

Vengeance

For a 108 year old widow, Maude Carney was certainly a spry lady. I saw her take the stairs two at a time the day her cat got caught in the upstairs window fan. OK, I'm sure she wasn't really that old, even though she looked it. I never saw such deep wrinkles on a person's face. Years later when I saw the film, "Planet of the Apes," I was reminded of her. That's unkind, I know, but accurate. And she was aware of her visage, so I would needle her a bit about her age. Like the time, after mentioning she lost her husband in the war, insensitive as I was, I asked her if it had happened at Gettysburg or Antietam. Her eyes fired up and her brogue got thick as she looked up at me and said, "Ah, you're such a lovely little man and I would thump you silly, but you're a tad too young for me." Guess so, I was 17.

Maude lived across the way from my aunt and uncle on the Vienna Road at the edge of the village of Sylvan Beach, a declining summer destination for Central New Yorkers. Sitting on the eastern shore of Oneida Lake, the town featured a Midway where you could ride the Ferris Wheel or The Salt and Pepper Shaker that would no doubt kill somebody one day. The homes on Vienna Road weren't primitive camps like most at The Beach. Maude and her neighbors were full time residents of the town, involved in the fire department, church, politics on occasion and the usual untidiness of small town doings in the 1950's.

During my summer after high school, I would often hitchhike to the Beach to visit my aunt and uncle when I ran out of things to do. I'd sit around with my Uncle Tom annoying him with my imitation of Mel Allen while he tried to listen to the real Mel narrate a baseball game on the radio as we waited for Aunt Margaret to finish making us sandwiches in the kitchen. It was Tom who one day suggested I drag my lazy butt across the street to help Maude with her chores and in general make myself useful. "You know," he said, "mow the lawn, paint the fence...don't touch the water heater, even if she asks. I had a hell of a time getting it to burn just right and I'd just as soon it was left alone."

Maude was a thoroughly nice lady. I would work for no more than 20 minutes and she would have me come in out of the heat for a cold Pepsi and chocolate cookies. We'd gab for an hour and then I'd go back outside and work for another 20 minutes. Maybe she just wanted the company.

"You know," she said one afternoon, after I had repaired the door on the little garden shed that housed the lawn mower and other outdoor implements, "Mr. Carney built that shed right after he came home from the war, to kind of get his head calmed down after all the fighting." Something told me to not make a smart remark or acknowledge this change to Mr. Carney's war history. Then she looked a little embarrassed and said, "It's just simpler to say he died in the war to people who don't know about it. But I'll join you in another Pepsi and tell you what happened, since Tom and Margaret evidently haven't."

"My husband, William, was convicted of homicide in 1948," she said. "He got the electric chair. If the jury had known a secret, he might have gotten life in prison instead. Maybe he would have been paroled eventually and come home to me."



According to Maude, William was a wonderful and large lunk of a man, but as hot-headed as they came, "they" being dumb, thick-headed Irishmen. But William drank too much and would turn belligerent and get into an argument with anyone within his sight.

William came home from his job at the Marina in the late winter of 1947 and told Maude he had been fired. His side of the story was plausible, of course,



but it didn't surprise her to learn during the trial that a fellow worker named Hoichi Kanazawa had been putting up with William's jokes and horse play for some time before the tiny Japanese man put his fists up to her husband that afternoon. William was said to have laughed and hauled off with a roundhouse punch aimed at Hoichi's head. No one knew it, but Hoichi Kanazawa had been a Japanese Boxing Champion in the 1930's and had killed a man in the ring, for which he was acquitted. He didn't kill William that day, but he defended himself quite adequately. He popped William twice in the head and the big man went down for the count. Hoichi helped William to his feet saying, "Sorry, lucky punch," but William was not to be placated. He was ashamed to be lying at another man's feet, especially a diminutive Asian like those he had been shooting at not so long ago. For the first time in his life William felt small. And for the first time since the war he felt afraid. But he got up and tried to continue the fight when the marina owner told him to get out and not come back. William would never forgive Hoichi. The big Irishman had lost his job, but worse, he lost the image of himself he had carried since childhood.

Hoichi and his Chinese wife, Siao Wei (sha-WAY) had come to America from mainland China before Pearl Harbor. A mysterious and quiet couple, they were often remarked upon by the resident blue-collar workers at The Beach. But they were respected. Hoichi was an excellent marine mechanic and Siao Wei ran a small concession stand among the rides at the Midway during the summer.

William now stayed home and kept to himself. He was sure he could find another job and he planned to do so when Spring finally arrived. Meanwhile he would take a "vacation" and enjoy his newfound freedom and maybe a few sips from the bottle under the workbench while working on one project or another in his cellar in the afternoon. Maude worried. Often he wouldn't come up for supper or even for bed and she would find him asleep next to the old coal bin in the morning.

A burning anger and humiliation simmered in William until one night he left the house for the first time since his degrading defeat. Maude tried to convince him to stay home and come to bed, but he had finally worked up the courage to go out and

face the men he knew and often worked with around town. He went down to the local tavern. There are varying accounts of what took place there, who said what, who jeered, who didn't.

