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### Carving Black Walnut

The hottest days of summer ended. Nights turned cool. My marriage ended. Much of the way I lived dissolved.

The chaos of marriage breaking up began to resolve into a calmer, more peaceful existence. Autumn gave way to winter. I moved to a cabin in a hollow on the west slope of the foothills of the Sierras. Vandals had damaged the cabin. I repaired it to pay the rent, replaced broken windows, replaced broken shakes in the roof, replaced burned boards in the back deck, cleaned up garbage left in the cabin and the parking area.

I wrote stories and poems, invented new songs, and explored the mountain around me, free of any commitment to time, to people for a few weeks, for a few months, for now.

I tried to decide what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I didn't want my jobs or my living to bring harm to the earth, to other species, to other people. I tried to see what that left me to do. I worked odd jobs for people who lived on the ridge. I landscaped yards, carpentered, repaired plumbing, shoveled snow, replaced broken windows, whatever people would pay me to do so I could pay for my food and pay all my other expenses for living.

At daybreak, I put my guitar in its case, carried it, and hiked a deer trail through ponderosa pine trees and manzanita brush, over a ridge, across the highway, across an ancient footbridge suspended above the clear-running creek. Clean water ran under the bridge, under my feet. Moss attached to the bank under the water swirled long tendrils into the current. Moss still hung onto some pale leaves from fall of the year.

The sun rose and shone into tops of trees. I hiked along another ridge halfway out the old cemetery road and toward Sam's place, isolated on the edge of the canyon. Clouds closed off blue sky and brought rain and snow, mixed together. I walked through cold, wet wind and then stepped out of the wind into Sam's front room. His wife had gone to town to work, and his children had gone to school.

We arranged chairs so we could play guitars and sing songs. I saw a

dark, triangular piece of wood in his wood box. I picked it up and said, "This is black walnut. You can't burn this. It's valuable. They sell this stuff by the pound."

Sam said, "One of the places I cleaned out, they put that with the stuff they wanted me to haul to the dump. It was a blank for a rifle stock, but it's cracked, so they threw it away. You want it?"

"I do. I could carve that. Anything but a rifle stock."

"It's yours. After we play some music."

We played songs and worked out rough spots in the way our music went together. I worked out sounds as I went. Some of the sounds from my guitar seemed to work into the songs I invented.

I had trouble staying with what Sam played. He was patient with me, but he didn't teach me much. I think he enjoyed understanding more about musical structure than I did, and I think he enjoyed waiting for me to catch up, waiting to see if I would eventually understand enough about how the song we worked on was built that I could play along with him. I was glad to work on songs that way for that moment, for a while.

When I led our music through the roughness of a song I had worked out, he stayed with me as I played what I knew were not standard song structures.

We drank tea and visited and ate lunch and played more music.

I hiked the trail home at dusk. Wind blew clouds toward the Sacramento Valley and left the sky clear. Moon and stars gave me light as day's light faded. I carried my guitar and the piece of black walnut.

The next morning, I carried the walnut wood out into sunlight. I cut off the narrow end of the triangle, where the wood had split, and I started carving. A small spiral in the wood's grain suggested a cheek and an eye, so I carved away wood toward a face in the wood.

Through the days that followed, the heavy, dark brown, close-grained piece of wood slowly took on form that matched forms in my mind. Forms in my mind changed as I dug farther into the wood and carved where the grain of the wood directed me. Carving the hard wood was a slow process.

On one of my infrequent trips to the valley town below the mountain, I walked into a hardware store and studied carving tools. I could see the right tools might make the carving process easier, so I bought a set of hand tools.

I started forming the wood into two women, two generations, back to back, an older, heavier woman facing one way and sharing part of her back with a younger, slimmer, woman, large with child, facing the other way. The heavy, dark wood began to represent three generations, one generation not yet born.

I carved the black walnut a while most days. I carved the tightly-spiraling grain until it looked like a young woman's cheek and eye, then her shoulder, her arm, and behind her, growing from her, an older woman beginning. I smoothed the upper part of the figures with sandpaper. Carving became a study in blending deep patience with vision that developed more and more detail as I worked with the wood.

Except when it was raining or snowing, I worked outside on a rough table I hammered together out of scrap wood. When it snowed or rained, I worked inside. I had no electricity, so it was darker inside, but I worked partly by touch, felt the smoothness of the wood, held it up to the light coming in the window to see what I needed to do next.

I hadn't finished the figures emerging from black walnut when spring came to the mountains. Once again, I bid contracts for blister rust control, quiet work with hand tools, no machines, no poisons, for the Forest Service in the forests of the Sierras. I got some of the contracts, and I gave the cabin back to the people who owned it.

I worked alone that year and camped in the forests where I worked. I took everything I owned with me. I had no place to store possessions. I couldn't keep much beyond the essentials for survival and work.

I sold my carving tools. I gave the sculpture to a friend. She said, "It doesn't have to be smoothed out and polished. It's emerging. This one emerges from this one, and another will emerge. The form still emerges from the wood."

Yes. Still emerging. Like my life. Like life.

I thanked the wood for my experience with it, for the figures I found in it. I thanked the tree the wood came from. I thanked the force of life for growth, for learning I gained from the wood, from carving, from finding figures in heavy, dark wood. I kept memories of seeking form as rich, newly-opened smells of wood rose to my face in sunshine or inside the cabin where it was darker but sheltered from rain and falling snow.

I remembered sunshine of late winter soaking into me as I carved. I

remembered the trees and brush and grass and forbes that grew around me on the mountain where I lived when I carved.

Higher on the mountain, I worked into summer on blister-rust contracts. Carving dark wood lived in my memories. I walked through forest and soaked up sunshine. Everything I had learned from carving, from living blended into sunshine, into summer, into the present around me as I walked into my future.

I didn't know what I was going to do with my existence. Defining my future mattered less and less to me. Moving into my future was like carving black walnut with no clear idea of what I worked toward, defining what the wood would be by what I discovered about it each day. I guided my steps forward by a strong value: Do no harm, to other people, to other species, to the earth.

Walking into my future was like walking in sunshine across steep slope, between trees, through growing brush, grass, flowers growing toward the sky, growing toward blossoming on the mountain above a clean, cold stream running wildly beneath budding currant bushes toward the ocean far below us, across a broad valley and over another mountain range.

Sunshine soaked into me. Anxiety about the world, about my future, my life, lessened. My constantly-whirling mind slowed. I felt more at peace than I remembered feeling at any time since I was a child.

Answers to every question about living, about my life, would come to me slowly, like figures emerging from black walnut, like water running toward the sea, like sunshine soaking into me and causing wild plants all around me on this mountain to grow toward the sky, to grow toward blossoming, to grow toward seeding future life.