

Part 1-Buck Hale

He chose to live out here. He is old; not ancient. He has barely survived a failed marriage and resultant suicide attempt. Barely. Twice he loaded his Remington 870 Wingmaster, placed the barrel in his mouth and his right big toe at the trigger guard and waited for courage. It was the second time, while acting this idiocy out, that it dawned on him that what he was doing was pure cowardice. Not just cowardice but, worse, selfishness. Sure, he was as far down spiritually as a man can get but there were others who loved him. That recognition of others love for him dictated his fate. Putting the shotgun away his mind flexed back to alternatives. The alternative which he finally accepted with a stamp of his minds approval brought him to this place, this time. He finally figured that he may as well die out here as anywhere else.

His name is Buck Hale. Mr. Hale is 68 years young and could care less about expediency or caution, medications or any other contrivance of civilization as pertains to the stereotypical labeling of a man his age. Buck is, in fact, fed up with all things people. Sure, he needs people in the form of a store to buy food and, when he feels like it, to take a bath or shower; once in a while. And, were you to ask him, his health improved a month after he left the city! His meds are no longer needed as they once were.

Buck makes his "home" in the Sierra-Nevada mountains on a back and forth continuous loop between Kirkwood and either Murphys or Markleeville. In these three towns he has friends for which he works when his whimsical journey takes him to one or the other. He works their property with a love which is tangible. He is accepted for who he is and what his life style is; a virtual vagabond. But a vagabond with great intelligence and a love that radiates from him so that all who meet him are warmed into friendship with he and his manner.

Buck is expert at fishing with only a hand-line (4 lb test monofilament rolled on a small, green pine twig (carefully enough that it never tangles), small, #12 barbless hooks, brass, and grasshoppers or, when push comes to shove, salmon eggs This spot on the Stanislaus river he has fished since a young man of 23 and, as far as he knew, he was the only one who knew of it.

Here the river issues out between grey, granite canyon walls in a cascade of white water which falls over twenty feet, boiling over the boulders of granite shed from the canyon over millennia and is just 11 miles west, outside of Markleeville. It's hell to get down here but even at 68 years he is fit enough to climb in and out. There is, in fact, a method to his madness. You see, he intends to die here if God and fate will allow. It is the spot where he feels most at peace. A peace that many only dream of. A peace that is between he and his maker, his maker and the maker's creation. He feels the hand of God while standing knee deep in the Stanislaus; naked as a jay bird. In this place he is humbled by the creation and intrinsic beauty that surrounds him like a cocoon.

Buck is a skeptic of timeline's when it comes to science. Their timeline of human existence, it seems to him, disregards other, older versions of human history. If, he once posited, mankind is millions of years old how come his greatest leap in technology came just a century and one half ago? Why not the bronze age? And, if man was advanced in those days, why did his technology falter and disappear so quickly; in the historical sense. The Antikythera mechanism was reputed to be 2000 years old. So, he reasoned, the concept and building of machines had to have started much earlier. After all, the gear was the first practical application of physics and math so why did it stop there?

His mind tended toward the religious and he had spent many years of his life attempting to collate the differences between science and religious belief. In other words, where

was the confluence and where were the branches. Archaeology, it seemed to Buck, gave too much credit to carbon dating which, he had become aware, was often taken for granted while dismissing or ignoring historical fact.

Scripture told him that history, as cited in that book, was often relegated to the trash bin by science; which led him to believe that science might very well be on a crusade to create its own historical treatise while not using every reference available. Now, however, really honest archaeologists are in the beginning stages of recognizing epochs of change. He had read of a group who were looking at the science while attempting to correlate the Bible at the same time. One particular item they took to task was evolution. It is recognized while, at the same time, is challenged, not so much by Bible scholars, but by the Earth's geological record itself. Long hidden by evolutionists is the evidence that each epoch did not end by creatures evolving, rather, that time ended in cataclysm. The geologic record, looked at objectively, shows no "evolution" of species. It shows that species died out relatively suddenly and completely. In an instant instead and not over millions of years which would have allowed for Darwin to be correct.

This, then, is the mind of a man set free from societal norms and politics. A man who had it all and ultimately gave it up after the ruin of what he held most dear: a marriage.

It was out here in the Stanislaus national forest wandering to and fro from Kirkwood to Markleeville which brought back his mind but only after more than a year of deep, abiding depression. This is where our story begins.

Buck Hale-Part 2-The Canyon

The climb down into the canyon was never easy. Even for a young man of, say, twenty-five it would have been tricky. For Buck, and his sixty eight years, there was no pretense of bravado. He picked each step with care mindful that one misstep would quickly and easily send him plunging to his death. And that death, if not instantaneous, would be a long, bitter and painful exit. Dying alone with infection from broken bones was not Buck's idea of a vacation well spent.

No, Buck was precise during his descent. Once at the bottom he found himself in his much loved and singular, if not rugged, paradise. There was only one thing to do now. He quickly shed his clothes and standing, as he stated it, "With ass, dingle and balls in the wind!" plunged into the pool formed by the cascade. His "dingle" instinctively cried "holy shit" and fled into shrinkage as the cold water immersed it and Buck. Even before he surfaced there was a smile of abandonment on his face. The complete extraction of civilization pulled out of him like a tumor. The extraction for which he had so long craved. Heaven on Earth? He wasn't sure that it was but it was certainly the next best thing. Whatever "it" was "it" was right. There was no wrinkle of wrongness in this. Nope, not an iota of evil or awkwardness or restriction. Freedom. Plain: and simple.

