Natural-Born Proud

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WE THREW ON OUR CLOTHES and raced through breakfast. The sky was still dark and dome-like, but no one acted as if it were four-thirty A.M. On later mornings, we’d be a little less anxious to get out, but that morning we were determined to be early. No one complained or joshed or teased. Each person knew what had to be done and went about it single-mindedly.

By five-thirty, we were aboard the truck and climbing up Baker Mountain. Shooting time started a half hour before sunrise, so to us that meant we could shoot anything legal we saw from about six-thirty on. The air seemed colder than it had been on any morning we’d seen so far. Every now and then we saw flashes from lanterns or headlights bouncing off the trees as we moved up the hill. I could feel the excitement flowing out of each of the men huddled in jackets, gloved hands deep in pockets against the chill.

The drive to the top took about an hour, so it was still dark when the Old Man stopped the truck in a clearing and said in a loud whisper, “Well, here we are brothers. Let’s git to our spots and set up so we can be ready by daybreak. Take everything ya need ’cause we gon be out for awhile. Sit still an be sure you can see what you shootin at. Ya know we can shoot forked horns. Ready, boys? Got plenty toilet wipe?”

“Oh, yeah,” I answered quickly.

“It’s cold out here,” said Bub.

“I know,” the Old Man told him. “But you’ll get warm walking to your spot, an the sun’ll be up before too long.” He and Deke headed down the hill. The rest of us lined out to find our stands.

Smitty struck out first, then Willis and Unca Billy moved away. I asked Bub, “You ready? Got everything?”
“Yeah. Let’s go.”
We started off.
I had to move slowly, feeling my way around big stumps, over logs and through occasional underbrush with my flashlight. I had to go over, around and through barriers that would disappear in the daylight. The morning moisture on the ground, halfway between frost and dew, was slippery, so I had to be careful. After only a few steps, Bub and I were out of sight and sound of each other, as if we had dived into a deep pool of dark water. I felt like it took me a long time to get down to my spot, but my watch face glowing in the dark told me that only fifteen minutes had passed. I got there, buttoned up my coat collar and sat down on the log, my back against a cedar tree, rifle resting across my lap, to wait for my buck.

I could smell drafts of pine and cedar in the cold, light air. Up there, we were in big timber—lots of sugar pines with their foot-long cones bigger than pineapples, old douglas firs, a few incense cedars and western hemlocks. I liked the doug firs and cedars best. The firs were stately, with their long branches swooping up toward the sky, and their short, bristly, green needles and small green and brown cones spread over them like carefully-placed Christmas ornaments. They grew highest up, and the oldest and largest ones had mounds of sloughed-off bark around their feet. They were usually over a hundred feet tall, sometimes nearer to two hundred, and their bough’s upward arch made them seem to be trying to lift off the ground into the air. The cedars were shorter, mostly seventy to eighty feet tall, and only two or three feet thick at the base. Their branches drooped down toward the ground and their delicate, soft needles dripped off them like fronds. Their bark and needle networks smelled sweet like Mom’s hope chest, and the trees had a graceful, almost dainty, lacy look about them.

Every now and then I heard the wind whisper through the big conifers. And after I had been settled and still for a few minutes, I started hearing little snaps and cracks in the trees and on the ground around me, the going-to-bed rustlings of some creatures, the wake-up ones of others—owls and raccoons trading places with sparrows and chipmunks. The faint glow in the eastern sky told
me that in a few hours I’d be exchanging my morning shivers for midday sweat, which at the time seemed like a good bargain to me.

I learned on that trip that a big part of deer hunting was sitting alone and quiet for hours on end. I came to see it as a test of my character, a way of disciplining myself to blend in with nature. To become as much of a part of the earth, the forest and the light as I could. I understood more and more of what the Old Man had been training Bub and me to do. I found that silence and stillness became comfortable companions. Waiting became the constant broken only occasionally by bursts of action. I got so I liked it, even craved it. The peace. The serene order. The oneness of everything.

I tried estimating where the others were set up. I had been to Bub’s spot, a small clearing on a ridge that let him see halfway down the hill across a ravine from him and a good ways down the hill he was on. He was on my left and slightly uphill from me. I didn’t know for sure where the others were, but I had pictures in my mind of where they should be: Smitty part way down the mountain where the road made a sharp bend to the right; Willis and Unca Billy not far from each other just below the ridge on the other side of the mountain from Bub and me; the Old Man and Deke roving slowly around the bottom of the mountain.

