

The Justice of Cord's Lick

Poachin' Tom rocked forward in his chair, cocked his head, then shot a wad of tobacco juice between his legs. He settled back with a grin as the biggest part found the crack between the warped floorboards underneath the table. "Shit," Tom said "he ain't shit, Earl. I done eyed him already and I shore don't got no worries atall." So saying Tom dragged the back of his hand over his mouth to stop the dribble of tobacco spittle from making its way to his chin.

"Well, ya know the stories 'bout that buck being some kinda spirit critter. But I'm sure ya'll are right Tom, you always is. I reckon I just worry cause you ain't as spry as you onc't was. Shucks, we're both past our frying days an afore long we won't even be worth stewin!"

The one room cabin filled with the hoarse laughter of the two older men. As their laughter died Tom cornered the mason jar of moonshine that was still more than half full and slugged down a gulp. He passed the jar to Earl then broke into one of his many poaching stories. Earl followed in kind. The rising sun awoke to find Earl sprawled on the floor; mouth gaping open and Tom face down in his chair, the empty Mason jar still clutched in his hand.

The battered Chevy pickup slid to a halt just before entering the grassy meadow, cloaked in darkness that lay straight ahead. The engine sputtered, coughed, and died with a nasally wheeze. Tom threw his weight against the door, swinging it open wide. He stepped out pulling his Winchester 30/30 with him then clambered into the truck-bed and settled down till silence filled the woodland once again.

The sliver of a moon was well up on its journey through the night sky when suddenly a blinding beam of light arced through the peaceful glade. It moved quickly, purposefully across the glade stripping away the night's protective shadow, jerking to a halt on the herd of deer it had uncovered.

Two does and a fawn turned their heads with the coming light and were now pinned with the beam directly in their eyes. Fear and lack of understanding riveted them in their tracks. The 30/30 in Tom's hands barked loudly three times evenly spaced. Just as evenly spaced the three deer crumpled to the ground as if they were puppets on a string to lie motionless, blood seeping from their shattered skulls.

Once again the light began moving. Without going far it found another doe and a fawn. Tom shot them quickly then swung the light rapidly across the glade freezing on a glint of metal. Again the rifle in

Tom's hands barked three times in rapid succession, each shot ramming into the large shortening can he had hung in the brush. Filled with rocks, the can set off a loud metallic clatter. The sly old buck who had circled the glade behind the hackle berry bushes, slipping silently away down his escape route, bounded away from the horrible din that had erupted almost under his nose. As the buck moved into the glare of the spot Tom jerked the light into his eyes. Tom paused to spit a wad of tobacco over the side of the truck, he laughed to himself "Ole mister grandpappy buck thought how he had him a plan to slick Poachin' Tom, hen, hen. Well I guess he done found out how smart he ain't." Swinging back to the buck still frozen in the spotlight's glare Tom shot him through the spine at the base of the neck. "Wouldn't wanna muss up that perdy head o' yours, no sir. Why I'll be gettin' me a city slicker wantin' a wall hanger and you'll sure fill my pockets then!"

Tom had stripped to nothing more than a stained undershirt as he finished loading the last of the gutted deer into the Chevy. He paused to wipe the blood off his arms and hands then swung to face behind him placing a hand to his ear like in the movies. "Well I declare" he said, acting as if the woods about him held an audience, "I do believe I hear a Jeep a headin' this way. I sure hope it ain't that new mister Game Warden come to arrest poor ole Tom." He spat a wad of tobacco in the general direction of the "Jeep" then climbed into the truck's cab and cranked the starter till the engine rumbled into life.

As Tom's pickup swung out of the clearing onto the remains of the logging road he had followed to the meadow the lights of the Warden's Jeep cleared the ridge and started down towards him. Tom grinned when he saw the lights then slid the clutch out and headed with a jerk down into the valley below.

Warden Simmons pushed the Jeep's speed up as much as he dared now that his quarry was in sight. He'd heard that Poachin' Tom had been bragging on how the new Warden was nothing to worry about. He'd guess right now Tom wasn't feeling so cocky and knew he'd feel even less cocky behind bars!

