Natural-Born Proud

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III

The Old Man decided he had to preach the Sunday night sermon himself, so we didn’t get to bed until about eleven o’clock that night. Too excited to sleep, Bub and I talked for awhile.

“Think you’ll be able to hit a deer, Satch?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “All you gotta do is aim like the Old Man showed us. I just hope we see some.”

“Oh, we will,” Bub said.

Then, exhausted despite our anticipation, we both fell into that fitful, gray, floating space between sleeping and waking for the few hours before three A.M.

I don’t recall whether it was the smell of the ham Mom was frying for breakfast or the sound of the Old Man moving around out in the hall that woke us up, but when he knocked on our door, we were already up and scrambling into our clothes. Mom made us a good, hot meal and filled two thermoses with coffee. Then she fussed around petting and kissing us, especially her baby Bub, as we got into the car. She told the Old Man,

“Be careful with my boys,” and waved us out of the driveway. We headed down the hill into Monterey Bay’s early morning fog to pick up Willis to go deer hunting.

We left between four-thirty and five in the morning, but Deke and Smitty had taken off in the truck at midnight so they could cover the four hundred-odd miles to Modoc in time to start setting up camp before we arrived. Since he had attended Sunday night services too, Deke hadn’t slept much, but with Smitty along to help him drive or at least to keep him company, he wouldn’t doze off, as he was prone to do on long drives. The Old Man’s ‘51 Oldsmobile 98 would cover the distance much more quickly than the Weapons
Carrier. A big, two-toned blue Holiday sedan with a bright, smiling, chrome grill and a soft, comfortable interior, the Olds would put us there well before time for dinner.

Smitty was twenty-three, and recently back from two years in the army, one of those in Korea. He was the middle son of my dad’s older brother, Buster. He was full of talk about the war and the “goddamned gooks,” though he wouldn’t use those exact words in front of the Old Man. I never knew for sure if he had actually killed anyone, but he had come back from Korea more temperamental and short-fused than he had been before he went. He’d cuss and threaten to fight quickly, but he was a good traveling mate for Deke because he’d laugh and tell stories all the way to Modoc.

Joe Willis was already up and set to go when we reached his ramshackle house at the back of the wrecking yard. I had known him for five or six years I guess, but I still thought him a funny-looking white man. He was about Deke’s height, but skinny, distinguished only by his fire-red face and hairy, freckled arms and hands. He had a high-pitched voice and talked real fast, his voice seeming to come out from his nose. He was older than my dad, but followed him around like a boy, saying, “Well, praise the Lord, Rev,” which always sounded to me like “Press a Lord, Ref.” He was a Pentecostal preacher, too, but he didn’t have a congregation of his own. When he didn’t go to Reverend Nystrom’s church, he came to the Old Man’s, where he got a chance now and again to preach, or to wrinkle up his red face and cry in the spirit.

I wasn’t surprised that my dad would take a white man hunting with us because he always taught us that what people did was what counted, not what color they were. Mom tried to teach us the same thing, but for some reason she didn’t seem as clear about it as the Old Man did. Back in those days, there was probably as much race prejudice on the Monterey Peninsula as there was anywhere else in California. I remember fighting with Italian boys who called me nigger, and I’ll never forget the day our Japanese friends, Johnny and Agnes, disappeared, never to be heard from again. I would discover later that Willis’s presence in our hunting party was a surprise to some people, but it wasn’t to him and us.
He opened the car door, grinned, and climbed into the front seat beside the Old Man. “Mornin, Ref,” he said. “Well, Press a Lord, we’re a gonna go git em. Howdy, boys. You ready?”

“You bet,” I replied, and Bub said simply, “Unh-hunh,” and slouched drowsily back into the seat to get comfortable. After putting Willis’s old .30-40 Krag in the trunk along with our guns and the other stuff, the Old Man moved the big car through town and picked up speed as we passed Fort Ord. We were finally off.

§ § § § §

Within an hour, the Old Man had slid up Highway 101 to San Juan Bautista and turned east toward Hollister. Bub was snoring quietly from his corner of the back seat. No matter how hard I tried not to, I kept dozing off myself. The car was warm and cozy inside, and its engine was so quiet we could barely hear it. It hummed me to sleep.

