SEEING THE LIGHT

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Jeannie‟s eight, finally old enough to go coon hunting with Daddy. She isn‟t big enough to carry a rifle, but Daddy says she can carry the flashlight. It‟s eighteen inches long and takes six batteries. Her gloved fingers slip on the heavy silver cylinder and she has to carry it in both hands. It‟s a lot easier when she holds the flashlight for Daddy to work on the car or under the kitchen sink. Then she can rest it on something sometimes. Helping Daddy‟s always fun–learning about Phillips and flat head screwdrivers, socket and pipe wrenches, needle nose pliers and ball peen hammers. She likes helping him build things, and when she and Daddy fix something, it stays fixed.

But being with Daddy tonight is extra special. Jeannie‟s never been out so late before. They didn‟t even leave until after her usual bedtime. And nobody else is with them. She‟s all alone with Daddy.

Tramping across the field toward the dark smudge of woods on the other side, they don‟t even need the flashlight. Moonlight on snow makes it about as bright as day, but with a pale green cast to the light. Everything Daddy says is new and special, almost magical. He points to the trees across the way. “You can tell an oak or a maple or a walnut by their bare bones. You don‟t need the leaves.”

He walks easily, the rifle cradled in the crook of his arm. Jeannie scrambles to keep up. “Always keep the safety on till you‟re about to shoot. And don‟t never run with a gun in your hands.” They come to the fence that separates the Kull farm from Joos‟s. Daddy says, “Whether you‟re goin‟ over a fence or under it, you always lay the gun flat on the ground first.”

No Hunting Allowed and *No Trespassing* signs dot the fence and nearby trees. Daddy says, “You don‟t never want to hunt on posted propity without talkin to the owners first–lessin you don‟t care about gettin fined and stirrin up bad blood with the neighbors. Any of the farmers around here‟ll let me hunt. They know my dogs ain‟t gonna kill sheep or suck eggs. But I talk to em every year anyway, just to stay friendly.”

Daddy stops to smoke a cigarette. He‟s got a thermos of coffee in his coat and he gives Jeannie a sip–hot enough to scald and bitter, too, but the cup warms her fingers. Daddy says, “There‟s no point coon huntin till the weather‟s been cold for awhile–till they get their winter coats. Thin coats ain‟t worth takin.”

Daddy flicks the butt of his cigarette into the snow, the sizzle loud in the night silence just before the dogs start up. “You can tell when the hound‟s treed a coon by his voice. You hear Lead now? He‟s just havin‟ a good time. He ain‟t picked up a scent yet.” They‟re hunting with three hounds, but Lead is Daddy‟s favorite. He‟s the best. Daddy paid over three hundred dollars for him and always says, “Lead more‟n paid for hisself that first year, and him still just a pup.”

One of the dogs changes key, his voice deeper, and Daddy says, “Lead‟s

got one treed now. Which way is he?" The dogs have fanned out and they"re all barking. Jeannie listens and then points off to the right. Daddy grins. "Yep." Jeannie starts to run toward the baying hound but Daddy grabs her arm. "Whoa! Don"t go runnin in the woods at night. You could trip and break a leg–or worse. That coon ain"t goin nowhere."

When they get to Lead, he"s up on his hind legs against the tree, in full voice. The other two dogs lope up and circle the tree, baying in chorus. The moonlight is so bright that sometimes Daddy and Jeannie can see a flash of the coon"s eyes. Daddy says, "Now you put the light up there in the notch of that maple where his eyes is shinin so"s I can get a good shot. Hold it steady now." He has a light on his cap for when he hunts alone, but now Jeannie holds the light steady and Daddy shoots the coon in the head. It thumps onto the ground. Daddy growls, "Stay! And all three dogs back off, whimpering and prancing, while he cuts the jugular vein and lets the coon bleed out.

It"s nearly four o"clock in the morning when they head for home. Daddy"s carrying the rifle across his arm and three dead coons in the game pockets of his hunting coat. Jeannie"s fingers and toes are numb. She doesn"t complain but her feet are leaden and she stumbles twice. The last mile to the car, Daddy carries Jeannie piggyback, her head bouncing against his shoulder.

