

THE LONG RIDE HOME

FICTION BY CHINLE MILLER

Glenwood Springs, Colorado

After quickly pausing one last time to gaze at the sheer maroon-red cliffs and forested ridges high above, Jim Bone stepped onto the train.

Worried that Jim might change his mind, the train made a clanking sound, lurched a bit, and began slowly moving, pulling out of the station. The massive engine let out a series of sharp whistles that echoed all the way up-canyon to the little valley of Four Mile Creek. There, the sound bounced off the cinderblock walls of Jim's house, then bent around to the back yard where Jim had often sat in the evenings by the choke-cherry bushes and iris, listening to that same haunting sound, wondering where the big silver train was going, who was on it, what stories they lived.

Now he'd find out.

Jim settled into one of the seats in the almost-empty car, as far from any other passengers as possible. Train now picking up speed, he looked out the window at the big river alongside the tracks, then raised his eyes just in time to catch one last glimpse of Glenwood Springs, his home for the last 10 years. That glimpse was an accident—right now, he wished he were anywhere else.

As the train worked harder and faster on making Jim's wish come true, the white-tipped waves of the Colorado River fell behind, engulfed by the deep maroon-walled canyon. The chika chika of the tracks drummed songs of rambling adventure. A mile or two out, Glenwood was already in the rear-view mirror of Jim's memory.

Back at that little cinderblock house on Four Mile Creek, Jim's girlfriend Natalie was talking on the phone to her best friend Patsy, no idea that Jim was on the train. The day after tomorrow, Natalie would receive an envelope, postmarked Green River, Utah, with the keys to Jim's old Oldsmobile and a note asking her to pick up the car at the train station. The note would be scrawled on the back of a California Zephyr ticket to Salt Lake City. Natalie would cry for a moment, then call Patsy.



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The train, finally up to speed, emerged from the deep ruby canyon of the Colorado River and rolled through the middle of the little coal town of New Castle, rattling the pop bottles in the old faded-green tarpaper-wrapped grocery store near the tracks. A few more miles and the train slowed at a yellow-brick station with the word "Rifle" above the door.

Jim rose to get off. He could call the county road shop from the station phone here in Rifle and tell Jerry he was sick, then hitch a ride back to Glenwood, go back to work tomorrow, and nobody would ever guess how close he'd come to leaving.

The train stopped long enough to take on the mail, no passengers, then slowly started up again, taking its time, waiting for a small herd of mule deer to cross the tracks on their way to the river for a drink. Jim had plenty of time to get off, but as the train picked up speed, Jim finally sat back down, unaware of the gray-haired couple in the rear of the car who were watching the back of his blue-and-brown plaid wool jacket—the man wondering why Jim hadn't gotten off the train, the woman wondering why this handsome man in his prime seemed troubled.

Gathering momentum, the train rolled through sagebrush flats and headed for more

river canyon. Jim swayed with the motion, lost in a deep sense of regret, a profound feeling in a place where Jim hadn't felt anything for a long time.

He'd felt this regret since early this morning, when Natalie told him she'd taken the pup to the pound—the little leopard-spotted Heeler puppy he'd found by the county road up near the old Sunlight Mine, the pup who'd been riding next to him in the road grader for the last two weeks while he promised Nat he'd find it a home.

Last night, Natalie had taken it to the pound on her way to work at the Riviera Restaurant. Jim had gone to bed early after a 16-hour stint working on a bridge abutment that was trying to wash out. Even though Natalie had warned him, he felt betrayed when he found the pup missing this morning. But deep inside he knew it was more than the pup that was wrong.

Walking out the door without a word after she'd told him, he drove his Olds down to the dog jail, that dingy yellow building that used to be the people jail.

"Jim, I'm not supposed to tell people where the pets go, cause sometimes it can cause problems," the shelter custodian, Joe, stumbled on his words. "Usually we have dogs in here for awhile, but that pup was picked up last evening right after your gal brought it in. It was taken by a woman goin' through on her way back over to Utah. That pup seemed to really like her, Jim, if it's any consolation. She said she's out a lot in the backcountry. That pup will have a good life, chasin' bunnies."

"What was her name, Joe? Where can I get ahold of her?"

"Jim, I can't tell you that, cause I don't know. It was late and I didn't do the paperwork

like I should've. She drives a little old Willys jeep—green, beat up, Utah plates. Nice lookin' gal, sandy-colored hair. That's all I can tell you Jim. I'm sure sorry."

Jim silently walked out of the pound, got in his Olds and sat there for a minute, then drove around town for awhile as if he might see the old green jeep that had taken his pup. Finally, for no real reason, on impulse, he turned into the parking lot by the train

station.

Just as the passenger train rolled in from the east, a sense of futility crashed hard in Jim against a deep feeling of bitterness, like two massive train cars coupling.

Jim really had no intention of leaving, he hadn't even considered it. But something drove him to walk over to the ticket window and get in line behind a fellow in a well-cut deep blue suit who was arguing with the ticket agent in a subdued voice.

Turning from the window, the fellow asked Jim. "Would you like a ticket? They won't give me a refund, and I need to finish up some business here. My bad luck is your good luck, sir, if you're wanting to go west."

Still feeling that searing sense of hopelessness, Jim took it, but he really didn't care if he got a free ticket or not. He didn't care about much of anything right then, except his missing buddy, little Blue.

But maybe the free ticket was a sign, a change of direction somehow in a life that had long needed bearings. Jim had been wanting to go back to the desert for years, but his life in Glenwood just slipped by, day by day, a haze of routine comfort, never getting

ahead enough to do anything else. And now little Blue was way ahead of him in making a new life, going west to Utah in some old green jeep.

And that train sitting there, that train he'd heard every day for 10 years—that big silver train was going west, too, to Salt Lake City—Temple City, Utah, on the other side of the Zion Curtain.

And so, unexpectedly, Jim had stepped onto the train.

Now, as the train left Rifle and continued west, Jim could see the engines curving around way ahead, following the rolling river into De-Beque Canyon. He'd heard there were wild horses here, but the odds of seeing them from a noisy train were slim.



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having been an Episcopal priest,
and his brother Roger was now in hell—
Green River, Utah, that is.**

Maybe he should get off in Grand Junction, he thought. It was only 85 miles from home—he could still make that phone call and get back to Glenwood today. But maybe he should just keep going—it had been years since he'd been in Utah, and that had been just a quick visit to Bluff, the little town along the San Juan River where he grew up with his brother Roger—they'd been raised there by their mom's brother.

His uncle was now in heaven, having been an Episcopal priest, and his brother Roger was now in hell—Green River, Utah, that is. Jim smiled wryly, thinking of all the times he'd razzed his brother about living in the remote town out in the middle of that sweeping empty desert.

He hadn't seen Roger in three years. Maybe he'd just go on over there for a few days, then head back home. Hell, maybe he'd just go the run of the ticket to Salt Lake, become a Mormon, get a job, and start a new life there. He liked toying with the idea.

He was feeling a little better now, and as the train edged next to the yellow cliffs of De-Beque Canyon, Jim started singing to himself softly.

next page...



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