My Uncle Lucifer and Mason

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Abstract

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**My uncle Lucifer and Mason**

THERE'S ALL KINDS of hogs—Berkshire, Cheshire, Chester White, Hampshire, Poland China, Tamworth—but Mason was a sow. My Uncle Lucifer named her Mason because right from the start he said he knew she'd be a blue-ribbon winner in the hog calling contest and he didn't want her to have the drawback of being a sow—or at least having a name like a sow most usually does. But the question I kept asking myself was, would Mason win the contest?

Well, it was a cool spring morning and I was nine then and I'd got up early to go over to Uncle Lucifer's house to help him pretty up Mason. The leaves of the oaks and cottonwoods along the path had started unfolding, and now and then I could hear the call of a bobwhite or a mockingbird. By the time I reached Uncle Lucifer's the sun was above the barn and there he was sitting beneath the peach tree by the hog pen, smoking his corncob pipe. There's a certain smell about a hog pen and Uncle Lucifer liked it, specially when he was smoking. He was a big man and his face always had a red color to it, even in the mornings. His hair was gray, combed back at the sides. A man had a certain distinction about him, he said, if he parted his hair in the middle. You could sight down the part on his head like looking down between two rows of corn. He was frowning and I knew right off something was wrong. When I opened the gate a large curl of smoke rose from the pipe.

“Come here and sit by your Uncle Lucifer, Son, something bad's happened.” He rubbed his thick, gray mustache with the edge of his free hand like some bug'd got in it. I'd used to trim it on Saturday nights but somehow stopped, when I got older. I sat down and must've looked so serious that when he turned his head he said, “Now it's not that bad, Son—nothing's happened to Mason. It's them Jenkins boys—the three of them’re gwine to enter that razorback of theirs in the big hog calling race.” I breathed deep because I knew it was bad and I was going to ask him how the judges—Mitchell and Luke Banks—would even let that razorback in. But Uncle Lucifer said, “They've been feeding it that brew they
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make and I hear it'll run lickety-split half a mile if they just wave a jug within seeing distance."

"There ain't no justice to it," I said.

"You're right. I just heard yesterday and I'm watching Luke and Mitchell just to see how much money they'll put on that razorback." He knocked his pipe against the tree and stood up and brushed the seat of his overalls. "You don't see Mason, do you?"

"Nossir."

"You won't either. Not till I call him, anyway. I got him so trained I think he'd almost root out his name there in the pen, if I wanted him to." He placed his pipe in the pocket of his overalls then cupped one hand around his mouth and gave a low hog call. "This gwine be a sight worth seeing, Son." Mason came lumbering from the barn, with a blue ribbon tied around his neck. (I most always called Mason he when Uncle Lucifer was around.) He had white hair with tiny black spots like a bird dog and it was so smooth it felt like Aunt Maude's fur coat she'd bought at Mineola. Uncle Lucifer laid one hand on my shoulder and said, "Ain't he purty." He was grinning so much his face got redder than usual and Mason walked right up to me and rubbed his snout against my toes. "He sure does like you, Son. Just look at him." Mason was grunting now and had his head cocked to one side toward the hog pen. He started to go for it, but Uncle Lucifer curled two fingers through the ribbon and held him back. "You don't want to go over there with them hogs, Mason. You'll just get dirty."

About that time Aunt Maude opened the screen door and stepped out on the back porch. She was holding her apron in her hands and looking over the top of her glasses. She was as fat as one of those hogs in the pen and I didn't see any right for her talking. "Lucifer, why in blazes don't you let that sow go — you pay more mind to her than you do me."

Uncle Lucifer looked up and grinned. He was named Lucifer because they said my Grandma Cora had a vision of the Devil just before he was born. Well, they weren't very wrong and there he was standing and grinning at Aunt Maude. I knew he was going to say something that'd be a whopper but he said, "I got to take care of Mason, Aunt Maude. You don't think he's gwine to win the race if I don't, do you?"

Aunt Maude took off her glasses and polished them briskly
Sketch

on her apron and looked straight at Uncle Lucifer. She always polished them that way when she was mad. "I don't care what that sow does. Why, I honestly think you'd take her to bed with you if I'd let you get by with it — and don't call me Aunt Maude. I know you're trying to win Lester's fancy for one of those silly jokes of yours."

"Why, Maude—" Uncle Lucifer looked real serious and pulled Mason back and gave him a fond slap on the side, whereupon he grunted loudly. "But being's you mentioned it I can't tell much difference between you two." Aunt Maude looked so mad I didn't dare crack a smile and Uncle Lucifer never did laugh at his jokes — except maybe when he was drinking. And so we all stood there and all you could hear was the grunting of the hogs. I thought Aunt Maude was going to cry and Uncle Lucifer finally looked up and said, "Now, Maude, I warn't meaning to be serious — you know that."

