

Don't Give Me No Hand Me Down Love

He awoke with five bullets in his heart to a pale orange morning stillness. The room was dark and cold and silent. He propped himself up in the bed and reached over to where she lay, her breathing so shallow he had to put his hand on her ribs to gauge her life.

Her hair was straight, black, and shiny – out-of-place in that country at that time. Mississippi is a long way from everywhere. Her hair was disheveled upon the bony nakedness of her shoulders so that he smoothed it over a corner of her pillow and then took up a handful and held it to his nose breathing in some homemade Asiatic shampoo she had made with lavender and wild jasmine and fresh fruit.

She snuggled up against him mumbling his name in her pidgin English. He kissed her neck and felt her hand slip down along his thigh. He eased onto his back, but when he did he heard the nervous commotion of horses stepping and snorting outside the house – then some nameless voice calling him out as if God himself meant to pick a fight.

He rolled off the bed and crossed the room to the closet in one motion. The wood floor felt cold on his feet, the worn oak betraying each step in an otherwise quiet morning. And although she could no more understand his language than do long division, she must have sensed something was wrong as well, for she knelt naked at the bureau drawers frantically fumbling ammunition into an army issue Colt .45 pistol and whispering to no one in her own language.

The morning sun glinted through the window as dust twinkled against the backdrop of light. He had an antique muzzleloader from the War Between the States and he held it flat in his palms, flipping it from side-to-side as if he could tell something about the virtue of the old-timey weapon by studying its weight and posterity.

She mimicked him with her oversized pistol and a look of tense concentration wrinkled her sallow forehead. Big black eyeballs swaying in their sockets. He smiled at her tightly and motioned for her to get underneath the bed. She smiled back and motioned at him as if they might be playing some lovers' game of monkey see, monkey do.

He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. He pointed more directly for her to get beneath the iron-posted bed, and this time she frowned and obeyed him. She lay on her back clutching the weapon to her bare chest with both delicate hands – one around the grip and the other around the barrel.

The booming voice outside the house had subsided and the horses were quiet save for their occasional neighing. His own lungs felt invigorated, full of the crisp morning air – but wheezing too. Gas does not know friends or enemies. He leaned the rifle against the wall and hopped into some dingy corduroy britches, then pulled on a worn-out pair of mismatched brogans, and finally took up the muzzleloader again and crept to the window in a crouch. He pushed the curtain aside with the tip of the rifle and peeked out on that ever-expanding dawn. They were waiting for him.

“I see you Jeremiah Hobgood.”

He stood the front porch of the house slouched against one of its pillars unrolling the sleeves of his flannel shirt considering the two riders who still sat their horses as if they might be summoned momentarily to return from whence they came or perhaps dispatched immediately to some new destination altogether.

“Yall look like a bunch of regular cowboys.”

T'George leaned and spat and smiled at him. “Shoooot,” he said dragging it out.

“What are yall doing up here in Beartown?”

“I got some bad news about the old homeplace. I aint going be able to sell that timber like you asked. Somebody burnt it all up.”

The boy with T’George would not sit still. He kept wrangling with his horse and trying to peer over at Jeremiah. And he was making a fuss about it.

Jeremiah Hobgood said: “Who’s that you got with you, cousin?”

The boy, considerably younger than the two men, 16 mayhaps, sat his horse slightly in back of T’George with a scowl upon his face as if he were permanently mad about something and did not want to talk about it.

T’George looked back over his shoulder at the kid and sort of made a mean face at him. “Aint you got no manners, boy? This man is talking to you.”

The boy just sat there with that snarl curled on his lips. The faint outline of a weak mustache hurting his cause.

T’George twisted around in his saddle to face the boy, but turned his head to the side to speak to Jeremiah Hobgood. “This here kid don’t believe you’re still living. He thinks you gave it up over there on the front.”

Jeremiah Hobgood said: “Gave what up?”

A long pause followed when none of them seemed to breathe, as if each man were considering the essence of such a question and searching his vocabulary for some suitable answer among the number of possibles. Even the horses stood still, mayhaps considering their own possibles.

“What I mean to say is I guess he figured you for dead. When he heard I was coming out here he said he wanted to come along and see you for his ownself. Said he’d heard something

about you being shackled up with a Japanese woman.” The cowboy swatted at a horsefly near his ear. “The Japs killed his older brother over in Hawaii. He brung a little pistol with him. I reckon he wants to settle up.”

