

# THE LONG RIDE HOME (CONTINUED)

-----CHINLE MILLER

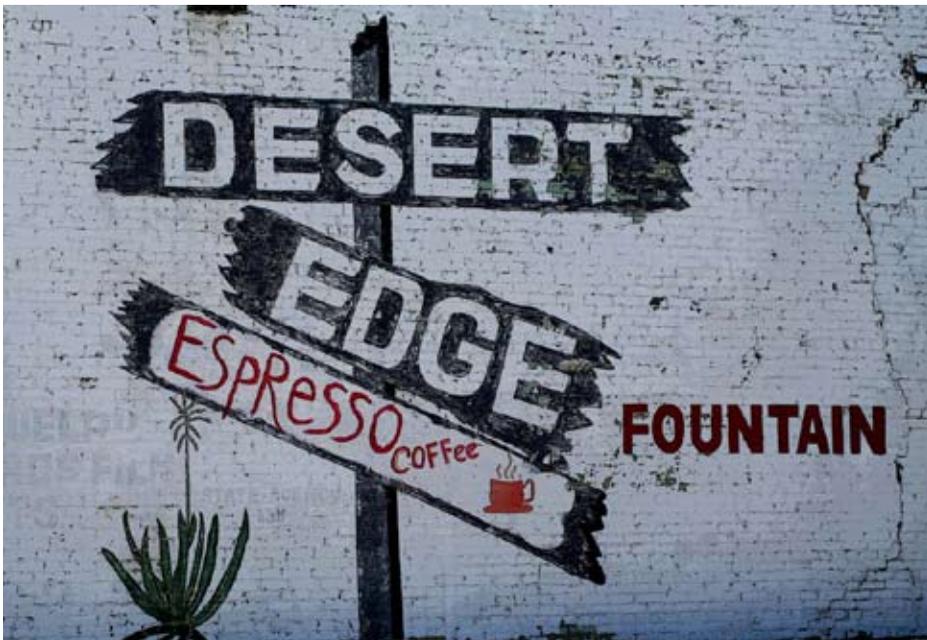
*Ramblin' rose, ramblin' rose, How I love you, heaven knows. Wild and windblown  
That's how you've grown, Who can cling to a ramblin' rose.*

Behind him, the gray-haired woman heard the tune, looked out the window, and began humming along. The gray-haired man, immersed in a story in the paper about old-timers, didn't hear anything.

Hearing her humming, Jim turned. The woman smiled. He touched his hat brim in return. He must be feeling better, the gray-haired woman thought.

The river canyon suddenly opened into a wide valley, and they now passed by peach orchards interspersed with picturesque farm houses, just on the outskirts of Grand Junction. Soon the train began to slow as it negotiated the streets of the city. Jim looked down at the drivers in the passenger cars waiting at each crossing and wondered what their lives were like. He waved back at a couple of red-headed kids on bikes. As the train rolled to a stop, a voice came over a scratchy speaker:

"Folks, we're in Grand Junction, Colorado. We'll be here for 20 minutes. There's a snack bar here and telephones. If you get off, please have your tickets ready when you reboard. Thanks for riding the California Zephyr with us. Our next stop will be Thompson, Utah."



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On the sidewalk in front of the station was a little portable snack bar with sandwiches and drinks. The gray-haired woman was ordering muffins and tea. Jim ordered a ham sandwich and black coffee. Up close, the woman looked to be in her early-70s, Jim thought. She was slight and wiry, and her tanned and lined face spoke of a life in the outdoors, a life in wind and sun.

The woman smiled at Jim and asked, "Are you enjoying the ride?" Jim replied, "I am. I haven't been on a train since I was a kid."

"We're getting off soon, in Thompson. It'll be good to get home. Where are you headed?"

Jim surprised himself with his answer, "Green River. My brother has a melon farm there and I'm going to go work for him. I was born and raised in the desert, and I'm kind of in the mood to go back for awhile."