"All I know is you're going to turn that sow in there with the rest before long and feed her corn instead of corn-meal sweetened with maple syrup — why, it beats all I've ever heard!"

"You want him to win, don't you?" He looked at me and placed one hand on my shoulder, holding Mason by the ribbon with the other. "Lester and me know he'll win, don't we, Son?" That's the question I'd been asking myself and I wasn't sure but I nodded and looked down at Mason like I could see him crossing the finish line right then. "He's fast all right," I said.

"And that blue ribbon around her neck! I don't know where you got it, but I'm going to look in my hope chest and if any of my taffety ribbon's gone, I'm moving right over to Lester's Mama's house — do you hear me?" She started to slam the screen door but about that time Mason broke away from Uncle Lucifer and ran right for the hog pen. And before we could budge an inch he'd jumped the logs and was right there in the mud.

After we'd got Mason all washed up again we started out for Mitchell Bank's pasture — that's where the hog calling contest was going to be held. The land was flat and stretched two miles before it hit a grove of oaks and pines. Before we'd left I'd gone to the barn to get a bottle of Uncle Lucifer's best whisky from the toesack that was buried beneath the bin of white corn. He said he'd need it to brace him up if
Mason lost. He put it in the back pocket of his new overalls he'd put on and we was on our way. The sun was shining through the pines on each side of the path and the shadows of them was like someone holding his fingers up against a coal oil lamp. It was still cool and the smell of turpentine and grass burning here and there in a field made me hungry. But Mason, who was walking along between us, still smelled like the hog pen — even though me and Uncle Lucifer had sprinkled some of Aunt Maude's lilac water on him.

When we reached the fork in the path Uncle Lucifer stopped. One way led to the Jenkins place and the other to Mitchell Banks.' He uncorked the bottle and took a swig. "I think we'll go up there and talk to them Jenkins boys, Son, and see if they're really gwine to enter that razorback." I didn't much want to because I knew they'd be drinking on Saturday morning and sometimes they took a shot over your head just to see you run. They didn't shoot and after we'd passed the sorghum patch, I saw Will Jenkins sitting beneath an oak, holding a jug on one shoulder. He was the youngest of the three and always serious, trying to be like his daddy when we came to buy whisky. And he always bragged about his daddy never being caught by the law because they couldn't find the still.

"Howdy, Mr. Lucifer — Lester. Looks like you brought thet sow of yours along." He lifed the jug to his mouth and took a drink. "I thought you'd leave her at home."

Uncle Lucifer said, "I'd prefer you called him Mason, Will."

"Him? Thet hog's a sow — and thet's all she'll ever be." He took another swig. "But I don't have no mind for fussing. Here, Lester, let me show you the hog's that's gwine to win the race." He got up and carefully rested the jug beside the tree. "I don't dare take *thet* with me because when he sees a jug or smells whisky, he nearly stomps the ground, man — nearly stomps the ground."

I didn't budge an inch because I knew he'd make Uncle Lucifer mad. But when Uncle Lucifer started following him I fell in behind them and we all walked toward the barn. And there was that razorback in this log cage with chicken wire on the top.

"He's so mean, Lucifer, we have to keep him hemmed up like this."

Mason had gone right along with us and he walked up
to the cage. “Keep that sow away, Lester, or he'll tear her to shreds.” I reached down and grabbed Mason's ribbon, but Uncle Lucifer said, “Never mind, Son, Mason's so fast that pig couldn't even touch him.” Will looked real sinister and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “That ain't no pig, Lucifer, it's a hog.”

Uncle Lucifer took a swig from the bottle again and handed it to Will. “Hog, then. But Mason's gwine to win the race.”

Will handed the bottle back to him. “This ain't our whisky.”

“It's real whisky, Will. Lester's Papa brought it down from Dallas.” Uncle Lucifer corked the bottle up and tapped at the label. “The best — White Horse. Read it.” Will spelled out the words, then looked sharply away. “Maybe you don't like our whisky — maybe you don't want to buy any more.”

“That's whisky talk, Lucifer, don't pay no mind to that boy.” Jake Banks was standing in the door of the barn and his face was red. “Hitch the mares up to the wagon, Will. Papa'd whop hell out of you if he heered you talking like that.” Jake walked up to the cage and spread his fingers out across the chicken wire and looked between them at the razorback. “What you think of him, Lucifer? Still think Mason's gwine to win?” Jake had a lot of respect for Uncle Lucifer and White Horse whisky and that's why he called Mason, Mason.

Uncle Lucifer handed the bottle to him. “Have a drink, Jake.” After Jake took a long swig and passed the bottle back again, Uncle Lucifer said, “That Mason's gwine to win hands down. He's a hog if I ever seen one.”

