

A Sonoma Afternoon

The school bus braked and he said goodbye to his friend Ernie and to Sam the driver, then hopped down and waited as the bus drove away, throwing up a small shower of dust. He crossed the road to the track towards his uncle's house. It was hot, what his uncle working in the orchard would have called a 'fat day', where the air swelled around you like a warm bath. Here the forest was sparse and the sky was cloudless and the light was albino pure; the boy thought of what he would have to drink when he had walked the half-mile to the house, picturing the bottle of lemonlime soda he'd find on the refrigerator's top shelf.

At Truebridge's shack of a house, the old Impala was parked just off the track, but Truebridge himself was in the hospital down in Petaluma – and Uncle Will said he'd probably never get out. The track curved and entered a mix of woods and brush. Here the sun moved in and out of the branches of the overhanging cottonwood trees, casting only intermittent rays of light through the few holes in the lattice-like arrangement of the leaves. A blackbird whistled sharply over to his right, and closer to the track something rustled in the fern beds – snake maybe, and he moved along quickly.

When he came to the final bend, he saw his uncle's pickup truck in front of the house, as well as an unfamiliar car, a maroon Camaro with black trim, parked awkwardly to block the back of the truck. The front door of the house was hooked open as usual, but where normally Ellie, the collie mix, would come out from under the acacia tree to greet him, now there was no sign of her.

As he came through the open door he called out, 'Hi, I'm home,' but no one replied. He went to the kitchen and got his drink out of the fridge and drank half of it at once, straight from the bottle, then went and stood in the big open room by the stone fireplace while he finished the rest. The mail was on the dining room table and had been opened; there was a credit card bill lying on the table.

He walked through the kitchen again to the back door, at this time of year only a screen door, and stood on the new deck he'd helped his uncle build the spring before. He listened but heard nothing, so he figured his uncle must be in the Valley Orchard, probably showing his visitor around. Maybe it was the county agent, the boy thought, though that wasn't his car.

He came down the steps of the deck and took the path through the rhododendron and hydrangea bushes until it opened out in front of the frog pond. There was no one there or in the barn, where he stopped in the doorway and called out, so he walked through the small patch of pine and eucalyptus woods until he came to the start of the Valley Orchard – the bigger of the two sections of apples, it stretched for almost forty acres, first down then up, with views in the distance of the higher hills, almost mountains really, of the northern part of the county.

From the rise he could view the whole orchard, and his uncle wasn't there. He wondered whether he might be in the Back Orchard, which was a long slog away, but just then he heard Ellie bark, way back near the pond. And he thought the greenhouse. Of course; his uncle was in the greenhouse, showing off his latest Gravenstein grafts.

But that didn't make any sense; the greenhouse was the last place his uncle would want visitors.

Now the boy tried to walk quietly as he moved back towards the greenhouse, straining to hear the dog again, but knowing that noise would be deadened here in the small section of dense woods and undergrowth. He left the path and took a shortcut through the woods until they gave way to grass on the far side of the pond, which ran on the left up to the greenhouse and the hill it backed against, and on the right back around towards the house. As he came out of the trees he saw the end of the greenhouse bathed in the honey-gold of the afternoon sun and he slowed down right away when he saw his uncle talking with two men right in front of the greenhouse door.

The other men were both tall, taller than his uncle, and one wore black cowboy boots and a showboat Stetson stuck on his head; the other was noticeably broad in the shoulders, with thick forearms sticking out of a short-sleeved shirt he wore which was bright canary yellow.

He had seen them twice before, most recently two weekends earlier when Maris had decided to take him shopping in Healdsburg for a new pair of sneakers. On their way out they passed another vehicle, which had pulled off the sandy road at Truebridge's and waited to let them by. 'Who's that?' he'd asked, and Maris had replied, shaking her head, 'Beats me. Must have come to see Will. Pickers maybe, looking for work.' The men had been driving a pickup truck instead of a Camaro, but he knew it was them because he recognised the Stetson.

