

Gus Edwards

HAMILTON DANIEL



One those islands, people lived close to the land. Which is to say close to nature. Right up close against life and death, birth and helplessness. My mother told me this story about her father, Hamilton Daniel, my grandfather, a man I met only once when I was about six. My only impression is that of a tall man with light brown skin and a sharp nose whose general features resembled those of my mother. I remember he picked me up, called me by a nickname and bounced me around for a bit. The house he lived in was a shack close to a rapidly moving stream. I recall going into that stream to catch tadpoles and being warned not to wander into the middle or strong current would take me away.

My mother didn't like her father, she told me many years later. "He was a hard man who didn't understand that girls are different to boys." She was the only girl among four brothers and Hamilton apparently treated her with the same brusque indifference he treated his sons. "Thing is, they could stand up to him. They were men. But me, I didn't know what to do so I used to hide and cry."

Relationship with her brothers was different. "My brothers were brothers but they also were protectors, too. With Garfield because he was younger I used to fight. Wilmot was always serious so I used to listen whenever he told me anything. And Bob, the one I named you after was more like a father than my father. He used to look out for me and every so often ask for no reason, "Marie, how you getting on?"

"But Papa had no softness. He didn't have time for weakness. And anybody who wasn't tough in the way some mountain people can be tough, in his mind was weak.

“I used to wash the clothes, cook the food, clean the house and when that was finished, help Papa in the bakery. I’ll say this for him. He was a man who knowed how to make good bread.

“Wilmot used to fight with him because Wilmot said we should expand the business. But Papa say the place was his and any change Motty make would be over his dead body. When he couldn’t take it no longer your Uncle Wilmot left and went to England.

“Bob was intelligent so he went to school in Bigtown. People say he coulda been a lawyer but he didn’t have the money to pay for the schooling. So he became a policeman.

Motty in England sent word that he had go married. People told Papa the wife was ten years older than Motty and ugly. Papa laughed, “See, I told you that boy wouldn’t amount to much. He wouldn’t listen to me. How look what he stuck with.”

Garfield was so bad all along that nobody expected much from him. One day we got word that he shot a man in a gambling game, then went to sea with some cutthroats. All Papa could say is “Lord, I hope that boy don’t die before I get to talk to him once more.”

None of us die. All of us survive. Wilmot is back home now running the bakery with his wife and six children. Bob, as you know, is Chief of Police. And Gar settled down with Sylvanie and those 5 children although they say he got 36 more spread out all over those islands.”

I had always thought I was my mother’s first born. She told me that wasn’t so. There had been another before me, born while she still lived at home.

“I was seventeen and didn’t know what I was doing. The fellow used to come in the bakery and smile to me. He use dot talk soft and I was happy to be round somebody who was just nice. So we used to meet after everybody was asleep. I think he really cared for me. But when I told him I was pregnant, he got scared. Said my father was a mean man who would try to beat or maybe kill him. So he left to I have no idea where. I just remember one day people say he was gone. And that was it.

“When I told your Grandfather, he hit me and called me a dirty no-good. Some women who lived close by helped me through the confinement and I had a boy I named Garfield. Papa said, “He’ll come to no good naming him after that scamp.” But Papa then liked the baby and used to take him everywhere he went to show off what was then his first grandson. But Gar wasn’t well. Midwife said he was born with a sickness. Papa thought he could cure him with boiled bush water and other kinds of herbs, but he was only getting worse. And since we didn’t have no doctor in town, Papa had to take him 30 miles to the hospital. Bob, my brother, say if he was there, we woulda take him to Bigtown. But this was 1935 and we didn’t have things like telephones. In our whole village, there was only two cars.

“Gar stopped breathing about three hours after we got him to the hospital. We coulda buried him there, but Papa said, “No. Family get buried on family land.” So we took him back and buried him behind the house. After that I couldn’t stay home no more. There was nothing to hold me. So six months later when Bob came to visit I asked him to take me to Bigtown. Papa got mad and told me if I leave I would never amounts to anything. I would just be a whore all my life. Bob told him to “Shut up!” and told me to follow him. I worked in Bigtown for eight months and then I left for St. Kietts. That’s how I left the island.”

“Your grandfather was a tough man. When he was young, he dig for gold in Brazil. When he was a little older, they say he was in with a very bad set of men. Something happened. Ramor it that he or one of his fellows he was with killed a man and he came back home. But he bought land, married my mother and had all of us. She died when I was three and Garfield was just a baby. After Papa brought us up.

:”I remember an incident,” she said. “Maybe this will give you and idea about your grandfather.”

“He had a friend named Ben that he used to drink with. Ben was the opposite of Papa. Quiet, nice, soft. He used to give us children pennies sometimes. We all liked him.

“Ben, was married once but his wife ran away with another man. After that, Ben never bothered much with anybody. Only Papa.

One Sunday, for no reason that anybody could explain, while we all was at church, Ben dressed himself in his best white suit, sat out in yard, then took a razor and cut his throat. People passing by screamed. Nobody know what to do. He was just sitting there fluttering, covered all over with blood. Somebody said, “Send for Hamilton Daniel,” so they did. Papa call out, “Murie, come with me.” I was just back from church so I had to go in my good church clothes.

When we got there, all I could see was blood. Nobody wanted to go near Ben or touch him. But Papa walk up like there was nothing there. He turn Benny’s head this way and that. Brush the blood away with his hand and said, “This man ain’t gon die. Clean him up and take him to the hospital.” I told you the hospital was 30 miles away. But they did and do you know, Papa was right. Ben had cut his throat but he didn’t cut his jugular vein. So even with all that loss of blood, he loss of blood, he lived. In fact, he lived longer than Papa who saved him.

“How did Gramp know the cut wasn’t fatal?” I asked. My mother shrugged, “He used to butcher animals for us to eat. Pigs, goats, sheep. When you do that often, you learn the various parts of the body. That’s all I could figure.

“I have no nice memories of your Grandfather,” she said once again. “He was too rough. And sometimes people need to be a little soft in life.”