The next day Jeannie holds a coon by its hind feet while Daddy skins it out. Before, he always just hung the coon upside down from a gamblin" stick to skin it, but this time he said, "Daughter, if you"re gonna hunt, you gotta take care of what you kill." His hunting knife has a wide blade and a bone handle and is sharp enough to split hairs. In Daddy"s big, hard hand, it looks almost little. He rings the coon"s legs at the foot joint and cuts down the middle of both hind legs from the rings to the crotch. He does the same with the front legs, cutting to the middle of the chest, and then opens the pelt along the belly from the crotch to the end of the jaw. He peels the skin back slowly, cutting through the pale yellow layer of fat to separate the hide from the muscle, taking care not to nick it. "What we"re doing here is getting the whole pelt off in good shape. You don"t want no more holes than"re necessary," he tells Jeannie. "That"s why it"s best to use a rifle and aim for the head." He cuts across the base of the tail, only on the underside. He skins out the back legs then grips the base of the tail between two little sticks and pulls slowly, sliding the tailbone out. "Iffin you want to sell the pelt, it"s best not to pull the tail off." The coon"s coat is thick and sleek. Jeannie thinks about how a coat like that would feel. Daddy will stretch and scrape the pelts and set them to cure so he can sell them in the spring–thirty-five or even fifty dollars apiece.

He skins out the front legs. "To cook up a coon, you gotta get rid of them scent sacs," Daddy says and removes the two pear-shaped musk glands under the forearms. "A lotta folks"ll eat coon." He grins and drawls, "An some of them as eats it even like it." The ones that like to say you just got to treat it like dried beans–bring it to a boil with a couple of hot red pepper pods and then let it sit off the heat for or an hour or so. Pour off the soaking water and put in fresh, along with salt and a little

vinegar to take away the wild taste. Boil it again till it"s tender, maybe an hour or two. Then you can fry it or make a stew or even barbecue it. Jeannie"s seen a lot of people do it, and tasted it a few times. She thinks it tastes all right, but Mommy doesn"t. Mommy doesn"t mind squirrel or rabbit, pheasant or deer, but she says coons are too gamy by half. So Jeannie"s family doesn"t cook coon. They give most of the meat to folks on the other side of town and feed the rest to the dogs.

Skinning out the head, Daddy cuts the ears off even with the skull and leaves the nose button attached to the pelt. "If you make a bad ear hole, the pelt"s value"s gonna go down, fifty cents or even a dollar."

Finally he slits open the coon"s belly from crotch to throat. He drops the guts onto newspapers spread on the cement floor of the basement. They"re mostly shades of brown and grey with blue lines that look like big rivers drawn on maps. The smell of blood and raw meat hangs heavy in the air. The last thing Daddy does is to cut off the head, tail, and feet. He drops the carcass in a bucket of ice water and takes up the next dead coon.

When all three carcasses are done, Daddy says, "You were a big help, Daughter." Jeannie smiles. Hunting is fun. She can hardly wait to go again.

But Jeannie can"t go hunting on school nights and Daddy starts working a second job on weekends to pay the doctors" bills. Mommy"s in the hospital an awful lot. Jeannie cooks the beans, dusts the whatnot shelf, irons Daddy"s work shirts, and keeps an eye on her little sister. (Louise is only five and just a little bit of a thing. Everybody calls her Weezie.) Jeannie asks Daddy when they"re going hunting. He just shakes his head and says he doesn"t know. When she asks him again, he says, "Don"t pester me now."

Sometimes Daddy goes out in the backyard to shoot target practice. Jeannie hangs around, handing him shells, setting cans up on the posts. She doesn"t say anything–she doesn"t want to pester–but she watches every move he makes. One day Daddy says, "You wanna have a try, Daughter?"

"Oh, yes! More than anything!"

Daddy is using his light-weight rifle. He shows Jeannie how to line up the sights. "Once you got the shot lined-up, take it. You wait too long, that rifle"s gonna start feelin might heavy. You gotta hold her steady an squeeze the trigger easy." Jeannie hits the can with her first shot. She just nicks it, but the can wobbles off the post. Daddy tells her to try again and her second shot is better. Daddy laughs. "It looks like I got a regular Annie Oakley here."

Mommy is one of thirteen children and when the family has a get-together, which they do two or three times a year at least, there"s likely to be fifty people or more. The women try to outshine each other as cooks and as the most beleaguered. They carry their covered dishes into the kitchen and sit around the table or lean against the sink, trading recipes and talking about who"s pregnant, who"s in the hospital, who"s out of work, and whose kids are acting up. The littler children run in and out, banging the screen doors and yelling, playing tag or hopscotch or hide-and-seek, crying and tattling when they get pinched. The older girls giggle and talk about

boys and Coty‟s new Hot Pink lipstick. The older boys hang around the men, who smoke cigarettes and drink beer and spin yarns. Usually there‟s a game of penny-ante poker going on and as often as not, someone suggests target shooting.

This time Daddy brags on Jeannie‟s marksmanship and the uncles think he‟s putting them on. He says, “I wouldn‟t pull your leg. Jeannie‟s a right good shot. I bet she could outshoot you or any of your kin.”

