Natural-Born Proud

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VI

After the excitement of Unca Billy’s bear, I don’t think anyone slept much more. I know I didn’t, and I could hear mumbling from the direction of Willis and Unca Billy’s tent. The voices sounded angry like the men were arguing about why Unca Billy hadn’t killed his bear, I supposed. And I noticed through slow, sleepy wakefulness that I didn’t hear Deke’s heavy snore anymore.

Soon, I heard someone stirring around outside. It was Unca Billy starting breakfast. Then in the bright light of the Coleman lanterns, I could see Willis moving around the table. I started getting into my clothes. One by one, the others climbed out of their tents. It was four-thirty, about the time we’d be getting up every morning. The sky was still black, and the air’s sharp bite made me glad I was wearing long johns and wool. We backed up to the fire, rubbing the seats of our pants, while Unca Billy made a big breakfast of pork and game meat sausage, eggs, and pan bread that Mom called “hoe cake.” He was tense and didn’t talk as much as he usually did, and Willis seemed glum. No one laughed about the bear business, but it wasn’t far from anyone’s mind.

The Old Man broke the tension by joining us at the fire and saying, “Hey, Unca Billy, smells like you makin’ us some pretty good eats.”

“Hope so,” was his preacher friend’s only response.

Seated near the end of the table sipping coffee out of a tin cup, Willis sort of roused himself, shifted positions and said, “One time I was cuttin up a ole Packard over’n Gilroy. The fenders was all smashed up, but it had a pretty good trunk lid and two or three pretty good doors. Little boy ’bout eight or nine kep hangin aroun watchin.
“How come you ain’t in school?” I asked him.
“‘No school today,’ he said.
“‘You any good in school?’
“‘Yep.’
“‘C’n you spell?’
“‘Yep.’
“‘Lemme hear you spell rat.’
“‘R—a—t.’
“‘Lemme hear you spell many.’
“‘M—a—n—y.’
“‘Lemme hear you spell together.’ I never did git much schoo-
lin, but I figgered I’d git ’im with that one.
“‘T—o—g—e—t—h—e—r.’
“‘Hey,’ I said, ‘That’s pretty good.’
“‘Naw it ain’t,’ he said. Sounded almos like he was mad.
“‘What is it, then?’ I asked.
“‘That’s perfect.’

We cracked up, and Unca Billy even laughed as he stirred the
scrambling eggs. It was good to see Willis laugh. He had already
seemed less morose, and he seemed to get teary eyes less often than
I had expected he would. Unca Billy seemed to feel better too.

Deke stepped in with one of his stories. “Hey, Doc,” he began,
“remember that rabbit I killed that year down by White Horse?”

“You mean the one you tore all to pieces with that .30-30 you
used to have?” asked the Old Man.

“I didn’t tear ’im up,” Deke protested. “Jes shot his head off,
sort of. Anyhow, brought ’im to camp, dressed ’im all out an got
ready to cook ’im down in brown gravy for dinner. Cooked ’im for
’bout a hour an then decided to taste ’im. He had a pretty good
flavor, but he was tough. It was a good thing we’d put on a pot of
red beans that day ’cause that brother needed some work on ’im.
I mean, we cooked that booger for a long time, maybe two more
hours, an the longer we cooked ’im the tougher he got. Couldn’t
even bite off a piece to chew. Like concrete done gone to sleep on
ya. Finally, Unca Billy took ’im down ’cross the road out yonder an
buried ’im in a hole in the ground.”
“Didn’t wanta attract no bears,” Smitty piped up. Everybody started laughing again, including Unca Billy.

§ § § §

Within the next hour, we had begun getting ready to go on our scouting trip. Bub couldn’t find his cotton gloves among all the stuff in our tent, so we had to wait. That set the Old Man off. He groused at anyone who came within earshot about people not putting their things where they could find them, one of his constant complaints. I didn’t see why he blamed the rest of us when it was Bub who couldn’t find his damned gloves. But that’s how he was—sometimes he’d get a little bit of grit in his craw, and he’d lay it on whoever was nearby. I resented his heavy-handed authority, so I got a little bit out of sorts with him first thing that morning.

We gathered up our guns in their cases, our binocs, gloves, canteens and snacks, and climbed aboard the now open truck. Day had broken. Off to the east the sunlight was bouncing off the hump backs of the Warner Mountains and fanning out in long vertical shafts. The early morning air was still cold, so we huddled inside our jackets.

