

Ballad for Hermit Jim

Warm wind rose from the canyon. Jim stood below the burial grounds in the shadow of the west ridge and watched sunlight climb the steep, dry slope east of him. A few small juniper trees grew on that slope, and grass, dry with the changing seasons, and brush, more grey than green with the dryness of autumn in dry slope.

Way down the river, below the reservoir, a truck started up the winding gravel road. The big diesel engine hammered a deep, explosive roar into the afternoon sunlight. Dust exploded from beneath the wheels and swirled up around the massive bulldozer chained to the trailer. Dust broke away from the rolling rig and hung, a grey cloud above the road, settled down the bank and onto the river.

The sound ran up the river canyon, and Jim heard it eddying up Wolf Creek Canyon as the trucker geared down for a hard grade, then pushed it high speed through the long curve below the dam. Coming up fast, pulling a heavy load.

Jim thought, "Plenty of big trucks come up the river. Nothing different about this one." It faded from his hearing as the truck went behind a sharp ridge that shielded the sound from where he stood. He walked up through the burial grounds.

Yesterday's rain had washed out bone beads and obsidian arrowheads. Jim picked them up. He felt the smoothness of time-treated bone and the intricate workmanship of the points and then reburied them deeper.

As he left the burial ground, the truck emerged from behind the ridge, two miles closer. The diesel sound eroded his sense of peace in the summer afternoon. Diesel sound chiseled away the sunshine's brightness.

He climbed the ridge and looked down the west slope to the road that ran by the river. Red, white and black truck pulling a bulldozer on a lowboy trailer thundered up the last stretch, geared down, pulled into the Wolf Creek road and stopped. Diesel engine idled in the mouth of the canyon.

Rick had said maybe five years. This was only two. The lean old man stood at the top of the ridge and looked down at the machines.

Sunshine shot straight above him and left him in the shadow of the high

west ridge. Wind plucked at his thin shirt. He set his ancient, broad-brimmed, felt hat more firmly on his head against the rising wind and walked back down the ridge.

As he picked carrots and cabbage for his dinner, he heard the bulldozer unload and shut down. Then the truck rumbled back down the river road, out of hearing, and the evening carried only sounds of birds; nuthatches, and two camp robbers who flew down and complained that his dinner scraps were late being served. Ravens quarreled somewhere up the ridge. Before dark, coyotes yipped back and forth at the top of the ridge.

Before sunrise, the bulldozer started working on the canyon road. Diesel pistons slammed sound against breaking rock, bounced exploding sound from canyon walls, shattered the day. Dust and diesel fumes rose high above the canyon and hung in the still morning air.

It was a long day for Jim. His senses wore thin. Late afternoon, he put a bedroll together and hiked up the canyon to the cliff house, a cave in the dark basalt rock underlying the limestone mountain. The mountain rose high above the ridge there. Thin, tall spires stood away from the mass of the central mountain. Centuries had eroded distance between the rough spires and the mountain itself. Juniper trees grew on the tops of the spires and on the top of the mountain. Limestone cliffs exposed white and varying shades of light green and blue.

Thirty-five years before, he had started to spend a night at the cliff house. Something kept him awake that night. "Bullfeathers," he had mumbled into the fire. "I don't see nothin nor hear nothin to put me jumpy this way. Ain't a thing here could hurt me."

Still, he didn't sleep. He carried his bedroll up to sleep through the dark hours of the morning in the trees a mile away from the cliff house.

This night, he didn't build a fire. He sat in the wide entrance to the cliff house as darkness settled into the canyon below him and closed him in on the cliff face. He wrapped himself in a blanket and leaned back against stone, dozed, and woke to watch the night.

The moon rose. Clear, yellow light opened the broad face of the dwelling. A tall man crossed the cliff face on the trail, puffed dust under his moccasins as he crossed the ledge, and sat down in the shadow of the moonlight, facing Jim.

The moon continued its climb into the sky. Coyotes sang far down the

west ridge.

The tall man spoke. "Blind Man's Spirit and Wounded Bear will be here. What would you have us do?"

"What can you do? It's this mountain they're after. Tear it down and haul it out of here, grind it up for cement."

