Horace’s death ushered in a brief era of cohesion and cooperation among the Hooper siblings that ended badly when Horace Hooper threatened to eat his sister’s seeing-eye pig. When a cannabis augmented brain-storming bore fruit.

“There’s just not that much use for hazelnuts,” said Cletus, croaking the words in such as to emit sound and no air. He breathed out a cloud. “They make flour out of it. They flavor stuff with it. They make chocolate peanut butter out of it. They don’t do much else.”

“There’s pralines,” said Cletus. “They make pralines out of hazelnuts.”

“Them’s pecans,” said Buford.

“Southern pralines are pecans,” said Cletus. “Belgium pralines is made out of hazelnuts.”

“Cletus, you’re the dumbest person I ever met,” said Buford. “We ain’t in Belgium so our pralines is gonna be southern pralines.”

“It may be that if people are gonna buy Belgium candy they’ll want them to come from Belgium, or at least be packaged so they look like they came from Belgium, so I don’t think a locally sourced Belgium praline would really fly.”

“What about the hazelnut flour?”

“Maybe. I suspect we could sell some. Niche market though. Don’t think we’d sell much. I think Daddy probably was thining he’d start some new trend, something that would catch hold, you know, like the bean bammock.”

“The hazelnut peanut butter?”

“Could be. There’s one out there that’s already pretty popular.”

“Nutella, it’s called.”

“Yeah, I think it’s an Italian company.”

“Shit, Jack, with your ignorance, I don’t know how you and me got to be in the same family. First you want us to sell Belgium pralines and now it’s Italian peanutbutter.”

“Now hold on Cletus,” said Buford. “That peanutbutter might be made by an Italian company, but it’s not necessarily and Itally-associated product in the mind of the consumer. Not in the same way a Belgium pralines is associated with Belgium. People wouldn’t object to buying a locally sourced hazelnut butter. They’d be glad of it, in fact.”

“That dog, Bandigo, he come from Italy!”

“Yes,” said Jack. “So he did, why?”

“Don’t you see? That’s the connection between them Hazelnuts up there that dad planted and that chocolate Italian peanut butter.”

“I suppose,” said Jack, doubtfully.

“It can’t be a coincidence,” said Buford. “Dad was going to go into competition with an Italian company that makes choclolate Hazelnut peanutbutter and so he brought in an Italian dog to help him to do it!”

“By God, Buford, I think you’ve nailed it,” cried Deacon Dan.

“That Buford can come up with some shit,” said Cletus.

“Now, my Wes, he has a way with them animals and he can train them to do about anything he wants. There’s not one of them dogs will chase a chicken and Wes never had to hit even a one of them with a dead one to keep them from it. He can get Bandigo to be in a commercial. Sit up and beg for some chocolate peanut butter. Or just set and look at a jar all slobbery and longing-like and a voiceover man say something about how he loves his chocolate hazelnut peanutbutter that aint made in Italy or any place foreign but right here at Clover Creek Farm.”

“Well,” said Cletus. “If those dog’s is never been hit with a dead chicken then they ain’t properly chicken trained and that’ll come back to haunt you some day. But it’s true the boy is good with animals and I reckon he could get that dog to be in a commercial.”

Wincey and Blind Marnie were skeptica”l of the plan.

“It doesn’t make sense,” said Wincey. “Dad can’t have intended some mass production of a product with a four-acre hazelnut orchard.”

“What then? And why Bandigo? From Italy?”

Wincey didn’t know, but agreed that it might be possible to have a small production and disstibute through local stores and local commercials was something they could attempt and still preserve some of the family fortune.

“Whose going to do all the work?” asked Blind Marnie. “I think creating a product, bringing it to market is a lot more effort that you want to take on, Buford, even if you had the ability.”

“Ervine Carter would help us,” said Arwin. “Dad liked him. Knows production and distribution.”

“Ervine Carter!” cried Buford. “I used to play poker with him. He was always going on about how we should do something with the money Dad made and get a business going again. Of course he’ll help!”

The enterprise nearly along the traditional faultline between lBuford and Blind Marnie over the shape of the jars. Blind Marnie wanted a patterned French sqare or hex and Buford insisting that a fancy jar projected lack of confidence in the product within, and insisted on a plain round vessel. The issue consumed the family and

Arwine Hooper took a long drag from a hand rolled joint

“There’s that one brand of

The men set up a camera and some lights and other equipment some of which were some of which were connected with cables and cords. The air worked it’s magic on the smell of gear oil and lense cleaning solution combined to create a smell that was a bit like spider venom and so their noses fashioned the entire scene into a great spider web and the instsruments and objects within were objects that had become trapped there.