For nearly an hour Buck swam, dived and splashed like a three year old. When he dove he spotted Rainbow Trout gently fanning the sandy, rocky bottom as pyrite glinted in the sun's rays back to the sky. When he surfaced he would yell at the top of his lungs and listen to the echoes fading in ever more silent repetition; like a passing freight train disappearing in the distance. This was home. This was surcease. This was natural exhilaration as God meant it to be when He created us. At least, that's how Buck saw it.

Eventually, he got out and grabbed his bar of biodegradable soap from his backpack and bathed. Even with biodegradable soap he was cognizant not to over-do the lather. It didn't sit right with him watching the suds float down and away from him. Just enough soap to rid the smell of three days hiking and then he laid out on a rock in the sun to dry.

When he had first arrived in the forest he had not known what to bring along. so, of course, he had brought everything he could think of including a Coleman cooler and lantern. Freeze dried food of every variety and three novels to wile away the time. Before long it became quite apparent that, in the forest, there was little time to wile nor was it practical to have a lantern or cooler or even three novels. It wasn't a month before he knew that paring down his supplies was a necessity. Almost instantaneously his pack shrunk for 55 pounds to 40 pounds. That left him grinning and shaking his head and also made life a bit more bearable and hiking nearly a breeze. Three weeks in he had become a backpacker and the heaviest thing in his pack was his old Svea 123 stove. The Svea was a godsend of practicality. A little self-contained brass cylinder about 4 inches round and 6 or 7 inches high which took white gas; carried in two pint containers. He had even managed to keep the pin to clean the orifice along with the handle and cup. The complete stove weighed less than a pound but sounded like an espresso machine when fired up. It's staccato roar when lit was comforting and reassuring as tea, water or coffee (freeze dried) was brought to the boil. To Buck this little invention was a thing of inestimable beauty of both design and function. Besides which, there were no fuel canisters to carry and, worse, to have to haul around empty until they could be properly disposed of.

A peculiarity of persona was his knife. He wanted a folding hunter with a case but, because of said peculiarity, decided on a Schrade rather than the one which carried his first name. He wasn't sure why this was but it had worked out well if not

a bit of an odd reasoning. He didn't want to be mistaken, if found dead years later, for the inventor of said blade. It made little sense and Buck knew this but went with it anyway.

The afternoon was getting on as Buck noticed the sun dip behind the canyon wall, His familiarity with time and no watch told him that it was right around 3:30 in the afternoon. Time to set up camp, gather firewood for the evening and see what he was going to have for dinner. Over the past few months he had been running low on freeze dried food and had made the decision to try polenta as part of his diet. Watercress, Sierra style, was his main vegetable and he found it almost everywhere on the river's more quiet eddies.

Once the fire was lit and burning nicely he warmed himself, cooked his polenta with a touch of cinnamon and pinch of salt while chewing on water cress and drinking Darjeeling tea. It was delightfully quiet and still once the Svea was shut off with the first stars peeking through just above his head.

He had pulled up a log carried here by the last winter's storms and laid his head against it just looking up at the stars as they glimmered on and drifted off into thought. The quiet was absorptive, calming and peaceful as only being in the forest can cause them to be

Buck Hale-Part 3-Long Nights

His suicide attempts, like an unwanted guest, slammed into his mind. Raucous and swearing, raising the dead with memories of the lead-up to his attempts.

He lay on his side, head cradled in his right elbow, pondering the day when he was jolted to wakefulness. Sleep had almost conquered when the devil of causation reared up and swatted away any hope of rest. Suicide. What had he been thinking?

He groaned, "Not again."

Pandora laughed, *"Yep, did you think I'd let you rest? When so much enmity still resides in that thick, moldy, sawdust-crammed skull of yours! Keep kidding yourself, junior, I'm way ahead in this race! I'm opening the box again just for you!"*

Rachel!

The last thing he needed, lying here under a star-filled blackness were thoughts of Rachel. As the Big Dipper's star's turned from ladle to smirk he groaned again. "Shit!"

He got out of his bag, threw three more logs on the fire, and rummaged through his pack for the Svea stove. Putting it between his legs to warm it and get the gas vapors going, he brought out his tea and resigned himself to a sleepless night. The cup soon came to a boil and, putting his tea canister in the hot water, careful not to touch the blazing hot cup, went to sit on a boulder; half in, half out of the river. The Stanislaus minded its own business as it rambled past showing little concern for Buck's dilemma.

He had met and dated Rachel in college during his last semester as a senior. Nothing had come of it for her part but he was instantly enamored of her charms and quirky personality. It was the type of friendship, he figured, that would last until either or both got married; when societal mores would normally settle in and put an end to communication. In retrospect, Buck supposed, that would have been for the best...had it happened that way. It did not.

It was almost three years later that he got a phone call from a number he did not recognize some time close to one in the

morning. More than half asleep he had slurred into the phone, "Thishiz Buck." It was Rachel.

"Buck, I know it's been a long time but I need to come see you."

Buck sat on the edge of his bed with the stupidest grin on his face any man could muster. "Sure" was all he could muster..."When?"

It wasn't two days before Rachel came to his apartment. There ensued a three day, mattress pounding love fest which ended with the drunk couple on a plane heading to Reno, Nevada to get married.

The marriage lasted two months short of 11 years when Rachel came to him and announced that she was pregnant. His joy was overwhelming until she matter-of-factly announced that the baby wasn't his and that she would have her lawyer call him to have the divorce papers signed. With that, she walked out of his life.