"There is nothing for us to do. But you should stay here tonight."

Four old men sat in the warm dust in the moonlight. They talked of other times in this mountain and river country. Before daylight, they left all conversation. Jim leaned against the stone that still stored the daytime sun's heat and slept.

He woke when sunlight struck the cliff house. Through the rock of the mountain, he felt stone and earth shatter as the bulldozer ripped rock ten miles down the canyon. He sat on the ledge in front of the cliff house all morning, trying to have everything around him resolve again to harmony.

He walked down the canyon to his cabin. The cabin was five miles closer to the working bulldozer, but he didn't feel the vibrations there. He thought, "This cabin sits on dirt, not on rock, and dirt cushions it. It don't matter as much here, because it ain't this cabin they're after."

Wounded Bear had asked him, "Will they take your cabin?"

"They'll come about from here to the end of the ledge to it with the road. Might as well take it for that. If they get the road up this far, they'll run trucks by there all day."

"Our history becomes your history."

"You fought."

"Yes. We fought."

"That part of your history becomes part of mine."

"There is something to be learned from the time that has gone between the time of our fighting and now."

"And there's something to be learned because I understand what's coming at us better than you did then. I can't see what to do yet, but I know I got to do something."

Rick drove up the dirt road to see Jim the next morning. He said, "That's a mess down there. They've already bladed out my grandfather's walnut trees. They're moving pretty fast. They want to get it well-started before more people get interested in trying to save the mountain."

Jim said, "Well, let's see if we can buy some time. Maybe we can catch

some attention. I'll talk to the driver."

He told the driver, "This is a holy place, this canyon and this mountain. You can't tear it apart."

The driver said, "I'll tell you how it is. If I go down and tell them I quit, can't tear up a holy place, two hours after I leave, there'll be another man up here running this machine and chances are, he won't care as much as I do. I care, see, but it's going to happen regardless; you already know that, and I need this job."

"You'll have trouble keeping your machine running."

"I'm going to forget you said that, in case somebody asks me. If I come out here and the machinery don't run, I fix it if I can. If I can't fix it, I go back to town and get somebody who can. I get paid if I run the dozer or if I drive back to town to get a mechanic. If it breaks so bad it can't be fixed, they'll bring out another dozer. They got plenty."

At the top of the ridge again, Jim said, "Maybe he's right. Maybe they're coming through here regardless."

"Does that mean don't fight it?"

"No. It might mean know the battle is lost and still fight a good battle. That might be part of sharing the history."

Jim walked down the dark ridge that night and put sand in the engine and transmission oil.

For two days, no machines ran in the canyon.

Rick hiked up the canyon past Star Junction and camped there.

The third morning, a truck roared up the winding canyon road and unloaded another machine, and that machine worked the rest of the day.

Rick hiked down the ridge and looked at the day's work, then walked back up to Jim's cabin. He said, "There's a watchman down there now. Got a little fire and a bedroll and a pickup truck."

Jim said, "I seen that. Well, it gives us some idea what they can do."

Jim started a fire in the cookstove and cooked corn and beans, and they ate. "You think we can stop them, Rick?"

"I don't know. Not many roads get abandoned half-finished. If they finish the road, they'll use it. I don't know what to do."

"They'll bury me before that road goes by my cabin. I still know some things to do. Thing for you to do is go back to the city and stay there until I finish what I know how to do. Will you do that?"

“Yes.”

“Get a long ways away. If you’re close, you’ll be up here and in it, and that ain’t what you’re to do. Get back a ways, and you might see a way to slow it down some more when I’m finished.”

“Do you think we can win?”

“I don’t know win or lose. I just know I have to do what I can.”

In the bright sunshine two days later, a big young man came up the ridge. He said, “I’m Jack McCann.” He offered his hand.

Jim motioned with his rifle barrel. “Keep about five arms’ lengths between us, or you’ll make a cloud of dust rolling back down the hill.”

“Sure. Okay. That thing’s loaded, huh? Shell in the chamber?”

“Back off another ten feet. You got a way of edging up while you’re talking. Who’s Jack McCann to me?”

“I own that equipment. You told the men you’d start shooting if they didn’t stop working.”

“That’s right.”

“Why?”