The director himself was a great lanky spider and, indeed, this manifestation would have seemed proper to the humans in attendance for Snidenbaum was an angular, fuzzy man with expressionless eyes and protruding bones.

Buford approached Wesley cheerfully. Wes, sensing

“OK, son,” he said. “I’ve seen you do it a hundred times. Now let’s go capture it on camera!”

Bandigo trembled. He was terrified of this web and of the upright spider who ruled it and would have not part of whatever sort of capturing it was that occurred within.

“I .. I can’t,” said. “The spider!”

“The spider?”

“It’s awful.”

“It’s Okay, Bandigo. There’s not really a spider. That’s just something your nose has made up. Come on, please.”

“I can’t! I can’t! Oh, please don’t make me.”

Wes looked to the other dogs for support but saw that they were terrified, too. He sighed.

“Okay,” he said. “You don’t have to go.”

A groan from the Hooper siblings. Snidenbaum gave Buford a look.

“Now wait a minute, Wes,” said Buford. “Now just hold on. Everybody’s here. Everything’s all set up. We can’t just give up like that. We have to coax him a little bit. He’ll be fine. You’ll see.”

Buford took Bandigo by his collar. Bandigo

“Dad, don’t,” said Wesley.

Bandigo writhed and yanked back. Buford clasped him between his shoulders and rib bones. He dragged Bandigo about four on his haunches. Bandigo whimpered and left a trail of unine.

“Leave him alone, you fucking ass wipe!” Wesley howled.

Mosey gasped. The dog bolted. Buford faced Wes. The color drained from his face then returned to it in a remarkable way that the none in the family had witnessed before or since. A horizontal line of read appeared on his skin at the collar of his shirt and rose along his neck so that all his flesh below the line was beat red and all above was ash white. The line rose to his chin and cheeks and the top of his balding head. When all of his head was beat red, Buford’s hand went to his belt and Wes turned to run.

Buford snatched him and wheeled him round, and gave him three or four solid whacks with his belt. Wes fled wailing to the farmhouse. Buford’s siblings were roughly divided on the subject of corporal punishment but all were equally horrified to see it applied in such a public fashion. It was an ugly affair. Wes was of an age and size where it required some effort on Buford’s part to overpower him and the struggle he put up was mighty. Furthermore, Bufford was a man who needed his belt. The altercation caused his pants to sag far down his waste and the viewing audience was treated to a near full view of Buford’s tighty whities.

Buford hitched up his pants and cinched his belt. He walked the the front porch and pulled the flask and drank.

“This farm is a much more peaceful place when Wes is with his mom,” said Tennyson Jack.

Ferdinand the Wonder Pig, no longer the object of attention, was now attempting to open the jar of hazelnut spread by holding the jar between his cloven-footed forelegs and twisting the lid with his mouth. But he couldn’t adequately secure the jar and it turned with the lid and failed to open.

“Look what that pig is doing!” said one of the crew members.

“Don’t mind him,” said Cletus. “He’s just a pig.”

“What’s he doing,” asked Blind Marnie, and when it was explained to her, she smiled. She extended her hand and said, “Here, Ferdinand. Let me help you.”

Snidenbaum had been seated in his directors chair massaging his exoskeletal temples. But now he watched with rapt attention, wondering if the pig would really carry the jar to the woman and place it in her hand. Now the object of attention again, Ferdinand made the most of the moment. He gave a small flick of his head and now the jar was no longer in his mouth but balanced on his nose. It rested there for a bit as Ferdinand kept it aloft by shifting his nose under it with delicate precision. Then he gave another flick of his head to send the bottle sailing end over end into the air. It landed on Blind Manie’s palm with a soft satisfying slap.

Snidenbaum’s jaw went slack and is eyes filled with wonder. His features softened and his bones sank down to where they belonged deep inside of himself.

“Places, everyone,” he whispered.

Does chickpoakypse already need to be there?

Is this already the second act. Does all this need to occur after they know about the truffles?

Willis jeep with pto.

“Wesley,” said Buford. “Let’s talk.”

“What do you want, Dad?”

“I wanna talk.”

“You can count on one hand the number of times I’ve spanked you, son. That’s the only time I’ve ever spanked you in anger and I wish I hadn’t done it.”

“I’ll fix him!” said Calla the goat. “Someday when his back is turned I’ll come up behind him and I’ll but a couple of horn prints on his ass. Wait and see if I don’t.”

