

## THE OLD MAN AND THE BEAR

by Paulette Callen



The story is stranger in the telling than it was in the living, for at the time, we had Jamesy, and he made everything seem inevitable and natural. Jamesy was Blackfoot. A solitary man and the old man's best friend. It was the bear brought them together--a testament to the fineness of Jamesy's nature that he took in the young white man he found mangled and bleeding to death since rumor had it that as a boy, Jamesy had watched while soldiers massacred his village. He rarely spoke except to Hiram, and even that was little.

As Hiram recovered he nursed no ill will toward the bear who had nearly killed him, but listened to the Indian's legends of the grizzly bear. The great bear is ancestor to the Blackfoot people, Jamesy said. He spoke with reverence and called the bear Grandfather.

In remembering, I am there again. I can feel the evening wind blow across the valley and ruffle my wispy hair that always flies loose from the braids that Gramma Ez does for me every morning. I hear the creak of the old man's rocker against the slats of the porch as we sit, supervising the sunset, him telling me Old Bear stories and me asking him always the same questions to lead him on. "The trouble with Old Bear," he says, "is he's got attitude."

I'm never quite sure when he's talking about the grizzly in general, and when he means the old bear, the one who maimed him, the one he's been trying to save his whole life, almost.

"Yup, the trouble with Old Bear...he don't negotiate. He's too smart to waste his valuable time negotiatin' with a white man. He knows no white man ever kept a treaty." The old man chuckles. "There I expect he's smarter than the Indian. Now don't you go tellin' Jamesy I said that. (He wags his finger at me sternly. I say, "No, Grandad.") Though I expect Jamesy knows it

all right. Nope, the Indians lived 'long side Old Bear for hundreds and hundreds of years." With a sweep of his left arm he takes in the span of years like they are hills stretching out before him in the glow of the setting sun. "I heard some say--though I never seen it--that they know'd Old Bear to kill a sheep and only eat its liver. Leave the rest. Well, hell, I seen white men do the same to a whole herd of buffalo. Seen that myself. Shoot 'em down, cut their tongues out. Just their tongues, mind you, and leave the carcasses to rot. Or skin 'em for them fancy buggy rags back East. Naw, that's nuthin to hate old Bear for. Nuthin at all. But we hate him. We do."

Grandad loves the bear. He settles back in his chair, squints into the distance and rubs the stump of arm hanging from a lifeless right shoulder.

My dad and my uncle Joe tell me of the times they've seen the old man stand up against the whole valley, offering to pay out of his own pocket for sheep they said were taken by the bear. Many's the time, they say, Grandad stopped the ranchers from sending out every able-bodied man and boy to hunt the bear down. And the only reason they backed off was not the money, though some of them took it, all right, but because of his scars and the blue fire in his eyes when he faced them.

But there are changes in the valley. The old folks, the ones who remember Hiram Cutter in his prime, are almost all gone, and the younger ones aren't so respectful of an old man's shoulder. Some of them, I hear, even doubt he was ever mauled by a bear, and some of them doubt that it is the same bear that once in awhile in the Spring comes down from the mountains to eat their sheep. The valley is changing all right. The little town is creeping out over the land. There are more ranches, more fences. You have to ride almost to the foothills now, Dad says, to run out of private property anymore. "Too many people," Grandad grumbles. "Too many. It ain't gonna work, this many people."

"What ain't, Grandad?"

He just looks at me and rubs his mangled arm.

Grandad is full of Old Bear stories. One of his favorites is the time old Jeremiah Jenkins, that's JJ Senior--he's dead now--set a trap for Old Bear in one of his mud wallows down by the creek. "Yup, he set this here big trap and attached it to a log, you know, so he could follow Old Bear through the brush after he was caught and so the bear would be tired out from pullin' and bleedin'. So after a couple days, old JJ Senior goes back to check on his trap, and don't you know..." Grandad stomps the slats with his feet and laughs and laughs, "when he gets back there he sees that Old Bear has relieved himself smack on his trap. Quite a heap it was, too. Well, that made JJ Senior so disgusted he didn't even try to clean it up. It was a mess! Ooowee! He just left it there to rust out by the creek, sprung by a pile of bear shit!" The old man laughs so hard he's wiping his eyes. I laugh, too. Every time.

But to get out of him my favorite story I just have to ask, "Grandad, why don't you hate the Old Bear?"

"Cuz he's a forgivin' bear. He let me off with just..." he looks for the word and finds it as he always does in the back of his memory pile where he stores bits of the sermons he's heard over the years from being coaxed to church every Sunday by Gramma Ez. "He let me off with just a...exhortation. I was young, headstrong, sort of a drifter, you know, and headed for trouble. Full of attitude myself, you see. I stumbled into him like the fool I was, sassed him like the bigger fool I was, and he taught me a lesson. He could of killed me, but he knew what a harmless little grub I was. I didn't have no gun on me or nuthin, nor fat neither, so I wasn't more 'n a mouthful, so he give me a tap. A love tap. Yup. A forgivin' bear."

