

Hattie

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By William Currens Devol

The old Dexter house sat on a hill on the east end of Carbon Hill, Ohio. To be technical, the Dexter house was near where Mineral Avenue takes a right turn and becomes 5th Street. It was ancient and unpainted forty years ago when I saw it for the first time. A lot of Dexters lived there; two of them were my friends.

I lived in a house on a gravel driveway up behind the gym. That's all you need to say in Carbon Hill for people to know the exact spot. As long as I'm being technical, the gym sits where 5th Street joins Main just before it takes a really sharp turn and heads to Candy Town. The Dexter house and my house were just over the ridge from each other.

Over the ridge, up the holler, down the road a piece, near where Murphy's barn burned down...small town, rural life can be less exact. I like that; it suits me.

My house from those days is gone...I heard it burned down. Burn down, fall down, get pulled down, time just keeps erasing the landscape of your past and erecting a new landscape that will become someone else's past. In Carbon Hill, time works at a much, much slower pace, so today's landscape is hardly different from the landscape of this story.

It was September, Nixon was President, Dad was in Vietnam, and I was a freshman in high school. Larry Dexter was my age Jeff Dexter was only a grade ahead of us, but he was two years older.

The leaves hadn't started turning, but they were drying up. When the wind blew, the trees rattled more than swished. Carbon Hill is in a clear spot on the edge of Wayne National Forest. If you look at satellite pictures on Google Maps, you'll see why I noticed things like when the leaves stopped swishing and started rattling.

Just after sunset on the day I learned some of the future, the two Dexter brothers and I borrowed twelve bottles of Daddy Dexter's home brew. We sneaked into the basement of the Dexter house under the cover of darkness and each grabbed four of the beers from where they were stored in a cool dark root cellar dug into the dirt floor of the basement.

With four beers each, we doubled over to hide our loot and ran across the Dexter's lower yard and into the woods. The canopy of leaves quickly blocked the twilight lingering in the western sky. There was a path that snaked back and forth up the ridge to a large, stone fire ring. It was a place where coon hunters drank moonshine around a fire and argued about whose dog was at the head of the pack of hounds chasing raccoons or some other furry creature the hunters might be sober enough to shoot once the dogs got it treed.

That was our destination. The path led to the fire ring from the Dexter yard and then picked up on the other side of the clearing and fell steeply away to my yard on the other side of the ridge. From the Dexter house to my house was less than a mile by air, but we didn't fly. Walking the whole route in daylight took about fifteen minutes; the night-time trip might take twice as long.

"The old man's beer will knock the two of you right on your asses, you pussies," Jeff said from the lead position after the three of us made it past the tree line. Jeff stopped to light a cigarette, and Larry and I stopped with him.

Jeff was taller than Larry and me. He actually shaved, but only for school. His hair longish hair was lighter than his whiskers. He was painfully thin. I don't think he or Larry ever got enough to eat, but they never complained.

Jeff set his beers at his feet and fished a Winston out of the pack in the pocket of his t-shirt. He dug in his front pocket and pulled out a kitchen match. He used his thick yellow thumbnail to scratch the match to life. He applied the match to the end of the cigarette, inhaled, and blew the smoke out of his nose.

He held the match out to us. I put my beer down and I reached down to my right sock and pulled a cigarette out of the pack I hid there. I leaned in and got my own smoke going. Jeff held the match out to his brother.

"No fucking way am I going to be the third guy on a match," Larry said and he pushed past me and Jeff to the head of our line.

Larry had a buzz cut courtesy of Daddy Dexter. He was the shortest of the three of us, but his jeans ended several inches above the tops of his ancient Chuck Taylor high tops. His t-shirt was too long and his pants were too short, but no one back then would ever think of saying anything about it.

Poor was its own pain, and it was an unwritten rule that we didn't mention the sorts of things caused by a lack of money. Therefore, free lunch, hand-me-downs, and bad teeth were off limits to all but the biggest assholes.

When Jeff smiled at Larry's superstition, you could see he was missing a couple of teeth on the right upper side of his mouth and his front teeth were yellow with some obvious decay. The Dexters had no family dentist.

"You ain't in the trenches in World War I, you dumb motherfucker," Jeff said.

"I don't give a shit," Larry called back over his shoulder. "I ain't taking any chances."

Jeff and I grabbed our beer off the ground and started after Larry.

