines, all bearing nuggets the size of a pullet's egg, like the nugget which always hung from his watch fob. What Grandma felt, she never told us, but there was a certain bliss or peace about her the time she got a forty-eight hour rest from being with the meanest man on earth.

It started on a Saturday night before Halloween in the little town of Powder River in Eastern Oregon. The music from the Saturday night barn dance had lulled me to sleep several hours earlier, but the noise had grown louder and finally awakened me. It sounded like a big commotion over at Jarman's livery stable. I could hear Grandpa grumbling to Grandma from their bed in the next room. I slipped out of the covers, tiptoed over to the window, and kneeled down, stretching my head toward Jarman's livery stable. I watched the flickering lights filtering through the cracks of the old building. Suddenly there were voices shouting and several high pitched screams. Someone bolted out through the livery stable door, running toward our house. I watched until he vaulted over our front gate then I jumped back, pulling the starched curtains in front of me. He banged on the front door!

"Sheriff!" he shouted, "sheriff, wake up! You're needed real bad over at the dance!"

Grandpa was awake in the next room but didn't answer. The banging on the front door grew louder.

"Luther Perkins, wake up!" the man outside continued. "Pee Wee Marshall's got a broken beer bottle over at the dance and he's gonna cut the guts outa Wilmer Ogg if you don't get over there and stop him."

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"William!" Grandpa shouted to me, "who in the hell is it and what does he want? Go on out there and let him in!"

I ran to the front door and unlocked it, stepping back as Elmer Fosnot rushed past me into the living room.

"It's Elmer, Grandpa," I shouted. Elmer Fosnot was a hired hand for Big Bill Buchanan and called the dances on Saturday night.

Grandpa walked out of the bedroom carrying a kerosene lamp. He stood there barefooted in his long nightgown, slowly turning up the flame of the lamp.

"What the hell are you bothering me this time a night for?" Grandpa asked, angrily.

Elmer told Grandpa how Pee Wee Marshall and Wilmer Ogg had got drunk and started fighting over at the dance and that they got pretty mean and called each other a lot of dirty names. He said that Pee Wee had broken a beer bottle and threatened to cut Wilmer's guts out, right on the spot, and everybody at the dance said that someone better run right over to the sheriff's and bring him back to handle the ruckus that Pee Wee and Wilmer were causing.

Grandpa told Elmer that Pee Wee and Wilmer were good friends and that they weren't going to hurt anyone, and Elmer had an awful time getting Grandpa to go with him for what he said was his rightful duty.

Grandpa went back into the bedroom cussing at everything and put on his shoes and pants. He was strapping on his gun when he came out again.

"Let's get the hell over there," Grandpa shouted to show his authority as he slapped the holster of his gun. "The sooner I get this over with the sooner I can get back to bed."

They hurried out the front door and down the steps.

"Can I go too, Grandpa?" I shouted after him.

"Hell, no, you can't go," he said. "That dance ain't no fit place for a kid your age—get back in there to bed!"

Grandpa and Elmer were half way down to Jarman's when Grandma shouted from her bed, "William, get in here to bed!"

"I'll be careful, Grandma," I said as I jumped down from the porch and ran through the gate. "I'll be careful!"

I got there just as Grandpa and Elmer were entering the livery stable door. I ran around to the back window where I'd watched lots of dances before and saw Elmer Ogg climb-

ing the hay-loft ladder with Pee Wee Marshall right behind him, a broken bottle in his hand. Wilmer looked pretty scared and lots of women were screaming bloody murder. Grandpa took one look at Pee Wee and Wilmer and drew his gun. He pointed it up in the air above the two men. The women screamed louder than ever, but Grandpa shot the gun straight up and didn't even come close to Pee Wee and Wilmer. The shot exploded with such a noise that everyone stopped screaming and Wilmer and Pee Wee stopped climbing.

"Pee Wee, you drop that bottle and get your big fanny down here right now," Grandpa said, "and Wilmer, you get right down from there too!"