I woke up to find us dropping down the eastern slope of Pacheco Pass into the San Joaquin Valley. We were out of the coastal fog, so the air felt warm, and was thick with the smells of harvest. It was fruity, bringing back to my mind the sight of cut apricots sprayed with sulphur and spread out on long, wide, wooden trays in the sun to dry. The sweetness of fresh-cut alfalfa hung in the air like fog pockets. Moving through Patterson and Gustine toward Modesto and Stockton, I saw lights in barns where I guessed Portuguese dairymen were hooking their Holsteins up to milking machines. The Old Man and Willis were talking about Ben and Sissie again. Willis sniffed, weeping softly.

Willis poured a cup of coffee for him and the Old Man to share, and the Old Man turned on the radio. Nat “King” Cole crooned “Never Let Me Go.” Sometimes on long trips, the Old Man would let us listen to whatever came on the radio without tuning away from music to news or some all-night show that was all right for saved people to listen to. That morning, I thought dreamily about how much I liked church singers, The Soul Stirrers and The Pilgrim Travelers, Rosetta Tharpe and Marie Knight. But Nat Cole’s mellow oooohs and aaahs were even closer to my heart.

The Old Man slowed down as Highway 99 entered the outskirts of Stockton. Though the day was just dawning, already
TRACTORS, TRUCKS, COMBINES AND OTHER FARM VEHICLES, THEIR HEADLIGHTS ON AND STEAM PUFFING OUT OF THEIR EXHAUST PIPES, WERE TURNING ONTO AND OFF THE MAIN ROAD. FARM SUPPLY COMPANIES, CROP PROCESSING PLANTS AND HARDWARE STORES LINED THE STREET. PARKING LOTS FULL OF PICKUPS SURROUNDED NEARLY EVERY ONE OF THE EARLY-MORNING BREAKFAST JOINTS. THE AIR VIBRATED WITH FERTILITY AND SIGNALIZED THAT THE DAY WOULD BE HOT.

REVEREND WILLIAM PERKINS LIVED IN A BIG HOUSE ON A QUIET STREET LINED WITH FRUITLESS MULBERRY TREES OVER NEAR THE COLLEGE OF THE PACIFIC. IT WAS CREAM-COLORED, WITH WELL-KEPT LAWNS FRONT AND BACK, AND A WIDE, SMOOTH DRIVEWAY LEADING TO THE DOUBLE GARAGE WHERE HE PARKED HIS BRAND NEW ‘53 CHRYSLER. UNCA BILLY AND HIS WIFE BELLE HAD THREE DAUGHTERS, ALL MARRIED AND GONE AWAY FROM HOME, SO THEY LIVED IN THAT BIG HOUSE WITH ONLY A COCKER SPANIEL AND A BIG BLACK TOM CAT NAMED GHOST.

“HEY, Y’ALL,” UNCA BILLY HOLLERED DOWN OFF THE PORCH, AND HEADED FOR THE BACK OF THE CAR TO PUT HIS THINGS IN THE TRUNK. HIS GUN WAS A .35 REMINGTON CARBINE.

“HEY, UNCA BILLY,” THE OLD MAN ANSWERED.

“DEKE ’N SMITTY GIT OFF ALL RIGHT?”

“Yeah. They should be up above Red Bluff now,” the Old Man told him.

“MORNIN’ CHIRPED WILLIS AS HE GOT INTO THE BACK SEAT.

BUB MOVED INTO THE MIDDLE NEXT TO ME AND MUTTERED SLEEPILY, “MOVE OVER, SATCHE.”

UNCA BILLY SETTLED IN THE FRONT SEAT WHERE WILLIS HAD BEEN. HE WAS A LITTLE MAN, SHORT AND SLENDER. MOM CALLED HIM “NO-NECKED” BECAUSE HIS HEAD, WITH WHAT SHE THOUGHT WAS “GOOD HAIR” CURLED UP ALL OVER IT, SAT RIGHT ON TOP OF HIS NARROW SHOULDERS. HE HAD A GOLD CROWN ON HIS RIGHT FRONT TOOTH WHICH GLENTED WHEN HE SMILED. HE SMILED OFTEN, WHICH TOLD ME HE WAS PROUD OF IT. WHEN HE LAUGHED, A SMILE SHOWED ON HIS FACE, HIS GOLD CROWN FLASHED AND HIS UPPER BODY ROCKETED BACK AND FORTH, BUT NO SOUND CAME OUT OF HIS MOUTH. THE OLD MAN SAID HE WAS A BANTY ROOSTER. HE POSED WHEN HE STOOD AND STRUTTED WHEN HE WALKED.