The first place the Old Man headed for was the hill where Smitty had killed his buck several years earlier. To get there, he had to drive down off Baker Mountain to the junction at White Horse Reservoir and turn left onto the dirt road that ran from Lookout all the way to Tule Lake, seventy-five miles away. Baker Mountain, the largest in a range of smaller mountains bordering the lava beds, stood north of Lookout and Big Valley. Off to the west of that range were the bigger mountains, north of them the Sierra Nevadas and the Cascades.

There, like ageless, dark-robed monarchs, the two large volcanoes reigned over that entire region of northeastern California. Having erupted way back in dinosaur days, Mt. Shasta loomed silently with its snowy head in the clouds. Occasionally, as if from royal duty, it would peer out and survey its domain, year-round frosty locks and beard spilling over its shoulders and chest. Sixty miles to the southeast stood the smaller, younger Mt. Lassen, still smoldering after its explosion in 1914, its fuming vents belching acrid smoke and sulfurous steam. Its scalding hot springs and
bubbling mud pots could cook the hide off a man in the time it takes to boil an egg. The two majestic cones hung suspended from the sky, surrounded by clusters of smaller peaks bunching up around them like chicks snuggling up to a mother hen. They held secrets known only to them and to the ancient Indians who went there to worship. That whole corner of the state fell away from the volcanoes and stepped its way in stages down to Big Valley, where Fall River and some other one-horse towns squatted.

Smitty’s nameless mountain, where we were headed, was smaller than Baker, but it was still high enough to serve as a vantage point from which to look out across the valley and get a hint of the Sierras and Cascades in the distance and to make out the two huge volcano peaks. Over in the east, the Warners were barely distinguishable against the sun’s rays. The Old Man put the Weapons Carrier in four-wheel drive and went straight to the top of the mountain. Then we got out and scouted down the sides for a couple hundred yards.

The sun was already getting high, but the air in the timber was still cool, and the needles and twigs carpeting the ground were moist. Though there were broken branches lying around, there was not much underbrush because the big trees kept out most of the direct sunlight. As a result, a hunter could see quite a distance with no other obstruction than large tree trunks. It was easy to move through the trees slowly and quietly, the way my dad had taught me. Now and then I would stop and stand still against a tree trunk or sit quietly on a log, since I understood that deer, which hear and smell better than they see, sometimes moved when they heard sounds and stopped when they didn’t. I hoped to spot one standing and looking for me, or moving out of impatience when I was still for too long. I was disappointed.

At about ten o’clock, the Old Man whistled us back up to the truck. I was a long way down off the saddle, so I arrived last, sweating and out of breath. The others were scattered around in a sunlit clearing, sitting on rocks or stumps, resting against the sides of the truck. When I got there, he was standing in the center of the group like he was in the pulpit. He was saying, “What we’ll do, men, is drive up on these high points the first thing in the morn-
nings, while it’s still dark. We’ll scatter out an still hunt till the sun gets up pretty good; that’s in case somebody else drives a buck up on us from down below. These deer gonna head uphill when they been rousted outta bed or jumped early in the day, an one might jes walk up on us if we’re sittin still an quiet enough.

“We’ll leave a coupla guns up on top, an the rest of us’ll walk down off the sides like we just did. Go slow so you won’t be too outta breath to shoot, an be quiet so you can get close up on whatever’s there. An pay attention to where you are an where you been ’cause sometimes these hills all look jes alike. You don’t wanta get los. Never know that you won’t jump a buck an get a shot or run him onto somebody up on top. An always, always be careful with these big guns. They can kill a man with one shot jes like they can kill a deer. A few years ago back there on Baker Mountain, we saw a man who’d killed his own boy by accident. Be careful.”

The Old Man had learned to hunt deer and elk when we had lived in Montana, so he knew more about it than any of the rest of us. That experience increased the authority his position as “the Rev” gave him. He seemed to be teaching the others as he taught Bub and me. We grunted or nodded assent, officers listening to a commander lay out a battle plan. No one had seen anything, but the trails, beds and fresh signs all told us we were where the game was.

§ § § §

After pit stops, stretches and groans because of muscles already tightening up after exertion, we got back aboard the big army truck. It whined and growled its way down the hill toward the lava beds. The lava beds lay between Lookout on one corner and the White Horse Reservoir and Baker Mountain on another and covered miles in every direction. They were silent reminders of the awesome volcanic cataclysm that created them, a monument to the tumultuous flexibility of the earth’s crust.

