

Coon Huntin' Wisdom

By Keely Smith

Prologue

In the backwoods of Northern Georgia, where the alcohol content is high and tempers run even higher, quick wit and strength of character are the only qualities that separate you from a city-slicker or a yankee. Besides caring for your kin, maintaining the country culture is one of the most critical duties that a person from these parts can accomplish. Although some have foolishly tried, there isn't a soul in this whole world who can do away with this approach to life, no matter how determined he or she may be. This country code of conduct has been passed down through the generations, instilling within the youth lifelong morals and memories. For this very reason, Miss Annie May Marsh, a fiery widow with a heart as mighty as the kick of her .30-06 Springfield rifle named Old Bessie, was taking her grandson, Virgil Lee, on his first coon huntin' trip. As Miss Annie had described to Virgil Lee many a time, hunting isn't a skill that comes naturally; you have to be taught the ins and outs of the pursuit. According to Miss Annie, "It's just a dyin' shame that Virgil Lee's pa ain't taught him to fend for himself or put food on the table." Virgil Lee had just turned ten years old, and after badgering his father for the past two years (Miss Annie was an excellent marksman by the age of eight) to teach his boy, she finally took it upon herself to see that Virgil Lee got the best education in marksmanship that she could provide. She had a better shot than her lethargic son-in-law anyway, and while she was at it, she figured she could teach Little Virgie some other life lessons that he might have missed along the way. Even after eleven years, she still couldn't believe that she had allowed her precious baby girl to marry such a no good, couch sittin', Nascar watchin', pork rind eatin' slug. Miss Annie

loved her daughter, but she realized that girl didn't have the sense God gave a gopher when she ran off and married that idjet (idiot). Miss Annie often thought to herself, and even more often told her daughter, "It's a darn good thang that the good Lord didn't take me with your father because I seem to be the only one takin' the time to teach Little Virgie the necessities of life." Her daughter would reply that Virgil Lee learns everything he needs to know in school, but that was simply unacceptable to Miss Annie. She said, "Book learnin' won't do him no good. Besides, the boy can't find his way out of a paper bag! The poor little guy is already a pale, scrawny, little thang, not to mention that stringy mud-colored hair that he got from his daddy's side of the family. He surely can't rely on his looks to find someone to settle down with! There ain't a woman in these parts that will turn down even a homely man that's good at huntin' and fishin' and bringin' home the vittles. There's a shine of love in a country woman's eyes when her man comes home holdin' up a freshly killed possum that she's gonna get to skin and cook up with some corn bread and collard greens!"

Virgil Lee loved his grandmother dearly, and the thought of wandering around the woods with an elderly woman carrying a gun didn't intimidate him in the least. In fact, he had never seen Miss Annie without Old Bessie by her side, and he trusted his grandmother with his life. From her huge goulashes to her homemade burlap dresses and straw hat, Miss Annie was quite a sight to behold, but the sparkle in her cloudy cataract-filled eyes told the story of her life: her determination, wisdom, and love. Virgil Lee never could understand why she still had such a good shot even though she was just about as blind as bat, but she said that she had been hunting so long that she didn't need to see the prey; she could feel its presence. Explaining her appearance, Miss Annie would say, "I might be rough around the edges, but at least I ain't like those prim and proper, blue bouffant-haired women who congregate down at the Curl and Clip!

Those dang women are wound tighter than the strings on a Gibson Guitar! When I was young, I was quite a dish, but now that ma husband has passed, the rest of my time on this Earth should be spent caring for the coon dawgs, the still, and Little Virgie.”

Miss Annie picked up Virgil Lee right after dinner in her 1956 Ford Pickup, and they drove past the little white-washed church, the cherished family cemetery, and the worn-out brick schoolhouse until they reached a fading path in the woods only accessible by foot. They parked the truck and marched off along the one and only trail to Miss Annie’s cabin so that they could collect the huntin’ supplies and the coon dog before embarking on their excursion. On this warm summer night the sky was as clear as could be and the moon glistened like the antique mother of pearl pendant that Miss Annie’s grandpa had given her on her first coon huntin’ trip so many years ago. She had worn the pendant on every trip since then for good luck, and she has never been disappointed. Only minutes after Miss Annie and Virgil Lee set out after having let out Boone, the trusty old coon dog that was at times a little over exuberant, Virgil Lee heard a rustle in the big oak tree not far from Miss Annie’s rickety old shack. He could see the silhouette of a small creature in the moonlight, and he knew for sure he had found his first coon. He whispered, “Grannie, look! There’s one! Let’s shoot it!”