"I dragged him under a ladder two summers ago, and he damn near pissed his pants," Jeff shouted at the back of his brother's head. Then to me he said, "I don't believe in bad luck; it all comes down to whose belly you squirt out of. If you come out of the right woman, you got it made."

"That's what you figured out, did you," I said. "How did such a big thought fit in such a tiny brain?"

Jeff stopped and turned around and flashed a quick smile. "That was a good one, Professor. You might just not be the stupidest smart kid I ever met."

Professor wasn't such a bad nickname. I ran around with kids called Rat Sandwich and Dog Leg Blair, so a nickname that made fun of good grades was fine with me. Jeff had been after me to "quit being such a pussy," and he insisted that learning the correct insult protocols was an important step toward my un-pussyfication.

"Hey, girls," Larry called back to us. "Want me to leave you two alone and turn the lights down? Am I going to have to drink this beer while you two make out?"

"Fuck you, asshole," I shouted. I looked over at Jeff, and he was grinning from ear to ear.

"You'd love to, you fag," Larry said.

"You wish," I said.

"You are both flaming queer baits," Jeff said, bringing the insult chain to a well-crafted conclusion. "Let's get up the hill and drink this beer."

That's what we did.

Larry put a fire together with wood from a pile the coon hunters left at the edge of the clearing. He moved with quick, sharp motions. He pulled an old brown paper lunch bag from his back pocket and stuffed it under his pile of sticks. He pulled his most prized possession out of his front pants pocket and clicked the chrome Zippo to life to light the paper. Once the paper was burning, Larry lit a cigarette of his own and clicked the Zippo shut.

The oldest Dexter boy, Mike, was a Drill Instructor in the Marine Corps. The Zippo had been Larry's birthday present from Mike the summer before. It came in the mail with a card. Mike Dexter hadn't set foot back in Carbon Hill since he hitchhiked to the bus station in Nelsonville the day he left for basic training eight years before.

Larry was proud of his oldest brother for being a Marine. I always thought that Jeff was the proudest that Mike had gotten out and never came back. Jeff wanted out of Carbon Hill when he got out of school. As it turns out, that never happened, but after couple of beers, Jeff would start telling us all about how he was getting out and never coming back once he got his diploma.

"Crack em' open, queers," Larry shouted. He followed his own orders and took a long drink from the lukewarm beer.

Daddy Dexter's beer was strong. It was best not to let it linger on the tongue. Yeasty would have been a compliment and skunky would have been kind. It would never win any gold medals; it was for getting drunk.

There were, of course, beer drinking protocols to be followed. Nobody particularly cared how much you drank, but if you opened it, you had to finish it. If you got caught wasting beer, a beer court was convened on the spot. Your guilt was not in question in beer court; you were guilty. Beer court determined your punishment. You might have to chug a beer or give everybody a cigarette.

I was never hauled before a beer court. That night, I might never open my other three beers, but I would finish the one I opened.

Silence didn't bother either of the Dexter boys. They were content to sit, smoke, and sip their beer. With eight kids still at home, silence was a special treat for my friends. I was lighting my third cigarette halfway through my first beer when I heard a loud thrashing sound from the woods behind me.

I jumped to my feet.

"Jesus Jumped up Christ," I yelled. "What the hell was that?"

"If it was something that was going to eat us, it wouldn't be making so god damn much noise," Jeff said as he flipped a cigarette butt into the fire.

Just then we heard a tremendous belch from the edge of the clearing and Hattie Nutter stumbled into the glow of the fire from out of the woods.

We called her Nutty Hattie. Back then we didn't know about bag ladies, but that's what Hattie was. She carried a filthy, Army surplus back pack and a canvas duffle bag that may once have been white. Both were stuffed to bursting with God knew what.

Hattie smelled like crap soaked in urine. Her clothes were layer over layer of dirty rags, and she had one tooth up and one tooth down. Her face was a mask of wrinkles and every one of them was caked with dirt or coal dust or both.

Hattie lived in a cave which had been turned into dynamite storage for a strip mine back when both sides of a valley were blasted to pieces so the coal could be picked out of the rubble. She lived in the cave behind chain link gates that had been bolted to the bare, rock face of a hill that had all its coal blasted out of it twenty years earlier.

Hattie covered the rusty chain link gates of her cave with cardboard, scrap lumber, or anything she could drag up an old access road that ran off of Mineral Avenue near the Dexter house.

"Get out of here you crazy old bitch," Larry shouted at Hattie as she lumbered toward the fire dragging her pack and her duffle.

