Natural-Born Proud

Martin Jr., S.R.

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I learned it on that first Modoc trip and over the years since, but hunting trips were largely about talk. The men made plans, argued the merits of various kinds of guns and ammo, rehashed events repeatedly, bragged about kills, and told stories. Some guys told their stories before they left home. Pretended to go hunting so they could sneak away from their wives to go carousing. Our bunch, though, were devout Christians, so they didn’t do that. They hunted hard, ate good food and told stories—tall tales, old-country fables, hunting legends, true and false ones, old and new ones, funny and sad ones. And the morals and punch lines became a kind of private language, a code often repeated in camp and sometimes for years after a hunt.

It started around the campfire that first night. Our bellies were full of pig’s feet and rice and fried apple turnovers, and we were sitting back feeling satisfied and hopeful. Bub and I had finished the dishes and joined the others drinking coffee all sugared and creamed up, and we were entertaining ourselves by throwing twigs into the fire.

Pushing his hunting cap back on his head and crossing his legs, Unca Billy started teasing Deke.

“Well, Deacon Carl,” he began, “we ’bout to go git ’em. You and the Reverend gon dream huntin again tonight?”

This gambit was designed to bring forth one of the best known and loved stories about my dad’s deer hunts in Modoc County. Deke just grinned and mumbled, “I don’ know, Unca Billy.”

Unca Billy went on with the story as if his question and Deke’s answer were the introduction he had anticipated.
“Musta been five or six years ago. Wasn’t nobody on that trip but me an Deke an the Rev, so we was all sleepin’ in the same tent. Night befo the season opened, we went to bed early so we could be out first thing the next mornin. Man, way over in the middle of the night, I heard somebody jump up outta bed. It was ole Deke. He say, ‘Yon’s a buck! Yon’s a buck!’

“Rev, he didn’t turn over, didn’t even quit snorin.

“Deke said it again, ‘Hey, Doc, yon’s a buck!’

“Rev raised up an say, ‘Is he legal? Got to have three points, ya know.’

“Deke say, ‘I don’ know. Cain’t see ’im too good.’

“Rev say, ‘Put the glasses on ’im, an if he’s legal, I’ll shoot ’im.’

“Then the Rev broke win an’ woke hisself up.”

Unca Billy broke into his silent, rocking laugh. The rest of us joined in, Deke and my dad a little less energetically than the rest of us. Smitty wiped the tears out of his eyes and asked,

“Unca Billy, you don’t mean they was dreamin the same dream at the same time, do you?”

“Yeah, man. Them brothas was sleepin an talkin at the same time. An the nex mornin, they didn’t know nothin ’bout it.”

Willis asked,

“That true, Ref? Deke?”

“Thas Unca Billy’s tale, Brother Willis. You’ll have to ask him,” my dad said, grinning sheepishly.

“Sho it’s true,” Unca Billy came back. “I’m sanctified an a preacher. I wouldn’t tell y’all no lie.”

After the laughter, Deke said,

“Well, I don’t remember talkin ta the Rev in no dream, but I tell ya one thing. Whatever I dream tonight, I’m gon be out there lookin in the mornin.” “Well, brothers,” the Old Man said, accepting Deke’s lead. “We git ourselves a good night’s sleep, an we can scout around tomorrow to see what we can see.”

“Yeah, Doc,” answered Deke.

“I kinda wanta look around down in them lavy beds ’fo too many folks git here and disturb the hills. Maybe drive down through White Horse an aroun the back way.”
Smitty put in, “Before we go too far, I wanna take a run up over that big hill just on the other side of Baker Mountain. Last time I was here, I got a big three-point where that hill runs out into that high saddle up there. Remember? Man, that’s my spot.”

The Old Man came back, “We got plenty time to go wherever we wanna go. Today’s Monday? I figger we oughta drop down to the Pit River along about Thursday to shoot our guns for the las time to git ’em good an ready. Maybe even do a little pike fishin. Then we can come back Sunday mornin, maybe stop off an go to church in Lookout. Then we’ll make our plans for openin day.”

“Man, I wanna git me a bear this year,” from Unca Billy.

For a couple years, Unca Billy had talked continuously about killing a bear. Three years before, the Old Man had gotten one and had the skin made into a rug for the den. Once Unca Billy saw it, he wanted one too.

“I got to kill me a bear so I can have a rug too,” he kept repeating. Since bear season coincided with deer season and we all had tags, at least he’d be legal if he got one. His chances seemed reasonable, though he had never yet killed anything on his trips to Modoc.

Unca Billy got up and went down across the creek to the latrine. We lounged back, comfortable tired, and listened to the early night noises coming through the cool air. There was already enough of a chill to make the day’s heat seem like a distant memory and the campfire feel good. Willis stretched and yawned.

“Ya reckon we oughta tie our food up in a coupla these trees, Ref, case we do get a little bear?”

“That might not be a bad idea since there ain’t many hunters around yet and they liable to be pretty bold. What you think, Deke?” my dad said.

