

Murder, tough love and redemption in a wild Montana ride.

Old Music

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2373.html?s=pdf>

OLD MUSIC

Earl stopped cold, his face still in shadow. Jesse swallowed a knot hard as stone. Then the old man came forward out of the doorway to the edge of the steps and Jesse saw his father's face for the first time.

"You a reporter?" the old man snapped.

Jesse felt like a blind man suddenly gifted with sight, stupefied and at once distrusting. He drank in Earl's face, the thick gray hair, wide black eyes, straight nose, mouth nearly obscured by the full mustache turned down at the corners, the dimpled chin. It was a face that might one day be his own, a good face, unspoiled by what he knew was a long, unhappy past, yet an almost impish, devilishly handsome face that now showed anger at an untimely intrusion.

"I--I'm Jesse Lomax," the son stuttered, his voice quivering.

The color drained instantly from Earl's face. He rocked on his heels as his mind went blank. He opened his mouth but couldn't speak. His eyes darted back and forth, up and down the sidewalk, reaching for someplace else to be and, finally, for something to say. The silence between them seemed to last a century and then he felt something push from inside him, a rush like hard wind through a deep canyon. At last his cheeks flushed. He bit the corner of his lip.

"Walk me to the bus," he said, coldly, without emotion.

Chapter 1

The two men waited in the shade of the barrow pit. They sat on the side of the bank, plucking tufts of cheatgrass and passing a pint bottle back and forth. There was no wind and although the thick stand of lodgepole pine trees sheltered them from the sun, the day was blistering hot. Across the road at the top of the opposite ditch a lone magpie sat on the second strand of a barbwire fence and lifted first one foot, then the other, as if the wire were hot enough to burn. There was no sound at all in the midday heat.

The younger man was well over six feet tall; his boyish face was complete with bright, shining eyes and dimpled cheeks. He had wide shoulders, and thick arms and chest. The cords in his neck drew taut as steel cables when he swallowed from the bottle. Now and then the boyish grin would become a sneer as he stared without focusing along the barrow pit. A scar ran straight up from the corner of his jaw past the front of his ear and

disappeared into a tangled mass of red curly hair. It was a bad scar, one that had once been a deep, ugly wound that had not been promptly or properly closed. He squinted as he looked at the sun through the dense, high branches of the lodgepoles, and stared without blinking for a full minute as if ordering it to pass by. Then the smile broke out on his face again and he lay back against the grassy bank and lit a thin, black cigar.

As he blew smoke rings into the still afternoon air above his face the other man rose and began to pace up and down in the barrow pit. He was older; his face was weathered like deeply tanned leather and his small, tight mouth seemed frozen in a snarl. Wispy black hair wet with sweat matted in curls on the back of his neck. His hands were huge and hard, the knuckles gnarled and swollen. He was barely five feet tall.

"Those things stink," he said, as he passed in front of the younger man on the ground.

But he got no answer and he continued to pace back and forth, stopping now and then as if to listen. His eyes seemed permanently squinted as though he were trying to see far away. He leaned over and swallowed from the bottle that lay in the cheatgrass, walked several yards down the barrow pit, then back, and stopped in front of the younger man. His hands were in his back pockets and the back of his shirt was soaked with sweat.

"I said they stink," he repeated. There was an emphasis on the remark this time as if he expected an answer.

The younger man looked up. He was at eye level with his companion although he lay back against the bank. His face still wore the grin and he spoke without any change in expression.

"You got better things to think about, Wendell." He pulled a tuft of cheatgrass and began to burn its head with the tip of the cigar.

The man called Wendell boiled but said nothing. He picked up the bottle and drank the last of the liquor, then capped it and put it in his back pocket.

The sound of an approaching car caught their attention and the younger man looked at his watch, his face suddenly drained. Wendell ran a couple of steps up the side of the ditch so he could see into the road.

"Too early," the younger man said. "We got a long time to wait."

"When?" Wendell asked.

"Twenty minutes, maybe twenty-five. They wouldn't be this early."

The young man with the red curly hair stretched full out, grabbed the ground behind his head and settled back.

They waited in the heat of the ditch. The car passed without slowing and Wendell bounded backward down into the shade without taking his eyes off the road. He sat down in the grass and pulled a short-barreled revolver out of his pocket. He checked the cylinder, spun it, then snapped it shut and sighted down the barrel.

"Pah! Pah!" he called softly down the barrel.

"You're joking," the young man said.