The deflation wasn't immediate. No. It took a few weeks for Buck to go through every unrealistic fantasy about Rachel coming back to say it had all been a big mistake and she still wanted him and would love him for ever and ever and she was mortified by her actions. That didn't happen. In reality, he never would see or hear from her again.

Sitting on the rock, half in and half out of the river, head slumped over, he mused back to that incident. It had been almost twenty years ago but the ache, shock, and emotional repercussions were still able to hold court over his emotions no matter how hard he tried to forget. When these memories burst through his guarded doors they took no prisoners. It was every man for himself.

The first suicide attempt had come a few months later. Unable to cope, his business was sliding down hill and his emotional

condition was an empty cloth sack which used to be a pillow. The feathers of memories lie around his life like so many dead dreams.

The shotgun was in his mouth for a full thirty seconds when he made his mind up NOT to pull the trigger. Or, more properly, push the trigger as he took his right big toe off of it. Unfortunately, the removal of his big toe went slightly awry pushing the trigger down rather than sliding smoothly off it. The report of the shotgun was deafening and left him hard of hearing in his left ear. It also blew a hole 9 inches wide in his ceiling. The only good thing to come out of this was the ceiling above was also the floor of the upstairs apartment. Made out of poured concrete the shot flattened harmlessly upon impact.

Nevertheless it woke his upstairs neighbor who called the cops, who broke down his door, and arrested him. The trip to the station was an adventure in the surreal. The interrogation was brisk, commanding and to the point. Buck used the bromide that he was cleaning his gun and it just went off. The cop told him that guns don't "just go off" after having his blood drawn to see just how drunk this pecker-head was.

Four hours later, a sober and in-shock Buck grabbed a cab back home. The next morning he made a point of going to apologize to his neighbor which garnered him only a diatribe of inflective curses centering on his having sex with his mother. A thing which, essentially, had never occurred to Buck to participate in. Nope, Not in a million years!

The result of all of this was deepening depression which, a month later, led to a car ride out of town; shotgun in the trunk. He drove down a dirt road he'd never seen before. Stopping he got out of the car and sat on a log which was handy and tried again.

Shotgun in mouth, check. Toe on trigger, check. Again, he

thought better of it. After putting the gun away in the trunk of his car his mind clicked over like a stuck gear tooth which finally breaks its bind against another gear tooth allowing the machine to resume forward progress. It was then that his mind opened to a reasonable possibility. "Fuck THIS!"

Buck Hale-Part 4-Dawn and On

"Lord, what was all that about?" was all Buck could think. "For all intents and purposes, all I've been doing is carrying around a stinking turd in a sack tied to my neck all this time."

Then he laughed. Laughed long and hard at himself and how obtuse he had been all these years. Rachel had been no good. Plain and simple. No lost puzzle pieces or psychological deviance here. She returned him nothing for his emotional investment and that was the sum, total of this whole affair. Shit! What a maroon I've been.

Besides, he grimaced, I've got "Three Nut bridge" to cross tomorrow. Now, that's something to be concerned about. His reference concerned a narrow length of the Stanislaus over which a fallen tree, about three and a half feet in girth, bridged the gap at around 19 feet from the rocks and water below. It was narrow and physics dictated that the river sped up greatly through this narrowing; the combination of which, height and speed, made the crossing dangerous. Of course, add to that the 40 some pounds of back pack and the picture became less rosy. The span itself was equal to the tree's height from the river; about 20 feet. Someone, long ago, had taken what looked to be an adz and removed the bark and about an inch of

the top of the log; making it slightly less rounded. Still, it only gave a platform plus or minus 6 inches for a foot's grip on life. A fall from this bridge was about 96% fatal, Buck reckoned.

Buck had named this "Three Nut Bridge" for reasons having to do with courage. The first time he happened upon it he had spent an hour and a half looking up and down stream for another way to cross. Striking out he had come back to sit and contemplate his fate. He said to himself, after a good amount of time, this is going to take balls to walk across. He figured he could sit astraddle of it and shinny his way across on his butt; six inches at a time but the video playing in his mind; grown man with 50 pound pack struggling on his ass, hands between his legs, to cross a log didn't sit well. He had walked across it that time like he was walking on broken glass. Toe first, carefully test as he lowered his arch and flattened his foot. All the time, hand out, waving up and down like a tight rope walkers. It didn't help that his pack was not evenly loaded. It pulled which ever direction he shifted his balance overcompensating his every move. It had taken 15 minutes to make the first crossing. He figured if there was any positive it was that the height off the water eliminated spray and moisture. If he slipped it was because he was a klutz. He wouldn't slip.

Now, though, he had spent an emotional and sleepless night. He rolled out of his bag feeling like he'd been "rode hard and put away wet" and, holy shit, pretty happy that he's finally gotten a monkey named Rachel off his back; for now at least. Wow, the realization sunk in. He wasn't depressed this morning! Holy Hannah, it's sunny and cool. The river sounds like the voice of an old friend that I just met after years of not seeing and, he chuckled, the old friends got a couple bottles of Makers Mark 84!

He prepared a quick polenta breakfast, ate quickly, and packed his backpack. This time he packed very carefully, wrapping his

tent line again and again around the body of the pack. No shifting this crossing, he murmured. Finally satisfied, after undoing and rewinding the line twice, he started up the cliff saying goodbye over his shoulder to his spot on the river. After 20 minutes he picked up the trail and headed toward Three Testicle Bridge. He knew it would take at least an hour from here.

The forest quickly closed in around him like an old comforter. He knew individual trees like the old Ponderosa pine with someone named "Charles Hannity-1896" carved into its bark. As he walked he pondered the age of this forest.

