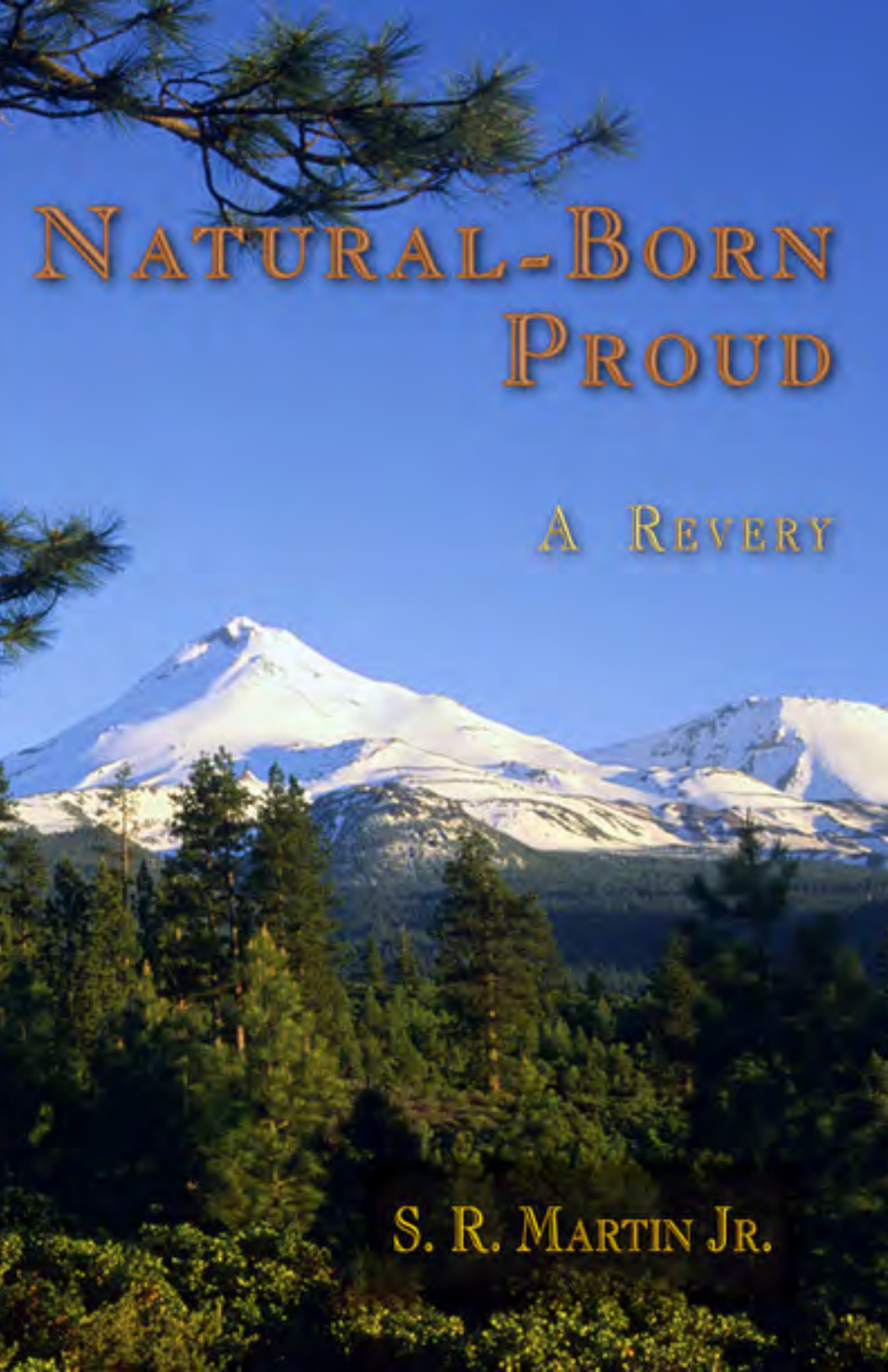
Natural-Born Proud
A Revery
S. R. Martin Jr.

Natural-Born Proud

2010

Natural-Born Proud

S. R. Martin Jr.

Natural-Born Proud

A Revery

S. R. MARTIN JR.

Utah State University Press
Logan, UT
2010

Utah State University Press
Logan, Utah 84322-7800
USUPress.org

Cover photo: QT Luong/terragalleria.com

ISBN 978-0-87421-775-9 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-87421-776-6 (e-book)

Printed on acid-free, recycled paper
Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Martin, S. R. (Sennie Rudolph), 1935-
Natural-born proud : a revery / S.R. Martin.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-87421-775-9 (pbk. : alk. paper) ~ ISBN 978-0-87421-776-6 (e-book)
1. English language~Rhetoric~Study and teaching. 2. Universities and colleges--Curricula. I. Title.
PE1404.M359 2010
808'.0420711~dc22

2010004738

My . . . daddy, natural-born proud

—Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington,
"My Mother, My Father (Heritage)"

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee,
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.

—Emily Dickinson

I

WE'RE BURYING MY DAD TODAY. At one o'clock. He died suddenly last Thursday. When he didn't come home from his office at the church, Mom got worried and called. No answer. One of the deacons went in and found him slumped dead over his desk. He was young, only 63, but he had a stroke like his mother, brother and sister before him. I now know the end that some of my genes may hold for me and my children. But right out of the blue? I bet if he'd had a choice, he wouldn't have picked this as a surprise for his family and friends.

Feels like ages ago that Deke's phone call got me up from the dinner table. "Hey, Satch. You better git down here. The Reveren died this evenin." Just like that. Jesus Christ! So here I am driving that same hundred and thirty miles down to Monterey from San Francisco again. Must be the fifth time I've made this trip in the last seven days. I was just there yesterday, but had to go back to the city to pick up my wife and kids for the funeral.

Seems I've lived a whole life behind the wheel since last Friday, but this is the last trip for now. Claudia's quiet and a little tight, but she looks pretty in her navy blue suit and hat. Prim and proper. Michael, Anna and baby Booker are so cute in their Sunday-go-to-meetin clothes. Wish it weren't their grandpa's funeral we were going to. Hard thing for an eight-year-old, a six-year-old and a toddler. Poor kids. Poor Mom. Poor Dad. Hell, poor all of us.

What a week! Mom falling into bed and needing the doctor. Bub and Carolyn flying in from Kansas City. Everyone running to me for what to do. Phone calls. Confusion. People pouring in and out of the house. Police escorts, flowers, undertakers, caskets, insurance, everybody and his brother "wanting to say a word" at

the service. Pounding back and forth up and down the freeway between San Francisco and Monterey. I feel like a zombie.

What's that saying—"Life's a beach and then you're dead"? One week the Old Man's cruising along, feeling great—making plans, doing just fine. The next week we're putting him into a hole in the ground. And here I am doing everything from fathering other folks and deciding what to do to running little jive errands because somebody lost his goddamned car keys. Taking care of everything and everybody. Madness. It was my father that died, so who's taking care of me? What am I supposed to do?

I didn't need this. I'm not ready to be the head of this family. I'm too young. I need more time, time to get my own life in shape and my kids farther along in theirs. Besides, I wasn't finished with my dad yet. But no, I've got to stiff-upper-lip it. Make sure everything comes out right for other people, manage their affairs. Besides, I hate funerals.

I can just see the hordes of people that'll be there. They'll jam the aisles and gather in clumps around the steps up into the church. The mayor and local business people droning on about his service to the community. His preacher friends, black and white, from all over the state praising his "faith in the Lord and his devotion to God's people." Same old stuff, but this time about my dad.

The music will be the only good part. No Bach chorales, no sorrow-song spirituals. Just plain, strong Gospel music. If everything about my folks' religion were like the music, I could dig it. The choir singing "We Are Our Heavenly Father's Children," and the singers, the organ and the piano merging into a single sound, one that's simple and complex, brilliant and dark, that thunders and soars. When they get to the last line, "He knows just how much we can bear," even if I do have a hole as big as the Grand Canyon in the middle of my guts, I know I'll feel like everyone else, transported right up through the ceiling toward heaven. What music!

Of course Sandra Wilkins, chubby and cherubic, will sing "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," my dad's favorite, promising divine guidance on earth and everlasting life in heaven to everyone within hearing distance. It'll make saints and sinners, birth

and death, all one. Bishop Jones's sermon about God's faithful servant's having labored in the vineyard and gone on to his just reward will try to explain what's happened. Maybe the Bishop's words will satisfy some people. Make them feel like my dad's early death was all right, that they and he will have many mansions to look forward to. But not me. No, sir. Hell, no. I'm not convinced God's eye really is on the sparrow, or me.

I know the Old Man's hunting buddies'll be there. Of course, Deke will be there. I saw him at the church before I went home yesterday. Unca Billy's been dead five years. I'm not sure about Willis because he doesn't live on the Peninsula any more. If they all could come, I know they'd talk about those hunting trips we used to go on. Sure. And they'd probably bring up some of those old yarns and stories. Hunting and stories, stories and hunting. Damn.

Poor Mom seems lost. She's three years younger than the Old Man was, but somehow, she always seemed to assume she'd die first or that his death wouldn't be so quick or final, so inconvenient. For one thing, she doesn't know the first thing about how to handle their finances because he always did that stuff. Oh, they discussed money and made decisions about big expenditures together, things like whether to buy a new car or more lots, "on speculation," he called it. And they shared the view that even though the congregation dearly loved and took good care of their pastor, he and his family had an obligation to be independent of other people's good will, free from the ways the spirit might move the two hundred house maids, manual laborers and pensioners from the military. Having the full responsibility for her life is something she hasn't looked for, and she doesn't seem prepared to do it or have much inclination to get ready to do it.

Bub's struggling too. When I called, I first told him to sit down. He started to resist like he used to do when we were boys, "Why?" I raised my voice and spoke faster, "Would you please sit down and shut the hell up?" Sitting or not, he got quiet on the other end of the phone line. I told him the Old Man had died, straight and direct like Deke had told me. After Bub kept asking me, "What?" "What?" "What?" about ten times, like he didn't understand English, he couldn't stop murmuring quietly, "Oh,

no. Oh, shit. Oh, no. Oh, shit," over and over. He was having a hard time.

I don't think his problem is just that he's younger than I am. It's also that he feels guilty for what he believes are his past mistakes—running away to the army back when he was eighteen, not going to college, not getting saved. I wish he didn't feel that way.

He acts like if he overwhelms himself with scrambling around and helping take care of things, he'll wake up one morning to find that all of this was just a bad dream. The Old Man will still be alive. He'll walk into the folks' bedroom, and there will be our dad, propped up in bed with pillows, reading his Bible or his Sunday School book over the top of his glasses, just like he did on Saturdays for as long as either of us can remember. Bub's so manic he makes me nervous. With some more time, maybe he'll be able to accept what has happened and move on with his own life. But right now he's drowning in his grief, and I have to help him. I'll deal with my own stuff later.

I'm sure that if I poked around in my own deepest feelings, trying to name my most basic response to my father's death, and to his life, I'd have to admit to being more like my brother than different from him. I too feel cheated, robbed by Dad's dying as he did, so young, so suddenly, mid-stride so to speak. And if I were honest about it, I'd confess that I, too, must have almost believed that the Old Man, in some ways so much bigger than life, was bigger than death too.

Goddamn, my Old Man and I went through a lot of things with each other. And we never did quite finish all that was left. Isn't that always the way it happens? I remember how he rankled at my insistence on living in the City rather than on the Monterey Peninsula. And he felt a deep, but seldom-expressed sadness that I chose not to be religious in the same way he was. Wanted me to be a preacher too. He said I was "bookish" so I'd "study God's word and be a good shepherd." Not me, Jack. I'm no good at faith. I have a hard enough time trying to understand things.

Mom always said he and I were proud and born that way, that we bounced off each other like a Mack truck and an army tank. I've never known whether I was the truck or the tank, but I guess I am

stubborn and strong-willed like he was. I don't mean to be. It's just that...oh, I don't know. But he seemed to think he had some innate sense of what was right that others didn't have. Maybe that's one of his family's traits too, like the tendency toward stroke.

Of course, I really must have been a trial to my parents when I was growing up. I didn't always mean to. It just happened. I know I made them crazy by refusing to argue; going ahead and doing what I was going to do regardless of what they said or did. It drives Claudia crazy too. She puts her hand on her hip and cocks her head to one side. Then she says, "You haven't listened to me. You're standing there with your head up in the air and staring off into space just like your father. You're going to do as you please, right?" Then I usually have to laugh because she looks so cute that way, kind of like I imagine she must have looked when she was nine. If I'm not too pissed off.

The Old Man recognized early on that I was going to make my own decisions. He would say to my mother, "Don't argue with that boy, Mama. He gits his mind set on somethin, and he's just like a mule with the bit in his teeth." I guess he was right.

Despite their objections, I did spend my last high school summer running a field Post Exchange trailer for the National Guard down at Camp Roberts by Paso Robles. And then I spent the very last summer at home before going away to school, not actually at home but on the road with Frank, Duke and Jimmy playing jazz gigs. I felt like I had to do those things.

Then I'll never forget our blowout over me and Lucy. That awful scene was only one high point of his and my struggles as I grew up—one of many—but it sort of stood for all of them. Lucy Winston was my girlfriend from high school days clear up through my junior year in college. She was from Salinas, a smart and lively kind of girl a lot of men would like to marry. I ended up marrying such a girl, too, but I couldn't do it back then, back when I was nineteen and Lucy seventeen. Her folks were the same brand of Pentecostal as mine, so they knew each other. I had come home from school for the Easter break, and she and I had gone down to Big Sur camping with a bunch of friends. What a good time! We swam naked in the river, played volleyball in the sand and made

love under the stars. The night air was brisk, and we were wet and warm in our zipped-together sleeping bag.

A month later, when I was home for Bub's birthday, Lucy had called and talked to him because I was slow getting to the phone. She told him she had been afraid she was pregnant, but had finally got her period. Bub played dumb, the signifying monkey. When he heard the word pregnant, he blurted out "Pregnant?" Just like he used to do when we were kids. Mom heard him and started in on me.

"Lucy pregnant?" she asked me after I had hung up.

"No."

Bub disappeared. "What was your brother talkin about?"

I never could really get away with lying to her. Must have been her round, pixie face and quick, snappy eyes she tried to make look hard when she was mad. So in the end, she wheedled it out of me that we had been sleeping together. The cat was out of the bag, as they say.

When the Old Man got home and all situated with his after-dinner paper, he lit into me.

"I understand you and Lucy been havin sex."

I just shrugged, full of dread but defiant.

"You know I got a reputation in this town, an I can't afford to have you aroun here livin by your balls instead a your brains. What you do reflects on me. I've always said that whenever you git one a these little ole gals pregnant, you gon have to marry her. An I meant that."

"Lucy's not pregnant," I came back.

"No thanks to you," he snapped. He had a hot temper he was trying to control. He sometimes mentioned in church that he'd had to pray hard and often to manage his anger. "You know I don't hold with no sex outside of marriage. I'm a minister of the Gospel. How do I look chastisin other people for their sins an my own son goin aroun here jumpin into every little split he can?"

What was I supposed to say to that? I just tightened my guts, looked away, holding on.

"Now I want you to go in there an call Brother an Sister Winston an tell 'em what you did. Then you apologize to them an

tell 'em you'll stay away from their girl. Then you apologize to yo mama an to me. I can't tolerate no such behavior long as I'm puttin food in yo belly an clothes on yo back. You hear me?"

I was so mad my ears burned and my head felt like it would explode, but I said only, "Yessir," and did what I was told. Then I stomped out of the house, threw my few little rags in my car and tore out for the City. I stayed away until late that summer, working at a music camp over in the San Joaquin Valley and calling home only once in awhile. I needed to cool myself down and to let things cool down there too.

Not long after that, Lucy Winston and I went our separate ways. Not because of that beef, but we just sort of drifted apart. She married Johnny Taft from Oakland a couple years later, and I got deeper and deeper into my music. I also met Miss Claudia Meeker and started trying to figure out how to turn her into Mrs. Claudia Hankerson. Yeah, Baby.

None of us ever said much more about the flap around Lucy and me, but that experience somehow characterized much of my dad's and my relationship. We didn't always fight. In fact, as I got to be a man, we had a lot of fun hunting and fishing and just being together. He had meant well, but I thought he sure had a hard way of showing it. To be fair about it all, how else could he have responded, him being a holiness preacher and all? I might have acted the same way he did if I had a son like me, but I still felt he had been unnecessarily rigid.

I have to admit that I was pretty stubborn and headstrong back then. That's what I think Mom was talking about when she would say both my father and I were natural-born proud. Anyway…it's all over now. What's the end of that Robert Frost poem about the boy who loses his hand and his life to a power saw? "No more to build on there." Yeah.

II

IT'S FUNNY HOW EXPERIENCES SHAPE people's lives. Some of them fade from the memory, drift away, get fuzzy around the edges, as if the light of recollection gets dim in places, bringing back only outlines, shapes or fragments. Others remain part of the consciousness in such pristine form that they merge with the perpetual present we live in, standing out, clear, sharp and whole, firm and palpable, distinct like a warm light focused right in the center of our foreheads. Picking and choosing among experiences and memories, as if deciding which clothes to wear, often leads to fractured, unstable personalities. Only careful use of experience and memory, of past and present, can form the basis of our making the future worth having.

Like my dad's and my fight over Lucy Winston and me was a building-block event, so was Bub's and my first deer hunt in Modoc County with our father and his partners. That one in particular is a yesterday that's still today. And without some yesterdays like that, todays never matter much and tomorrows seem likely to be grim.

Frederick Harold Hankerson's nickname, Bub, was short for Bub-Baby, which was what I called him when we were small. Two years younger than I, he was a tall, skinny kid with a round, milk chocolate face like Mom's, and sandy, kinky hair that gave his head a reddish cast, as if someone had sprinkled copper flakes or cinnamon all over it. At once my dearest friend and bitterest enemy, he was still a little spoiled (having been a sickly child) and something of a cry baby when we went on that hunt. I always whipped him when we fought, but he always told Mom or the Old Man, and one of them always whipped me for whipping him. That cycle seemed to keep all our relationships clear.

Everyone knew me as Satch, a name the Old Man had picked out for me long before I was born. When he was a boy, he had seen Satchel Paige pitch in the old Negro Baseball Leagues, and had vowed then to name his first son after Paige. I didn't much like "Satch," though I too came to think of my namesake as an important black hero, but it was better than my given name—Alvin. Alvin Carter Hankerson. By the time we made that first trip to Modoc, I was already five-foot-ten and stocky, destined to have the Old Man's height and the bulk that came from Mom's side of the family.

Bub was in eighth grade. I was a sophomore at Monterey High. When we told our teachers that we'd be gone for up to three weeks on a big game hunting trip with our dad, they seemed a little shocked that he'd keep us out of school so long, but they didn't object. After all, we both were passable though not outstanding students, and the Old Man pastored the largest black congregation on the Peninsula. Some of our teachers knew him and felt he'd most likely do right by his sons.

I turned fifteen and Bub thirteen that year of our first hunt. Every year before that, when the Old Man had come home from hunting, we had excitedly helped unload and store the equipment. The heavy, oily guns in their leather cases smelled of cleaning solvent as we carried them into the house, careful to point their muzzles straight up or straight down. The tents and sleeping bags puffed out clouds of red dust when we cleaned them before storing them in the basement underneath the garage. The hunting clothes gave off aromas of sage brush and mullein, and animated the whole experience with a thrilling wildness.

Our father had carefully and methodically prepared us for hunting. On countless Saturday afternoons he had taken us to the Salinas River bottom out past the Main Garrison of Fort Ord to practice shooting our .22 rifles. We got so that most of the time we could hit a cottontail from 50 yards away, before it could dart behind a bush, or a groundhog before it could dive into its hole. We could shoot.

The Old Man had also taken us up into Los Padres National Forest at the foot of Carmel Valley to train us. Outside of Princess Camp, which was just below Chews' Ridge and just above Tassajara

Spring, he had taught us how to move quietly through the woods, how to tell the time of day and take our bearings from the sun, and how to read game movements by their tracks and sign. And he had taught us how to pitch and trench our tent, how to build and keep a fire going, and how to find fresh water.

I remember one weekend the three of us were camped up on Chews' Ridge, hunting squirrels and scouting around for wild pigs. About midafternoon on Saturday, I got bored because we hadn't found anything to shoot at, so I took a shot at a magpie riding up toward us on the warm drafts out of the canyon below. I missed, so it just bounced up higher on the breeze and sailed behind a tree. But the Old Man got mad and chewed me out anyway.

