

The Barber

With apologies to Ring Lardnerⁱ ...

By Stephen Caldwell

I like new hair. Well, hair that's new to me, that is. Your hair's not so new, I suppose. At least not to you. But it's new to me.

I've been cutting hair in Maysville for, oh, I don't know, twenty-five, twenty-six years, I guess. Got a shop downtown. I went to a barber school, of course, but I really I learned about hair from Nams. That's my dad's mom. Fran was her real name, but we called her Nams. She was a beautician. I'd hang out at Nams' shop when mom and dad was working. Even after I got old enough that I didn't need no sitter, I'd still hang out there. No TV, but a bowl with some candy, and I could have some if I didn't misbehave.

"Watch. Listen. Learn." That's what she'd say. And when she didn't have no one in the chair, she'd teach me stuff on this fake head with a wig on it. So I knew a lot about cutting hair by the time I finished high school. When I wasn't fishing or playing football or baseball or chasing pretty girls, I was hanging out with Nams for more lessons on hair. She paid me some to help out around the shop, so it was sort of a job.

When I got done with high school, I figured I'd get a chair in Nams' shop, maybe open my own someday. But the great state of Arkansas held my license hostage until I finished barber school and passed a test. I guess they need some way to keep the riff-raff out. And to make a few bucks, of course. Wasn't a problem, the test. Just took a little time. But that's the only reason I went to school.

Anyways, I've been coming up here to Ridgeview for two years now. I like it when someone new like you arrives, although it also means you took someone's place. And that's not so good. You'll like it here. Good people, especially Miss Laura. She sorta runs the place. The residents are nice. Most of them are sharp as a field skinner. I'm telling ya. Take old Bill. He's 102. And Gene Ann, she's 101. They're the two oldest here, and they both remember more than I'll ever learn.

Lewis, of course, isn't so fortunate. He's in his 70s and has dementia. He don't remember much of anything. Don't say much. Just a word here or there. I'm told he was an honor student and an Eagle Scout in his younger days. He did two tours as a Marine. Came home, got married, and had a nice little

career as a fishing guide on Lake Pioneer. But his only child was a daughter who died in a car wreck when she was just 26. His wife died a few years ago from cancer. So he outlived his family and ended up here. I guess this is his family, now. Mainly Miss Laura. Strange how he can talk to her. I think it's 'cause she has the gift of kindness and mercy.

It's funny, but someone once told me the name Lewis means "famous warrior." That might have fit him when he was a Marine, but now he's a quiet and gentle sort of fellow. Although he did have that episode with Eddie.

Did I tell you about Eddie? I need to tell you about him. He was a card, but sorta mean sometimes. Still, I miss him. Don't let me forget to tell you about him. But first I gotta finish telling you why I'm here.

So, anyways, I come up here once a month. I guess Miss Laura or someone told you that or you wouldn't have made an appointment. Some folks think it's odd—a barber coming to a retirement center where most of the customers are women. But that's mostly all the customers we had at Nams when she was still living. Now that she's gone, I don't get many women at the shop downtown. Besides, I find it sexist to think a strappingly straight male such as myself can't take care of a woman's hair just as well as a female beautician.

Did I mention I got a wife and a couple of kids?

Well, I was at the shop one afternoon about two years ago, taking a little off the top for Doc Henson right after Betty Durford passed. Natural causes, whatever that is. Not like her grandson. Eddie was Betty's grandson. What a card. Eddie, that is. I miss him, but he could be mean. Oh, I need to tell you about Eddie. I guess you could say he died because his heart stopped, and that's a "natural cause." But I give the bullet full credit.

Well, Betty, she was a beautician. 'Bout the same age as my Nams, so, you know, well past her prime. She'd been cutting hair at Ridgeview for years. Doc Henson got the call when they found Betty sittin' silent in her chair at home with Wheel of Fortune on the tube. Doc's also the coroner. He didn't want the job, but no one else was close to qualified when it opened up, and so he took it by default. That's why he got called. Come to think of it, he also got the call when Eddie up and died.

