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The Deerslayer, the Bootmaker, and the Violin Player, Part 1

by Scott McPherson

Once there lived a man called “The Deerslayer.” The Deerslayer lived in the plush green valley of a rugged mountain range and survived through his cunning and skillful use of a rifle to hunt game. His mountain valley home was far to the north; he saw only a few short months of warm weather each year.

His travels took him far and wide; he often spent days climbing high into the mountains in search of meat. The Deerslayer was a hard-working man, who applied a strong sense of pride to his work. If the misfortune of the day (or week) should send him home empty-handed, the Deerslayer looked to no one else to feed him. He went hungry. The Deerslayer set his life to a schedule. He would never eat all that he killed. As a rule, he held enough food in reserve to get him through the next several days, should he run into a string of bad luck.

However, he did have to face certain realities. Through the long, cold months his hunting was restricted by the harsh weather, because, though the Deerslayer was an expert hunter, he was not a very good maker of boots. His footwear was often inadequate to protect his feet from the cold. This fact kept the Deerslayer from eating properly during the winter months. After all, if he could not get out to hunt, he could not eat. For all of his skill, his remained a hand-to-mouth existence.

Across the valley there lived a man called “The Bootmaker.” The Bootmaker was a portly man, who did not get about easily and spent his time before his fire making clothes. When he had animal skins, he rarely suffered from the elements, because his was a fine hand at crafting garments that protected him from Mother Nature. He, too, took great pride in his work. Trousers and shirts he could make quite well, but the Bootmaker reserved his greatest energies for his greatest pride — the making of the finest boots in all the land.

Unfortunately, the Bootmaker was not much of a hunter. Many a night he spent huddled before his fire, cold and empty in his stomach for lack of a decent meal. And with no skins, he also went without adequate clothing.

One particularly cold day, the Bootmaker was walking back to his cabin after another unsuccessful hunt, when he happened across his neighbor. "Hello," he called across to where the Deerslayer was filling a cup from the stream. "My feet are warm this evening, but my stomach is not. If only I were half the hunter you are, I should eat like a king!" To which the Deerslayer replied, "And if I were half the bootmaker as yourself, I should be out plying my great skill this very moment, rather than drinking water for my dinner!"

"Well let us drink together this evening," suggested the Bootmaker, "and talk away the hours that might go by more slowly with nothing else to hear but our grumbling bellies."

And that cold night, something amazing happened. The Deerslayer watched in awe as the Bootmaker wound his thread through a fine deerskin, gently molding and shaping the material to create a pair of beautiful boots. Looking down at his exposed toes, the Deerslayer was struck by an idea.

"Bootmaker," he said to his companion, "what if you were to give me those boots you are making this evening? With those on my feet, I could hunt far into the mountains and bring back a deer and split the meat with you, half each."

The Bootmaker sat quietly for a moment, pondering. "I don't know," he answered. "It takes a great deal of time to make a pair of boots, time that will be deflected from my own hunting and keep me from feeding myself. I think that I should need three-quarters of the deer all to myself in exchange for a pair of boots. If this is agreeable to you, then you may have these boots that I am finishing tonight."

"It's a deal," said the Deerslayer, reaching across to shake the Bootmaker's hand. "With your fine boots, I can travel farther and stay out longer in search of game."

"Indeed," said the Bootmaker, "and with your skill, I shall have a decent meal tomorrow for the first time in weeks!"

And so it went. The next day, the Deerslayer had his new boots. And that evening, the Bootmaker ate like a king.

But soon, fine as they were, the Deerslayer's boots again wore through. The Bootmaker again found himself tromping back to his cabin, empty-handed. Sitting hungry by his fire, the Bootmaker realized how much valuable time and energy he was wasting struggling to hunt for himself. The Deerslayer spent hours in frustration as he tried to mend another pair of decrepit boots.

So they decided that the Deerslayer should dedicate his time to hunting, and the Bootmaker to sewing. Each would do what he was best at and trade the other for what he could do well, freeing each from squandering time on something the other could do more easily. "Here is another skin," the Deerslayer would say after returning from a successful hunt. "Make me more clothes and I shall pay you with meat."