"Don't do that Satch," he said. "First, you shouldn't shoot a rifle out across a canyon like that. Those bullets travel a long ways an could kill someone you can't even see on that other side over there."

He sat down on a rock, propping his own rifle against his leg so its barrel pointed straight up into the air. Then he said, "The second thing is that magpies are protected. You can't shoot 'em. Game warden would fine you if he caught you shootin at a magpie. Besides, they're good for the forest 'cause they eat dead animals an help clean up the woods that way."

"But they eat bird's eggs too, don't they?" Bub asked.

"Yeah, sometimes, but thas part a what they s'posed to do. Main thing, though, is they're scavengers so we don't shoot 'em. See, there's laws about huntin an then there's rules. Laws tell ya' what kinds a licenses ta have, what kinds a guns ta shoot an things like that. Rules tell ya not ta leave no mess in your campsite, an ta share your game, an ta be careful with your gun, an like that. Good men an good hunters like I want you boys ta be go by both. We hunt in season, we kill legal game, an we eat what we kill. Thas natural. We don't cheat in no way. We don't kill things just to kill 'em. Fact a business, not even wild animals do that. Lions an bears an what not don't jes kill other animals to be killin 'em. They kill for food, an so do we. Thas nature's way."

He slid down off his rock and walked a ways up the ridge, beckoning for us to follow. We walked up to a clearing from which we

could see a long way down the canyon to our right and out toward the Pacific forty miles away on our left. In the hazy light, the canyon we were on and the canyon behind it and the one behind that one looked purple, and the individual trees turned into timber that traced the bumpy outlines of the ridges. Out toward the ocean, the mountains disappeared into the gray under the sinking sun, signaling the fog bank rolling eastward. The Old Man scanned the ridges, canyons and horizon east and west for a moment. Then he swung his arm in a wide arc and said,

"Ain't that beautiful? God's handiwork. Mountains, canyons, ocean, trees, sky, animals. All God's work. Men call it nature, but it's God's work. Everything in its place, doin what the Lord made it ta do. All them trees droppin cones an seeds are doin what they was made ta do." His face broke into a grin, "Them squirrels an pigs we been tryin ta find been hidin from us 'cause God put that in 'em. They know people are dangerous to 'em, so they hide. Folks sometimes don't like to give God the credit, but what they call nature is God's work. Ya might say that bein out here the right way is worshippin God."

The next thing he did startled Bub and me so much that we just stared at him. He stood in a wide-legged crouch, slung his gun strap over his shoulder, cupped his mouth with his hands and hollered down the canyon,

"Whoooeee! Whoooeee! Whoooeee!"

The echo came back,

"Oooeee! Oooee! Ooee!"

Then he turned toward the ocean and did the same thing,

"Whoooeee! Whoooeee! Whoooeee!"

He let his hands down to his sides and said,

"Sometimes there ain't nothin else ta do but ta holler." After a moment of confused silence, while Bub and I stood there dumbfounded, trying to grasp what had gotten into our father, the Old Man moved down off the hill mumbling, as if to himself,

"Les go pull camp so we can get on home for church tomorra." My brother and I glanced quickly at each other and fell in behind him.

§§§§§

The most important thing of that summer happened on Bub's birthday. The Old Man took us to Rasmussen's Sports Shop in downtown Monterey and bought us new deer rifles. He gave each of us a Model 99 .250-3000 Savage lever action rifle, complete with Redfield peep sight and leather carrying case with soft, wooly lining inside. Shoulder straps made the guns easy to carry, and they looked wonderful—long, sleek and efficient. There was something elegant about them. The Old Man said they were serious firearms, and he showed us how to aim through the peeps so that despite the difference in power and recoil of the new rifles, we quickly became just about as accurate with them as we had been with the .22s.

We rodded them out, oiled the cartridge cylinders and actions and wiped down the blue steel barrels and smooth, dark, wood stocks before putting them away after every outing. We assumed nonchalant manners when we bragged to our friends about our new guns and our upcoming hunt.

"Well, I tell you, my man, if that buck jumps up so I can put that Redfield on his behind and squeeze that Savage off, he can forgit it, Jack. Liver for dinner, and that's for real." We couldn't have been more eager.

Back in those days, even little hunting trips for cottontails and groundhogs always started in my feelings, in my dreams and fantasies, long before it was time to leave the house. They still do. So it's not surprising that the weekend before we left for Modoc, we worked day and night getting our things together. And we thought and talked and dreamed only of going hunting.

To our old man, gear was life. Material things were like lifeblood to him. He was especially vulnerable to gadgets that were the newest thing on the market, and ones that seemed to be bargains. He'd buy stuff and throw it into a closet or onto a shelf and forget about it for months, sometimes years. I just know that after this funeral business is over, when Claudia and I will help Mom go through his things, we'll find cases of motor oil, tools still unused in boxes, even stuff he didn't know how to use but bought thinking it might come in handy someday. God! The Old Man and his gear.

Preparing for a hunt was a critical part of the whole ritual, and there was lots to do getting ready for Bub's and my first big deer hunt. We packed warm, tough hunting clothes in duffel bags. We stacked the tents, Coleman stoves and lanterns, tools, pots and pans, sleeping bags, and all the rest of the gear—much of it army surplus equipment from Fort Ord—in piles in front of the garage. Mom, my cousin Willie Mae, and some of the sisters from the church had baked for days; filling up a 30-gallon cardboard barrel with cookies, brownies and fried turnovers, some apple and some apricot, with flaky crusts and smooth, delicious fillings. The Old Man had topped off the boxes of food by bringing home 15 pounds of fresh pig's feet, 'cause the first night's dinner on a hunt was always boiled pig's feet in a spicy tomato sauce spread over white rice. Finally, everything was ready to load into the big Dodge Weapons Carrier.

§ § § § §

Besides Bub and me, there were to be five others on that trip, so we'd be an efficient hunting party. First, there was the Old Man, the leader of the hunt, Booker T. Hankerson. Most people called him "Reverend," or "Rev." I'd sometimes get embarrassed by my family's practice of naming children after famous black figures, but few people ever made jokes or messed around with my dad's name. They didn't call him "Book," or "B.T.," or "Hank," or anything like that. He'd say, "I'm Reverend Booker T. Hankerson," and that would be all. Mom, whose name was Sarah, called him "Papa," and Bub and I called him "the Old Man" behind his back and "Dad" to his face. He was 40 and big.

"Six-foot-four, two-thirty," he'd say.

He stood so straight and erect that he seemed taller than his height—tall enough to see over things someone else equally tall couldn't. He could have been one of those African princes whose pictures I'd seen in books at the 1ibrary—a tall, Tutsi chieftain or a Zulu warrior with a large, supple body capable of enormous strength, agility, and speed.

Next, there was Augustus Carl, the Old Man's number one sidekick. Also 40, and known by most people as Deke, but by his wife as Gus, he was my height, five-foot-ten, and weighed in at two-

sixty. Deke was a carpenter, and generally what the Old Man called "handy." He could fix machines and do all sorts of work with his hands, and he thought that all men worth anything should be able to do the same. He was shiny-black, and when he brushed his hair back and slicked it down with Murray's grease, it was hard to tell where the skin stopped and the hair started on his high forehead. His smooth skin needed shaving only once a week. And he had a clear, tenor voice he tried to make husky and deep when he wanted to sound stern.

He was head deacon in the Old Man's church. They were good friends and close spiritual brothers. He called the Old Man "Doc," and the Old Man called him "Deke." Bub and I and our cousins Spats and Earl used to make fun of them. We stood like they did, imitated their gestures and talked "Doc" and "Deke" when we thought they wouldn't catch us. We said they looked like the Cisco Kid and Pancho, and we enjoyed Deke's high-pitched "hee-hee-hee" of a laugh. He was a funny guy.

One of the other three to go on that trip was Reverend William Perkins, called "Unca Billy," one of the Old Man's preacher friends from Stockton. We picked him up on our way through the San Joaquin Valley. Then there was my cousin Smitty, Theodore Smith, who helped Deke drive the truck. Last, there was Joe Willis, the white guy in our party, who rode with us in the Old Man's car.

The Old Man and Joe got to be friends when they both had been on the Monterey Peninsula only a little while. Both were young and poor, both had growing families, and both were pretty fair shade-tree mechanics. So they fixed people's cars for extra money. At the time of that Modoc trip, Willis ran a wrecking yard and lived in a back corner of it with his grouchy, stringy-haired wife and four of his five kids. He always drove a different car, whichever wreck ran best at the moment. When she discovered Willis was going with us, Mom, who wasn't afraid to speak her mind and who didn't much like white people anyway, said she couldn't see why the Old Man bothered to hunt with him. She said,

"Why you takin him? That po paddy ain't got no money. He oughta be keepin hisself here to work and take care of all them

little ole scrawny kids he got 'stead of runnin off to no deer huntin!" The Old Man answered,

"Well, Mama, you know I'm saved, an the Bible teaches us to treat everybody nice. Brother Willis loves to hunt, an he's still grievin over his girl, so I don't mind the little bit extra it costs to take him along. I'm just glad the Lord blessed me to be able to do it." That settled it because neither Mom nor anyone else challenged the Old Man's authority when he went deep on them and called out the Spirit or the Bible.

§ § § § §

About two in the afternoon of the Sunday before we were to leave, Deke came over to help us load the Weapons Carrier. Bub and I handed the gear up to him and the Old Man, who placed it in the truck so we could unload the camp stuff in the order that we would need it. They were laughing and talking as they worked. At one point, Deke asked the Old Man,

"Doc, you reckon Brotha Willis gon be up to this trip since it ain't been but a few months since he los his girl?" The Old Man replied,

"He's still grievin pretty bad, but I think he'll be all right."

"That sho was sad 'bout his daughter."

"Yeah," said the Old Man. "Jes shows how when folks turn their backs on God, their lives end up in a mess. An that girl wasn't but eighteen years old. Almos every time I see Brother Willis, he still cries an tells me what happened all over again like I didn't know. Jes bawls like a baby."

"Ya know," he continued, "that gal used to belong to Reverend Nystrom's church, an my boys knew her from school. At least Satch did." After giving each other a glance since we already knew the story, and masking our impatience poorly, Bub and I sat down on the duffel bags to listen and wait. My dad settled into his storytelling voice and manner.

"She wasn't but sixteen years old when she left home, but she looked a lot older 'n that, an she was fast. Name of Charlene. They called her Sissie. The boy's name was Ben, Ben Mott, from down around Dos Palos somewhere. He was 'bout ten years older 'n she was, an a cop."

"Kine of a tall, red-haired kid, wasn't he?" Deke interrupted.

"Yeah. Big ol' boy. Willis claims Ben an the girl met while he was in the MPs out at Fort Ord. He useta go to Reverend Nystrom's church some too. His mama an daddy is saved. Him an the gal got to sneakin 'roun, an Willis 'nem didn't find out till way afterwards. All of a sudden, one day the girl borrowed one of Willises' ole cars to go to Salinas looking for work at Sears' or somewhere. Next thing they knew, she'd done ran off an married the boy. Moved in with his family down in the San Joaquin Valley. I mean, she left her clothes, her family, her home, the church, left everything an everybody. Jes left. Left Willis's car parked at the bus depot.

"Things rocked on, rocked on, with Ben here in the army an Charlene down there 'roun Dos Palos. Went on for close to two years, until he got out the army an went down to work on his daddy's farm. That was sometime early this pas summer."

"Didn't have no kids, did they, Doc?"

"She was carryin one when it happened," the Old Man answered.

Right then, Mom came out onto the back porch with a bundle of rags and towels for us to take.

"Where you want these, Papa?"

"We'll take 'em up here. Take that bag from your mama, will you, Satch?"

"Sure."

Anxious to get on with the loading, I leaped up to get the bundle. Bub got up too and started fooling around with the ropes on the truck's canvas tarp.

"Willis says they started havin trouble soon as the boy went home," the Old Man resumed. "Fact of business, Sissie came back here to the Peninsula an stayed with her mama an daddy a coupla different times. Look like the boy went kinda crazy. Couldn't take bein outta the army. Willis says he'd put on his uniform an gun an then drive 'roun fast in a jeep he bought. Then he got to drinkin heavy. His folks tried to get him to stop, but I guess they didn't do no good.

"Then one night, him an the girl was drinkin an playin cards with some friends. Jes another man an his wife—sittin in the

kitchen of their friends' house playin cards. Ben an Sissie got to arguin over the cards, an he got mad. Jumped up from the table cussin an went outside. They thought he went out to cool off, but he went out an got his pistol. He walked back in the door an didn't say nothin to nobody. Shot his wife in the head an the other man in the heart. Killed 'em both dead on the spot. Then hopped in his jeep an tore out."

I don't know how many times I'd heard that story, but it still gave me an empty feeling. I could see the smoky little kitchen. I could hear the shots and smell the blood. I could see the bodies sprawled out on the floor and the other wife struck dumb. I thought about Charlene and remembered her chesty, curvy build. Deke said in a hushed voice,

"Unh, unh, unh. They don't know how come he done it?"

"Naw. Don't nobody know for sure. You don't never really find out why folks do that kinda stuff. Devil jes gits in 'em. They figure he thought the other boy an his wife was foolin 'round. They found him the next day parked down in one of the cotton fields on his daddy's farm. He'd put the gun muzzle in his mouth an blowed his brains out. An that was the end of that.

"Willis an his wife was all tore up. I went to the girl's funeral, an then I went to pray with 'em two or three times after that. Las time I went, I invited him to go huntin with us. He jes held onto my hand an cried an cried. Seem like the spirit moved me to take him along."

"Unh, unh, unh," Deke said again.

All of us were quiet. Then the Old Man abruptly slid down off the truck's tailgate.

"C'mon, man," he said. "We got to git this stuff loaded if we goin huntin."

III

THE OLD MAN DECIDED HE had to preach the Sunday night sermon himself, so we didn't get to bed until about eleven o'clock that night. Too excited to sleep, Bub and I talked for awhile.

"Think you'll be able to hit a deer, Satch?" he asked.

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

"Oh, we will," Bub said.

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

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

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

We left between four-thirty and five in the morning, but Deke and Smitty had taken off in the truck at midnight so they could cover the four hundred-odd miles to Modoc in time to start setting up camp before we arrived. Since he had attended Sunday night services too, Deke hadn't slept much, but with Smitty along to help him drive or at least to keep him company, he wouldn't doze off, as he was prone to do on long drives. The Old Man's '51 Oldsmobile 98 would cover the distance much more quickly than the Weapons

Carrier. A big, two-toned blue Holiday sedan with a bright, smiling, chrome grill and a soft, comfortable interior, the Olds would put us there well before time for dinner.

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

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

I wasn't surprised that my dad would take a white man hunting with us because he always taught us that what people did was what counted, not what color they were. Mom tried to teach us the same thing, but for some reason she didn't seem as clear about it as the Old Man did. Back in those days, there was probably as much race prejudice on the Monterey Peninsula as there was anywhere else in California. I remember fighting with Italian boys who called me nigger, and I'll never forget the day our Japanese friends, Johnny and Agnes, disappeared, never to be heard from again. I would discover later that Willis's presence in our hunting party was a surprise to some people, but it wasn't to him and us.

He opened the car door, grinned, and climbed into the front seat beside the Old Man. "Mornin, Ref," he said. "Well, Press a Lord, we're a gonna go git em. Howdy, boys. You ready?"

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

§ § § § §

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

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

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

The Old Man slowed down as Highway 99 entered the outskirts of Stockton. Though the day was just dawning, already

tractors, trucks, combines and other farm vehicles, their headlights on and steam puffing out of their exhaust pipes, were turning onto and off the main road. Farm supply companies, crop processing plants and hardware stores lined the street. Parking lots full of pickups surrounded nearly every one of the early-morning breakfast joints. The air vibrated with fertility and signaled that the day would be hot.

Reverend William Perkins lived in a big house on a quiet street lined with fruitless mulberry trees over near the College of the Pacific. It was cream-colored, with well-kept lawns front and back, and a wide, smooth driveway leading to the double garage where he parked his brand new '53 Chrysler. Unca Billy and his wife Belle had three daughters, all married and gone away from home, so they lived in that big house with only a cocker spaniel and a big black tom cat named Ghost.

"Hey, y'all," Unca Billy hollered down off the porch, and headed for the back of the car to put his things in the trunk. His gun was a .35 Remington carbine.

"Hey, Unca Billy," the Old Man answered.

"Deke 'n Smitty git off all right?"

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

"Mornin" chirped Willis as he got into the back seat.

Bub moved into the middle next to me and muttered sleepily, "Move over, Satch."

Unca Billy settled in the front seat where Willis had been. He was a little man, short and slender. Mom called him "no-necked" because his head, with what she thought was "good hair" curled up all over it, sat right on top of his narrow shoulders. He had a gold crown on his right front tooth which glinted when he smiled. He smiled often, which told me he was proud of it. When he laughed, a smile showed on his face, his gold crown flashed and his upper body rocked back and forth, but no sound came out of his mouth. The Old Man said he was a banty rooster. He posed when he stood and strutted when he walked.

Unca Billy was a holiness preacher like the Old Man, but his church was a storefront down near Stockton's Chinatown, not a

building of its own, like my dad's. His big house and fancy car were for show. "Brotha Poikin," as he put it, said his last name stood for what a coffee pot did on a stove.

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

"Yep," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

and came to the line,

'Cause Pharoah's army got drownded,

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

Oh, Mary, don't you weep.

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

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

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

§ § § § §

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

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

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

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

"I don't know. But I know I don't have no time to be foolin 'roun this mornin."

We were coming into Orland. The two cars glided down the main street, the tan Hudson in front, the blue Oldsmobile close behind. There were two lanes in each direction on the street through town, so when the Old Man moved over to the right at the one signal light, the Hudson and the Olds sat side by side. The Hudson's driver, a young white guy with a crew cut and a day-old beard, grinned over at us and signaled us to come on. The Old

Man pretended not to notice, but he got off first when the light turned green, and picked up speed as he moved through town.

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

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

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

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

"Awright, Rev!" Unca Billy cheered.

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

But his eyes were the thing. They must have made people feel like he could look through them or see under their clothes. Bub and I always felt he could see us when others couldn't—when we were fooling around in church or had been somewhere we shouldn't have been. And he could silence people just by giving them a little frown, or by looking past them as if at some object way

out in space. Not ignoring them exactly, or being mean, but like a prince might do if he were impatient or bored. Or angry. Times like that are part of what Mom meant when she said he was proud.

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

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

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

Corning seemed to rise up out of the ground and come rushing up to meet us. The wind whistled past us, and the car leaped ahead. It seemed to sail through the air, a kite hurled before a storm. The golden grain fields flew along at eye level. The morning light was a bright, narrow tunnel around us, and it faded into a hazy glow way ahead of us and way in back. Moths and gnats no longer exploded against the windshield, but swept past us in the Detroit-made gale blowing over the car's muscular shoulders. We sat tensely. And then, almost as quickly as it had begun, the race was over. The Hudson Hornet faded farther and farther into the distance behind us. The Old Man let up on the gas and coasted into Corning.

"Got 'im, Rev!" yelled Unca Billy.

"Press a Lord," Willis breathed.

Bub and I laughed out loud and looked back boldly to see the Hudson over a mile behind us, no longer in contention.

"Good God, this thing is fast," Unca Billy declared.

"Well, I wasn't exactly racin, but I'm glad we didn't see no cops," the Old Man said with a smile. "Sometimes, though, you just need to blow the cinders out of a car like this."

"Hot-damn," I thought, and knew for sure that starts like this would help me to love hunting trips to Modoc.

IV

EVERYONE BURST OUT TALKING AT once. "Whoooee," Unca Billy shouted. "Man, did you see this thing? I mean it ate that Hudson up! I tell ya, Rev, I thought my new Chrysler was fast, but now I don't know. I 'spect this 98'd outrun it."

Willis hollered into the Old Man's eyes in the rear view mirror, "Why, Ref, even after the needle went outta sight, this car kep on pickin up speed."

Bub and I laughed, and he said, "Boy, is this car fast!"

"Fastest one I ever had, I expect," the Old Man announced proudly to all of us. I figured winning the race would have been worth the ticket if a speed cop had nabbed us, and the Old Man seemed to feel that way too.

We eased through Corning and made for the next town.

"We gonna get gas in Redding?" Bub asked. "I got to go to the bathroom."

"What you gotta do?"

"Everything," was Bub's answer.

"Me, too," I chimed in, hoping my agreement with my brother would be enough to make the Old Man stop, since he always complained about stopping on long drives. He grumbled a little bit, but agreed to a quick potty stop.