“Don’t play dumb. Look at what you’re doing down there.”

Jack McCann sat down in the dirt on the steep slope and looked down into the canyon. Sunlight reflected silver and gold from the water running in the stream.

“When I was eighteen, I spotted that mountain. I knew it was limestone, and I thought, millions of dollar’s worth of cement standing there needing to be used, thousand and thousands of yards of concrete. Build a lot of houses, bridge, roads, dams. Ten miles to a railroad.

“You’re hungry, you see an apple, you pick it and eat it. This mountain’s ready to be picked, and if I don’t pick it, someone else will.” He dropped a rock, and the rock rolled a long way down the steep face of the ridge.

“You’ll pick this one after I’m buried.”

“Do you own the ground you’re built on down there?”

“Solid lease.”

“You know Bob Graham, lives over that ridge?”

“I know him.”

“I used to go up there and mine with him and his brother when they were washing it out. You know Herschel Crowder? He used to live up

Strawberry Canyon? He moved into town about five years ago. He was getting older, and he had more trouble doing everything he had to do up there. He's got a real nice garden now, and he can keep going under his own steam. He couldn't have done it much longer up there by himself."

"Like I told your driver, I'll tell you. Start those machines for any reason other than load and haul them away, I'll put bullets in the radiator and fuel tank, just for starters."

"We can shoot back."

"Help yourself."

"I'll buy that cabin from you. Pay you four thousand cash."

Jim started up along the top of the ridge. McCann said, "Name your price. I'll give you six and help you find a good place anywhere you want and get you built on it, to order. There's better places than this. Places where it's warm all winter. You can have a garden year round."

"Hey, you crazy or something? You don't even listen to me; you just keep walking away."

"It ain't so much I don't like your company, though we got that to think about. It's more you got a real loud, irritating voice, and you keep edgin' up on me. Keep twenty feet, or I'll put a bullet through you, and then I'll have me some peace and quiet."

"Eight thousand dollars."

"No road's going up this canyon while I live."

"Then you're going to die, you know that? Die for a damned cut in the rock. Listen Jim, I don't want to see you get killed. I don't want to see anybody get killed or hurt."

"Haul the machines away."

"That's not going to happen. One man can't stop it. You can't stop it. Put up the rifle, and we'll work it out."

"Hoping you'll excuse me, McCann, but I got places to be before the day goes."

The sheriff brought the news back to McCann that Jim wasn't coming down. "It's not so much do I have grounds to arrest him as can I do it? I could put charges against him on what you and your drivers say, but he isn't surrendering his weapon and coming in. I'm not shooting it out with him on what I got to go on, nor calling in a lot of men to try to run him down. I saw him today because he was willing to see me, but I won't see

him again unless I'm unarmed, on foot, and a long ways from anybody else."

McCann started the dozer, nervous because the noise it made shut him off from everything around him. He didn't know where Jim was. He worked a half-hour and thought maybe he was going to get away with it, and then he was sitting in a lot of diesel fuel. He turned around and found two bullet holes in the fuel tank. Streams of fuel ran onto the ground and onto the back of the seat. He hadn't heard the shots over the engine.

He shut down and scanned the ridges, tried to spot Jim. He'd expected him to be on the east ridge, but the bullets came from the west ridge, maybe in the timber above the low spring.

McCann had his rifle with him, but he couldn't see anything to shoot at. It looked like Jim wasn't shooting as long as the machines were shut down, so McCann went back to town to see what he could do about getting the law into action.

The sheriff agreed he had more to go on, with Jim shooting things up. He took four men up the canyon. They found jackrabbits and coyotes, seven rattlesnakes.

McCann ran the bulldozer when the men went out hunting Jim. He figured Jim would run for high country, but bullets let the water out of his radiator and put a side window out of his pickup. He went madder than hell four-wheeling up toward where he thought Jim was. He couldn't drive the loose slope, and he lost one tire to a bullet.

Jim's cabin burned down that night. Men destroyed his garden. McCann watched for him at the cabin, but Jim didn't go back to the cabin site.

It got into the news. For a man working alone, Jim did a lot. McCann ran cat all one day without interference and then stood armed guard the next day himself, high up, where he could see most of both ridges. But Jim came down the river and up the road and stood there holding his rifle until the driver saw him and shut it down and got off.