Without having to worry about his garb, the Deerslayer was able to spend his days in the field, bringing home more meat to eat and trade — he stayed fed, and his wardrobe grew exponentially. At first, the Bootmaker got only meat out of the deal, but soon he suggested making specialty items like gloves and socks for the Deerslayer. In exchange he asked that he be able to keep half of the skins for his own personal use. With plenty of food available to barter for and a steady supply of animal skins to work with, he stayed well fed and his wardrobe likewise improved. “As long as I don’t have to worry about grub, and you don’t have to worry about your duds,” the Bootmaker laughed, “there will be more of everything for us both!” The Deerslayer heartily agreed.

Their friendship flourished. The men’s stomachs stayed full, and their backs stayed warm against the cold northern winds. They ate, traded, and modestly prospered. For the first time in their lives starvation and nature were being kept comfortably at bay. When differences between the two men arose, they settled them peacefully, so that neither might suffer for lack of the other’s addition to his life.

One evening, after the Deerslayer had returned from a particularly successful hunt and warmed his hands by the Bootmaker’s fire, there came a knock at the cabin door. The Bootmaker opened the door, and in walked a man half naked in his dress, feet bruised and bleeding from the frozen ground, and the gaunt look of one who had not eaten for some time.

“I am the Violin Player,” he announced to the room, holding out a magnificent violin of finely carved wood, “and my music is more pleasing than the chirping birds, more soothing than a gentle spring, and more uplifting than the sunrise on a waterfall!”

The Bootmaker welcomed the man to his fire, and offered him a cup of water and a bowl of warm broth. “What brings you into our fine valley?” asked the Bootmaker, after the stranger had a few swallows. “The weather is cold, and the wind blows strong, and you are far from properly dressed to suffer either’s abuse.”

The Violin Player set down his cup, waved his instrument in the air, and said, “I have come to bring you music!” And with this, he began to play.

When he had finished, he addressed the Bootmaker: “Word over the mountains is that you make the finest clothes around, and that you,” he said, turning to the Deerslayer, “are a hunter of no compare. I wish to stay in this valley and play for you, so that you might put clothes on my back and food in my stomach. With such security, it would be easier for me to make my beautiful music!”

“Thank you for your compliments,” said the Deerslayer, after a brief pause. “True, we are those of whom you speak. And heaven knows it has been long since we heard so sweet a tune, but our food is sufficient only to feed ourselves, and the trousers, shirts, and boots the Bootmaker provides are too few to clothe more than just us two.”

“Yes,” said the Bootmaker, “you are welcome to warm yourself at this fire, and enjoy the broth — it is a gift. And should you desire to lift your violin to your cheek again and play another song, we would be most delighted. But I’m afraid that it is not so important to us to justify the expense of a deerskin or the meat we get out of it.”

The Violin Player set his bowl down sharply, spilling a little broth over its edge, and spoke with a touch of irritation in his voice. “What do you mean? You are dressed so well, and you are obviously not going hungry as am I. Do you mean to tell me that two as blessed as you, enriched as you are with material success, will not part with a pittance to retain my services as your entertainer?”

“Your music is wonderful,” admitted the Bootmaker, “but our clothes and food are not yours to measure. True, we have squirreled away a little for the future. But we have also worked hard for what we have, based on a desire to trade for one another’s services, determined by the amount each is willing to give in exchange for what he will receive, fixed by the usefulness each attaches to the other’s offering.

“Your music,” he continued, “as grand as it would be to our ears, will not protect us from the cold should these clothes wear out with nothing to replace them, because you are wearing what we kept in reserve. It will not fill our empty stomachs if the animals should leave the mountains surrounding this valley, because you have eaten what we stored for just such an emergency,” he said.

“But you admit my music is grand! Yet you will not pay to hear it?”

“No, we will not,” said the Bootmaker. “But,” he added quickly, “perhaps if you were to gather wood for our fires, we might be relieved of that burden and have more time to hunt and sew — and in turn reward you for your contribution toward our endeavors.”

“You would reduce me to gathering wood?” asked the Violin Player, contemptuously. “How dare you attempt to reduce someone of my abilities to a common laborer. Hah! Gather wood indeed! Across the mountains, in the village, they love to hear my songs, and demand that I play long into the night!”

“Then play for them,” said the Deerslayer, showing the Violin Player to the door. “And ask them to feed you.”

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