An hour later, after the short toilet break and more fast driving, we turned off the highway at the Tip-Top Truck Stop in Redding. Its neon sign imitated a spinning top and its door opened through the round front of a building shaped like one. It was one of my dad's favorite eating places when he drove through that part of northern California. We ate fat, juicy hamburgers and hot french fries, and we drank thick milkshakes—Bub's a chocolate malt and

mine a pineapple. The men told hunting stories and had a second cup of coffee each.

As we got back into the car, Bub and I got into an argument about who would sit in the middle of the back seat.

"You're the smallest," I told him under my breath.

"But I'm tired of straddling that hump in the floor, and I don't have any place to rest my arms," he argued loudly. That was one of his favorite tricks: loud-talking me to get Mom's or the Old Man's attention.

It worked. Willis volunteered to do it, but the Old Man intervened.

"Naw, Brother Willis. Let one of these boys ride in the middle. They're a whole lot younger an more limber than you."

"That's fer shore," Willis agreed.

I saw it was a losing proposition, so I slid resentfully into the middle of the seat. Bub got in on my right, Willis on my left.

When we left Redding and turned northeast onto Highway 299, we had about three hours to go to reach Lookout, in Modoc County, our jumping off place into the mountains where we would hunt. Almost immediately, we put the flatlands behind us and climbed out of the Sacramento Valley into rolling hills spotted with scrub oaks; terrain and vegetation very different from that on the sandy, salty Monterey Peninsula with its stunted oaks and pines, its stands of jutting Cypress, its groves of Eucalyptus. It was also different from the lush vegetation in the flat San Joaquin. The sun-dried field grass looked like a brown carpet broken by rocky gullies covering the low hills.

Fall was taking over, but the early afternoon sun was still hot, so we coastal dwellers simmered and sweated. We rolled all the car windows down, allowing the wind to cool us off a little, but it also blew the sounds around, making conversation between the front and back seats next to impossible. Willis slouched down in the seat and began to snore. Excited by the race and the prospect of hunting, Bub and I were wide awake, so we looked out the windows, lost in our private fantasies.

Having to shout, the Old Man and Unca Billy talked and talked—about desegregation, about Joe McCarthy, about the war in Korea, about communism, about the atomic bomb.

"You reckon it'd be any better for cullud folks if the communists ran things, Rev?" Unca Billy asked.

"Well, I don't b'lieve we got a whole lot of 'em in this country like some folks say, but I 'spect things would be about the same for us if they was in charge long as they white," the Old Man replied. He went on, "The main thing is I don't know sometimes if these crazy folks gon kill us all with these atomic bombs or what."

"White folks'll do jes about anything, Rev. You cain't never tell about them," Unca Billy said.

"It ain't just white folks. Black ones jes don't have no bombs yet," was my dad's counter.

I wondered if Willis heard any of their talk, so I glanced over at him. He was still asleep. About white people, Unca Billy felt more like Mom than like the Old Man—feared and disliked them. The Old Man seemed to think they were just like everybody else—good, bad, rich, poor and all the rest of it. He wasn't afraid of them and didn't like them any more or less than he did anyone else.

"What folks do is what counts," he said.

"Maybe so, but it sho is worrisome," Unca Billy ended the topic.

Under their talk, I could hear Gene Autry and Kitty Wells and the Sons of the Pioneers on the radio, so I knew we were getting farther away from the cities and closer to Modoc.

The road got steeper and more crooked, so the Old Man had to drive slower, and we started seeing more big conifers than scrub oaks. We also saw apple orchards rowed up and down the soft hills. By the time we passed Round Mountain, where the Old Man promised we'd buy a box of apples when we went home, we were in logging country. We passed big trucks going to and from the sawmills in the centers of all the little towns we went through, and the air smelled piney. Everyone was wide awake and looking around curiously. For practice, I concentrated on looking under trees and in little clearings in the manzanita on the off chance I'd

see a deer or some other wild animal out taking some afternoon sun. I didn't see any.

At Fall River Mills, we broke out onto a high plateau. I'd looked at a map before we left home, so I knew our turn off to Lookout was thirty-five miles away, at the end of Big Valley. I could see a few fertile-looking farms stretching out to the big hills where the timber began. But the land looked as if some giant hand had scraped off most of the trees, leaving only small clumps of pines that hadn't been logged off. The towns got smaller and more desolate, and when we reached our turn off for Lookout, I felt that at last I would actually go deer hunting in Modoc.

I guess you could call Lookout a town, though it didn't look like much of one. The sign at the city limits said the population was twenty-seven, but we didn't see any of them on the street. The place had only one paved street a couple of blocks long with a short row of two or three buildings on each side. Behind one of the rows of buildings, there was a line of bluffs with four or five family homes scattered around on top of them. It was like all those little bitty northern California towns we went in and out of on later hunting trips. It had a post office, which also served as the bus station. I couldn't imagine anyone going hunting on the bus, but hunting was the only reason I could see for anyone going to Lookout at all. One of those signs with a picture of a greyhound on it and the word "bus" underneath hung from the front of the square, basalt block building.

Across the street was a Department of Highways maintenance yard with a snow plow parked against the fence and a few piles of gravel, sand and asphalt lying on the ground. A sign on the gate said "Trespassing By Permission Only." A little farther down stood the nondenominational church where the Old Man always claimed he was going to go offer to preach someday. Swaybacked and no longer white, its faded, gray sides leaned into the red dust the wind swirled up and down the street. There were just a few buildings including a deserted grammar school and a dingy café. All of them looked tired, and they gave me a sad, lonely feeling.

The only way into or out of Lookout was by the White Horse road. One direction would take us out to camp, the other toward

the main highway and Nubieber, seven miles away out on the broad, high plateau that stretched a long way in every direction, then merged with the brushy hills. The big, timbered mountains loomed in the distance and formed a jagged, purple boundary dominated by the two giant volcanoes, Mt. Lassen and Mt. Shasta, where the earth met the sky. As I later learned, Lookout was situated on the spot where the white settlers had stood to fight the Indians who were there when they arrived. I wondered why they hadn't called it something like Battleground, or Last Stand, instead of Lookout. Afterwards, the whites sheared the forests off the volcanoes and other mountains and sank mine shafts into their flanks. They set up towns, ranches and farms all through that country. They stuck the Indians off on a reservation up near Klamath Falls and left them with only legends and a few places where their ancestors were buried, instead of a whole region to roam and hunt. Even as a kid, I felt that that arrangement wasn't right.

The only store in town was run by the area's game warden, Jack Heater, and his wife. The men said Heater was the meanest warden in the area. His wife usually did the work in the store since he was out in the hills most of the day. The store was in a building set back off the street. In front were two gas pumps—the old-timey kind with a handle that you worked to bring the gas up into the glass cylinder at the top. A telephone booth stood off to one side.

A once-white building like the church, the store had a high roof line that sloped from front to back into the bluff so it appeared to be sitting back against the hill, the way a cat sits back on its haunches. Its front was jacked up on concrete blocks and 4x4's, ready for a flood that hadn't yet come. The store's front looked a little like a sad face, with the two windows for eyes, its porch for a rectangular nose, and its steps on each end a mouth that turned down at the corners. Near the top was a sign, like a scar on the forehead. It read "Store," in rough, black letters a third-grader might paint. All of the letters faced in the right direction, but they were crooked and headed uphill toward the right-hand corner as if trying to climb off the sign.

The Old Man pulled up beside the pumps to gas up the Olds, and we crawled out to stretch and move around. Mrs. Heater came out onto the porch.

"Howdy, Reverend," she called down. "A coupla your fellas stopped by here earlier today, so I knew you'd be here pretty soon. You gonna camp at the Baker place again?"

"Oh, yes," he answered. "Wouldn't stay anywhere else." She was a slender, round-shouldered woman with light brown hair and a friendly face.

"Been seein any deer much?" the Old Man called up to her.

"Jack says the herds are big this year and stayin together more than usual. Season don't open until next Monday, but I wouldn't doubt that you'll see him somewhere out there." He paid her for the gas, and we got back into the car for the last leg of our trip.

I'd never been to Modoc County before, but I liked it at once. I couldn't have put words to it, but the high, steep mountains covered with big stands of pines, the lava beds like huge, delapidated buildings we drove through and among, the dry, narrow road that spun up a cloud of red dust behind us, all had the feel of being ancient. Brooding. Even now, the most I can say about it is that the country felt mysterious, spiritual, even a little spooky, like it was part of the earth but different from any part I'd ever been in before.

§ § § § §

We got into camp about three in the afternoon. The old Baker place was the site of an abandoned mine, gold I think. Any structures that had been there were gone, and the shaft had long since been closed. The only remaining signs of human presence were sawed-off stumps of trees and the barest hint of what had been a road. There was a large, flat, circular clearing, much bigger than we'd need for our camp. It was on top of a knoll that stuck out like a toe from the mountain behind it, and it was bordered on the back by big trees and on one side by a spring-fed creek that ran down and under the road through a culvert. It was a grassy, hillside perch that gave us a good view of the dirt road creeping up the hill and bending sharply to the left, and it was up out of the dust boiled up by passing cars and trucks. It was beautiful.

The Old Man pulled the Olds off to one side of the camp's entrance, its ample body aimed at the mountain and forming a partial wall that shielded us from the traffic on the road below. The air smelled sweet, and the pine needles on the ground were soft and springy under foot. The afternoon sunlight sprayed down between and through the trees, dappling the whole place with spots of light. Deke and Smitty had taken the tarpaulin cover and its steel braces off the back of the truck and had already put the three tents up. They were working on the tarp covering for the cooking area.

When we got out of the car, there was lots of shouting and hollering, back slapping and hand shaking. Smitty and Bub sparred around in a mock fight until the Old Man made them stop.

"Y'all didn't have no trouble, hunh?" Deke asked down from the bed of the truck, where he was standing to tie off the tarp.

"Naw," said the Old Man. "We made good time."

"We outran a Hudson Hornet down in the valley," Bub offered laughing.

"I mean we ate it up," Willis piped up, using Unca Billy's expression from earlier.

"Sho did," Unca Billy agreed.

The Old Man just beamed.

Everyone worked fast and hard for the next hour and a half. Smitty and Willis dug a latrine down below the spring to keep from contaminating the water. Bub and I put the bedding, guns and personal belongings into the tents—Bub's, Smitty's and mine together in the back tent, Willis's and Unca Billy's in the uphill one and Deke's and the Old Man's in the downhill one. All the tents faced inward, toward the center of the camp. Smitty and Willis diverted water from the spring twenty yards away by placing one end of a long, two-inch pipe in it and digging a big hole and a trench at the other end of it to trap the water and guide it back to the creek bed. That brought cold, sweet water within 15 feet of the center of our camp. Then they grabbed a chain saw and axe to go gather fire wood. Since Deke and Unca Billy were to be the camp cooks, they set up the stoves, lanterns and cooking gear after Deke built a long table out of eight-foot 1x6's he'd brought from home and belt-high poles he cut for legs. As usual, and as if by divine right, the Old Man

supervised, making suggestions and offering advice and encouragement when and where he felt it necessary.

With camp all set up, we lounged around in comfortable folding chairs, breathing in the crisp, piney air, smelling the pig's feet boiling in their sauce and feeling pleased with our condition. We were tired, but we were there in Modoc. We had our camp drill down pat—Bub and I and Smitty and Willis would cover wood, water and K.P., Deke and Unca Billy would cook, the Old Man would fill in, and we were on the hunt. We were on the hunt.

Munching on roasted peanuts he kept pulling out of his pocket and shelling, the Old Man turned to me and said, "If you hike up onto that ridge behind the camp, you'll be able to get a good look off toward Egg Lake an the lava beds an all, if the light's still good enough." I looked at Bub, who had started to move, and we leaped up almost in unison.

I hesitated, then asked, "Can we take our guns?"

The Old Man seemed a bit uncertain, not wanting to risk our shooting something before the season opened, but then he said, "I guess so. Season ain't open yet, so if you see a buck, you can't shoot him. An we don't wanta disturb the hills too much. Why don't you jes put a coupla shells in the chamber an leave the barrel empty?" That was fine with us.

Almost running, we flung ourselves at the hillside, but the incline quickly forced us back into a more patient pace. In a few minutes, we were out of the sight of camp, moving through the lengthening late afternoon shadows and the tall evergreens. In half an hour we came out onto a clearing on one of the mountain's shoulders. From perches up on stumps we could see for miles off to the west, just like our dad had said.

"I can see McArthur, and there's Pittville," Bub hollered, gesturing.

"How do you know?"

"'Cause I can see the road we came to Lookout on. See? Just look back towards the sun a ways and you'll see 'em." He was right. Partly not to be outdone, and partly judging by the smoke hanging in the air, I shouted,

"There's Fall River Mills."

"Yeah. Can you see the volcanoes?"

"I can't make 'em out for all the haze."

"Me neither."

The light was failing, but we decided that some of what we took for shadows were really the giant mountains. Closer to us were White Horse, the egg lakes and the lava beds we had driven through a few hours earlier.

I didn't have the words for it then, but the feeling I remember was of being small and inconsequential as I sat high on a great big stump and surveyed the panorama before me. It was as if I were privileged to see things forbidden to most humans, as if the mountains and rocks and trees had permitted me an entrance reserved for the few. I thought back to that day that the Old Man had hollered off Chews' Ridge and figured I knew something about how he had felt. I didn't holler then, but I have a few times since. It was something like being in church. I sighed and said to my brother, "Well, here we are."

"Yep," was his answer.

"Think we'll see any deer?"

"Sure. The Old Man has killed 'em here before, and that lady in Lookout today said there are lots of 'em this year."

"You scared?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he came back after a pause. "You?"

"A little."

"What of?"

"I'm scared I'll miss one if I see him."

"All you gotta do is aim and shoot like Dad showed us," he replied, parroting what I had said to him earlier. He sighted down his gun barrel and said, "Pow—got 'im!"

Instead of answering, I stood up and peed off the stump onto the ground six feet below.

"If you shake it more than twice, you're playing with it, and I'm gonna tell Dad," he teased. The play brought my horniness out from the recesses of my mind and I resolved to take care of it when I got the chance. I shook it twice more to spite him, and to please myself. Then I climbed down off the stump for the walk back to camp.

V

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 wanta 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 wanta 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, comfortably 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 spraddled 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.

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 schoolin, 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-

ings, 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-

eycombs. 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.

§ § § § §

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 eyeguards 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 unloaded 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 teenage 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, different 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 marvelled 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 leading 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 "staying power," which I learned meant that when the rest of us pounded 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.

VII

CAMP WAS TENSE THAT NIGHT, the gloominess of our mood matching the darkness in the sky. Smitty's getting lost had upset everyone, him and me more than anyone else. He was angry at the Old Man and embarrassed for himself. He had also been scared. I was pissed at him and at my dad. I had been scared too. Smitty's racing off into the brush had struck me as childish, the Old Man's stubbornness about the guns as needlessly rigid.

Another factor in our feeling bad was fatigue. In fact, one of my most powerful memories of that trip was the tiredness at the end of each day. I had begun to learn how physically exhausting deer hunting could be. I don't think I'd ever felt so drained before. My shoulders and neck felt strained, my lower back and legs burned and ached. As I looked around camp at the others, I could tell that they were at least as bad off as I was, except, of course, the Old Man.

Deke hummed snatches of some nameless church song as he moved around fixing dinner, and Willis made himself as busy as possible, though not necessarily as useful, trying to help Deke but mainly getting in his way. Smitty was glum and silently stacked up more firewood than we'd use in a week. As if impervious to it all, the Old Man, sitting near one of the lanterns, read his Bible while the meal was prepared. Bub and I sat around the fire watching the men.

Unca Billy's return of thanks for the food seemed to drag on for hours. Not only did he call down God's blessings on all of the less fortunate of the world, but he prayed for the Lord to give his servants guidance and peace, which I took to be about the row between the Old Man and Smitty. I doubted that God paid much

attention to little beefs like that. He had other, more important, things on His mind, if anything. No one told stories as we ate, and as soon as Bub and I finished up the dishes and helped Deke and Unca Billy stow the food, we all staggered off to bed.

We slept in the next morning, which is to say that we got up around seven. The pall from the night before was still over us, but the night's rest made us feel a little better. Everyone was stiff and sore. We would spend that day resting our sore muscles since we had worked our bodies harder than usual and weren't used to sleeping on the ground. We would also spend some time rearranging our gear for the trip down to the Pit River and taking short hikes on Baker Mountain to loosen up our stiff joints. No one mentioned taking guns on those walks. Smitty joined Bub and me on a walk back up to our view point. He was still mad at the Old Man, but because of his own silly mistake the afternoon before, he was pretty subdued.

"I tell ya, Satch," he said to me as we looked out toward Big Valley, our next day's destination, "the Rev is a great big pain in my ass sometimes. Reminds me of the first-sergeant I had in Korea—didn't nobody know nothin but him. He useta ride new guys in the company jus to show off what a big deal he was. He didn't bother my ass though 'cause he knew I'd lay a left hook on him."

"Remember how the Rev bugged me about that speeding ticket I got up by San Jose? Just nagged and nagged at me."

"Yeah, I remember."

"But hell with it. I'm gonna hunt my ass off an git me a nice buck. You watch."

"It won't do you any good if you get lost again," Bub put in.

"Shut up!" I snapped at him. "You take care of your own bananas."

"Don't worry 'bout that. I'm gonna show all a y'all," Smitty came back. We scouted around the side of the hill, watching for signs of deer, then hiked up over the top and back down to camp.

Since we planned to camp on the Pit River for only a couple or three days, the next morning we gathered up just enough things to get by on. The Old Man told us, "If ya put everything away an tie down the tent flaps, nobody'll bother it. Hunters won't steal your

stuff like a lot of folks will. Huntin an stealin don't usually seem to mix." I didn't share his faith in the virtue of outdoors people, but I took his advice and helped tidy up the camp so we could go. I was anxious to shoot my new rifle some more. I didn't care that it would be only at targets.

We threw our gear into the back of the truck, and by nine o'clock, we were on our way. At White Horse Reservoir, we turned right toward Lookout instead of left into the lava beds, and I noticed right away that more hunting parties were arriving. Wispy layers of campfire smoke hung over the trees around the junction. The dust raised by cars and trucks moving over the road formed a reddish-brown tunnel that we drove through. Every time a vehicle passed us headed into the woods, some of us would wave at its passengers. I felt smug and good knowing that our main camp was all set up and our scouting done while the newcomers still had work to do and trouble to go through. In fact, all of us seemed easier together than we had been at the end of the day before, so we sprawled around on the truck, trying to get comfortable for the ride down into the valley.

About halfway to Lookout, a slick, new Jeep loaded down with stuff passed us going toward White Horse. Its driver was a burly young white guy, and a young blonde woman was in the passenger seat beside him. Willis suddenly got very quiet and nervous. In a few minutes, he leaned forward and tapped Unca Billy on the shoulder and said to him, "Brother Perkins, I reckon you done heard 'bout me losin my girl back in June." Something told me that whatever Unca Billy answered, Willis was going to tell him the story.

"Yeah, Brotha Willis, an I sho was sorry to hear that."

Willis paused for a bit, as if he were trying to gather himself to go through the ordeal again. He was one of those people whose body shows what's going on inside him. His face sagged and his narrow shoulders hunched upward and forward, like he had a bad stomach ache. His rough, red hands, possessed of a life of their own, moved awkwardly in his lap. He stared straight in front of him and spoke quietly, almost as if he were talking to himself, so everyone sat still in order to hear him over the engine noise.

"I reckon it was wrong of us, but Sissie bein the oldest an all, she was kinda our favorite. We figgered that outta all our kids, she'd be the one to do somethin for herself. Me an my wife knowed she wasn't real happy stayin there at the house helpin her ma wit the young 'uns. Kinda restless-like she was. Then she took up wit that boy Ben. We didn't like him on account of he was so much oldern her an drank an everything. He was kinda wild, ya know. Then when she run off an' married him an that, we jes hoped everything'd be all right."

As he talked, I let my mind wander back over what I'd heard my dad tell Deke about him. Joe Willis had been poor all his life. He had left some farming town in Arkansas with his wife and two children and had come to the Monterey Peninsula hoping to better his condition during World War II. He went to work as a mechanic for Klaus Baumgartner, the old German who then owned the wrecking yard. He was a good worker and an honest man. So when old Klaus slowed down because of damage to his eyes from all the cutting torch and welding work he'd done and then retired somewhere around Watsonville near his grown kids, he took Willis in as a partner. Klaus later sold out to him.

By then, Willis and his wife had four kids, with another on the way. Neither of the Willises had much education, but his wife tried to keep the books while Willis pulled parts off wrecks and sold them. Because of his ignorance, Willis never made much money. All he had to show for his effort and hard work was a big brood of kids and a reputation as a decent man.