In places, these floes of lava rock had formed mounds and buttes a hundred feet high. Here and there rough columns soared skyward. Ragged steeples reminiscent of old edifices crumbled and fell in disarray. Pumice boulders big as houses, spat miles from their lodgings in the throats of the volcanoes, perched on
and leaned off the sides of these rocky bluffs at weird, dangerous-looking angles. And they rose suddenly up out of the ground, creating barriers to be climbed over or walked around, and strange, half-animal shapes. In other places, the lava had flowed out into what seemed like smooth, plowed fields of stones—orange, red and black and different shades of gray and brown—varying in size from pebbles to pieces like footballs.

As he had done up on the mountain, the Old Man gathered us around him and mapped out the hunting strategy. Old logging roads crisscrossed the lava beds, breaking off and returning to the main road, forming sections about a mile square. His plan called for a couple of us to set up in hiding places on one road and have the rest move through the lava beds and jack pines, pushing whatever game was there onto one of the guns.

“Down here now,” he said, “the deer will move way ahead of you when you walkin through, so be sure to give the guys on the other end a chance to git set up before you start. An once you git set on a stand, be sure to stay in one spot an stay still.”

We got started. As I walked along, the air of the place, the eeriness of it, seemed to swallow me up. I wondered about who and what had preceded me there. Surely in some timeless era, Modoc Indians had passed through these lava beds on spirit quests to their sacred places on the volcanoes and the other big mountains. They went to and from where their dead were buried. When the wind moaned through the lava crags and cupolas, I imagined I could hear the old braves singing and praying, something like the Old Man’s hollering off Chews’ Ridge. Bird calls and animal cries echoed from rock to rock, conjuring the mournful hymns and hosannas of those ancient worshippers. And in the stifling, midday heat, I thought I could feel their restless spirits hovering ’round about me.

Later, I saw the movies at the tourist center in Lassen Park, showing rivers of molten rock flooding down off Mt. Shasta, Mt. Lassen, and some other volcanoes that no longer exist—oozing their way around hills and into low spots, sometimes around giant old fir and cedar trees left stranded midstream. When they cooled, they formed layer upon layer of brittle, lumpy rock, perforated like hon-
Young trees had shouldered their way up through cracks and crevices in the lava that broke as it cooled to nod their heads in the sunlight and stretch their spindly limbs every which way.

I climbed up onto a lava mound and looked all around me. I could see down lanes between the trees and over the small rock piles pushed up and strewn all over. Most of the trees were Knobcone Pines, what Californians called “Digger Pines.” They were also known as “Monterey Pines,” a name I liked, since there were, in fact, stands of them in various places on the Monterey Peninsula. My dad and Deke had named them “Jack Pines,” for reasons I never knew. Maybe it was because they didn’t look quite like the bigger pines that grew on the hills and mountains. Maybe they were “almost pines.” Like the Old Man thought that Mormons away from Salt Lake City were “Jack Mormons.” They were gnarled, stunted trees whose low height, twisted shapes and long, flexible needles suggested the dry, gravelly soil they grew in.

Lots of game and other animals lived in the lava beds. Several years after my first trip, I saw a cougar there. Another time, without Unca Billy’s fanfare or failure, I killed a bear that had denned up in a hollow in the rocks. Herds of deer wandered through the lava canyons and valleys, eating the tender leaves off the small trees, and the young grass shoots growing beneath them. I found out that stalking or driving deer through the lava formations was hard work, because sometimes unexpectedly the light, porous rock crumbled into rust-colored powder under my boots or shifted position so I stumbled and felt like I was walking in deep sand. It took a long time to get anywhere and wore me out.

As we moved through one lava bed section, Willis and Unca Billy jumped some deer they never saw, but the two does and three fawns walked right past Deke, who said he could have shot any one of them. He grinned and said, “Man, I ’spec I’m gon git my buck outta these lavies.”

I never saw anything, but I heard something thump-thumping away from me as I walked through another section. I stopped and held my breath, listening and looking as hard as I could. My heart was pounding against my chest so loudly it drowned out nearly everything else. Bub on my left and Smitty on my right heard it too,
so we decided it must have been a deer and probably a buck, since it was traveling alone and made sure to keep the trees between us and it. Just hearing the animal assured me that we were going to get game. I was even more anxious to get a shot.