Hiram Cutter is seventy-five, thin, brown, and tough as a hank of jerky, sun dried, wind

cured, and salty. Men like Grandad--hardy sheep ranchers and a few old mountain men that still hang onto the mountains like scrub brush only showing up in town once a year to buy coffee and tobacco--these men never die in their beds. They don't get sick and fade away. They get up, go to work and drop dead behind the barn, or climbing over the next rise, or calling their dogs, or brushing down their mules. I can't imagine death ever coming to the old man. I see him going up the mountain and turning into a tree or a blackbird, or something, and starting life fresh, but never can I see him diminished in any way.

"Don't mistake me, Girl. I ain't no blasphemer, but you know the story of Paul on the road to Damascus. He was struck blind so he could learn somethin'."

"Yeah, Grandad, but Paul recovered, didn't he?"

"That's right, and so did I. Jamesy found me and carried me back to his cabin, that same over the hill there. I lay half dead and mostly crazy for days and nights. But I recovered. This arm you see here missin', why I didn't need it! I've put in a full day's work every day of my life since then, married a good woman, got me two fine sons and one fair-to-middlin' granddaughter (he pulls on my braid). Now I never could of done that with all the attitude I was burdened with as a young buck. Why, Esmeralda wouldn't of give me the time a day while I was in that pitiful condition. Just like we wouldn't of had no religion without Paul learnin' somethn' that day, and it took a stroke to teach him, I'll tell you. Well, Old Bear taught me. He sure did. And I've been a happy man. A man can't ask for more than that."

"No, Grandad."

"Yup, it's going to rain tomorrow. Old Bear tells me so." He rubs his shoulder. The stump of arm left from the Old Bear's swipe is the surest weather report in the valley. Grandad says, "Nope, it's gonna storm tomorrow," and folks run to batten down the hatches. "Frost tonight,

Mama. Cover your roses. Old Bear tells me so," and the roses wind up under a pile of straw. Old Bear is never wrong.

The old man liked to work. I can't remember any particular time when it happened, but one day I knew that Granddad was not happy. Dad had been gradually turning the ranch into something bigger over the years. We had several hired hands who lived on the place, and Dad hired extra hands for the lambing and shearing. They were all young and tough, except Pete, who was older than my father but nowhere near as old as Granddad. It seemed the old man was spending more time fussing with the tackle in the barn and tending Gramma Ez's flower beds than he was herding sheep, or mending fences, or digging wells. He helped at lambing time--we all did--but he was gently being put to pasture, as he told me once. I know my father thought he was doing Granddad a favor. "Dad, take it a little easy. We got plenty of hands now. You don't have to work so hard." But Granddad would grumble and go off to find something to do. Anything at all.

Then came that Spring when Old Bear came down out of the mountains and started killing sheep...and didn't stop. The ranchers were all riled up, but nobody could even get a glimpse of the bear, never mind take a shot at him, and Granddad just shook his head. "Something's wrong with Old Bear. He never went on like this before...a few sheep here and there...a dog or two...he's gettin' old, I reckon. Can't cut the mustard. Sheep's an easy meal for an old porker." I think the old man felt for the bear, even when it was our sheep that were found mangled and half eaten.

Some still doubted that it was the same bear taking sheep as had attacked the old man in his youth. But he knew it was. The bear was old and sheep were handy. Handy...they were all

over the place. No more berry patches, or honey troves, or favored roots...everything was gone to sheep. So, Old Bear ate sheep.

By the end of July, the valley was in a frenzy. They ignored Grandad's offers of money and sheep to repay their losses and tried to track the grizzly. But still nobody ever saw the bear, they just found the results of his carnage.

A meeting was called to decide whether or not to hire a professional bear hunter. My father had lost sheep too, and he was, I think, inclined to side with those who wanted the grizzly shot, but out of respect for Grandad he didn't come right out and say so. Dad and Grandad went to the meeting. It was held on a Sunday at the town hall and they left on horseback right after dinner, about 1:30.

Ma and Gram and I sat in the kitchen all afternoon and played cards. It was getting dark; Ma had just lit the lamps when we heard their horses. They went right to the barn. It takes a little while to unsaddle and tend to a horse properly so Ma and Gramma took their time fixing sandwiches and coffee. I went out on the porch to wait. I waited. And waited. Through the window I could see the table set and Ma sitting down sipping her coffee and Gramma working on her crocheting. Finally, Dad came out of the barn. He looked...different. He put his hand on my head as he passed me but didn't say anything. I followed him into the kitchen. In the light of the kerosene lamps I could see why my father looked the way he did. He'd been crying. It was a shock because I'd never seen a man cry. I didn't think they could. Gram just looked at him and rested her crocheting in her lap. Ma looked scared. "John? What happened?"

