

# CHASING AMERICA

JOSH ROUNTREE

## *1. Go West, Young Giant – 1837*

It took longer than expected, crossing the Atlantic on clouds. Paul wished for a storm front to stretch out like a rumbling gray road beneath his feet, a pathway straight through to the New World. But he was accustomed to trials, and was content to pick his way from cloud to cloud, searching for the perfect westward drift, hoping one wouldn't dissipate before he found another. And driven by innate stubbornness and fear of the world he left behind, Paul found his new home.

After a period of careful searching, he determined that beanstalks were hard to come by in the New World. But he found a forest of tree-tops piercing a low-hung blanket of stratus, and decided one method of descent was as good as another.

A short climb later and Paul stood in America.

The forest surrounding him was quite unlike the ones he'd played in as a boy. The woods of Albion were shadow-drenched places of bent oak, wych elm and boxwood, so choked with history that you couldn't help but search the undergrowth for boggarts and goblin teeth, enchanted jewels and the bones of ancient barbarian kings. Every hidden grove gave solace to witches and whistling thieves, wolves with unsure motives and broken men who'd murder a child for the touch of copper against their palms.

But this American forest was unspoiled. Pines rose straight and stout, and they seemed to hold up the sky itself. Grasslands rolled away from the tree line, spilled into a busy valley that teemed with life. Horses pulled huge felled timbers, coaxed on by men in checkered shirts and woolen caps.

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Laughter and smoke poured from scattered wooden buildings. A white-capped river cut a path through the camp before disappearing beyond the valley's edge, and Paul imagined its continued progress. Beyond the valley stood a seemingly endless stretch of majestic forest, and beyond that, mountain peaks topped with snow, bathed in sunlight that chewed away the clouds.

There was room to live here. How easy to get lost in such a land, and easier still to evade the Jacks. They'd never find him.

Paul stepped boldly into the valley, drawing stares from the workers. A bent man with a drawn face and patchy beard approached and turned a bemused gaze upward. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"Albion," Paul said, as if that explained everything.

"Big fella, ain't you?"

Paul shrugged. "Big as I need to be, I guess."

"Can you handle an axe? Or a saw?" The man offered Paul an axe but the giant waved him off. He wrapped his arms around a skinny pine and pulled it from the soil with a few sharp tugs.

"Name's Charlie Blade," the man said, watching Paul lower the tree to the ground with a mixture of fear and admiration in his rheumy eyes. "I'm the foreman around here. You looking for work?"

Paul wasn't looking for work, but he *was* looking for a new home. The men here seemed content. And there would be plenty of time to get lost in the endless world beyond the mountains if the need arose.

He shook the foreman's hand, and the legend of Paul Bunyan was born.

Paul might have lived in the logging camp forever if Charlie Blade hadn't been crushed by a log spill. Paul loved the camaraderie a rough day's work fostered in the souls of working men, and he never grew tired of the quiet evenings, the sounds of work calls and blades on wood banished to the morning, when endless night crossed the world like the shadow of God. This was a land where all men were giants. And true giants like Paul? Well, they were something *more*.

In Albion, giants were accused of hoarding gold, stealing women and stomping houses beneath booted feet—a ridiculous notion. Paul was small for a giant, but the largest of his kind stood no taller than a ship's mast. Those stories were the product of fear and insecurity. The Americans wove

their tales from the twin threads of admiration and respect, spreading wide a blanket of belief that anything was possible in a world so new and fine. There were no limits to what men could do, and Paul understood their need to express this. When they shared tales of how his footsteps created lakes or how he kept a giant blue ox for a pet, he'd simply smile, shrug and return to his labors. These men worked hard and they deserved their indulgences.

On the night before his death, Charlie Blade crowded the cook stove, rubbing his bony hands together to stave off the brutal cold. "So damn cold out tonight, the lantern light's liable to freeze solid."

Paul chuckled, rattling the bunkhouse and causing a few of the snoring loggers to stir beneath their blankets. "If it did, I'm sure they'd find a way to give me credit for it. Zeb Walton asked me this morning if it was true I punched a hole through the mountains to clear a path for the railroad."

"Well, you're stronger than a grizzly bear, but I doubt you have that kind of might." Charlie gave Paul a thoughtful look. "You're good to go along with all that. They ain't just teasing you, you know. They think highly of you."

"I know."

"This is a hard life and men need to know great things are possible. Just a little hope, you understand?"

Paul nodded. Hope was the reason he'd crossed the ocean.

