

# 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 noting 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.

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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 snaggy 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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