Uncle Ris says, “We don‟t allow no BB guns. No cap pistols, neither.” Ris just says it to rile Daddy, knowing he doesn‟t hold with toy guns. Daddy‟s always saying, “A gun ain‟t a toy and kids shouldn‟t get used to thinking of em that way.”

Now Daddy says, “I‟m not talkin about any damn fool toy. I mean a rifle, a pistol, or a shotgun. Take your pick.”

The uncles hoot and slap their knees and say things like, “Elwood, you got such a poker face, if I didn‟t know better I‟d think you was serious.” After a while, the talk goes so far nobody can back down. Everyone who‟s going to shoot puts a dollar in the pot, the fathers anteing up for themselves and their sons. None of the girl cousins shoot, or even come out to watch. The rules are rounds of nine shots per person, three each with pistol, rifle, and shotgun. After each round, those tied for the highest score go on to another round, until there‟s a winner.

Jeannie picks up the pistol, holding it in both hands the way Daddy taught her. They are shooting cans and bottles off fence posts–easy targets. Her first six shots are hits and the uncles and cousins stop laughing. The shotgun is heavy, though, and Daddy kneels behind her and takes some of the weight so the gun won‟t waver, so she can aim. The kick knocks her backwards and Daddy catches her. Her aim is true. The shooting goes on and on. The butt of the shotgun is bruising Jeannie‟s shoulder to purple pulp but she doesn‟t cry. And in the end, Daddy wins the bet.

The spring Jeannie is ten, Mommy and Daddy sit at the table with her and Weezie. “The doctor says I can‟t have any more babies,” Mommy says, and there are tears in her voice. “So we want to talk to you girls about adopting a brother for you.”

Daddy is looking at his hands. He says, “We love you girls more‟n anything, but...”

Mommy finishes. “But having a son to carry on the family name is real important.” She clears her throat. “So how would you girls feel about us adopting a brother for you?”

Weezie shrugs. Jeannie looks from one to the other. Finally she says, That‟d be all right, I guess.”

The county adoption service says they‟ll have to wait a couple of years for a baby. But if they would consider an older boy, there would be no wait. Jeannie‟s mom is twenty-nine, her dad twenty-seven. They say they are too old to wait and that giving a good home to a boy who needs one would be a Christian thing to do. Daddy is a deacon in the Evangelical United Brethren Church and Mommy teaches Sunday School. Weezie and Jeannie know that doing the Christian thing is good. Mommy

and Daddy visit the county children‟s home several times and then they bring Richard home for a weekend. He‟s not quite a month younger than Jeannie but he‟s in the same class as Weezie because his real parents never sent him to school. He started two years late, after Children‟s Services put him in the county home. He‟s very quiet. Very polite. And he eats a lot.

Rich visits several times and then comes to live with them for a trial year. The rules say Rich must have a room of his own, so Weezie moves all of her things in with Jeannie. Late at night they whisper about how hard his life was before–being tied to the bedpost, having to comb the sidewalks for cigarette butts for his mother, not having shoes in winter. They wonder why Mommy seems so set against Rich and vow that they‟ll do everything they can to make it all up to him.

When the first snow falls and Jeannie asks her father when they‟ll be able to start coon hunting, her mother says, “You‟re getting to be a young lady now, Jean–too old to be a tomboy, tramping around the woods in the middle of the night. You can see that, can‟t you, now that you‟re growing up? Besides, your dad has a son to take hunting now.”

Tears well up in her eyes. She turns mutely to her father. “Now, Jean, there‟s no use lookin at me. You know you can‟t play your mother and me agin each other.” So in the end, she never goes hunting again. When Dad works on the car, Rich holds the flashlight. He doesn‟t know one tool from another.

The trial year is up and the adoption is about to be final. Mom, Dad, and the three kids all sit around the table one Saturday morning, talking about changing Rich‟s name. He has been in school under his old name all this time. Everybody knows him as Rich Ballantine. Dad says, “Given your age and all, maybe you don‟t want to change it.”

Rich says, “It don‟t make no difference to me one way or the other. I‟m as much a part of this family as I‟ll ever be.”

Louise doesn‟t say anything. Jean thinks this is really something for Mom, Dad, and Rich to decide. She does wonder who would carry on the family name, though, and whether that doesn‟t matter anymore. And if not, why not? But she doesn‟t ask. In the end, he stays Rich Ballantine

For his twelfth birthday, Dad and Mom give Rich a rifle. Jean runs her finger along the smooth steel blue barrel, traces the carving on the walnut stock.

A brass plate on the butt is engraved *Richard Ballantine.* Rich is a fair-to-middlin‟ shot and doesn‟t much like hunting. Mostly he plays sports. He becomes a star athlete, letters every year in baseball, basketball, football, and track. His rifle is seldom out of the the gun case.