Archeologists claim that the Sierra's had seen human habitation since 9000 B.C. That number seemed incredible to Buck but research he had done seemed to support it. The interesting question that came to Buck's mind was: which race? Was it people from Siberia? Mongols, say? Or...? He'd probably never know but the thought of this place being experienced in so distant a past was intriguing. Why did they leave where they came from in the first place? Did they travel across the ice bridge from Siberia or come up from South or Central America?

The time passed quickly as he perused the cabinets and files of his mind concerning this wondrous forest. Before he knew it he was heading down the lightly worn path to the Three Nut Bridge. The trail sloped down a bit before the bridge so that it was hidden by a slight rise before it. Cresting the rise he looked down through the pines and rock and there it was: Three Nut Bridge; all twenty feet of it.

Taking his pack off, he took a quick look at the log bridge checking for damage or change. Wouldn't do to start across and have it crack and fall. Or, more likely, dislodge itself from where it had sat all these decades if his weight suddenly prompted a shift. Everything looked as it always had. The river could be heard slamming rocks caught in its current

against the boulders of the little gorge. Music of destruction, he thought. In more ways than one if anything goes amiss.

Slinging his pack back on he fastened the straps as tightly as he could and still breathe. Slowly, one step at a time he climbed over the snags of roots left on the old trunk. Once past those obstacles he was on the tree itself. This is where his footing was most secure. From here on, the bridge offered only the 6 inches of adzed pathway which, as he looked at it he caught the gorge through his peripheral vision, vertigo affected him just enough to cause a light headed hesitation while he checked his balance.

A deep intake of breath and he looked to the far side. Only twenty feet. Yep, in twenty feet this will all be over and done. Hitching his courage he set his right foot and strode forward with his left, setting it down firmly. A glance down told him he was now on the edge of the gorge. From here on he would be out over the gorge with the river bashing stones below.

What are the odds I'll slip and fall; the query entered his mind unbidden. One in a thousand came the answer, also unbidden; causing him to falter. Yeah, but who knows which sequence the "one" is in today. Could be sitting near ten or leap frogging over the numbers and sitting near nine hundred fifty. Shit, it could be right here and now.

Shaking his head, he cursed to himself. Snap the fuck out of this. He took another step. Now, he had nothing below him but river and boulders, white water and crunching stones. He looked ahead at the carved path he had yet to tread. Was that a sag in the middle? Was this old tree sagging? If it is it's gotten weaker. Oh shit! The thought of turning around bit like a snake. Yeah, just an easy turn around to safety. No! Get a fucking grip!

Another thought reached out and pulled his muscles taut. Is God going to strike me here for saying “fuck” so many times? By now he was frozen. He had to calm down. What would Rachel say if she saw me like this? “DAMN IT!” He cursed loudly enough to break the tension. If I just run across this’ll be over! No, stay cool for heaven’s sakes. Cool. Yeah, be cool and one step at a time just like a recovering alcoholic. The “alcoholic” part did the trick. With a grin he moved forward. One step at a time.

The deep sigh was indication enough that he had mastered himself, finally. Stepping off the other side he looked back from where he had come. What was that all about? It took not a second to realize that the whole episode encapsulated one sleepless night and one disturbing realization after another upon waking from his brief repose of an hour or two. Now that he considered it, he felt he was more than a little fortunate he hadn’t panicked which, though out of character for him, wouldn’t have surprised him had it happened.

He looked down into the chasm at the water and shuddered. So close, yet, so far away came to mind. Oh well, he thought, time to move. Time to go into Felix’s territory.

Buck Hale-Part 5-Felix

Buck had trekked three miles uphill since the Triple Nut Bridge. As he started he was again given the peace of the forest cathedral as it closed in around him on the trail.

Sugar Pines and the occasional Ponderosa of massive girth set the table for his emotions. He knew of the Creator by His

works and wondered that so very many poo-poo'd this belief. He supposed it was their loss because he saw the love and critical thought that went into all he could see surrounding him. The complexity and interdependence of one species on another was in no way a monumental accident or an accident of evolutionary intent. Or, so Buck reckoned.

With a sigh of reverence he trudged on up the trail. This trail was not on any topo map. What Buck had done was to spend the time on his hikes following game trails to see if any were sufficiently long enough or wide enough to allow his passage. It was what a person with no deadlines can do and he did it with a religious fervor. Eventually, he had found connections enough to find his way through on his own trail. A trail unknown to all but the animals which used them. In one way he had considered it a safety measure in that he couldn't get lost if he had an intimate knowledge of where he was; even off the main trail. He had done this with map and compass over many months, and numerous dead ends, which required retracing and then finding a new access. It hadn't been too long until he wove a short cut of game trails which took time off his march. In fact, he had discovered before he lost his watch, it cut almost a full hour off his trek although it did require stepping or climbing over falls and snags the foresters never had knowledge of.

Buck was headed, eventually, to Markleeville. Well, not to Markleeville proper but to the Herndon ranch about 4 miles out of town, west. He had known Geoff Herndon and his wife Sylvia since before he made his exit from society. They had been friends for some 25 years and had purchased this plot of 250 acres shortly after Buck had met them. He supposed now that their purchase of the land might be the genesis of his conception of his getting the hell out of Dodge. At any rate, Sylvia and Geoff were salt of the earth people and Buck came here specifically to help out around the place. In return he got their friendship and a place to stay and, more

importantly, a shower and shave and a great, home cooked meal. It worked well for all parties and neither took anything for granted. It was all about friendship.