Periodically, I counted limbs on small trees and shrubs to be sure I could see points on a buck, and I sighted down my gun barrel a few times to be sure I could shoot accurately in the still-dim light. I started figuring out how to see, hear and feel the living patterns laid out around me, how to flow with the natural movements like I did when singing close harmony on one of those old church songs.

I thought about how sometimes my dad would stop and sweep his arm out over a canyon or a forest grove and say, “Ain’t God a wonder? Men try to make like they know all about nature, but don’t nobody know about all this but God. God said, ‘Let there be...,’ an all this was. Men couldn’t put these hills an lakes an woods here. An all these animals an birds. We oughta feel blessed to be out here among the Lord’s other creations.” That morning, I understood part of what he meant. I felt like hollering. I still do sometimes.
The red, eastern glow turned gold and spread over the whole sky. Trunks and branches of the big trees came at me out of the gloom. The sun was bursting up over the horizon; sheets and shafts of its light fell down through the trees to the ground. The warmth and light drew me toward them, but my dad’s instructions pushed me back toward the shadows so deer wouldn’t see me. I was shifting around, trying to stay hidden and comfortable at the same time when I heard my first shots. They came from down the hill toward where I expected Deke and the Old Man were. They sounded surprisingly loud, given how far away I judged them to be. “Pow! Pow! Pooww!” went a rifle, the sound simultaneously sharp and muffled, echoing like a firecracker going off in a barrel.

My head jerked up, my heartbeat quickened. What if the Old Man or Deke had a buck down already? The first thing on the opening morning of the season, and we might already have one. “Oh, shit,” I thought, “we might be on our way.” In my mind I pictured us dragging a buck laboriously but joyfully to the truck. I tried to sit even stiller and quieter, straining all my nerves into my hearing, hoping for other shots and trying to remember whether the sounds were like those made by either of their guns down at the Pit River.

No more shots came, and I didn’t hear any voices floating up to me or echoing down the canyon, so I decided that whoever had been shooting had either missed or killed the deer outright and didn’t need help finding it or making a kill shot from up close. I looked over the hillside below me even more carefully because the Old Man had told us that was the direction game would be coming from and that rifle fire would put animals on the move. I turned my head back and forth slowly, being sure to look at every stump, every little opening in the timber. I breathed as slowly and as quietly as I could, straining every fiber in my body to see and hear.

In about twenty minutes, I heard a sharp crack, a branch breaking. Something or someone was moving up the hill toward me. I slid slowly down off my log and quietly snuggled closer to the trunk of the big cedar I was sitting against. I adjusted the strap around my left forearm and tightened my grip on my gun. I eased my right hand down over the trigger guard so I could release the safety to
I raised my gun up into the crook of my arm, close to my shoulder. I heard thumping steps down below and to the right of me. I squinted as hard as I could and tried to slow down my breathing so I could hear something besides the blood pounding in my ears. Nothing happened for a while.

Suddenly, as if by magic, they appeared—a doe and two fawns. They were mule deer. She must have weighed well over a hundred pounds, and her coat looked dark and smooth in the early light. The fawns had lost most of their spots and bounced after their mother like little goats. The doe looked back over her shoulder toward the direction they had come from. Then she kept climbing. They were only sixty or eighty feet away. I could have shot any one of them, maybe all three. Every cell in my body seemed to tingle, and my palms sweated in my gloves. My breathing was shallow and quick.

I stayed put, because bucks sometimes let does and fawns move first, as if they understood that hunters wanted only male deer. All three of them moved gracefully away as mysteriously as they had come, but no buck came out and I didn’t hear any other sounds of movement. Damn! I had done it right. I had stayed hidden so well that the deer had never seen me and had walked right out into a place where I could have killed them. I smiled to myself and relaxed a little, trying to breathe more normally.

No more deer came out. In a few minutes the sounds of the woods returned to what they had been before, as if what had happened had been only in my mind. The morning sunlight was spreading out into bigger swatches, splashing down in larger pools. I waited.

