

Louie
Raymond Willcox

I hated Pepe. I made it all the way to the fourth grade not hating anyone or anything before I met Pepe. I still hate him and I'm glad that he's dead although it's now been so many years that he would have died long ago anyway.

Pepe lived next door to Joey Menant's cousins, Terry and Caroline Brouard. Joey was a year younger than I and a year older than my brother Alan. All of us except Caroline were in the same classroom at East End Elementary School in Metairie. Mrs. Garity taught first through fifth grades in that one room, and she didn't mess around.

One morning on the school bus Joey pulled up his pant leg and showed us where Pepe had bitten him. "Dat dog done bite me good," he had said. He talked with a thick Cajun accent, as did his parents and most of the kids in school. Alan and I had a hard time understanding them even though it had been over a year since moving from Seattle. My dad said they talked coon ass. I said that once too, but Mom popped me across the chops and I became considerably more circumspect in describing local dialects, especially when she was within arm's reach.

"What did he say?" Alan asked.

"Looky dere," Joey said pointing to the punctures in his leg. "Dat where he bite me."

We'd never seen evidence of a dog bite before and were impressed. "Dat dog a Mexican Chihuahua and he a mean little bastard," Joey explained.

Alan and I smirked at one another. We still weren't used to hearing our contemporaries use cuss words. A few days after Joey showed us the bite marks, I rode my bike half a block over to Terry and Caroline's house to see if they wanted to come over and play kickball in our back yard. I rode fast because I liked the little dust trail that the bike made in the crushed oyster shells. I got off my bike and was going up the steps to the porch when Pepe streaked across the yard, yapping like a banshee. I probably could have just run into the house, but that thought never entered my mind. You just didn't go into somebody's house uninvited. I tried to get back to the bike and escape. Pepe cut me off before I could get aboard and nailed me a couple of good ones on the back of the leg just above the ankle. I could keep him at bay as long as I faced him and kicked at him when he charged, and I backed most of the way home before he finally lost interest and trotted away. I later came to understand that we had reached a Mexican standoff.

After that I developed a way to torture Pepe. Joey told us that Pepe got you on the down stroke if you were peddling your bike so I would get going as fast as I could and then come zipping past Pepe's house. When he came charging out, I'd lift my legs to the handlebars and coast while he yapped and jumped, trying to get me. He must have thought that I could coast forever because he always turned back for home before I had to peddle.

I told Alan about the game, and he wanted to give it a try. The next day the two of us came flying by the front of Pepe's house. I don't know if Pepe got smarter overnight or if since there were two of us he decided he should chase us twice as far. Unlucky for Alan, he was behind me when we coasted to a stop with Pepe right on our tail. Alan was able to keep him at bay for a few seconds by putting one foot down and then the other as Pepe ran around the bike to try and get at him. He looked like a dancing chicken until Pepe got even smarter and ran under the bike to nail him.

I grabbed a stick that was lying on the side of the road and we were able to keep Pepe at bay while we backed our way beyond his sphere of interest. Alan, always dramatic, began to

wail and sob about his injuries as we neared our house. Mom came running out, and we told her that the mad dog up the street had attacked us. We skipped over our part in teasing him.

Mom washed Alan's wounds and put peroxide on them. Peroxide doesn't hurt but when it fizzed up Alan was sure that anything that looked like that must hurt, and he howled all the more. Mom finally told him to pipe down or she'd give him something to howl about. Miraculous words: he stopped in mid-tizzy and toned down to a whimper.

Our backyard baseball games gave way to football as cooler weather replaced the early autumn heat, and we didn't tease Pepe anymore since he learned to chase us further. With the advent of nicer weather, Pepe was walked once around the block as Miss Maime, the LaForte's maid, pushed the baby buggy. I didn't even know the LaForte's had any kids until that began.

Joey told us about Miss Maime long before we ever saw her. No one else had a maid, so she was something of a novelty. Joey said that she did all the work around the place and when she hung out the wash she dipped snuff and could spit hard and straight enough to nail a grasshopper in flight. I never saw her do that, but he swore on his grandma's grave it was true. That's a serious oath, especially for a Cajun.

Most of the time we played in the back yard, but on this particular day we were on the front porch playing army men. In addition to Joey and Alan, our little brother Jeff was there, too. Even though he was only four, we had to let him play too or mom would get after us. When Miss Maime came along, we waved and spoke because it was good manners for kids to speak to adults regardless of color. Failure to be mannerly would get you a whipping just as fast as hitting a brother.

I don't know what got into Pepe, but he suddenly ran right up onto the porch and bit Jeff on the hand. He didn't even bark, just ran up there and bit. I jumped up and had the satisfaction of giving Pepe a good kick even though I was bare footed, and he ran back to Miss Maime. It really wasn't all that much of a bite, and Jeff didn't squall nearly as much as Alan had. Nevertheless, Mom was pretty mad and that was serious, but that wasn't Pepe's worst problem. Pepe made the mistake of making Louie mad.

