

Groundhog

Forrest Pritchard

Table of Contents

Groundhog.....1
 Forrest Pritchard.....1

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If you grab a groundhog by the tail he's liable to either bite you or ask you which county you're from.

from Abel's West Virginia Sayings

To hear Cecil tell it, it weren't more than a couple years back. But little Chuck's grown up, and big Chuck and Mrs. Peters ain't half as spry as they used to be. It was a little while before you came, back when the Tompkins were still living in your all's place. Little Chuck was only a little guy back then, and big Chuck was still working with the saw mill's gang.

You know that old dirt road just down around the corner? Well, there used to be an old labor camp where the pickers used to stay in the fall. That had been all grown over for some time, and Chuck used to get his firewood there. Little Chuck weren't much bigger than my knee when big Chuck would have him out there, picking up kindling sticks and dried bark and such. Chuck had a great big wood burning stove back then, heating up the whole house with it.

Now, big Chuck had an old stack of wood behind his house. He'd get so much wood in the fall that come winter he'd have enough to last clear through. As it was, he never got to the bottom of it, and there was logs down on the ground that was either half-sunk in the dirt or rotted away. But it came to one fall where Chuck had been laid up with a busted foot from the mill, and he didn't get as much cutting done as he'd like. Folks weren't around so much then as they are now, but a couple of fellahs brought a cord or two of hickory over. That's hard, slow burning wood, and it pushed them through the last big snow. With what he had left over from the year before they made out all right, and it was only toward the last cold snap that they reached the bottom.

Little Chuck was real little, but he could carry an armload of sticks, and sometimes manage to wrassle a good sized-log in when big Chuck was out working or Mrs. Peters was busy. The pile was getting to the bottom, and little Chuck was left with what he could get. As it was getting a little bit warmer, he was able to pull some of the half-sunk wood out of the ground that weren't rotted too bad. Even back then, he was always careful to bang the dirt off the sticks before he brought them in the house. He was a smart little guy.

It happened that Chuck had a garden next to his woodpile so he could throw the chips and mulch without much work. But what he didn't know was that a groundhog had come by near the end of summer to settle himself under the woodpile for his winter nap. Big Chuck figures that the old hog wanted to get an early jump on spring, it being right near the snap peas, and all. So here was little Chuck pulling and tugging on a old stick stuck in the ground when out it comes bringing with it a big hunk of dirt. Little Chuck saw that he'd made a good-sized hole in the ground, and when he looked down in it he seen that woodchuck curled up real dead-like. What had really happened was he'd pulled the top off the burrow, and caught that hog napping. Like I said, there was a little cold snap, and the groundhog hadn't woken up any yet.

Chuck forgot about hauling wood, I tell you! Here was an honest-to-goodness dead woodchuck thrown right at his feet! Just to make sure, he grabbed a long piece of kindling wood and poked him a little bit. Little Chuck knew

Groundhog

better than to go around messing with critters without first making sure they was dead. When the hog didn't move any he was so happy he reached down and grabbed it around the middle and pulled it out and took it right in the house. He didn't know what to think. His story is, he thought it was stone-cold dead, but I ask him later, "Why then did you want to bring an old dead varmint in the house for, anyway," but even ten years later he'd just smile and shrug his shoulders. That little Chuck was just a little boy, after all.

He took it straight away to his room and laid down and set there looking at it for awhile. But it weren't too long before little Chuck heard his pa hollering about the firewood he was supposed to have brung in, so he went back out to get an arm-load before he got a whipping. But while he was outside, that groundhog perked himself up a bit and decided to have a look at his new surroundings. It weren't that often that he had laid down one place and woke up in another, and he was mighty confounded. He wobbled around a little bit, and since little Chuck had left his door open, the hog made off toward the living room where that nice warm fire was burning. Now, it happened that big Chuck had cleaned out the old wood stove earlier, and left the bucket full of ashes setting next to the fireplace. When that groundhog caught a snoot-full of those warm ashes, he decided to climb up in there and make a little nest for himself. Those hogs love that sort of thing. By the time he got well-settled in he had rolled around so much that his fur was near pure-white. But Chuck must have left a hot coal in there or two, though, 'cause that woodchuck sprung out of the bucket, knocking ashes all over the floor. Then he scurried back to little Chuck's room to work on his burnt fur.

By this time little Chuck came in with big Chuck, as he was too little to put the wood in by himself. They both saw those ashes all over the place, and little Chuck didn't know what had happened. But he seen that big Chuck was getting a look in his eyes that meant a whipping was coming. He knew he hadn't done it, but instead of trying to explain it to his pa he just lain down the wood while his pa was inspecting the damage, and ran to his room before big Chuck could collar him. Big Chuck weren't so mad. He knew how boys are, and figured that little Chuck had just wanted to help him with cleaning out the ashes some. He was straightaway disappointed that his son hadn't done a better job, though.

