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3,168 words

Summer Time

July 25. Heavy frost in Whitney Valley that nestled between steep ridges high in The Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon. Sun rose above dark stone of Cottonwood Bluff, tall above the mountain valley. Ice crystals on tall grass refracted sunshine. Rainbow spheres sparkled beside the road and radiated brilliant colors into early morning. Smell of mown mountain wild hay changed with every shift in breeze from across the river where we had cut different kinds of wildflowers in every swath gathering behind the machines.

I walked down the gravel road and looked across the river to the meadow as I walked. Over by the timber, elk grazed just above where we'd cut hay the day before, where windrows of hay waited to dry in morning sun. I walked into the back door of the cabin where Jim slept, banged on the walls, and stomped my feet. Jim pulled the covers up over his head until his feet stuck out the bottom. I said, "There's elk on the meadow. About forty of 'em."

He sat up in bed. "Any bulls?"

"How do you tell the bulls?"

"They got antlers on their heads. Kind of like little trees branching up."

"Oh. No. No bulls."

"Let's go shoot one anyway. A yearling would taste mighty good."

"Let's go get the swathers ready to run, come back and eat breakfast, then cut hay til dark."

Jim lay back down and pulled the covers up over his head. "That wouldn't be any fun."

"Beats working for a living."

"What time is it?"

"Five forty-two."

"What's that mean?"

"Eighteen minutes till six. It's this three dollar digital watch I got. I just read what it says, and it says to the minute, not like the old round face, where you see what quadrant the long hand's in and name it. I'd have been here earlier, but pretty heavy dew last night, has to dry some before we cut it."

He threw the covers off, got up, and dressed.

We drove the lumbering swathers back and forth and back and forth across the sawmill field, cut twelve-foot-wide swaths and left the cut-off mountain meadow green grasses neatly windrowed at the center of the swaths. Dust smell from wide

wheels and smell of juices from just-cut plants rose toward sun.

We finished cutting the sawmill field. I drove the gas swather up the graveled county road, turned left off the road down the dirt road to the river, and crossed The Burnt River at the shallow ford. Jim followed me in the ranch pickup. Shallow, late summer water swirled around the swather's tires and the pickup's tires. Muddy water spread lazily downstream. I parked the swather close to the river and shut it off, climbed down and climbed up into the pickup with Jim, and we drove back to the sawmill field.

Jim brought the diesel swather across the river, and I drove the pickup. The pickup has to come along because it carries all the tools, fuel, and replacement sickle-bars.

10:12. I cut too close to the timber and jammed a big limb, hidden in tall, lush grass, into the auger. I shut down, climbed down with the big wrench, and turned the auger backward until it rolled the limb out. I raised the header and checked the sickle-bar. Nothing broken.

Down by the river, a quarter of a mile downslope from me, Jim's swather sat at an angle in bright sunshine, like he'd dropped a drive wheel into a hole. I cut the rest of the way around the top and down alongside the ditch to the river. Jim had the chain hooked up to his swather and laid out on the ground. Metal smells mixed in air around us with smells from plants, from water. Jim sneezed from dust, hay dust, dirt dust.

I turned around and backed up. Jim hooked the free end of the chain to my swather and climbed back up into his. We both poured on power, and his swather roared up out of the hole. He raised the header and shut off the motor. I shut off my machine, and we cleared his header of the dirt he'd cut loose as he dropped into the hole. We put a sharp sickle-bar in his machine.

The temperature hit about ninety-five degrees. We sweat and wiped dust around in sweat. Jim sneezed again. When we were ready to cut again, I said, "Let's jump in the river before we start up."

"Jump in the river?" Jim stripped and dove off the bank, splash. I hit the water right behind him, washed the dust and grit off, swam up and down, sat on the bottom a minute, then up and out.

Jim said, "Boy, you're the best boss I ever had. Nobody ever said jump in the river, least not meanin' I should actually take a swim."

"I'm not the boss."

"That's what John said. He said on this ranch you're the boss, so do what you tell me to do. You say jump in the river, I'll jump in the river."

"Okay, but I'm promoting you to equal boss with me. I

generally refuse to do anybody else's thinking for them. Juniper and Amanda some, because I'm responsible for them, and they aren't grown up yet, but even there, generally sparse."

I stood on the sandbar and dried myself with sunshine. Swallows flew their rapid, zig-zagging flight above the river water, caught insects and then turned nestward to feed their young. When I picked up my clothes and started to dress, Jim walked up out of the river and started dressing. "How long till lunch?"

I picked up my trousers and dug my watch out of the pocket. "It's eleven o'clock. What time do you want to eat?"

"Whenever you say."

"Let's cut hay till one and then eat."

When we leaned up against a tire, and ate lunch in the shade of the swather, Jim said, "What happened to the band on that watch?" A red-tailed hawk soared above the meadow, took its pick of meaty delicacies mowed by swathers and left as free lunch for local predators and scavengers.

"I took it off. It pulled my hair. I like pocket watches better, but as far as I know, they don't make these super-cheap ones in pocket watches."

