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## Day On The River / The Great Escape

Daniel Alexander  
*Southwestern Oklahoma State University*

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## **The Great Escape**

If there is a force in the universe the equal of gravity, it is the eternal draw of boys to mud. Stephen Hawking could have used the draw of mud and the possibility of lost and forgotten treasure to create his first model of a black hole. I spent a lot of time on the river with my brother, although not as much time as I would have liked and learned a lot. Afoot on the river, there are rules for mud and quicksand. First off, anyone who has spent much time on the river knows that old sloughs are nastier and more dangerous than quicksand. It is hard to sink more than knee deep in quicksand. I know. Over the years during a thousand trips to the river, I have tried. Just keep walking.

A thin kind of mud soup with a light crust on the top is a different kind of critter. Sometimes the crust will be all curled up and dry. Sometimes it will have just a bit of water on top. Regardless, an inexperienced person who tries to cross a slough may find themselves up to their waist in mud. You are going to sink, but the mud is not going to close over your face. From experience I know that a person caught in deep mud can usually lay down and slowly swim out. I also know that when you are caught, there are no treasure chests down there that a fool can stand on, to keep from sinking.

On a perfect spring day, my twin brother and I made big plans to spend the day on the river and surprise our parents with fresh fish for supper. As soon after lunch as

possible, we made our escape. Along with poles and a stringer, we brought a bucket to help carry the fish and any treasure we might stumble upon. We found a good fishing hole and by two o'clock had two nice blue cats on a stringer. Finished with the larger project, we explored fishing holes, found Indian and robber ambush sites, and hunted buried treasure.

By mid-afternoon the wind faded to nothing and the day became unseasonably warm. Above us, the tops of giant cottonwoods marked the river's passage and gently rustled in what little breeze they could catch.

The day was ours and we were in no hurry to waste it on productive behaviors. We loitered, ran, and jumped the tributaries that make up the South Canadian. We slid down muddy banks to the water's edge and skidded on our bellies across bog holes. And we discovered the mother lode, an old mud slough.

We found long sticks and within minutes finished probed all of the most likely spots in the bottom of the slough for old wagon frames or boxes of bullion. The mud must have been more than four feet deep. None of our sticks touched the bottom or anything we could identify as a treasure chest. Jimmy was the first sacrifice himself to our research. He made a short run and plunged into the mud. As soon as he stood, the victim of an imaginary arrow, he sank to his knees and fell forward into the deepest part. I had to make the same sacrifice, and to drag him from the slough filled another forty-five minutes with leaps of faith, treachery and sudden twists.

Later, in the interest of science and to make our research complete, we took longer sticks and personally verified the depth of the mud from the edge to the middle of the slough. The measure of the mud was the same measure of our heroics and peril. We

escaped trap after trap.

Finally, exhausted and caked in layers of brown silt, we returned to our original task. We waded out into the channel to clean the accumulated mud from our pants, took off our shirts, dunked and washed ourselves before we returned to the task at hand. While our shirts dried, we caught two more catfish and added them to the stringer.

Before we turned for home, we dropped the fish into the bucket, filled it with fresh water, and carried them with us as we moved down the river. As we walked, bored with easy fishing and games, we decided to go for a real challenge. Jimmy remembered our father and his brother Thurlin, “Uncle Bud,” talk about something called “noodlin.” Bud had described wading along the bank to find the deeper cuts and stumps under the riverbank, then how they reached into the den to find a hiding fish. They described how they would grab a catfish by the jaw and drag it into the light of day.

Armed with our stunning ignorance, our first try almost broke us from the process. I went first and found nothing. When Jimmy shoved his hand down under the riverbank and felt for a fish, something alive tried to slide past his hand. He grabbed and after a moment of wrestling, pulled out a huge black snake.

Over many years, many knowledgeable people have told me that poisonous snakes, specifically cottonmouth snakes, do not live on the South Canadian. I don't care what they say, what Jimmy pulled out sure *looked* poisonous. Not only did it look poisonous, but the snake seemed to think that we had picked the wrong time to jerk him so rudely from his haven. When Jimmy saw what he had, he flipped the snake free of his hand, and we both shot backwards as fast as we could crawl!

My turn came again and while we giggled and laughed about the snake, I moved

down the bank about five feet and reached under another half-buried log. Stunned, I found something deep within the cold, black water and slid my thumb into its mouth. Then I grabbed hold of its chin with my fingers and after moment of struggle, dragged a magnificent, iridescent blue channel cat to the surface.