I never knew what his experiences with black people had been, though I assumed they were similar to those of other southern white people, but he really liked my dad. They got to be real friends, even fixing up and selling some of those old cars together. One time they were working on one, and the jack stand holding it up slipped. The car fell on my dad, its rear spring pinning his shoulder to the concrete floor of the garage. He screamed out in pain. Without hesitating or thinking, Willis bent down and picked the back end of that car up off of the Old Man. The Old Man lost some blood and had to have the gash sewed up. Willis strained his back and was stove up for a month. But they both got well and

kept on working together. In fact, Willis damned near worshipped my old man. I tuned back in to Willis's monologue in time to hear him say,

"In a little while, they started havin fights an everything, an Sissie come back home to stay with us a while after the first of the year. She stayed a coupla weeks, till he called her up on the phone an then she run back down to Dos Palos where he was. That was the las time we seen her alive." He stopped and blew his lumpy, red nose in his bandanna. That was the first time I actually experienced his suffering like that, and I wondered how I'd respond if I raised a child up to Sissie's age and had him or her suddenly taken away from me like she was. Then I hurt for Willis.

When he got to the part about the shootings, his voice got even quieter and sounded more like someone sobbing than someone talking. I had a hard time making out what he was saying, but I already knew the story. No one else spoke. He said, "Now she's gone, an she wa'nt but eighteen year old. She's dead an her soul is los 'cause she didn't know God." Willis's grief and pain overcame him. He wept loudly and shook violently.

No matter how many times I heard about Sissie and Ben, it never ceased to remind me of my dad's middle brother Jigs, the one between him and Smitty's dad. From what I knew, back in Texas where they grew up, Jigs came home from work one day to find his wife Ruthie in bed with another man. He grabbed a gun and blew their brains all over the bedroom. Then he lit out for the West, moving from place to place and never visiting his family. But even now, some Christmases and Easters he gets drunk and calls on the phone, crying and apologizing. He's a mess. It's almost as if he were dead too.

As Willis cried, Unca Billy murmured, "God bless you, Brotha Willis." When he managed to stop crying, Willis blew his nose again and said, "I'm sorry, brothers. I didn't mean to burden y'all wit my sufferin. But when I seen that Jeep with them young people in it back yonder, it jes come down on me agin. Ref, would y'all mine sayin a word a prayer wit me?"

Without answering or hesitating, the Old Man swerved the truck off the road and parked, leaving the motor running. When

the dust had settled a little, he and Unca Billy prayed, Unca Billy laying his hand on Willis's forehead. The prayer was short and quiet so I didn't hear the words. I thought it was probably because the Old Man had prayed with Willis so many times before and because he was anxious to get down to the Pit River.

"Thank ya, brothers," Willis said when it was over. "I b'lieve it's good for us to be here together. I feel better already." The Old Man drove back onto the road, saying, "The Lord is our refuge in a storm, our help in a time of need, and our comfort in a time of trouble." I figured the men believed that, but if I had been Willis, I think I'd have wanted more sympathy than that short prayer and those few words offered. But the Old Man didn't say or do anything else.

"Yes, Lord," Unca Billy breathed. We moved on.

§ § § § §

Way up ahead of us, where the road climbed out of a canyon over the crown of a high lava butte, rose the dust plume from a vehicle headed toward us. "My goodness!" said the Old Man. "Somebody sure is movin fast on this narrow road." He pulled the truck over to wait for what we could see was a car to pass. The car slowed down. Instead of going on by, it stopped beside the road across from us. As the dust cloud cleared, we made out an olive-drab '49 Ford coupe with a State of California seal on its door. I fingered the four shells in my pocket and glanced quickly around the truck to be sure everything was as it was supposed to be. Jack Heater climbed slowly out of the car. I'd never met or seen him before, but somehow I knew him instantly. And I didn't like him.

The dust had turned into a haze that hung in the air a long ways up and down the road in front and in back of us and a little way into the jack pines beside the road. Heater was alone. He ambled across the road toward us, thumbs hooked in his gun belt. I didn't think game wardens usually wore pistols, but this was Modoc so I guessed he could do as he pleased. Jack Heater was short and fat, and his loose paunch shook as he walked. He peered out at us through thick sunglasses, and he had the nerve to try to swagger like TV tough guys when he walked.

He had sweat rings running from under his arms down the sides of his heavy, dark-green uniform shirt. It was too hot to be dressed like that. He stank of sweat, which reminded me of what Mom said, "Old nasty white folks ain't like us. They smell bad." I didn't know about all of them, but sometimes Brother Willis smelled a little funny to me. And Jack Heater downright stank. Heater looked more pathetic than fearsome to me, but that was my first deer-hunting trip, so what did I know?

The warden knew who we were because there were no other black hunters who went regularly into his area, and my old man had been going there for years, but Heater didn't smile or let on. He just walked up and said, "Howdy, boys," like a big shot lawman.

The Old Man grinned, nodded and said, "Howdy." No one else spoke.

"Lemme see your licenses and tags." My dad turned to us. Heater didn't say anything while he examined our licenses and tags. He just sweated and breathed heavily through his nose and mouth in deep puffs. Willis reached across Deke and the Old Man to offer his license, but Heater waved him off. Willis glanced around at us embarrassedly and sheepishly put his wallet back into his pocket. The Old Man saw what had happened, but acted like he didn't. I knew he saw it 'cause his head gave a little jerk when he looked from Willis back to Heater. He should have said or done something, but he kept quiet. I couldn't understand why he didn't speak up because he didn't usually let things like that pass. He pissed me off taking race crap from that lame dude.

When Heater had finished looking at our licenses and tags, he pointed up into the truck and grunted in his hoarse voice, "All them guns unloaded?"

Deer season wasn't even open yet, so of course our guns were unloaded. Everyone started handing him the empty guns, one by one. He inspected them all, including Willis's old .30-40 Krag. When he got to Bub's, he worked the lever a couple times, raised it to his shoulder and looked down the road through the peep sight before giving it back. The sleek Savage looked good, even in his claw hands. The Old Man handed over his custom-built

.270 Winchester, careful of the scope and making sure the muzzle pointed straight up into the air.

A beautiful gun, it had a smooth, blue steel barrel and a hand-made sport stock of polished, straight-grained wood. Its cheek rest was cut to fit the Old Man. Its pistol grip fitted his hand. The Bausch and Lomb four-power scope sat firmly in its mount and gave the whole weapon a finished, elegant look. You could see Heater's eyes bulge when he took it into his hands. He tried to act cool, but he handled the gun awkwardly, obviously nervous. He started to raise it to his shoulder and sight down the barrel as he had done with Bub's .250. But he hesitated, glanced quickly at the Old Man, turned red and let it back down. He worked the bolt once, looked into the empty magazine and said to the Old Man, "Goddamn! Custom?"

"Yep."

"Must have cost right smart to have a piece like that made."

"Yep."

"Belong to you?"

"Yep."

"Son of a bitch!" Heater said.

What was wrong with that clown? He must have known, as even I knew, that sometimes hunters did use borrowed guns. Sure. But no one would even try to borrow an expensive, custom-built rifle like the Old Man's. That's personal stuff.

The Old Man took his gun and put it carefully back into the scabbard belted beside the driver's seat. The warden backed away and stood there in the dusty road for a moment. Then he waved his hand toward the truck and asked the Old Man, "Whose Weapons Carrier?"

"Mine," was the reply.

"Lemme see your registration slip."

I know better now, but I still get an angry twinge when I think back about how Heater badgered us that day. He had to keep prodding and pushing, just like people said he did. He had a legal right and duty to check on us, of course, but he had no cause for suspecting us of any violation. We were only driving down the road, minding our own business. But he couldn't leave us alone because

we were black except for Willis. And he used Willis to remind us of that fact.

Lots of the people in that part of Modoc knew the Old Man and that he was a minister and a law-abiding hunter. Heater did, too. The son-of-a-bitch. I wasn't saved, so I could at least think curse words, though I couldn't say them in the Old Man's presence. Bub's eyes looked scared, so I looked at him hard and signalled him with my hand, warning him. We had no reason to be afraid, but I felt tense, too. Damn that Heater! And damn Bub, and the Old Man, too!

Deliberately, the Old Man took the registration slip out of its case on the steering column and shoved it at the warden. As he looked at the slip, Jack Heater asked, "Army surplus, ain't it?"

"Yep."

"These bastards'll go damn near anywhere. Must be your tracks I seen up in some o' these hills."

"Probly so," said the Old Man, beginning to stare past Heater into the trees behind him. He seemed to be working at keeping his anger in check.

Without a "thank you" or "good luck," in fact without another word, Jack Heater thrust the registration slip back at the Old Man, turned and started across the road to his car, his pistol slapping his fat behind as he went. He revved up the Ford's engine and made a U-turn behind us. Screeching to a stop alongside the truck, he leaned across the seat and shouted out the window, "Y'all boys know it's agin the law to shoot from the road, don't ye?" Without waiting for our response, he gunned his motor and shot off up the road, burying us in his dust.

The Old Man sat there, waiting for Heater's dust to settle. I could tell he was mad, but he just stared. Then he fired up the truck and pulled out onto the road. We rode along quietly until Willis spoke up, "Ref, they orta be sumpn a man can do 'bout folks like that."

"Well, sometimes there is an sometimes there ain't," came back the Old Man.

We moved on toward the Pit River. All of our good cheer was gone. Our encounter with the warden had brought us back into

the social reality that our days in the hills had allowed us temporarily to forget. Even in 1950's California, white people could still harass black people and get away with it. The Old Man kept driving slowly, pensively, no longer scouting or talking, just staring straight ahead up the road. My first Modoc deer hunt was off to a terrific start—we had outrun a white boy in a Hudson Hornet, but a cracker game warden had hassled us for recklessly breathing while black. And we hadn't even actually started hunting yet.

VIII

THE PIT RIVER FLOWED OUT of a reservoir somewhere up above Adin and meandered its way south and west down through Big Valley and across the Cascades before dumping into Shasta Lake over by Redding. About twelve miles east of Fall River Mills, it made a sharp turn to the west and flowed deep and wide toward the little mill town. There were a few trout and a lot of suckers in it, but we were mainly interested in California Pike—slender, three- to four-pound fish that fought like demons. We set up light camp at the river bend. Once we got situated, we got after the pike with lures and spinners.

Since we arrived at our spot a little before noon, I knew we'd have time to set up camp, fish or fool around, and shoot before the day was over. Once we had fished a little and had a bite to eat, it was time to get the guns out. All of us had already shot our guns, some more than others, but this would be our last target practice before the hunt. My Old Man was never one to take target shooting lightly. It had to be done the right way all the time. And it always had to be done before season. He'd say, "Why would ya wanta take target practice at the thing you tryin to kill? That don't make no sense to me."

Willis and Smitty piled up two four- or five-foot mounds of the soft earth of the river bottom. They were high enough for us not to shoot over and thick enough to stop a rifle bullet. We positioned five-inch bullseyes on the sides of the mounds by poking little sticks through the corners of the paper. Then we paced off a hundred yards. The Old Man said we didn't need to sight in at a range greater than a hundred yards because if we didn't hit a deer

within that range, our chances of hitting him at all weren't worth a plugged nickel.

All of us shot, two at a time, from the same distance, but we had individual targets. And we all shot from the same positions—propped on the truck's hood, standing, sitting, kneeling on one knee and lying prone on the ground. We fired three shots from each position, trying to get them into as tight a pattern as we could.

The first few rounds were startling because the explosions from our rifles were so loud. Their concussion filled the air around us and crashed off across the prairie, receding like sharp thunder claps. By the time everyone had fired several shots, I could distinguish the sound each gun made—the smaller guns cracked, the larger ones boomed. The smell of gun powder hung over us as we fired, and after the first few shots, my ears rang the whole time.

The Old Man and Smitty went first to give the rest of us something to aim for. The Old Man never did much cooking or other work around camp, but, by God, he could shoot a rifle. He liked shooting from one knee best, but in every position he put all three shots within the bullseye. Competing with the Old Man, Smitty called up his military experience and also put all his shots inside the bullseye, and then bragged about how practicing to shoot gooks would help him get his buck. He said he didn't care which position he shot from; he could hit from all of them. When Bub's and my turns came, the Old Man reminded us of what he had taught us before.

"Shoot with both eyes open, an don't squint. Look straight down the barrel through your sights at your target. Take in a deep breath, let out half of it an hold the rest, then squeeze the trigger. Don't pull it, 'cause if you do, you'll miss every time. If you squeeze the trigger right, you won't know when the gun's gonna go off, but you'll hit your target. An don't worry about recoil. Don't flinch. All these big guns kick, but if you wrap your forearm through the sling an hold the grips tight, you can stand the kick. Besides, by the time you feel the kick, your bullet's already gone."

Bub did better than I did, putting two out of three shots in the target in all of the positions. I put all three in while propped on the

truck, and sitting, but I put in only two kneeling and lying down, and only one standing.

"You're pulling your trigger instead of squeezing it like Dad told us to do," Bub told me. Damn him. He needled me every chance he got.

"Shut up and mind your own bananas," I told him.

Unca Billy put about half of his shots in the target, and Willis did the same. Seeming to forget his buck fever during the bear episode, Unca Billy claimed he'd shoot better at a live target. He said, "I may not hit these paper targets too good, but I bound ya I'll git my buck if I git a chance. Don't worry 'bout me." Willis looked embarrassed and allowed as how he was "kinda nervous" that day, referring back to his crying jag on the White Horse road.

Shooting the guns was fun. Everyone seemed to let go of some of the tension of the previous couple of days. Smitty joked and played with Bub and me, and though I still hadn't forgotten my earlier feelings, I enjoyed myself.

Poor Deke, however, was in trouble. He couldn't come near the bullseye. He never had been a great shot, but only some of his shots even hit the paper his targets were on. The rest kicked up dirt when they hit the mounds. At first, the Old Man and Smitty tried to coach him, but as he got more and more frustrated, we started thinking something actually might be wrong with his gun, not just his shooting. When neither the Old Man nor Smitty could hit with Deke's gun, the question was settled.

"I told you it wasn't me," Deke declared, feeling vindicated. "Sumpn's wrong with this lousy gun."

A military .30-06 bought out at Fort Ord, Deke's gun still had a heavy wooden stock running from the shoulder plate to the end of the barrel when he got it home during the spring before the hunt, so it looked like a tree limb with a shank of pipe buried in it. During the summer, a guy in Monterey put a sports stock on it, then Deke bought himself a Weaver scope from Sears in Salinas. My old man tried to get him to have a gunsmith mount the sight, which was fairly delicate work, but Deke refused, apparently thinking that being a master carpenter qualified him in gunsmithing too.

"Naw, Doc. All thas gon do is cos me twenty-five dollars for him to do what I can do myself." So after drilling and tapping the barrel, he mounted the scope himself. The result was that he couldn't hit shit with it.

Deke had been a self-reliant guy all his life. Mom called it "independent" and liked him for it. In fact, I think that quality may have been a large part of why he and my dad were such good friends. The Old Man's pride and Deke's independence weren't altogether different from each other. Deke didn't think there was much he couldn't do, and his wife Susie claimed he was so stubborn that he'd argue with a sign board. He didn't believe in buying things on credit, and he always carried his carpenter's tool box in the trunk of his car. More than once I had heard him tell about how he had started his life in Texas as the fourth one down in a farm family of thirteen children. They had lived comfortably enough through the Depression because they were able to feed and take care of themselves off their land.

When he was fourteen and nearly as big as he ever got to be, he ran away from home, hoboed his way to Houston and did odd jobs to support himself. It was there that he took up the carpenter's trade and got so good at it that he could frame in doors and windows without using a square. He could simply look at a line of studs and tell if it was straight. Unlike most people, who run away from things, Deke had run to something, his craft. And craft became a large part of who he was.

After he married Susie and got saved, he moved her to California to make war money and get away from her huge, excessively needy family. They never had any children themselves. He was always in demand as a carpenter, and buildings he had raised were spread out all over the Monterey Peninsula.

But his skills and independence did him no good at Pit River. Unless he got help from someone else, his chances of killing a deer were slim and none, as Unca Billy told him. There was a good gunsmith in Fall River Mills, so after fussing and fuming and using pliers and a screwdriver to mess around with the gun some more himself, Deke finally broke down and decided to take the gun to him to be bore-sighted.

IX

WE GOT UP EARLY THE next morning to a big breakfast of bacon, eggs and grits, and more of Mom's sweet stuff. Still fuming about his "lousy gun," Deke got ready to go into town. Unca Billy, who for some reason was always running out of toothpaste, shells for his .35 Remington, or something else, decided to go too—mainly, I think, just to keep from hanging around camp since we still had three days before deer season opened the next Monday. I went so I could drive, which Deke, exercising his staying power, was glad not to have to do himself. I didn't get my license until I turned sixteen the next year, but the Old Man had already let me learn to drive at home. Not in his Olds 98, but in the Weapons Carrier, which we used mainly for hunting and hauls to the dump, and in a '37 Studebaker President someone had sold him cheap. He apparently didn't figure anyone would care if I drove without a license in sparsely-populated Modoc County.

That day, everyone wanted to do something different. Bub, who would fish anywhere anytime, planned to try the river for pike. Joe Willis, who didn't need anything from town and was broke anyway, decided to go fishing with Bub. Saying he hadn't come to Modoc to be busy all the time, the Old Man stayed in camp to read his Bible and loaf. Smitty, jittery and anxious to hunt, grabbed a .22 and went to pick up two or three cottontails to put with Bub and Willis's fish for dinner.

So only the three of us drove into town. It was a gorgeous day, and we were full of energy, excitement and anticipation. Deke and Unca Billy sat back and told down-home, country tales and hunting stories while I corkscrewed the truck along the dirt road beside the river.

Deke's and my companion that day, Unca Billy, was so bow-legged he seemed to be walking straddle of something all the time. I guess that was because he had the biggest dick I ever saw on a man. It hung down almost to his knobby knees. Peeing against a tree back at main camp earlier that week, he'd said to me, "Big man, big dick. Little man, all dick." From then on I made sure to use some other tree.

William Perkins had grown up as a city boy in New Orleans, "Nyaollins, Loozanna," as he put it. Like my family and many others, he and his wife Belle had migrated west during the early years of World War II. Belle was taller than he was, a pretty, cocoa-brown woman with a nice figure and a handsome face. Though Unca Billy pastored a small congregation in Stockton, I always thought of him as more of a follower than a leader. The grown-ups whispered about him being a woman chaser, and I recall hearing the women complain about how he undressed them with his eyes and made up to them by sweet-talking and flashing his gold-toothed smile.

Mom said Unca Billy was "one a them triflin', yella, Louisiana, Creole niggers that never was nor would be no good." She was partly right. He was something of a leech and a cheat. He broke the rules and acted like he was some kind of exception to any regulation other than his own. He'd catch more fish or shoot more game than the limit, and he'd be the one who had left his billfold at home when it came time to pay a café tab. He was always volunteering somebody else's car to go someplace so he could leave his own, usually a new Chrysler, at home. And he had the habit of jumping up in somebody's face, like small kids or people who wear glasses often do. The Old Man knew Unca Billy wasn't quite "right," but I guess he thought that befriending him would show him by example how an upright, holiness preacher should behave. Hunting deer with him was O.K., but somehow he made me glad I was going to be tall.

I felt a little cocky with the warm sun beaming down on me when I dropped Deke and Unca Billy at the gunsmith's place. The smith's name was Cliff Higgins. He had been a logger until he lost a leg in an accident. He then turned to running a gun shop and sports store in a small building in back of his house.

§ § § § §

While they were getting the gun fixed, I took off to investigate and to get a milkshake at the drive-in. It was about noon. I stopped at a corner to let pedestrians cross, and to watch a group of girls. One was a pretty, freckle-faced redhead with bulging breasts stretching her western shirt tight across the front. Smitty called tits like that "rising beauties." I didn't know where he had got that phrase, but I thought it fit the redhead. I liked the way her Levi's, loose at the waist, hung on her round hips and butt, hinted at the shape of her downy hump, and wrapped around her slender thighs before falling away to her cowboy boots. She triggered wild visions in my fifteen-year-old head. I looked off, not to be obvious. She did, too, but I knew she couldn't help noticing a black kid driving that big, powerful rig through that little town.