"We have to remember to throw them in the river, Dewayne," Wendell said. "Throw them off the bridge at the Seben Ranch."

Dewayne looked up. "If we don't have to use them, we ought to get to keep them."

"Stupid," Wendell answered. "You know we'll use them. No. No damned guns around. We'll throw them off the bridge just like we was told."

Wendell put the gun in the grass beside him and clasped his hands behind his head as he leaned back

M. J. MELNECK

against the bank. Dewayne threw the cheatgrass down, took a long, last drag off the cigar and snuffed it out on the bottom of his boot. He wiped the sweat off his neck with the back of his hand and wiped his hand on his pants, and looked at his watch. He stared at it for a long moment, then leaned back as the grin spread again across his face. He drummed his fingers on a dirt clod and smiled with his eyes closed. It was quiet; there was only the press of the scalding heat in the ditch. The magpie flapped its wings to blow away the dust that was settling after the car had passed, and the odd companions lay quietly on the grassy bank.

Every eye in the prison farmyard was riveted on the door of the small, yellow house that served as office and library during the season the farm was used. Some of the men worked with their heads cocked toward the house and some simply stood and stared, their hands crowned over rake or shovel handles. No one spoke. Sweat ran unnoticed down their faces; it ran down their necks and darkened their shirts. An orange pickup with a DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS decal on the door sat at the gate. A fat man with a shotgun cradled in his arms sat on the fender, watching the men watch the house. He swung his feet and kept inching back to keep from sliding off the fender. A couple of the men took off their caps and wiped their sweaty foreheads on their shirtsleeves.

Then the men came alert. On the porch a smiling kid named Anderson jumped up as Earl Lomax opened the door and came out of the office. The late afternoon sun climbed the steps and the old man squinted into the yard as he started down them. Anderson was on his arm.

"That's sure some deal you got, Mr. Lomax," he said, his voice quick, friendly. "That is sure some deal."

Earl checked his stride, and stopped on the bottom step as the afternoon sun hit him in the face. He was

slender, deeply tanned, and his still handsome face showed awareness and anger. He turned to the younger man who had come across the porch to him.

"Tell you what, Jimmy," he said. "With that commutation and a sharp stick I got two pains in my butt. I was inside for twenty years and on this farm for the last six. I know everything there is to know about beets and laundry and not a stinking thing about the Sunday paper." He balled his hands into fists and turned his face up to the afternoon sky.

"They're letting me out so they don't have to bury me. I'm goin' out 'cause I'm goin' down. Something like that, maybe, but not a good reason. Not the right one. That ambitious bastard in there just told me I was free and what he really meant is I can go down the mountain and die on someone else's time. No, my young friend, it's been too long. There's nothing out there I want to see. Not any more."

Anderson was embarrassed. He took Earl's arm and started toward the gate at the front of the yard. The men who had been watching them turned back to their work, their heads down and their faces tight.

"Come on, Mr. Lomax," Anderson said. "I get to drive you to town. Jorgenson's already collected your gear. You're going to be just fine--you get to spend the next week in that fine Graybar Hotel while they process you out and then you're a genuine citizen again."

Jimmy Anderson's enthusiasm was lost on him. He was far away, already deep in thought trying to back up twenty-six years, trying to inventory nearly half a life. They walked through the gate and down a short piece of sidewalk to the bright orange pool car. Earl slid across the back seat and looked out the window. The men no longer watched him; none had spoken to him. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

M. J. MELNECK

The white station wagon rolled slowly along the gravel mountain road above the river. The driver searched both sides of the road, looking into the ditches and past them to the stands of lodgepoles that stood sentinel in the hot afternoon. Small boils of dust rose and settled in the car's wake. The man in the back seat looked straight ahead, his legs crossed. His hands were folded in his lap and his face bore an expression of calm confidence. Neither spoke; there was nothing to be aware of in the car except the soft hum of the air conditioner.

They drove past the stone ruins of an old church, known only by a weathered signpost back where the freeway's frontage road ended and became a wandering, gravel country lane. The sign read:

ST. PETER'S MISSION--8 MILES. AT THIS SITE
IN 1867 GENERAL THOMAS MEAGHER PLOTTED WITH
FATHER ANTOINE DE MILLE TO STEAL THE TERRI-
TORIAL CAPITOL FROM HELENA AND MOVE IT TO
THE ORIGINAL SITE, THE TOWNSHIP OF BANNOCK.
IN APRIL OF THAT YEAR GENERAL MEAGHER WAS
LOST IN THE MISSOURI RIVER NEAR FORT BENTON
UNDER UNRESOLVED CIRCUMSTANCES.