“Hold your horses there, Virgie. That ain’t nothin’ but a boomer (squirrel),” said Miss Annie, who was trying to listen to see if she heard Boone.

“Why can’t we just shoot that?”

“Boomers aren’t worth the gunpowder it takes to blow em’ away. They’ve got more fur than meat and ain’t nearly as tender as coons. Boomer meat is too stringy.”

“I’d still eat it! My daddy told me that meat is meat, and there ain’t no difference.”

“Boy, don’t you give me any lip, and don’t you get hard-headed like yo pa neither! Remember, a hard head leads to a soft behind, and if you are hard-headed around me, I’ll make sure of it. Old Bessie ain’t only a rife, but she’s also a mighty good spankin’ paddle!”

“Awe I’m sorry Grannie, I just went hog wild with excitement. Like Boone!”

“That’s alright, Virgie. It’s just another thang I’ve gotta teach ya. Hard-headedness can surely get you into a mess a’ trouble. I sho’ nuff learned that lesson when I was a youngin’ like you.”

The Tale

I’ll tell ya me and ma grandpappy were like two peas in a pod. He had a mess a’ grand chillun’, but I was always the apple of his eye, if I don’t mind sayin’ so maself. And for that reason, he called me his little moonshinin’ apprentice. I was the only grandbaby he trusted to help him with the still, and he even ’loud me to carry the jugs of white lightnin’ to the shed hidden way over yonder in the rhododendron thicket. I might show it to ya after awhile, but I digress. In this here town we never had too much of a problem with the gov’ment. Just about ev’rybody enjoyed a nip of Grandpappy’s *elixer* ev’ry now and then or at least had enough respect for him not to blab. Whenever the regular revenueurs were spose’d to look for his still, they’d come on up here and find a jug or two wain’ for em’ by the side of the path. They never could remember whether they done found the still or not, but they sho were happy about sampling the goods.

Now all that changed when those darn Feds sent Revenuer Randy to our town. I never did catch his last name; I think it started with a G, but it don’t really matter now. The fact of the matter is that he was the yankee-ist yankee I ever met in ma entire life and a city-slicker to boot. Luckily for us though, that worked in our favor. He came dressed like a Philadelphia lawyer and

was so crooked he could hide behind a corkscrew. He just thought he was somethin' else with his shiny badge and gov'ment cap, but that smile a' his was as devious as the grin on that thar Cheshire cat. He was awful proud of the fact that he done busted ev'ry one of the moonshiners he'd come across in Tennessee, but he was no match for ma grandpappy. Ma grandpappy wasn't just rough around the edges; he was rough down to the bone! He was a true Georgia mountain man; he was six foot six, had a long, scraggly beard, and of course always had Old Bessie by his side. And as for his mind, he was slyer than a fox. As you can imagine, Revenuer Randy wasn't anythang but a field mouse in comparison to ma grandpappy, and in time even he knew it.

My grandpappy was friends with just about ev'ryone in the community, and because of that, they all warned him that trouble was a'brewin.' A bunch of folks had seen Revenuer Randy wanderin' around, actin' all official like, and tellin' people all his successes in bustin' up stills all over Tennessee. At first ev'rybody just told him that we lived in a dry county and goin' round lookin' for moonshiners was about as useful as a steering wheel on a mule, but then he done showed up at the weekly Saturday night poker game down there at the Honky Tonk. Well let's just say those men had had more than their fair share of Grandpappy's elixer, and I'll tell you what that Yankee got his knickers tied in knot like nobody's bis'ness. The next morning' he was as mad as the green snake that married the garden hose when he showed up at church. I remember as clear as day 'cause right before the service he was goin' round interrogatin' people, gettin' all up in their faces, and generally stewin' ev'rybody's goose. Now ma Grandpappy was not the type to pick a fight, especially in the House of the Lord, but I surely do remember some of the other men's replies to that no good Yankee like "If you don't watch out, I'm gonna cream yo' corn" and "You better give your heart to Jesus, 'cause yo' butt is mine!" I declare it took the preacher near about half an hour to settle down the congregation.