The woman extended her hand. "Nice to meet you. You know, we're only about 25 miles from Green River—come on over and visit us at the Rancho Not So Grande, about a mile up Thompson Canyon. I'm Mattie Davis."

Coffee in one hand, Jim stuck the sandwich in his jacket pocket so he could shake her hand. Back on the train, Mattie introduced Jim to her husband, Jack Davis. Jack seemed

detached, now reading about Paris hairstyles in a magazine someone had left on the next seat. Jack loved to read, but his standard fare was either Louis L'Amour or the *Blue Mountain Journal* from down in Monticello.

He'd never seen *Vogue Magazine*. Now this was different!

Soon the train was on its way, dropping down through the drainage of Salt Creek into Horsethief Canyon, there meeting its old friend the Colorado River once again. Horsethief Canyon soon merged with the multicolored walls of Ruby Canyon, tall ramparts streaked with desert varnish, inky black on crimson. Jim saw a huge Bald Eagle rise from the river with a fish in its talons, scattering a flock of smaller birds before it like prismatic speckles against the sun.

Huge ancient cottonwood trees bent over the river like monks, blessing their beloved and holy water with outstretched gnarly arms wearing a hint of spring green. Flotillas of early-arriving geese left snowflake tracks on the thin-edged ice before hopping into the river, oblivious to the cold water in their comfy down jackets.

As the train rattled on, Jim caught a quick glimpse up Rattlesnake Canyon, narrow and deep, elegant arches carved high above in the Entrada sandstone. Someday he would come back and hike up there, walking out onto the highest arch of all, standing with arms outstretched, just to see what it felt like to be out in thin air like that eagle he'd just seen.

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Suddenly the light coming in through the windows went dim, then bright again, then dim, and Jim realized there must be another set of tracks here, as another train was passing them only a few feet away, going toward where they'd just been. It was a freight train, its huge round cars painted with the words "Corn Syrup."

The California Zephyr slowed almost imperceptibly as it began the climb back up out of the river canyon, up onto the Mancos flats of the Cisco Desert above. Following the river would soon be impossible, for its course churned its way wall-to-wall through Westwater Canyon, thundering and driving its spring snowmelt through places like the Room of Doom and Skull Cave, places where trains weren't welcome.

Jim now noticed a rough two-track road, almost a trail, paralleling the train, following the turns and bends of the tracks so closely that the train would surely brush against any vehicle there. Someone had recently driven it, leaving narrow tire-tracks in the soft dirt, tracks that still had a soft dusting of unmelted snow. Jim wondered why anyone would be way out here—it was too early for a rancher to be grazing stock.

As they neared the little settlement of Cisco, the whistle sounded. Train clattering over road crossing, Jim caught a quick glimpse of a little olive-colored jeep waiting for the train to pass. In it were two passengers—the driver, a woman with sandy brown hair—and a little merle dog, black and white spots blending into a dusty blue color, eyes wide at the sight of the big blue train.

The image was quickly gone, left behind in the clacking of the rails. Jim jumped up, "Blue! It's Blue!"

At the same time, Mattie said, "Look, Davis!" She nudged him, "Pops, we just passed Callie!"

They soon reached the station at Thompson, where Mattie helped her husband Jack collect his new-found assortment of reading materials. Mattie paused as she passed Jim.

"Come on by sometime, Jim, and I'll introduce you to our friend Callie. She comes by our place quite often, especially when she needs to write up her archaeology reports. See ya soon."

A half-hour later, Jim stepped down off the train, finally back home in the desert.

He felt suddenly free, carefree, no luggage, no baggage. Waiting in the dark by the closed station with its art deco glassblock windows, he watched the train slowly disappear around a curve to the west. He quickly knelt down, putting his ear to the rails.

Standing back up, Jim shook his fist in mock anger. "Lying Hollywood bastards! You can't hear the train through the rails."