By nine-thirty, the morning’s heat had conquered the night’s chill and taken hold. I could tell the directions where the “pow! pow! pow!” of the shots I heard occasionally were coming from. I hoped some of the shooting was by my party.

I heard another noise off to my left between me and Bub. My blood rushed again and I got ready to shoot. I heard a twig snap fairly close by, and I felt confident that if a buck appeared, he
would be mine. Then speaking and moving at the same time, my
dad asked, “Your gun on safety?”

I let out my breath and relaxed, disappointed that my vigilance
had brought only the Old Man, not a four-point buck.

“Un-hunh,” I answered, watching him come into view.

“Good,” he said. “I thought I heard somethin movin ahead a
me on my way up here. You see anything?”

“A doe and two fawns came out right over there, and I could
have killed any one of 'em. They never even saw me and went on
over this hump towards the others.”

“Good fer you,” he said again. “You in a good spot, so you
shoulda seen anything that came up this way.” I felt praised and
proud.

The Old Man took a leak beside a tree, and letting go a big fart,
he sat back against my cedar log with me, mopping his face with a
red bandana.

“Man, that hill’s steep, an it’s gon be hot today. You see or hear
anything from the others?”

“No. I heard some shots, but I don’t know if it was them or
not.”

“Well, it’s hard to tell where shootin’s comin from up here.
Hills and valleys deflect the sound an make it echo funny,” he said.

After resting for a bit, he stood up.

“It’s a little after ten, so let’s climb on up to the ridge an call
the others. Deke should be there with the truck pretty soon, an I’m
gittin hungry.” I stood up stiffly, stretched my arms and legs and
slung my gun strap over my shoulder. Then my dad and I zigzagged
slowly and silently up the mountainside together.

He moved in front of me, placing each foot carefully on the
ground to avoid the noise of breaking branches. I stepped where he
did when his strides weren’t too long. Then I took the lead since
we were backtracking from my stand. Periodically, we stopped to
catch our breath in case we needed to shoot. We didn’t talk as we
climbed, but we moved in such unison and with such clear inten-
tions that we didn’t need words.

Within the next hour, all of us made it to the top of the hill
where Deke met us. No one had fired a shot, but almost everyone
had seen deer, so we were excited. Bub told me, “Satch, a doe and two fawns walked right out in front of me and just stood there. They didn’t even see me. I could have killed any of them if it had been a buck.”

“I think they spooked off Dad when he came up the hill,” I said, nodding sagely, and then told him about how the deer had passed in front of me, too. Willis said a big spike had jumped from him and gone by Unca Billy.

“Sho did,” the little man said, “an I mean he was a big rascal too, prob1y over two hundred pounds.”

Smitty, who had walked the farthest, hadn’t seen any game, but he said, “Man, all the shootin sounds like a war. Like Korea. Must be a lotta deer in here.”

“Yeah, man,” Deke put in. “Folks back down the hill where we come up this mornin’ killed a forked horn just below the road. Nice one, too.”

“I ’spect we ran him onto ’em,” the Old Man said. He went on, “We know there’s deer in these hills, so les eat a bite an have a blow an go git some of ’em.”

Unca Billy got out the grub, and we sat out a long hour around the truck on a grassy knoll in the sun. We ate cans of sardines and Vienna sausages with crackers. Passing the cans of sausages around, Unca Billy started his silent laugh and a story.

“Boy worked in a grocery store,” he began.

“An every few days a old maid school teacher come in an bought one garlic sausage, kinna like these viennies. Every few days, she come in an bought one sausage an that was all. So the boy, musta been ’roun ’bout eighteen years old, decided to follow her home an see what she did with that one sausage. Nex few evenins she come in an bought her sausage. An when she left the store, he run out the back door and followed her home and went ’roun to the back a the house and peeped in the kitchen winda. The old girl put that sausage on to boil for a few minutes, and got it nice an warm—not hot, jes warm. Then she slid back a piece a the linoleum an stuck that sausage in a hole in the floor so it stood straight up. Then she dropped her drawers and sat down on that sausage an had herself a good time.”
Bub and I snickered and looked at each other, and Smitty laughed out, “All right, Jack.”