Sylvia had come from a rather simple lifestyle while Geoff was from a monied family. No matter how Buck tried, he couldn't place how Geoff and Sylvia had met. To Buck it really didn't matter. Together they were like the Rock of Gibraltar; steadfast and dependable and always there if a friend needed something. Needing something was something Buck knew little about. His life, so complicated before, was now the life of one who has conquered the fear of being apart from people. He was doing quite nicely in the forest; thank you very much. Buck had the forest and that was enough.

As a kid he had worked hard to put himself through college doing construction jobs as he could. That meant going to night school for so many courses that at one time he told a friend that he had forgotten how to sleep. It wasn't far from the truth. He got about 5 hours of sleep a day and cat-napped when he could; often in class or in a shady spot under a tree.

He was looking forward to his visit but now he saw what he had been waiting for while wool gathering on his trek. Around this bend was a granite bluff which protruded out from the mountain. The bluff itself was over one hundred feet high and overlooked the little valley northeast to southwest. He had passed the bluff many times on his pilgrimages to and fro from Kirkwood to Markleeville but the last time had shaken him to his knees; literally.

Returning from a stay at Geoff and Sylvia's after helping them with some irrigation plumbing and ditching he had been in one of his somber moods. These moods were always about Rachel, and his debacle of a marriage, when he got to the bluffs and stepped out from the trees. Thank heavens the wind was blowing from the east that day because it probably saved his life. Coming around the last turn he looked east to the bluffs.

Sitting hunched over, licking its privates with rear legs splayed out in front of it was a Mountain Lion. The clearing it was in wasn't a full 100 yards away. A distance the cat could have crossed in less than 10 seconds. Buck saw it and froze. The cat, absorbed in its bath and enjoying the sunlight of midday had not heard Buck. The wind blowing toward Buck kept his scent from reaching the cat as he was downwind. Frozen, heart racing and not knowing what to do except not do something stupid, or loud, Buck slowly squatted down and tried his best to get low behind the few brushy shrubs available for cover. He ended up flat on his stomach with the pack bearing down on him as it was full from his freshly starting out from the Herndon's place.

He desperately wanted to take it off but dared not. As it was, he wasn't sure that the cat wouldn't see it and get curious. Buck stayed quiet for thirty minutes before risking a look up the bluff. The cat was gone. Not finding it didn't set him at ease however. Not in the least. he had no idea which way the cat went and he knew very well how quiet they can be when hunting. For all Buck knew the cat was on one side of him or the other getting set to spring. He started jumping up and down and yelling. Turning 360's in the air all the while. He kept it up for a few minutes and when he finally quieted down there was no sound but a Jay squawking at him for waking it up or disturbing his berry meal or something only the Jay could get upset about.

Being in the forest is a great way to live if one can adapt to the rigors. It does, however, require a stoutness. A stoutness which, though not bred out of the human race, is something one only discovers in situations like this. Buck found it that day and knew he could live here; deep in the forest.

Waiting another thirty minutes Buck finally screwed up his courage and moved on. The cat had probably gone to higher ground to hunt, or watch, and that meant it had to go east; away from Buck. A thought of an old time cartoon leapt into

Bucks mind as he started on. Felix the Cat. Probably a 1940's cartoon as they were already old when he was a kid. Felix had been a black cat but all he could remember was Felix's angular cartoon face. Didn't matter though, the name stuck. This was Felix's territory and Buck had just made his acquaintance. Thankfully, on Buck's terms.

The good news was that Felix wasn't near. (If he was, Buck knew, he wouldn't know it anyway) and Geoff and Sylvia's place was only a couple of hours away.

Buck Hale-Part 6-Zero Hour

Now Buck was sure the cat was nowhere around. Of course, no one can be sure of such things but Buck had every reason to believe it. He was still weary and figured he would have something to eat and then, maybe, take a nap. Sleep was not a 5 hours only and then action any longer. he was tired and he knew that tired and hiking forest trails don't match up in any way but accidental. Besides, the sun was shining and the clouds he had seen were probably just a group wandering on the winds and updrafts from the mountains.

Soon, he had a freeze dried meal of beef stew in his small bowl and water from his canteen and all was good. Propping his pack against a tree he leaned back and shut his eyes. Just a catnap he figured. The forest was tranquil and Felix was doing his thing some place else. Buck could rest and let the nourishment from the stew work for a few minutes.

He awoke a full hour later, neck cramped and his left foot asleep. "Shit! You dumbass! How long have I slept?" Looking at the angle of the light over the mountains he figured he had slept at least one hour; maybe more. What bothered him more

than the sleeping were the clouds. The clouds he had seen so far away were now scudding over the peak above the bluff. That wasn't the only thing. The drop in the temperature was noticeable. Looking toward the bluff Buck saw that heavy, dark clouds were forcing their way across the sky quickly blotting out the blue and replacing it with foreboding grey. Anvils were what came to mind. What caught him by surprise was the drop in temperature. This time of year snow was rare but not unheard of which gave his rather carefree trek to the Herndon place an immediacy heretofore unconsidered. He quickly figured that he had ten miles, give or take, to get there. Whether or not this would turn into a storm of consequence was not likely but, nevertheless, it perked up the pace from a meander to a rush.

Buck had not outfitted himself for inclement weather. All he had was a pullover, rainproof parka. Little good if it snowed because he wore just shorts and a tee shirt and did not have a tent. Just his Merrill boots to give him an edge; if there was an edge to be had. The question of the moment was, "What are the odds?" The odds of snow, though almost inconsequential, was multiplied by the change of wind direction and the chill it brought. The temperature was dropping noticeably and, if he was not mistaken, the lenticular refracting from what was left of the sun was almost an assurance of bad weather on the way; soon.