I'll have to tell you more about Eddie.

So Betty passed, and Miss Laura—you know, the one who works here—well, she told Doc ... she's sweet on Doc ... she told him they needed someone new to come cut hair for the residents. Doc told me this while I was cuttin' his hair, and I thought, why not me? Frankly, the ladies up here aren't too particular and most of the men hardly have enough hair to mess up. I think Lewis is the only man here with anything close to a full head of hair. So I agreed not to soak you folks for a full rate. So it was decided that I could have a trial run, even though I'm a man. Guess I done OK, 'cause I'm still running.

I was gonna tell you 'bout Eddie, wasn't I? He used to stop by here from time to time. He'd find some excuse or another, but we all knew it was because he was after Miss Laura. Can't blame him too much. She's young and pretty and smart, and there ain't too many like her around Maysville. Then again, there was one big reason why Eddie shouldda had no interest in Miss Laura, and that's Mrs. Smithson—Eddie's wife. Not to mention their five kids!

Of course, that didn't slow Eddie. Nothing much slowed Eddie.

He'd come to the shop downtown even when he didn't want a cut and talk with the gang about all the stuff he'd be up to, and most of it was no good. But he kept us entertained. Frankly, he was good for business. My shop's a hangout, but people hanging out don't pay the bills, you know? But if enough folks hang out, some of 'em end up in the chair.

Eddie loved to tell stories about huntin' or fishin' or playing practical jokes on folks. He was always playing jokes on people. He could be a little mean, though. When Doc would come in for his cut, he sometimes would swing by Ridgeview and pick up Lewis and bring him along just so he could get out once and awhile. Eddie treated Lewis like the proverbial red-headed stepchild. I got nothin' against redheads. Or step-children. But you know what I mean. The way he teased Lewis had a real mean streak to it. He'd bump into Lewis as he walked by and say, "Oh, didn't see ya there, buddy." Or he'd casually ask questions knowing Lewis wouldn't answer, just to make fun of him.

"How's the weather in there, Lew?" he'd say. Or "What's up in La-la-land, Lew?"

"Watch out, Eddie," Doc said one day to try to get him to stop. "You may be in his chair one day."

"Well, put a bullet in me if that's the case," Eddie shot back in what turned out to be a bit of prophecy.

Anyways, Eddie's other favorite pastime was complaining about his wife and kids. One day he says, "Well, last week I went to see Doc with a nasty pain in my butt. Turns out he'd already met my wife." He'd say stuff like that all the time. Then he'd just howl laughing at himself. Whenever he'd leave, he'd always say, "Well, time to go home and kiss the dog and kick the wife." We weren't always sure he was joking.

Lord knows Lucy couldn't have been too happy with him, either. Lucy was Eddie's wife. But with all those young ones pulling on her dress, it was pretty clear she was afraid that living without Eddie would be worse than living with him. She grew up poor. Her daddy drank most of his paycheck. Her mom ran off when she was 12, and she married Eddie when she was 16 and pregnant. Poor is all she'd ever known. With Eddie, she didn't get much, and she had to take most of that, but she knew the score. Without him, well, she'd have to start over. Maybe find a job, which would be hard since she had no education or experience. She couldda done it, of course. Heck, she did. Once Eddie was pushing tulips, she didn't have no choice.

Anyways, Eddie was always playing tricks on her, mostly to make sure he had control of the money so he could drink beer and shoot pool or buy whatever things he wanted. Lucy, she got enough to keep the lights on and food on the table, and that was about it.

She'd trick Eddie sometimes. Find ways to get a bigger slice of the pie. Maybe get some new clothes for the kids. But that didn't happen often, and it usually cost her. Once, back when Eddie was working at the cotton gin, she got Mr. Lon to give her Eddie's paycheck on Friday morning instead of giving it to Eddie later that afternoon. Well, Eddie was some kind of mad about that, and he took aim on Lucy and the kids.