As the car rounded a curve the driver riveted his attention on the right barrow pit at the bottom of a small hill. He lowered his hands from the top to the sides of the steering wheel.

"On the right, in the ditch," the driver said. He spoke the first words since the car left the freeway. The man in the back seat came erect and looked in the ditch as the car slowed to a stop. He uncrossed his legs and took off his sunglasses.

The two men in the ditch did not move at first, then both got up and walked a few steps up the bank as the station wagon's rear door opened.

Dewayne had his hands clasped behind him, the pistol tucked in his belt in the back. Wendell began to fuss nervously with his shirt and when the car stopped he reached under the shirt for the gun, and felt its heat on his belly when he settled it. He pulled the shirt out to cover it.

The man in the back seat got out of the car and walked to the side of the ditch. He looked up at the sun, squinted down at the two men and unbuttoned his suit coat. He spoke clearly and quickly, his voice crisp, the words clipped.

"Mr. Haliburton would like you to forget it. It's off."

Dewayne and Wendell turned to each other, then looked back to the top of the ditch. Wendell answered weakly.

"What's a Haliburton?"

"How come you know we're here?" Dewayne added.

The man at the top of the ditch ignored the questions and folded his arms across his chest. His voice turned cold.

"I have only to tell you that Mr. Haliburton is a very busy man and is entitled, as we all are, to change his mind. You have been well paid. Take the money and go on about your business as though this task were finished."

"How come you know we're here?" Dewayne repeated. He rubbed his hands on his pants, and hooked his thumbs in his back pockets, near the gun.

"It's off. That is the complete message."

The driver rested one arm on the seatback and looked out but saw nothing except the back of the man who stood at the edge of the ditch.

"Who are you?" Wendell demanded. "We don't know no Haliburton. We made a deal with a man named Charles."

"He didn't give a last name," Dewayne said. "Which was ok with us. Paid in cash means a man don't have to sign no check."

M. J. MELNECK

"It doesn't matter," the man said. "You work for Charles and perhaps I work for someone else, except that your job is finished and you don't work for anyone any more."

He turned his back, as if to get into the car, and stepped to the side so that the glare from the car windows shone in the men's faces. As he reached for the car door Wendell and Dewayne looked at each other as if neither was quite sure what to think or do.

Suddenly the man spun around and dropped to a crouch, a silenced .22 automatic held firmly in both hands. In a split instant he fired two shots into each man's head. The force of the bullets drove them backward into the ditch as surprise and terror and rage registered and froze on their faces, and they toppled backwards and went down like sacks of meal. It was over in seconds. The driver turned his head to look when he heard the gun's muffled pops. As he leaned forward the other man straightened up and turned to face the car, ran his thumbs around his waistband to straighten his shirt, then slipped into the back seat without looking behind him.

Then there was only the heat in the quiet mountain afternoon. The magpie flew up over the pine trees as the station wagon drove off slowly down the road.

The tall, angular boy had been walking along a ridge some four hundred yards back from the road. He carried a canteen on his belt and a 35mm camera in his hand. He had seen the white station wagon in the road, had seen a man get out. Then the man was out of sight for a few seconds behind the car, then he stood up and got back in and the car drove off.

Now the boy ran in the middle of the road, the camera tight in his hand and the canteen slapping at his hip. Sweat streamed down his face and stung his eyes as he

jogged toward the highway. He crossed the old two-lane road and ran through a hay meadow toward the bridge that crossed the river at Craig. He stopped at the fence by the bridge and fell to his knees, his heaving breath catching short in his throat. He looked around as he gasped but there was no one behind him, no car on the road. He pulled up his shirt and wiped his face, sat for a minute with his hands on his thighs, stared at the new mown hay as the thick, sweet smell of it boiled up in his face.

He got up and climbed through the fence. He scrambled up the steep dirt bank onto the road and ran across the steel decked bridge. A block from the bridge he stopped in the middle of Craig's only intersection. He looked at the four corners as he caught his breath--at the Conoco station, the grocery store, the brown stucco house, and the Clifford Tavern. He wiped his face again, checked behind him. He walked to the bar, up onto the porch to the open screen door. Two fishermen sipping drinks at the end of the porch nodded as he went inside.