Turning quickly east Buck increased his stride and quickened his pace. He intended to cross those ten miles in just a few hours rather than half a day. He knew the trail and the worst was over. In less than a mile he would pickup the Forestry Trail which was a veritable super highway compared to this. Also, he figured that he would meet other hikers and, if worse came to worst, be able to partake of some accommodation more than what he had. He knew how to build rudimentary shelter and keep himself warm but, he deemed, it would be much better just to freight it to the Herndon place as quickly as possible.

Even while he considered his options the first flakes began to fall; pushed ahead of the clouds as the sunlight dimmed and vanished. This was going to be a full fledged assault. He only hoped it would not be one for the record books.

The snow flakes were now blowing in from the northwest. Blown at a 45 degree angle from the perpendicular made it apparent the wind was steadily gaining strength. Buck knew that his sunny day with a light breeze was quickly turning into a leaden grey nightmare. He was not ready for this and he knew it. Reaching the trail he thought to start jogging but quickly abandoned that plan as he remembered that he was less than two years from 70. He felt great but jogging was something he hadn't done for years. Discretion, ever a bulwark of Buck's life, told him that walking quickly in the way he was used to would be a far better bet than trying to jog to beat the storm.

Now on the Forestry Trail he had no encumbrances to slow him down. His mild, one mile per hour trek was now boosted to three miles per hour plus. If he could maintain the pace he could make it down to the Herndon's in less than three hours which was his plan. If not, well, if not he would figure it out when the time came. For now, however, all depended on speed and care for obstacles such as roots and rocks which he knew were a part of this landscape. Looking down he saw that the snow was beginning to stick. It wouldn't be long before he was leaving footprints behind. There was no one else on the trail and, had he had a watch to see, it was eleven minutes after three pm.

Buck Hale-Part 7-The Herndons

"What time do you have in there?" yelled Geoff Herndon from the seat of his John Deere.

"Just a little after 2:00 pm!" yelled Sylvia from the kitchen. "What shall we have for dinner!"

Geoff started to yell back then said, "Oh *hell!*" to himself and stepped down off the tractor to become a bit more civilized than yelling back and forth allowed.

Walking up to the house he felt pretty good about the day's work. The fields left to mow were done and his only problem came from a brief power outage that morning. If it was 2 pm, he figured, that meant he needed to set the time-clocks that controlled the irrigation forward twenty minutes.

In the kitchen Sylvia was peering into the fridge's freezer. "Don't think it's too late to take out some venison steaks do you?"

Geoff said he thought that would be great because old Buck loved venison. "That'd be supercalifragillistic... and the rest of that nonsense." he stated.

"Bet you can't spell that," Sylvia said with a grin.

Geoff grinned back, "Nope, don't know how, don't care to learn. I have to reset the time- clock's and then I'll be in to help."

Sylvia looked up, "Buck thought he'd be here by about 3 when he called last week. Now I see the clouds rolling in. You think it's alright? Could be a late summer storm. I'd hate to see him get soaked. He probably will if it rains. He never packs enough to stay dry. You'd think he'd have learned after 2011 and that freak storm that caught him without a tent or warm clothes."

"He'll be fine," stated Geoff, "he's a grown man and he knows his stuff." With that Geoff got back to the tractor and headed out to the pump-house to take care of the time-clocks.

The pump house was a quarter mile from the main house. When they purchased the property he had a well sunk to 375 feet, The drillers had hit the aquifer and the water pressure at the well head was 300 gallons a minute. As Geoff heard one of the well drillers say, "That's enough pressure to put a man on the moon." Geoff didn't know about that scientific fact, Geoff wasn't an astro physicist, but he kind of doubted the veracity of that claim.

Driving out to the pump house the afternoon sun was just going behind the mountains. He had to stop, as he frequently did, and just look at the view. he agreed with Buck that this whole planet was no accident. Anybody who thought that had their head up their ass or was blind or just plain dumb as a rock. The meadows and fields were a rich, luxuriant green that contrasted with the granite domes and peaks of the mountains in a fine display of the Creator's handiwork.

What got his attention, though, were the clouds. From his vantage point they were light grey on their tops and an ugly, foreboding black on their bottoms. To Geoff they looked not just like a storm, but, like snow. As Geoff put it, he was going to put his worrying hat on now because this didn't look kosher to him. No, this looked like a pretty good chance for trouble if Buck didn't show in time. He looked at the sky some more remembering that, by now, it was 2:20 or so. He would wait till three before he felt he would need to make a move.

The time clocks reset Geoff put the tractor in the big metal shed where his tools, cars, and work benches resided and made his way inside. When he got to the kitchen Sylvia was tossing a huge green salad. Buck loved nothing better than fresh greens after a week or two on the trail and Sylvia didn't aim to disappoint. She had even gotten the good whiskey out wit

three glasses to toast another safe journey for Buck. She was, however, also aware of the clouds forming and made that known to Geoff. "Looks like it's getting nasty out there, Hon."

Geoff nodded, "yep, I won't start worrying yet. We'll wait until three to start worrying and worry till four. Then we'll have a decision to make."

"What shall I do with the steaks?" Sylvia wanted to know.

"Just carry on like he'll be here. We won't get upset until we need to. I'm gonna pull the Jeep around anyway. Make sure she's gassed up and check the oil."