Down a dirt street with a faded "Broadway" sign, Jim walked slowly toward the lights of downtown, where he could barely make out the flashing neon sign of the Robbers Roost Motel. He soon neared a little bar with "Billiards" painted in ten-foot letters on its dingy white clapboard side. "Back at 1," said the hand-scrawled curled-up yellowed sign in the window. Jim smiled—the owner must've got on the train and never came back, just like that, no luggage, nothin'. Probably over in Glenwood Springs right now, eating linguini at the Riviera.

As Jim walked by the desultory old bar, he noticed two skinny little strays watching him from the alley, eyes shining in the dark. He stopped and called to them.

"C'mon out kids, what's up?"

The dogs hesitated and started to run, then turned back and watched him, warily. Jim called again, then, remembering the long-forgotten sandwich he'd bought in Grand Junction, took it out of his jacket pocket and tossed a small piece in their direction. One little dog turned tail and ran, but the other quickly snatched up the piece of bread, gulping it down. The dog then sat and watched Jim as the other dog, obviously from the same litter, slowly came out of the shadows.

Jim, now engrossed with the little strays, tossed two pieces of bread midway between the dogs and himself, then lay down in the middle of the dark empty street, pretending to ignore the young dogs, talking softly. Only in Green River, Utah, could you lay in the middle of the street and not get run over, Jim thought, smiling. Smelling the sandwich, the dogs eventually came to him, warily eating from his hand, finally letting Jim pet them, still half-afraid.

Jim stood and began slowly walking in the direction of his brother's house, a mile or so away towards the river road. The dogs hesitated, ready to run back to the shelter of the dark alley, knowing their luck was too good to last. After a moment, Jim turned and looked back, and suddenly a strange sense of peace flowed through him.

He whistled to the dogs gently. "C'mon, let's go home—it's way past time for us to go home." The dogs followed, wagging and dancing happily while jumping up to gingerly touch cold noses to his open hands.

Several months later, nearly two hundred miles to the east, Natalie soaked luxuriantly in the steamy waters of the Glenwood Hot Springs Pool, watching the last failing rays of sunset above those inspiring maroon cliffs.

Her new boyfriend sat on the edge of the pool, feet dangling in warm water and a shroud of steam floating around his straight black hair. Tony was the cook at the Riviera, the restaurant where Natalie waitressed.

Now Tony paid the rent at the cinderblock house on Four Mile. In the afternoons, before he and Natalie would go to work, Tony relaxed in the back yard by the chokecherry bushes and iris, wondering where the big silver train was off to this time, who was on it, what stories they lived.

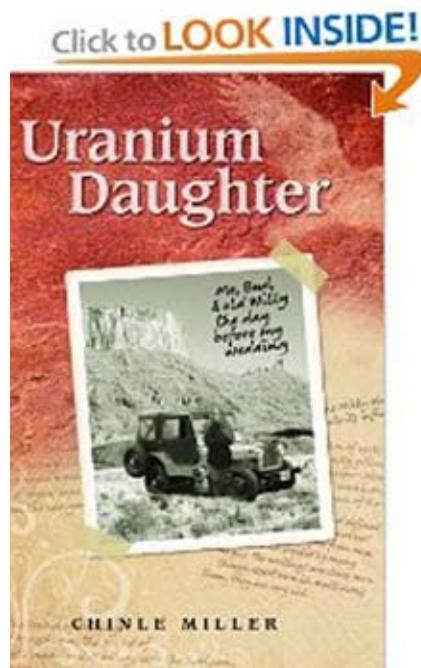
That same day, down in the Glenwood train yards, the flattened hulk of Jim's Olds was loaded onto a flatbed on the eastbound freight, headed for the smelter in Denver. The old car, impounded from the station parking lot and unclaimed, had finally been sold as scrap.

No one ever found Jim's note to Natalie in the console.

*Natalie, honey, let the next poor bastard have a dog. Love, Jimmy*

**CHINLE MILLER lives (for now) in Moab, Utah.  
But she moves around...a lot.**

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