Unca Billy went on, “Boy ran back to the store an watched for the nex time she come in to buy her sausage. Nex few days, sho ’nough, she come in. He followed her home and watched her put the sausage on to heat. When she did that, he crawled up under the house, and when she slid the linoleum back an put her sausage down, he pulled it on down through the hole an stuck his thing up through the floor. He could hear her movin aroun droppin her britches. She squatted an sat down on it an was just about to git goin real good when the door bell rang. Then she jumped up to go to the door, an tried to kick the sausage under the stove ’fo she went.”

Everybody whooped. Smitty fell over onto the ground and slapped his thigh, laughing his falsetto.

“Hee, hee, hee,” Deke giggled.

Willis blew his nose and sighed, “Oh, me.”

When Smitty got himself collected, he said, “That one kinda reminds me of one that used to go around the gym back when I was fightin.

“They say a middleweight outta San Jose was havin a fight down in Fresno. Went out in the first round, and the guy knocked him down, cut his eye and busted his lip. He got back to his corner, and his manager said, ‘You doin great! He didn’t hardly lay a hand on you, and you already got him goin. You can probly take him out in this next round.’

“So he went back out for the second round, and the same thing happened again. The guy pounded on his body, opened up the cut on his eye again, and everything. Got back to his corner, and his manager said, ‘You almost got him that round, and he didn’t get to you at all. Just keep it up, and you’ll get him for sure next round.’

“Went back out for the third round, and that time it was worse. The guy knocked him down twice, once clean outta the ring. He staggered back to his corner bleedin, with his face all puffed up, and his manager started in again, ‘You just about got him that round, and he ain’t hurtin you at all.’ The middleweight stopped him and said, ‘Wait a minute. You say I’m tearin him up, right?”
“Yeah,’ the manager said.
“‘And you say he ain’t laid a glove on me?’
“‘Well,’ the manager said, ’not hardly, just a little maybe.’
“‘Alright, then,’ said the middleweight, ‘you better watch that referee, ’cause somebody’s kickin the shit outta me.’

We had another good laugh. I especially liked that one because Smitty didn’t tell stories often. He usually left that up to the men. The other reason was that he got away with saying the word “shit” without the Old Man lecturing him. Things seemed better between them now that we were actually hunting. I had to admit to feeling a little better too, and Willis hadn’t broken down again after that first time. We all were relaxed and having fun together, expecting to get game. Shirts burned off by the hot sun, feet propped up on rocks, stumps or the running board of the truck, we were letting our lunch settle and postponing the moment when we’d hurl our bodies at the manzanita growing down the flanks and into the crotches of the hills below us. We figured that was where the deer would be during midday and that we’d have to go in there after them, but we were taking our time about getting to it.

Deke looked over at Unca Billy who was stretched out flat on the ground, his legs crossed at the ankles and resting on a small log.
“Dogs barkin, Unca Billy?” he asked.
“Man, you got that right.”
“Hee, hee, hee,” Deke giggled. He went on, “Walkin these hills and mountains’ll do it to ya. They say a ole sister done been workin hard for the white folks all day long. Scrubbin floors, washin walls, doin everything. By the end a the day, she was in bad shape. Had the backache an her feet hurt. I mean, she was ruint. Then she went home an ate a whole lotsa pig feet, collard greens, sweet potatas an corn bread, lotsa heavy stuff. So her belly got to kickin up too. She was a mess.

“Say the ole girl got to prayin: ‘Lawd, you got to come help yo po chile. She’s tired an her body’s in pain. She done hurt herself today, an Miz Alice an Mister Archie done gone off to Dallas.’”

I couldn’t figure out where Deke was going with that one, but like all the others, I waited expectantly for him to finish it off. He continued.
“Say she prayed on, ‘Help me, Lawd, help me. You got to come help me yo self, ’cause I’m po an I’m needy. Help me, Lawd. An don’t come sendin that boy Jesus, ’cause this ain’t no job for no chillun.’”

When the laughter died down, the Old Man said, “Well, I don’t know if it’s a job for chillun or not, but we ain’t gon git none a them bucks down there in that manzanita if we keep sittin up here on our butts.” We gathered up our garbage, loaded the truck and took off.