I figured I had about an hour to kill, so instead of turning left toward the drive-in, I turned right to cruise the main street a couple times. The stink from the mill pond hung in the still, warm air and made me want to hold my breath. I hated the steady hum and the startling, loud bangs and screeches that came from the mill, but the townspeople seemed not to hear the noise. Most of them seemed to ignore me too, being busy seeing what they were looking for. Some, however, had to look around me not to see me, as if I were an obstruction of their sight lines. Not angrily, just as if they didn't want to be bothered with seeing me. Since schools were in session, kids on lunch break were swarming around, playing grab-ass in front of the high school. A few of them looked like they might have been palming cigarettes whenever one of the patrolling teachers glanced their way. I drove by, glad to be hunting instead of studying, and turned the truck around in front of Jerry's Good Eats. It was a café with a rounded front, blue-tinted windows and food the Old Man said tasted more like sawdust than birthday cake. I planned to drive back through town in the opposite direction, keeping an eye out for the redhead.

I wanted my shake first. The Valley Drive-in Restaurant sat back off the main street out near the edge of town. I could see two girls who looked high school age working inside. They weren't as cute as the redhead, but they'd do. A white kid about my age was

sweeping up the front half of the parking lot with a push broom. He was about my size and had one of those pimply faces Smitty said came from jacking off too much.

As I turned in, the kid hollered, "Hey, boy, goddammit! Don't pull that damned truck in here. Can't you see I'm tryin ta sweep?" I stepped on my brakes.

"Where'll I park?"

"Don't matter ta me. Park out there at the curb. I'm busy here, boy."

I didn't mind walking across the parking lot, but I didn't like his swearing at me and that "boy" stuff. Who did he think he was? And who did he think I was? He couldn't have known about it, but I must have still been a little edgy after the way Jack Heater had treated us on our way to the Pit River. The girls were watching us through the windows. I parked the truck and walked stiffly over to the order window. A few feet from the building, the kid blocked my way:

"Whatcha doin' here, boy? Deer huntin?"

Without answering, I stepped around him to continue. When I did that, he quickly shoved his broom between my feet. His quick move surprised me. I got tangled up in the broom, stumbled, and fell sprawling into the side of the building. My head hit it, seeming to thunder against the stucco wall. My hunting cap went flying.

For a few long seconds I didn't discover that I was down on my hands and knees, facing the building. I stayed on my all-fours another moment, listening for the kid sniggering behind me and for the girls inside. But the only sounds I heard were my own heavy breathing, the blood pounding in my head and the mill noise vibrating the air. Smoke and the odor of stagnant water filled my nostrils. My eyes watered and my head throbbed just above the hairline on the right hand side. "Oh, shit," I thought, "I'm gonna have a knot on my head. How'm I gonna explain it? Deke and Unca Billy are gonna tease me about a white boy hitting me up beside the head, and the Old Man might think I've been doing something I shouldn't have been doing and get pissed."

I'd never been knocked out before, and I remember to this day how strange I felt. My head was spinning, but I crawled around so

I could see the kid standing over me, holding his broom like a club. I pushed myself up onto my right knee with my left foot slightly in front, as if I were in starting blocks for a race. I hesitated, then lunged at him as hard as I could with a straight right-hand punch, fist tight, arm fully extended, the way Smitty had coached me. I caught him just below the rib cage. I knew I had hurt him when my fist touched his soft belly, and I heard his breath whoosh out. He doubled over, sagged backward, and sat down on the ground hard, his broom handle across his lap. I stood up, still shaky but hot and on guard, reached around for my cap, and stole a sideways glance at the girls inside the restaurant. They were laughing. I walked the remaining steps to the service window and, nonchalantly, ordered an extra large pineapple malt.

The girls didn't mention what they had seen, but they took my order and smiled at me. By the time I had paid for my drink, the kid had got up and collected his broom. He moved away hunched over, rubbing his stomach and watching me over his shoulder. The egg-shaped lump beneath my cap hurt like hell, but I didn't let on as I climbed back onto the truck. Without hesitating, yet deliberately, sipping the good, rich malt, I pulled away from the curb to go pick up Deke and Unca Billy earlier than expected.

I was nervous about slugging a white kid in that little country town a thousand miles from nowhere. It felt an especially long ways from my familiar hometown where we Hankersons were so well known. But guys like that pissed me off, acting like they were shit on a stick, always trying to boss people around. Like Jack Heater. Like Tim Grogan, a kid I went to school with back home in Monterey. I hadn't been thinking about Grogan, but that kid put him on my mind. He made me feel the same way Grogan had. He was showing off when he tripped me, but I'd showed him a thing or two.

§ § § § §

I still felt kind of mad but had to grin when I saw Deke and Unca Billy, like a bear and a boy, come out of the gun shop to the street where I had parked. Deke's shiny black skin seemed to be stretched tight over his plump, working-man's hands and sausage fingers, and his heavy torso on top of his skinny legs made him look like

a barrel walking on stilts. His bulldog jowls gave his face a solemn look that contrasted with his happy nature.

Deke wasn't educated. He moved his lips and traced each line with his finger when he labored through his Sunday School lessons, and he pronounced the word "a-d-u-l-t" as "aldut," but he had a lot of what Mom called "mother-wit." And he was the strongest man I ever knew. Except for the Old Man. One time when Willie James had a flat on his '36 Chevy pickup, I saw Deke just back up against the side of the truck and raise it up so high all Willie had to do was slip the spare tire onto the axle. And he wasn't driven by panic the way Joe Willis had been that time when he got the Old Man out from under the car they were fixing. What Deke did was plain, brute strength.

Deke was all right. He'd said O.K. when I'd told him that I wanted to go get a milkshake instead of standing around the gun shop. He always treated me and Bub like he recognized we were almost men. Gave us room. One Saturday afternoon that past summer, going home from surf fishing, he had caught me parked in the Monterey sand dunes feeling up Johnnie Mae Holmes in the back seat of the Studebaker. All he did was husky up his bright tenor voice and say, "Hey, Satch, you better git yo dad's car on back home." And I don't think he ever told the Old Man what he saw.

When they got to the truck, Unca Billy grinned and said, "Sho made a quick trip. Sumpn happen?"

"Had a little problem at the drive-in," I answered.

Deke looked sour and had no gun. I quickly reassured him that I hadn't got a ticket or hit anyone's car. Then, figuring they'd see the knot sooner or later, I told them what had happened. Just as I'd expected, they both laughed, but Deke seemed too depressed to tease me much.

Unca Billy started in on how white people mistreat black ones, especially country whites like those in Modoc. Of course, we all still felt tight and touchy from our recent insults by the game warden.

"I don't preach fightin, now," he preached, "but sometimes thas all a country peckerwood understan."

Deke looked at me from the passenger seat.

"Anybody see it?"

I told him about the girls inside the drive-in.

"Well, shoot, boy," he laughed, "them little gals is what it was all about. He didn't want no cullud city slicker up here messin wit his gals. You got to look out, boy, 'cause we don't want them rednecks after us. You know how they is. They's a lots mo a them than they is of us." I cocked my hunting cap down over my left eye, not caring that my knot showed as I pointed the truck toward camp.

Cliff Higgins hadn't been able to fix Deke's gun right away because he had several other customers before Deke. He had promised to have it ready by noon the next day, Saturday, which meant that someone would have to return to Fall River to pick it up. Unca Billy quickly established that he didn't intend to go back to town by saying, "Well, I was kinda hopin to ketch some a them pikes tomorra." Deke just grunted. I quickly offered to go back for Deke's gun. Of course the driving was part of it, but there was more to it than that, though I couldn't say exactly what it was. Deke liked that idea and promised to ask my dad to let me go.

Back at camp, I found that the Old Man wasn't at all angry about my ruckus. All he said was that I had to be careful in these funny little towns. And after I promised to stay out of trouble, he agreed to my going back for Deke's rifle the next day if I drove carefully and kept my nose clean. The rest of the guys teased me about that white boy hitting me up beside the head, which wasn't quite accurate but served the purposes of their teasing. I was preoccupied with wondering what would happen when I went back to town. Would the drive-in kid haul a gang of his friends out looking for me like in stories I'd heard about white mobs still lynching black people down south? If that happened, what would I do? My mind kept going back to Tim Grogan.

Two things had made me dislike Tim Grogan. Once at a band festival in Berkeley, a bunch of us had gone to the YMCA for a swim, and they wouldn't let me in because I was black. Grogan said, "Well, Satch can wait for us while we swim. Then we'll all go bowling or get a pizza, or something." Didn't even ask me. Why would I wait while the rest of them swam? Did he think he could buy me off with a pizza or something? Would that make the Y's discrimination all right? Grogan and the drive-in kid assumed they

naturally knew what was good for other people. Who said they could speak for others?

The other thing was that Grogan had invited me to a junior high school graduation party then backed out the day before. Claimed his mother wouldn't let me in their house because she had almost been raped by a Negro one time. Almost raped by a Negro. Ain't that a bitch? And didn't he know that before he invited me? The real reason he didn't want me at that party was that he'd invited Shirley Boone, a new girl from South Dakota. She liked me. He may even have liked her himself, I never learned about that for certain, but I was sure he couldn't stand her liking me. Everyone around school was talking about it.

Tim Grogan and the drive-in kid. What a pair! I couldn't decide what to expect, and I didn't have any special plan in mind, but I knew I had to go back to the Valley Drive-in.

X

THAT NIGHT, I LAY CURLED up in my warm down bag, looking up at the busy sky, swatting dive bomber mosquitoes, listening to the river chuckling under its breath and to the coyotes howling across the high plateau. Their cries sounded faintly like I imagined Indians singing might sound—high, sharp, soaring sounds. Falling asleep, I wondered what that country was like when the Indians had it. How did those ancient red men live? Did they, too, catch fish out of the Pit River? I imagined I could see them working their fields, trapping and killing game, fishing the streams and dancing around their fires, their chants ringing across the sky. I couldn't name the country's special quality, but I could feel it like a breath on the back of my neck.

Before going on that hunt, I had read about the Indians in Modoc, partly to complete a history assignment and partly because of my upcoming trip. The book I read said that the Indians who gave their name to the county were part of the Plateau branch of the Penutian-speaking people and had lived in southwest Oregon and northern California, around Modoc Lake (now called Lower Klamath Lake) and Tule Lake. The neighboring Pit River Indians, who spoke Palaihnihan, a Hokan language, also lived near Tule Lake and along the river that was named after them because of the pits they dug near it to trap game. Both they and the Modocs gathered roots, seeds, and berries; lived off the resources of the rivers and lakes; and hunted game. The Modocs, like their cousins, the Klamaths, harvested salmon and made meal and flour from *wokas*, seeds of the water lilies growing in their lakes.

The Indian bands in Modoc set up their villages and gathered food in different spots each year so the earth could regenerate

itself. They arranged their tule and brush huts in a horseshoe shape with the openings facing Mt. Shasta and Mt. Lassen. They built burial mounds in the foothills so their dead could see the volcanoes. Every spring they traveled through the lava beds to the mountains to visit their ancestors and to commune with their gods. They took food to share with family members gone from visible life, and they taught their children to mingle their spirits with those of their forefathers, spirits that moved in and out of their bodies. I wished I had been alive to see those Modocs back in the olden days.

I also knew a little bit about Indians from the experience of our family living in Arizona when I was small. But most of what I took for recollection probably came from hearing the Old Man repeat the stories time and again. I had little snapshots of those days in my head—the Old Man preaching on the San Carlos Reservation, the little kids dancing around in circles, wordless and clapping their hands while Mom sang and the Old Man played the guitar he'd learned to cowboy pick on a Wyoming dude ranch.

My dad and those Indians liked each other. They said he looked Indian because of his high cheek bones and beak nose. He said the Indians were a spiritual people, which put them in the way to know God and to hear the Gospel. Being in Modoc reminded me of Arizona and brought those mental pictures back into sharp focus. Long after everyone else had started to buzz, growl and snort, I finally fell asleep looking forward to my trip the next day. I dreamed I was an Indian boy driving the Weapons Carrier across the San Carlos Reservation looking for a place to swim. A red-haired girl rode beside me, and I woke up in the morning with a throbbing erection.

Contrary to his pattern, Bub didn't want to tag along, so I took off alone right after breakfast. None of the others really wanted to go, which was fine with me. I had a private errand to do in Fall River: I needed to revisit the territory I had conquered. I was scared, but I was determined to find out what would happen when I went back to that town. Winding along the river at a comfortable speed, I let my mind wander back over the events of the previous day, afraid and confident at the same time, the knot in my stomach larger than the one shrinking on my head.

I drove slowly, meditatively. I was tense, so I relaxed myself by looking over the spectacular terrain. I was a tiny speck on a huge map. Seen from the Pit River Road, Fall River Mills and the surrounding mountains stood in sharp contrast to each other. The easterly mountains were a bumpy rim of the landscape. Off in the west, the Sierra Nevada Range formed a jagged, purple boundary, broken by the giant volcanoes. The town nestled in a curve in the road and looked out across a wide plateau toward the mountain range to the east. Fall River Mills was a lumber town of about five hundred. The mill, owned by the Fruit Grower's Corporation which also owned thousands of acres of rich farmland down in the Sacramento and Santa Clara Valleys, took up one whole side of it. Across from the mill, the rest of the town fanned out in a half-circle—the downtown, rows of identical company houses fingering their way down paved streets to a fringe of individual private homes, then the abrupt edge where sage brush and mullein commenced.

The big contraptions inside the mill pulsated in a constant rumbling that was felt more than heard all over town twenty-four hours a day, six days a week. When the mill hands burned shavings at night, the mesh tops of the cone-shaped incinerators glowed red, and firework showers of sparks popped and bounced out of them, moths around a candle. The pond the workers floated the logs in looked like dark brown soup, and in the hot, early fall weather, the yeasty odor of rotting wood and stagnant water, sour as buttermilk, blanketed the town like one of those Sacramento Valley "tule" fogs. More than once over the years we went there, I saw the tall Fruit Growers stacks puke out thick, black soot and smoke that blew off in clouds on windy days. When no wind blew, the stuff snowed down and coated everything with a film of sooty, greasy dirt that was hard to wash off.

I hurried down the main street for the drive-in as if drawn by a magnet, my mind buzzing back over what had happened. I parked the truck and was preparing to step down when I saw the drive-in kid coming toward me. The same two girls from the day before were working inside. Suddenly I understood what some of the questions I needed to answer were: Had I won the previous day's

battle decisively? Would I have to fight again? Would those girls see me as superior to that white kid?

I was ready to duke it out again, but he grinned. "You shur do hit hard. Look here," he said, raising the front of his shirt and showing me a dark bruise about the size of my fist on his belly. That seemed a fair exchange for the bump on my head, which I kept covered with my hunting cap. I relaxed a little, figuring that my winning the first round meant that I'd probably not have to fight him again.

"I just finished what you started," I said.

"Aw, hell," he replied, "I didn't mean nothin by it. Jus funnin."

"Well, you can't have any fun with me by cursing at me and calling me boy." I didn't mention his tripping me.

"I'm sorry 'bout that. What's yer name? Mine's Harry Walker."

"Satch Hankerson."

We shook hands and shuffled around for a moment.

"Where you camped at, Satch?"

"Up on Baker Mountain above White Horse."

"Got yer own gun?"

"Sure. A brand new .250-3000 Savage."

"God-dern! Bet it's purty."

"Damn right it is, boy."

I'd have given almost anything not to have said that last word. He winced, but didn't say anything. He was trying to be friendly. He'd been acting tough for the girls in the restaurant the day before, just like Deke had said, but he still reminded me of Tim Grogan, and that made me edgy.

He propped one foot up on the running board and looked the truck over admiringly.

"Whose army truck?" he asked.

"My old man's."

"Lets you drive 'er by yerself, huh?"

"Yep." I didn't tell him this was the first time.

"Got yer license?"

"I get it next year."

"Yer old man let you stay outta school to go deer huntin?" I nodded.

"Mine don't. He lets me skip school sometimes to work here or go cut firewood," he muttered enviously. I shrugged.

"Some guys're just lucky, I guess."

"What year in school're you?"

"Sophomore."

"You like school?"

"Pretty much."

"Oh. Git good grades?"

"Good enough to keep my old man off my back."

There was a pause in the conversation. Then he resumed, "You gonna go to college?"

"Sure. Aren't you?"

"Hell no! Me, I'm gonna quit school next year when I'm sixteen like my brother done. Git me a pickup and haul firewood. Then I can hunt when I damn please. Leastways when I ain't out chasin' nooky." He drew the corners of his mouth down and winked at me. Thinking of the redhead I'd seen the day before, I said,

"You've got some pretty girls up here, all right."

He abruptly changed the subject.

"Ever been huntin here before, Satch?"

"Nope."

"Ain't many of your people comes up here huntin. They stays mostly over to Quincy and down 'round Sacramento." I thought, damn, I knew it. This redneck's gonna tell me about my people and where we're supposed to be. He's like Tim Grogan, all right. I shrugged again. Gazing off toward the eastern mountains, he went on, "White Horse. By God, there's lots a big deer over in them lava beds. I seen a six-point there once. Mighty fine country, too. Indian country, y'know." I could see more coming—the cat was going to tell me about Indians too.

"Yep," I said, feeling in control of things. I could whip him, I was on a hunting vacation and he was working, so I felt increasingly confident. I could afford to waste a little time before getting Deke's gun, so I decided to have another malt and see what this Harry had to say. Just to goad him on a bit.

When I returned and got back in behind the wheel, he was sitting back casually against the side of the truck, arms folded, ankles

crossed. "Indian country," he resumed, having waited patiently for my return. "Folks here 'bouts says back in the olden days there was thousands a Indians all through this here country. They come down from Canada, over from Idaho and Nevada and everywheres. There was a whole lots more a them than there was a the white people come in here to settle."

He unfolded his arms so he could gesture and continued: "And them som'bitches was tough, too. You had to shoot 'em in the gut or chest to stop 'em, 'cause if you shot 'em in the arm or leg, why they'd just take an hop on their ponies an ride off into the woods or the lava beds. Then you'd never ketch 'em."

"They'd come a swarmin down, hundreds and thousands of 'em. And they'd be a rustlin and a rapin and a killin. Sometimes they'd do somethin to women to make squaws out of 'em, 'cause no self-respectin white woman would hook up with no Indian buck on her own." I thought to myself that he talked about white people and Indians as if I were colorless, or stupid.

"Them redskins liked nothin better'n to sneak up an shoot a white man in the back with a gun they'd stole or one a them bow'n arras, an add his scalp to the belts they made out of 'em. Fact I got some arra heads from 'round here back at the house. An if they was to ketch a hunter or trapper out in the hills by his self, why they'd take an cook 'im up and eat 'im. They had medicine men they figgered was gods an all, an them medicine men would give 'em weeds to smoke or roots to chew that made 'em wild. An that's when they'd go on a rampage. They was savage, boy...uh, Satch."

I didn't fault him for that "boy" since he changed it quickly and since I myself had made the same mistake. I stared off at the surrounding mountains. The books I'd read about the Modoc Indians said the white settlers wanted their land, so the whites herded the Modocs onto the Klamath Reservation over in Oregon. Then the army kept them there, like prisoners, jammed in with their old enemies, the Snake and Klamath tribes. I trusted the books a whole lot more than I did this Harry. I said, "I'd heard that there never were all that many Indians here and that the white settlers put them on reservations a long time ago. Besides, the Modocs didn't seem like people who'd go out killing and burning.

"Who told you that?" he asked suspiciously.

"No one. I read it."

"Well, you read wronger 'n shit," he exclaimed confidently, for all the world like Tim Grogan when he had said, "Satch can wait for us."

"There was lots and lots a them bastards, an they was meaner 'n hell. They didn't take an go to no reservations until after that Modoc War what happened over 'round White Horse, where you're camped at."

"What was that?" I asked, though I already knew, and felt like I did in school when I had studied hard and had a test snookered.

"Well," he resumed, pacing back and forth alongside the truck.

"The baddest renegade of 'em all was a chief name of Cap'n Jack, a giant, damn near seven foot tall, that could bust a man's skull with one blow from his tommy hawk. He was cross-eyed, but a crack shot. An he drank human blood." He grimaced and spat on the ground.

"Had about six white wives he'd stole an about twenty half-breed brats. Wouldn't have nothin to do with no Indian woman. He decided to drive the settlers clean outta this country, so he took an' rounded up a big army a braves—two, three thousand of 'em—an come ridin an raidin down through Big Valley here. They musta killed about a thousand white people. Even a general in the Army, the one they named the town of Canby after. An they burned Adin an a couple other towns to the ground. I mean it was awful what they done."

