An Orchard and Three Generations of Dogs

(From Chickpocalypse and the Remarkable Praline Redemption Device)

Esmerelda, a black lab mix with a patch of white on her chest and the tip of her tail, lay attentive to the wind on a sunny spot of fresh dug earth and watched the people work. She sniffed at the air in that way dogs do when their noses have something to say to them, only to them, and you and I can only watch them at their sniffing and wonder what could be in this moment that has them so captivated.

Horace P. Hooper was planting an orchard of hazelnut trees. He didn’t tell his family on that day or in the years that followed why he wanted an orchard of hazelnut trees, and when they asked him, he gave them the same unsatisfactory answer: “To sustain you after I’m gone.”

“We’re going to eat hazelnuts?” asked Buford, who was the oldest and regarded himself the wisest.

“You’re not.”

“Feed ‘em to Blind Marnie’s pig?” asked Cletus.

“If she wants.”

“That’s still my pig!” Buford proclaimed. “And feeding it wouldn’t sustain any of us because now, just because it leads her around the farm and they let her in the grocery stores with it, everybody will be mad at me if slaughter it.”

Captain Beauregard Hooper of the 17th Tennessee Exhibitionary Regiment sidestepped the longstanding grievance by interjecting a guess of his own.

“We’re going to sell them?’

“No.” his father answered.

“Grind them into a potion to charm wild beasts?” asked Blind Manie, who was a witch.

“I forbid it.”

“Fend off wild wolves with them?” asked Tennyson Jack, the comeliest and cleverest among Hooper offspring.

“Hush, Jack. You’re not clever,” dad told me.

“Maybe it’s not the hazelnuts, but something about the orchard itself?” ventured Clara.

Deacon Dan snorted.

“Stop it all of you.”

Horace P. Hooper believed in keeping his plans to himself until they were close to fruition, and his plans for the hazelnut orchard were far from that.

He had his ways, did Horace P. Hooper. They had served him and his family well. As an ambitious young mechanical engineer, he dreamed of leveling the playing field between family farms and corporate conglomerates by developing farm implements that would provide agricultural automation at a price family farmers could pay. Ultimately, he was frustrated as an inventor, owing more to lack of imagination by financial backers than his own creativity. But he achieved wealth and notoriety as an entrepreneur in consumer products.

Surely you remember the bean-bammock? Likely, you have owned one -- lost yourself in scrunchity-soft comfort, just as announcers on television commercials had urged you to do. The bean-bammock was Horace P. Hooper’s concept. He built a company around it. He sold the company while the fad was at its height, prudently invested the downpayment and carefully managed the note.

He had achieved life-changing wealth. He had not achieved generational wealth.

Horace and Mosey’s seven children continued to live on the farm as adults. They varied wildly in aptitude and disposition, but they had in common a degree of industriousness and an unwavering belief that their financial wellbeing was preordained as a matter of birthright. Unshackled as they were from any concern over their own subsistence, they felt free to devote themselves instead to whatever pursuit happened to engage their interests, and to make, at best, only cursory efforts at their own support, and this, only in as much as such pursuits validated the aggrandized notions they had of themselves.

Horace did his best to understand his children, but it was all he could do to even hear them. His ears, it seemed, were failing him. His children, frustrated at having to constantly repeat the basic points of conversations, convinced him to visit an audiologist. He sat in the waiting room ruefully contemplating the years of operating farm equipment and evaluating affairs on his factory floor without ear protection. He hoped his impairment wasn’t too far advanced. What the doctor told him horrified him. He could hear just fine. He just didn’t.

The Hooper progeny rarely spoke to Horace unless it was to ask for money, and he often gave it to them. This became Horace’s preferred approach for expressing love for his children and this arrangement suited all concerned.

The children busied themselves with matters of self-fulfillment, artistic expression and furthering causes. Their mother, unlike their father, was an engaged listener, and as they conceived new enterprises and purposes for themselves, they presented them to Mosey for the entertainment value in her disapproval. This she supplied in abundance. Mosey approved of working at an hourly rate. She approved of purchases made at deep discounts. She approved of suffering privations in the interest of thrift. She did not approve of any of the following: distilling moonshine whiskey, spreading the gospel unto all the world, counterfeiting designer tomatoes, harnessing the mystical power of the earth, reenacting civil war battles, hiking the Appalachian Trail, penning quasi-literal southern gothic fables, constructing a 30-foot concrete knotty-head fish, this building a praline redemption device. These Mosey denounced each after the other as unproductive dalliances that would come to naught but rejection, blindness, lawsuits, blisters, damnation, amputations, avalanches, cease and desist orders, abductions and ruination.

When she was right, and that was often, she surfaced subject at every opportunity, leaving whoever’s turn it was no longer entertained by Mosey’s disapproval but now abashed and chastened by it, squirming in their seats, defending themselves as best they could while his or her siblings looked on with not an ounce of commiseration, but rather, with enjoyment and an incongruous sense of vindication, elevated, somehow, by the shortcomings of their siblings.

“It didn’t work out the way I wanted it to,” said Bearegard, Mosey’s third, who was learning now to eat with his left arm. “But I am content in knowing that I stood with my confederate brothers.”

“I’d give you every minute of contentment I ever had to save you an arm,” said Mosey. “You’d get about 10 of them. They’re scarce when you’re raising seven young’uns.”