"I wouldn't own a damned watch."

"I like to know what time it is."

"I know when the sun comes up. I know when I'm hungry."

I forgot to take that watch out of my pocket, and Laura ran it through a washing machine in town at the Laundromat, and that was the end of time for that watch.

Jim gave me a ten-dollar pocket watch for my birthday. It was too big for my watch pocket, but I tucked it into the backpack. I take with me when I work.

A young coyote trotted along the mowed hay ground, close to the timber, relaxed but ready to gallop into the trees if any of the machines rumbling along the meadow exuded humans. \

Every day, we cut hay. Wayne's crew raked the hay two days after we cut it, and the big baler gobbled up the hay a day behind the rake and dumped 4 foot by 4 foot by 8 foot bales, 1400 pounds of wild mountain meadow hay each, off the back of the machine onto the stubble turning yellow gold in late summer, high elevation sunshine. Jim and I pushed the swathers hard into tall grasses and stayed far enough ahead of the baling crew for the hay to dry. We cut hay till dark most days and hung onto a slim lead.

Beavers maintained their dams in the river, lazed in the river in summer and harvested cambium from the willows growing thick along the river.

Jim and I jumped in the river at lunch time and sometimes again in the middle of the afternoon. It's easier to run the hot,

rough-riding, dusty swathers a long day if we wash off the sweat and grit and swim a while in summer's shallow waters.

Evenings, when we shut down, we jumped in the river again. I jumped in, washed, climbed out, and toweled dry, got clean clothes from my pack, dressed, and headed for home, but Jim stayed at the river and swam a while, even on cool evenings. He goes all amphibian anytime you get him near water. Sometimes I had to drive back down to the river and drag him out to come up and eat dinner about to go cold on the table because he didn't have much idea of time passing.

Sixteen days we cut hay, broke down, and repaired hot, greasy machinery in hot sunshine on wild mountain meadow, a million miles from anything but elk, deer, coyotes, hawks, ravens, and sandhill cranes. Jim said he looked up from wrenches, bolts, grease, hay dust, and hot metal of the diesel swather and saw three fledgling sandhill cranes walking behind their parents across the meadow from him when he took out a broken auger shaft and put in a new one. We left 800 acres of stubble and 1,964 bales of hay behind us.

We drove the swathers 20 miles down the winding dirt road beside the river flowing through the steep canyon down the mountain, to the boss's home ranch near Unity, and left them there. Jim went back to work at the home ranch, down near Unity.

I worked on the fence up in the timber above the meadow, trying to get it in shape before they turned cattle onto the mowed meadows. It became clear I wasn't going to make it in time, so I called John. "Last winter blew a lot of trees down on the fence in the timber along the west boundary. Lots of beetle-killed lodgepole pines up there and lots of wind to bring them down. I'm going to have to have help if we want that fence in shape before the cattle go onto the meadow."

John said, "I'll send Jim up as soon as he finishes swathing down here."

A few days later, Jim drove back up to Whitney Valley and worked with me three more weeks. Our chain saws screamed under load. Sharp chains spit shavings and sawdust. We cut blown-down trees off the fence in dense timber near the bottom of the ridge. We replaced bent steel posts and repaired smashed fence, dropped beetle-killed lodgepoles and cleared a safer access road along the fence. Gasoline smell and saw exhaust and sawdust and cut wood smells joined other smells on that side of the meadow, rose up the mountain.

Autumn touched deciduous growth in the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon. Alder brush and willows along the river turned red and yellow and started dropping leaves. Aspen turned yellow, and leaves blew in sharp wind. Western larch,

the biggest trees in the forest on the steep slopes above Whitney Valley, turned yellow and shed their needles into autumn wind.

We fought barbed wire hot afternoons, sweat pints, and started to cuss the job.

I said, “Every time I get to hating barbed-wire too much, I back up and remember I worked in a die-casting factory in Berkeley for a while. In the city, indoors, no windows, at night. I worked in a service-station in northern California on concrete and asphalt. City buildings, concrete, asphalt, all hold the heat. Sometimes the thermometer read a hundred and twenty-five. Fixing fence in the mountains beats any other job I’ve ever had.”

Jim asked, “Is it lunch time yet?”

“We can eat if you want to.”

“If we eat too early, we won’t make it through the afternoon.”

“Well, you know when the sun comes up, and you know when you’re hungry.”

“Gonna make me ask, ain’t ya?”

“Ask what?”

“What time is it?”

“Five after eleven.”

“Oh boy. My stomach says one o’clock.”

“We can eat.”

“No, let’s wait till one, or the afternoon’ll go on forever.”

After lunch, down the fenceline a ways, we spiked and wired together split western larch and built a rock jack, loaded it with rocks, and stretched wire to it. Jim asked, “How long till quittin time?”

“It’s three o’clock.”

“We fixed a lot of fence today. Let’s go swap this tractor and trailer for my pickup and drive up to Trout Creek Reservoir and go for a swim.”