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By about two o’clock, the men decided that we had only to work out a manzanita patch to be finished with the days’ scouting. That was fine with me, because I was already tired as hell. Sitting on the short running board of the truck, Bub said to me,

“You tired, Satch?”

“Damn right, I’m tired,” I muttered to him so the Old Man wouldn’t hear me swear.

“Les go work through part of that big manzanita holla over above White Horse Reservoir,” the Old Man said.

“We should be able to do that by about four-thirty or five o’clock. Then we can head back to camp and eat dinner.”

He acted like he wasn’t tired, but he’d hiked just as much as the rest of us, and we were bushed. He seemed to walk along through the hills, easy, slow and quiet, and not get tired. In fact, he seemed to get more energetic the more he walked. I was young and sturdy, and still a little miffed at him over his reaction to the glove business. So I promised myself that I’d beat him at his own game, that I’d keep walking until he said he was tired. I’d do it if it killed me.

We headed for the manzanita patch. Green manzanita grew on the flanks of the big hills below the heavy timber and down into the gulleys and gulches at the bottoms, like pubic hair. The thick, green shrubs began about a third of the way up a slope, usually near the tree line, where drainage left the soil dry and where sunlight was unhampered. They grew over six feet high in some places. From high up on the slopes, they looked like a solid blanket of oval-shaped leaves covering the ground. From up close, their smooth mahogany trunks and branches could be seen to form a web that was almost impenetrable.

Deer and other animals liked to browse on the manzanita leaves and reddish-brown berries, so they made small, twisting trails that wound up and down through the manzanita. Mule
deer especially liked to bed down under the arbors created by the shrubs and spend the hot part of the day dozing and nibbling. A man could follow the trails, though slowly. And by climbing up on the boulders the plants grew around, a hunter could survey a wide area, spotting other boulders, tree snags and sparsely covered areas he couldn’t see from ground level. Our dad liked to hunt the manzanita patches after morning hunts on the hills and before late afternoon hunts in the jack pines of the lava beds.

The strategy was similar to what it was to be in the lava beds. The difference was that in the manzanita we’d yell, bark, and make as much noise as possible. Since we weren’t actually hunting yet, we planned just to move through and scout, disturbing the land and animals as little as possible. On the way there, the Old Man warned us, “Make plenty noise, but don’t be in too big of a rush. An stop pretty often so you can get up on a rock or stump to see if anything’s movin, an keep your bearins. That stuff’s thick an easy to get lost in.”

We agreed that Deke and the Old Man would drop us at the top of the manzanita patch then drive the truck back down to the road where they’d pick us up as we came out. As we got down off the truck, tired and somewhat reluctant, Smitty asked the Old Man, “Rev, can’t we take our guns with us this time?”

“What for? Season ain’t open yet so you couldn’t shoot nothin’.”

“We could jus carry ’em to get used to ’em.”

“Naw. Game warden might come up while you down in there. Then here we’d be out in the hills with our guns. He’d give us a tag sure as you born. ’specially Heater.”

I had already heard the men talk about Jack Heater. They said he threw his weight around as if he were Mr. California himself. According to them, one year when only three-point bucks were legal, Heater arrested a hunter for killing a forked-horn because the guy mistook the deer’s eyeguard for points. The short horns over the buck’s eyes were two-and-three-quarter inches long when they had to be three inches to be considered points. The Old Man always thought the law was the law, no exceptions, but I didn’t see
how a tired, excited hunter should be called guilty for a quarter-inch of misjudgment.

“But we could take the guns an leave the shells here in the truck,” Smitty persisted to his uncle.

“What good would that do if the warden decided you was huntin before season?”

“We wouldn’t be huntin without no shells.”

“Leave the guns here in the truck,” the Old Man said, closing the topic and staring off into space.

“But...” Smitty came back.

“I said leave the guns here,” the Old Man growled.

Smitty turned away, frustrated and angry.

I thought Smitty was right. I was itching to carry my new gun, and I didn’t care whether it was loaded or not. I just wanted to see it and feel its weight, get used to it like Smitty said. How could a warden, any warden, accuse us of hunting if our guns were unload-ed and we didn’t have any shells in our pockets or anywhere? I didn’t blame Smitty for being pissed off. The Old Man had let Bub and me take our guns on our hike up Baker Mountain, so what was the difference here? He was just being stubborn and bossy, like he could be sometimes. Since he’d seen the Old Man be that way often enough, Smitty knew that just like I did.