He really warmed up to his story. "Well, anyway, the army commander sent down to Sacramento for more troops, an then they lit out after them redskins. Caught 'em, too. Over in the lava beds. Took 'em 'bout a month to roust all the damn Indians outta them caves n' hollers, but they got 'em, by God. A lotta the Indians n' a few a the soldiers got killed in the fightin. The soldiers hung Cap'n Jack n' the other leaders. Then they took an moved what was left a the Indians onto the reservation up to Klamath. Even had to build a fort there to keep 'em on the reservation. That's how the town of Klamath Falls got started. They been purty quiet since then, but you gotta watch out 'cause Indians is one sneaky bunch."

When he stopped talking, I walked over and threw away my milkshake cup. His story was way off, especially about "Cap'n Jack," whose real name was Kintpuash, and about the Modoc Wars. Part of my mind told me just to cut out and forget about Harry and his story, but he seemed so cocksure, so self-satisfied I couldn't resist setting him straight, at least about some of it. And I could sort of get back at Jack Heater by doing this dumb kid in. It was my turn to show off.

"Harry," I said, climbing in behind the wheel, "Cap'n Jack wasn't trying to drive anybody anywhere. He was fighting back. He and his people were going to their holy grounds on Mt. Lassen when the U.S. Army tried to ambush 'em. But they couldn't do it 'cause the Indians would disappear into the lava beds." I could picture the Modocs not even running away, but silently vanishing along the trails they'd always walked, leaving the soldiers stumbling around in the lava beds like so many Keystone Cops.

Harry must have guessed I didn't believe any of his story because he started to speak, but stopped. I probably should have stopped too, but I couldn't. I needed to finish him off for good, like the Old Man should have done Heater. I rushed on, words tumbling out, falling all over each other.

"Over a thousand white troops got together at White Horse to go catch the Indians, but it took 'em more than a year to do it. A year, Harry!

"When they finally got Cap'n Jack, they discovered that he'd had only thirty warriors all along. Thirty Indians killed and wounded over two hundred soldiers! The soldiers killed eight braves and a few women and kids. Then the army guys hung Cap'n Jack and the other leaders at White Horse and sent the rest of the Indians to reservations at Klamath and in Oklahoma. Now that's what happened in the Modoc Wars, Harry!"

I stopped, slightly out of breath and clutching the steering wheel in both hands, but exhilarated. Harry, red-faced, seemed about to bust wide open. After a long, tense pause, I started the motor and he backed away.

"How come you know so much about it, hunh?" he snarled.

"You never been here before. You said so yourself. You a damned Indian or somethin? Hunh?"

Silently, I backed the truck out into the street. He shouted out to me, "Think you're smart, don't ya?"

I pulled over to the curb. I looked him in the eye and said quietly, "Harry, you don't know shit about Indians. All you know about is white, and that ain't everything." With that, I eased out the clutch and moved the truck off smoothly and powerfully. I thought I had had the last word, but I'd briefly let myself forget who I was and where I was. I could see him through the rear view mirror before I could hear him. Standing at the curb, hands cupping his mouth, he yelled at the top of his voice, "God-damned Niggerrrr!" His last word, the same old one white people always fall back on when all else fails.

I shifted into second, beeped the horn twice, and flipped him a bird with my right hand. Way up in the high sky, out toward the Warner Mountains, a V-wedge of Canada geese were honking and humming their way toward Tule Lake. They seemed to be fleeing from the sounds and smells of Fall River Mills. Then I noticed that the wind had blown away the smoke and stench from the mill. Breathing fresh, clean air and cruising along with confidence, I headed toward Cliff Higgins' gun shop. I felt mostly satisfied as I went. I would never think about the drive-in kid or Tim Grogan in the same way again.

XI

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.

§ § § § §

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, noncommittally, "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 waiting 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.

§§§§§

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 enterprise. 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.

XII

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 rust1ings 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

shoot. 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 intentions 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 1otta 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.'

"'Allright, 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."

"Seemed 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 probly 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 1avies 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.

XIII

THE NEXT THREE DAYS WERE like the first. Up in the dark, down with a quick breakfast and out to the daylight hunting spot. Hours of chilly, silent sitting near the hilltops, listening and watching and waiting. Then pounding the brush under the hot, midday sun, and finally scouring the jack pines in the lava beds in the late afternoon. We went to different spots, but the hunting pattern remained the same.

I quickly learned how to distinguish the sounds of the nocturnal birds and animals headed for bed from those of the diurnal ones looking for breakfast. The sweet, woody scent of the high cedars, the sharp, acrid odor of hillside manzanita, and the medicinal, piney air in the lowlands grew increasingly familiar to me. I also learned to pick my way through the brush on the hills easier and to move over the lava bed rocks more quietly. I saw lots of critters—owls, hawks, woodpeckers, chipmunks, a skunk, and even a few does and fawns. But no bucks.

I brooded on the one we had missed and on what seemed like a permanent rift between my dad, brother and me, but in the main, the spirits of the others in the party improved. I went back to plotting out what I'd do—how I'd breathe and fire—when I saw a buck. Deke kept cheerleading, "We gon git 'em! We gon git 'em," and Unca Billy and Willis kept chipping in. Once in awhile, the Old Man would say, "Aw, yeah, there's lotsa deer in these hills." But we didn't even see a legal buck, let alone shoot one.

By Thursday, the men started to get more than a little antsy. They were frustrated, and moved around agitatedly. The only bucks we saw were hanging on long poles tied between two trees as we passed other hunters' camps, and one day we drove by a guy

dragging one out onto the road. But as hard as we hunted, and as much ground as we covered, we still couldn't seem to do any good.

In the mid-afternoon of that Thursday, before we moved down for the lava bed hunt, we made a drive through the manzanita. Unca Billy and Smitty were on stand and the rest of us were making the drive. We were pretty spread out in a big, triangular patch—Deke on top, the Old Man on the bottom and the rest of us in between.

We had gone only a little way into the brush when I heard movement up ahead of us. Not wanting to repeat Bub's error, I sang out immediately, "Deer! Deer!" and climbed up onto a stump so I could see. Things started happening fast.

"Did ya see 'im?" my dad shouted to me.

"No, but I heard it moving, down between me and Brother Willis, headed towards Unca Billy."

"Go slow now and watch out good," he answered.

"Here he comes, Unca Billy," I hollered before jumping down off my stump. We were going to get one!

I could hear Bub and Deke on my left and Willis on my right barking, yelling and whistling. I did the same. We zig-zagged back and forth, uphill and downhill, to keep everything in front of us. Once, standing on a rock, hoping for a shot, I saw the brush move seventy-five yards ahead of me, toward Unca Billy. Given the kind of marksman Unca Billy was, I wished whatever it was had been going toward Smitty, or that the Old Man had been on that stand.

I was scrambling through brush higher than my head when I heard what I took to be Unca Billy's carbine,

"Poww! Poww! Poww!" I dropped to the ground and covered my head for a second in case a bullet ricocheted in my direction. Then, instead of climbing back up onto something so I could see, I went straight for Unca Billy as fast as I could. I forgot about my hurt leg, which was better anyway, and charged through the manzanita. The others were coming fast too. I broke out of the really thick stuff into waist-high shrubs that ran for fifty or sixty yards.

Down to my right, I could see Joe Willis going as fast as he could toward Unca Billy, who was holding his gun in both hands,

still at the ready, and peering into the manzanita between himself and Willis.

"B'lieve I got 'im," he hollered to Willis, a big grin on his face.

Willis and I converged on the spot he was pointing to at almost the same time. The deer was down all right. We finally had one! As Willis, Unca Billy, and I came together, I noticed they were less jubilant than I expected them to be. Willis caught my eye and pointed wordlessly a little way over into the brush. There, shot through the withers and dying, lay a young, blacktail buck, a spike buck. Unca Billy had shot an illegal deer.

"Reck'n we got us a spike," Willis began just as the Old Man panted up.

"What?" my father burst out.

"I thought he was legal...I mean...he looked like a forked horn," the little preacher tried to explain, sweat streaming off his brown face.

"Unca Billy shot a spike," Bub yelled over his shoulder to Deke, who was still laboring down the hill.

"Be quiet, boy," the Old Man snapped. "You wanta call Jack Heater down on us?" He was still mulling over the Heater experience, too.

"Aaawww, Preach," from Smitty.

"What you shoot a spike for?" the Old Man demanded from his friend, his rage barely contained.

"Man, I thought sho that was a forked horn," Unca Billy repeated, starting to look forlorn.

"Messed up, hunh Preacher?" Deke puffed. We all stood quietly, feeling bad.

The Old Man was boiling. He went after Unca Billy almost like I had gone after Bub.

"How could you think that was a forked horn when them spikes is six inches long and as smooth as the palm of my hand? Couldn't you see that deer didn't have but one horn on each side of his head, Man?" He was glaring at Unca Billy.

"Well, he was runnin when I first seen 'im, kinda bouncin like," Unca Billy began.

"I heard Satch holler so I was lookin for 'im. Then after I seen he was a buck, he run in the brush, an I couldn't see 'im good. So I jes shot where I thought his front part was."

"Three times? You know better'n that. You know you ain't supposed to shoot at no brush. You supposed to see what you shootin at. My goodness! You ain't one a these boys," the Old Man went on. He was fit to be tied and not controlling his anger as well as he usually did, so he poured it onto Unca Billy.

"Talk about buck fever...man!" he ranted.

"Yeah, I guess you right," Unca Billy apologized lamely.

"Guess nothin," the Old Man shot back.

"We can't have no guessin 'bout legal and illegal. We got to know at leas' one horn has two points 'fore we shoot a deer. We obey the law an hunt too hard for this kinda mess." No one else said anything, preferring to stay out of the way of my father's wrath. We stood there under the blazing sun, my dad staring off into space in utter frustration. I remembered Unca Billy and the bear. Then I thought about about Game Warden Heater and hoped he didn't pop around from behind a tree.

Deke broke the silence, "Well, what we gon do?"

"What we gon do?" raged the Old Man. "We gon git the devil outta here an hope nobody didn't see us. Hard as we been huntin an then shoot a spike...good gracious!" he trailed off.

"We can't take none of 'im back for campmeat?" Unca Billy pressed, hoping to regain at least a little lost ground.

His question wasn't all that far-fetched, but his timing couldn't have been worse. Just as many other hunters and fishermen ate their first kill or catch in camp, deer hunters often killed a small doe or fawn and ate off it for the duration of their hunt. They thought it was acceptable to take what they called "campmeat." But my dad had never done that, and he wasn't about to start then.

"Naw, Man! What's wrong with you? You wanta go to jail?" the Old Man roared. "Les go," he spat over his shoulder, starting up the hill toward the road. One by one, we cast final looks at the dead deer and straggled after him. That one was for the coyotes and buzzards, an unwittingly-made offering to nature's forces and processes.

"Things like that take all the heart for huntin outta me. Les go back to camp," my dad announced when we got up to the truck. He climbed into the passenger seat, which meant that Deke was to drive, and stared off into the trees. Ashamed and guilty, Unca Billy surrendered his gerry can seat to Willis and sat in the back with Bub, Smitty and me. No gold-toothed grin, no stories. I looked at him and felt glad to be able to focus all my hostility on him momentarily. His blunder let me give my dad and brother a little break. Shot at the moving bushes. Shit! I thought Mom was right about him—he really was a jive stud. We must have looked like a deadbeat and desolate bunch as we rode back to camp early, before putting in a full day's hunt, leaving one deer for the predators and ourselves still without meat.

As we sat around the fire that night, frustrated, trying to figure out how to change our luck, the Old Man declared, "If we don't git somethin tomorra, brothers, I think we oughta change up on 'em some. Maybe hunt the lavas first thing in the mornin an then drive some a the back roads where most folks can't get to in the evenin. Ya know we been seein more a these deer down low than up in the timber."

Smitty asked, "You think with the weekend comin up there might be more folks in the hills to move 'em around more?"

"This seems pretty far away for weekend hunters, 'cept for locals, but maybe."

"I wouldn't mind ridin around doin some road huntin, for a change, would you, Deke?" Unca Billy asked tentatively, trying to recover the face he had lost that day.

"Naw, man. Thas perfect," Deke answered, referring back to Willis's story about the little boy, "'cause we gon git 'em one way or 'nother."

§§§§§

The next day was Friday. We began that day with our usual morning hunt in the big timber and passed the middle of the day pounding the manzanita. No luck. Then we moved on toward the lava beds for the evening foray through the jack pines.

As we wound down the red, dusty road to the flats, I felt a little better. I was disappointed that we hadn't killed any legal game yet,

but my skinned up shin had improved and I was in a better mood. I figured everyone would be more careful after having missed the buck Bub had jumped and after Unca Billy's illegal one.

All of a sudden, Deke slammed on the brakes and pointed to a small manzanita patch off to the right.

"Hey, Doc," he said. "Ain't this that brush pile where you shot them two bucks that year?"

"I don't remember for sure," the Old Man answered. Then, "Yeah, I think it is," he said.

"Sho, it is," Deke explained, "cause yonder's that big rock you was sittin on. An that lil' road we drove down on is right there behind us." He pointed as he talked. "The brush done growed up so we cain't see it good now."

"Yeah, that's it, all right," my dad agreed.

"Man, that was sumpn," Deke went on, still sitting and keeping the truck's motor running. "Wasn't nobody on that trip 'cept me an Doc an Unca Billy. That was the trip Unca Billy was talkin 'bout the other night," reminding us obliquely of Unca Billy's story about the dream Deke and the Old Man had shared.

"It was the first day of the season, an we'd done already hunted that big hill up 'side Baker Mountain. It was hot, an we was tired, an was lookin for small brush piles. Doc sat on that rock down yonder an Unca Billy worked up towards him from that far corner down the hill."

"An you went a little piece down in there and moved over to the right towards that big snag," put in Unca Billy, back on his gerry can perch beside the Old Man.

"Yep," continued the deacon. "We was yellin and barkin an all, an didn't see nothin. All of a sudden, 'poww!' We stopped and hollered, but the Rev, he didn't say nothin. We commenced barkin and hollerin again, an then we heard another shot from the same place, 'poww!'"

"Man, we come haulin outta that brush.

'Didja git im? Didja git 'im?' An ole Doc, he didn't say nothin. I didn't figger he'd done missed 'em, but I didn't know.

'What happened? Was it a buck?' I hollered.

'Sho,' he said, an pointed, once up 'bove that rock he was sittin on and once down yonder in front a where Unca Billy was. They was two bucks layin on the ground, one of 'em still kickin. They was both blacktai1s, a forked horn an a three-point."

"Where'd ya hit 'em, Ref?" asked Willis.

"In the neck, Man," Unca Billy answered for him.

"I mean we jumped two bucks, ole Rev shot twice, and we had two bucks, both shot dead through the neck."

"Well, press a lord," Willis praised, and Smitty cheered, "All right."

The Old Man smiled triumphantly.

"Yeah, we got 'em all right," he said.

"Course I didn't have to do nothin but wait an shoot. They came out one at a time, so I jus let 'em git out to where I could see 'em good an shot 'em both."

"Man, that was sumpn," Deke said again as he drove away. I smiled at Bub, my pride in our father temporarily overriding my lingering anger. The Old Man really had made good shots. I resolved then to shoot my buck in the neck, too. No being careful. Just one shot to the neck was what I was after. That would make everything right.

§ § § § §

When we piled out of the truck to make our evening hunt, everybody seemed anxious and excited again. We dropped Smitty on one stand, and the Old Man told me it was my turn to be on the other.

"Walk a little ways into the trees, and get yourself a good place to shoot from, an stay still," he told me as I prepared to drive the truck around the mile-square section of pines to my stand. Everyone else would walk through the area.

I parked off the road in the trees and worked my way through the lava piles until I found a good place to hide. It was at the edge of a vale spotted with trees and small lava formations. I could see about a hundred yards through the trees and rocks toward where the others would be coming from. I figured Smitty was a couple of hundred yards down the road to my right.

I picked out a big fallen log, one with several small pines growing out of the soft ground beside it, and sat down between two trees growing close together. I was covered well, but still able to see and shoot. The fading afternoon light cast a haze over the lava beds, and except for a few birds and small animals, the woods were quiet. The brooding volcanic statuary seemed to represent ancient knowledge grudgingly revealed. Some of the lava stacks looked like craggy tombstones, others like funny little animal houses, with gaps and holes for entrances and exits. Off to my left, odd-sized rocks and boulders had tumbled into the trees like a river. I was continually struck by the variety of sizes, shapes and colors of the lava floe. The lava beds had a strange, eerie beauty about them.

I had become accustomed to lonely, silent vigils, so for most of an hour I sat listening and watching, and thinking back over what had happened so far. I still didn't feel right toward my dad and brother, and I was convinced that Unca Billy was jive, but I was so anxious to kill a deer that I pushed those feelings out of my mind to concentrate on hunting. Then I heard it—"click," then "click-click"—like a twig breaking or a pine cone falling in front of me. I froze, gripping my rifle and trying to breathe slowly and quietly. I heard it again—"click-thump...thump-thump." It was a deer.

Between me and the others, fifty yards away, I saw a big, red-brown form moving slowly in my direction. I eased my gun up and watched the animal move casually toward me, its head arched back over its shoulder. It was trying to locate the noise that had spooked it. Carefully and quietly, I shifted positions so I could see it better, but by then it had stepped slightly past a lava mound so I still couldn't tell whether it was a buck or a doe. I slid cautiously out from the two little trees I was wedged between and worked my way toward the deer, moving slowly, watching carefully, my ears burning, my heart pounding. I felt sort of tingling and alive and quiet all at the same time.

I crept into the prickly limbs of a small jack pine, using the tree as a shield between me and the deer. It was a doe, big and red. She was a mule deer, tall and full-bodied, like she may have been pregnant. Like stone statues among the rocks, we both stood watching each other to see what would happen next. She was beau-

tiful—sleek, velvet, sweet-faced. She looked curious. She controlled every one of her muscles when she made quick, dainty movements like flipping an ear or switching her tail. We stared each other down fearlessly, more interested than anything else. If she had been a buck, I could have raised my gun and shot her before she could have gotten away. I exhaled loudly, and she went bouncing away in long, jumping-jack bounds toward the road—boing, boing, boing. I decided I needed to move so I could watch the trail she had been on better.

I knew the Old Man said, time and again, that once a hunter took up a stand, he should stay put and not go chasing deer around as if he could catch them on foot. But I figured that if I had stayed in my original hiding place, I never would have been able to find out if the deer I had just seen was legal to shoot or not. I had been too buried in the trees, and she had been partially hidden by the lava piles. I decided that if she had been on a trail that deer used regularly, I would need a different spot to watch from. So I left my log and sat down on a small knob of lava with a couple of little jack pines blocking me from the direction of the Old Man and the others.

I hadn't been in my new spot for more than fifteen minutes when I heard someone shouting. It was Deke. "Buck! Buck! Yon' he go!" This was it. A buck. And coming right at me. My heart pounded in my throat. I crouched lower against my lava pile, straining to hear and see around me with all the sharpness I could muster, but I didn't see or hear anything. Then I did hear him—thump, thump, thump, bouncing along but not running full out yet. I slipped my gun off safety and prepared to shoot, but I still couldn't see the deer.

Suddenly, I heard another thump coming from over near where I had been sitting. I whirled to my right, gun at the ready, just in time to see a big, white butt bounce right over the log and between the two trees where I had been. If I had still been there, he would have had to run over me to get away. But I didn't have time to shoot. I saw just a glimpse of his rump and that was all. He was gone. My chest throbbed. My palms sweated. My legs trembled. The buck had come all right, but I had goofed. Shit! Shit! Shit!

Instantly, it seemed, the Old Man and Deke burst upon me in my disappointment and confusion.

"Did ya see 'im? Why didn't ya shoot? Which way did he go?" the Old Man demanded, excited and puffing.

"He come by here?" Deke panted, looking around wildly.

I didn't answer at first, not wanting to admit that my moving had cost us a buck. Deke plunged back into the trees. The Old Man spun toward me. "What happened? Why didn't you git 'im?"

"We...well," I stammered, "I...I was sitting over there," pointing to the log, "and then I moved over here. I heard him first, but I couldn't see him. When I looked around again, all I could see was his tail going over that log." I had blurted out my error.

I listened to my ears roar. I licked my lips and swallowed hard. I dried my palms on my pants legs. I wished I could disappear.

Deke returned from having circled fifty yards out toward the road. "He gone now, Doc."

The Old Man didn't answer.

"You sure it was a buck?" I asked Deke, hoping to deflect some of the attention from myself.

"Sho, Man. He was standin still wit his head in one a them lil' trees when I first seen him. Then he moved an I knew he was a buck. I don't know how many points he had, but he sho had a rack. A big devil." The Old Man strode over to the log I had pointed out.

"You were sittin here?" indicating my log.