There was no peace left for giants in Albion. The Jacks saw to it that they were always on the move, afraid even to rest easy in the ancient cloud cities for fear that the Jacks might one day organize and topple their entire existence. When Paul first came to the camp, he'd asked Charlie if there were any loggers named Jack. There'd been only one, a stone-faced, unhappy man named Jack Pierre and Paul had kept a close watch on him from day one. There was no fool-proof way to tell if Pierre had murderous intentions, for not all men named Jack were giant killers. But all giant killers *were* named Jack, and as a result, Paul had long since given up the luxury of sleep.

"You look tired, Charlie."

"Long day. Gonna be a longer day tomorrow. Got to get them logs ready for the river." Charlie went to bed and Paul left the bunkhouse, eliciting a chorus of shouts when the howling north wind carried into the room. Paul shut the door behind him and took a seat near the river's edge.

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The temperature had no effect on him; the cold night smelled like ice and pine needles, and the wind whispered forgotten stories of the forest, tales left behind for those who would hear them of a time before men walked the woods.

It was the most perfect place on earth, the only place Paul had ever found peace, and he wanted to absorb every second of the experience.

He remained by the river until light blossomed in the east and bunkhouse doors creaked wearily open, once again releasing men into the world with their coughs and laughter, banging pans, axes on whetstones. The misty air carried the logging camp smells of fried ham and morning urine, unwashed bodies and bitter black coffee. And within minutes they were hard at work again—Paul with them—whipping horses into action, bucking logs, working them toward the dump. Spring had come, and soon the river hogs would ride the shipment downriver.

Paul was helping some men choke a log when the ruckus started—panicked shouts, a low rumble, then a terrified scream truncated by horrible silence. Paul released the choke cable in his hands and leapt away from the rumbling logs. By the time he regained his feet, men were already lifting away the massive lengths of pine that had scattered like spilled matches. Paul heaved the logs away, one after another, no doubt giving birth to a hundred more stories. But it didn't matter, there were men trapped beneath.

They found seven dead in all, including Charlie Blade. Paul cried when he saw the old man's grizzled face, and he pulled the limp body from the timbers. But his sadness turned to a fear when he saw Jack Pierre standing just beyond the edge of the insanity, watching Paul with his smoky eyes, smiling. He held a cant-hook at his side like a medieval pike, and his breath came in malignant white clouds. There was no mistaking the man's cool malice.

Paul would have taken revenge on a normal man. But not a Jack, no matter how much he wanted to.

Paul was no fool.

He didn't wait for Charlie Blade's burial. That night, he chose the largest log and rode it downriver. And so it was that Paul began his life on the road.

*2. A Giant Keeps His Back to the Wall – 1876*

Paul tossed back another nickel whisky and studied the cards in his hands. A pair of sevens to go with a mixed bag of nothing. Luck was not on his side.

The man seated across from him, however, was the luckiest son of a bitch he'd ever met. He'd introduced himself as Bill Hickok, and Paul recognized that name from the newspapers. He couldn't reign in all the details but Paul knew one thing for sure. The man took his gambling seriously.

"So you came here for the gold?" Bill tossed a couple of poker chips into the center of the table, then glanced back toward the door. He'd done this often enough during the course of the afternoon that Paul assumed he was waiting for someone. The saloon was filled with raucous men who smelled of earth and sweat; heavy drinkers, card players, and those who simply had nothing better to do. Women in nightclothes and stockings wandered from table to table, laughing and planting lipstick kisses on dirty foreheads, drumming up business for Swearengen's brothel. Bill and Paul had claimed the last unused table, far in the back of the room where they were mostly ignored by a bored-looking bartender who waged a losing battle for a clean countertop with a whisky-soaked rag.

"No. Had enough of that madness back in California." Paul matched Bill's ante. "I don't like watching what gold does to people."

"Then why in the hell did you come? Ain't nothing here *but* gold." Bill leveled a curious stare at Paul, and the giant met his gaze. The gambler's eyes looked to have soaked up every ounce of virgin wildness the West had to offer, and they provided a frank glimpse into Hickok's soul. This man had stared down the barrel of a Peacemaker rifle at a doomed Sioux chief, bested the famed John Wesley Hardin in Kansas, and followed Buffalo Bill around the country in his Wild West show. Hickok was the weaving, wandering spirit of America and Paul realized they were very much alike.

"I like to wander," Paul said. "Deadwood is just another place on the map. I spent time in a logging camp over in Minnesota, got tired there and headed out for Oregon. You ever been there? Trees big around as houses. I've been all through the Rockies, I lived a while in Texas, and I already told you about California. It was a lovely place to be until the prospectors came."

"Forgive me for saying, but you don't look old enough to remember

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California before the gold rush." A slanted smile broke beneath Bill's bushy moustache, the kind a man might use to humor a harmless drunk.