UNCA BILLY WAS A HOLINESS PREACHER LIKE THE OLD MAN, BUT HIS CHURCH WAS A STOREFRONT DOWN NEAR STOCKTON’S CHINATOWN, NOT A
building of its own, like my dad’s. His big house and fancy car were for show. “Brotha Poikin,” as he put it, said his last name stood for what a coffee pot did on a stove.

As the Old Man backed out of the driveway, Unca Billy turned around to us and asked, “Y’all boys ready to go git ’em?”

“Yep,” I said.

“I’m gonna get two,” Bub answered, and everyone laughed. Since the Old Man hadn’t commanded it earlier, we bowed our heads while he said a prayer before leaving Unca Billy’s driveway. Then we took off on the hunt.

Driving up Highway 99 through all those little valley towns between Sacramento and Red Bluff—towns like Woodland, Zamora, Dunnigan and Arbuckle—we sang church songs into the early morning light:

Certainly, certainly...
Certainly, Lord.
Certainly, certainly...
Certainly, Lord.
Certainly, certainly...
Certainly, Lord.
Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord.

The Old Man and Unca Billy traded the lead back and forth on each chorus and then joined in to help sing the harmony on Certainly, certainly, certainly Lord.

All of us could sing, so the songs sounded good, and they filled the car with a half pious, half playful mood. We had an especially good time on “Oh, Mary, Don’t You Weep.” Every time we got past the first two lines:

Oh, Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you moan,
Oh, Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you moan,

and came to the line,

'Cause Pharoah’s army got drowned,

Brother Willis would hold the high note on drowned and the Old Man would add drowned in the sea real fast on the bass notes, so that one voice went up, one down, and the rest stayed in the middle. Then we’d all finish the last line in harmony,

Oh, Mary, don’t you weep.
We did “Take Your Burden to the Lord and Leave It There,” and lots of others, including some with one of the men singing the lead and the rest of us doing hoom-a-lanka-lanka-lanka, hoom-a-lanka-lanka-lanka rhythm and harmony in accompaniment. Willis could really sing for a white cat, probably because people in the white churches he went to didn’t sing all at one time and on the same beat like most of those folks. They really swung their songs, almost like us.

During one of the breaks in the singing, Willis said, “Well, press a Lord. Ya shore cain’t beat them good ole songs.”

“Sho cain’t,” Unca Billy put in, and we did “Oh, Mary, Don’t You Weep” again just for fun. We sang and watched as the tall silos and brown fields zipped past the windows at seventy miles an hour.

Between Willows and Orland, the Old Man jumped around a semi-truck loaded with cattle and had to squat the Olds down real hard behind a tan-colored Hudson Hornet. It was practically new, a ’51 or ’52, but the guy in it was cruising along at only about forty-five even that early in the morning.

“My goodness,” the Old Man groused, “here this guy is creepin along on a wide open highway on a nice day. An they claim them Hudsons are real fast.”

He sped up and pulled out to pass on the two-lane road. When he did, the driver of the Hudson picked up his speed so the Old Man had to drop back behind him to let the oncoming cars pass. Then the Hudson settled back down to about fifty again.

“What you reckon he up to, Rev?” Unca Billy asked.

“I don’t know. But I know I don’t have no time to be foolin ’roun this mornin.”

We were coming into Orland. The two cars glided down the main street, the tan Hudson in front, the blue Oldsmobile close behind. There were two lanes in each direction on the street through town, so when the Old Man moved over to the right at the one signal light, the Hudson and the Olds sat side by side. The Hudson’s driver, a young white guy with a crew cut and a day-old beard, grinned over at us and signaled us to come on. The Old
Man pretended not to notice, but he got off first when the light turned green, and picked up speed as he moved through town.