As the Warden continued to push his Jeep down the logging road the gap between Tom and him closed rapidly. Just when the Jeep's headlights seemed to reach the tailgate of the old Chevy pickup, Tom took a sharp left off the road and turned his headlights off instantly disappearing from sight. The Warden cranked his steering wheel sending the Jeep into the brush after Tom's disappearance. With the wheel rolling back to straighten the Jeep out on it's new course Warden Simmons caught the glint of his headlights reflected back from directly before him. Straining forward in an effort to identify Tom's truck Warden Simmons was almost thrown into his windshield as the Jeep jerked to a halt, the front canting down at a wild angle.

He sat still, staring ahead in shocked silence unable to comprehend what had happened. He shook his head, sucked up a deep breath, held it for a long count, then blew it out feeling his nerves settle. Gathering his wits about him the Warden climbed out of the Jeep and clicked on his flashlight. He stomped the ground with a heavy foot and cursed as his light fell on the freshly dug trench his front tires were mired in. He cursed again when his flashlight exposed the two large coffee cans hanging by string

just on the other side of the trench.

The Warden was jarred out of his state of shock and anger by the gunning of an engine followed by headlights moving on down into the valley. He clenched his fists and stared until the truck's lights moved out of sight.

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Sunday morning Tom scraped the stubble from his face then put on his best, and only, polyester shirt. Slicking his hair back with Wildroot then banging the mud from his boots Tom was ready for anything, even Preacher Polk's sermon. So off he went humming to himself something that vaguely resembled a tune.

Preacher Polk looked out over the congregation, his flock, as sorry as it seemed sometimes. There was Frank Littleton, the laziest man in the county and maybe the whole state. Behind him was Bertha Bottoms, giving sideways glances over her nose at the rest of the gathering. On the other side of the aisle sat Emily Lou Davis, she fluttered her eyelids as his glance paused on her more than a second. Over her shoulder was the new Game Warden, now that was interesting, first Warden that had ever attended his church. Polk smiled to himself, pleased. And in the back row was Earl the town drunk and Poachin' Tom, both a couple of real no accounts. Polk bristled, he was sure they came each and every Sunday just to irritate him. Why couldn't they just sleep through the better part of the day with a hangover like they did every other day of the week?

Preparing to begin his sermon, Preacher Polk cleared his throat loud enough to bring the attention of the small chapel's gathering to bear on him. Opening his mouth to start his practiced fire and brimstone he felt suddenly overwhelmed with inspiration. Yes! The Lord was speaking through him today and he had a special message for a certain Tom here today!

Well, just about everyone in the room had one time or another got to feel the heat of one of Preacher Polk's "inspirations." Except for Tom and Earl who always sat in the back out of the good light where the Preacher could focus his less than perfect vision. But today for some reason the preacher could see Tom clearly and so he began.

"God has made our world, each creature and insect and every Mountain and tree, as he so declares to us in the book of Genesis. He has made man in his own image and given to him all the fruits of the earth to serve all of mankind's needs in life."

Preacher felt himself warming up, "God has given us the fruit of the trees and the roots of the herbs." He glared across the room daring anyone to meet his gaze, none did. "He has given us the animals for food and clothing...", the Preacher left a long pause to gain affect, "but he has not given of all that he has created so that we may abuse his gifts for our own perverted little desires."

As a side thought he recognized that Emily had squirmed in her pew as she always did when he used the word "perverted", which was why he so often did.

"No, my friends, there is evil underfoot in Cord's Lick, an evil that abuses God's gifts that he hath created with his own loving hands."

Most of the congregation was sitting up with anticipation now waiting for the blow to fall, privately guessing on who it would land.

The Preacher had them. He saw the expectant looks directed at him, the rapt attention that told him he was once more in control. Now was the time to drop the bomb.

"And so I say to you, he who refuses to obey the laws of God and Man, wantonly killing the beasts of God's kingdom for his own personal gains is a heinous creature likened unto the Devil, Satan, himself!"

Amens and Hallelujahs blurted from several parts of the little Chapel.

Tom's basking reverie was shattered as the Preacher's words filtered through his daydreams. He looked wildly about to see that the entire congregation was staring at him with looks mixed with hate and disgust. Tom leaped to his feet and dashed out the door not slowing down till he was half way up Tanner's Ridge.