Jeremiah looked the boy over and then stared off at the sun where it was steadily rising and making the day anew. He clenched a fist and blew into it. “Well, how much you figure he thinks I owe him?”

T’George leaned and spat again. He considered the boy. “You better say something to this man. He’s a bona fide war hero. Don’t sull up now.”

The boy leaned his head back to better see from under his hat and touched his finger to its brim. “Hidy,” he said.

T’George nearly fell off his horse. He looked over at his cousin who had squatted on the top step of the porch. Jeremiah stared at something far off in the distance. The cowboy reigned his horse around in a circle to placate the animal, then tipped his hat back high on his forehead like some charismatic vaudevillian. He leveled his gaze at his youthful companion. “What did you just say to him?”

The boy was taken aback and shot a quick glance at Jeremiah and then back at T’George. “I said hidy.”

“Hidy?”

“Yessir.”

T’George folded his hands over the saddlehorn and shook his head at the boy. “Well, who says such a thing as hidy?”

“Lots of people says that.”

T'George raised his eyebrows as if to question the boy. Jeremiah had a smirk on his face as if were trying hard not to smile. T'George said: "Damn. Do you believe this?" He shook his head. "He's my sister's kid." T'George repositioned himself in the saddle and worked the horse in front of the boy. "Who do you know that says hidy?"

The boy stared at his own lap.

"I'm talking to you."

"I know it. I'm thinking. Don't a man get to think of an answer when somebody asks him a question?"

Jeremiah chuckled and rose to stretch his legs one at a time and then bent and touched his toes. "Well, I don't have all day. I'm hungry. You two can sit out here and sissy each other till next Friday, but I'm going inside to eat some breakfast."

When he spoke they both admired him with him some reverence and looked to each other for some translation, but none was forthcoming and the screendoor was already closing.

Jeremiah sat at a round wooden table made from a telephone-cable spool. He had poured three cups of coffee and set them out and waved his cousin and the boy over to the table when they came through the door. There was no light in the house save a dull sunshine glinting through the windowglass. A wood-burning stove stood in the corner of the room with a pipe that escaped through the roof. A knee-high icebox covered with stickers from foreign countries stood pushed against the wall.

T'George sat in a straightbacked chair beside his cousin with both hands wrapped around the coffee mug. He blew on the liquid and tested its temperature then blew some more. The boy catted around like he was casing the place or looking for evidence of some crime only he was

privy to. Eventually, he found his way to the table and made to sit as well, but Jeremiah Hobgood raised a hand and the boy froze, his eyes wide and worried.

“How about reaching in that oven and pulling out that pan of biscuits for us,” he said. The boy seemed stuck, or afraid, and stood mid-squat for another moment as if uncertain what was expected of him, and then, at last, he righted himself and opened the oven and retrieved the biscuits, which were covered with a cloth towel. He had one hand on his hip holster while he stood there holding the biscuits like a dummy. T’George finally got aggravated and jerked the tin out of his hand and put it on the table.

“Dang. What’s wrong with you, boy? Quit acting like an idjit.” T’George reached out and swatted him on the arm. “And close that oven.”

The boy did as he was told, then returned to the table and was about to sit down when Jeremiah Hobgood raised his hand again.

“I take a little grits with my biscuits. How about stirring that pot on the stove for me.” The boy looked at T’George who kind of urged him on with his head and apologized to his cousin. “He aint usually like this, Jeremiah. He belongs to Mentora. You remember her? Can you believe she’s got a sixteen year old boy?” He pressed his thumb into his biscuit. “The other one was seventeen. The one that got hisself killed.”

“He didn’t get hisself killed,” the boy snapped. “Those yellow Japs sabotaged him.”

“Will you shut-up?” T’George walloped him on the arm again. He turned to Jeremiah. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him to behave like this.”

The boy stood awkwardly at the stove stirring the grits carefully. When Jeremiah told him to quit the boy seemed relieved. He wiped his hand on his britches, then sat fingering the

tiny gun in its holster and eyed both men suspiciously as if they might be in conspiracy against him. They had not offered him the tin of biscuits and he had not asked about it.

Jeremiah leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, what happened out at Daddy's old place?"