"They'd already made their minds up to it. They already had the guy's name and where to telegraph him--the bear hunter. But they took a vote. Dad and I didn't vote. It was unanimous. Then Dad got up and he said since their minds was made up, he'd have no hired killer take the

Old Bear." My father's voice broke. "He's going after him himself." He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair, and put his hat back on. Dad never wore his hat in the house.

Gramma Ez was quiet, and Ma said, "You're not going to let him?" My father shouted at her. He'd never done that before, either. Dad never shouted at anybody. But he was shouting now.

"What am I going to do, lock him up in the barn? What do you want me to do?"

"We have to do something," Ma said in a small voice.

"We'll give him these sandwiches. He'll be getting hungry, I expect." That was Gramma Ez putting aside her yarn-work and starting to wrap up the sandwiches they had made for our supper. She put them in a bag and handed them to Dad who was taking the gun off the rack. As he was going out the door, he turned to me and said, "Abby, as soon as I'm in the barn-- make sure Grandad don't see you--run and get Jamesy."

"Yes, Daddy."

I watched him cross the yard in long strides. His back was stooped. He'd never looked small to me before. As soon as he closed the barn door behind him I took off behind the house and headed up over the hill, past the graveyard where Gramma Ez's people were buried. Jamesy's cabin was "just over the hill" but it was at least three miles--five if you took the road but I didn't. I ran all the way. His Indian ears heard me coming even though I thought I was pretty quiet. Jamesy was standing on his porch, waiting for me. I was gulping air but managed to spit out the gist of what was happening back at our place. "Wait," he said. He went to his little barn and led out his pony. He still rode the Indian way, with no saddle. Jamesy was about the same age as Grandad, I guess, but it was hard to tell. He'd always looked the same. His face was so lined and brown it looked like tree bark. His hair was long and mostly black still. He tied it with a piece of leather, and it hung down his back like a tail. He reached down and hauled me up behind him. He

smelled of wood smoke and sheep—kind of a good smell—and I put my arms around him, waiting for the gallop. He walked the pony all the way. "Jamesy, don't you think we should run?" He said, "No."

Jamesy didn't go after the old man, who, of course, was long gone by the time we got back. I had assumed that was what Dad wanted him to do. Jamesy would have been the only one who could follow Grandad without his knowing it. And maybe I was right, because Dad looked stricken to see us ambling into the yard the way we were doing, with no sense of urgency apparent.

Jamesy so seldom spoke, that when he did, it was a matter of notice. He could see my father's face as he came down the porch steps to greet us and lift me down from the pony, even in the dark, and he said in a voice that sounded younger than his face (I guessed because he didn't use it much, it didn't age with the rest of him), "John, let's bed down the pony. Come to the barn." I'd never heard him put so many words together in one string. My father didn't say a word. He just went to the barn with Jamesy. They were there about thirty minutes. What Jamesy told him, I don't know. Dad never did say.

Ma made me go to bed early. When I woke up, Jamesy was sitting on our porch with a cup of coffee in his hand looking out on the horizon. That day, the hired men did the work and my father made a show of working, but he stayed close to the house. Jeremy Jenkins--JJ Junior--came over and seemed to be inquiring for the rest of the valley. At least he gave himself airs as a spokesman. What was going on? Was the old man to be trusted? Could he kill the bear? Could he even find the bear?

Dad lost his temper and for the second time I heard him yell. He told JJ Junior that they had, every one of them, agreed to let Grandad try. If he couldn't track the bear, nobody could,

and they had demonstrated that all summer long, and if Grandad said he was going to do something, he'd do it by God, his word was as good as any man's, and he almost threw JJ Junior bodily off the place. Pete had to step in to keep him from taking a punch at JJ Junior. After that, Pete stayed pretty close to my father, and there were no more visitors of an inquiring mind.

Jamesy stayed on with us, and by that time my Uncle Joe was there too. Jamesy was the glue that held us together, though I couldn't see why and nobody said so, but I felt it was true. If Jamesy hadn't been there, Lord alone knows what might have happened. He sort of kept the lid on things, just sitting on the porch, sipping Ma's coffee, waiting. He wasn't wasting time. He knew what he was waiting for, even if the rest of us didn't. Gramma Ez was quiet, too. Inside quiet, I mean. Everybody talked less than usual, but only Gram and Jamesy were kind of peaceful, watchful and peaceful. Gramma moved her rocker to the porch on one side of the door; Jamesy was in a chair on the other side. He was just looking and waiting, she was rocking and crocheting. Ma cooked and cleaned like her life depended on it. Maybe it did. She cleaned the house so much she nearly rubbed it away. We had more food laid on than anybody could possibly eat, especially since nobody was really hungry except the hands who did manage to put it all away.