Two weeks later, his next payday, it was Lucy's birthday. He told her and the kids to meet him at Frizzy's for ice cream after work. They was all excited, of course. But he never showed. He took that check, went to the pool hall, and laughed with his buddies there about the joke he'd played. Imagine, Lucy and five kids all under the age of 10 all expecting ice cream and all getting none on account of Lucy not having no money. They'd of just gone hungry if Doc hadn't happened by, seen Lucy fighting back tears, and bought cones for all those kids.

"I'm sure Eddie'll be along shortly," Doc said. "He can pay me back next time he sees me."

Of course, he knew Eddie wouldn't come by and that there was a better chance of seeing pigs drive by on motorcycles than seeing Eddie pay back the money.

In fact, Eddie was mad when he found out Doc bought those cones. It was just another reason Eddie didn't like Doc. The main one, though, was that Eddie had the hots for Miss Laura, and Miss Laura was all about Doc. She finally told Eddie off one afternoon right here in the center. Eddie come over on some pretense and was making his usual attempts to convince Miss Laura she oughta meet up with him later and in more private "for a drink and who knows what," as he liked to say.

I wasn't here, of course, but from what I was told, she finally had enough of it. Right over there in the dining room, with all the residents working over their meatloaf and green beans, she says, "Eddie, there's not enough liquor in this county to get me drunk enough to go somewhere alone with you. Besides, I don't drink. So go home to your wife and leave me alone!"

You know Lewis, right? He's the one with the bad dementia. Don't say much, and remembers even less. Well, he was sitting right there next to Miss Laura when she said that, and he come out of his private world for about five full minutes. He started laughing and slapping his knee and saying, "Amen, Miss Laura. You tell him. Amen." Over and over. Laughing himself in stitches. "You tell him," he kept saying. "Amen."

Eddie stormed out of there, knocking Lewis on the floor on his way out. He blamed that on Lewis, of course. Called Lewis a "crazy old coot" and told him he'd give him far worse if he ever got in his way again. But when someone ribbed Eddie about it the next day down at my shop, well, he just played it off like it was no big deal. He was just funning around anyway, he said.

A couple of weeks after that, Doc brought Lewis with him down to the shop when Eddie wandered in.

"Hey there, Lew," he said. "What's mumbling in your world?"

"Lay off him," Doc said.

"OK, then, what's mumbling in your in world, Doc?"

Doc used that as a cue to take the focus off Lewis, and he mentioned that he had to travel over to Rocktown that afternoon to help a friend move into a new house.

Well, I finished Doc's cut and he left me with my regular fee and a nice tip. Then he helped Lewis up, and the two of them headed out the door.

Eddie plopped down in the chair next and realized Doc left his phone in the seat.

“Well, look here what the devil dropped,” he said.

I started for the door to catch Doc, and Eddie grabbed my arm.

“Hold off a sec,” he said.

He typed something in the phone and was about to hand it to me when Doc walked back in.

“Looking for this?” Eddie said. And he tossed Doc his phone.

“What’d you do?” I said to Eddie.

Eddie just smiled. “Nothing. Just having a little joke,” he said.

Well, turns out he used Doc’s phone to send Miss Laura a text message, which he then deleted from the phone. It said, “Cole’s Diner. 8 tonight?”

Of course, that got Miss Laura fired up, and she got all dressed up and was there at 7:58. At 8:30 she asked the waitress if she’d seen Doc that day. No such luck. At 9, she sent Doc a text.

“I’m here. Are you coming?”

He wrote right back: “Coming where? I’ve been in Rocktown most of the day. What’s up?”

Eddie and a couple of his pals had taken up a look-out position at the bar, and he saw Miss Laura’s face go pale when she got that text. He figured what had happened, and he and his buddies burst out laughing.

“Who ya looking for, Laura?” Eddie said. “You know, I’m still available.”