It wasn't until a few weeks later that Revenuer Randy began suspectin' ma grandpappy of moonshinin'. One night he was prowlin' around in the woods near our cabin when we were settin' off to jar up the moonshine. That dadgum revenuer wasn't anywhere near our still, but the fact that ma grandpappy and me weren't at home into the late mornin' hours was enough to get him all riled up lookin' round ever' whar. Ma grandpappy decided to confront him and hopefully scare him enough that he wouldn't come back to these here backwoods. My grandpappy said, "What in the world are you doin' here at this hour of the evenin', Mr. Revenuer Randy?"

Revenuer Randy replied, "The real question is what are *you* doing here so late at night? I am here looking for a still. Do you happen to know anything about that?"

Thinkin' quick on his feet, Grandpappy said, "Little Annie and I are out on a coon huntin' trip, and no I don't know anythang 'bout all that bis'ness. You better skedaddle on out'a here 'cause I liked to thought you were a killer coon and was fixin' to shoot you right between yo shiny eyes."

That uppity Yankee-snake gave us a glare as vicious as a rabid dawg and said, "I'll be sure to watch out."

Finally ma grandpappy told him, "Well I reckon Little Annie and me best be gettin' on. Ain't much moonlight left to hunt by. I guess we'll be seein' ya." We went in the opp'site direction from that lowdown braggin' carpetbagger, but then Grandpappy and me doubled back around and followed him 'cause there was absolutely no use in us not takin' precautions. Later on I asked Grandpappy why he said he was fixin' to shoot Revenuer Randy even though we knew good and well it warn't a killer coon since we'd been followin' that Yankee all along. Grandpappy commenced to tell me that that thar was a fact both he and I knew, but Revenuer

Randy best be kept in the dark of the root cellar 'bout that little white lie. Ain't none of his bis'ness no how.

Just to be on the safe side, we followed Revenuer Randy 'til daybreak even as he got further and further from our still. We even got all the way to the Owens's property that is a good long hike away from our cabin and the still. Now the Owens are a peculiar bunch a' folks. They were known for bein' strange back then and still are to this very day. They don't say too much and have wide-set eyes. Some folks say there ain't many branches on their family tree, if you know what I mean. Anyway, Revenuer Randy found Little Beauregard Owens down by the huckleberry bush having his early mornin' snack. Of course Revenuer Randy began askin' questions to see if he knew anythang about the white lightnin' bis'ness, but Little Beau just stared at him like a deer in the headlights. Revenuer Randy got frustrated with the poor boy and stormed off like a thunderhead on a summer day, but then he came back only a minute or two later and asked Little Beau if he knew where the nearest outhouse was. The huckleberry-pickin' boy just gave that dang revenuer the same empty stare and didn't utter a word. Once again, Revenuer Randy stomped off in a hissy fit. He went past some trees and found the nearest patch a' vines and then hurriedly dropped his britches to do his bis'ness. He looked around, and there was Little Beau starin' at him again, this time just outside a' the vine patch. Revenuer Randy hollered, "Get away from here you creepy little kid! What's wrong with you?"

Little Beau didn't move an inch, but in a drawl slower than molasses in January said to Revenuer Randy, "I wouldn't do that if I was you."

After that remark Revenuer Randy blew up like a bunch a' firecrackers on the Fourth of July. He said, "I can do whatever I want and certainly do not need permission from an ignorant little hillbilly boy like you! Now get away from me and let me be! You wouldn't help me before,

so now I'm taking care of things for myself!" With that said, he settled down a little deeper into the vines for a minute, cleaned his bottom with some soft shiny leaves, and then pulled up his britches lickity-split and went on back to town. Little Beau, with a tiny grin peeking out the side a' his lips, stood there quiet as a cat in a dogpound, watchin' as the angry man waddled off into the distance.