"Shut your stupid mouth, moron," Jeff yelled back. "Hattie can share our fire."

I never saw Jeff Dexter be mean to people that didn't deserve it first. And he was never mean to people less fortunate than he and his family. Hattie Nutter was one of the few people in Carbon Hill that qualified in that second category.

"Hattie," Jeff said. "You're welcome to sit by the fire, but it would be wonderful if you sat up wind from us. I mean no offense."

You never knew if Hattie was with it or out of it. She was drunk as much of the time as possible. She had been married once, and her husband had got himself caught in a coal crusher and lost his left arm just above the elbow. His job went with the arm.

The local legend was that Hattie's old man started making moonshine to make ends meet. Hattie, the story goes, continued to distill white lightning until she got so drunk one night that she forgot where the still was. My Grandmother told me that Hattie got a Social Security check at General Delivery on the first of each month and drank through that at an amazing pace.

"I am a bit on the ripe side," Hattie said sniffing under one arm and then the other. Then Hattie winked at us and exposed her two teeth and dark gums in what passed

for her smile. The smile faded as she plopped onto the ground...thankfully up wind from the three of us.

Hattie was shaking badly. She was sweating hard, and the sweat had scrubbed relatively clean streaks down both cheeks and on her forehead. I thought she was having a seizure or a heart attack.

"Hattie," Jeff said in a quiet voice. "Hattie would you like a beer."

"Don't give that old bit..." Larry started.

"Shut the fuck up," Jeff told his brother. "She's going to rattle apart right here if she doesn't get a beer in her." He got up and took one of his beers over to Hattie and opened it on his belt buckle.

"Hattie, go ahead. It looks like you could use a beer," Jeff said. "Here, mind you don't spill it."

Hattie reached out with a barely controlled hand, took the offered beer, and drank it in about three swallows.

"Oh, yes, young man," Hattie said. "I needed that one. Could you spare a couple more and maybe a smoke?"

It was years later when I realized that Jeff knew Hattie was having DTs because he saw his dad go through them. George Dexter would sometimes see all manner of snakes and bugs when the money ran out before the month did. You could hear George screaming at those snakes to leave him alone up to a quarter mile away.

Jeff knew that the only thing for a wet brain that got dried out was more wetness. It didn't seem right that in the end George Dexter buried his son and not the other way around.

Larry and I were taxed one beer and three cigarettes each, and Jeff gave Hattie one more of his beers but none of his cigarettes. Hattie rummaged around in her pack and came out with a rusty bottle opener. She made her second beer disappear as fast as the first. Her third was pretty fast, but the need seemed to pass after that one.

She picked up one of the cigarettes on the ground next to her and stuck it between her lips. She dived into her pack again and came out with a book of matches in her grimy hands. She lit the cigarette and flipped the dead match into the fire. She took a long, deep lungful of smoke, leaned back, puckered up, and blew five perfect smoke rings.

She was the most bizarre person I had ever been that close to. She had a better moustache than I would be able to grow for another ten years, and she had whiskers that grew thick and black under her chin. Her nose had been broken at least twice. One break was high on her nose and the other was about an inch lower. Her nose jogged right and then left between her eyes.

Her eyes were deep wrinkled wells on her face shaded by bushy white eyebrows that reminded me of blackberry thickets. You could see reflections from the fire at the back of her shaded eye sockets, but you couldn't tell what color eyes she had. I realized that I had never looked right at Hattie Nutter before. I looked around her or over her, but I had never looked at her.

"Take a picture, four-eyes, it will last longer," Hattie barked at me in her rasping whiskey and cigarette voice. "Don't no one from your family have any manners. Didn't your Grandma teach you nothin'? I once saw your Grandpa paddle ten boys for being rude when he was Principal."

It never occurred to me that Hattie could know anybody I knew. I was always amazed when people told me things about my family. Carbon Hill was the only place I had ever lived where people knew me before I moved there. Navy brats never go anywhere where anyone knows a thing about them. Here I lived in a place where people knew all the generations of my family."

"I'm sorry, Mam," I said dropping my gaze.

"Well, there might be hope for you yet," Hattie said. "You tell your Grandma that I use that quilt she made for me every night."

Grandma had made a quilt for Hattie? I didn't know that. I never thought of my Grandma ever doing anything other than being my Grandma. Later, I found out that Hattie worked in the school cafeteria for my Grandfather in the early 1950s. Grandma had made quilts for Grandpa to give to his staff for Christmas. Hattie's last year with the school was in 1953, the year before I was born.