As the catfish flopped and we wrestled with him to prevent his escape, a dirt clod rolled down the riverbank and splashed water into our faces. Startled, we looked up to see Snag and Benny Green Teeth standing on top of the bank with hands on their hips and big smiles. They looked down upon us and smiled, as predators having just discovered something warm and crunchy for lunch. We knew them by a little more than reputation from our little one room schoolhouse and them catching us a long way from home was not good.

Stunned, we could not believe we had been discovered and so completely surprised. The river was *our* treasure, wiped clean of the trails of other explorers by wind and rain. We never expected to see anyone else here and we were in deep trouble.

They stood on the riverbank directly above the place we had left our boots. If they took our boots and hid them, we were goners. Walking barefoot through three miles of canyon and sticker patches would be bad enough, but going home without your boots just was not done! The humiliation would never end. Everyone who heard the story would nod and agree, “Them dummies just forgot where we stashed them. It is just bad blood.” Our parents would be the butt of public ridicule and shamed by our carelessness. For their effort to rescue us, Snag and Benny would become local heroes.

Benny graduated from the eighth grade the year we started school. His teeth were the obvious source of his nickname. Back then if you wanted to lose your appetite, all

you had to do was sit across the table from him and watch him grin. We heard that Snag had returned from a long and unplanned visit to some other part of the state. After the school fire, he had seriously needed to be somewhere else and had taken the Greyhound to get there.

We breathed a collective sigh of relief when Snag stepped past our boots and slid down the bank to the water's edge. In the next second, whatever reprieve might exist from his failure to discover our boots ended and we knew for certain our lives were over.

Snag quickly gained momentum and before we could move, he grabbed us both. I did not know how cruel laughter could be until Snag grabbed us both by the nap of the neck and plucked us from the sand. With my feet a foot and a half from the sand, he shook me like a terrier shakes a rat then he spun around and chunked me downstream. I flew ten feet before I landed and skidded another five before coming to rest in a small mud hole.

Stunned from the impact but still game, I rolled over and tried to stand. While I struggled to find my senses, Snag tucked Jimmy under his arm and walked to me. When he got near enough, he laughed and kicked me in the butt. I flew another four feet before I dropped flat on my belly. Sure of himself, he walked to where I lay, placed one of his giant feet between my shoulder blades and pushed me into the mud.

Trapped beneath his foot, I thrashed while he laughed. When I finally wiggled free enough to catch my breath and clear my eyes, more mud and sand dropped onto my face. Trapped in Snag's arms, Jimmy's feet dangled above my head.

As quickly as they wrapped us up, Snag asked Benny, "What do you think we should do with these punks? Maybe we should teach 'em a little respect you know and

give 'em a little what for.'"

I still remember Benny's hair raising, high pitched, squeaky laugh. The sound still reminds me of barbed wire that is stretched too tight then twangs and squeals through the staples as it breaks. The sound of his laugh, the image of his green teeth underneath a ragged bowl haircut and the few long black whiskers on his lip that he never learned to trim still fills my body with adrenalin and the need to do violence.

Maybe the way things started, they had only intended to play with us, like everything was just a joke and then go on about their business. They didn't offer us the choice.

Trapped in the mud, I twisted again to see what Benny was doing. On the bank, he reached deep into his pocket, pulled out an old yellow-handled Case pocket knife and began to cut willow switches from the bank. As soon as he had a handful, he slid down the bank and threw a couple to Snag.

Snag tucked Jimmy tighter under his arm and reached with his free hand to grab the switches. As soon as his hand filled, our world got real ugly.

Snag laughed as he alternated between hitting me with the switches then swinging at Jimmy. After all these years, I still wake to the hiss of the switch as it slices through the air. I still remember the feel of my skin as it sizzled and burned through my thin cotton shirt. Years passed before I learned not to sleep in the same place where the memory of those switches is stored.

Jimmy got hit two or three times before he managed to twist away from Snag's grip and we got a break. When Jimmy hit the ground, Snag reached to grab him, but caught a handful of shirttail and shifted his weight from my back. Free of his weight, I

rolled in the mud and wrapped my arms around his boot. Once I had a grip, I did my absolute best to bite his calf and pants leg off.