Wessley smiled at her.

“I’m okay,” he said.

“It’s my fault,” said Bandigo. “I should’’ve just gone into the web and let that spider capture me.”

“It is your fault!” said Floydarina.

“It’s not your fault,” said Calla.

“Come on. Let’s go on a snipe hunt.”

They were at the bridge.

That night, an aereal wraith made of starlings destroyed the corn field.

Weeks later, Buford on his couch watching football. Then the commercial break and the familiar music signaled Wesley.

“It’s on again!” he called.

Mosey came in from the kitchen, Blind Marnie and Wincy from the living room and Tennyson Jack from upstairs.

“Not again,” muttered Buford.

Blind Marnie’s voice on the TV.

“Let me help you with that.”

Whisling and whooshing supplied by a sound editor as the jar spins end over end before landing in Blind Marnie’s hand. Thanks again to the sound editors, the jar makes a pleasant pop when Blind Marnie opens it.

She looks at the camera.

“If pigs had thumbs, they could eat what they want. And that would be Clover Creek Farms PrailineButter.”

For the hundredth time, Mosey, Wincey, Cletus and Tennyson Jack cheered.

“Oh, don’t act like it’s the first time you ever seen it,” said Buford.

“I’m glad it’s working out OK. It’s just not a very good commercial. That about pigs having thumbs, you barely have to use your thumbs to open a jar.”

“Fair enough,” said Tennyson Jack. “Next commercial we can change it from ‘if a pig had thumbs’, to ‘if a pig had prehensile appendages.’ Would that settle your hash?”

“No,” said Buford. “The whole idea of a pig promoting food at all. People wanting to go out an buy something because a pig will eat it. People feed pigs table scraps, watermelon rh

And the idea of a pig promoting food. People wanting to go out an buy something because a pig would eat it! Hell, a pig’ll eat almost anything and that one has. Table scraps. Watermelon rinds. Soap, talcum powder.”

“Your missing the point,” said Wincey. A pig eats all those things because that’s what people gives it to eat. But if a pig had a choice, and the opportunity ..”

“The point,” said Baldy. “Is the commercial works. That stuff is flying off the shelves. We’ll need to order more soon.”

Indeed, the ‘If Pigs Had Thumbs’ campaign was a stunning success. The grocery stores sold out in within a few weeks of the commercial’s release and another 10,000 jars were on order. Blind Marnie and Ferdiand had become local celebrities. The director guy did shots of Ferdiand doing a bunch of other tricks and got them aired on national television shows. Made money that way.

Merchandizing around that became a revenue stream. T-shirts.

“That pig got in the bathroom once and ate a bar of soap. Ate some carpet padding once.”

“That was the goat,” said Cletus.

“From what I understand of Wesley’s grades, Ferdinand has been eating all of his homework,” said Blind Marnie.

Buford was furious.

“You know what? If you wanna think back about how that pig come into this family, you may recall that he’s actually my pig. I bought him from old Hoyle Atchley and I have a bill of sale around here somewhere I can probably find, and even if I can’t, old Hoyle certainly can.”

“That’s silly,” said Wincey. “What does it matter if you bought him. You don’t have any use for him and Marnie does.”

“Why, a pig’ll eat rat poison!”

“Most anything’ll eat rat poison. People with advanced degrees design rat poison so things will eat it.”

“But I do have a use for him,” said Buford.

“And what’s that?” she asked.

“The use I had for him when I got him.” Buford reared back. He crossed his arms and batted at the flask in his vest pocket with his thumb. “A freezer full of pork.”

“He don’t mean it,” said Cletus. “I can’t tell you how I know, but I know he don’t mean it.”

Blind Marnie was ashen. “That’s the most awful thing I’ve ever heard! I’m going to use all my fame and influence to make sure you’re the most reviled man in the state.”

Marnie had become a regular guest on a weekly radio broadcast called Spirit of the Hills that aired weekly on the local public radio station.

“Poor Ferdinand is destined for the dinner table,” she proclaimed.

“What?”

“That’s right. He’s exercised his right of ownership and taken my beloved familiar …, er, service animal from me and now intents to brutally butcher an eat him.”

“A service animal? His own sisters?”

“There’s nothing to be done,” said Blind Manie.

Buford had not heard the broadcast. He piddled at the old farmall tractor that morning and listend to sports talk instead. He begain receiving phone calls from unknown numbers and ignored them. After a while, he heard a vehicle pull into the driveway. It was Hoyle Atchley. He was carrying the bill of sale for Ferdianand.