Damn that Preacher, Damn! What had caused him to attack poor ole Tom like that? Jesus, he felt like shit. Why did he have to pick on Tom? Why? Shit, shit, shit.

Tom alternated walking and running the rest of the way back to his cabin. Crossing into his own yard he finally started to feel safe but he still went inside right away dropping the bar on the door behind him. Tom pulled several jars of moonshine down and proceeded to calm his fears until he passed out.

The woods had peace the next several nights as Tom refused to leave his cabin staying drunk night and day. On the third day Tom finally quit drinking.

"Foolishness, just damn foolishness" he told himself "that there Preacher ain't never said nothing but foolishness."

Still Tom felt uneasy and angry. He stayed off the shine for the rest of the day and even went out back behind the cabin in the late afternoon. By nightfall he was dead tired. Crossing the cabin Tom flopped on his cot without undressing asleep before he hit the tick mattress.

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The big buck loomed in front of Tom caught in the spotlight unable to escape. Its face was close enough to touch. Tears began to roll out of its big dark eyes.

"Oh Tom. You kill and kill and kill. Evil. Tom the evil is in you."

Tom jerked away from the deer. Moving back his eyes glanced down to see that everywhere the tears from the buck's eyes had touched the ground little fires had started. Tom threw his arm in front of his face warding off the beast before him only to have his arm turn into gun. Bang! The gun fired. The buck dropped dead. "No, no!" shouted Tom. Suddenly the entire deer began to smoke. The smoke thickened then took shape. The figure of an Angel took shape before Tom.

"So this is how you treat God's gifts?" the Angel said and moved toward Tom.

Tom jerked his body around to run and promptly fell out of bed on his head. Drenched with sweat he shook himself realizing he had been dreaming.

Tom poured down his third cup of coffee. His fear had turned to anger. Just what he needed. That damn Preacher and then bad shine. Well, shit, he'd show them you can't keep Poachin' Tom down, no sir!

Tom parked the truck on the west side of Tanner's Ridge. The place he was going tonight was by foot only. He was going to get the old mossyhorn buck of Tanner's Ridge.

The evening was warm but Tom still had a slight chill that kept sending a shiver down his back. Damn, that was really some bad shine he thought. He slipped out over the crest of the ridge and slid out onto the east side just above a small but deep cut in the side of the ridge. Tom settled down to wait for the buck he knew would come.

The moon was almost in its dark phase, shedding only enough light to make the shadows dance. Tom watched and waited his attention never leaving the little cut. A movement caught his attention, he held his breath. It was the buck moving up the cut, just like he knew it would.

With the buck in front of him, Tom clicked on his portable spotlight. The deer was caught in the beam like a fly on flypaper its natural senses dulled having never seen a human on this side of the ridge before. Tom held his breath and fired feeling the gun buck against his shoulder. But in that instant his feet slid out from under him. He fell in a skid of loose rock and dirt. The spot flew from his hand to land somewhere below him. He heard the shattering of glass as it hit. In the flickering moonlight he saw the buck move up the other side of the draw.

It couldn't be! He had shot it at point blank range in the head! It had to be dead! Suddenly Tom's ears filled with a roaring sound. He searched the bank for the buck. There it was! He fired again and the deer jerked or, no! The deer had grown wings!

Tom raised his gun again. Suddenly he was blinded with a light like he had never seen before. He tried to run but it pinned him down. He couldn't see anything, didn't know which way to run! He froze filling with fear and confusion...just like the deer! Oh God! Please God! Don't, please don't! Tom screamed, heard the shot ring out then he knew no more.

"Damndest thing Sheriff, I slipped up over the ridge and swung the helicopter's spot on him and he started screaming then he keeled over right beside that big buck he'd killed."

"Well the coroner said it was his heart and the moonshine so don't blame yourself."

The Warden and the Sheriff grew silent as the Preacher gave the final send off to Ole Poachin' Tom.

"And so it is that our good friend Tom has gone to join his savior, Jesus Christ, to lay forever in God's grace," the Preacher peeked around to make sure everyone one was praying respectfully, "no longer to be of the worries of this world, released of his" the Preacher looked up "perversions", Emily squirmed and the Preacher smiled to himself, "forever."