Natural-Born Proud

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Back at camp, I found the others lounging around somewhat restlessly. Bub was half-heartedly catching pike on filed hooks and throwing back all those not too badly hooked to survive. Smitty, who had killed no rabbits, was fiddling with his rifle. The Old Man was dozing in his chair, and Willis and Unca Billy moved around talking about hunting.

Deke was pacing back and forth through camp, anxious about his gun. He met me at the truck.

“Ya git it?” he called up to me, rubbing his hands on the seat of his pants.

“Yep.”

“Didn’t have no mo trouble, hunh?”

“Nope,” I said, climbing down and handing him his rifle.

“Get any more knots on yer head?” Smitty teased.

“Not a one,” I answered calmly, grinning and feeling pleased with myself. “Everything went just fine.”

We quickly organized ourselves to test Deke’s gun again. Both Smitty and the Old Man thought the gun was pretty accurate after Cliff’s bore-sighting. It needed only a few minor adjustments. And even Deke put two out of three rounds in the bullseye when he shot sitting down. Once the men were satisfied that the gun was all right, Deke offered Bub and me a chance to shoot the .30-06. Shooting that big a gun was a little scary, but fun. Each of us fired three shots through it. My pattern was a little tighter than Bub’s, which he dismissed by saying,

“You’re bigger’n me and that gun’s heavier and kicks harder’n ours.”
I was still feeling so warm and proud after my Fall River Mills conquest that I didn’t even bother to argue with him. As Deke put it, “Now we ready to take care a bi’nis.”

All of the serious business of our side trip was taken care of, and we had a couple hours before doing the chores of making dinner and getting ready to go back to Baker Mountain. The Old Man asked Bub, “I haven’t never taught you guys how to throw a sling, have I?” He asked the question as if it promised something. I took his mood to mean that he was pleased by what I had done, though he knew only part of it. Bub answered, “No.”

Though our dad taught us a great deal as we grew up, he didn’t usually talk a lot about how to do things. He just did them in our presence and expected us to copy him. More doing and less talking. After sweeping the driveway clean enough to eat or sleep on, he’d say, “Do it right the first time, an ya don’t have to worry about it no mo.” After putting away all the tools and equipment, he’d say, “Put everything back where it’s ’spozed to be, an ya won’t have to waste time lookin for it nex time ya need it.”

That day, he dug around in one of the storage bins at the back of the truck until he found the “stuff bag,” a heavy canvas sack containing string, wire, nails and all kinds of other odds and ends that came in handy on camping trips. He brought out a ball of leather thong, which I didn’t even know we had. I couldn’t figure out what he was doing when he cut off four pieces, two about two or two-and-a-half feet long, and two about six inches shorter. I had made lots of sling shots out of Y-shaped tree limbs and rubber strips from car tire inner tubes, with shoe tongues to hold rocks, but I had never done anything like what he was doing. Then he cut two pieces of canvas, about two by three inches.

“I useta make these all the time when I was a boy back in Texas,” he said. “This is what David killed Goliath with. Me an my brother Buster useta see how far we could throw rocks with ’em. An he could knock a squirrel outta a tree with ’em. I’ve seen him do it more ’n once.”

“Man, I made a lotta them things in my day,” Unca Billy put in as my dad worked.

“Me too,” echoed Deke.
Willis added, “Mama useta beat us fer usin the strings outta our high-top shoes to make ’em with.”

“You guys go down there to the river bank and pick us up a bunch of smooth rocks about the size of a four-bit piece while I finish these up,” he told Bub and me. We dashed off and returned to find the two slings completed. Everyone else had gathered around while he tied a long thong on one end and a short one on the other of each canvas patch, coming up with two slings.

“Here’s how you shoot ’em,” the Old Man said once we had deposited our rocks in a pile. He took up one of the slings, then moved a little ways away from the group, wrapping the end of the long thong around three fingers. He creased the canvas sharply and put a rock into the crease, then held the short thong between his free thumb and finger. Holding the canvas-enclosed rock in his left hand and the thongs in his right, he raised both arms over his head and began twirling the sling, releasing his hold on the rock in his left hand as he did.

“The spinnin holds the rock in place,” he said, twirling the sling faster and faster. After four or five turns, he reared back and, turning loose the short thong, flung the rock out toward the river. The rock sailed away in a high arc and splashed down over half way across the river.

“Good throw, Ref,” breathed Willis.

“Sho was,” agreed Unca Billy.

“Wow!” Bub said.