"I hate to say it. The waste of it. The house burned slap up. There aint nothing there no more but that old grindstone. People said something about an explosion or dynamite. Don't nobody know for sure." T'George rose and pulled a rolled-up newspaper out of his back pocket and tossed it on the table in front of them. "It's all in the papers. That ole girl that used to chase after you when we were teenagers wrote it up."

"Eulalia Barber?"

"Yessir. She works at the paper now. She made some pictures too."

Jeremiah unfolded the paper and splayed it out on the table. He smoothed over the seams deliberately and sat studying the story as if he could not understand what he was looking at. When he looked up he said, "What's she doing working at the paper?"

T'George laughed. "I don't know. I reckon they'll let just about anybody work there."

The boy snickered and when they looked at him he got quiet. Jeremiah leaned across the table and waggled a finger for the boy to lean in closer as well. T'George nearly had to clap the boy on the back.

"What's your name?"

"Heyndon Cutrer," he said looking out from under his thick eyebrows as if his name were something different altogether.

"Well, Heyndon, I'm Jeremiah Hobgood. I'm sorry about your brother. It's nice to meet you anyway."

The boy swallowed hard. "I know who you are. Everybody around here knows who you are. They say you shot down 27 planes and singlehandedly rescued nine men who went down after you did. They say you carried each one three miles through mine fields while dodging enemy fire barefooted – and whistling the whole time. Some people say you got shot five times and ought to be dead, but I don't believe that because anybody that got shot five times can't keep living. Not even you." He waited for a long minute and his voice diminished. "They say other stuff too."

T'George raised his hand to smack the boy, but Jeremiah held back his cousin's arm. Jeremiah glared at the boy who had been staring at his coffee cup the whole time.

"Hey," Jeremiah said, his voice like the wind cutting through the silence, which had spread over the house like a cancer. "Look at me now."

Heyndon looked up and they stared at each other for a long time.

"What else do they say?"

The boy kind of shrugged halfheartedly.

"That ain't no answer. If you can carry a pistol to a man's house bearing ill will then you can look him in the eyes and answer him to his face. Say what's on your mind. You're entitled to your own opinion in this house."

The boy didn't know where to look or what to do. He could smell those biscuits. "I reckon people say what they say for a reason," he said finally.

The sun had come in more brilliantly through the window and it lit up Jeremiah Hobgood's face. "But do you believe what they say?"

The boy looked to his uncle for some reprieve, but T'George only shook his head. "I can't answer for you, bud. Tell the man the truth."

Heyndon fidgeted in his chair and considered the spindles of light dancing sweetly on the floor and the wall like cabaret. He looked at Jeremiah Hobgood: a man with dark, wavy hair mussed from some rowdy sleep, blue eyes that seemed to have no end, and a face full of whiskers rubbed with knuckles gone obtuse and knobby – a man not yet thirty years old, but already too old for his young life and reputation.

“I don’t believe you did none of what they say you did. And if you did do what they say about shooting down those planes and rescuing those men and such then why didn’t they have no parade for you through town like they did for Hap Miley when he came home from the war with his real foot blowed off and a wood block in its place? And how come you to not get no medals? Seems like they ought to have give you something for all that heroing you were supposed to be doing.”

Jeremiah Hobgood arched back in his chair and sucked in his lips. He eyed the boy. T’George made to drink some coffee, but it had grown cold so he set it back on the table and sat there staring at it. He almost said something, but held and shook his head and that was the end of it.

Jeremiah rocked back in his chair and clucked his tongue. “Heyndon Cutrer,” he said and what little air was left in the room escaped. “Would you believe I put a horny toad down your mamma’s shirt when we were fifteen years old?”

A terrified look crossed the boy’s face and he sat there petrified with his lips quivering as if he might cry at any moment or get up and run out of the house and take off never to be heard from again. And then his uncle T’George slapped his knee and cackled and began laughing so hard the whole kitchen shook. Jeremiah smiled at such riotous laughter. The boy could have choked on his own pride.

Jeremiah rose and fixed three plates and halved three biscuits then spooned gobs of steaming cheese grits over the bread. T'George was still laughing and holding his stomach as he rose to fetch the coffee pot. He had just begun to refresh his cup when the boy hollered bloody murder and jumped out of his chair kicking it over backwards and startled T'George so that he nearly threw the scalding coffee at the boy.