We got to the manzanita patch the Old Man had picked out around two o’clock. It was about halfway between Baker Mountain and the lava beds, so after we had worked it out, we wouldn’t have a long way to go to get to the jack pines in the lava beds for the late afternoon hunt. The heavy brush grew from the bottom of the hill up to the road, which looked like a dirty, red scar about a third of the way up. The rectangular patch ran about two hundred yards down to the bottom and about three hundred from the timber on the right hand side to the clearing on the left. Big trees grew right down to the edge of the high bank above the road. Anything we scared up out of the manzanita was likely to head either for the road or for the clearing at the end of the patch.

Although the patch wasn’t too big, the hillside was steep and the brush thick, so we planned to have the drivers stay pretty close together in order to keep everything in front of us. The Old Man took up a stand just below the road toward the end of the patch, and Smitty struck out for the next hillside to the left. Joe Willis went down to the bottom before heading out of the timber on the right into the thicket, and Unca Billy went in just above him. Bub and I took the middle, with him below me, and Deke cruised through the edge of the patch nearest to the road. At a whistle from the Old Man, we started through.

The manzanita was no easier to negotiate on the real hunt than it had been on our scouting trip—it was plain hard, hot work. We moved slowly, barking, hollering and making as much noise as possible. About fifty yards in, I climbed up on a stump to look around. I couldn’t see my brother, but I could hear him scrambling along down to my right. Willis waved up to me from the bottom, and I
could see the brush moving where I figured Unca Billy should be. No sign of the others.

I clambered down and was starting to move ahead when I heard,

“Buck! Buck! Buck!”

It was Bub. As fast as I could, I turned around to get back up onto my stump, tripping over a thick branch and scraping the skin off my left shin in my haste. Bub was still yelling.

“He’s going downhill. Get him! Get him!”

Just as I stood up to look, I heard a shot down toward Willis and Unca Billy. Visible above the manzanita and pointing toward the timber behind us, Willis shouted, “Thar he goes! Thar he goes!”

Visible above the manzanita and pointing toward the timber behind us.

“Which away did he go?” from Unca Billy, who popped into sight between Bub and Willis.

“Down the hill into the trees,” from Bub.

Willis exclaimed, pointing, “He was runnin back the way we come from. I seen him for jes a second when he run through that little clearin yonder. That’s when I shot.”

By that time, everyone was in sight, calling back and forth excitedly.

“Where’d he come from?” I asked Bub.

“Must have gotten up behind us, between me and you, and doubled back down into the trees.”

“Did you see him?”

“No. I just heard him.”

“Why didn’t you call me sooner, when you first heard him?”

“I didn’t know it was a deer. I thought it was you moving.”

“How could you think that? You knew I was in front of you.”

“I don’t know.”

“What you mean ‘you don’t know?’”

“I don’t know. That’s all.”

I could tell he felt bad from the way he ducked his head, and how he was distractedly picking manzanita berries and throwing them away into the brush. But I couldn’t let him off. The sun was
pounding down, and I was still out of breath. I could feel blood sliding down my shin, which felt hotter than the sun and hurt like hell. Here we were breaking our asses to drive deer out of the brush, and Bub couldn’t tell the difference between me and a buck. I was so disappointed and so mad at my brother that I wished I was close enough to slug him. It was one of our archetypal struggles—I pushed and he pulled.

“Damn!” I muttered, loud enough for him but not the others to hear.

All of us stood, quiet and immobile, for what seemed like a long time.

“Should we go back and try to find him?” I shouted to my dad. He didn’t respond, so I hollered again.

“He can’t hear you,” Unca Billy told me. “That buck done gone now.”

I tried to glare at Bub as hot as the sun beating down on all of us. I felt sweat trickle down the back of my neck and blood down the front of my leg. My heart was still pounding, and my frustration felt like a big ball in my chest and stomach, like the anticipation I’d felt when I went back into Fall River Mills. I dreaded going into the brush again, but when the Old Man whistled and waved us on, I climbed down off my stump.

I moved slower than before, protecting my hurt leg, and I didn’t pick up my noise-making until I heard the others, one by one, pitch in again, though less vigorously than before. We howled and barked our way through the rest of the patch, and whenever I got up where I could see, making sure not to let another buck sneak away from us, I usually picked out at least one of the others. We didn’t jump any more deer, and within an hour we came to the end of the manzanita. Sweating and puffing, we crouched or kneeled down to catch our breath. Then tiredly, we straggled back along the road to the truck, our shirts soaked through, our rifles slung over our drooping shoulders.