Jim did what damage he could to the machine with a high-powered rifle and disappeared into the timber before McCann could clear the point of the ridge and get to where he could see where Jim had been.

Rick wanted to go back then, but he knew he couldn't do anything, because he wouldn't be carrying a rifle, and it was still rifle-carrying time. Jim had said, "You'll know when there's something to do. It won't be what

I'm doing, because this is an old style that's got to go. But you'll see a place they can't go past, and you'll know something to do."

They buried Jim on a Monday. Jack McCann was still in the hospital, would be for a while yet.

Grey rain drifts across the river from Idaho. Rick stayed at the cemetery for a long time after everyone else left.

In some of the news reports, a crazy old hermit fought a heroic battle and lost, and the forces of progress rolled on. In other reports, the battle was not lost. People with political clout were interested in the mountain.

Rick went to the hospital to see McCann, and McCann told him, "The old man didn't win anything but getting his last ticket punched. You can't beat it. No way in the world you can win. I'm not trying to tell you what's right, just trying to tell you how things work. Save your sacred mountain. What's that do? Concrete's got to come from somewhere.

"You buy cement; your friends buy cement. The strongest mountain savers buy cement, don't they? Don't they use concrete? Save this mountain and another one comes down, where people don't care as much. Or that much more limestone gets strip-mined. If they strip mine it, the overburden gets pushed out of the way, and more plant and animal life goes than it would from this near barren mountain. You got tunnel vision.

"Or you save this mountain now, and in a few years, some salesman makes a study of how many jobs can come out of this mountain coming down and being used, and the people build a model of it for posterity and tear it down for prosperity, and you want to know, you're talking to the wrong man anyway.

"I contracted to build the road and haul. Cement company's been here seeing me, and they'd like to buy my contract so they're running the whole show, and I'll probably sell. I doubt I could meet my contract deadlines now anyway. So, for that part of it, you got what you're asking. I'm resigning from it, looks like. But, like I've been saying, that doesn't gain you much. You might as well see that."

Rick went to the cabin site and sifted through the ashes. He found charred, melted, burned-up memories. He took a few square nails that wore shiny in his pocket when he went to the city and repeated and expanded his walking and talking circuits and found more interest than he had before.

Enough interest that he wasn't really needed. The work moved forward. The mountain might be saved. At least tearing the mountain down would be delayed. The cement company worked quickly and skillfully, but the bulk of people and bureaucratic entanglements between the mountain and the bulldozers became daily more ponderous.

Rick had lost more than a deeply-treasured friend. He thought now he might lose more than a sacred mountain. In the midst of people who would work hard to save the limestone mountain, people who treasured what Jim had symbolized, who encouraged Rick in his thoughts and actions, Rick felt more and more isolated, a stranger, an outsider, despite their common cause.

If he received, "Have a good day," he responded, "Sure. Save another whale today. Save another mountain. Have a good day," and he meant it to be funny, a comment on the times, when every laborious step toward good for all needed constant verbal affirmation, like members of a baseball team talking up their spirit on the field.

The people he talked to didn't see his humorous intention. They seemed to worry about what he meant.

He filled his pack. He thought he should write a note to someone (I love you all. I'm fine. Don't worry."). He sat for a long time with paper and pencil, but he found himself unable to begin even the simplest note. He couldn't get Jim off his mind.

Maybe he understood why Jim had been a hermit. Maybe it was the only way you could live and not do damage. He noticed the deterioration of the environment more every day, and he felt it as if every instance of destruction was against his own body.

He went into the Sawtooth wilderness, stone mountains, high timber, cold wind in the early autumn mornings.

He walked all day in intense mountain sunshine. He found a sun-warmed shelter in dark rock and slept. Up again and walking by daylight. Going nowhere exactly, just north and east. He thought he could wait for the falling snow. That could be the way to go, in the wilderness in the snow.

He had a plan worked out. "Or maybe it's a daydream and not a plan," he said, but he saw it like a movie in his mind.

Opening with trucks thundering up the river road. They left a dozer and

a loader.