After four terrible days, Jamesy, hearing some cue nobody else heard, told Pete to saddle up his strongest horse and come with him. He wouldn't let Dad or Joe go along.

We waited all day. Ma and Gramma kept busy, Dad and Joe took over the chairs on the porch and gave up all pretense of working. Dark came on and the lamps were lit. Ma kept the coffee going but finally gave up the cooking. Nobody made me go to bed. I think they forgot all about me and I kept quiet. We waited all night. As the light from the lamps got lost in the dawn, my father blew them out and we followed him onto the porch to wait there. We were all out

there: Ma and Gramma, Daddy and Joe, me, and Pete's wife, Shirley. We all saw them at once, I think, as they came over the rise down the trail to the ranch. Jamesy and Pete were walking, leading three horses. As they plodded into focus we made out that the horses were hitched in tandem to a large travois bearing a double burden. Jamesy had brought back, not just the body of my grandfather, but that of Old Bear as well. For the second time I saw my father cry. Joe cried too. And Ma.

Dad and Joe went out to meet them. Pete seemed to do most of the talking. Dad and Joe just listened. Then Jamesy said something and Dad and Joe nodded their heads. Joe went with Jamesy and the horses and travois, and Dad brought Pete back to the house. "Tell 'em, Pete," he said. Ma had her arm around Gramma. So did Shirley, but Gramma Ez looked better than they did. I guess she knew the old man better than any of them and was more prepared. Pete took off his hat and ran a meaty hand back and forth across his bald head. "I don't know, John...like I was sayin', Ma'am, (that was to Gramma Ez) this was just the damndest thing I ever seen. We found Hiram's horse first, wandering toward home. The rifle still strapped to the saddle. So it looks like he just walked up to the old bear and stuck his knife in him. The bear took a swipe at him all right. His chest is laid open some, but not bad. Not like I've seen. I've seen a bear turn a man inside out, but this was a clean swipe. Clean and deep enough, so the old man bled to death...but he didn't exactly die of the wound, you understand. The wound could have been fixed up okay, I think. And the bear...well, I don't know. I've seen grizzlies walk away full of bullets and knife wounds a whole hell of a lot worse than this one the old man gave him. So I don't know. We found 'em, they was both lying on the ground dead, the old man wrapped in the bear's hug, so I thought he must have been crushed, you know, by the bear's grip. But nothing was broken. No ribs, nothing. Jamesy and I both checked. They was both a little warm still when we got there. It

was...just the damndest thing. There was no sign of fightin', no signs of struggle. Nuthin. The horse wasn't even skittish when we found her. She was just wanderin' around grazing, making her way home, like I said. It seemed like they just laid down and let themselves bleed to death. Like the two of 'em, I don't know, like they decided on something. Just the damndest thing." Pete kept rubbing his bald head, then finally replaced his hat. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. I better go and help Jamesy. We're going to bury him now, if you don't mind, Ma'am."

Then Dad said to Gramma Ez, "Ma, do you want to see him? He's not injured bad, just covered with bear blood mostly. But he looks like he's sleepin'..." and then my father went all to pieces, sobbing like he just couldn't get to the bottom of how bad he felt, and Gramma put her thin arms around him like he was a little boy again and just crooned, "There, John, I'm sorry, John."

So that afternoon they buried my grandad in the family burial ground on the hill behind the house, and Jamesy set a fire around the bear a little way from the old man's grave. I think he would have liked to bury Grandad the Indian way, you know, not bury him at all but put him up on poles, closer to heaven, the way they do, but he knew it wasn't our way, so he just helped dig the grave and put Grandad in it. But he built his fire around the huge carcass of the bear. And we listened to him all day and all that night, softly chanting in his own language. It was eerie, but comforting in a way, too. Gramma Ez went out on the porch and sat, I think so she could listen better. He sat on the hill cocooned in his blanket for a day or two—I don't remember—chanting for the old man and for the bear. Ma made food for me to take to him, but he would take only water. He chanted till the fire burned out. Then he scattered the ashes all over, took his pony, and went home.

It took a little while for the valley to find out that the bear and Grandad were both dead.

After a few days the minister came out and said some words over the grave, and if he noticed the huge charred spot where something had been burned recently, he didn't comment. I suppose he and most of the valley would have been outraged at Jamesy's heathen ritual, but all of us, even the hands, kept our mouths shut. And if the rumors flew, as I'm sure they did, they never got back to us. Anyway, we knew what Jamesy did was what the old man, and maybe even the bear, would have liked.