Earl slept fitfully in the back seat of the car. He remembered sticky afternoons in the best bars in Nashville and seamy nights in the worst ones. And he remembered later, in Montana, the first time Irene had spoken to him. Yes, I've been playing piano a long time, he had said and her wide, almond eyes were eating him alive. He'd said Records are going to be even more popular now that the war is over; she didn't hear a word for three days. A week later he found her with a group of other college girls in a broken down beer garden near the railroad depot. He told her how much Missoula was like Nashville, except in winter, of course, and she had stared a hole through him and said You don't owe me.

M. J. MELNECK

The car rolled onto the main fire road and turned west, down the mountain. Anderson stretched up to look in the mirror and thought how much older than sixty Earl seemed. "You're going to be just fine," he muttered under his breath, knowing Earl couldn't hear him, and knowing, in that certainty a man shares in common, not with facts, but with other men, that it wasn't true. He concentrated on driving down the mountain and on trying to spot deer in the timber stand above the road. He drove over a washboard of ruts and Earl stirred awake, then turned sideways and folded his arms against his chest.

Earl awoke again when the car rounded a turn in the road and Anderson caught his breath and said, "My God!" as they rolled past the two highway patrol cars and ambulance that were parked on the shoulder of the road with their lights flashing. In the mirror he saw only the flat-brimmed hats on the patrolmen standing in the barrow pit.

"My God!" he repeated. "What do you suppose that was, Mr. Lomax?" He craned his neck around and saw Earl's eyes close again.

Earl remembered enough of the circuits and the good times to feel that all the towns weren't named the same after all, that good towns and bad ones had their own faces. Near a slow, mossbanked river in the Tennessee hills he slept two nights with a haunting girl named Johanna Benedict, then spent the next year so alone that it still hurt him after all the time that had since gone by. He remembered the soft, gray rain in Tennessee summers and how it carried the smell of hidden stills across valleys and meadows of tall wild grasses. He gave way to a recurring dream and settled on the way summer rain moved in waves across Tennessee; how it took old men from the little boroughs out of their porchbarrel chairs to stand at store railings and smell it a little, catching what they could of it in their weathered faces. He thought he could still taste the

time when he and the others, the uncles who raised him, and their friends, would stand there and find in the rain the faint odor of the stills and how they would tell him, with laughs he didn't then understand, who was making mash that day. His mouth made the names--in his sleep--Joe Ray Hatter, who always used his whole name, Lundeen, McTee, Dunhill, DeMille.

The car stopped at the bottom of the mountain, turned onto the highway and sped up. Earl stole a glance at Anderson. He turned his face down, away from the window of the car, and let the rhythm of the concrete highway coax him to sleep.

As the boy picked a path through the crowd and made his way toward the pool table the game between Jesse Lomax and Virgil Two Buttons was down to four balls and up to seven dollars.

"Remember to set that shot up again after this is finished," Virgil said. "I'll bet you a quart of beer you can't make it again." Virgil leaned on his cue and shook his long, black hair.

Jesse bent low over the table, squinting at the five-ball.

"A quart," Virgil repeated.

"Budweiser," Jesse nodded. "It's not hard. Not that hard." He walked around the table, looking for a way to set up a following shot. "You have to earn the table's respect."

Virgil leaned forward on his cue, one arm straight out on the other, a bottle of beer held lightly in his fingertips.

"You have to own it, that's all." He waved the bottle at the table.

"I lost a game right here three weeks ago," Jesse said. He drew the cue back and forth between his fingers, taking aim at the five-ball. "Lost to a girl." He shot, and the five

rolled along the rubber and died at the mouth of a corner pocket.

Virgil laughed. "Probably never knew what she won."

"Never happened, amigo," Jesse said. "Besides." He nodded to the auburn haired girl behind the bar. "I'm every kind of busy." He chalked the cue stick and backed along the table, then stopped short when he realized the five hadn't fallen.

"You missed," Virgil shrugged, a Christmas morning grin on his face. "You just plain-assed missed."

Jesse stared at the chalk in his hand, then down at the ball that lay at the lip of the pocket. Virgil bent low over the table and drew a bead on the five, pulled back and drilled the cue ball across the table. The five slammed into the pocket and the cue ball, without enough English to compensate for the forward momentum, followed it down.

"That, my Native American friend," Jesse laughed, "will cost you." He reached for his beer, took a long swallow, and set the empty bottle on top of the jukebox. He walked around the table and picked the cue ball out of the pocket. The boy appeared at his side as he spotted it.