Although Will was facing the boy, his attention seemed focused entirely on the two men. They all seemed to be talking and gesticulating so aggressively that the boy realised they were not so much talking but arguing. Ellie was sitting next to his uncle, panting a little as she always did in the heat. She must have caught the scent from the boy because she lifted her head up, wagging her tail furiously, and barked happily, then began to trot towards him. His uncle called to the dog, then looked the boy's way and saw him, just as the men turned around and saw him too.

And his uncle shouted, 'Run, Jack! Run!' And the man in the Stetson turned back to his uncle and suddenly lifted his arm and the boy saw that he held a gun in his hand. It looked like a shotgun and had twin barrels, but they had been cut down to virtually no barrels at all.

There was a flash of light, even in the brightness of the afternoon, and immediately after it came the noise of the gun firing. Then his uncle's chest exploded into a scarlet mess, as if half a gallon of paint had been thrown from close quarters right against it.

Suddenly the slow and humdrum passage of the day was gone, gone forever, though at first the boy almost laughed in his astonishment and part of him wanted to shout, Hey! Let's see that again, as if he could watch a video replay. And the boy stood for a moment, completely immobilised, as the man turned and said something to his friend, and both men then stared across the length of the pond directly at the boy, and their intense regard somehow penetrated the bubble of disbelief the boy was frantically inflating against the reality of what he had just witnessed and there! the bubble burst,

and he at last broke out of his stunned inertia and began to run just as the man in the Stetson starting running towards him, carrying the amputated shotgun in his hand.

And as he raced down the trail towards the house the boy heard another shot, the same kind of boom he recognised as the cutdown shotgun, and he knew they couldn't hit him with buckshot at this distance – he must have had a hundred yards head start – so why were they firing at him? And then he realised that they must have shot Ellie, too, for he heard no barking now.

He headed for the house, thinking, the phone the phone, but there was no shortcut which only he would know, just the path all the way around the pond, then past the rhododendron bushes, and it was here that he realised from the noise behind him that the man in the Stetson was gaining on him, gaining fast. He'd fired both barrels but it wouldn't take him long to reload – unless he already had. The boy would still be dialling when the Stetson man caught up to him.

So as he came out of the bushes heading for the back door he was furiously thinking gun, one of his uncle's shotguns in the gun case next to the fireplace. As he leaped up onto the deck and scooted straight through the back door into the kitchen, he stopped and hooked the screen door shut just as the Stetson man came out of the rhododendron running full tilt towards him. Absurdly, his hat was still on, and the boy saw he had a moustache, a thin line, which looked slapped on above his tight lips, pursed now in a look of controlled and steely determination. And the boy turned and ran into the dining room, where he saw the remains of his uncle's lunch – he'd had a sandwich, the boy somehow managed to register – on a plate on the table, and he got to the gun case, a big mounted cabinet with a glass front, and pulled at its door. It was locked.

There was no sense of unreality now, but rather of a reality accelerating out of control, where his thoughts could not keep pace with the presented danger and his actions lagged accordingly. He heard the man shaking the back door, pulling at it, and panic suddenly came in one vast wave. He looked wildly around him for a weapon, but what good was an ashtray to him now, what would the poker by the fireplace say to a loaded gun? And when he looked out the front window he suddenly shivered and his right arm oddly, erratically started to shake, because the man in the yellow shirt had circled to the front and any minute was going to find the front door wide open and would come right in. The boy felt something warm and wet at the top of each thigh, and understood that he had pissed himself without even feeling his loss of control down there.

Panicked, he ran in some wild counterintuitive stroke back to the kitchen, only to see the man in the Stetson yanking with maniacal vigour at the back door. On the counter there was a cutting board with a fat cylinder of hard salami. Next to it lay a butcher's knife on its side with a streak of cold salami grease smeared on its wide moon blade. Just then the Stetson man finally managed to open the screen door, ripping it half off its hinges, holding the cut-off shotgun in one hand. As he came in and started to raise the gun, the boy grabbed the knife and, stepping forward, plunged it up deep and straight into the Stetson man's chest.