§ § § § §

Smitty was like another kid to my parents. He had lived his teen-age years in our house. When he was eight, his mother, Eliza, had died giving birth to his baby sister Betty. And his father, Buster, whose last name was Smith after my grandma’s first husband and who had become a drunk, got himself killed in a car wreck three years later, leaving five children behind. So at various times, differ-ent ones of the Smith kids had lived in our house. Smitty (no one called him Theodore or even Ted) had gone through high school and then into the army as part of our family.

Smitty was quick-tempered and volatile. I remember how he used to blow up and slam things around and pout as a teenager. Once, he even got so mad he rammed his fist through a plate glass window in Penney’s down on Alvarado Street and had to pay a hundred bucks for the damage. The Old Man said he was “a
hothead” and that he had to mature a lot if he expected to stay out of trouble. He wanted good things to happen immediately. He was always in a hurry.

Right after high school, Smitty had boxed for a year or two as “Si1ky Smith,” a middleweight. He was five-nine, broad-shouldered and tight-hipped, built for speed. He had a square, copper-colored face that seemed to break apart when he laughed, while his high, falsetto cackle burst out of his throat, and he held his stomach and stamped his feet. He was nervous and impatient, but he won more fights than he lost.

Now safely home from Korea and living in the early part of his manly strength, Smitty felt physically able to do almost anything. He was a good shot with his .257 Roberts, having been an expert on the army firing range. And because he walked so fast (“double-timing,” he called it), the Old Man would put him on the outside edge of the party so he could walk the greatest distance when we made drives through the brush or timber. But although he was twenty-three and a military veteran, he was still one of “y’all boys” to the Old Man and Deke. They were the men.

Smitty was really boiling, and I felt that gave me a good excuse to be mad too. Mad for my cousin and for myself. The Old Man, however, seemed unconcerned, staring off down the hill over the manzanita as if nothing had happened. Smitty glared at us and flounced around angrily as he tightened the laces in his combat boots and got ready to attack the brush. Passing me, he muttered, “Sometimes, boy, I’d like to hang one on your old man. I’ll take the outside position. You guys stay on the inside.”

Although I was mad at my dad for my cousin, I thought his taking a poke at the Old Man would be going too far. Besides, he was too damned big. But I took Smitty’s side against my father. He had good reason to be mad. I was also relieved that he was willing to take the outside position, because whoever did that would have to climb over the crest of the hill we were on and walk part way up another before coming down and out at the bottom.

We dawdled around a bit before taking off. Bub and Willis took long drinks from the water bag instead of carrying canteens, and Deke went over behind a fallen log to take a dump. I waited
and Smitty fumed. Finally, Deke and the Old Man drove away in
the truck, and the rest of us spread out to drive the manzanita.

Even going downhill in the late afternoon, struggling through
the thick brush was hard, hot, dusty work. At times I had to crawl
on my hands and knees. Sometimes I had to backtrack myself up
the hill and try a different trail from the one I had been on. I mar-
velled at how deer, especially big bucks with their antler spreads,
could wind their way through these patches. Every now and then,
I climbed up on a boulder or stump to locate the others. It was
hard to do since we weren’t barking and yelling as we would be
later. Sometimes I’d see and wave to Bub or Unca Billy, and once
I watched Willis fall down as he tried to leap from the top of one
bush to another.

About halfway down, I rested and watched from on top of
a huge rock, and I noticed Smitty veering off to the left. He had
already passed the point where he should have turned sharply
downhill. He was going the wrong way, toward the flat place lead-
ing onto the adjoining hill. He had gone so far so fast I thought he
must have been galloping. I yelled to him, but he didn’t answer. He
just kept going away from us in the wrong direction.

The next time I stopped, I could see Deke leaning against the
side of the truck down on the road. Deke always said he had “stay-
ing power,” which I learned meant that when the rest of us pound-
ed the dirt or bucked the brush, Deke stayed near the truck. He’d
meet us after we had walked the jack pines or made a drive through
the manzanita. He’d be leaning against the truck, gun slung over
his shoulder, hands in the pockets of his bib overalls, which he
called “overhauls.” I could tell by watching the brush move off to
my right every now and then that Bub, Unca Billy and Joe Willis
were slightly below me. I couldn’t see the Old Man, and I couldn’t
see Smitty. I decided to stay put and rest and watch for a while.