Louie was our cat. Actually, we were his family and he thought Jeff belonged to him. His mother lost all nine of her lives in an ill-advised decision to run across Canal Street. His brothers and sisters were adopted right away, but Louie was kind of scraggly looking and didn't have a lot of curb appeal. Somehow my tenderhearted mother heard of his plight and brought him home for us to become his family. My dad named him Louis in honor of Louis XIV since we lived near New Orleans. My brothers and I called him Louie. He wasn't weaned yet, so we fed him with a toy baby bottle, and Jeff loved to feed him. Even though he was only three, Jeff could fill that little bottle with milk and not spill a drop, feed Louie, then fill the bottle again and feed him again. Louie loved the cold milk and the life of a fat cat and he loved Jeff.

Louie was over a year old when Pepe bit Jeff, and he'd grown from a scraggly runt of a kitten to a hefty male tabby. We didn't call him a tabby even though that's what he was because he seemed to think it sounded kind of swish. He had the run of the house, and could come and go as he pleased because he knew how to use the screen door. Going out was a no-brainer since all he had to do was lean against the door. If the door was latched for some reason, he would climb up the screen and meow at the latch until one of us undid the hook. He used us like a voice activated unlatching service. From the outside he would hook his toes under the door and pull it back far enough to get his nose into the opening and then push on into the house.

The day after Jeff was bitten, Mom had put me on room confinement. Apparently I'd had a tone in my reply to some request she'd made. "You take that smart mouth upstairs, young man.

You are on confinement until I tell you to come down, and you just think about the proper way to speak to me.”

There was no point in asking her what I’d said; that could turn an hour’s worth of confinement into a life sentence. The smart thing to do would have been to apologize on the spot, but I stomped my way to the room Alan and I shared. When I got upstairs I heard Miss Maime coming along for their late afternoon walk.

Our bedroom was at the north end of the house, and I watched Pepe, Miss Maime and carriage go by the front. When I went to the side to watch them go up the street, I caught a glimpse of Louie. He was paralleling them in the weeds on the other side of the dry ditch from them. The grass and brush was too thick to keep him in sight, but every now and then I would see some movement in the weeds and I knew it was him. They were about twenty-five yards up the street when all of a sudden Pepe started barking wildly and charged across the dry ditch into the weeds.

Pepe’s frenzied barking abruptly ended with a shrill yelp that may well have been the Chihuahua equivalent of “Oh Shit!!” That was followed by a lot of growling and thrashing and crashing in the brush. My attention was diverted from the movement in the brush to Miss Maime. She howled and it made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

She knew beyond a shadow of doubt that a Hoodah had grabbed Pepe. They were known to come out in the early evening and create all manner of mayhem, especially for animals, children, and people of color. Then after that howl, which would have caused a demon to defecate, and she then ran up the road with a speed that was nothing short of astounding. If I hadn’t seen it myself, I would have never believed a person with that mass could cover so much ground so quickly. I would estimate that before I lost sight of her when she turned the corner, she had covered about a quarter of a mile in slightly less than 10 seconds.

By the time Jeff and Alan came over to see what the noise was about, she was out of sight. Her reaction had an unnerving effect on me. Things were now death still where the thrashing in the brush had been going on. I told my brothers the awful, unvarnished truth: Miss Maime had seen a Hoodah, and it got Louie and Pepe. I tried to get Alan to go out and check since I was on confinement, but he wasn’t having any of that. Nor could we get normally gullible Jeff to go out either. Hoodahs have that effect on you, a tendency to want to stay indoors and in groups.

We were eating supper when we heard Pepe’s owner walking down the street calling for him. I told the rest of the family about what I’d seen that afternoon, and wondered if we should tell Pepe’s family that a Hoodah had got him. Of course, my mom and dad launched on the “there’s no such thing as hoodahs and ghosts” speech. My brothers and I just exchanged glances. How do you figure adults? They tell you that there is a Santa Claus, and we all knew that there was not, and they tell you that there are no spooks when all the evidence clearly says that there are.

It was my job to take out the trash after supper. Our burn barrel was way out in back of the house, and I was in the process of negotiating with Alan for him to go with me when we heard Louie mewing outside. He’d escaped from the Hoodah! We looked out and there he was at the bottom of the back door steps. His tongue was out and he was panting. We’d never seen him do that before. Then we saw why. Just outside the splash of light from the kitchen, there was Pepe...dead as a doornail. I think that the penny dropped for Alan and me in the same instant, and we realized that Louie had done in Pepe and dragged him home.

Other than the look on his face and the fact that his bulgy eyes were even bulgier, Pepe didn't look all that bad. There were some marks where Louie jumped on him and teeth marks on his neck where he'd been choked, but all and all not too bad. After a hurried whispered conference, we went and got Dad, and the three of us buried Pepe behind the garage back into the brush. We thought it best to not tell Mom and Jeff although I suspect Dad told Mom after we'd gone to bed.

Louie got a long drink of water and then assumed his normal spot on the living room windowsill where he could keep an eye on the universe. Jeff was blubbering with happiness at his return while Louie acted as if nothing had happened at all. A little while later we heard Mr. LaForte coming down the road calling for Pepe. Dad just gave us a little negative shake of his head. People can be funny about their dogs, even nasty little dogs like Pepe.

Louie was sitting on the windowsill the next afternoon when Miss Maime came by on the usual walk. We were playing on the porch, and I was going to comment on how fast she can run, but she spoke first and asked us if we had seen Pepe.

"No, Ma'am," I replied honestly. "The last time I saw Pepe, he was out there in the brush."

Alan nearly wet himself. And when I looked over at Louie, I thought he had a smirk on his face.