From A Long Way from Chicago by Richard Peck

It looked like a slow place to us. But that was before they buried Shotgun Cheatham. He might have made it unnoticed all the way to the grave except for his name. The county seat newspaper didn’t want to run an obituary on anybody called Shotgun, but nobody knew any other name for him. This sparked attention from some of the bigger newspapers. One sent in a stringer to nose around The Coffee Pot Café for a human-interest story since it was August, a slow month for news.

The Coffee Pot was where people went to loaf, talk tall, and swap gossip. Mary Alice and I were of some interest when we dropped by because we were kin of Mrs. Dowdel’s, who never set foot in the place. She said she liked to keep herself to herself, which was uphill work in a town like that.

Mary Alice and I carried the tale home that a suspicious type had come off the train in citified clothes and a stiff straw hat. He stuck out a mile and was asking around about Shotgun Cheatham. And he was taking notes.

Grandma had already heard it on the grapevine that Shotgun was no more, though she wasn’t the first person people ran to with news. She wasn’t what you’d call a popular woman. Grandpa Dowdel had been well thought of, but he was long gone.

Presently, she said, “I’ll tell you what that reporter’s after. He wants to get the horselaugh on us because he thinks we’re nothing but a bunch of hayseeds and no-’count country people. We are, but what business is it of his?”

“Who was Shotgun Cheatham anyway?” Mary Alice asked.

“He was just an old reprobate who lived poor and died broke,” Grandma said. “Nobody went near him because he smelled like a polecat. He lived in a chicken coop, and now they’ll have to burn it down.”

“Down at The Coffee Pot they say Shotgun rode with the James boys.”

“Which James boys?” Grandma asked.

“Jesse James,” I said, “and Frank.”

“They wouldn’t have had him,” she said. “Anyway, them Jameses was Missouri people.”

“They were telling the reporter Shotgun killed a man and went to the penitentiary.”
“Several around here done that,” Grandma said, “though I don’t recall him being out of town any length of time. Who’s doing all this talking?”

“A real old, humped-over lady with buck teeth,” Mary Alice said.

“Cross-eyed?” Grandma said. “That’d be Effie Wilcox. You think she’s ugly now, you should have seen her as a girl. And she’d talk you to death. Her tongue’s attached in the middle and flaps at both ends.” Grandma was over by the screen door for a breath of air.

“They said he’d notched his gun in six places,” I said, pushing my luck. “They said the notches were either for banks he’d robbed or for sheriff’s he’d shot.”

“Was that Effie again? Never trust an ugly woman. She’s got a grudge against the world,” said Grandma, who was no oil painting herself. She fetched a sigh. “I’ll tell you how Shotgun got his name. He wasn’t but about ten years old, and he wanted to go out and shoot quail with a bunch of older boys. He squeezed off a round and killed a cow. Down she went. . . . The boys took the gun off of him, not knowing who he’d plug next. That’s how he got the name, and it stuck to him like fly-paper. Any girl in town could have out-shot him, and that includes me.” Grandma jerked a thumb at herself. . . .

A stranger was on the porch, and when Mary Alice and I crowded up behind Grandma to see, it was the reporter. He was sharp-faced, and he’d sweated through his hatband.

“What’s your business?” Grandma said through screen wire, which was as friendly as she got.

“Ma’am, I’m making inquiries about the late Shotgun Cheatham.” He shuffled his feet, wanting to get one of them in the door. Then he mopped up under his hat brim with a silk handkerchief. . . .

“I’m going door-to-door, ma’am. You know how you ladies love to talk. Bless your hearts, you’d all talk the hind leg off a mule.”

Mary Alice and I both stared at that. We figured Grandma might grab up her broom to swat him off the porch. . . . But to our surprise she swept open the screen door and stepped out onto the porch. . . .

“You a newspaper reporter?” she said. “Peoria?” It was the flashy clothes, but he looked surprised. “What they been telling you?”

“Looks like I got a good story by the tail,” he said. “‘Last of the Old Owlhoot Gunslingers Goes to a Pauper’s Grave.’ That kind of angle. Ma’am, I wonder if you could help me flesh out the story some.”
“Well, I got flesh to spare,” Grandma said mildly. “Who’s been talking to you?”

“It was mainly an elderly lady—”

“Ugly as sin, calls herself Wilcox?” Grandma said. “She’s been in the state hospital for the insane until just here lately, but as a reporter I guess you nosed that out.”

Mary Alice nudged me hard, and the reporter’s eyes widened.

“They tell you how Shotgun come by his name?”

“Opinions seem to vary, ma’am.”

“Ah well, fame is fleeting,” Grandma said. “He got it in the Civil War.”

The reporter’s hand hovered over his breast pocket, where the notepad stuck out.

“Oh yes, Shotgun went right through the war with the Illinois Volunteers. Shiloh in the spring of sixty-two, and he was with U. S. Grant when Vicksburg fell. That’s where he got his name. Grant give it to him, in fact. Shotgun didn’t hold with government-issue firearms. He shot rebels with his old Remington pump-action that he’d used to kill quail back here at home.”

Now Mary Alice was yanking on my shirrtail. We knew kids lie all the time, but Grandma was no kid, and she could tell some whoppers.