When I got to the truck, Deke was already there, sitting behind the wheel with the motor running.

“Hard work, ain’t it?” he said.
I didn’t answer, but nodded my head and began knocking the leaves and dust off myself and looking for the water bag. The Old Man and Bub arrived as I finished drinking, and I silently passed the water to my dad instead of my brother. He gave it to Bub, saying, “Well, that’s one we almost had. But that happens sometimes when ya huntin.” He climbed up into the passenger seat and glugged down a long drink from the bag Bub gave back to him. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and turned to Deke.

“Les drive on down to that bend and pick up the others.”

Once my brother and I were seated on the metal benches running along the sides of the truck bed, I went right after him like I usually did when we were having a row.

“How come you didn’t call me sooner?”
“I told you I didn’t know it was a deer. I thought it was you.”
“You couldn’t have thought that.”
“Yes I did.”
“How could it have been me when I was in front of you?”
“I don’t know, but I did think it was you.”
“You couldn’t have.”
“Yes I did.”
“No you didn’t.”
“Yes I... “
“You didn’t.”
“You guys stop arguin,” our father broke in. “The buck’s gone now an ain’t nothin we can do about it.”
“But we were right on him, and if Bub had called me sooner, I could’ve shot him,” I came back.
“You don’t know that,” he countered.
“These deer are smart. We’re the strangers; they’re at home. Sometimes they’ll let you walk right up on ’em an they won’t move. I’ve even seen ’em watch hunters an move when they move an stop when they stop. Besides, you might have missed him if you had’ve seen him.”

That really pissed me off. It hurt my feelings too. True, I hadn’t hit with every shot I took down at the Pit River, but I still believed I’d hit a deer if I shot at one. I was mad at both Bub and him again then. He always did that; he’d take Bub’s part against me any day.
Because I was older, he always said. Bub’s eyes got teary and he never said anything, but looked away into the manzanita. I sat there boiling, my shin throbbing and my long johns sticking to the drying blood. Up ahead, I could see Smitty and Willis standing beside the road. Unca Billy was sitting on a big flat rock.

Climbing up onto the gerry can strapped beside the seat on the passenger side by the Old Man, Unca Billy said, “Man, I sho thought we had one there.”

“Sheemed like it,” replied the Old Man.

My cousin took a long drink from the water bag before getting up into the truck bed with me and Bub.

“Well, I mighta got ’im if I had of saw ’im sooner,” Willis explained after he had sat down beside me.

“Maybe,” said the Old Man.

“Maybe we’d all have seen him sooner if one of you other guys had jumped him,” I put in.

“I mean, he still wasn’t a hundred yards away from me when Brother Willis shot at him.”

“He was purty close, alright,” Willis agreed.

Having the Old Man get after Bub wouldn’t have made up for the lost deer, but it would have helped my feelings.

“Well, maybe,” my dad answered pointedly, “but things like that happen when you’re huntin. Many is the time I’ve seen an old buck lie right down on the ground an stay still till you walk by him, then sneak away behind you. I mean these deer are smart, an you have to be on your toes all the time to git ’em.” He still wasn’t blaming Bub. Deke said brusquely, “Les go,” and drove us off toward the lava beds.

I was still so mad at my brother that I couldn’t look at him without wanting to bust him one. He always got away with more than I did. Mom and the Old Man always took his side against me. Like that time with old Smokey’s tail.

Smokey was a gray alley cat that Bub brought home. We must have been about ten and eight. We already had a dog, part cocker spaniel, named “Hey, You” that had simply appeared on our doorstep one day. “Hey, You” were the first words Mom had said to
him, so we called him that for three years, until he got run over by a car out on Fremont Street. Mom told Bub he couldn’t keep the cat, and that if we didn’t feed him, he would go away. Bub fed the god-damned thing anyway, and he stayed.

I didn’t like Smokey. He was big, probably eight or ten pounds. He was also ugly, with legs that looked too short for his body, short ears, a long, skinny tail and white splotches mixed in with his gray fur. And he was mean. He fought all the other cats and some of the dogs in the neighborhood, and the Italian family next door kept complaining to our parents when Smokey would chase their cats away from their dishes and eat their food. They finally started feeding their cats inside their house.