"I'm older than I look," Paul said. If Bill knew how old he really was, the gambler might choke on his whisky. Paul was aware he was sharing too much of himself, but he'd never held his alcohol well. Normally, he was very circumspect about his heritage, and especially his comings and goings. With the Jacks always on his trail, it was simple common sense. But Paul felt a kinship for the man they called "Wild" Bill; they were kindred spirits.

"You'd have to be a damn sight older."

Paul didn't reply. He folded another losing hand and waited for Bill to shuffle the cards.

Bill raked in a mound of chips. "In my experience, most men who say they're wandering are on the run from something. That the case with you?"

"Yes it is."

"What did you do? Kill someone?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Then why are you running?"

"Because I'm a giant."

Bill dealt the cards, chuckling at Paul's revelation. "You damn sure are. I wasn't going to say anything, but as long as you brought it up, how tall are you? Ten foot easy, I reckon."

Paul shrugged. "I never measured."

"So what about being a giant caused you to be on the run? You escape from a circus?"

Paul let the unkind comment slide. "No, it's just the way giants are. We're restless. It comes from looking over your shoulder your whole life."

Bill glanced at the door again. "Speaking of that, you mind if we switch seats? I never like to sit with my back to the door. I got a lot of people in this world that don't like me. Keeping my back to the wall has kept me breathing a lot of years."

"Sorry. I have the same policy."

Bill nodded, looking only mildly put-out. "I understand. It's just that sitting this way irks the hell out of me."

"I'll watch your back."

"Guess that'll have to do."

They played for a time in silence. Bill won most hands, but occasionally

Paul managed to get some of his money back. When it was Paul's turn to deal again, Bill poured another shot of whisky, slid it to Paul, then fixed another for himself. "I gotta know. What's so scary it keeps a giant on the run?"

"The Jacks." Paul drank the whisky and held out the glass for a refill. The drink was steering the conversation into dangerous waters, but he didn't care. His adopted homeland was wide and untamed, more far-reaching than he'd ever imagined. But it was also lonely. Paul sensed that Wild Bill was a man who understood that.

"Who're the Jacks?"

"Giant killers."

Bill laughed, then cut it short when he realized Paul was serious. "My grandma used to tell stories about a kid named Jack who went around killing giants, stealing their gold. Stuff like that."

"They aren't just stories."

"You're telling me there's a bunch of kids running around trying to cut off your head?"

"They're not kids. The old stories have been twisted. They're regular men, but they've got something in their blood that makes them hunt us."

"Something in their blood? Like it's carried down from father to son."

Paul shook his head. "More like a disease. You can't tell who they are by their family or how they're raised. The only thing they all have in common is they're named Jack. It's an ancient struggle, creatures of magic versus those who would banish us from the earth. And I've never found a reason for what they do beyond simple blind hatred."

"Men don't always need a good reason to kill." Bill skipped the shot glass and drank straight from the bottle. "Damn. I must have drank more than I figured. I actually believe what you're saying."

"I'm just telling the truth." Paul dealt the cards. The noise and smoke were giving him a headache but he wasn't ready to leave the game. It was rare to find a man like Hickok with whom he could share his troubles.

"Seems strange to me you'd run from these Jacks if they're just regular men. You're big enough. Why not just whip their asses?"

"Quite a few giants have tried. But it's never ended well. The Jacks are lucky. I'd say fate was on their side, but what does that say about my kind?"

"Fate pisses on everybody with the same stream. You just got to learn to

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keep out of the way.” Bill discarded a single card and grinned. “I’ll take one.”

Paul was about to lose some more money. He slid a card across the tabletop, hoping it wasn’t the one his companion was looking for. When he pulled back to study his own cards, he noticed the man standing a few feet behind Hickok and the .45 revolver he had aimed at the table. Paul’s eyes widened and Bill was savvy enough to react. He was on his feet, gun in hand and beginning to turn when the assassin’s bullet tore into the back of his head. Another bullet followed and Bill dropped his gun. He fell back into the chair and collided with the table edge. A pair of aces and a pair of eights slipped from the dead man’s hand.

A group of men tackled the shooter and wrestled away his gun, but not before Paul recognized him. Jack McCall—a buffalo hunter he’d crossed paths with a few years back in Wyoming. He struggled against his captors, shouting about murder and giants, but his ravings meant nothing to the clientele of Saloon #10. Everyone in the room had seen him kill Wild Bill Hickok, and that was the only fact that mattered. Only Paul understood those bullets were meant for him; Bill’s lightning-fast reflexes had propelled him into the path of the gunfire, and into frontier legend.

Paul didn’t wait for the trial.

He left Deadwood before sunset.