Buck Hale-Part 8-Snow Load

Less than two miles from his picking up the pace Buck was cursing himself. Rather than a brief flurry, soon over, the storm was intensifying and settling in for the long haul. It was becoming all too obvious that Buck just might be in trouble.

The cursing came from Buck as he realized he had broken the cardinal rule of hiking the Sierras: *Be prepared! There are no constants.* Seasons meant nothing to the mountains. Though it was late September and significant snowfall usually held off until November it was certainly no hard and fast rule. Rules of weather were only for talking heads on TV weather broadcasts and even they knew better than to bet against snow at 5500 feet. The added weight of a down jacket and, perhaps, waterproof pants was less than three pounds. For the lack of three pounds, Buck realized, he may quite well become a Popsicle. *Frozen man on a stick for Felix*, came to mind as he plodded onward.

The point he was approaching on the trail now was about one mile of uphill. The change of elevation was almost 600 feet. Easy enough for one in shape as Buck but the snow was accumulating fast and about three inches lie on the ground now and was starting to pile up.

Looking ahead he knew he would have to slow his pace or risk slipping. A slip here, he knew, could be fatal. Not so much from the fall but from possibly incapacitating injury; a broken bone or twisted joint should the fall be hard or awkward. He knew he had no choice other than to slow down out of caution and avoidance of such a mishap. Add to this, he was getting chilled. The sweat from hurrying was quickly affecting his heat retention and, though he had put his parka on, it was of little help. It barely kept him from getting wet and had little to no effect keeping him warm. Cursing and shivering Buck took the incline.

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“Let’s saddle up.” Geoff had been looking at the clock which told him an hour had passed. It was now 4:11 pm. “Sylvia, grab a change of my warm clothes and two or three wool blankets. Put what’s left of the coffee in the thermos and, oh, hell yeh, grab that bottle of Jack from the cupboard.” He was referencing a bottle of Jack Daniels which he kept in the cupboard for when drinkers came over. Though not a tea totaler Geoff was not much of a drinker himself. “no telling what Buck’s gotten himself into. If I told him once I told him a thousand times not to trust Sierra weather!” It was a pet peeve of Geoff’s that Buck thought a season would be on good behavior and do the expected. AS Geoff tried to tell him, “Always take along what you think you won’t need. It could save your life up here.” Geoff knew this range of mountains after living in them for almost 35 years.

They quickly had the Jeep loaded. Geoff had equipped it with a PT0 plow on the front as he used it primarily in the winter to

get around the ranch and into town during the snow season. He rarely took it off which suited him just fine at this juncture. Putting it on now would have taken about 40 minutes. That was 40 minutes that he might or might not have.

The snow was already a few inches deep as they started out. Geoff's property bordered the National Forest and he had conceived and built a gate which was pretty much camouflaged so it was difficult for hiker's to see from the trail. The trail passed within a quarter mile of his property and early on in the 1990's he'd had problems backpackers using his fields for a short cut to town. Most were fine but the few wrecked his crops or squatted in his ditch leaving their waste for him to clean up. After a year or so he saw the light and disguised his road out with a gate made of steel I-Beams welded to a makeshift track assembly which made opening the gate fairly quick and easy. It pivoted open with the touch of a finger.

They swung the gate open and had started toward the trail when Sylvia said that she thought it was illegal to drive the Jeep on it. Geoff's reply was curt, "Fuck the law!" He figured the Feds could quibble with him after he found Buck. Not before.

###

Granite's exfoliation process goes on unceasingly over eons. The process of freezing, heaving and thawing cause separation on the molecular level forcing layers both thick and sometimes of massive width to slough off and fall where ever, and whenever, gravity and momentum chooses. Some shatter on impact, creating rocks and gravel while others haphazardly stack; leaving voids both large and small.

The pines and conifers shed their needles and the shrubs their leaves over those same eons eventually breaking down to form the soil which, in turn, allows more trees and shrubs their potential to grow The rain and snow melt had moved this earth

and gravel to form a natural concretion around the voids created by exfoliation; the aggregate congealing into large, deep holes in the rocky bluffs. Holes which, though randomly formed, sometimes provide warmth and shelter for any of the wild creatures that find them. So it has continued for centuries.

At the very crest of this granite bluff stood a stunted and precarious Ponderosa pine. Like a sentinel it stood, rooted into a cleft of granite angled between the face and the top of the bluff. A lightning strike decades ago had sheared it off. From the huge scar the tree had sprouted a new top which now stood some twenty feet from the older, scarred trunk. The new growth had forced the roots deeper into the cleft firmly implanting the weight of the tree and weakening the rock which caused an adjoining piece of granite to exfoliate and crash silently, unheard into the forest below. It had been mid-winter that this occurred and only one living thing had been aware of the noise.

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Buck Hale-Part 8-Snow Load 2

“You’re gonna catch hell when the rangers find your Jeep on the trail! Can’t you just park it and we’ll walk up and find Buck?”

The look Geoff gave Sylvia silenced her. His face was turning red and that meant that he had reached his limit for suggestions. Staring straight into the blowing snow he hit his high-beams to see farther up the trail. The hill went up from here with rocks close in. The trail was meant for walking not for Jeeps. But, Geoff knew, the Forest Service kept ingress

wide enough for trucks to get in in case of fire or other emergencies. In this case, Geoff was sure, this was just such an emergency and he'd be damned if there was anything going to get in his way. As he stared ahead he felt his tires spin for the first time. The snow was building and was now about three inches deep. He jammed on the brakes and jumped out to spin the Warn hubs for the front tires. The Jeep was an old CJ 5 with a 302 V8 and 3-speed shift. Modern day Jeeps have, for the most part, done away with hubs on the front in favor of electric engagement of the 4 wheel drive. In 1975, Warn hubs were standard on Jeeps as was the three speed manual transmission and manual just about everything else.