“By God it’s a Jap!” Heyndon said. “And she’s got a gun.”

The boy reached for his sidearm and got off a shot before Jeremiah snatched the gun away from him. The bullet struck the tiny woman in the shoulder and she flinched squeezing the trigger of the Colt .45 before she dropped it.

“She’ll kill us all,” Heyndon screamed, stumbling for cover and shielding his head as he cowered in a corner behind the woodstove whimpering and praying and cussing.

“She won’t do no such thing,” Jeremiah said.

The woman stood in the kitchen doorway as naked as could be, hiding her face with her hands like a child. Blood poured down her arm and dripped off her elbow. T'George seemed dumbfounded by the action. He stood there flushed, staring with a shocked expression and who could say if it was the woman’s nakedness or race that embarrassed him most?

Jeremiah rushed over to the woman and prodded her wound. The bullet had gone through cleanly and blood also ran down her back. She looked from man to man to man for some explanation, but all she found were eyes. Jeremiah bunched up a handtowel and applied it to the wound. He gave the woman some instructions in a clipped language and she pressed the towel firmly against her shoulder. Jeremiah stood there with his hands in his pocket squinting at the stove. He had given up on the breakfasts.

T'George tried to catch his breath. He held onto the back of one of the chairs steadying himself still trying to make sense of what happened. "Man alive! Is anybody hurt? Heyndon? How are you?"

The boy was still balled up in the corner and when he poked his head out a thin trickle of blood slipped down his cheek from his earlobe. T'George reached and touched his own lobe with his index finger and nodded his head at the kid. "Watch your ear, Heyndon."

The boy swiped at his ear and examined the rich red blood on his fingertip. He turned a calcide white color and wobbled a little, woozy from standing up for himself. He looked scared and his teeth chattered. He kept saying, "She shot me. That Jap shot me."

T'George had sat down again and held his head in his hands. He bounced his knee and from time to time it bumped against the underside of the table, but he never looked up. Jeremiah went and picked up the coffee pot and called out to Heyndon. "Bring me that coffee can off the top of the icebox," he said.

The boy had colt legs and they had stiffened so he walked straight-legged to the icebox and snagged the coffee can and crossed the room like a zombie with his stiff arms and stiff legs watching the Japanese woman the whole time.

Jeremiah righted the boy's overturned chair and practically forced the boy to sit in it. He pulled another chair close to Heyndon's and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and studied the boy's bloodied ear. He pinched it between his fingers while blood spurted out.

"Oww."

"Quit your whining. I've had my feelings hurt worse than that."

Heyndon would not stop looking at that petit naked woman, blinking his eyes and holding his mouth funny. "I can't believe she shot me," he said. "Give me my gun."

Jeremiah placed the boy's little .22 caliber pistol on the table. "There it is," he said. "Go on when you think you're ready. Shoot her again. Kill that Jap dead."

The boy trembled, but made no motion for the gun. Jeremiah shook the coffee can and stirred its contents with his finger. He pulled out a long ribbon with a medal fastened to the end of it. "You want a purple heart or the Medal of Honor?"

The boy looked at him. Jeremiah tossed the medal onto the boy's lap and pulled out another ribbon with a medal attached to it. "Here's the Medal of Honor. It's heavier. You want it? You're bleeding pretty bad."

Jeremiah fished out still more war decorations. "Medal of Valor. Now that's you. Or, wait...here you go. Here's another purple heart. Take it too."

The boy sat there dumbly.

"All them ain't good enough for you," Jeremiah said. He held out the can and indicated for the boy to dip his hand in and pull out some award. "Go on, pick out the one you want." Heyndon shook his head. Jeremiah dumped the entire contents of the coffee can onto the boy's lap. Dozens of tiny gold and silver and bronze stars fell to the floor like the sky had exploded a metallic meteor shower.

"Get you some," Jeremiah said. "Pin them on your chest and wear them around your neck and go strutting through town bragging to everybody about what a hero you are."

Tears streamed down the boy's face.

Jeremiah Hobgood rose and walked over to the Japanese woman who was quivering with chills. He said something low and then took off his shirt and wrapped it around the woman and turned to face the boy once more. Five pock marks the size of silver dimes were arranged randomly in the center of his chest and seemed to wink at the boy each time his heart beat.