“Here it is, Buford. The bill of sale for that pig.”

“What’s that for?” Buford hadn’t thought about the conversation of the night before where he’d threatened to eat Ferdinand.

“Well, sir. I don’t figure you for being what you might call a fussy record keeper, so I figured I’d bring this by so you’ll know someone’s got one in case you should ever have a need of it. I support you a hundred present when that pita crowd shows up. We all do.”

“Pita crowd?”

“Yes sir. They’re coming to protest that pig.”

“Pig murderer!”

Jaws swollen with chew. Overalls and flannel. Baleful.

“Listen, ya’ll, there’s been a misunderstanding. I can’t really slaughter that pig. It’s my sister’s service animal.”

“What’s the matter, you aint a vegetarian are you?”

“What? Vegetarina? No!”

“Where do you think bacon comes from? It’s alright to kill some pig I don’t know, but Lord, don’t let nothing happen to no pig I’m personally acquainted with. That right there would be murder.”

“A man’s gotta right to eat! To feed his family!”

Seeing the look on their expectant, chaw-swollen faces, Buford succumbed to the lure of leadership.

“Well, by God, a man does, don’t he?”

“Hell yeah, he does.”

“Pigs was put here in a devine transaction with the lord for the purpose of turning \* and spend still mash into pork chops. A deving transaction with the lord Hisself, and if a man make an exception just because he has a personal acquaintance with one particular pig, well, then a man aint no man he’s a … he’s a … a vegetarion.[

“That’s right!”

“Come wintertime, we’re puttin’ an apple in that animal’s mouth and putting him on a spit. And ya’ll are invited. We’re going to have us a pig roast right here on Clover Creek Farm and the whole community is invited!”

Cheers and whoops.

The farm was situated off scenic mountainous section of US Highway 129. At the driveway was a long flat roadside table where Horace P. Hooper himself had posted a sign that read “No Parking, No Turning Around, No Nothing.” It was here that Arwine Hooper was constructing his 30 foot concrete knotty head fish and it was here that the animal rights activists set up their demonstration. The more virulent among them decorated the fish with obscenities and, at great risk to themselves, attempted to knock it over. Arwine had jacked it up and it was resting on six by six blocks in preparation for moving to a trailer and hauled to an interior location on the farm in compliance with a cease and desist order that had come from complaining neighbors, the state now having designated that section of US Highway 129 a scenic corridor.

The protestors painted obscenities on it and some of the more virulent members of the group attempted to knock it over, going after the blocks supporting it with sledge hammers. They did this at great risk to themselves, for the fish was extremely heavy and could have easily crushed a large number of them. With great effort, they knocked out the block that jostled the fish and caused it to list violently to an angle. Fortunately, that did not cause the fish to fall, but it did cause the head to fall off and it narrowly missed a woman in a sundress who was playing the guitar and singing a song she had written for the occasion and instead pinioned a large, mylar banner held at either end by two demonstrators who collapsed towards each other and onto the head.

Cooler heads intervened and the assault on the fish ended. The protest continued peacefully for a while and a group of demonstrators arrived from town with cans and cans of spray paint and worked at the fish to cover the obscenities and create a pig motif while others waved placards and banners and invited passing motorists to honk.

Later that afternoon, things turned ugly again and protesters stopped traffic on 129.

Blind Manie addressed them.

“Thank you all for coming out. I am moved by your effort on behalf of myself and my reliable and useful minion.”

The activists looked at each other.

“That is, my loving and affectionate animal compatriot. But please, let’s please protest peacefully!”

“My foolish brother, in a fit of jealousy because his spoiled brat son couldn’t train that mut to sit still long enough to be filmed for a thirty second commercial.”

“Wait, you were going to have a dog in a commercial for a chocolate product?”

“Chocolate is poison to dogs!”

“The dog wasn’t going to actually …”

“What kind of people are you?”

“Boycott!”

“I have brought for you several jars of Clover Creek Farms Hazelnut Spread which is available at local grocery stores.

Blind Marnie had unleashed forces she could not control.

“Any publicity is good publicity,” said Blind Marnie.

“Boycott!” they shouted. “Boycott!”

“Boycott? What? No!”

The boycott was successful. Clayhill County was not normally a community to hold with the causes of animal rights activists, but this was a service animal, and for a blind woman, no less. Clover Creek Farms Hazelnut Butter stopped selling and the stores that carried it lost customers. Store managers removed the product from their shelves and requested the that the company drive vehicles that did not have Clover Creek Farm logo when they came to pick it up.