"Yeah," I confessed, "and then I moved over there." He was looking for tracks in the dirt. He moved away from us toward the road. Deke and I followed. Willis and Unca Billy rushed up while the Old Man searched around in the red dust. They both spoke at the same time.

"Bub's down yonder wit Smitty," said Willis gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb.

"We heard y'all hollerin so we come runnin," said Unca Billy.

"I seen a big buck, but we didn't git no shot at 'im," Deke explained.

"Aaww" and "Shoot," said Willis and Unca Billy, again in unison.

"What happened?" from Unca Billy.

After a pause, I replied, "I moved," wishing that I had announced my own death instead.

"Here's one set a tracks," my dad called from across the road, "buck tracks. Great big ole hoof prints and dew-claws."

"There's a doe track," Deke pointed out.

"Reck'n they both musta crossed the road goin thata way," Willis thought out loud.

"I saw the doe. She was huge. That's why I moved," I pleaded.

"Where's the truck?" demanded the Old Man, heaving a big sigh, so outdone he was speechless. I led them to it.

Driving us to pick up my brother and cousin, the Old Man opened up. "Well, that one would've made two. An that one was a big one. I done told you guys an told ya, once ya git on a stand, ya got to be still an stay put. If ya see a deer, you'll have plenty time to move so ya can make out what it is an shoot." My mouth was still dry and my feelings were on the floor. No one else spoke. "But you, Mister Smarty-pants, you had to move 'cause ya saw a doe. I bound ya Bub woulda done what I said an stayed in one place." Lucky for me, Bub wasn't there to hear him, but that one did me in. I felt my eyes running over with tears I couldn't hold back. I looked away, over the tailgate down the road through our dust cloud into the darkening lava beds.

Bub and Smitty climbed aboard, wanting to know what had happened. Neither my dad nor I spoke, but let the others fill them in. I kept my face turned away, feeling worse than I ever had in my life. I've endured worse pain since then, but I'll never forget how absolutely desolate I felt on that long, sad ride back to camp.

The old Baker place was cold and dark that night. We stumbled mechanically through dinner, and no one told jokes or sang. Bub wisely gave me plenty of room. The others, too, moved around me as if I were a long-lost leper. The Old Man stared off into space. I moped around in a deep funk. At one point, Unca Billy complained,

"We got to git some game, mens. We got to git this stink off of us."

Who was he to talk after killing a spike, I fumed to myself. He was a pain in my ass. I wanted to kill him.

On his way to the latrine, Willis stopped at the fire where I sat feeling sorry for myself. He said quietly and earnestly, "You look lak the boy what dropped his biskit in the dirt wit the ser'p side down. I shore know how ya feel 'cause I felt that way lotsa times. But hold yer head up, Satch. Like yore pa said, stuff lak that happens when you huntin. An I b'lieve him. He's one of the best men I ever knew. Maybe the best. Here I am poor an not even colored, but he invited me on this trip. An jes huntin and bein here with all you good brothers has made me feel a whole heap better. Like family. I should be jes fine by the time we go back home. You'll feel better too once we start gittin some game. Jes you watch."

I appreciated his concern and was glad he was feeling better, but I couldn't afford to acknowledge it. I especially didn't need to hear anything good about the Old Man. I shrugged his hairy hand off my shoulder and continued to mope.

I went to bed uncomforted. Bub tried unsuccessfully to keep from gloating. I could see it in his face. I bristled like old Smokey the cat whenever he came near me. He finally moved aside and waited while I fluffed up my sleeping bag and pillow before climbing into his own bag.

Smitty sympathized quietly with me. "It's all right, Satch. Ain't nobody born knowin how to hunt. They have to learn it, and that means makin some mistakes. Your old man acts like everybody oughta know everything, like he thinks he does. Remember how he treated me that day up above that manzanita patch? That's the way he is. Burns me up, too." His words touched only part of my suffering, but I appreciated his effort.

"You mean the day you got lost?" Bub broke in.

"You shut up!" I snapped at him.

"Shoulda done what Dad said," he came back, at last able to rub my nose in my error. I raised up to hit him, but was stopped by the Old Man's growl from his tent thirty feet away.

"You guys shet up and go to sleep. We got to git some a these deer tomorra."

I laid back down, burying my guilt and my grief, along with my head, under my pillow, and tried to go to sleep. But I never sank

into deep slumber. My mind was filled with images of big bucks bouncing lithely over logs and stepping silently around lava cones. I got up tired and grouchy the next morning.

XIV

By then, we had spent nearly a week roaming that entire section of Modoc County—the timber high on the mountains, the heavy brush and manzanita on the hillsides, the mullein-covered plateaus and the lava beds. We had hunted hard for long hours. True, we had made some mistakes, but mainly we had hunted intelligently. We had started out wanting only mule deer, but we had been reduced to taking the smaller blacktails if they came along. Five days of walking and waiting, climbing over logs and crawling through brush, and finally changing our tactics, had all gone for naught. The two bucks we'd missed out on, along with Unca Billy's spike, stuck in the middle of everyone's mind. The Old Man's hopes of Bub's and my getting a shot on our first trip seemed dashed. But we still had another full week to hunt.

The next morning, Saturday, Smitty spotted three bucks loping across a small clearing in the timber. Before the Old Man could skid the truck to a complete stop, the pandemonium started—such noise and commotion I'd never heard. Like the end of the world. Unca Billy was the first one off the truck. He was down on one knee beside the road, racheting the lever of his rifle so fast it sounded like a Gatling gun. The rest of us joined in as soon as we could. All of our high-powered rifles going off at once created so much smoke and concussion that after firing one shot at the biggest deer, I put my gun down and covered my hurting ears with my hands, leaving it up to the rest of them to get us meat. I don't know how many bullets we zinged up that hill, but I do know that when we finished, the ground was littered with spent shell hulls, everyone's ears were ringing, and the smell of gunpowder hung heavy in the air.

When the yelling and shooting were over, the smallest of the three bucks, a hundred pound blacktail forked horn, was left scooting around on the ground. He was shot through the front legs. His goat-like bleating was all pain and fear.

Smitty saw the deer was down and hollered, "I got 'im! I got 'im! I got 'im!" He laughed proudly. Seeing that the other bucks had got away, the Old Man said to him, "How you know you the one that got him when all of us were shootin at 'em? Man, any one of us coulda hit that deer."

Smitty angrily mumbled to himself about the Old Man thinking he was hot stuff and bossing everybody around, looking to me for support. I was suddenly so relieved of the tension and sense of failure I had been feeling, so caught up in the thrill of the kill, that I almost missed what the Old Man said. He bragged, "I knew if we hunted hard and right, we'd git some game. I don't hardly ever git skunked in Modoc."

I wanted to side with Smitty, as he had with me earlier, but I thought the Old Man was right that time. I didn't see how Smitty could be so positive his bullet had hit the buck either. I knew the one shot I fired had missed all of them clean. Smitty could have missed them too. I kept my mouth shut, hoping my friendly smile would satisfy him and not make the Old Man mad. The main thing was that the deer was down. We had meat.

Everyone knew the Old Man's hunting code—"All game is divided equally, regardless of who makes the shot," and "We eat what we kill." That was good enough for me, and I thought it should have been for Smitty too. We had meat. That night there would be the traditional first-kill feast I'd heard so much about and so looked forward to—a meal of fresh deer liver which Deke called "lectric liver" because too much of it gave you the runs, fried potatoes and onions, mustard greens boiled with ham hocks and sweet stuff out of Mom's baker's barrel. I knew dinner would be just fine.

§ § § § §

Later that morning, we got a second buck, a prize, three-point muley that weighed over two hundred pounds, down among the jack pines in the lava beds. During Bub's turn on stand not far from Deke and the truck, the rest of us drove the buck right onto

him. The deer never saw Bub and walked right up to within twenty feet of him. Bub shot him through the heart. A good shot, even up close like that.

His being the first one of us to get a buck was almost more than I could stand. Damn! Damn! Damn! I groused to myself. After all, I was older. And on top of all that had happened before, it didn't seem fair. "You got lucky," I told him meanly. "You had your chance," he came back, which made me feel guilty again as well as frustrated.

I watched the Old Man to see how he was taking it. He was prancing and proud, the way he had been after outrunning the Hudson Hornet down in the valley. I finally had to admit to myself that I had flubbed my first chance at a kill. In the end, my relief at having game in hand overrode some of my bad feelings toward my brother.

Amid exhilarated pats on the back and loud bragging, the Old Man let Smitty tag the little one, and Bub put his tag on the big one he killed. Unca Billy strutted and postured as if he had killed both deer. Tears and grief forgotten, Willis, like Minnie Pearl from the Grand Ole Opry, was "proud to be there." We field-dressed both deer right where they had fallen. Since Deke knew all about slaughtering and butchering animals from hunting experience and from growing up on a farm, he did most of the work. The rest of us watched, careful to stay out of his way, and helped out when we could. As usual, The Old Man supervised. With both deer, Deke followed the same procedure, precisely, almost religiously. It had to be done the right way.

Kneeling in the dirt and pine needles, working deliberately, reverently, Deke took the musk glands from the hind legs. Then he raised the tail and inserted his knife up the butt near the rectum and cut all the way around in a circle allowing him to pull out the penis and the bladder with the intestines a little later, making sure not to spoil the meat. The early morning sunlight splashed down through the trees, sprinkling the rocks, and bathing the lifeless animals and the silent men in a golden pool. Next, Deke opened the belly with one long cut from the crotch up to the rib cage. At a nod from him, Smitty held the head up by the antlers while Bub

and I each grabbed a hind leg and spread the carcass open. Deke pulled out the entrails, leaving the liver inside.

The pile of guts on the ground steamed and stank. I wasn't squeamish, really, but the stench made it hard for me to think about venison liver, or chops and roasts. I recalled the Old Man's rule about eating what we killed, nature's way, and decided that I'd be ready when the steaks were served. So regal and lithe when alive, the deer looked small and pitiful lying dead on the ground. After draining the black blood around the wounds out, we hoisted the bucks onto the truck which Willis had pulled up close to take them back to camp. Deke was bloody up to both elbows, and his overalls had a stain on one knee. Once we got them loaded, Willis said, "Good lord. That wasn't no job fer no childern, was it?" Everyone laughed in general good feeling.

We rode along happily. Somewhat recovered from his shame, Unca Billy came up with another one of his stories. Looking from his gerry can seat over his shoulder at the four of us riding in back with the deer, he opened it with his silent laugh, and said, "They claim a ole bull an a young bull was standin up on a hill eatin grass. They looked down 'cross the fence an seen a bunch a heifers grazin in the nex field. The young bull stopped eatin an got to lookin at them heifers, an lookin at 'em. Then he say to the ole bull, 'Hey. Look at all them fine young heifers grazin down there. Don't they look good? Les you and me run down there an jump that fence an mount one of 'em.' Ole bull, he didn't even stop eatin, didn't never even look up. He jes say, 'naw, son. Naw. Les walk down there an go through the gate an mount 'em all.' From the sizes of 'em, look like we got us a young bull an a ole bull here." Everybody laughed, and I looked down into the truck bed at our two bucks, feeling proud.

At camp, after skinning them out, we wrapped them in cloth game bags to ward off birds and rodents and laid them on the ground to cool out. We'd hang them up before going to bed. We had meat. The odors of blood and musk lingered in my nostrils for hours. Bedlam still rang in my ears, and I kept seeing the first deer we got scooting around on the ground. I kept hearing him bleat. I wasn't sure why, but I wanted to be quiet and alone for awhile, so

I walked off down the hill to where the creek crossed through the culvert under the road and looked for tadpoles.

After we got the bucks all settled, the Old Man decided we should go into town to call the women since we'd already been gone from Monterey for nearly two weeks. He had originally thought to go in on Sunday, a day on which those Christian brothers didn't hunt, but our good luck caused him to change his mind.

"I feel like celebratin," he said. "Les go into Lookout an git some ice cream an pop an stuff. Smitty an the boys can take the deer down to Nubeiber tomorrow to git 'em validated an put in cold storage."

"Amen," echoed Deke, and the rest of us also thought that was a good idea.

§§§§§

Smitty and Unca Billy decided to stay in camp. Smitty claimed he wanted to rest and read for awhile, but really he was still in a bit of a huff after his run-in with the Old Man about who had hit the forked horn. Unca Billy, still not fully recovered from his own failure, offered to stay and keep him company. So we five headed out about one in the afternoon, figuring to be back in camp before dark.

When we got onto the truck, the Old Man repeated his regular warning.

"You guys be sure to unload your guns. You can hold some shells in your hand or put 'em in your pocket. It's against the law to have a loaded gun in a vehicle, an I don't want no mo trouble with Jack Heater. Fact is, I don't want no truck with him or any other game warden they got up here. If we see another buck, we'll have plenty time to load our guns. Back there at three buck hill this mornin, Unca Billy loaded and emptied his gun twice." Since, despite his killing the spike, Unca Billy usually couldn't hit a Brahma bull in the butt with a two-by-four—as the saying goes—everyone laughed. Deke chimed in, "I guess Unca Billy figgered if he didn't hit one a them bucks, he'd at leas shoot a hole for him to fall in and break his neck."

No one else mentioned anything more from or about our previous encounter with Jack Heater, but the Old Man's mentioning

him just gave voice to what I was already thinking. Since he obviously still had Heater on his mind, I guessed everyone else did too. I felt my stomach muscles tighten from some apprehension about what might happen in Lookout. Most of my guilt and resentment were gone, but I still envied my brother for having already killed his buck.

The sunny day was hot after the early morning chill. The warm afternoon breeze carried the fresh smell of pines and biting, volcanic ash on its light drafts. With the windshield laid down flat over the hood, the truck resembled a great, flat bed we rode on. The plume of red lava dust it kicked up rose away in back of us like a rooster tail behind a high-powered boat skimming across a lake, despite the fact we were doing only ten or fifteen miles an hour. Whenever another truck or car loaded with hunters passed, the Old Man smiled and held up two fingers, showing how many bucks we'd killed, and pulled over to the side of the road to wait for their dust to settle before moving on. We rode toward town, enjoying our success and keeping an eye out for more deer, because the Old Man said that when you hunted, you hunted all the time or the deer would catch you with your britches down.

Whenever we went in to buy supplies or use the telephone, we took that old logging road. I still remember that the red dirt road from White Horse, two miles below our camp, ran straight as a string through the lava beds and made its dusty way twenty-six miles to the little town. I can see it as clearly as if I had traveled it just yesterday.

We rode on toward town, feeling good and checking out any quick movements we saw in the brush or trees. Once, topping a small rise in the ground, we stopped to glass some deer which turned out to be a doe and a spike buck. One more point and we'd have had another one. I thought it was good Unca Billy wasn't with us.

When we got going again, the Old Man said, "Well, brothers, at least we got somethin to make the gravy stink." Deke grunted his assent. From his place beside Deke, Willis asked, "Where you reckon them two bucks we missed went, Ref?" Deke answered for him, "Man, them deers is long gone clean outta the country."

"Naw," disagreed the Old Man. "Deer are animals of habit, like cattle. They'll bunch up and forage right around the same area until they eat up all the food or get spooked bad enough to move out. The woods are pretty well disturbed, but I don't 'spec they went too far away." "Well," Deke laughed, "after all that shootin we done, them two mus still be runnin out 'cross that prairie down yonder by Nubieber." Another laugh.

Willis put in, "I 'spec we orta break day Monday on top a that hill where we seen 'em at. Then if we don't do no good, we can move on down an work the jack pines or manzanita. We know they's game there, an they'll probly brush up on them lower hills during the hot part a the day." Not only had Joe Willis stopped crying and sniffling, he had begun to assert himself a little. "You may be right," conceded the Old Man, and that seemed to fix the plan for our next hunt.

Things got quiet. Everyone was thinking his own thoughts and looking forward to the next kill, hoping he would be the lucky one to get a good shot at a nice buck. Passing through alternating sunny and warm then shady and cool areas along the road was like going through doors into room after room. Deke started nodding in the seat beside the Old Man, who drove slowly and silently. I propped myself against the back of his seat and stared off at the strange lava formations. Only a few groups of hunters passed us, so we had to pull off the road to let their dust settle just once in awhile. Bub stretched out on his bench, cradling his rifle in his arms, and everyone seemed comfortable for the ride into town.

Suddenly, Deke said, "Hey Doc, les don't stop in Lookout. Les go on over to Nubieber. It ain't all that far. We don't have to put up wit no mess like that Jack Heater gave us the other day."

"Naw," the Old Man argued. "He gave us a hard time that day, but Nubieber's almos another twenty miles, round trip. And he's liable to be gone by the time we get to town."

"What we gon do if he ain't?" Deke persisted.

"Then we gon make that monkey treat us right," my dad answered. I wondered what he meant by that. In my mind, I went back over what Heater had done to us, and I wasn't surprised at how hot my anger at him still was. I was also still pissed at the Old

Man too. He should have told that bastard off, or something. Like I did that clown at the drive-in back in Fall River Mills. He wouldn't have had to slug Heater or give him the finger, but he should have done or said something instead of just ducking his head and taking it.

"Peckerwoods like that make me mad," Deke went on, sounding like Unca Billy. Obviously, the more Deke talked or thought about the incident, the madder he got. "Well, les quit talkin about it. Talkin don't help. Les jes go on about our business," the Old Man concluded. I agreed with Wi11is and Deke—we should do something, go on to Nubieber. Something. I didn't want anything more to do with Jack Heater, but I figured the Old Man was being stubborn and proud again.

Then, as if involuntarily or as if he were talking to himself, my dad asked, "I ever tell you about what happened to us one time back home?" No answer. "One time, me and Mama was drivin across East Texas in a old '34 Chivvy I had. We was on our way back to Fort Worth to pick up the boys from my mother's house. We'd been down past Tyler on the only cotton pick we ever went out on together."

He paused for a moment, then went on. "Outside of a little town called Edom, Texas, a cop stopped us. Fact of business, it was two of 'em. They came down the road toward us an turned around so they could stop us, like Heater did. They had they guns out when they got up to my car. They made me stand with my hands on top of the car while they patted me all over to see if I was armed. Lot of Nigroes carried knives in them days. Dallas specials. Then they searched my wife an the car. One of 'em said, 'C'mon, nigger. You goin with us.' They left mama in the car parked beside the road an kept a gun on me all the way into town. Musta been six or eight miles."

He exhaled heavily, remembering. "They got me to the jail, put me in a cell an told me to wait. In about an hour, they brought a white woman back where I was, an one of 'em asked her, 'Is this the nigger bothered you?'"

"'Naw,' she said, 'I never seen that man before.'

"'You sure this ain't him?'

"'Naw, I don't know this man. I never seen him before.'

"'One of 'em just kept on after her.

"'You say the word, an we'll fix this nigger good. You sure this ain't the one?'

"She told 'em again, 'This ain't the one. I done told you I never seen this man in my life. Now how come you don't leave us alone?'"

The Old Man pulled the truck over to the side of the road, got down and took a leak beside the front wheel. His going reminded me that I, too, was in a tight. I stood up and peed over the tailgate into the red dust, not wanting to get down and delay the story. The Old Man took a long time. He blew his beak nose between his thumb and forefinger, wiped them on the seat of his pants, farted loud and got back in behind the wheel. I wished he'd hurry, but he fumbled a bit before getting the truck back onto the road.

"They took the woman an left," he went on. "I could hear 'em arguing up in the front. I waited an prayed. One of 'em came back after a few minutes an told me, 'nigger, you better be glad that woman didn't say it was you bothered her, 'cause we woulda fixed your butt good. Now git on outta here, an we better not ketch you hangin 'round here again.'

"He took what money I had before he let me out—all our cotton-pickin' money, 'bout a hundred an twenty or thirty dollars. I walked out to the edge of town and tried to thumb a ride, but no one would pick me up. I had to walk all the way back to my car. Mama was scared 'cause it was dark by then an she was by herself out there on that road. She had the doors locked an' was cryin', but she was all right. We drove on home to Fort Worth. Got there with less money than we had when we left. I think we had four or five dollars."

I'd heard lots of the Old Man's stories, but never this one. From the silence following it, I judged that none of the others had either. My stomach felt sick and my arms and hands tingled. I glared at the back of Willis's head, thinking about the Old Man's story and about Heater. Willis fidgeted around on his seat, but didn't repeat his "Press a Lord," thank goodness. The only sound was the truck's motor as we moved along the road.

After what seemed like a very long time, Deke asked hesitantly, "Well Doc, you didn't never fine out what had happened to the woman or why they picked you up?"

"No," my dad answered. "I didn't never find out any of that. All I know is what I told you."