Her need gone, Hattie opened her fourth beer and sipped it. She looked at Jeff and turned her head right and then left.

"That busted eardrum is gonna keep you out of the Army, boy, no sense even trying to enlist," Hattie said to Jeff.

Jeff looked like he had been slapped. His mouth fell open and his eyes went wide open.

"How'd she know about your eardrum," Larry asked his brother before turning to Hattie. "How'd you know he had a busted eardrum, Hattie?"

“I was at the Bridge Inn the night your Daddy busted you in that ear, son,” Hattie said looking straight at Jeff. “It bled something awful. The County tried to take you, but your momma wouldn’t let them. She took a bus all the way to West Virginia and spent the summer with her people. The County quit trying after a while. I think you was three or four when it happened. You was just a little one.”

“Holy shit, Hattie, I thought you were reading my mind,” Jeff said.

Hattie leaned forward, squinted up her face, and farted. The fart started with low, rumbling notes and ended with high notes. Hattie’s laugh came out as a cackle which turned into a coughing fit. It took her a minute and a few sips of beer to get herself under control.

“Hell, boy, I was,” Hattie said waving the fart away from her nose. “I can read minds and tell fortunes too, but you don’t hear me bragging about it.”

“Yea, Jeff, Hattie is a fortune teller. Didn’t you ever hear of Hattie the Magnificent,” Larry said. “What a load of bull. OK, Hattie what am I thinking right now?”

“You’re thinking I’m a crazy old woman,” Hattie said.

“That was an easy guess,” Larry said. “Pure bullshit, just like I said.”

“How about I tell these two how you window peek on Mary Justice,” Hattie said. “Or I tell them that you think your dick is way too small. I can’t believe the trash you are thinking Larry Dexter. You should be ashamed.”

I knew Hattie had told the truth because Larry Dexter turned bright red, shut his mouth, and looked into his lap.

“God damn,” I said. “That’s amazing.”

Hattie turned her eyes from Larry to me.

“Boy, that kind of language is going to get you sent straight to Hell,” Hattie snapped. “You better start believing in God because he’s watching your Dad in Vietnam. He’s gonna come home, boy. It ain’t time for him. Stop eating up your insides. God has it handled.”

When Hattie said it, I knew it was true, and a weight lifted off my shoulders.

“Jeff Dexter,” Hattie said turning to look at him.

“Yes, Hattie,” Jeff said.

“You got to quit smoking son. You got to quit smoking or you ain’t never gonna see thirty. The Viet Cong ain’t gonna kill you, but the Winstons will. Do you hear me boy,” Hattie said looking into Larry’s eyes. “That’s what I come down here to tell you. Do you hear me, I said.”

“Yes, Hattie,” Larry said. “I hear you.”

The three of us just sat there while Hattie finished her beer, belched, and stood up. She collected the remaining beer from each of us. We never said a word. Hattie stuffed each beer lovingly into her duffle bag and walked back into the woods the same way she came out of the woods.

“That crazy old lady took our beer,” Larry said, when he finally found his voice.

“Don’t feel much like drinking anymore anyway,” Jeff said as he stood up and dusted his ass with both hands. “Come on Professor, walk back to our house and then go home on the road. You’d fall and break your neck going down your side of the ridge in the dark after this.”

I followed the Dexter brothers back down the path, and when we came out in their yard, their house was dark.

“Mom’s saving kerosene again,” Larry said. “I won’t be able to see a fucking thing in there. I’m tired. I’m going to bed...and my dick isn’t too small.”

“For picking teeth,” I said to Larry’s back as he trotted toward the house.

“Nice one, professor, nice one,” Jeff said. “Come on, I feel like walking, anyway.”

When we got down to the corner of 5th and Main, Larry fished a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it with another kitchen match.

“Aren’t you worried about what Hattie told you,” I said.

“You know what, Professor,” Jeff said. “I was scared of going into the Army, but it was a ticket out of here and this shitty life. Mike did it, and I was going to do it too. But it looks like cigarettes are my only option, now. So don’t bust my balls about it.”

”I’d have to find them first,” I said.

“I’ve created a monster,” Jeff said as he turned and walked down Main Street away from his house.

Jeff Dexter finally quit smoking when he died of lung cancer about three weeks after his 25th birthday.