Much of the remaining product was donated to food banks and was a tax write off but a thousand jars or so came to the farm and was stored in the shop.

Buford still had a dilemma. He had promised his neighbors a pig roast for the \* and had not pig to offer.

There were among Buford’s siblings ardent advocates of corporal punishment who faulted Buford for withholding it but were nonetheless would have been horrified to see it applied. The other attendants

“That boy ain’t been spanked enough, if you ask me,” said Cletus. “When

The advocacy of corporal punishment was a split

Bandigo faced Wes.

“Who loves Clover Creek Farm Home Made Praline Butter?,” asked Wes, holding out a treat...

Bandigo’s eyes lifted. His head tilted.

“Line?” he called.

“For the hundredth time, said a yellow cat perched on a rail post, “you don’t have any lines, and even if you did, nobody but Wes would know you were saying them.”

“Just bark,” said Calla the goat.

“Alright,” said Wes. “Let’s take it from the top.”

Horace’s death ushered in a brief era of cohesiveness among the Hooper siblings, which lasted from the launch of the family brand of spreadable praline paste until brother Cletus’s announcement of his intention to eat his blind sister’s seeing-eye pig.

So at considerable expense, they produced 1000 jars to test in local markets. Contracted with a regional vegetable canner to produce 1000 cans to districutre locally, but the minimum they would do was 10,000 and it was more cost effective to buy they hazelnuts on the excahgne rather than harvest their own.

Buford was determined to set up production facilities in the barn and begin harvesting. And he did hire people to harvest the nuts. But shelling them proved complicated and the nuts would have to be shipped to facilities in southern Georgia, shelled there and shipped back in order to be processed into

The film crew arrived in a van. The director was a young

The filmed a commercial. Hired a production company. The director, an exoskeletal young man, scowled up at the cloudless sky and micromanaged the placement of cameras and fill lighting. He scowled up at the cloudless sky, scowled at the script, and scowled at the orchard.

“Where’s the dog?” he asked. And when Bandigo was presented to him, he scowled at him, too.

“And why are all these other animals here?”

“Because this is a farm?” answered Wes.

A camera man chuckled. The director turned his back to Wes, and took a couple of steps. He took a long, deep, patient breath and exhaled.

“Who’s in charge of the kid?” he asked.

Buford approached Wes.

“Son, no more smart talk. Mr. Snidenbaum there had interrupted filming his documentary on civil war reenactment to do our commercial, and right now, this ain’t no farm, it’s Mr. Snidenbaum’s set.”

“Well, I don’t like him and neither does Bandigo. Grimwalt says he smells like spider venom and he looks like a daddy longlegs walking upright on four of his legs and using the other four to juggle fly eggs and all the other dogs agree.”

“Don’t start this now, son. Let’s get though this thing and make everyone proud of you.”

“You mean make you not be embarrassed by me,” said Wes.

“What? Embarrassed by you? I’ve never been embarrassed by you. I just want everyone else to see the Wes I see. All smart and special.”

“Look, Wes has taught this dog to drop down and cuddle his head up against a jar of this stuff all loving and affectionate like. It’s as cute as anything you ever saw. Show him Wes.”

“He’s not going to do it,” said Wes.

“Sure he will. Just coo at him a bit and get him to relax. Just try a little bit, won’t you?”

“Why don’t you coo at dees nuts?”

Mosey gasped. Buford flushed.

“Wesley Hooper!”

The family cringed. These episodes between Burford and Wesley were routine. They blamed Buford for spoiling the boy. Buford had been a fawning dad when Wes was younger. They regarded Wesley as an odd child and a difficult one. He was a difficult child and Buford’s siblings tolerated him to the extent necessary.

Buford blamed Wesley’s mother, a prim intelligent woman of a good family who came into his life at a time when Buford thought it was time to marry and he had already doo many good relationships go to seed. So he cast aside his misgivings and they were married. He had been not quite four when Buford left his mother.

Buford blamed her for turning Wesley against him.

and Wesley had been barely four when Buford left his mom. They lifed in town then. Buford moved to the farm and they shared joint custody.

Calla the goat let out was a a bleat to everyone to Wesley. To Wesley it was: “Wesley, there’s no need for this. You’re dad isn’t blaming you. He just doesn’t understand.”

The family cringed. These explosions between Hooper and Wesley were the norm. Criticism of Buford for spoiling the boy. Inssiting that he wasn’t disciplined enough. But inevitably .