Hubs spun he shifted the transfer case into 4 wheel high and rammed the accelerator pedal down. The 302 roared and jumped forward like a spurred horse, throwing Sylvia back in her seat with an utterance, "Lord have mercy!"

The Jeep easily topped the hill and they were looking down on a switchback. Geoff took advantage of the hilltop to look as far down the trail as he could. Seeing nothing but trail, he shifted into first and let compression slow him as he crawled the Jeep down to the bottom. At this point, he knew, they were only a half mile from the trailhead and he guessed that if Buck wasn't here yet then trouble was exactly what he had run into.

He couldn't take the jeep as far in on the trail as he had hoped. Once into the trees it narrowed as tree trunks and huge boulders claimed their own real estate. The Jeep, small as it was, would never fit between them. Another mile and they'd be walking. Besides, much farther, he knew, and he wouldn't be able to turn the Jeep around. The decision was made, he'd take it in as far as he could and hope that they met Buck on the short trip in. Hopefully, they'd meet him whistling a tune with a spring in his step and not a care in the world. At least, that's what he hoped would happen.

Buck Hale-Part 9-Approach

It was snowing much harder now. Buck, instead of making good time, was beginning to struggle against the bitterness he felt from the cold. He had never felt so cold and his breathing was becoming rapid. As it dawned on him how much trouble he was in he started looking for shelter. He was past exhaustion, losing his balance and stumbling. Catching his balance and moving ahead a few steps at a time. Once, he thought he had heard a twig crack behind and off to his left. That was the uphill direction. It was too rocky for a man so he knew there was no help there.

When he fell it was sudden. What had caught his foot he would never know but, already off balance, he dove head first the full length of his body. He caught himself, barely, before smashing his left shoulder on the side of a boulder. By placing his right arm out in front of him he only just evaded a full impact on the unyielding rock. Glancing off the boulder he landed on his right side, twisting his ankle horribly as his toe had caught beneath the root of a tree. Instantly he knew he wasn't going to be getting back on his feet. He lay there with no need of assessing the damage. The pain was breathtaking. His shoulder screamed of damage while his ankle sang harmony; one octave lower.

He lay there for several minutes as the snow piled relentlessly around him. If there was any good news it was that he found himself just a couple of feet from a pine which had fallen and lie across the rock he had fallen against. Gritting his teeth against the pain he pulled himself slowly

and agonizingly under the fallen tree. There was nothing else to do but, he thought, to die here just one mile away from Geoff's and Sylvia's home. The irony stung as he thought how close he was and, yet, as the poet's say, so far away.

###

She was a hunter. She knew the forest intimately, within a radius of ten miles. Knew where the rabbits holed up and their trails into and out from their dens. She knew where the deer hid with their fawns and when a chipmunk dug a new nest merely by the scent of fresh dug earth.

At five years old she had already had her first set of cubs: two. She had reared them inside and on the bluffs where she had discovered a hole formed from the exfoliation of random slabs of granite years earlier. The den was approximately twenty feet deep with a horizontal slab of granite deep inside which had made an ideal place for her to bed down. Down the center of this den ran a small crevice which, when heavy rains came, forced the water to flow in it keeping the den dry as the runoff ran through the den without puddling until it exited through the crevice and under the rock formation. For her it was an ideal den located at the center of three game trails. Deer frequented these trails all year long and dinner was never far from her home. Rather like running down to the corner deli to grab a quick bite to eat.

Her mother had taught her the subtlety of stalking. How to stay menacingly quiet and keep the wind at her head so the deer could not catch her scent. How to avoid breaking sticks and staying silent by careful placement of her paws. How to remain motionless, mid-stride. Her mother had also showed her immense affection which had served to set her apart from other mountain lion's by her thoughtful demeanor. She didn't kill fawns. She recognized their helplessness. It was contrary to most lions but not to her. Besides, she was well supplied with adult deer and her skills meant she never went hungry

Within the past year she had become conscious of a man who used this trail often. She had seen him each time he came through. The familiarity had raised her curiosity about this creature. She watched for him from her perch far up on the bluff; behind a snaggly pine holding the bluff only by its roots. At one point, she recalled, this "manimal" had acted frenzied, or perhaps, mad, by making a terrible noise and jumping up and down in circles. It appeared to her that this "manimal" was sick or crazy or both. She no longer looked at him as game. She looked at him as being possibly ill. This fact furthered her curiosity as he did not seem to succumb to his illness. Rather, he kept walking on the trail; a trail which she avoided but, nevertheless, watched from time to time.

She had seen many of these "manimals" come through from her perch above. Her interest was only cursory as she lie here only when resting; not hunting.

Now, however, she lay not twenty feet from this "manimal." She had seen him go down, she guessed, injured. She had been following him for over a mile; her curiosity at the full again. She was interested in him and his behavior and, if she had understood this, she considered him a "fellow" of the woods. Not one to be hunted and killed but more as a house cat appears to feel for humans. She recalled her mother who had gotten sick and was dying. There was nothing she could do for her so she had laid against her, snuggling, to keep her mother warm. It had done no good as her mother passed away but that memory stood out for reasons she didn't understand. This "manimal" posed no threat. Of that she was sure.

She watched as he painfully attempted to pull himself to shelter under the fallen tree. The scent of the "manimal" indicated severe trauma and impending death; an easy meal.

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