When my teeth locked down on boot leather, pants, and Achilles tendon, Snag screamed. As the pain in his leg overwhelmed his sense of purpose, Snag lost his interest in Jimmy. He turned, shifted his weight to the leg I held and tried to kick me in the belly. He would have hurt me pretty serious if he hadn't slipped in the mud. As it was, his foot caught my ribs and weighted with mud, slid by and continued upward. When he landed on his back in the mud hole, I tried to escape. When Snag's feet went up in the air, his hands involuntarily opened and released Jimmy's shirttail from his grasp.

Free, Jimmy took two steps back. I lay on my belly in the mud and for just a moment, time stood still. I thought Jimmy would run to hide, for safety or for help. He had enough of a lead. Even so, he did not cut his losses and run. In all our life together, Jimmy never did run. Instead, Jimmy looked at me. His eyes flared and his face filled with a loon crazy, brittle smile that stretched from ear to ear.

Jimmy turned and made a running dive for the hole he'd just noodled. When he took his first step toward the riverbank, I knew his plan. If drowning in the mud then and there could have helped him on his mission, I would have been the first to hold my own head under.

As Jimmy turned, Benny dived and tackled him by the ankles. When Jimmy fell, he plunged his arm deep under the riverbank.

With his arms full of kicking legs, Benny rose to his knees and tried to drag Jimmy away from the hole. While Jimmy struggled against Benny, kicking and screaming, he stretched to reach farther into the hole. When I saw Jimmy go stiff, I knew

what he had found.

Life shifted from normal speed to slow motion.

Jimmy's arm came out of the hole with the head of a huge and very angry snake trapped in his palm.

Jimmy rolled onto his back while Benny dragged him clear of the riverbank. When Benny saw what dangled from Jimmy's hand, he recoiled, frozen in terror, and dropped Jimmy's feet.

With his leg free, Jimmy rolled forward and stood to confront Benny. What Jimmy faced was not a fair fight. Nothing I have ever known is ever face-to-face or fair, but that didn't stop Jimmy.

When Jimmy's eyes were level with the second button on Benny's shirt, he focused, arched his back, threw his arms back, and drew himself into a living bow. He became a sorcerer with the power of the universe in his hands. With his back arched and hands behind his back, Jimmy squared himself to Benny and inhaled as if to draw power from the air. When his lungs were full and his back taught, he released his breath in a scream of fury, thrust forward with his back and both arms, and when his arms were fully extended, he opened his hands to release one very large and angry snake.

Jimmy's curse plus four feet of snake and a handful of mud flew arrow straight into Benny's face. The snake's body smacked against Benny's head then dropped to his chest and right shoulder. The mud hit him between the eyes.

Speechless, Benny's mouth moved as if he could chew air. The noise did not start until the snake twisted and wrapped itself around Benny's arm and neck. In response to the movement of the snake, Benny screamed and began a strange kind of dance. First he

shuffled backwards two steps then hopped straight up and down. On his third jump, he twisted and jumped backwards two steps. Later we called his dance the “Jump Back, Get-The-Snake Off-Boogie.” Benny screamed, ran, and hopped in place, all the while flinging his arms about as if he were trying to shake water from his fingertips.

Behind, Snag sat on his knees open mouthed and watched Benny dance.

Of course, Jimmy added what he could to the panic. He screamed, “Look out, it’s a cottonmouth! It’s poison!”

Benny finally grabbed the snake by the tail and shook it free. As quickly as the snake released Benny’s arm, Benny twisted and flipped the snake over his shoulder. Clear of Benny, the snake twisted and floated through the air like a miniature helicopter rotor.

The snake hit Snag on his chest and draped over his shoulder. When hit, Snag recoiled from the snake and landed on his back in the mud.

This turn of events absorbed all of Snag’s attention and like a little crab escaping a mud hole, I slid away and crawled sideways until I could stand.

As I watched, Snag pushed himself up from the mud hole. His feet slipped and he rocked back then sat down on his crossed ankles. With his feet and legs trapped by his butt, he couldn’t move. When he realized his legs were trapped, panic swept his face and his eyes popped wide open. Unable to run, he screamed and hopped around on his knees as he tried to free himself. While he hopped, his arms flapped and waved as he tried to grab the snake and somehow not touch it. When he finally gathered the strength to touch the snake’s skin, his hands refused to close.

When Snag started to hop, the snake had enough for his part, he had already been

airborne twice that morning. He decided to end that nonsense and wrapped himself around Snag's neck. Once the snake had two coils around Snag's neck, it began to wriggle and slither toward the top of Snag's head.