He never said what his purpose in telling us that story was, like he sometimes did when he was trying to teach Bub and me something. Clearly, though, somehow the story related to our experience with the game warden and was somehow important to my dad.

§ § § § §

The road broke out of the jack pines and lava beds and washboarded into some low, brushy hills, which it circled and climbed over before swinging through a wide curve into the little town. As the Old Man stopped the truck by Jack Heater's gas pumps, I noticed Heater's Ford backed up alongside the store, facing the street. "Oh shit," I thought to myself. "What next?" Deke jumped down and worked the pump handle to gas up the truck. The rest of us, following the Old Man, climbed onto the wooden sidewalk, our boots making a lot of racket, and thumped up the steps to the door.

The inside of the store felt different from the country—the mountains and the lava beds. It was cramped and disorderly, like Bub's and my room when we had thrown things everywhere instead of putting them away. Things were scattered around as if the storekeepers had forgotten where they were. Bare bulbs on wires gave only wan light. I had to dip and duck and step over stuff. On the left-hand side facing in was an unlit meat case containing a few dry-looking steaks, several thin porkchops and a mound of brown, crusty hamburger. Across the room, stingily stocked shelves held the remainder of their contents not spilled onto the floor: canned foods, bakery goods, cereal, sanitary pads and fishing tackle. Other items were thrown into cardboard boxes scattered here and there. Piles of clothes and boxes of boots and shoes were stacked under the windows and along the front walls. Farming hand tools, like bunches of wooden and steel bananas, were tied together and hung on ropes attached to hooks in the ceiling.

Back of the counter was a lighted cooler full of beer, wine, dairy products and a huge jar of pickles. Jack Heater stood there staring at us. The mass our bodies added to the clutter in the room seemed to make the walls bulge. The air felt close and thick. Flies droned lazily through it as if they were swimming against a current. The woman, Heater's wife, was nowhere to be seen.

Heater nodded. He kept his eye on us as we moved around deciding what to buy. Bub grabbed a bag of potato chips out of one of the boxes and started eating them.

"That'll be twenty-five cents," the warden-turned-grocer snapped.

The Old Man took a handful of the chips and spoke up in an edgy voice, "I'll pay for everything when we finish."

I can't explain what came over me, but somehow Heater struck me as funny. Maybe he felt nervous with all those black people and one white man in his store. Maybe he thought we'd hurt him or steal stuff after he had harassed us back on the White Horse road. I didn't know. But he made jerky little movements like a marionette, and his eyes kept darting from one to the other of us. I broke into a giggle and quickly covered my mouth with my hand. Bub elbowed me in the ribs. The Old Man froze us with a glance, and an uncomfortable, silent moment went by.

Brother Willis began digging around for his size in a pile of wool socks up in front. Bub and I started looking through the glass counter, picking out some goodies for our pockets. Bub liked Beeman's pepsin gum, so he chose four packs. I put half a dozen bags of cornnuts on the counter. I liked to fill my mouth with them and eat them one at a time, like a squirrel eating acorns, while I was on a stand during the hot, dry, manzanita and lava-bed afternoons. I liked their nutty flavor, and the salt on them tasted good even if it did make me nip at my canteen too often. The Old Man silently put things onto the counter. Eggs, onions, bread, a couple cases of pop, ice cream, coffee, tooth paste and toilet paper. Maybe a few other things. Bub's potato chips, by then only an empty bag, and Willis's socks joined the pile too.

There were quite a few things, so Heater needed a few minutes to run up the cost on his worn, manual adding machine. He

surprised me by asking the Old Man, "How much gas you get?" I didn't think he'd noticed Deke gassing up the truck. Willis hollered out the door, "How much for gas, Deke?"

"Six dollars." Everyone heard Deke's answer. Heater surprised me again by taking Deke's word and simply adding six dollars to the total. He said,

"Twenty-eight dollars."

Without hesitating or saying anything, the Old Man took out his wallet and gave Heater a hundred-dollar bill. I was standing close to him, so I could see some twenties, tens and other bills in his wallet. I knew the Old Man had brought along plenty of money, but seeing him sport that c-note, with Ben Franklin staring off it plain as day, surprised me a little. Heater paused, his hand out in the air, then he reached for the money. He dropped both his hands below the counter, trying to examine the bill on the sly. Then he looked up at the Old Man. He moved slowly. The tension built as if it grew up out of the floor.

In the sticky heat, sweat beaded Heater's upper lip and trickled off his red face. "Ain't y'all...ain't y'all boys got nothin smaller?" he asked quietly. The Old Man did a controlled half-turn toward Brother Willis. Willis embarrassedly stammered, "Ref, I...I only got twenty dollars to my name." His words reminded me of Mom's thinking of Willis as a "po paddy." She was right about him. The Old Man looked toward the door, but Deke was still outside at the truck. He knew Bub and I had only a few bucks in pocket money.

After a moment, Heater cleared his throat. "Whyn't y'all come back tomorra? I'll have more cash in the till then," he pleaded. It was the Old Man's move. I was sweating almost as much as the warden was. The Old Man faced him squarely again, scowling down from his height. His voice was strained but soft when he finally spoke, "You mean you don't have my change? The stuff we bought cost a good part of that bill I gave you." Heater shrugged his shoulders. He mopped his face with a handkerchief like those in the pile at the front of the store. Then he swallowed audibly, his eyes darting around. The Old Man began looking past him into space, and I knew what that meant. Jack Heater couldn't figure it out, but I understood that his gaze into the distance meant he was pissed.

His anger was about the change all right, but it was also about a lot more than that—Heater's bugging us back there on the White Horse road, what happened to him in Texas, and probably about stuff the others of us had no idea about. The Old Man waited a moment more, then he said, "Tell you what. You know us. We been up here huntin deer in Modoc County every year since these boys of mine was young. Now they're old enough to be here with us. This is their first season, an the youngest one killed a buck this mornin. We're camped at our regular spot at the old Baker place, an we come in an outta Lookout every few days. Let us have this stuff on credit, an we'll bring you the money next time we come in. Or, if you want to, you can stop by our camp while you're out in the hills an I'll pay you then."

He hesitated a moment, thinking. Then he said, "Better yet, since we're shoppin in your store, why don't you drop my change off by our camp some day while you're out? I won't need the money, an I can trust you to bring it."

Heater seemed confused. He looked dumbly from one to the other of us. Then, running around the end of the counter, still clutching the hundred-dollar bill, he barked, "Y'all wait a minute." He broke for the door so fast Joe Willis had to jump out of his way.

I got to the front window just in time to see Jack Heater, head down, scrambling up the street as fast as his short, fat legs could carry him. Bub ran out onto the porch and cackled, "Boy, look at that joker run."

The Old Man checked his watch. Sensing his anger, Willis wandered off toward the front of the store and pretended to be interested in the merchandise strewn everywhere. I stuck close to the Old Man, anxious to see what would happen next. Jack Heater's exertion had spread his musk about the room. I could also smell the wildness in my own clothes—sage brush, pine resin, gun oil, solvent and sweat. The Old Man always said it was good for a man to stay out in the hills awhile and get real gamey before he went back to town. He never said so, but I felt he meant it was good to go out there and get tired and dirty to know how to appreciate town and home.

We waited a few, tense moments and then heard Bub yell, "Here he comes, and he's really runnin now." We went to the front of the store. Heater was charging back down the street toward the store. I guessed the little post office-bus station was empty, and the way he was swearing back over his shoulder toward the café told me that no one there had had change. I thought to myself, here it is the 1954 deer season, the high point of the year around here, and no one in this one-horse town can change a hundred-dollar bill.

When the warden came up beside Deke sitting in the truck, he kept right on going. He didn't even slow down. Turning around the hood of his car, he saw the Old Man standing up on the porch. He hollered, "Got to go to Nubieber. Y'all wait here." Then he jumped into his old Ford and tore off up the road. His car bounced hard when it hit the dirt road at the end of the paved block. It trailed a dust plume we could see rising into the high sky as he raced across the plain to the next little town. I had to hand it to Heater. He tried hard to do the thing his way.

The Old Man shrugged slightly and said, "If he'd rather drive twenty miles than bring us change or give us credit for a few days, it's all right with me. We can wait."

I called down off the porch, "Did you see that, Deke?" Getting down off the truck giggling, and coming up onto the sidewalk, Deke said, "Yeah, I seen it. Heard it too. What he say, Doc? 'Y'all wait here. Got to go to Nubieber,'" and he put his head down, hunched his shoulders and stretched his arms out in back of him, fingers spread wide, imitating Heater's desperate haste. Watching Deke, we all started to crack up. Willis laughed,

"That was perfect."

The Old Man relaxed a little and started to chuckle. Bub and I sat down on the steps on one side of the porch, laughing and shoving each other, partly out of fun and relief, partly because we were already bored with waiting.

The Old Man and Deacon Carl went to the phone booth and called home to Monterey. Bub and I talked to Mom, and he told her about killing his buck. I told her I hadn't gotten mine yet, but that I would. I left out the part about missing a buck because I had moved. Then he and I walked the half block to the end of

the pavement to throw rocks at tumbleweeds with the slings the Old Man had made us. Willis sat down on the running board of the truck, waving to the cars that passed every now and then. The air was cooling off, and I watched a long, slender arrow of a cloud move slowly toward the big mountains. It was a kind of clock timing Heater's errand.

In about half an hour, Bub looked up and shouted to the others, "There he comes," and headed back to the store. I followed after throwing a few more rocks. We were milling around the truck and up on the porch when Jack Heater came roaring back into Lookout. Red dust whirled up the street.

He drove right back into the space beside the store and slammed to a stop, not bothering to turn his car around the way it had been before. He leaped out, a sheaf of bills in his hand. He looked around wildly for a moment, then rushed up the steps into the store. The Old Man waited a bit, then said, "You guys stay here at the truck," and went inside behind the game warden now storekeeper.

Quickly, in about three minutes, he came out, a large bag under each arm. He had a grin on his face. We climbed onto the truck. As we pulled away, Deke asked, "Git your change, Doc?"

"Sure did," answered the Old Man brightly, "an fresh, hard ice cream too."

Deke said, "You didn't have no change, hunh, Doc?"

"Well," the Old Man began slowly, "the way I see it, if a man opens a business, he oughta have change for whatever anybody gives him or be able to make other arrangements mighty fast." Then he broke out laughing. The others did too, but I didn't.

While they were laughing, I pondered what had happened. I had seen the smaller bills in the Old Man's wallet. Did he know I had seen them? He never let on. He hadn't really told Jack Heater a lie. He had just kept quiet, his anger turned into something else. The point I got was that you didn't always have to hit folks over the head or push them around to make your point. If you had the goods on your side, all you had to do sometimes was nothing. Just leave them alone and let them step into the cow piles on their own.

But was that what he should have done? What would I have done? It was clear that "true" and "honest" are often different. Had my Old Man done the "true" or the "honest" thing? I wasn't quite sure how I felt about the rightness of what my dad had done, but I was sure that I felt a lot better toward him than I had earlier back on the White Horse road.

The Old Man drove briskly back along the washboard road through the low hills on the way back to camp. The sun was going down, and the air was cool. The light had started to take on that glow that settles in before those cold, dark, Modoc nights. Everyone was relaxed for the ride, not even pretending to look for deer any longer. Every now and then, Deke would say, "Ain't y'all boys got nothin' smaller?" or "Whyn't y'all come back tomorrow?" and we would crack up.

The lava formations loomed up in their odd shapes and eerie colors in the fading light. The whole area felt like a moonscape through which some unimaginable, prehistoric creature had walked, sinking into the lakes of steaming, mushy lava, making mounds and domes, squishing nobs up between its toes, its heels imprinting holes and valleys in the mud. The truck motor's hum blended in with the early evening sounds of birds going to roost and animals settling in for the night.

Lounging comfortably in the bed of the truck, legs stretched out, feet propped up on the bench, gun resting easily on my chest, I felt fully peaceful for the first time in days. My dad had showed us one way to make things come out right, even if that didn't happen quickly or when you thought it should. I looked out through the jack pines and back down the road at our dust cloud, by then brown rather than red, and listened for the old Indians' songs through the trees. I thought to myself that the Old Man had been right about one thing. It was good for a man to stay out in the hills until he got good and gamey. I poured a handful of cornnuts into my mouth, ate them one by one, and looked forward to the first-kill feast waiting for us back at camp. And I knew that at some point and somehow I'd get my buck.

XV

"CARTER, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? You're driving over eighty," Claudia says, her tone of voice and her using my given name shocking me to attention. Jesus. I hadn't noticed. Guess I wandered off. The kids are riding well and I don't need to get Claudia all ticked off. She already claims I drive like my dad used to—too fast too often. Better ease off a little.

More relaxed after getting my attention, she asks, "Do you want to stop by the church first, Hon? You mentioned last night that you might want to do that. I can handle the kids for a little while."

We're passing Fort Ord, and I can see blue glimpses of Monterey Bay whenever we top one of the sand hills of the Peninsula. The white houses of Monterey are like doll houses spotted around in the oak and pine groves, and Highway One looks like a gash cut over the crest of Carmel Hill. I can smell the ocean air. I discover I'm strangling the steering wheel, and I have to consciously relax my stomach muscles to breathe and answer her. I take a couple deep puffs of salty air. I stare straight ahead.

"Honey? Carter?" I've forgotten to answer her. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Aww...I don't know, Babe, I don't know. Doesn't seem to be much use, but I could check up on how they have him set up. I'll drive by, and if there aren't a lot of people there yet, maybe I'll stop in for a minute. But I can't take long. I need to get on up to the house for Mom and Bub."

"Take your time, Hon. You have a right."

Goddamn, I love that woman. What she knows, how she feels. I just sigh, "Guess so."

Fremont Street looks like always, just as it was when I left here yesterday. Bright, hazy sunshine. Stores and cafés open. People on the streets. There's a garbage truck. Gas stations are busy. No one seems to know why I'm here, what I'm doing. A line from a Stephen Crane poem crosses my mind: "A man said to the universe, Sir, I exist. No shit? answered the universe." Something like that. Life goes on, right?

The funeral's still three hours away, so the only car at the church is the hearse. Parked right in front. Its back doors are wide open, and out from them a maroon carpet runner goes up the stairs into the building. Looks like a shiny black whale, its great mouth gaping, its long purple tongue sticking out and disappearing into the church. Later, the limousines will file in behind it. And my father.

I pull off Fremont to the side of the church and park in the space under the sign reading "Reserved for Pastor." As I get out, Claudia stands the baby up behind the wheel where he goes into his driving game. "Ooootnnh. Ooootnnh," he growls, his version of how a car engine sounds, and turns the wheel back and forth with his chubby little hands. The other kids scramble out to move around.

The sun is bright outside, but the inside of the church feels cool and is dark. Funereal. A recorded organ hymn carries the heavy fragrance of flowers all over the auditorium. Flowers of all kinds—roses, carnations, gardenias—are everywhere. On the pews, in upright stands, covering the pulpit, draped all over the casket and trailing out to the sides and down the aisles. I know every inch of this room.

I used to sit right over there in the second pew after Sunday School. I played that very piano for the bishop when I was eighteen. Claudia and I stood right where I'm standing to recite our wedding vows. Here's where the Old Man proudly christened Baby Booker, his namesake. Now it feels like some place I've never been in before. It's so quiet. No clapping hands. No joyous songs. No shouted amens.

The coffin's bronze surface mottles through the flower trellises in places, even darker shadows in the already dark room. The white satins and silks caressing him seem like clouds. His black, turned-

around collar contrasts with his billowy resting place. His skin is ashy, but his face looks natural, at peace. No hint of the awful, wrenching moment that brought him to this final repose. God! What must that have been like? Did he suffer? Was he afraid? My dad, all right. Guess I do look some like him. Mom and Claudia think so.

I wish I could sit down with him for a few minutes, but there's no place to sit close. Doesn't seem like twenty-five years have passed since we made that first Modoc trip together. College, graduate school, the symphony, marriage, kids. A lot of things in some ways, not many in others. Years and events rolled by fast, like river waves curling downstream from one shore toward the opposite one.

"Well, Old Man, I thought we'd come to such a place as this someday, but not so soon. I sure wasn't ready for it. Were you? Somehow, I thought it would all be different. You used to call our house and say to Claudia, 'Hi, baby. This is your reverend father-in-law. Is the doctor home? I thought he might want to go to Los Banos duck hunting.' Or, 'Think you guys can steal a few days to run up to Lake Almanor trout fishing?' Back then, this moment seemed like only the threat of a storm. She'd laugh at your calling me 'doctor,' and wonder if you were teasing me about how old-time, honky-tonk, folks used to call musicians, especially whore-house piano players, 'professor.' But you liked the symphony's recordings of music I wrote."

I'm filling up and breaking down, so I back away and sit down in the first-row pew to get a hold of myself for a few minutes. Sitting there with the bright sun streaming in the windows is a little like it was sitting on a shady stand in those ancient hills where we went year after year.

Over the years, Modoc became symbolic to him, and to me. It became part of the neighborhood of my life. Lookout, the Baker Place, White Horse, the Egg Lakes—all of that country became as familiar to me as downtown Monterey. We took many a nice buck out of that country. Being in that vast, wild and powerful place—the first time and the last as well—watching mere men hurl themselves against those mountains and those volcanic remains, and dreaming of what happened to the people and things that preceded me there

seemed to bind me to the earth. And living through those hunting rituals and patterns reinforced my sense of order in the world, gave solidity to the core of my being, like tracings along my nerve paths. It must have been the same for my dad, for it was out in the hills and fields that he was most himself.

There he was most at ease, most clear about the nature of the world and the proper place of humans in it. I don't think he ever knew it, or would have admitted it, but he really was a kind of Pentecostal deist, strange as that may sound. Nature was God to him. The farthest he would have gone would have been to say that out in the wilds he was most in touch with God's handiworks.

I've hunted deer in Modoc County many, many times. At different times, various ones of the old party have gone or not gone. Willis moved away to somewhere down in the Mojave Desert, Unca Billy died of cancer, and Deke's high blood pressure forced him to give up such strenuous activity. I never saw Jack Heater again—he transferred to somewhere else, retired, or died, I suppose. But the Old Man, Bub, Smitty and I continued to hunt in pretty much the same places and ways.

I've kept returning to the sensations, attitudes and insights I encountered on that first trip. I've continued to observe my father's life, and my own, and how men relate to each other and the world, partly through the lens of that early experience. And when I look at my daughter, and my two sons, I understand that my dad faced the central question all parents come up against: how to teach their children what they know and what the children might need to know without violating the children or themselves; how, as the Old Man often put it, to enable ones' children to grow upward from ones' shoulders rather than repeatedly slogging through the same mud on the ground.

"Set your sights high and then go for 'em," he'd say.

I remember when I was asked to apply for the assistant director's job at the Symphony. I was uncertain about leaving the faculty at State to take the position. Claudia wanted me to do it. Mom said, "Do what's best for you and your family." He drove up on a Thursday afternoon and stayed for dinner. Sitting back from the table drinking coffee and giving sips to Michael on his lap, he said,

"I don't see how come you can't make up your mind, son. You say the money's good an conductin an composin are what you always wanted to do. What else is there? All them years a school an all the strugglin y'all did. You done stuck to it this long. What else you been workin so hard an long for? I can't tell you what to do no mo, but I sho would do it if I was you."

That's largely what he was about—sticking to it. Hunting, work, religion, no matter. Stick to it. I went after the job and got it. First black symphony conductor in the Bay Area, first in the whole state of California, for that matter.

As I've gotten older, and according to Mom more like him—proud, I guess—I've sometimes caught myself asking, "Would the Old Man have done this? Am I acting like him or like me?" I've given different answers at different times. I've decided that he was right about Heater, the money and all of that, but he wasn't right about everything. And I needed him to be right about everything back then. No, that's not it. What I really needed was for him to show me that what he was like was possible for me.

How long have I been sitting here? I can hear car doors slamming outside. And voices. As I get up and move back over to his coffin, I notice how cold and clammy his skin feels, like the clay he would say we're made of.

"I guess this is it, Dad. These tears, and this snot are for you. And for me, too. They are both thanks and promise. I don't have your ramrod stance toward life, or your piercing eyes, or your moral lessons, or your Bible-bound rigidity. But I have my own stuff, along with the memories—the stories and the humor and the gentleness—and all the rest that you gave me. You always struggled toward things that were bigger than you were. Higher goals, you called them. I guess I do that too. I expect that sometimes I'll feel you looking over my shoulder. But that'll be okay. I'll just go ahead and keep doing what I think best. I'll keep on going after the big stuff."

Well, I'd better get on up to the house now. Mom and Bub are going to need me.