Jake roared and slapped Uncle Lucifer on the back. He was bigger than the three of us and had blond hair like Will. “Get on and hitch up them mares, Will.” Will looked at him for a minute, then walked out. “That boy's been drinking all morning, Lucifer — don't pay him no mind.” Uncle Lucifer pushed the bottle at Jake again. Jake had a guilty look on his face and shook his head. “That's too good whisky to be drinking up all at once. Here.” Jake shook his head again, but the third time he took the bottle and said, “Thany kindly, Mr. Lucifer. This is sure real whisky.”

By the time we'd showed Jake Mason's trick of running circles round a tree, Will had the mares hitched to the wagon
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and we was ready to start for Mitchell Banks' pasture. Ezra Jenkins came out of the house and the four of them lifted the cage onto the wagon. Ezra was brother to the sheriff in Quitman and people had a lot of respect for him, specially Uncle Lucifer, because he outfoxed the law. "Me and Leon ain't gwine to go, Lucifer," he said, "because I got a little business to tend to." He winked and walked back in the house.

In a few minutes, after we'd loaded Mason into the wagon with us, we was on our way, and with Will's hollering and slapping the mares I was more excited than I'd been all morning. I was sitting in the back holding Mason so he couldn't get to the razorback's cage and the more I looked at the two, the more I was sure the razorback was going to win. But I remembered how Mason had broke away from Uncle Lucifer and jumped in the hog pen and I wasn't sure.

Mitchell Banks' pasture was covered with sweet clover and if there was anything Mason liked, it was sweet clover. So when the wagon had pulled away from the grove of pines and onto the pasture, Mason jumped and I leaped after him. I could hear the people yelling at the other end, where the log fence was, and I started racing after him and that's when I decided Mason might win after all, because he was fast. Uncle Lucifer was hollering, "Ketch him, Lester ketch him! He'll tire hisself out!" And the Jenkins boys was laughing and screaming and slapping their thighs. Finally I made a leap and caught him and he squealed so much I was sure I'd hurt him. Uncle Lucifer ran over to us and said, "How is he, Son, how is he?" I told him I didn't know, but when I took hold of the ribbon he started wallowing in the clover again and I knew he was all right.

Everybody was there, including Sheriff Murdock and Miss Myrtle Hughes, who was president of the Humane Society that year. She always came to everything that had anything to do with animals and even went once to the stock show at Ft. Worth. I could tell you how she caused a scene there at the show when an auctioneer made an announce­ment, waving his hand at the stalls and saying, "All them bulls are for sell — principally for slaughter —" but that's a different story. Anyway, Miss Myrtle was standing there with her bonnet over her head and with a clean, starched apron on, real nonchalant, just like she'd stepped out of the house,
not even having any idea of coming down to the pasture.

Some people said Sheriff Murdock was sweet on Miss Myrtle, but as I knew it then she wouldn’t even look at him twice because she was almost sixty and he was fifty-five and she said she was too mature for a man young as that.

Well, she was standing at the end of the log fence that they had put up for a short distance in place of the barbed wire. Sheriff Murdock said he knew it was silly, but she’d warded him so much about the hogs being scratched up if they ran into the barbed wire, that he made Mitchell put up the fence.

After the distance hog calling contest was over, everybody agreed that only Mason and The Arkansas Traveller (that’s the name the razorback was entered under) should run the race because not another hog there, they said, could match them, so far as runners go. Mitchell and Luke Banks led Mason across the pasture to the edge of the pines where the razorback’s cage was and I could see Luke was afraid to let that razorback out himself because he talked to the Jenkins boys before he left and kept waving one hand toward the pasture. When they got about halfway across, Uncle Lucifer took out his bottle again and started to take a swig, but Sheriff Murdock walked up to him and said, “Lucifer, you can’t drink here, there’s women folks around.” Uncle Lucifer turned his head slightly and looked straight at Miss Myrtle. “I don’t see no women,” he said.

“Right there, man.” Uncle Lucifer laid one hand on the sheriff’s shoulder and took a drink. “Why, Sheriff, I thought that was a scarecrow.” And Sheriff Murdock laughed so hard he had to have a drink, too.

When the Jenkins boys gave the signal Luke raised the front of the razorback’s cage and Mitchell let Mason go and the race was on. Jake and Will were waving their jugs and hollering to best everything. I’d climbed upon the log fence and Mason was leading by a hog’s length. Uncle Lucifer was so drunk by then he couldn’t see that far away, and he put one hand on my leg and said, “How’s he doing, Son? Is he leading?” “By a length,” I said. He looked real serious and walked away. A few people said Mitchell let Mason go first, but nobody believed them since he had ten dollars bet on the razorback.

When they was about half a mile from the finish, Mason
had gained three lengths and Jake and Will was jumping up onto the fence, waving the jugs, taking a drink, then jumping down again.

