

(*Taken from the middle of the chapter*)

You have seen the typical caricature of an old western cowboy in a cartoon ...well, have you noticed how bowed his legs were in the picture? Ol' Bud's legs are bowed like that now, and he can't hack the boots in deep mud anymore at age seventy-six. But Ol' Bud still radiates the excitement of a boy on his way to the ol' feeshin' hole, as he guides you around in the garden of his memories.

On March 18, 1994, the rugged and aging survivor would be brought face to face with his fading strength. It was fifty-nine degrees on the day that spring fever drew him down to Bear Creek's sandy banks. He cast out a couple of lines and waited for some winter-starved catfish to find his worm-baited fishhook. He grabbed a tree limb to help himself back up the bank. In his words, "**The durn limb broke an' I went over backwerts into the creek.**" He went under and came up splashing his way to the bank. Reaching up and hugging the bank, he noticed his watch read four o'clock.

Try as he did, the bank was too steep to scale. His coat, overalls and cowboy boots were all full of water. Roots he grabbed broke, and when he would bury his knees in the bank to lift himself out, the sand would cave in under his weight. He had the place looking as though a coon, held fast in a trap, had been clawing and wallowing the bank all night to free himself.

Water was about three feet deep where he stood. He understood it was deeper behind him, and deeper on both sides. He had never fallen in the river in his life while pole and line fishing. The March water temperature of forty degrees and the forty-eight-degree evening air were numbing cold. His knees were red and scuffed. And now night was coming on.

Men on three-wheelers rode past, not far away, but his call for help could not be heard above the noise of their machines. His stoutest efforts could not save him, and his waning strength brought him face-to-face with the fact that a river he loved so much might take his life. The grave possibility began to worry him; that he would not be able to endure the falling temperatures for the night.

About eight o'clock, a pale moon shown down out of the clear cold sky and tempered the otherwise total darkness. Brooding and bewildered, he lay against the bank and offered his prayers.

The smell of creek, and earth, and roots in his face are no more the inviting ambrosia they were earlier that warm afternoon. Now he longs to escape them. He envisions a hot bath, dry clothes and steaming soup.

His brother, Dale, who lives near him, knew he was going fishing that day. When he came home that evening, he noticed Bud's El Camino was not home. He was concerned. Knowledge of his brother's haunts led him to his truck down on Bear Creek. At the noise of his arrival, Bud began to holler. Dale followed the sound seventy-five yards. Then he looked down at the pitiful spectacle; decrepit and helpless, gray with age and pale with cold, he huddled, looking up.

"Were you glad to see little brother?" I asked.

"**I hope to tell ya,**" he said.

He had been there four hours, and hypothermia was further weakening him. Dale tried but could not bring big brother up the bank. He left, went back to town and returned with 230-pound Gary Kennen and Little Ronnie, Bud's twenty-one-year-old grandson. The two jumped into the water, fully clothed, and lifted the honorable old sportsman up onto solid ground. Hardly able to stand, they bore him up to his pickup, and he, contrary to custom, let his grandson drive him back to town. Hot soup, hot tub, and warm bed came none too soon.

Oh, yes, one of the fellows reeled in his lines. One had a small mudcat on it and the other had a small channelcat. In no condition to dress them, he gave them away to the boy across the street.

And the story continues...