He was surprised there was no guard with the machinery. "I guess they think old Jim is dead."

Or maybe there would be a guard, but he knew how to take care of a guard.

He was six miles downriver and across the dam when the first charge went off and blew the machinery to hell.

Sheriff's cars and company cars and trucks and sightseers sped up the river road. Rick watched from the hills in Idaho until the road was clear. Then he sent the impulse that lifted 200 yards of road high into the air. It broke up into a billion pieces, floated aloft long enough for the sound of the explosion to smack Rick back a step, then dropped in slow motion into the lake as the shock wave in the earth rolled under his feet. Dust, smoke. Water spouted high. "Wow. What you can do with a little dynamite."

It might be the thing to do, if they brought machines again. He didn't know yet what he would do. Ten days of hiking brought him back into his own territory.

He camped some nights at the cliff house and some in the west ridge timber. Since the place had been in the news, a lot of people had come up the canyon. Beer cans, fireplaces, broken glass. The steep slope is a four-wheel-drive challenge, well-tested now. Someone has dug and sifted in the cliff house.

Rick remembered Jim saying, "Some people, they don't feel anything in a place like that. It goes on around them, but they don't see it or feel it or hear it, because they're not looking or listening, you know how I mean."

Rick felt something. The mountain. A numinous aura that touched sight, hearing, even tactile sensations.

Chilly winds began. In the early hours of the morning, he rearranged his sleeping gear to be warmer. Jim stood in the cliff opening, a dark form against the starlight sky. He said, "Fighting them can't do anything more. This ain't a battle of war on the ground, us with weapons and them with weapons, fighting it out. It's of spirit and understanding. Jack McCann had his ears shut. His spirit was dimmed. We have to decide we're going to listen before we can hear what makes sense."

Rick dreamed of a bear who fought men who came to tear down the mountain. The bear was mortally wounded. His bones fed the machines

that tore up the mountain. His bones were ground up and used for cement. And yet, he was not defeated nor lessened in spirit. The wounded bear never lost the power he gained from battling for truth.

Jim said, "My way ain't your way."

The wounded bear said, "This is the last of this kind of battle. You are in a new time. I'm glad my way was strong and clear, battle and die. Your way will be more difficult than anything I had to face."

In the early morning sunlight, Rick ran downstream, jumping from rock to rock, feet landing on stone in a rapid, uneven rhythm, daring a broken leg. "Leg, leg, mumblety peg. Stone, stone, falling home. Mountain, mountain, I'll keep on countin.'" Up the steep bank at a run. He rolled onto the deep grass, came up running, up and around the spring.

And stopped at the ashes of the cabin. Souvenir hunters have sifted through the ashes. All the remnants, all the artifacts are gone. He leaned against Jim's cherry tree. The bark is scorched from the heat of the cabin fire, and charcoal rubbed off on his shirt.

Rick asked himself, "Who says that's not my style, dynamite and rifles and what the hell, machine guns and grenades? It has to stop somewhere. I could get all the dynamite I need.

"But McCann's right. Blow up the machines. So what? They'll build more. Blow up enough of them, and they'll have to build a whole new plant to keep replacing them. Build the plant out of concrete. Mine the cement to build the plant to build the tractor that mines cement."

He took the square nails from his pocket and pushed them into the soft ground under the cherry tree and smoothed organic detritus over them. He didn't want any thing. Just the memories, tumbling images in his mind.

He knew what Jim said, "We have to decide to listen before we can hear what makes sense." He tried to quiet the busyness in his mind. He heard the earth, the sky, the stream running toward the river that runs to the ocean, every rock singing its song in the current, the harmony of all the voices together.

He might never know if the forces of destruction can be stopped. He did know the Wounded Bear never lost the power of battling for truth. Rick claimed the truth that Wounded Bear had given him, the truth that Jim had given him, even the truth that McCann had given him. He knew it was time to gather his forces and do what he could do, wherever he could

do it. It is wider than one mountain. There is still the entire earth, all of life.

He slid down the bank and ran down the creek, jumping from rock to rock, going slower now, sure of his footing, down into the narrows of the canyon as white clouds flew across the pale blue sky above him and reflected their rapid, white flight in the running, singing water around him.