Pee Wee and Wilmer climbed down and looked pretty sheepish. They started laughing and said that they really didn't mean any harm and were just having a little fun. Grandpa said that like hell they were having a little fun and that they could just have a little fun by cooling off in jail for a few days. Wilmer didn't take too kindly to Grandpa's remarks because he said that it was all Pee Wee's fault. Pee Wee said he'd be damned if he'd spend any time in that jail, especially the old town jail where that drunken Indian had died a few years back. Grandpa still had hold of his gun, and Pee Wee and Wilmer kept looking at it as if they would run hell bent for election if Grandpa didn't have it and wasn't waving it in their faces. Grandpa told them that they were going to jail and that was all there was to it and suddenly Pee Wee started to run for the door. Bruce Orburtion headed him off and tackled him around the ankles; several of the men, being already good and mad at Pee Wee and Wilmer, got a rope and tied him up. Then they all took Pee Wee and Wilmer to the jail. Pee Wee cussed all the way and Wilmer just said he wanted another drink. Grandpa locked them up and everyone laughed as Pee Wee and Wilmer cussed Grandpa with quite a string of cuss words that I'd never heard before. Everyone laughed at Pee Wee and Wilmer cussing until they were blue in the face. Grandpa said that they would just stay in there and cool their heels for two weeks if they didn't watch what they were saying.

Grandpa and the men were laughing and carrying on when they left the jail and walked back over to the dance. When they got there the dance was lively again and someone said

that Grandpa deserved a drink and Grandpa thought he did too, so he tipped up a bottle and began drinking. I went home because there wasn't much to interest me, and besides I had seen Grandpa drinking before, and that never was very interesting, so I walked home and went to bed.

Grandma said something, scolding me as I crawled in through my window. About an hour later Grandpa stumbled up onto the front porch and opened the front door. I heard each of his heavy boots fall to the floor as he took them off. Grandma said something to him, and Grandpa cussed her for a long time and then bragged about how he had captured Pee Wee and Wilmer single handed and taken them to jail. Pretty soon he went to sleep and so did I.

The next morning I was sitting in the front yard playing mumble-peg when I saw Old Lady Comer making a bee-line for our front gate. I stuck my knife into the grass with a left-handed "over-the-world." Since it was almost noon it didn't surprise me to see Old Lady Comer, for she had a nose for Grandma's cooking and an appetite to go along with it. She was always arriving at someone's house just in time for dinner.

Old Lady Comer was a grass-widow and surprisingly skinny for the amount she ate. Most of all, she was very hard of hearing. To make up for being nearly deaf, as some deaf people do she had developed a habit of talking very loud. Grandma always had to shout at the top of her lungs to make the old woman hear what she had said.

"Good morning, William," she shouted to me as she marched right up the front porch steps.

"Hullo, Missus Comer," I mumbled and did another left-handed "over-the-world."

"Yoo hoo, Katie, are you home?" she shouted through the front screen door. I picked up my knife, closed the blade, and walked slowly up the steps of the front porch. Grandma shuffled into the front room from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Come on in, Matilda," Grandma smiled, "and sit a spell." "I'm just getting Pa's dinner on the table. He's got to take Wilmer Ogg and Pee Wee Marshall's dinner down to the jail; so I'm a feeding him a little early."

"I hear they caused quite a ruckus over at the dance last night," Old Lady Comer said, and then she cackled like a chicken with the fits.

Grandma smiled at the old woman, but Grandpa never did—he always cussed her for all he was worth and called her every name in the book—especially when she couldn't hear him or was too far away to read his lips.

I opened the screen door with my foot and slipped into the front room. Grandpa was sitting in his rocking chair reading a newspaper. The old hickory chair creaked with his weight as he rocked back and forth.

"Good morning, Luther," Old Lady Comer shouted as she noticed Grandpa. Her voice reflected warmth as it always did whenever she just happened to drop over in time for dinner. Grandpa kept rocking back and forth—staring hard at the folded top half of his paper.

"Good morning, yourself, you skinny old witch," Grandpa mumbled without turning his head or looking up from the newspaper, for he knew of her knack of reading lips. "I see you dragged your carcass over here to eat off'n us again!"

"What's that you say, Luther?" the old woman shouted as she walked around to where she could see his face.

"I said 'it's a damn nice day, ain't it, Missus Comer?'" Grandpa shouted. He leaned over and spat a big gob of tobacco juice toward the spittoon at the bottom of the old pot-bellied Franklin stove. She jumped back out of the way, but Grandpa's aim was true and the familiar "twang" of tobacco juice splattered against brass.