“I’ll take those 10 minutes!” called Buford.

“If you’ll get that still off the farm,” she answered.

“Harm’s been done already,” said Blind Marnie.

“Wincy, help Cletus cut his pork chop.”

She did not.

Deacon Dan reached for a serving bowl and spooned a portion of what was in it onto his plate. Deacon Dan kept Jesus in his heart and a firearm at his side. He spoke with God and only to God.

“Lord, the way this family carries on,” he said.

“What about you dad?” asked Buford. “You got any contentment to pitch in? If we have to get by on Mosey’s, that’ll only come to a little over a minute for each of us.”

Horace silently consulted the green beans and cornbread on his plate. None expected that he had heard any of this. They were surprised.

“More than 10 minutes,” he answered.

Horace had often wondered if it had been a mistake to sell his company. Maybe he should have diversified into new product lines. He was an inventor with 14 patents in his name. He prototyped a number of devices he hoped would make family farms more profitable -- a nick-free sheep sheerer, a grape de-seeder. Some of his concepts found themselves in consumer products made by others. Horace wanted to bring something into production under his own direction, so he brought his stub-shaft powered bean harvester and a nine-foot-tall bag of cleanly harvested lima beans to the Chicago Agricultural Expo.

“Come back tomorrow with something simpler,” some venture capitalists told him. “Make it telegenic.”

He returned the next day with just the sack, only now, the beans in it were of expanded polystyrene, and it was sewn and grommeted on each end and suspended between support structures. He found a Hispanic woman to stitch the letters ‘mmock’ onto a large piece of denim and this he safety-pinned over the last four letters of the words “Bean Bagger” that were embroidered on the burlap sack.

“The Bean Bammock!” he proclaimed.

He was in production by the end of that fiscal year.

When he sold his company, he had thought he’d now become the family man he’d never had time to be before. But that was not the case. His ears were too well trained at not hearing. His checkbook had become too reliable a surrogate for expressing his love. They had lost themselves, all of them had, in scrunchity soft comfort. Horace had allowed this. And worse, he had too often allowed the regret and concern he carried in his heart to hijack the love that was in it before it could find a place in his eyes.

He should have kept his company, he thought. Then there would still be something at the center of this family. There would be something real for them to come together around or fight over. Either way, at least they would have focus.

Horace P. Hooper was not a contented man. So he planted an orchard. Esmerelda the dog watched and sniffed at the air.

“This,” he told his family. “Is something that will continue after I’m gone.”

This,” he said. “Is something that can sustain you. All of you. It’s something you will all have together.”

“You should have put out some raspberries,” said Mosey. “The kids could’ve picked them. We could have had pies.”

The kids would not have picked raspberries. There would not have been pies.

The years passed. Esmerelda grew old and died. Grimwalt, a basset-terrier, replaced her. The children moved away and moved back again. The orchard grew. And, finally, the day came when Horace P. Hooper looked out at his orchard and said, “It’s ready.”

“Finally,” said Blind Marnie. “Now maybe you’ll tell us what we’re going to do with all those hazelnuts.”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “When Bandigo gets here.”

“Good Lord!” cired Deacon Dan.

“Bandigo?” asked Wincy.

“He’s coming from Italy.”

Then Horace P. Hooper died.

Only Grimwalt saw it coming. The wind told him. Dried lilies, billowing down and … something metallic. He lifted his nose, tilted his head just so, and sniffed. Silver. The metallic smell was silver. That was death coming for Horace P. Hooper and Grimwalt could see it.

Dogs can see with their noses, you know. Or, more likely, you don’t. You probably think of a dog’s nose as an improved version of your own nose. That’s true to the same extent it’s true that a diamond is an improved version of coal. Your nose is as different from the nose of a dog as it is from the nose of an elephant. Moreso, in fact, because an elephant’s nose is a mere instrument, whereas a dog’s nose is an instrument of magic. It gives the air shape, gives it substance, fashions images from what is carried by the wind and, uniquely to dogs alone, from what is carried by the human heart.

When death came for Horace P. Hooper, it came as a great white swan. Its eyes were silver and they shined like dusk on a faraway river. Horace P. Hooper saw the swan, too, and he rose to greet it. Grimwalt watched him leave with the swan, and thought, *it’s too bad that people can’t smell love the way dogs can. His people would have understood him better*.

“He just raised up from his chair and gazed up toward that orchard,” Buford said, later recounting the epochal events of that day. “That dog there, Grimwalt, he looked, too. We all looked, but there wasn’t anything there.”

“Then he just fell over. There wasn’t time for anyone to even try to catch him.”

“The sound of him hitting the floor!” said Beau. “To this day if I hear something heavy land on a wood floor, I come 10 feet out of my chair.”

“Mamma heard it and dropped her phone,” continued Cletus. “She come running out.”

When Horace P. Hooper departed this earth, he left behind a wife, who, as it turned out, had loved him. He left behind six children who grieved for him as he knew they would. And he left behind the mystery of the hazelnut orchard. The day after his death, a crate arrived at the farm. Mosey had signed for it but she lost the paperwork. The family knew the name of the dog inside was Bandigo. They knew he was from Italy. They knew nothing else.

Bandigo emerged hesitantly from the crate. Grimwalt examined his anus for indications of duplicity or ill-intent, and finding none, took young Bandigo under his tutelage.