During the next twenty minutes, one by one the others started
breaking out onto the road, first Unca Billy, then Willis and later
Bub. The Old Man also came into sight. He was standing by the
truck with Deke. But no Smitty. I yelled and waved my red hat and
bandanna so they could see me. Bub waved back. Still no Smitty.
I started to worry because if Smitty had continued in the direction I’d last seen him headed in, he would have gone through the level place I saw before and up onto the next hillside, farther away from the truck than where we had begun our drive. I couldn’t see him. Not being sure what I should do, I decided to stay where I was. Down on the road, the others were gesturing and waving to me. I waved back, but I stayed put. Still no Smitty.

The sun dropped behind the hills, and almost immediately the air turned cool, but I still couldn’t see my cousin. I buttoned my shirt against the chill and waited. I could see the others moving around the truck agitatedly, and I heard the horn’s sound coming up to me as if from the bottom of a deep well. I waved and waited, knowing that I couldn’t stay where I was a whole lot longer. With the shadows deepening, I knew it would be darker on the ground, under the manzanita, than on top of it where I was. I started feeling afraid for Smitty. As excitable as he was, he might have headed off into any direction and stayed lost for days. He could have got into real trouble, and he had no warm clothes or food with him. And, thanks to my father, he had no gun.

I turned to climb down off my rock and make my way to the truck when I spotted something red moving around in a still sunny spot up near the top of the adjoining hill. It was Smitty, lost. He had gotten confused in the high brush. Just as I feared, he had mistakenly gone over onto the second ridge from us and come out into a clearing up near the top. I gestured to the others and waved to him, but they couldn’t understand what I meant, and he couldn’t see from the light where he was into the shadows where I was standing. I could tell from how fast he was moving around and around the clearing that he couldn’t figure out where he was. And I believed that he’d be in a panic if we didn’t contact him quickly.

My dad’s warning droned in my head: “Watch your bearins. It’s easy to get los in these hills ’cause they all look alike.” I got down and started toward the truck. I went through the trunks and branches as fast as I dared in the gathering darkness. As I slid and scrambled down the hill, I was pissed at both the Old Man and Smitty. If the Old Man had let him take his rifle and a few shells, Smitty could have protected himself or at least fired into the air to
let us know where he was. And if Smitty hadn’t gone charging off in such a huff, he would most likely have paid more attention to where he was and not got lost. But I was more mad at my dad than at my cousin. He was the more responsible. In my mind, I could see Smitty running around and around that damned clearing, and I knew he’d catch hell from the Old Man whenever he managed to get back to the truck.

When I got within shouting distance of the rest of the party, I climbed up onto another rock. I couldn’t see Smitty from there, but through yelling and pointing I managed to make the others understand that he was way up on a hill a long way from us. Someone, Bub I think, fired his rifle into the air, and I went for the truck as fast as I could. I was about fifteen minutes away, and Smitty was probably an hour. Just before I came out onto the road, another shot went off, and I felt assured that Smitty at least should be able to determine the direction we were in. I walked up the road to the truck just in time to hear the Old Man say, “That boy gits off with me so bad sometimes…”

I wasn’t sure whether he meant me or Smitty, so I said hastily, “I saw Smitty way up on the ridge two hills over.”

“He shoulda heard them shots and be comin this way,” Deke answered. The Old Man had that faraway look on his face.

We milled around the truck for another half hour not saying much. Every now and then, Unca Billy would say, “Unh, unh, unh, lost in these manzanitas,” and Willis would sigh, “Press a Lord.”

Deke finally said, “Hey, Doc. Why don’t we drive up an down the road wit the lights on? He’ll spot us after while.” The Old Man didn’t answer, but started the motor. We drove back and forth along the road, curving our way around the humps of three hills. We’d stop periodically and blow the horn in long blasts. Stars began to pop out in the sky overhead, and we started pulling on our jackets.

On the fifth or sixth pass, we rounded a curve and the headlights beamed onto Smitty sliding down a high bank onto the road. Tired, dusty and still scared, he flung himself over the tailgate into the truck bed saying, “Thank ya.”
“Had yourself kine of a long walk there, didn’t ya, Bud?” Deke asked over his shoulder after a bit.

Smitty nodded but said only, “Got any water in that bag, Unca Billy?” The Old Man said, “At least Satch did the right thing,” and aimed the truck for Baker Mountain and camp.