

I love my great, great, great, great grandmother very much...and she loves me. And we've never even met.

It all originated somewhere near Charlottesville, Virginia. Well, that's as far back as I can trace it anyway. There was something magically wonderful about the old Virginia Commonwealth of the late eighteenth century. The climate held such diversity with its long growing seasons in some areas, but brutal winters in others. They were so proud of their local boys; particularly Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Marshall. Most political roads flowed through Virginia.

Just outside of Charlottesville, there was a certain plantation on a certain acreage of land. It was some of the finest soil in the entire state. Out on the north territory, the tobacco fields stretched east, just shy of the dogwoods. On the lower fields, they cultivated pounds of peanuts, only a few miles from Moore's Creek. Behind the house, there were a few apple trees because the master of the house loved his apple cider.

A soft breeze glazed over the creek and blew the samaras all over the Owensby Plantation. A little girl scooped up a handful and ran onto the porch.

"What you got there, Syl?"

"Whirligigs, Mr. Owensby."

"Make sure you toss them up high in the air and make a wish."

"Okay," with that, she threw them into the sky, closed her eyes, and mumbled to herself.

"What'd you wish for, gal?"

"I can't say or it won't come true."

"Is that a fact?" He chuckled to himself. "Well, you better run on inside. Don't keep yo' mama waiting."

"Yes, suh," she opened the door and raced inside.

"Did you tell her yet?" A lady rocked in her chair, holding a glass of water.

He looked over his shoulder and sighed, "Not as of yet. But I'll do it, by the by."

"Best you get to it, Charles. Longer you put it off, harder it's gonna be."

"I suppose, Mattie."

Charles Owensby strutted over to his wife and sat in the rocker beside hers. He attempted to enjoy the abnormally cool breeze. His hands ached from years of hard labor, though slaves did most of the work around there. A bit of gray began to shine on his head, now that he was on the other side of fifty. He took his wife's hand and kissed it. It had already been too long of a day and noon hadn't even arrived.

Mattie smiled at her husband with concern. Tobacco planting time was coming and recent events had forced her husband's hand to do something he'd rather not do. She swept the flowing strands of hair from her eyes as she searched for words of comfort. There were none. Her sad blue eyes and thinning blonde hair told the tale of a woman who often took on her husband's stress. She couldn't think of anything to say. Holding his hand would have to do for now.

"Hey, mama."

"Hey, Sylvia."

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Makin' Massah Owensby his cider."

"Can I take it to him?"

"Can?"

"*May* I take it to him?"

"Yes, chile."

"You been crying, mama?"

"A little."

"What for?"

"Seems I's gonna have to leave real soon."

"To where?"

"With Mr. Bixby."

"The hoss man?"

"Yes, Sylvia, the hoss man."

She studied her mother's brow for a moment, "You don't love me no mo'?"

"Course I do, chile."

"Then, why you leavin'?"

"Massah Owensby need me to. He don't wanna do it. But he got no other choice about it."

"But why?"

"No mo' questions, Sylvia. Now here, take him his cider and let it be."

"But mama."

"What I say?"

She huffed, snatched the glass, and left the kitchen. Mabel covered her eyes and burst into tears.

Mabel was somewhere in her mid-twenties or so. Her documentation was somewhat sketchy. What we're certain about is that she was born sometime around 1780, give or take. Charles purchased her fourteen years ago from a neighbor who attempted to cut his losses after losing his crops to a random fire. Mabel fit right in and soon had a daughter with her husband, Thomas, who was lynched two years after Sylvia was born. Mabel wasn't sure she could handle losing another loved one.

Sylvia walked up to Charles and placed the glass of cider in his hand, "Why are you making my mama leave?"

"Excuse me?" He was caught off guard.

"Mama said she had to leave 'cause of you."

"That's not exactly accurate, Syl. See, I got in sort of a fix. We needed another tobacco man on the plantation and I had to make a deal with the devil and that cost us your mama. I'm very sorry, child."

Sylvia slowly forced herself from the porch to her favorite place.

"Well, that was brutal."

"Isn't there anything else you can do, hun?"

"No. We desperately need a tobacco man, Mattie. Floyd up and fled unexpectedly and no one else on the plantation can do what he did. That's the bad part about growing tobacco."

"Why don't we switch to cotton?"

"Switch to...this close to planting time? Just switch? That takes time, love. I need someone to make sure this is done right or we'll lose everything."

"And Bixby is the only man who has a guy?"

"On such short notice...yes. And he wouldn't accept any other offer."

"Except her?"

"Yes."

"Why would a man like Bixby want Mabel? His business is horses and transport. She doesn't know nothing about such."

"I imagine he wants her for far more personal reasons, hun."

"You mean *fleshly*?"

He nodded, "I've seen the way he looks at her, practically undressing her with his eyes. Such a vulgar man."

"So, that's it then?"

"Pretty much."

"How long?"

"He's supposed to arrive tomorrow afternoon. He's got some horse business in Richmond."

"Well, it looks like he's done with his horse business, cause that slimy snake is slithering down the path now."