“Okay.”

Trout Creek Reservoir is clear, cold water. Weeds grow thick in shallow water near the shore. They didn’t bother Jim, but I didn’t like the feel of them, and I didn’t like not being able to see down into the water, so I swam through weeds to the deeper, clear water, while Jim swam his way, wherever he wanted to swim.

The sun dropped toward the western mountains above us.

Jim swam to the dirt dam where I stood in sunshine. “What time did Laura say for supper?”

“Six.”

“What time is it?”

“My watch is up in your pickup.”

“You hungry?”

“My stomach’s starting to digest itself.”

“Let’s head up the road.”

We met Laura, Juniper, and Amanda coming back from Sumpter just as we pulled up to the highway. We followed them back, built a roaring fire in the cookstove, and cooked bacon for bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches. The fire heated the house too hot, but we all walked out, sat on the front porch, ate and laughed and told each other what we had done all day. Juniper and Amanda said they wanted to go swimming with us up at Trout Creek Reservoir.

I said, “Jim and I’ll take a day off before the week’s over, and we’ll all go up there and swim.” And we did, drove down the steep dirt road five of us crowded into the cab of Jim’s pickup and swam and wandered through the afternoon so far from civilization, we had nothing to hear but ourselves and the wildlife sharing the mountain and the day with us.

Jim’s grandfather gave him a silver pocket watch. A real pretty old-timer. He brought it back to Whitney Valley with him after we took a weekend off, and he showed it to me. I asked him, “What time is it?”

“Two-thirty.”

“Can’t be. That thing must be off.”

“I thought it was. I’ll watch it and see how it does.”

Jim’s silver pocket watch gained sometimes and lost sometimes. Minutes one time, and hours another. He put it away in his possibles box. “It don’t matter. I still don’t want to carry a damned watch.”

We finished that piece of fence runs all the way down the west boundary in the timber, and Jim went back to the boss’s home ranch and worked down there.

I repaired fence that goes by Whitney spring. Magpies and crows flew through sunshine in sagebrush ahead of me. Two sandhill cranes walked stately along the far edge of the meadow below the ridge I worked along. The tall birds walked into the dense willows along Camp Creek.

I stretched barbed-wire tight and fastened it to steel fenceposts in autumn sunshine. A falcon flew ninety miles an hour past my head, so close, wind from its flight banged against me, and I thought I’d been shot, until my thought caught up with my senses, and I realized I’d seen the fast-flying small grey raptor before it disappeared, prey-bound, into sage brush ahead of me.

I put what was left of my lunch under the trailer I pulled behind the tractor, with my pocket watch in the sack. I forgot it was there, and I ran over it when I started home. Made pudding out of the banana and reduced my watch to a junk pile.

I didn’t care anymore what time it was. I could look at the sun and say the time within a half-hour. I worked far enough

from home, I didn't go home for lunch most days. I ate when I was hungry. If I got home late for supper, the food was still good. If I was early, I quit for the day anyway. I was getting enough work done.

Jim got tired of feeding cows and quit his job. He came up to see us. He said, "I'm ready to do somethin' different. I'd like to get me a little stake together and just kick around winter and part of spring. You think I learned enough about using a saw up on that fence line to be a good wood-cutter?"

"Sure. You're a pro now."

"Pro enough to be a partner cuttin' wood when you go at it?"

"No need to wait till I start. You know enough to work by yourself if you're careful."

He cut firewood from dead lodgepole along the ranch's west boundary. I finished ranch work for the season and joined him cutting wood.

That first cold morning we drove out together to cut wood, we stopped on bench ground above the river and watched a great blue heron walk along low ground down by the river. It waded into the water and then stood still, looking for fish.

After we sat there a while, Jim said, "I want to get my saw runnin' before sunrise. What time you got?"

"I don't have it. We'll have time to cut some wood before sunrise."

"You don't have it? You don't have a watch?"

"No. I ruined that watch you gave me. Forgot I stuck it under the wheel in the shade, and I ran over it. I decided to quit thinking about what time it is."

"Huh. That kinda surprises me. You always used to know to the minute. Well, we'll be all right." He pulled his grandfather's silver watch from his pocket. "I got this one fixed."

I looked at him. He opened the engraved cover and exposed the face, with the second hand ticking its way around, timed just right. "Well, how often do you see a solid silver case like this? Jeweler I took it to said just the case is worth fifty bucks. It's worth a lot more in good shape. What's the use of carryin' around a watch if it don't work?"

I didn't say anything, just looked at him. He said, "It's a half-hour till sunrise. Well, don't you ever want to know what time it is?" He put the watch back into his pocket, dropped his pickup into gear, and we drove across the meadow toward the timber.

I thought about it almost all the way to the timber. Then I said, "I guess I do sometimes. I guess somebody has to carry a watch. Some days, it's cloudy all day, and you can't see where the sun is. I've cut wood when the snow came down so hard I had no idea in a snowstorm where the sun was. I'll probably do

that again some time, and I might want to know what time it is."