When the snake moved, I helped Snag as much as I could. I screamed, "It's poison! It's a giant Arkansas rattler! It's ten feet long! Oh God, it's gonna bite you!"

Released of his own peril, Benny fell farther into the panic than Snag. He screamed, "Oh God, if it bites you, I'm gonna have to make a tourniquet and amputate something!"

When Snag recognized the word *amputate* applied to him, his desperation became a living work of art. Snag struggled and slapped at the snake. The snake retaliated and bit Snag's hand. When Snag slapped the snake loose from his hand, the snake turned and bit him on the nose. Once in place, the snake locked its jaws and tried to hang on.

As Snag's mind filled with terror, he could only stare cross-eyed at the snake that dangled from his nose.

With Benny and Snag distracted, Jimmy took off. He headed upstream and angled toward the slough we'd explored earlier.

Startled by the snake and Snag's screams, Benny dropped most of the handful of switches he carried. He turned to try and catch Jimmy. When Benny turned, I could almost hear the neurons in his brain protest as they fired. He took two steps toward Jimmy before he came to his senses and ran back toward Snag.

Benny wanted to help his friend, but he did not want to touch the snake. Instead, he picked a willow switch from the ground, stepped toward Snag. He tried to slash the willow across the snake and knock the furious reptile from his friend's face. He didn't

manage to knock the snake free, but before he realized the willow switches would never do the job he did manage to raise huge welts on Snag's face. Exasperated, Benny finally threw the switch away. As he turned to his desperate friend, Benny looked down and realization struck him like a ten pound sledge. He had a tool in his hand that could solve all Snag's problems, his yellow-handled Case knife.

As he took a swing at the snake with the knife, Benny screamed to Snag, "I'll get him! I'll save you!" His first horizontal swipe cut completely through the tip of Snag's nose. When Benny saw the thin line of blood, he changed his technique. Instead of trying to slice the snake away, he began to stab at the snake's head. He missed twice, and twice the blade plunged through Snag's cheek.

Finally, more frightened of Benny than the snake, Snag staggered to his feet. When he tried to move away from Benny, he stepped backwards and tripped over me. When Snag fell, he grasped the air for support, found the snake by accident, grabbed the tail and pulled. When he hit the ground, he had the snake by the tail, and the snake had him by the nose. For a moment, stunned by the fall, both Snag and the snake lay motionless. When all the motion stopped, the snake turned loose of Snag's nose and unwrapped itself from his neck. Free, the snake slithered across the mud hole to disappear under the riverbank.

Under the influence of Snag and Benny, a beautiful day on the river and a simple fishing expedition managed to go completely south. I was still trapped under Snag's legs, while slightly upstream, Benny drooled and to the side, the snake slithered to safety. Ten steps farther upstream Jimmy initiated the greatest plan of this century.

At last, free of the snake, Snag gently touched his face. When his fingers touched

his nose, he squealed and pulled his hand away. He recoiled even farther when he recognized the blood on his fingertips as his own, from his cheek and the slice on his nose.

Furious because of his injuries, he rolled off me and said, "Maybe we need to do some cutting on them little sons-of-bitches what's caused this." He touched the blood on his fingers to his tongue and said, "That will sure enough teach them to respect us."

Before Snag finished, Jimmy took off running. When he had gained enough distance, Jimmy stopped and hurled the most deadly insult he could imagine. In a singsong voice he taunted, "Nanny nanny boo boo. You can't catch me."

Pitiful as it was, that taunt got the intended reaction from Benny Green Teeth. Although Benny had never established much of a reputation as a high jumper, he was a better runner than Snag. With twice the height and leg, he was a far better runner than my brother.

For his plan to work, the lead he took had to be narrow and Jimmy did the best he could with what he had. First Jimmy swung wide and ran around the mouth of the slough.

When Benny saw Jimmy run, he said to Snag, "I'll catch that little prick, then we can make them pay for what they done to us."

Snag nodded and said, "You catch that one while I hold this little prick here."

When Benny took off after Jimmy, Jimmy started to cut back toward the riverbank. Benny guessed Jimmy would try for the bank, grass, and willows to escape. God loved my brother that day because Benny took the bait and Jimmy's plan worked.

In seconds, Benny halved the margin of safety, the distance that protected my

brother.