The boy saw the man's arm fall downwards and the gun point towards the floor, and he looked up at the man with apprehension and relief. The Stetson man's mouth opened in a large silent 'O' of surprise, and he fell straight backwards onto the floor. The gun crashing onto the floor made more noise than the man's body, for it was a body – the boy knew before the man hit the floor that he was dead. And before he could do anything other than register the fact, he heard noise in the dining room behind him and then a shout: 'Walt! Where are you?' and the boy stepped right over the dead man and the knife protruding from his chest and ran out through the open back door.

He was on the wrong side of the house, away from the road, away from passing cars, away from help. He was running without thinking, praying that the man in the yellow shirt would stop for long enough to check on his friend and give the boy the head start he would have to have if he were going to survive. They'd killed his uncle and he knew – there was no reason to think otherwise – that they were going to kill him, too.

Running away from the house brought him to the pond and a choice of paths. He took the left side of the fork, which led to the orchard, but within twenty feet realised he had made a mistake. For the path went through a mixed stand of Douglas firs and oak but then suddenly opened out into the expanse of the Valley Orchard, where there was nowhere to hide for its mile of sloping – first gently downhill then more sharply uphill – apple trees. He'd be visible throughout the few minutes it would take the grown man to catch him.

He should have gone the other way, past the greenhouse and onto the rocky rise from which he'd always shied away – rattlesnakes were there in abundance. But by the greenhouse he would have had to run past the body of his uncle.

Instead he would have to hide somewhere right around him in the copse, and he left the path and ran towards the tree house in the middle of the wood. The brush was light here; if he tried to hide beneath the ferns he would get caught, since he'd leave a trail as obvious as the crushed beds of sleeping deer. He needed to get off the ground, he needed height.

The tree house had been built by his uncle, in the nexus of three large Monterey pines. The boy climbed up the biggest one, using the two board steps his uncle had nailed to its trunk. As he pulled himself up and stood on the pine planks that served as the tree house's bare floor, he paused to catch his breath, hanging on to one of the three walls his uncle had fashioned out of packing material, standing beneath the roof of two plywood slabs, pitched at an angle to meet and form a gable.

He stood still, listening for any noise from the man in the yellow shirt. But his heart was pounding so hard that his pulse thundered in his ears. Grabbing onto the outermost edge of this roof, the boy swung out and hoisted himself onto the roof itself. Without hesitation he stood and leaping up caught hold of a large bough that intruded from a neighbouring pepperwood tree; swinging his feet up, he lay with his back vertical against the big pine tree and extended his legs along the two contiguous branches of pine and bay. He knew he was invisible from the ground – even his uncle hadn't been able to spot him here. It was his hideout on those occasions when he wanted a solitude the house could not provide. Usually he came here out of nothing

more serious than a desire for private play, but on the rare occasions when he was upset, this was his refuge. Yet now he did not feel safe at all.

He forced himself to breathe slowly and tried not to move his legs as he slowly shifted his arms and chest around so he could peek out – towards the perimeter of the woods, since anything closer was blocked from sight by the tree house roof below him. But as he slowly swivelled he heard a faint crackling in the part of the woods he had just come through, and he kept his head down now, and listened. Sure enough there was another crackle – like a bag of potato chips being crumpled – then silence. The birds had suddenly gone quiet and the boy was certain the man was in the woods below him. And then a voice fractured the unnatural hush.

‘I know you’re in there.’ The voice was harsh but high-pitched, sounding strained. It chilled the boy, literally, as if a sharp cold breeze came suddenly out of sun to make him shiver.

The voice softened slightly. ‘You might as well come out – there’s nowhere to go.’ It paused, then added, ‘Nothing is going to happen to you if you come out now. I swear.’

Cross my heart and hope to die. For a brief moment the schoolboy familiarity of the words and the mellowing of the voice caught the boy off guard, since he was unprepared for cajolery. He almost lifted his head up until he appreciated this for the insanity it was, mentally kicked himself, and tucked his head even further into his shoulders.

‘Listen,’ the voice continued in its effort to charm. ‘I know we can sort this out. But we can’t do that until you come out, now can we?’