Everyone else wanted to try it then. In fact, Smitty and I crashed into each other going to pick up the other sling.

“I ain’t done this since I was a boy,” Deke said, taking the sling the Old Man had thrown with. I soon found out that the knack of throwing with the sling was something like casting a trout lure or a bass plug—I had to release the thumb and finger thong end at the highest point of the forward motion and follow through straight in the direction I wanted to throw. After a few throws, Bub and I sort of figured out what was required. All of us could pretty well govern the direction and the distance our rocks would travel.

The men outdid us youngsters, except for Smitty. It was an old trick to them and brand new to us. While the men threw, Bub
and I ran back down to the river bank for more rocks. We set up a contest to see who could throw a rock all the way across the river.

The Old Man, Deke, and Smitty threw their rocks all the way across, but the rest of us didn’t quite make it. Willis excused himself by saying, “I ain’t as stout in my throwin arm as I used to be on account of I got the arthritis in my shoulder.”

Unca Billy picked up that tack, “I ’spec them big ole guys can chunk it further n’ us smaller ones.”

Smitty responded, “It ain’t in the strength, Preach. It’s in the leverage and timing,” harking back to his boxing days. I silently agreed with Smitty, but Unca Billy was unconvinced.

Sometimes we threw the rocks in an arc, sometimes in a straight line. We even tried skipping them across the wide, smooth water. Everyone threw. The Old Man’s teaching us to throw slings was a kind of a gift to Bub and me, maybe a reward for my successful mission into town, I thought. For half an hour after the others had quit, until we were sweaty and tired and our arms sore, Bub and I kept at it. Then we reluctantly put away the slings and turned to other things.

We spent a refreshing hour bathing and swimming naked in the cold river, our mature and immature different-colored maleness swinging free in the open air and dry heat. I cut my eyes slyly at everyone’s body, comparing it with my own. We washed out a few clothes also, mainly our funky long johns and skivvies. We knocked down the mounds we had put our targets on, Bub and I finding and trying to identify the rifle slugs we dug out of the soft dirt. We organized our gear for departure and settled back for a dinner of fried pike—sweet, flaky fish with what seemed like hundreds of wiry bones in it.

We finished eating as night came on. Smitty and Willis hurried through the dishes to join the rest of us in singing around the fire. We did lots of the church songs we knew, mostly call and response ones like “Working On a Building,” which Deke had once sung in a quartet back in Texas, and which I liked a lot.

Deke broke out into the lead in his clear, tenor voice:

*I’m workin on a building.*

The rest of us answered in harmony:
Workin on a building,

Deke:

With a sure foundation,

The rest:

Sure foundation,
Holdin up a blood-stained,
Holdin up a blood-stained,
Banner for the lord.
Banner for the lord.
When I get through workin,
Get through workin,
On this old building,
On this old building,
I’m goin up to heaven,
Goin up to heaven,
To git my reward.
To git my reward.

Deke added lots of different first lines, like When you see me prayin, I’m workin on the building, and When you hear me singin, and each time we’d follow his lead all the way through to the line Git my reward, so we sang the whole thing through probably ten or fifteen times. We had enough different voices to make the harmony on the last line full and sweet, deep and potent, a little like the Ames Brothers sounded. Our singing floated into the night sky and seemed to represent our buoyant spirits.

I fell asleep looking up into the darkness, savoring my day’s experience and anticipating hunting. I dreamt about the Modoc War. About twenty Indians—all giants with long, sad faces—kept appearing and disappearing, singing mournfully as they came and went. One minute, they’d be coming slowly through fog toward me; the next, they’d be going away. And every time they’d disappear, I’d see white soldiers in old-fashioned uniforms, hundreds of them, all with Harry’s pimply face, trying to catch the Indians. The soldiers were running around, falling all over themselves, yelling and shooting wildly, sometimes hitting nothing, sometimes each other. The Indians were just moving, not running, but staying
ahead of the soldiers, going into and out of the fog and always keeping a little bit out of rifle range.

Every now and then, I’d see the redhead in the tight jeans and shirt. She’d be sitting on a rock or standing beside a tree pointing and laughing, either at the soldiers or the Indians, I couldn’t be sure. But she seemed to find something terribly funny. I snapped awake with another erection, which I jerked off onto the ground beside my sleeping bag. Then I turned over the other way and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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Breaking camp the next morning was quick and easy, so by the time Deke and Unca Billy got breakfast ready, the others of us had the rest of the gear organized and ready to load onto the truck. Since it was Sunday, the Old Man seemed to get into a religious mood as he said grace—he prayed extra long and extra seriously, not like he had prayed with Willis back on the White Horse road. As we ate, he announced, “Since it’s Sunday an we’re all cleaned up an everything, I think we oughta stop off in Lookout an go to services this mornin. I’ve been sayin for years that I’d go to church there and offer to preach sometime and never have, so today seems as good a time as any to do it.”

