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Purl's Sunny Approach to Picking up the Pieces

I crossed the paved road on Nimsheew Ridge in the Sierras above the Sacramento Valley. Purl split firewood in front of his house. When he saw me walking up his driveway, he put down his splitting maul, brushed off his splitting block, and sat down on it. His white hair haloed his head in a mountain breeze.

Purl liked to visit, and he knew the history of the area. For fifty years, he'd lived on a four-acre place he had bought for forty dollars an acre. Purl had worked in the area for many years, and he and his wife had raised a daughter. After his wife passed on, he lived with two Siamese cats that were also getting on in years.

Developers offered Purl hundreds of times his purchase price for his place. He sat on his splitting block in sunshine and laughed: "They think I'll get excited about the big money they talk about, but nobody can answer with any kind of sense when I ask them where I'm going to live if I sell this place. I'm not in love with money. This is my home."

Several days before, Purl had driven up the mountain to a Forest Service wood-cutting area, dropped two dead pine trees, cut them up, and brought the wood home in his pickup. Now, he split and stacked wood. He burned dry pine in his cookstove and in his heater for daytime fires. He saved oak, which is hardwood and burns slower and with more heat than pine, to hold his heater fire through winter nights.

Purl had built his shop, garage, and woodshed many years before, of boards he milled with his chainsaw mill, a simple device that helps the operator guide a chainsaw lengthwise through a log. He designed and built a system of weights, pulleys, ropes, and tripods he added to his chainsaw mill to pull his saw through the log and relieve him of most of the stooping and pulling.

We both enjoyed talking in morning sunshine, but Purl did have work to do, and so did I, so I went about my day.

Starting about midnight, a fierce wind scourged the ridge. I stayed tucked tightly in bed and prayed my cabin wouldn't blow off the ridge into the canyon. Come daylight, I fixed and ate breakfast, grateful that my small cabin was tucked into a low

place below the top of the ridge, so the fiercest part of the wind blew above us.

The wind eased about noon, and I walked over to Purl's place. Purl assessed the damage in sunshine. A large ponderosa pine tree had blown down and smashed his woodshed. Purl laughed at my wordless, wide-eyed response to the damage. He said, "It didn't hit my house, did it? Woodsheds are easy to fix. Houses where old men and cats sleep wouldn't be so easy. The cats and I heard this one come down. Felt it, too. Things rumbled and roared and shook around here about four o'clock this morning."

He got his chainsaw and related tools and started cutting up the tree. I had work to do for people on the ridge, so I left Purl and the newly-fallen pine.

Over the summer, Purl de-limbed the tree, set up his chain saw mill, cut boards from the tree, and used the boards to repair his woodshed. What he didn't use for boards, he cut up and stacked t dry for firewood. I stopped by some days to see how his project was progressing. Purl wouldn't accept help. He said, "If you came in here and did the work for me, what would I do, join a gym for exercise and have to drive clear down the mountain and work out indoors?" But he would stop and talk a while with me in the summer sunshine. "I'm not in any hurry," he said. "Winter's a ways off. I'd like this wood to dry before I nail it up."

Before the nights turned cold, Purl finished rebuilding his woodshed. I stopped by, sat down on his splitting block, and watched him cover newly nailed boards with paint the color of green pine needles. He turned to me and asked, "Do you want some boards?" I tried to stay as portable as possible, because I didn't know when or where I'd go from the ridge, or how much I could carry when I did. I knew he rarely had anything to give away.

I said, "I'd like to build a cupboard for kitchen supplies."

Purl cut boards for me, twenty-eight inches wide, and I built a cupboard about six feet tall, with six shelves, for kitchen supplies. I built it so I could take it apart and take it with me. I didn't paint it. The wood smelled of pine, and when I took supplies from the shelves I always thought of Purl, standing in mountain smell of pine, unperturbed by the destruction of his woodshed, cheerfully using the summer to repair the building with the tree that had crushed it.