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Like Tradition

Ava Like

The early morning winter darkness was everywhere overwhelmingly. I fumbled around my sister and I's shared room in the pure blackness, hoping to find some of the at least five layers of warm clothing I had meticulously laid out the night before. After getting my many layers on, I felt my way downstairs, but not without stubbing my toe three times. The bright yellow kitchen lights illuminated my father in full Carhartt camo, sitting at the bar drinking watered-down black coffee. He didn't say good morning.

He would sip his coffee and then eventually he would look at the clock on the microwave and say, "Better get a move on or them coons will beat the traps." We walked out into the abyss of crisp, sub-zero air and headed towards the barn to put on even more layers. I donned my thick, Carhartt coveralls and coat as well as a neon orange beanie and gloves that reduced my finger mobility to zero. My father lowered me down into the hip- higher rubber waders that would keep me dry from muddy creek water but force me to walk like the little brother in his snowsuit from "A Christmas Story." We both hopped into the old UTV and my dad started up its engine and loaded our supplies in the back. A variety of traps, bait, the "dead basket," and a revolver were the important things I always noticed we would take. Then we would start our trip across the dozens of dead, grey cornfields.

The cold air felt even colder while racing across the fields in the open vehicle. Eventually, we would reach a tree line and we would begin heading into the woods to check a route of traps previously set. The traps would often lay on the edges of frozen creek beds, or below trees where my dad assumed the raccoons nested during the day. He would always know exactly where each trap was, without hesitation. I lagged behind him. If a trap was empty, he would take out some of the bait and "refresh" it and then douse the area surrounding the trap with fish oil. He would always say, "They won't be able to stay away from that one next time." If a trap was sprung, he would always say, "Well damnit, these traps can't do a damn thing, getting outsmarted by a coon for Christ's sake." He'd add some more bait and fish oil and then we'd move on.

Sometimes we would find that animals that weren't our intended target found their way to the traps. One time we found our own dog Millie stuck in one. Her ankle was all bloody and cut up, but she survived.

Pretty often, we would find opossums in the traps. I'd walk up to them a poke them with a stick to see if they were actually dead, or just trying desperately to survive by playing dead. My dad called them "the scum of the fur trade." We ran the traps for as a source of income, and opossum furs were only worth a measly three to four dollars, compared to the thirty to forty dollars you could get from a raccoon fur. My dad always said, "Only reason the opossums are here is to steal food from the good stuff." So, if we came upon an opossum stuck in a trap my dad would pistol whip it with the revolver to stun it and throw it in the "dead basket" on his back. He would use it as bait in the coyote traps that we set in the afternoons. Stunning it kept the opossum alive for longer so it would be "more fresh" for the coyotes.

I dreaded when we would find a trap with a raccoon in it. When we found a successful trap, he would always say, "Well I'll be damned, that's a coon and we got 'em." Sometimes, luckily, the

raccoon will have frozen to death, the pain of the trap snapping his leg killed him, or he drowned in a nearby water source, so my dad wouldn't have to use the revolver. That didn't happen too often. Usually, the raccoon would hiss and snarl at us as we approached, stuck helplessly. My dad would pull out the revolver. Sometimes he would warn me, sometimes he wouldn't, but every time he would shoot the raccoon square between the eyes.

When I got a little older, he would even ask me if I wanted to do it, but I never did. I never could. It's not that I was against hunting or fishing or killing animals, but it just doesn't seem fair to kill an animal that sits helplessly stuck in a trap. You don't eat it and it isn't fun like it is to shoot an 18-pointer whitetail deer, or reel in a 5-pound large-mouth bass.

I would do my best to close my eyes and avoid the lethal gunshot. However, it was unavoidable to watch the raccoon squirm and shake after the shot, because they always did. My dad would put the revolver back into his holster, and disable the trap, freeing the suffering raccoon. He would toss the raccoon, dead or alive, into the "dead basket." Once we had checked all the traps on the route, the sun would slowly begin appearing over horizon, and we would make our way back to the UTV at the edge of the woods with a basket full of dead or dying raccoons.

I followed this same routine every winter for my first five years trapping. It scared me at first, but it eventually just became normal, even though I continually loathed it. I knew my family did it to supplement our income, so it must have been necessary. Still, I hated waking up at 4 a.m. on my Christmas break, and on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day for that matter. I despised how I would wear layers and layers of clothing, yet my knuckles and toes would still turn numb, and I would somehow sweat profusely at my core. I really hated how all those layers made me walk like a penguin, but there was nothing I could do about it. After all, this is just what my family does. I was the fifth generation of trappers; my family has been trapping for well over one hundred years. My great great grandfather started trapping out of necessity after immigrating to America to supplement the low-income life of farming. He passed trapping down to his sons, and they passed it down to theirs. I was the first woman born directly into my dad's family since we began trapping years ago, and that changed nothing. I learned the same things as my long-gone male predecessors. I learned to build all types of traps for different scenarios and settings. I learned to tolerate the cold Midwestern air. I learned to not become upset watching the animals my dad shot suffer in their last moments, or at least not to show I was upset. I learned to memorize where each and every trap was, and how to methodically place traps in the best spots. I learned that this is just what we do in this family. As I aged, I began to accept trapping and stop fighting it. I started thinking of it as a way to help provide for my family, which is more than what most kids were doing at my age. By age thirteen, I still despised everything about trapping, but I realized that it was slightly more enjoyable if I stopped telling myself how awful it was.