Smokey would arch his back and growl or hiss every time our dog got near him. Just watching him lying up on the two-by-four along the side fence sunning himself and switching his skinny tail back and forth, looking like the king of the world, would make me mad. And he would curl up on the most comfortable chair in the living room, tail wrapped around himself, and sleep. The bastard.

But he was Bub’s cat. He’d stay away chasing females for days, and sometimes he’d be all scratched and beaten up when he returned. Mom would talk to him when he would come to the kitchen door and howl for food in his loud, raspy voice, but he wouldn’t let her, or anyone else but Bub, hold or pet him.

Once, after we’d had him about a year, he came home from one of his prowls looking really bad. Both of his ears and his face were all cut up, he was limping, and nearly all the fur had been torn off his tail. He was a mess. I figured he’d been in a fight with a dog.

Bub fed and nursed him for a few days, but he seemed to get worse instead of better. His tail festered and oozed pus, and the flesh fell away, exposing the bones. Bub wanted to take him to the vet, but Mom said to wait a couple more days to see if he wouldn’t start to get well on his own. The Old Man thought he had gangrene in his tail. I hoped he would die.

The Saturday about a week after Smokey came home, Bub and I were trimming the hedge across the backyard. I was clipping off the long branches and making it smooth. Bub was raking up the clippings and piling them up in a corner of the yard where we’d
burn them after they dried out some. The cat was dragging himself around, looking like he was a goner.

“Hey, Satch,” Bub asked me, “think Smokey’s gonna make it?”
“Not if we don’t take him to the vet or something.”
“But Mom said to wait a few days more.”
“Then he’ll prob’ly die.”
I liked that prospect.

Then I had a bright idea. Looking back on it now, I see how cruel it was. But my young mind rationalized it as a marvelous insight into feline healing. I called Bub over close to the hedge and talked to him quietly.

“I bet he’d get well if you cut off his tail. That’s what’s making him sick.”
“Think so?”
“Sure. Gangrene’s poisoning his whole system, so that tail’s gotta come off.”
“How? He won’t let me catch him or pick him up.”
He had me for a minute there, but I wracked my brain for a little bit and hit on the answer.

“Put some food down in front of him, something he likes, and when he eats it, you can chop his tail off with the axe. I’ll go get the axe from the garage while you go get the food.”

Bub liked my idea, and threw down his rake to go for something out of the refrigerator to feed the cat. When I came back with the axe, Bub had already put some left over fried fish in the cat’s food dish. He was calling the cat.

“Here, Smokey. Here, kitty, kitty, kitty. C’mon, Smokey.”

The dumb cat went to him and crouched down to eat the fish, purring so loud I could hear him from twenty feet away. His sore tail stuck straight out behind him. I gave Bub the axe and backed away. Bub eased up to him with the axe in the air, and got himself ready. At a signal from me, he brought the axe down with all his might. He hit the tail just above all the putrid, rotten stuff.

Jesus Christ, all hell broke loose. The cat screamed and leaped high into the air, two or three feet at least, spinning in about three circles as he did it. Spitting and hissing, he hit the ground running. Round and round and back and forth across the yard he went, fast-
er than I’d ever seen him run before. I mean he was picking them up and laying them down! After a moment, when we got over our surprise and shock, Bub and I ran after him yelling. I was laughing and Bub was crying. The cat had headed toward the front of the house and disappeared around the corner. The tail was lying on the ground, wiggling like a snake. Mom looked out the back door.  

My brother said, “He’s gonna die. You made me kill him. I’m gonna tell Mom.”

He ran for the house. I had been laughing loudly at the cat’s mad antics, but when Bub started for the back door, I knew I was lost.

Just as I feared she would do, Mom called me into the house. She was in the dining room ironing. I could tell from the tightness of her jaw that she was pissed off.

“Did you make Bub cut off the cat’s tail?”

That word “make” allowed me a smidgeon of leeway.

“Well,” I started, “I didn’t make him do it. I just thought the cat would probly get well if he didn’t have that bad tail.” My hair-splitting—she used to call it “lawyering”—made her madder than anything.