Before he could answer, Unca Billy came back into the firelight and said, “Don’t worry ’bout no bears. One come in here to git in our grub, and I’ll put that Remington on his butt. I know season ain’t on yet, but if it comes to our food, I’ll git my bear early. I wish one would come in here.” He broke into his silent laugh, his smile flashing his gold tooth in the firelight and his upper body rocking. We all joined in, laughing out loud.
In the next few minutes, Deke backed the truck into the middle of the camp, close to the fire. He teased Unca Billy, “Wit the truck an the food up close, you can be sho to hit that bear when he come.” Bub and I helped Joe Willis cover up the stoves and the pots and pans on the end of the table while Smitty banked the fire to be sure it stayed in its pit. Everyone headed for the sleeping bags.

As we prepared for bed, the Old Man hollered out of his tent, “Be sure to turn that water pipe off ’fore you go to bed, Bub. It disturbs my sleep.” That was to become one of the nightly bedtime jokes, since, of course, the spring feeding the pipe could not be turned off. Bub, Smitty and I left our tent flap up so we could see out. I lay for a long time looking up into the clear sky.

“Sure is dark and quiet up here,” Smitty murmured, “kinda like Korea.”

“I think it’s scary,” said Bub quietly.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I answered both of them. The night seemed blacker than any I’d ever seen before, so black that the coals from our fire glowed like a beacon in the middle of the camp. In the part of the sky I could see, millions of stars—big ones and little ones, some in clusters, others single—hung right over my head, so close it seemed that they were only slightly above the tree tops. The last thing I remembered before falling asleep was the star canopy sprawled out wildly in every direction.

I snapped awake to the sound of pans banging against each other. I could hear movement out in front of our tent near the table. As I grabbed for my flashlight, I thought, “Bear.” I could hear Deke snoring and someone, I couldn’t make out who, whispering.

“Hey, Bub. Smitty,” I said quietly, “I think we got a bear.”

“Hunh?” Smitty sprang up in his bag.

Bub said, “What?”

“Bear,” from Smitty.

A flashlight came on from Willis and Unca Billy’s tent. In its beam I could see a black bear bigger than a cub but not yet fully grown nosing around the back of the Weapons Carrier.

“Shoot ’im, Unca Billy,” I heard Willis say excitedly.
Another flashlight beam came out of Deke and the Old Man’s tent, and I heard the lever action of a gun open and shut to my right, from Willis and Unca Billy’s tent. But there was no shot. The sound of the rifle’s action kept going “clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack,” and Willis kept whispering loudly, “Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!”

No shot. As usual, the Old Man knew what to do. Suddenly, back of the flashlight, first he then Deke started barking, “Woo-woo-woof. Woo-woo-woof.”

The bear stood up on its hind legs, partly blinded by the lights, and swung its head from side to side, picking up scents. It looked a hell of a lot bigger than it had before.

“Damn,” whispered Smitty.

Bub said, “Boy!”

Willis pleaded, “Shoot! Shoot!”

The rifle kept going “clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack.”

Bub, Smitty and I figured out what the Old Man and Deke were up to and joined them in barking, “Woo-woo-woof.”

The bear dropped down onto all four feet, woofed once itself as sort of an afterthought, and ran past Willis and Unca Billy’s tent up the hill so fast I wasn’t sure I had actually seen it go. In no time at all, I could hear it crashing through the brush in the dark above our camp. Then everything was quiet for what seemed like a long time.

I heard Willis’s high-pitched, nasal laugh coming from his and Unca Billy’s tent. Sounded like he was having a conniption fit—howling and laughing, coughing and choking all at the same time. I beamed my light over to my right at the same time that Deke did. There was Unca Billy in his long johns down on his knees picking something up off the floor of the tent. Willis was still whooping. Unca Billy, grimly silent, was scrambling around in the pool of light, picking things up, ignoring Willis’s laughter.

Deke hollered, “How come you didn’t shoot ’im, Unca Billy? He was close, Man.”

“Uh...I don’ know. I mean...uh,” the little man stammered. “My gun jammed...couldn’t get it to fire. I mean...”

Deke was first, followed by Smitty. Then the rest of us understood what had actually happened and started laughing. In his
panic and haste, Unca Billy had pumped all the shells out of his gun onto the ground without firing a shot. For a long time, all of us except Unca Billy laughed loudly into the night air.

Finally Willis caught his breath and said, “Wasn’t too big, but he was right close on us.”

Smitty yelled out, “Get the next one, Unca Billy, there’s lots of ’em.”

“But you’ll have to shoot the nex one from farther away ’cause we ain’t gon park the truck right up in the camp no mo,” Deke put in.

That started the laughter all over again. The Old Man finished it off by turning off his flashlight and saying, “Well, that’s one for the bear and none for the men. Let’s go back to sleep.”

Amid the giggling and fumbling with sleeping bags and pillows, Deke called out, “It’s all right, Unca Billy. You’ll do better when you pull that Remington down on a buck.” Unca Billy didn’t say anything, just crawled back into his bag.

Smitty got up and put a couple of logs on the fire, saying, “Man, I’m ready to go huntin.” Bub went out and peed against a tree, and we settled in for the rest of the night.