The oak gun case sits in the corner of the dining room. Dad converted it from a bookcase and the curved glass in the door shows off the guns. They are kept

loaded at all times. Sometimes someone–usually one of the aunts–says something like, “Elwood, having all them loaded guns in the house is dangerous. Ain‟t you afraid somebody‟s gonna get hurt?” Dad‟s answer is always the same: “People get shot all the time with guns they think aren‟t loaded. In this house, everyone knows they‟re loaded and handles them accordingly.”

Aunt Bessie is especially outspoken, and threatens not to let Eddie come visit any more. “You don‟t even have the door on that cabinet locked!”

Dad says, “What good‟s a lock on a glass-front door? Eddie‟s got sense enough not to fool with loaded guns. But every man sees by the light of his own candle. You keep him home if that‟s what you think is best. I hope you‟ll think better of it in time, but even if you don‟t, there‟s no hard feelings.”

Four years later, Rich‟s gun goes missing. Dad asks about it and Rich says, “I guess I musta lost it.”

Dad slaps him across the face so hard Rich stumbles into a chair. “Don‟t you lie to me! I know you‟ve been playin‟ pool and poker down at Horty Solt‟s. You sold it to pay gamblin debts–and didn‟t even get a decent price!” It‟s a small town and everybody knows.

Rich starts to deny it but says only, “I never...” before Dad slaps him again and grabs him by the shoulders, shaking him like a mop. Mom grabs Dad‟s arm, says, “Elwood, stop! Let go. You‟re gonna hurt him.”

Dad lets go his hold. Rich is looking at his feet. “So do you want me to get it back or what?”

Dad shakes his head. “It was yours. You were free to do with it what you wanted. I‟m just hurt because you went sneaking around about it. Disappointed because you gambled yourself into debt that way. And mad that you lied about it. Son, don‟t you ever lie to me again. I can‟t abide a liar.”

Nothing feels quite the same after that, though Dad continues to go to all Rich‟s games and watches for his pictures in the sports section of *The Eagle Gazette.*

Mom‟s health never really came back after all those miscarriages. She has one problem after another, everything from appendicitis to bowel obstructions to suicidal depression. She‟s hospitalized or bedridden about two thirds of the time while Jean‟s in junior high and high school. Jean‟s in charge of the house, doing the banking and buying groceries. She bosses Rich and Louise around, trying to be fair without letting them forget who‟s boss–trying to be like Dad. When Jean is thirteen, she overhears Aunt Nora telling Dad, “Jean can put a meal on the table good enough for anyone to eat, and she keeps the house cleaner than her mother ever did.” She feels proud–and superior to her sick, useless mother. She never says this to anyone, though, and feels guilty even admitting it to herself.

There‟s no doubt that Jean can master the wifely skills. She takes cooking 4-H and wins blue ribbons at the Fairfield County Fair for a chunky applesauce she invented at the last minute. She takes sewing 4-H and makes her dress for the

prom. These things are gratifying but not challenging. Housework stifles Jean. For one thing, it keeps her in the house when she‟d rather be out in the world. And for another, nothing ever stays done. The washing and ironing, sweeping and scouring, cycle „round again and again. And no matter how long it takes her to cook a meal, it‟s gone in minutes, leaving nothing behind but the washing up. She resents having to do it. Jean wants to escape–*needs* to escape–and the only way to do that is to get a real job. She‟s been babysitting for years–full-time in the summers, before and after school when it‟s in session–but their little town offers nothing else for her. As her sixteenth birthday approaches, Jean gets her learner‟s permit and a week after getting her driver‟s license, she has a job waitressing in the next town. Jean is a hard worker and honest. Soon the owner is asking her to take the last shift and close up at night.

Dad says, “A woman drivin around at night alone‟s gotta be able to protect herself.” He opens a small cardboard box and Jean sees a pistol nestled in tissue paper. He says, “It‟s only accurate to about thirty yards. But further than that, you don‟t need to shoot–just run.” He holds out the pistol. “It‟s for your car.”

Jean turns the weapon over in her hands. The barrel isn‟t as smooth as on Dad‟s guns. The grip is cheap plastic molded in a diamond pattern that will chip if she isn‟t careful. “Can‟t I get in trouble, carrying this?”

“Not if you don‟t hide it. It‟s only against the law to carry a *concealed* weapon. So you just lay it right out there on the seat beside you.”

Jean hasn‟t shot for a long time. Dad makes sure she can load and clean the gun, checks that she remembers about safety. They go out into the back yard and Dad pins a target up on the side of the old outhouse, empty for years now. Within the gun‟s range, Jean‟s as good a shot as ever. They shoot till night falls and they have to use the big flashlight to see the holes in the target.

THE END