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## Eyebrow

**C**HRISTMAS was in several days. It was unusually warm for December. I had my sleeves rolled up on the flannel shirt I was wearing. Ed and I had been over on the Potomac River oystering, and things had not gone so well. The oysters had been poor and had looked clear as an old sea nettle. We had also caught a mess of soups and snaps\* that we couldn't sell. We had made very little money.

I was sitting up on the pilothouse of the canoe watching for the turn at Tangier Light which leads into Cod Harbor. We moored the boat there near a landing close to my house. I dreaded the homecoming because Ed and I had made just enough money to buy a turkey apiece and a small bag of

\*Soups are small oysters, and snaps are long narrow oysters which are difficult to open. Neither are highly valued.

black walnuts. The turkeys were gobbling and scratching back near the stern where they were tied to a timber. I had drilled a hole through one several years ago for just that purpose—to hold the turkeys.

We had also cut several cedar trees for our families and friends on the western shore near Lewisetta. Trees are hard to come by on Tangier since there are hardly any growing on the island. Most all the trees came from the western or eastern shores.

It would surely be a sad homecoming with no presents for the children, and I hated the thought of it. I knew my wife already knew our plight since most of the boys, who were oystering with us, had left the week before. Ed and I had stayed the extra time hoping to find a lump of oysters, but it was not to come. Another problem was the wind that had often been from the southwest. This meant that when the tide was falling, there was a cross tide, and that made it hard to catch many oysters. We would have had to make a lick sideways across the tide.

I got up and went aft to talk to Ed who looked dazed in thought. "Ed, do you think those white bags of walnuts, we bought, had anything to do with our bad luck?" "Nope," he said.

The old-timers around Tangier used to say to bring a bag of black walnuts home from oystering was bad luck. It was just an old watermen's superstition. It obviously never bothered anyone too terribly much because most all of us would bring home a white bag every Christmas.

As I leaned against the collars of the boat, I shuffled the tongs about just to make certain they were secure. It was getting a bit choppy. We used sixteen-foot shafts on the Potomac because the water is not deep on the oyster rocks.

The shafts were made of swamp or black ash, which was only good for the short shaft tongs, because anything over sixteen feet would bend the ash too much.

I pondered what I'd have to do at home to make enough money for the children and Ida to have a fine Christmas with gifts and candy. Also, I wondered about the rest of the winter. In those days, however, it was not so much a problem because the stores would give tick (credit) and would carry a family an entire winter if necessary.

I thought about what I might have to sell, and there wasn't much to think about. My gun was the best on the island, but without it there would be little or no meat on the table, other than some salt fish. I couldn't sell her. She was a ten-gauge double-barreled Ithica. The barrel was thirty-two inches long.

I had plenty of decoys but so did everybody else on Tangier. Most of mine had been bought out of Sears Roebuck catalogue and made from white cedar. They were pretty good decoys and would not sink if you shot one. Most of them I had bought as a boy, and I can still remember unwrapping them. They arrived with newspaper print still visible on them from the paper they were wrapped in. The cost was around three dollars a dozen, and there would be eight drakes and four hens to a dozen. I had mallards, canvasbacks, redheads, bluebills, teal, and pintail. My geese and brant decoys were handmade from the Eastern Shore.

There was one thing, however, I knew I could sell, but I hated the thought of it. I had me an old goose named Eyebrow that was one of the best tollers\* ever to be on Tangier. I'd bought her from an old gunner on the Eastern

\*A toller is a live duck or goose used as a decoy by a hunter.

Shore when I was crabbing over that way. Old Eyebrow had sort of a reputation on the island, and there was one old gunner who had been after me to sell her to him.

I'd made the mistake of taking Eyebrow on a hunting trip with the old fellow and let him see what a real toller could do. He had been worrying me to death about selling her ever since. What a waste, he would say. You are off oystering and use the goose so little. Old Eyebrow was smart. I didn't work her too hard but when we did work, she did the job.

"Elmer, Elmer wake up." I heard. It was Ed. "You've been thinking right hard about something haven't you."

"Yep," I said.

"We are almost home now," said Ed.

I hadn't realized it, but we were at the mouth of the little ditch where I moored my boat. Ed pulled on up to the little dock there by the bank, and we quickly tied up and went on home to see the family. We would return later to take care of our gear and clean things up.

The walk home wasn't very far. When I got just about home I could see the chickens out by the hen house and there was old Eyebrow standing there watching me walk up the lane. She was a square-breasted old cuss because of being corn fed.

Ida was waiting at the stoop when I got to the white picket fence in front of my house. She came out and gave me a big hug. The children swarmed around me, and I picked each one up for a kiss. I sent the boys back to the boat to get the turkey and the Christmas trees. I had gotten two extras for relatives on the island.

I gave Ida the white bag filled with walnuts. She said the nuts would be good in the cakes she was baking. I told her

about the money situation, but it didn't seem to worry her. We had been out of money before.

After supper that night, I went down to Captain Peters store to talk to the boys. The old wood stove was blazing even though it wasn't needed. I was sitting around talking when old Clarence came in. The first thing he said was, "Elmer, I hear you boys didn't make any money oystering over on the Potomac. Why don't you sell me that good-for-nothing goose, so you can have a Christmas for your family."

I told him I wasn't sure I wanted to sell, but to come by after he got back from hunting in the morning, and we could talk about it. I didn't want to sell Eyebrow, but I knew I'd have to do something and besides I wasn't making a living as a hunter. It wouldn't be like selling my boat or my tongs. But, old Eyebrow was special and the thought of selling her made me hurt inside. She was like part of the family.