And that's when I saw Aunt Maude. I guess she'd been standing at the back of the crowd so Uncle Lucifer wouldn't see her. I knew then if there was anything she wanted, it was to keep from figuring she was the least bit interested in the race. She had on one of her prettiest bonnets and was wearing a blue and white polka dot dress. By this time Uncle Lucifer was hog calling louder than all the yelling and Mason was leading by a length, his ears slanting back against his head. I knew Aunt Maude didn't like what was going on, but she just stood there, straight as a board, not saying one word to anybody.

The Jenkins boys had swore they wouldn't hog call once and they didn't because they was so drunk all they could do was wave those jugs. And then the razorback started inching up a little, almost neck and neck with Mason. I saw someone tell Uncle Lucifer and he took a swig and went over and got Sheriff Murdock's pistol from the holster. Well, about that time Miss Myrtle saw what he was doing and before the sheriff could do anything she grabbed at Uncle Lucifer and he swayed out of the way. She missed and got the sheriff instead. He wasn't steady on his feet anyway and he fell and she went with him and there they was, she trying to get up and stop Uncle Lucifer, and Sheriff Murdock holding and kissing her, thinking she'd finally fell for him. You know how things like that go and, sure enough, about a year after that hog race, they got married.

Uncle Lucifer was next to me by then, holding the pistol and saying, "I just can't see him lose, Lester. I just can't." I was standing high on the fence and suddenly, like a flash of lightning, it came to me what Mason was doing. Those Jenkins boys was leaning over the fence holding out the jugs toward the razorback, and Mason was running their way too, and I knew if I'd get him back on his course, he might win.

I jumped off the fence and said, "He ain't going to lose, Uncle Lucifer, I'll get some of their brew." I started toward where Will and Jake was, but I didn't have anything to hold it in. If I was going to attract Mason's attention, I knew I'd have to make a loud splashing noise, pouring it out all at
once, like slop in a feed trough. And then there was Aunt Maude’s bonnet, pushed back a little from her forehead, shining in the sun, starched stiff as could be, and the more I looked at it, the more it looked like a bucket. Before I thought what I’d done, I’d run in back of her, jerked it off, picked up one of the jugs, poured it full, then went to the fence and leaned over as far as I could. All the while she was yelling, “Lester, you come back with that! You hear me! I’ll tan your little behind till you won’t be able. . . .” But my mind was on pouring the brew on the ground so it’d make as loud a slopping sound as possible. Mason, though, hadn’t swerved a bit. I started hog calling too, and waving the empty jug, but he just kept about half a length behind the razorback, loping along. And that’s when I closed my eyes, because I knew I was too late, and waited for the shot.

But I never did hear it and when I opened them again there they were, both Mason and The Arkansas Traveller, drinking at the jugs, like week-old pigs at a sow. And I thought Uncle Lucifer was going to cry. After a while Will Jenkins came over and put one arm around Uncle Lucifer’s shoulders and said, “Mason, he sure did run a good race, Lucifer, he sure did.” And they both were so drunk they just stood there, the pistol in Uncle Lucifer’s hand and a jug in Will’s, and they made a sad picture, sure enough.

By that time Aunt Maude was standing beside me, and I knew for sure she was going to let go, but instead she pulled at Lucifer’s arm. After the sheriff had took the pistol, we walked back across the pasture. Everybody felt sad for Uncle Lucifer and I think Aunt Maude did too, because she had one arm around him, like she held me sometimes when I’d done a favor for her. She said, “Well I guess you don’t think so much of that sow after all, do you, you old drunken fool.” Uncle Lucifer just leaned over and kissed her on the cheek and they walked all the way to his house, not saying a thing, with me just a little bit behind them.

Well, when I got older, ever now and then, when I’d come over to Uncle Lucifer’s, I’d find him sitting under the peach tree by the hog pen, sometimes drinking, sometimes not. But he always looked sad when he was around the hog pen. Once, when we was all at the dinner table, he got up and walked to the pantry and took out a bottle of White Horse whisky. “I got a new hog, Lester, that’s gwine to win for sure.”
'I don't know, Uncle Lucifer, I ain't much interested in hogs no more.'
He poured me a whisky glass full and said, "Here, son, drink this and even a hog'll look purty to you."

Modern Lazarus

The brown clock hooks crooked arms
About the arrogant, enameled numbers
And drags them down to me,
Stacks the hours around me
In a welded, knotted net.
But I shall draw the purple shades
And look away,
For who can then say, with calm assurance,
That the night will fall?
Who can say the day will break? Who will say, this is real and that a fake?
And where is this Nazarene
Who will twine his arms within the arms
Of the clock upon the wall,
And say, now is the time to rise and walk?
If He should ring my bell
I will not listen,
I will prop my feet upon a desk,
Puff a cork-tipped cigarette,
Read a modern novelette,
And let the hours fall.