Late in the evening, William came home and got his double barrel shotgun. He carried it through the cold slushy streets of late March and stood below Hoichi Kanazawa's apartment over the hardware store. Swaying a little, he took aim at an upstairs window where a light was shining. He clicked the safety off, pulled the trigger and loosed a blast of bird shot up through the window, blowing the glass inward and extinguishing the light.

The explosion from the gun brought him to his senses and he realized he was crying. As he wiped the tears from his eyes, Mrs. Kanazawa stepped out of the street level door and marched toward him carrying a U.S. Government issue .45 caliber pistol in both of her hands. The small Chinese woman high-stepped over the mounds of frozen snow and slush, keeping the gun level and pointed at William's head. Frightened, he raised the shotgun and pointed it at her, shouting for her to stop and to put down her gun. She kept coming.

Siao Wei Kanazawa was very afraid as she crossed the street, but this time she had a gun, unlike many years ago when she waited for the Japanese soldiers to finish with her sisters in the home her ancestors had built. While she was able to defend herself, she would never let another monster harm her or those she loved. Siao Wei walked right up to William and grabbed the tip of the shotgun to push it away from her. The gun's second barrel went off while she still had her hand on the muzzle.

William's heart almost stopped. He was shocked. He didn't know what the hell to do at this point. He had tried to wrench the gun away when the woman grabbed it. He had only meant to scare Hoichi tonight, to sort of restore the balance of fear. He looked at Siao Wei on the ground and although he knew he should help her, he ran instead. Maybe if he went right home no one would know it had been him.

Hoichi knew. He was with Siao Wei in the apartment when the blast sent millions of tiny pieces of glass hurtling across the room to where he sat reading by the lamp. He froze in terror, somehow transported back to the day when the Chinese defenders had blown up his troop carrier in Yancheng killing most of his comrades and severely injuring him. He sat frozen in his chair as

Siao Wei ran to the bedroom, retrieved the .45 and headed down the stairs. As she crossed the street, Hoichi recovered himself and went to stare in horror out the window at the madman with the shotgun standing in the middle of the street.

When the shotgun fired, Hoichi ran down the stairs and out on to the street to find William gone and Siao Wei writhing on the ground in a fetal position with her hands between her legs. The shotgun blast had blown off two of her fingers and part of a third. She kept insisting she was all right as he helped her back to the building. Torn between his concern for her and his anger, he scooped up the .45 pistol and ran after William. In a few minutes Siao Wei followed, clutching her hand to her chest with it wrapped in the bunched material of her blouse. She would not let the Japanese soldier who had saved her years ago come to any harm.



Hoichi caught up with William near the Early Bird Laundry, closed for the night. William stopped short and stood with his shotgun pointed at Hoichi while the little man danced around him, screaming and cursing and shouting in a gibberish William could not understand. William kept shouting at Hoichi to drop his gun, but Hoichi didn't appear to be listening. Abruptly, Hoichi's pistol fired and a bullet whizzed over William's shoulder. At the same time, William saw a runner coming through the jungle to Hoichi's aid and, terrifically frightened now to have two of the enemy on him, he raised the shotgun and fired, tearing one Jap's arm off at the shoulder. Then William ran home.

As a light freezing rain began to fall, Siao Wei screamed for help and tried to push snow into the hole where her husband's arm had been, just to stem the blood. It was no use, he died before the ambulance came. As she cradled her husband's lifeless body she picked up the .45 and hid it under her clothing before anyone arrived.



I sat a while thinking and not saying anything when Maude finished her story. My Pepsi was warm as I took one last swig.
“So no one but Siao Wei ever knew Hoichi fired first?” I asked.

“No one,” she said, “until 2 years ago just before Siao Wei died. She told me she hid the gun. She didn't think Hoichi fired on purpose. She wanted William electrocuted.”

“That's awful,” I said.

“It doesn't matter,” said Maude, “both our husbands are dead. We made peace with each other years ago. Siao Wei told me Hoichi was a fine man who had stopped the rape of her and her sisters by the rest of his squad. Later she found him in a hospital where she worked cleaning floors. His truck was shot up. He was injured pretty bad and his Army left him behind. They came to America as a Chinese couple on one of those programs when the garment workers union looked the other way. But they didn't like New York City and they came here to The Beach.

“It all seems *so* unfair,” I said, lamely

“You want another Pepsi?” asked Maude.

“I'd rather have a beer.”

“I'll keep you in my prayers,” she said.

Maude began to get up from the table and then paused to look at me. She held my eyes a moment with her quizzical look. Then the wrinkled old face began to smile and without taking her eyes from mine, she said, “Oh look! The front lawn needs mowing.” I was dismissed.

She must have wondered if it had been worthwhile telling me the story. She probably doubted a seventeen year old boy, who usually thought of nothing but himself, could understand or even imagine the pain of loving and losing someone or being left to spend the rest of one's life alone. Or the terror of the dreams that came not so often now of a violent ending, sometimes watching a shotgun blast tear an arm off, sometimes in the darkness under a hood with feet in a pan of water and arms cuffed to the chair. She was right, I couldn't.

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