The next day was a Sunday, and of course ev'rybody, includin' Revenuer Randy, was at church. I'll tell you what, that Sunday mornin' we had the jolliest congregation we've ever had at The First Antioch Baptist Church. Ev'ry time we stood to sing a hymn there was snickers and even outright laughter in the background 'cause ev'ry chance Revenuer Randy got to stand up he was reachin' back to scratch his behind. When we sat down to listen to the preacher, the whole congregation was watchin' him squirm in his seat like he was sittin' on a bed a' ants. It turns out that patch of vines he did his bis'ness in was a big ol' patch of poison ivy, and Revenuer Randy was just startin' to feel the consequences of his stubbornness.

That wasn't the last time that Revenuer Randy's hard-headedness got him into a pickle. After a week or two Grandpappy and I were back at the still, and somehow or 'nuther that Yankee caught us red-handed. He was smilin' at us like a possom eatin' persimmons 'cause he thought that we was just another pair a' busted bootleggers that he could put up on his wall a' successes. Well that certainly was not on ma grandpappy's agenda. He said, "What in tarnation do you thank you are doin' here on ma private prop'ty? If you don't get out'a here right quick I'm liable to blow you all the way to Eastaboga!"

Revenuer Randy replied, "I am an employee of the United States Government, and I have every right to be on your property and charge you for the making and selling of illegal alcoholic beverages. I am planning on getting you locked up so that you will never see the light

of day again! As for you ‘blowing me away,’ I think you and I both know that you don’t have the guts for that. Isn’t that right, you senile old dirt bag?”

As far as I know of, Grandpappy had never been insulted like that in his entire life. He pointed the barrel of Old Bessie right at that Revenuer Randy and shot that gun like there was no tomorrow! Now Grandpappy was not the type to break one of the Ten Commandments, and he would not kill a man unless he was directly threatened. For that reason, I soon found out that the only thang commin’ out’a that rifle was a heap a’ rock salt! That didn’t make no difference to Revenuer Randy, though. When he heard that gunshot he was so shocked that he fell right back on his tee-hiney into the briar patch and screamed like a baby with a diaper rash. As soon as he could get back on his feet he high-tailed it on out’a there faster than a hot knife through butter and made a beeline for town.

That was the last time that ma Grandpappy and I were ever bothered by Revenuer Randy or any other revenuer for that matter. We continued on in the moonshinin’ bis’ness with no disturbances until the day the good Lord took ma Grandpappy, and that is when yo’ grandpa and I took over the bis’ness.

With a soft chuckle, Miss Annie said, “Yes siree, Virgil Lee, I surely did learn from that son of a gun that a hard head can lead to a mighty soft and sore behind.”

“Gee Grannie that sho’ was a funny story!” said Virgil Lee.

“Well I am glad you liked it Boy, but I hope you remember the reason why I told it to ya ‘cause that lesson will keep ya out of a heap a’ trouble!” warned Miss Annie.

Suddenly there was a rustle in one of the trees nearby. Boone the coon dawg went crazy

as all get out barking up that tree, and Miss Annie said, “Look Little Virgie! There’s a big ol’ coon! Ain’t ya’ glad that ya’ didn’t let your hard-headedness keep us from gettin’ this here critter! Here’s Old Bessie; I’ll help ya’ load and shoot ‘er.”

“BANG!” The coon fell to the ground, and Virgil Lee held him up triumphantly.

The sun was just peeking through the trees when Miss Annie congratulated the boy and said, “Well I’ll be, look what time it is! We best be on our way home to start cookin’ this here critter. I’ll bet you anythang that we can get at least a week a’ vittles out’a him!”

Miss Annie, Virgil Lee, and Boone walked off into the distance of those backwoods of Northern Georgia with a boatload of pride and a coon to boot, but then, Virgil Lee stopped dead in his tracks and asked, “Grannie, what ever happened to Revenuer Randy?”

Miss Annie snickered a bit and said, “Well I reckon he must’a learnt his lesson, because when last seen by the townspeople, Revenuer Randy was a boardin’ the Southern Railroad passenger car with a pillow stuffed in the seat a’ his pants. Sam, the station clerk at the depot, told us that Yankee done hightailed it back up to Dee-troit, and fortunately for us (and him) he ain’t been heard of in these here mountains since!”