Old Lady Comer turned to follow Grandma into the kitchen. As she did Grandpa slid his reading glasses down his big nose and muttered, "Go on home you damn' old scarecrow, 'fore I sic my dogs on you."

Old Lady Comer turned and smiled, "What's that, Luther—what'd you say?"

Grandpa stood up and walked into the kitchen, smiling artificially. "It's nice weather, ain't it?" he shouted.

Old Lady Comer smiled right back at Grandpa. "It sure is, Luther," she said. "What's that you've made, Katie?" she asked curiously as she turned her attention toward the cook stove.

"Oh, this is just my old apple cobbler," Grandma replied, knowing full well that Old Lady Comer had seen her make it a dozen times. "Would you care for some, Matilda?"

"Oh, now, Katie, I don't want to put you out." Old Lady

Comer replied as she sat down quickly across the table from Grandpa. He was just dumping the last of four spoonfuls of gravy on his mashed potatoes.

"Like hell you don't want to put us out, you skinny old goat," Grandpa muttered with amazing clarity, not taking his mouth away from a slice of bread.

"What's that, Luther?" Old Lady Comer shouted as she reached for an ear of corn.

"I said 'how's that sick calf of yours doing?'" Grandpa shouted as he watched the old woman shove a whole slice of buttered bread into her mouth. Old Lady Comer continued stuffing food in like the seven-year locusts were coming to gobble up everything before she got her share.

"I hope you choke to death," Grandpa said, reaching for the apple cobbler.

"That's nice, Luther," Old Lady Comer smiled, apparently catching something different. She filled her plate with mashed potatoes and gravy and reached for another large ear of corn.

"I do think I'll try a little dab of your potatoes and gravy, Katie. And a little ear of corn. Your corn has been so good this year."

As I sat beside Grandpa I watched her eat. She clacked her store-bought teeth and shoveled the food into her mouth in big, heaping forkfulls. When the plate was empty, she took another piece of bread and wiped up the gravy that she had been unable to get with her fork. She belched contentedly.

"Belch your damn' head off, you old turkey neck," Grandpa said, getting up from the table. "Gimme that food, Katie. I gotta get down to the jail with it!"

"What's that you say, Luther?" the old lady asked.

"I said come over again," he shouted, "when you can stay longer!" Grandpa walked out through the back door carrying a tray of food for Pee Wee Marshall and Wilmer Ogg.

I quickly grabbed a slice of bread, buttered it, dabbed two spoonfuls of strawberry jam on it, folded it over and ran after Grandpa. I could hear Grandma calling after me to come back, but I pretended that I didn't hear and raced after Grandpa, whose big strides already had taken him down past the old vacant lot.

He turned around as he heard me coming and said, "William, you get on home, right now!"

I caught up with him, gulping down the bread.

"Please, Grandpa," I begged, "can't I go with you?"

He looked down at me contemplating an answer. Then he gave me the tray to hold and cut off a chew of tobacco from a Red Star plug, plopping it into his mouth. We started walking again and I tried to match his big steps, stride for stride.

"I don't allow no kids around that jail," he said and spat at a grasshopper.

"Please, Grandpa," I begged.

"I said you ain't goin' and that's final," he said.

"Then can I just walk as far as the pool room?" I asked. He looked at me, half smiling, half frowning.

"All right," he said, "you can go as far as the pool room and then you skedaddle right back home—do ya hear?"

I was pleased with the compromise and happier still when he said I could keep carrying the tray of food.

We crossed the street and started across a vacant lot where Mr. Pugh always pastured a few goats. As we approached the goats, one little billy tied to a stake with about thirty feet of rope came bucking over toward us. Grandpa stopped and so did I and we looked at the goat. It bucked toward Grandpa and looked him straight in the eye. The little goat bleated "baa," and Grandpa spat a big gob of tobacco juice right into his face. The goat blinked and bleated "baa" again and Grandpa said, "Now hump up and bawl, you bearded baboon!"

We left the bewildered goat on Pugh's lot and crossed Main Street, stopping in front of the pool room. Grandpa took the tray from me and said, "Get on home, William. If I catch you up town when I get back from the jail, I'll tan your hide."

I knew he meant it, so I found an old tin can and kicked it all the way home.