“Do we have to?” Bub whined, more interested in getting back to our Baker place camp than in having his soul blessed. No one else said anything, but I judged them to be siding more with Bub than with the Old Man. The Old Man said, noncommitally, “We’ll see,” and kept stuffing his mouth with brownies from Mom’s barrel.

We left the Pit River at about ten o’clock, and the trip to Lookout was a leisurely one. The Old Man drove along the highway at about forty-five, breathing big drafts of the light air and looking around at nothing in particular, almost distractedly. The rest of us didn’t talk much, preferring just to be where we were and think our own thoughts. When we turned off the highway onto the road to Lookout, I could make out the vague outlines of the volcanoes way off to the west.

The little town seemed busy. There were two or three cars parked in front of the store, and several parties of hunters, going
in and coming out, passed us. There was no sign of Game Warden Heater, so I supposed he was helping his wife in the small store they ran. The dingy café had steamy windows, and the number of cars parked around it suggested that the cook was busily making late breakfast.

The church, however, was dark and empty. The Old Man parked the truck in front of it and sat for a moment with the engine idling. Then he said, “They gone. Ain’t that somethin?” He got down off the truck and shook the locked door. Next, he looked in a couple of the windows. Getting back into his seat, he said, “Guess we won’t get to go to church this mornin.”

“Shoot,” said Unca Billy. “I bound ya them boogers done shet up the church an gone deer huntin.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it, Rev,” Deke agreed.

“Well,” countered the Old Man, “I met the pastor two or three years back, an he seemed like a decent fella, but they gone today sho as you born.”

To my dad, any religious group that wasn’t Pentecostal was “sectarian,” which to him meant that it was unregenerate at worst and misguided at best. No matter that he was damning most of the human race to hell. In fact, that seemed fitting to him and consistent with his doctrine.

He’d say, “Lotta these sectarian folks think ya can do just about anything you want to do an still be a Christian. They think ya can smoke an drink an fornicate, go to picture shows an dances an do almost any other kind of devilment an still git into heaven. They don’t even think ya have to go to church—you can just think about God an his works, an thas worship. But my Bible says that ‘strait is the gate an narrow the way an except ye come in by me, ye shall be los.’ I guess they Bible mus be different.” And so on.

He didn’t do the whole sermon that morning in Lookout. Instead, truly disappointed and backing the truck out, he sighed, “Well, don’t nothin beat a failure but a try.”

On the dirt road through the lava beds any religious feelings we might have had dissipated. No one mentioned the game warden.

Unca Billy opened up one of his stories. He began it, as usual, with his silent laugh. Then he said, “Hey, Rev. Seein that little
church back there reminded me of a tale they used to tell 'bout a old preacher boy back home. They say he was kine of a jack-leg—didn’t have no church of his own, jes went 'round from place to place preachin. Kine of a evangelis like.” I thought about Willis, but quickly dismissed the thought so I could listen to the story.

He cleared his throat and went on, “They claim the boy got real frenly wit some a the sisters in different places. Had done got three or four kids 'roun through there. Anyhow, he was gon preach at a new church, a little country one where he hadn’t never been befo. You remember them cutaway coats and tight pants men used to wear?” he asked everyone in general. He went on without wait-ing for an answer, “Well, he was wearin them kinna clothes.”

“An 'fo he put on his britches, he took an taped a ear a corn to the inside of his leg so it run down like a thing. Then he got to preachin. Preached real strong that mornin, all about adultery an fornication an everything. An every time he’d holler loud, he’d rear back, open up his cutaway coat, an stand wit the corn cob leg stretched out in front. So the sisters could see it, ya know.”

He leaned back in his seat, acting out his story.

“Say he got through preachin an coupla the sisters went down back of the church to the outhouse. Didn’t have no inside plumbin back there in them days, ya know. One was in the outhouse an the other one was waitin outside. “The one outside say, ‘Preacher sho did preach this mornin.’

“The one inside say, ‘Sho did, Honey.’”

Unca Billy made his voice into a high falsetto when he imitated the women’s voices.