My work then was done in the early morning hours, collecting the animals and resetting the traps. However, the other part of the trapping process was done in the pig barn on dark evenings. Skinning the animals we caught was important and took skill, but the evening meetings in the pig barn were also as close to a social gathering that my family gets to. The place is old, rats noisily run through the walls and the walls are decorated with mementos of the past. It smells really, really bad, but you get used to it and eventually you only smell the fresh wood burning in the stove. Every evening in the winter months, my uncle, grandfather, father, brother, and I met here. My father, uncle, and grandfather skin, and my brother Zeb and I watched and drank Orange Fanta. We would all talk about trapping and anything really. For the first five years I watched and talked, until one evening in December when I was thirteen.

"Ava... bout time you learned to start help fleshin' the coons. You can't even shoot one...you'd be a lot more useful here in the pig barn," my grandfather said as he cut away on a coyote. My fear of

shooting the animals had haunted me, and everyone knew about it. Even Zeb, my little brother, could do it. He could run the trap routes by himself in the morning at just nine years old. I was always accompanied by my dad, and occasionally my brother. I thought it was pitiful that I would have to hand a nine-year-old a revolver to shoot a raccoon for me.

“He’s right. We want to send you out to run the traps by your own but can’t do that if you’re afraid to shoot ‘em. You’re gonna have to change something. You’re only real useful if you’re with someone and you’re a teenager now,” my uncle piped in while fleshing some fat off a raccoon fur. My cheeks flashed red with embarrassment and shame. My dad cut away at a muskrat quietly but nodded in agreement.

“This coyote is really nice, will probably sell for hundred, hundred-thirty bucks,” my grandfather said as he worked away at a coyote. I was thankful he shifted the conversation. He knew everything and anything about hunting, trapping, fishing, you name it; he was a professional taxidermist. “Tell you what, come up here and cut at this coyote. It’ll be good for ya,” my grandfather said, motioning me to go put on one of the leather aprons. I froze for a second, I thought this conversation couldn’t have worsened, but it did. I then got up to put on one of the black leather aprons that hung in the corner. The aprons were all covered in fur, fat, and flesh, and mine grazed the tops of my feet. I shook nervously as my grandfather handed me a dirty, wooden-handled knife. He gave me a thirty second explanation on how to skin, but I mostly tuned it out because I was panicking. My knife gently grazed the thin layer of tissue between the soft organs of the belly and the skin of the muddy matted fur. I pulled the hide down tight with my right arm, and I cut with my left. After cutting down a few inches, I set my knife down and got a grip on the already freed fur and pulled down using all my might. I listened to the sound of tearing fat and tissue above me as I squatted to use as much of my body weight as possible. I stood up to see my progress. The hide had been pulled down to the neck. The rest of my work would involve nerve-wracking precise cuts around the thin fur and fragile facial features. My knife glided millimeter by millimeter along the jawline, gradually freeing more of the fur from its carcass. I eventually made my way to the tip of nose and inspected if my cuts were as meticulous as I had hoped they were. There wasn’t a single hole in the hide: it was perfect. I finally made the last cut, and the muddy fur hide fell to the dirty concrete floor.

“Not a single hole in your first skin. You’ve found your calling. Don’t know why we had you out there running those damn traps for so long, you could’ve been being real useful in here,” my uncle said as he picked the fur off the floor and inspected it. I felt good walking out of the pig barn that night. I knew I would never have to run traps again: I had found my place in the business.

Since that night, I was in the pig barn most evenings in December and January, and I’ve never run a trap route. I learned the entirety of the skinning process and I began to tolerate it doing it. But in being in the pig barn as often as I was, I heard a lot more about our trade.

“Gonna lose the most we’ve ever lost this year, Toby. I swear nobody wants nothing to do with a pretty raccoon or coyote fur anymore,” my grandfather said to my uncle on evening as they both worked on skinning raccoons. I listened in while cleaning some furs in the sink.

“You’re right, God knows what next year’ll be like. Damn, we were selling a fur for twice the price in ’85,” my uncle replied shaking his head.

“We don’t make money off trapping?” I said, completely abandoning the furs in the sink.

“Hell, we haven’t made a penny since the twentieth century darlin’. I would be happy if I could get away with losing less than a thousand each season,” my grandfather chuckled. They both went back to work, but I was astonished. I thought we did this to make money, why else were we doing it?

“Man, those were the days. I remember when we used to get paid to do this. Honestly now I wish I didn’t have to do it- was only fun when I was getting a check,” my uncle said.

“Oh I agree. It’s more a chore these days,” my grandfather said.

I was in disbelief. We don't make a profit off of trapping, and nobody here enjoys it? Why are we even here? I went back to washing the muddy furs in the sink, but with a blank feeling lump in the back of my throat.

Everything I had thought to be the truth about trapping was a lie. We do this every year, spend hundreds of hours each season, make no money, and everyone secretly doesn't want to do it. I didn't want to skin for the next few days. I was thinking about the days my father forced me to go out and check the trap route with him. He would say, "It's part of the family business, you ain't got no choice." But I did have a choice and knowing that infuriated me. I was forced to watch my dad kill animals at point-blank range at eight years old, and I believed that it was normal, and something I had to do as a Like, even at eight years old.