“Uh-oh. He wanta race, Rev,” Unca Billy said. There was a tense moment when no one in the car spoke.

“Turn around, boy,” the Old Man suddenly growled into the rear view mirror at Bub, who was staring out the back window and sticking his tongue out at the guy in the Hudson.

Highway 99’s two lanes swung out of the town in a big, gentle curve and then struck out in a straight line for Corning, about fifteen miles away. By the time we got into the straightaway, the Old Man was already doing seventy-five. The Hornet was right on our tail. Bub and I were snickering and stealing glances back at the guy in the Hudson.

“You guys stay down out of that window,” the Old Man warned us again. “I don’t want to have to speak to you any more.” The big Holiday 98 was drifting along quietly at nearly ninety, seeming to pick up speed effortlessly. The tan Hornet was still with us, even gaining ground.

“Awright, Rev!” Unca Billy cheered.

I watched carefully for the highway patrol as I knew the others also were doing. I couldn’t tell for sure about the Old Man. I stared at the back of his head and caught glimpses of his face in the mirror. His hair was cut short in back where his smallish head sloped gently upward on top of a long neck, and he kept a bang in front. Getting ready for church, he’d slick it back with Murray’s grease and cover it with a stocking cap. His skin was the color of wet coffee grounds. His nearly one quarter of Cherokee blood made his high-boned cheeks and forehead reddish brown. The shadows under his eyes and down his cheeks were dark. His nose dominated his face and was slightly hooked on the end, like a hawk’s beak. His lips were thick and smooth.

But his eyes were the thing. They must have made people feel like he could look through them or see under their clothes. Bub and I always felt he could see us when others couldn’t—when we were fooling around in church or had been somewhere we shouldn’t have been. And he could silence people just by giving them a little frown, or by looking past them as if at some object way
out in space. Not ignoring them exactly, or being mean, but like a prince might do if he were impatient or bored. Or angry. Times like that are part of what Mom meant when she said he was proud.

That morning, his eyes were darting from the road to the mirror and back again. He was leaning forward slightly, not saying a word. And he was holding the steering wheel with both hands, firmly but not tensely. He was alert to everything around him, but he was also focused on what he was doing.

Seeming not to worry about highway cops and without ever slowing down, the Old Man shot us around a slow-moving tractor so fast that the kid driving it hardly had time to look over at us before we went by. The Hudson followed us like it was tied to our back bumper. Telephone poles flew by like match sticks on a string. The tires’ stacatto slapping against the road joints became a drum roll, and the asphalt highway seemed only wide enough to hold one car.

At ninety-five, the Hornet pulled up alongside of us, about to pass. The driver grinned and stared up the road, and the Old Man stole a quick look over at him. Then he shouted down on the gas. The Hudson seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then it faded like it had suddenly run into a strong head wind. The speedometer needle in the Olds crept steadily to the right hand side of the gauge and went out of sight. We must have been doing well over a hundred. The Old Man kept the pedal down, and bit by bit we pulled away from the Hudson.

Corning seemed to rise up out of the ground and come rushing up to meet us. The wind whistled past us, and the car leaped ahead. It seemed to sail through the air, a kite hurled before a storm. The golden grain fields flew along at eye level. The morning light was a bright, narrow tunnel around us, and it faded into a hazy glow way ahead of us and way in back. Moths and gnats no longer exploded against the windshield, but swept past us in the Detroit-made gale blowing over the car’s muscular shoulders. We sat tensely. And then, almost as quickly as it had begun, the race was over. The Hudson Hornet faded farther and farther into the distance behind us. The Old Man let up on the gas and coasted into Corning.
“Got ’im, Rev!” yelled Unca Billy.
“Press a Lord,” Willis breathed.
Bub and I laughed out loud and looked back boldly to see the Hudson over a mile behind us, no longer in contention.
“Good God, this thing is fast,” Unca Billy declared.
“Well, I wasn’t exactly racin, but I’m glad we didn’t see no cops,” the Old Man said with a smile. “Sometimes, though, you just need to blow the cinders out of a car like this.”
“Hot-damn,” I thought, and knew for sure that starts like this would help me to love hunting trips to Modoc.