"Jesse, can I talk to you?" The boy's hands were tensed at his sides; his wet hair was pushed back from his face.

"Sure as hell, little cousin," Jesse said. He stretched his back. "What can I do for you? Long way from home, no?"

"Jesse, you've got to pay attention. This ain't funny." He kept his voice low, and looked around to see whether he had an audience. "There's two guys dead in a ditch. Up the mountain."

"David, my boy." Jesse said. Then he looked at the girl behind the bar. "Pull two, please, Paula." He turned back to his cousin. "You want something?"

"You listening to me?" David said, louder.

OLD MUSIC

"Just barely, my man," Jesse answered. "This is serious pool. Big money game. High stakes." He laughed.

"Jesse, there's two guys in a ditch up by Cooper's ponds and somebody shot 'em right in the face."

Jesse flushed. He laid the pool cue on the table, tucked it under the railing, and straightened up.

"If you're jacking me around, cousin--"

"Jesse, I ain't lying. Somebody shot two men, one right between the eyes and the other one almost the same."

Jesse scowled down at David. "What are we supposed to do about it? If somebody did?"

Virgil came around the table and stepped between them. He looked down at David, then at Jesse. "He's a pretty straight shooter, man," he said. "No pun. Let's listen."

David's eyes watered. He looked slowly around the room, and leaned close to Jesse. "I think I saw it."

Chapter 2

The river is wide. It is quiet and deep where it turns corners among the jagged canyon walls and in the shadows and deep pools it is emerald green and flecked with silt that washes down from mineral mines in the forest above, flushed through coolies and draws by the spring runoff. It is an old river, oily and thick somehow in late summer when the water is down and the beaches smell of backwash and algae. There are cuts and turns in the canyon floor where the river has come and gone leaving slab granite terraces old men stand on to fish for cutthroat trout, or, in their season, for bass. The old men who fish, and who inhabit bars that hunch up against the burly canyon walls, will tell you that the bass are long gone, but they never stop fishing. They mark their holes by chipping or spray painting their initials or signs on boulders along the banks so they can ice fish in

OLD MUSIC

winter, but if you find one of the old men in a bar in the canyon he'll tell you the bass have long since gone.

There is rarely a wind on the canyon floor and up near the top it's a thin, high whine that slips through sandstone caves the snakes laid claim to a long time ago. And there is a season when hawks glide through lazy turns in the drafts and thermals above the river, white-hot days when the sky around the sun is bleached clean, and when sweat burns running down the dry, tight skin on your back.

Meadows of hay and soft wild grasses dot the riverbank from Cascade to Wolf Creek where red and brown marbled walls draw back occasionally as though someone thought to pad the land in deliberate spots. The freeway passes most of the canyon by, and saves all of five minutes between Great Falls and Helena. The old highway was blasted and carved into the walls. It follows the river, hugging the sheer faces and only widening enough to let you breathe a few times in forty miles. The old road is broken now, pockmarked with frost heaves and potholes. When the freeway ran away from the river, when it ran up and across the higher meadows, the maintenance crews ran too. When they abandoned the old road, they stopped burning the ditches and the grasses and cornflowers grew again. Rock squirrels and porcupine, miles of cheat grass and cattails renewed.

At night in the summer, the canyon is sometimes thick with owls hunting mice and snakes, and the air is alive with the rush of their low, silent flight. The infrequent calls as they sound against the walls or trees can raise the hair on the back of your neck.

The mountains above the river hold a few small cattle ranches, old farms that exchange long days in summer and winter alike for a modest life.

M. J. MELNECK

Four miles from Wolf Creek, in the mountains to the east, up a winding gravel fire road, there is a prison camp, a penal farm where twenty special trustees of the state prison at Deer Lodge are kept from the spring through autumn to grow experimental vegetables. The farm is secluded and the road that leads to it from the main logging road is marked only by a small, steel sign that reads:

PROPERTY OF THE STATE OF MONTANA
EXPERIMENTAL STATION #6
TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED
TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW

There are bullet holes in the sign, the handiwork of hunters and picnickers who follow the fire road through the mountains to meet another road that runs across a wide valley and connects with the main highway at White Sulphur Springs. A narrow gauge railroad wound through the mountains while the composite mineral mines thrived; no trace remains. The railroad died and was torn apart for salvage when the mines gave out.

Murder, tough love and redemption in a wild Montana ride.

Old Music

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2373.html?s=pdf>