That groundhog heard little Chuck coming and he didn't know what to do. From his instincts he backed himself into a corner so as to have a good defense. Little Chuck had plumb near forgot about the groundhog for fear of his daddy's switch, and as he locked his door (just in case) he thought he could breathe easy. Now, the Peters ain't no more superstitious than your average family, but when little Chuck saw that his dead groundhog was not only up and about, but white as a sheet to boot, he thought twice about the ghost-stories he'd heard. If he had known that he was going to bring a spook in the house, and a groundhog spook at that, he would have left it in the hole instead of disturbing its peace.

He stood there looking at the groundhog, and the groundhog sat there looking at him. Neither one of them moved an inch, they was both so paralyzed with fear. Little Chuck couldn't stand it anymore. He give out a scream and threw his hands in the air. The groundhog thought that this was an attack, and he stood up on his hind legs, barred his teeth, and give out a hiss like a rattle-snake. This scared little Chuck about half-way out of his skull, and he started crying and begging that groundhog not to kill him. He tried to open the door but forgot to unlock it. Looking over his shoulder, he seen that groundhog coming toward him, paws out front, like in that Frankenstein movie he had seen in town. He seen death in those eyes. The groundhog wasn't sure what was going on, but he gave out another hiss and decided to watch what happened. That hissing set little Chuck's hair straight out on end, and he knew that if it hissed again he'd be a goner for certain. He was crying and blubbering so hard that he could hardly see straight, but he managed to get the door open and get outside. The groundhog was a might bit perturbed by all of the excitement, so he licked himself clean and curled up to sleep.

Little Chuck knew that one way or another, he was bound to get a whipping. First off, he had brought a dead varmint in the house without cleaning it or making sure that it was really dead. Second, his room was now haunted, and he'd probably have to get Reverend Lester down the road for an ex-cer-cizing. Third off, he had forgot his chores and his pa thought he'd made a mess of the living room. After he thought about it for a while, he

Groundhog

decided to pretend that nothing at all had happened, and kind of play it by ear. On second thought, though, he was a little sorry that he couldn't ever go in his room again.

Anyway, it weren't too long before little Chuck got called to dinner. He held his breath when he walked past his room as to fend off any evil spirits lurking about the place. When he looked in though, that groundhog was nowhere to be seen. At dinner he brought it up that he had found an old dead groundhog under the woodpile, and big Chuck said that it was right peculiar to find a groundhog out and about, dead even, this early. Little Chuck said that it weren't out and about at all, but underground. Big Chuck asked him how he'd happen to see a groundhog underground, and little Chuck told how he'd pulled the log out. Mrs. Peters asked him what he'd done with it, and little Chuck, remembering his plan, said he'd just poked it with a stick and left it lying there. Big Chuck said that the woodchuck was probably hibernating, and that he'd go have a look after dinner.

But it was just about this time that that old groundhog decided to poke his head around the corner to see what smelled so good (it was probably Mrs. Peters's cooking—greens). Jake, their hound dog, was sitting right under the table though, and he caught a big whuff of that critter and set so suddenly to barking that big Chuck jumped about clean out of his skin. That groundhog thought twice about those greens after seeing old Jake, and he turned tail and run the other way. Big Chuck and Mrs. Peters couldn't figure out what had set Jake off so, but little Chuck had a pretty good idea. Mrs. Peters was just going in to see what Jake was up to when in come that groundhog running like his tail was on fire. She was coming toward him just like he was coming toward her, and when they smacked each other, they fell back, stunned—like. Mrs. Peters screamed. The groundhog let out a scream. Mrs. Peters screamed again, and the groundhog, who was pretty confused by this time, jumped straight at her. Now, whether Mrs. Peters fainted or whether that groundhog was full of super—strength from the excitement, nobody could ever say. But woman and critter both went down in a tumble of hair and fur before the groundhog straightened himself out and got away again.

By this time big Chuck had figured out what was going on. He pulled his twelve—gauge down from the wall, and checked his shells. That boy was still recovering from his surprise at seeing that groundhog alive and whole when he saw his pa swinging that gun around. Little Chuck thought big Chuck was going to shoot him for being so bad, so he started crying and screaming again. Big Chuck figured that the only way to settle the whole thing was to get the job done himself, so he set off with his gun.

Meantime, Jake thought he had that woodchuck cornered, but it made such a show of clawing and biting that he let down his guard and it got away. Big Chuck run after him with his gun, following it into the living room. That hog jumped up on the bureau, and stood still, possum—like, hoping Chuck wouldn't see him. But Chuck caught sight of him from the corner of his eye and let out a blast from his twelve—gauge. The hog had a half—second jump on him though, and Chuck accidentally blew up a self—portrait that his mother—in—law had sent them for Christmas. To hear Chuck tell it, I'm not so sure he wasn't aiming for it.

That groundhog had finally run out of steam, and when Chuck caught up to it he had no trouble with grabbing it around the scruff of the neck. He was feeling real ornery, so he took it straight to the kitchen and made quick work of it with his knife. The next night they invited me over, and we all ate groundhog stew with Mrs. Peters' hot buttered biscuits.

That's the whole of it. You can go ask old Chuck, too, if you don't believe me. But don't ask Cecil. He never could get that story right.