Charles looked up to two horses and a cloud of dust. Two bodies approached, one on a Kentucky saddler, the other riding a Morgan colt. As the dust settled, Mabel appeared with her face pressed against the window. Charles looked back at her with dejection in his eyes. Sylvia exited the curing barn and sprinted toward them at top speed.

"You're early."

The White man glared at him through his beady black eyes and spat on the ground. Tobacco juice ran from the corners of his mouth. His scraggly, thick mustache held even more of his disgusting spit. He was desperately in need of a good shave. The man pulled his hat down on his brow as he scanned the grounds. Then, he finally saw Ms. Mabel standing in the doorway, barefoot in a pale green dress. She wanted to run, but her feet were stuck. When he

grinned at her, she could see pieces of tobacco conveniently located in his stained yellow teeth. Mathias Bixby turned his attention back to Mr. Owensby and spoke with his mouth full.

"I come to get what belongs to me."

"You said you had a tobacco man who knew the plant top to bottom."

"And here he is," Bixby nodded toward the young man on the colt. "Deal's a deal. And don't even think about going back on your word." He stroked the flintlock at his side with two fingers.

"He's just a boy," Charles glanced at him. "How old are you, son?"

Bixby answered for him, "Round about sixteen."

"Can't he speak for himself? I don't need no mutes."

"He ain't mute. And he knows curing better than most men three times his age. Been working on tobacco plantations since he was 'round 'bout five years old."

"Is that a fact?" Bixby started to reply, but Charles held up his hand. "Let the boy answer."

Bixby nodded for the boy to speak.

"Ain't nothin' on this farm I's can't do, suh. Best bet the man 'fore me was making some mistakes and I'm the one can fix 'em."

"I got him off Carson Farmer."

"Is that so?" Charles was impressed. "He's got some of the best Virginia cured I ever had."

"Cause of me," the young man boasted.

"What's yo' name, boy?"

"Rufus, suh. But folks call me Smoke."

"Smoke?"

"On account of his grayish skin," Bixby joked.

"Oh, no, suh. It's 'cause I make the best thing you ever put in yo' pipe."

At that time, Sylvia arrived, already yelling before she even got there, "You can't take my mama!"

"Mama?" Bixby hopped down from his horse. "Ain't you a pretty lil' thang? You didn't tell me she had a baby, Mr. Owensby. Come, let me look at you, gal."

Sylvia scooped up his tobacco droppings and hit him in the face, "Look at that!"

Bixby pulled his flintlock and aimed steady at the little girl. Mabel ran out and stood between them.

"Be easy, Bixby," Charles stared at him. "Maybe I can offer you some of my tobacco in place of Mabel?"

"Tobacco, I got by the pound. What I need is her."

"I'm thinking maybe we should call this whole thing off."

"You're not gonna scrub our deal, Owensby. I'm leaving with a girl, either Mabel or her daughter."

"She's only eight years old. You'd touch a child?"

"You get horny enough even that mule over there starts to look good."

"I'll go, Massah Owensby. Jest don't let him hurt my chile."

"Finally, somebody talkin' sense."

"Wait just a minute!" Mattie intervened. "We have some conditions."

Charles looked at her with concern over her surprise announcement.

"Conditions?" Bixby looked at her, gun still aimed toward Sylvia and Mabel. "Like what?"

"You have to bring Mabel back at least once a year when you come to Virginia on business. And you have to allow her to send her daughter letters by stagecoach every Christmas and every spring."

"Pass."

"You filthy man. If I weren't a Christian woman, I'd throw this glass at your head. In fact..."

Charles held up two fingers to her. He seldom lost his temper; but when he held up those two fingers, she knew to hold her peace.

"You let her write those letters and bring back Mabel every curing season, I'll make sure to set aside my best batch of Virginia cured, just for you."

"I don't know."

"You must not want her as bad as you say."

"I'll do whatever you say with a smile on my face," Mabel added.

Bixby looked at Mabel and how her body curved in that dress. He looked down at her dusty feet and back up to her naturally red lips. Glancing over at Rufus, he lowered his weapon.

"Get down, Smoke." He hopped off the colt and walked over to the porch, passing Mabel as she approached Bixby. "Lift yo' foot up here, gal." Mabel did as she was told, believing he would help her onto the horse. But he had other intentions. "You like feet, Owensby?"

"How's that?"

"Every man has his druthers, Charlie boy. Some like breasts. Some prefer butts. Other guys are leg men. But me, Owensby; I'm a foot man. See the way her foot arches up just so? That drives me plum wild. Ain't nothin' I love more than beautiful feet. I knew when I saw her at the general store that day, I had to have her." He helped her onto the colt and jumped onto his saddler. "You get any ideas about runnin' off, gal; I come straight back here and take that little girl fo' myself. And the Almighty hisself won't be able to stop me. Giddyup!"

With that, Bixby and Mabel rode off down the path with Sylvia chasing behind them. Her little legs finally gave out and she collapsed to the dust.