“The one outside say, ‘Sistaaa, sista, did you see the preacher’s leg this mornin?’

“The one inside say, ‘Say no mo ’bout it, chile, say no mo ’bout it—make my pussy pucker so I cain’t pee.’”

We broke out laughing, Bub and I stealing glances at each other. After a moment, the Old Man joked, “Loose, here, Satan. The Lord’s servant mixed up where the spirit led him.”

Deke sort of murmured, “Seem like we done been gone from home longer ’n a week, don’t it?” Then he imitated Unca Billy imi-
tating the women, “Sistaa, sista...,” and we laughed some more, our 
thoughts clearly shifted away from Lookout and church services.

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We spent the remainder of that day back at camp “getting ready.”
Though that was my first big game hunt, I came to understand
then the obsessive care with which hunters prepare for their enter-
prise. And no hunt I’ve been on since has been different in that
regard. Since we’d already been in the hills for a week, we had our
clothing pretty much together—our long johns, socks and shirts
were clean and neatly stacked. Our coats, hats and gloves were
carefully placed together so we could find them quickly. Our boots
were well broken-in and comfortable. We had cleaned and oiled
our guns again after the target shooting, so we had only to gather
up our ammo and our weapons would be ready to use. Unca Billy
put on a pot of butter beans with ham hocks for our first hunting
night’s dinner, just in case we didn’t kill a deer. Deke put our lunch
into an army surplus ammo case. Bub and I filled all the canteens.
Then we stowed everything in the back of the truck. Smitty and
Willis gathered firewood. The Old Man put away the gear we had
used down on the Pit River and did whatever little chores were left
to be done.

By nightfall, we had already eaten dinner and washed up the
dishes. We sat back, drinking coffee and watching other hunting
parties moving up and down the road below our camp scramble
around getting ready to attack the hills. The Old Man said, “In the
mornin, now, we’ll do jes like we did when we was scoutin. We’ll
open up still huntin on top a Baker Mountain. We git there good
an early, an somebody’s liable to drive somethin up on us. Up in
the day, we’ll work out a manzanita patch or two, an we’ll finish off
the day in the lava beds.”

That was our cue to head for our tents. As we went, Bub said to
me, “Satch, you gonna go to that same spot you went to the other
day, over beside that big dead log?”

“Yep,” I told him. “I can hide beside it and still see a long ways
in every direction.”

Smitty said, “You got to stay real quiet and still, and if you
move, you got to do it real slow and careful, ’cause if the deer see
you or hear you, they’ll sneak right by you without you gettin’ a chance to see ’em.”

“I know, I know,” I answered gruffly. And we turned in. I was still some upset that the Old Man hadn’t done Jack Heater in like I had that kid in Fall River Mills. And he could have done it easily. But mostly I could hardly restrain myself I was so excited to hunt the next morning.

I must have woken up a dozen times that night, and each time I looked out the tent flap I saw only the sky’s blackness and the Milky Way. “I’ll be deer hunting in a few hours,” I kept repeating to myself. Smitty and Bub must have been anxious too, because they both twisted and turned and mumbled in their sleep.

Finally, I started dreaming, one dream after another. I don’t know how many different ones I had, but one has always stayed in my memory. I was sitting on a stand up on Baker Mountain above camp. A noble, four-point buck appeared at the edge of a clearing, and stood looking in my direction. I eased my gun up, moving slowly and carefully like my dad had taught me, and shot him just back of the shoulder in the chest cavity. I took that shot instead of one to the neck because I wanted to be sure to get him. He fell right on the spot.

I got up and moved toward him, my gun at the ready in case he got up. In my haste and excitement, I tripped over a log and fell. When I went down, the deer jumped up as if he hadn’t been shot at all and disappeared in one bound. I, too, jumped up and started following the bloody trail he left on the ground. I chased him over the hill and down the other side. I heard one shot, then another, down below me, and I went in that direction as fast as I could. I discovered Harry standing over my buck grinning. He had shot him in the neck.

“I got ’im, Satch,” he said.

“But that’s my buck,” I told him. “Can’t you see he’s been shot already? I knocked him down up on the hill, so he’s mine ’cause I drew first blood. That’s a hunting rule.”

“No, he ain’t your’n,” Harry came back. “I stopped ’im, so he’s mine.”
We were arguing over whose deer it was when Unca Billy’s cry, “Rise and shine, brothas, it’s time to move,” woke me up. Immensely relieved that I had only been dreaming, I bounded out of my sleeping bag to begin my first deer hunt in Modoc County.