When I got home, I told Ida what I was going to do. She didn't say much except there was a little money from some washing she had done for a lady there on Tangier. It had gotten chilly during the night before I went to bed, so I started a fire in the stove and banked it up real high so it would last the night. Christmas Eve was tomorrow, and I hoped Clarence would come early.

The next morning I got up early and went out to the side shed by the house and was working on tong shafts when I saw Clarence coming down the lane. The dog started yelping as soon as he got inside the gate. Clarence backed outside and yelled to me, "Hey, Elmer that dog won't bite me will he."

"No, but watch out for that old goose," I said with a laugh.

"You want to sell that goose?" he asked, still not inside the gate.

"I've seen the old toller hunt and I know she is a good one, but I haven't done real good this year with the law tightening up like they have," he said.

"Don't give me that stuff, Clarence. You're the best darn hunter alive and I've heard them talk about all those canvas-backs and bluebills you killed," I said. "There were solid wheelbarrows full."

Clarence fumbled for words and then said, "All right, what do you want for the old cuss."

I told him what I wanted, and he paid it right on the spot and went out into the yard to catch Eyebrow. It was a sight to behold. The old goose started chasing Clarence up and down the yard. She was hissing and carrying on. It was all I could do not to laugh.

"Come here, goose," I yelled.

Eyebrow stopped and walked over to me. She knew what was going to happen next. I'd hoped she would have gone with Clarence without me having to help.

"Give me the sack!" I said. I reached down, picked her up by the neck and put her in the grass sack.

Ida and I left the children with some friends that afternoon and went down to Captain Peter's store. I bought all the boys a two-bladed Tree Brand pocket knife, and we got dolls for the girls. It would be a fine Christmas, and it was worth selling the old goose when the next morning the children got up and found a few presents and candy from Santa Claus.

It got cold the next few days, and ice began to come. Ed and I decided to stay home for awhile and not go back to the Potomac right away. Oystering wasn't much count anyway. We decided to go hunting. I had the two mallards that I tied to my blind over on Shanks Island, and Ed and I killed a few when we went.

My blind was close to where Clarence had a blind, and one afternoon coming home, Ed asked if Eyebrow was doing any good for Clarence.

I told him I hadn't heard anyone say. Naturally, if he wasn't I wouldn't hear because Clarence wouldn't tell anyone if he wasn't getting any birds. He was the hunter on Tangier and known for his skill as a marksman up and down the Bay.

"Let's ride over to his blind on Fishbone and see how he is doing," said Ed. When we got over there, Clarence was setting up in his little gunning skiff getting ready to pole home.

"How is the old goose doing for you, Clarence?" I asked.

"You stuck me, boy, the old goose won't talk a bit." Eyebrow was in the water swimming around not making a sound. "Clarence, let me come with you tomorrow and see if I can't get her to bring some birds down," I said.

"All right, but I don't think she can do it anymore," he said.

I told Ed I would go hunting alone the next day. Ed said he was going to our seine house to mend several of the nets that needed repair anyway.

The next morning I was up well before light and pushed across to Clarence's blind. When I got there the old gunner had already killed a mess of ducks. No thanks to the old goose he said. "She just won't talk," he said.

It was an overcast day and cold. Ice was forming in the blind that was in shallow water. Most of the blinds were in the shoal waters around Shanks, Fishbone, Watts, and Piney islands. Many a duck and goose has been killed around those places.

"The first thing you've got to do is untie the goose," I said. "She doesn't like to be tied up like a common toller. This is a special bird."

I had had the old goose for a long time, and I knew what she could do. There was something strange about all this, however. When Clarence untied Eyebrow she just swam around and didn't make a sound. "See, what did I tell you," Clarence said. "She ain't worth a hoot."

The entire day we hunted and killed a good mess, but Clarence was right; Eyebrow just sat there while the other tollers brought in the birds. "I'm going to kill that bird and have her for supper," said Clarence.

"I tell you what, Clarence, I'll buy her back from you." Clarence looked at me and said, "Will you give me what I paid for her?"

I told him it was too much for an old goose, and we settled for what I had left after Christmas.

"Give me the money and get on out of here," said Clarence. I picked up Eyebrow, and we shoved on back to Tangier. When I got back, Ed was breaking the ice around the dock, so it would not pull the pier up. It didn't make any difference because every year we had to put the dock back down if there was any ice at all.

"I see you got the old goose back, Elmer," said Ed.

"Yep."

"Are we going hunting in the morning?" Ed asked.

"Yep."

The next morning there was a mist of snow falling. It was a good morning for hunting. Ed came by before light and asked if I wanted to take the other ducks there in the yard. I shook my head no. I want to see what the problem is with Eyebrow.

When we got to the blind, I let the old goose swim and unlike the day before she started talking. We hadn't been there five minutes when a flock flew directly overhead too high for a shot, however. Eyebrow was raising a time trying to bring them down. This happened two or three times with the geese flying on by.

"Look over there, Elmer," Ed said in a whisper. A flock of geese was coming in close. Suddenly, the old goose took to the air and sailed up into the flock. Eyebrow guided the flock into range, and, as if she knew how close to come, veered off as the geese came into range. Ed and I unloaded, and we filled up our little gunning skiff that day.

The whole way home Ed kept asking me how I got that old goose away from Clarence. All I said was Eyebrow knew what she wanted and how to get it. That was one heck of a goose, by golly.