As fools can be predicted, Jimmy's choice of distance and angle worked.

Benny hit his full stride before he hit the slough. His first step into the slough went down about two inches. His second step went down a foot. With one foot caught, his own momentum pitched him face forwards. Benny started to scream when he fell and his eyes were wide open as the mud silenced his terror. He mud-surfed another five feet before he skidded to a slow stop about two thirds of the way across the slough.

When he finally oozed to a stop, with his mouth and eyes filled with mud, the bow wave of mud pushed by his face flowed across the slough and touched the bank just at Jimmy's feet.

If Benny had been born with the tiniest bit of a clue, he would have just used a combination of low crawl and breaststroke to continue on his belly to safety. Sliding across the slough would have been a bit nasty, but easy. Fortunately for our team, Benny could not do it the easy way.

The first thing Benny did was to push up to his knees and try to stand. When he tried, he immediately sank to his crotch in the mud. That he was on his knees and his feet were sticking up from the mud behind him was irrelevant. He could not see his knees or his feet, so they had to be lost somewhere below. As he continued his fight to stand, he tried to pump his legs and escape the mud. Gravity continued to work as it always does, and in seconds the mud and water rose past his belt buckle.

For the moment, compared to Jimmy, I was not doing so well. When I turned to run, Snag grabbed my collar and for just a moment, watched Benny begin his chase after Jimmy. Confident of the outcome, he bent down, picked up one of the switches and

turned to focus his attention upon me. He popped the switch in the air a couple of times and satisfied, he smiled and began to hit me. Up close, even if he hadn't had me by the collar, I couldn't outrun him or get away. He got in some good licks before Benny coughed mud from his mouth and screamed for help.

I never asked Jimmy if he had planned what followed or not, but for all the time we had afterwards, he always acted as if he had.

Trapped, with mud covering his nose and eyes, Benny sobbed in fear. Snag turned from me and we both watched as Benny tried to push himself upwards and away from the mud.

Benny pushed himself upwards and succeeded in rising for just a moment before his arms disappeared into the mud beneath him. Although he was lying on top of the slough, Benny's panicked mind recognized only that he was in deep enough for the mud to touch his chin.

Informed by too many movies, Snag recognized Benny's peril. As he looked around, he dropped me and ran toward the bank. Frantic to save his friend, he pulled a winter killed cottonwood branch from the pile against the riverbank. He must have thought he could use the branch to drag Benny from the mud.

Across the slough, while Snag dragged the limb to the edge, Jimmy threw mud balls at him. The mud balls presented no threat. They either disintegrated in mid flight or landed fifteen feet short.

Snag retaliated by breaking a branch from the limb. When he threw the branch, it flew across the slough like a boomerang and struck Jimmy across the face.

Freed of Snag, I finally managed to drag myself from the mud and stand. When I

pushed up, the first thing I saw was the whirling stick smash against Jimmy's head.

Across the slough my brother dropped to the sand, his hands covered with blood.

Enraged by the injury to my brother, I ran to the riverbank and ripped a four-foot-long and three-inch-thick cottonwood limb from a log half buried in the sand. As God is my witness, I did not intend to help Snag pull Benny from the mud! Even today, when I ride through the cottonwoods on the river, I look upwards at the branches and wonder how I ever tore that piece of wood from the trunk

While I broke the limb free, Snag gingerly inched forward into the mud and carefully extended the branch he carried toward Benny. As Benny twisted to catch the limb I heard Snag's ignorant, peckerwood accent when he said, "When you get out of there, we are really going to make those little shits pay for what they done."

Even to this day, I wonder at his statement. Maybe human nature is such that even long after there is nothing but legend and dust to feed their claim of joy and victory, mean spirited people still find purpose mining bitter ashes, where only shame should thrive.

Across the slough, Benny nodded in understanding and twisted in the mud just enough to grab a better hold on the branch. With a fresh grip, Benny shifted his weight and leaned forward.

Off-balance when Snag tugged the limb. Benny twisted and fell face first into the mud. Once again he turned the wrong direction to make an easy escape.

When Snag bent forward, he too lost his balance. For the next ten years, that instant was momentous, my sole claim to eternal glory.

I charged Snag from behind and at full speed hit him square in the middle of his

butt with my shoulder. As much as I would have liked it, Snag didn't go flying. As I bounced off him, he did fall face first into the mud and his momentum carried him to the middle of the slough. He slid to a stop within six feet of Benny.