Miss Laura left right quick, and she never said nothing to nobody, especially not Doc. But Doc found out, of course, because this is a small town. He didn’t say anything to Miss Laura. He didn’t want her to be more embarrassed. But he said something to me one day. In fact, he was standing right here when he said it.

I was giving Lewis a haircut. Lewis was sitting right where you are, quiet as a church mouse. Doc had visited one of the residents and stopped over to say hello on his way out.

“How you doin’, Lewis?” Doc said, but Lewis just kept staring into space. He seemed more out of it than usual that day. So Doc and I start talking and the subject of Eddie came up. I don’t think I ever

seen Doc fume like he did that day. I guess I shouldn't of mentioned what Eddie had done to Miss Laura, but it sure got him going. He recounted the whole story and how badly he knew it must have hurt Miss Laura's feelings.

"I've just about had my fill of Eddie," Doc said. "He's a fella the world could do without. I just don't understand how someone can get such joy from causing other people misery. Truthfully, I feel sorry for someone that messed up."

Here's a mirror. How's it looking?

Good. Glad you like it. Almost done.

What? Oh, yeah, I never did tell you how Eddie got himself killed.

Well, come to think of it, it was just a few days after I give Lewis that haircut. Eddie stopped over here to pretend he was sorry about what he done to Miss Laura. She wasn't having none of it, but he was persistent.

"Look, I'm going fishin' in the morning," he said, "and I wouldn't feel right going if you're still sore at me. Don't ya know I didn't mean nothing by it?"

Miss Laura just stared at him like he was crazy, but suddenly Lewis found his voice again.

"I love to go fishing," he said.

Eddie and Miss Laura were a bit stunned, of course.

"You want to go fishing?" Miss Laura said. And Lewis shook his head in the affirmative. "Well, I think Eddie should take you."

Eddie thought for a minute.

"Sure, why not?" he said. "I suspect I won't have to worry about you making too much noise out there. Joey's going with me. We'll be here at 6 a.m. to pick you up. ... Now Laura, this has gotta earn me some points, right?"

"If you're nice to Lewis," she said, "I might reduce my feelings for you from total loathing to mere hatred."

“Well, that’s a start,” Eddie said. “And with that, you’d like me more than my wife does.”

Then he left. And that was the last time Miss Laura saw him outside of a casket.

Doc gave her the news. As the coroner, he got the call from the sheriff. Joey had called the sheriff. He was the lone witness other than Lewis, who, as you know, don’t say much.

According to Joey, Lewis was sitting on the tailgate of the pickup as they were getting ready to walk down to the lake. Eddie sat his .22 pistol down in the truck bed with a box of bullets and asked Joey to load it for him. Eddie liked to be armed no matter what, but especially if he thought he might come across a snake. So he sat the pistol down and he walked back to the cab to get his cigarettes. Joey was working on his fishing line, but Lewis reached down and picked up the gun and looked it over. Then he said something I later learned was a quote from Daniel Boone.

Crazy, I know. But that’s what Joey claims he did. He sat up straight, held the gun and said, “All you need for happiness is a good gun, a good horse, and a good wife.”

Eddie was walking back up as he said it, and he grabbed for the gun just in time to hear it go off. And that was that. Lewis dropped the gun and Joey started screaming at him. But Lewis just looked at him with that blank look of his. He’d already forgotten what had just happened, I guess.

Joey did what he could for Eddie, but there wasn’t no hope. That bullet went straight through the heart. He was dead by the time he hit the ground, which was a good twenty minutes before the paramedics and the sheriff arrived. The sheriff called Doc and he made it official.

That was that for Eddie.

The sheriff, of course, ruled it an accident. What else would he do?

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ⁱ Ring Lardner (1885-1933) remains one of my favorite authors, and my story is a retelling of “Haircut,” which is one of my favorite Lardner short stories. His version, of course, is much better. Last I looked, you could read it at www.classicshorts.com/stories/haircut.html