

My First Huntin' Trip



The day that I was born was cold, twenty below zero and even colder outside. I remember all about it 'cause it was a great shock to my system. I had been in a warm place all my life, and the cold air on my damp little naked body was enough to get anybody's attention. When the doctor held me up by my feet and slapped my backside, tiny ice crystals came off my skin like a small snowstorm. It weren't the manly thing to do, but I started to cry. My pa looked me over and smiled. 'Course I didn't know then that it was my pa 'cause I'd never seen 'im before, but when he said, "Welcome to the family, young'un," I recognized his voice. I'd been listenin' to it for months, and I'd paid pretty close attention since there weren't a whole bunch of distractions when I was just layin' there waitin' to be born. So anyway, when I heard his voice, I knew right off that it was Pa. I stopped cryin' and I said, "Well, thankee, Pa."

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Pa was a little surprised to hear me speak so clearly when I was only minutes old. He'd been a precocious child himself, but even he hadn't spoken his first word for an hour or so, and he didn't talk in complete sentences for near a week. But he wasn't flummoxed for long, and he said, "Ya got any questions fer me young'un?"

I did have me a few, bein' so new to the world an' all, so I replied, "I heard ya' talkin' about tobacky and how it's good fer chewin'. Can I git me some o' that?"

Pa shook his head. "Naw, tobacky ain't good fer young'uns. You ain't got no teeth yet."

Puttin' my finger in my mouth and feelin' around convinced me it was true. I had no teeth. "Well, what about huntin', that sounded like fun."

Pa chuckled a bit. "Yeh, huntin', that's a good thing fer a young'un to learn about. But it's a bit frigid out there. Let's wait till it warms up a bit."

Eight days later, about sunup, Pa ambled into the livin' room where my cradle was, stoked the fire, and said, "Well youngun, it's above zero this mornin'. You still wanna go huntin'?"

I grinned. "Why yessir, I sorely do."

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I was just crawlin', hadn't learned to walk upright, so Pa took me out of the cradle and laid me on the floor. He reached up and took down the muzzle loadin' rifle and laid it beside me. Well, there weren't no way for me to use a shootin' iron four times as long as me, and fer the second time in my young life I started to cry.

Pa laughed and said, "Aw, young'un, I was jest foolin'. I knowed you couldn't lift that rifle." Then he opened a little drawer underneath the mantelpiece an' he took out an old flintlock pistol sayin', "Here's sumpin' yer size." He showed me how I could lay down an' shoot it like a rifle.

Pa helped me out of my frock and into some little bitty overalls, strapped a holster on me so I could crawl an' still take my shootin' iron along, and we started trudgin' through the snow. It was slow goin', Pa trampin' the snow down in front of me so I could crawl a little quicker. He told me we were huntin' bear. I didn't know what that was so he give me a little lesson. "A bear's a big animal that can run faster than most people think on all fours, but they can stand up on two legs when they want. They have a thick coat of fur and they're pretty good eatin'. The thing you gotta remember is they's hard to kill, you need to hit 'em between the eyes."

We ambled on for a spell with Pa tellin' me interestin' facts. 'Course, most facts are inerestin' when you've only had eight

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days to soak up all the learnin' you can. All of a sudden, Pa stopped in his tracks. He sniffed the air. "Ya smell that?" Well, I did smell sumpin' pretty pungent. Pa whispered, "That's a bear." He sniffed the air again, paused contemplatively an' said, "Smells like a three-year-old sow named Flossy."

Now, you may be wonderin' how my pa could tell all that from the lingerin' odor in the mornin' breeze. Well, most people can't, but pa has a powerful nose. The local sheriff hires him to teach hounds to smell. The hounds that go through his trainin' program can smell two or three times better than any other hounds. 'Course, they still can't smell as good as Pa. I've seen him shoot a bird out of the air with his eyes closed, just by smellin' its breath.

Well, Pa was on the trail now, and I was strugglin' to keep up. He ran into a clearin' thinkin' Flossy was there. She was, but bein' a hunter in her own right she was waitin' fer Pa. Before he could raise his rifle she swatted the gun out of his hands and it went flyin' through the air end over end like a majorette's baton after a bad throw till it stuck in the snow about thirty feet away. As I finally crawled up to the edge of the clearin', Pa was facin' Flossy with nothin' but a big old knife he'd been carryin' on his belt. Flossy swung one of her powerful arms an' sent that knife flyin' in the other direction. Pa turned his head and our eyes met. It was only an instant but I read the sorrow on his face with him

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thinkin' of all the things he wanted to teach me and wouldn't be able to see it done.

At that moment all my mind, heart, and soul came together in one resolve. "No, I won't have it!" I'd hardly got to know Pa, but I liked him, I liked him an awful lot. I weren't ready to see him kilt by a bear! I took that old flintlock pistol, pulled the hammer back, took a bead, and squeezed the trigger.

Now, if you've never shot a flintlock, you just can't believe how slow they seem to work, especially when you need 'em right now. When I pulled that trigger the hammer dropped and the piece of flint that was held in the hammer hit the iron frizzen, liftin' it to expose the primin' powder in the pan and at the same time sendin' a shower of sparks into the aforementioned powder. The powder exploded, shootin' sparks through a little hole into the main powder charge. In due course, this powder exploded and sent the round ball down the barrel. While this wasn't as quick as a modern firearm, it did happen a might faster than the time it took to tell you about it.

Once I'd pulled the trigger there wasn't a thing I could do but wait. The ball had left the muzzle and was speedin' toward the back of Flossy's head — just missin' the back of Flossy's head. On the other side of the clearin' it hit a boulder with precisely the right angle to ricochet and hit another boulder. That rock had

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just the right angle for the ball to ricochet back toward Flossy and drop her dead.

By the time I'd reached Pa and our dead bear, he had retrieved his gun and knife. He looked at me and I thought I saw a little tear in his eye as he said, "Thankee young'un. You saved my life."

I smiled. "Twas a life worth savin'."

Then Pa looked thoughtful and asked, "But, why did you do such a fancy trick shot?"

"Well, I knew I only had one shot, and you said you should always shoot a bear between the eyes."