When someone hurts your brother, it lights a dangerous kind of fire. Years later, I read about Berserkers, and I understand just a little of what happens inside them. My sense of time and right or wrong dissolved into a hurricane of incredible energy and violence.

Later, in a voice filled with awe, Jimmy described what had happened. He said, "You drug that big stick behind you and waded into the mud, crawled onto his back, stood up, then smacked Snag across the head and shoulders with that rotted cottonwood limb until there were no pieces left to beat him with. With no more of the stick to whack him with, you jumped up and down on his back like you was a hammer and he was a nail."

I do know that every time Snag tried to push himself up from the mud and twist to reach back to catch me, his arms were forced downward by his weight and disappeared into the mud. To help with what I could, I swung the limb with all my strength and tried to drive him deeper. I must have hit Snag on the head and shoulders a dozen times before the limb broke in half. I don't really remember.

Finally exhausted, I studied the broken piece of wood from my hand for a moment before I looked up and realized that Jimmy mouth hung open as he watched me. There was some blood on his face, but nothing that looked serious. Satisfied that Jimmy was safe, I began my retreat. Still filled with spite, I stepped forward and used one foot to push Snag's head back into the mud. Satisfied, I walked down Snag's back and legs

before I tossed the bit of a log about midway between Snag's legs and the bank. I stepped back to gain a little momentum then ran and jumped across most of the mud. The piece of wood I had tossed to the midpoint became my last step before I reached safety.

After I made my escape, the opportunity of a lifetime opened before Jimmy. When I turned and pointed to the bank, I wanted him to run for the brush meet me in the willows. I would grab our shoes and meet him on the trail home. Instead, he shook his head to decline my plan and motioned me to move back. Puzzled, I stood at the edge of the slough and watched him start his second greatest run.

There are things we do which should be preserved in stone. Regardless of success or failure, the stone should stand forever, an eternal monument to courage, love, and faith. On that day, Jimmy earned such a monument. When he threw the snake, that act became his first moment of eternal glory. His second moment came when he had baited Benny into the chase. What he did next sealed his reputation forever.

He turned and ran away for about twenty steps. He paused for just a moment and considered the distance. Satisfied, he dropped to a crouch, opened his hands, and ran toward the slough as hard as he possibly could.

Across the water, I heard his bare feet smack against the sand and saw the gouts of sand fly as his toes curled with each step and grabbed for traction. Small spurts of sand flew from his feet as he accelerated.

Even now, forty years after, I can still hear the rhythm of his acceleration. I can feel the wind in his ears, as if my own. The sound begins with quick taps and grows until the impact of each footstep overlaps and explodes into a single hissing pattern of pure

white noise.

Two feet from the edge of the mud, the prints in the sand end. Jimmy gathered himself and with his knees tucked into his chest, made a flying leap. At the top of his arc, Jimmy opened his legs and stretched as if he were Rudolph Nureyev. As he landed, his legs came together and both of his feet smacked down square in the middle of Benny's back. The impact of Jimmy's sixty pounds drove Benny's shoulders and face deep into the mud. Jimmy took one more stride then launched himself from Benny's mud covered butt.

Stuck in a trap of his own making, Snag saw it all happen and could not do a single thing to save himself. He screamed defiance, indignation and outrage as Jimmy left Benny's back and launched himself again.

Again, in midflight, Jimmy's legs stretched and reached as if he were a dancer on stage. This time his right foot came down upon the top of Snag's head. His weight and momentum shoved Snag's astonished face and indignant voice deep enough that fresh mud splashed against his ankle. With another single, short stride, Jimmy launched himself from Snag's butt, and his left foot found the remains of the small log I had left behind. On his last stride, pure glee lit Jimmy's face. He paused as he passed me, looked over his shoulder, and he said, "It's time to go!"

Before he could pass out of my reach, I grabbed him and we both spun about. As he stood safe beside me, I remember the purest of joy when I brushed the bits of mud and hair from his face and found no damage, well, no damage that would not disappear in two or three days.

Despite their pleas, we left the predators trapped by their own actions in a version

of the La Brea Tar Pits.

We both scampered to the riverbank. In passing, I scooped our fish stringer and bucket from the water. In seconds we were on top of the bank and had our socks and boots on. We ran toward the canyon and home.

Behind, screams of outrage and fury faded with distance and confirmed that both Snag and Benny were yet alive and well.