“Did you tell him to do it?” she demanded, her flashing eyes letting me know I’d best come clean.

“Yes, m’am,” I answered meekly.

“I’m gonna tell your daddy to whip you when he comes home. That was mean of you and stupid of Bub.”

Sure as hell, the Old Man came home from the church and blistered my butt with the wide leather belt he used for carrying his hunting knife and hatchet. Bub got bawled out for listening to me: “If Satch told you to go jump in a lake, would you do it?” and “You can’t go around doing everything somebody tells you to do. You got to think for yourself.” Things like that.

Smokey got well. He stayed away over a month, but he came home fatter and meaner than he’d ever been and lived to a ripe old cat age with no tail.

Bub and I have laughed about that episode since we’ve been men, but it sure wasn’t funny to me back then when the Old Man got after my ass with his belt. I knew I should have been punished
about the cat’s tail, but Bub’s getting only a talking-to while I got a beating didn’t seem right. I felt then just like I felt after Bub had jumped the buck and not called us soon enough. So I sulked all the way to the lava bed hunting spot and was slow getting down off the truck.

§ § § §

The Old Man repeated his safety reminders and his warnings about getting lost. He also tried to divert us by telling the story about the father who had killed his son, mistaking him for a deer. Then we spread out again, that time with Smitty and Unca Billy on stands, and moved through the jack pines toward the road a mile away. The Old Man positioned himself between Bub and me.

All of us were tired, and disappointed after coming so close and not getting the buck we’d jumped. Willis tried to cheer us up.

“i ’spect they’s another’n in thar, so les go git ’im.”

“Yeah,” weakly from Unca Billy.

Smitty retied his combat boots, and Deke took another drink from the water bag. We went slowly and rather unenthusiastically through the trees.

I was still mad, though my anger had shifted partially away from my brother and back onto my father again. I was even more anxious to see a buck, but I marched through the lava beds carelessly, picking the fastest ways around the big lava formations and circling stands of trees instead of going through them. I was the first one to break out of the jack pines onto the road. I heard quite a few rifle shots a long way off, but no one in our party fired. In fact, the only deer we saw were a couple of does that got up between Deke and Joe Willis. Right at dark, my first day of hunting deer in Modoc ended. We had been skunked. Without anyone having to say anything, I knew all eyes were focused on camp and Unca Billy’s butter beans and ham hocks.

Camp was subdued that night. Part of the gloom was because of the missed buck, but I thought the main part of it was because everyone was so tired. We had hunted for over twelve hours, having been up for nearly fourteen, and our bodies were paying the first-day price. I still remember my aching shoulders and my sore back, my total fatigue. I seemed to be stiff all over, especially in my hurt
leg, and I noticed that the men moved around as little as possible. While Smitty stoked up the fire, Deke and Unca Billy got dinner on the table. With our coats on against the night air, we fell to our plates of good, hot food hungrily and silently.

Immediately after dinner, Smitty, Bub and I groaned up out of our seats to clear away the dishes and food for the night. They did most of the work. My leg hurt, and I was depressed, feeling both anger and guilt over the clashes with my dad and brother. They and the others seemed absorbed in their own thoughts. As I sat beside the fire washing my bloody shin with hydrogen peroxide before wrapping it with clean gauze, Deke came by on his way to the latrine. He paused for a minute and then said, “Clean it up good, Bud, ’cause we gon git after ’em in the mornin. Ole Doc, he know how ta git these bucks. Firs year I come up here wit ’im, we hunted fer a whole week and didn’t see nothin. Not even no does much. Doc kep sayin we was gon git ’em, an we kep’ climbin and walkin. That was the time I fell on that rock down in the lavies an hurt my knee. You don’t remember that, do ya?”

“I don’t think so,” I shrugged.

“I know you was pretty small then. Anyway, we hunted fo mo days, and the nex ta las day we got one buck in the mornin and one in the evenin. Doc knowed what he was talkin ’bout. They ain’t done defeated us yet.”

In the next few minutes, Unca Billy pushed himself up out of his chair and announced, “Aaahh, Lord. I got to put this old body to bed.”

Nearly wordlessly, we scattered in the various directions toward our beds, seeking rest and oblivion.