That night we waited supper on Grandpa, who had not yet returned from the jail. I asked Grandma where she supposed he was. "I don't know, William," she replied softly; "probably off drunk somewhere again."

The next morning I could smell bacon frying and the sweet aroma of coffee clear through my bed covers. I walked into the kitchen where Grandma was putting a batch of baking powder biscuits into the oven. I yawned hard, silencing the tea kettle as I did. "Did Grandpa come home last night?" I asked.

"I haven't seen hide nor hair of him," she said rather pleasantly. This wasn't the first time that Grandpa had stayed out all night long.

"At least he didn't get drunk in town," she said, "because no one has seen him since he went to the jail yesterday with Pee Wee's and Wilmer's dinner." She checked the baking powder biscuits in the oven. "Maybe he went off to Wingville with those Roper boys again," she said.

All that day Grandma whistled contentedly as she busied herself with a dozen tasks. She sneaked out the mail order catalog from its secret hiding place, worked on a new dress for herself, and even walked over to Old Lady Comer's for a little visit. Grandpa didn't come home that night either.

It was nearly noon the next day, while I was whittling on a soft piece of yellow pine, that Big Bill Buchanan rode up on his bay mare. Big Bill lived on down the road from us and was real friendly with everyone in town.

"Where's your Grandma, William?" he asked, stopping the mare at our gate.

"She's in the house, I think," I replied, walking over to the gate to admire the mare. "Grandma," I shouted, "Big Bill's here!" I stroked the mare's sleek black mane as we waited for an answer.

"I guess she's down at the chicken house, Big Bill," I said. "I'll go and fetch her."

I ran down past the coops, rushing inside the chicken house. Several white leghorn hens flew off their nests past Grandma, who was gathering eggs in her apron.

"William---!"

"Grandma! Big Bill's here. He's out front!"

She asked me what he wanted and I said I didn't know and she said that she would take the eggs in the house and then talk with him. When she came out the front door, Big Bill was getting a drink out of the pump.

"Hello, Katie," he said.

"Hello, Big Bill," Grandma smiled, "what can I do for you?"

Big Bill wiped his mouth with the back of his shirt sleeve. "I found Luther," he said. "He's been locked up in jail for two days!" He began laughing. "It's the funniest damn thing I ever heard of," he laughed, wiping his face. His laughter

increased to a roar and before he could say anything more, tears were streaming down his face and he had to take out his big red handkerchief to wipe his eyes and blow his nose. He finally stopped laughing and told Grandma how Grandpa had taken Pee Wee and Wilmer their dinner and how Pee Wee grabbed Grandpa's gun as Wilmer twisted his arm behind his back and got his keys away from him. Then they locked Grandpa in the jail and ate their dinner while Grandpa cussed his head off. Big Bill said that Grandpa screamed his lungs out until he was hoarse trying to make someone hear him but because the jail was clear out in the middle of the old Smurthwaite pasture, no one heard him. Big Bill said that it wasn't until Pee Wee's little sister Darlene came by the jail thinking that Pee Wee was still there that Grandpa was able to let anyone know that he was locked in jail. Little Darlene stopped Big Bill and told him about Grandpa being locked in jail and he rode over to see Grandpa. After Big Bill had a good laugh, Grandpa told him to go on down to get an extra set of keys from Grandma.

Grandma saddled a horse and let me jump on behind her and we rode over to the jail with Big Bill. He unlocked the door and let Grandpa out. Grandpa cussed Grandma for a long time, saying that she ought to have sense enough to know where he was and why in the hell didn't she come looking for him. When Grandma said that she thought that he was just off drunk again, Grandpa cussed her some more.

That evening after a supper during which Grandpa didn't say a word, he started a fire in the Franklin stove. When the kindling was burning well he threw on a big cherry knot. The old iron stove soon took on a dull red glow. Grandpa settled back in his old black rocker and took out his knife. He peeled a big winesap apple and sliced off a piece. I sat on the floor watching him as he carved off chunks around the core, stuffing each piece into his mouth. I looked up at him.

"Can I have the core, Grandpa?"

"There ain't gonna be no core," he said.

I sat at his feet with a dejected look and he winked at me. It was then that I realized that it would take more than forty-eight hours in jail to take the cussedness out of my Grandpa!