### 3. *This Land is Jack Land—1937*

A roiling cloud of brown dust chased the battered flatbed Ford truck through the panhandle. Paul had a firm grip on the truck’s bed, knees pulled up to his chest to keep his legs from dangling over the edge. The truck lurched at every pit and pothole, but Paul managed to hang on. Sand stung his eyes and settled as a fine layer of grit between his teeth. It rode the wind, a voracious brown cloud that chewed away sunshine and distance, swallowed families and dreams, feasted on jobs and land and lives. Paul huddled in the belly of the beast, desperate to be anywhere but Oklahoma, and he prayed the sand wouldn’t follow them forever.

It wasn’t the only truck leaving Oklahoma. For months Paul had seen them hurtling down the highways, ferrying dirty, beaten people away from wind and misery, and if the rumors were to be believed, toward a rich bounty waiting in California. Paul knew California wasn’t the answer, but it



suiting him far better than waiting around to be buried in dirt. Besides, he'd stayed in one place long enough.

Two other men shared the truck bed with him. The first was a rangy man with nothing but a guitar case and a paper bag full of sandwiches who'd introduced himself as Woody. He seemed unconcerned that they might fly off the back of the truck any moment. One hand rested on his guitar, the other on his sandwich bag, and he watched the world recede with a weary smile, like he'd never seen anything at once so glorious and so heartbreaking.

The second man was gray with middle age and much less calm. His clothes were patched and a size too small, and he kept inching closer to the middle of the bed, shifting and groaning with every bump in the road. He hadn't volunteered his name yet, but in his mind, Paul had nicknamed him Jumpy.

"You comfortable yet?" Woody asked, flicking a cigarette butt over Jumpy's head and into the brown void.

"No I'm not," Jumpy said, missing the sarcasm. "Do you think he's going to drive this fast all the way to California?"

"Hope he does. The quicker we get there the better."

"Assuming we get there alive."

"If we don't, that's just one less thing to worry about." The truck lurched and Woody put a hand on his floppy hat to keep it in place. Jumpy endured a second of terror before settling down again.

"So, what's your story?" Woody asked. He shot Paul a quizzical look, as if he'd just noticed the giant was sitting next to him.

"What do you mean?"

"How'd you end up here? You don't exactly look like a native Oklahoman."

Paul considered the question and found no answer he was willing to share. Woody stared at him with probing eyes, but it didn't make Paul uncomfortable. From a normal person, he'd shun such close inspection, but he could tell Woody was studying him the way all great artists do. Soaking in the detail, saving it for a book, a song, a painting. Woody's connection to the realm of music was as visible to Paul as the man's weather-creased hat or the thin trails of dirt on his palms. The Music whirled about him like a shower of gold dust caught up in a tornado, and Paul knew this was no

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ordinary guitar picker. He was bound for something more. Woody scrutinized him for several more heartbeats, then nodded his head, unconsciously storing away everything he could remember about his giant traveling companion. Paul knew the man would write a song about what he'd seen some day. It wouldn't be a song about Paul Bunyan, roving frontier giant, but a song about everything he loved and feared. The vast majesty of America; man's desire for freedom and wide-open spaces; the pain of watching the last, lonesome places between the oceans shrink beneath cities, highways, fences, factories.

In short, the way the Jacks were ruining the country.

"I just left home and this is where I ended up," Paul said, answering Woody's question and yet offering no real insight.

"Well, you ended up in the wrong place. Smart you're getting out."

"You think life in California will be better?"

"Can't be worse," Woody said, munching on a sandwich. "Supposed to be plenty of farming jobs for those willing to work. And I am. Plus I figure somebody might want to pay me to play guitar. Better chance of that happening there than here."

"So you're a professional musician?"

"No," Woody grinned. "But I will be."

And Paul knew that was undoubtedly the case.

"Why are *you* headed to California?" Paul asked, inviting Jumpy into the conversation.

"I'm not really *headed* anywhere," he said. "I just like to keep on the move."

"How come?" Woody gave Jumpy the same stare-down he'd given Paul.

"Because if I stay too long in one place, the Germans will get me." Jumpy cast a searching look out into the dust storm as if his enemies might be lurking by the side of the road, waiting to take him out with a canister of mustard gas. Paul got the distinct impression that the man was crazy, though he knew people would draw the same conclusions about him if he went around saying an ancient order of giant killers was hell bent on his destruction and willing to wrinkle the very fabric of America to get to him.

"And how come the Germans are after you?" Woody asked.

"Do you remember that pilot they had back in the Great War?"

Richthofen? The one they called the Red Baron.”

“Course I do,” Woody said, indignantly. He seemed insulted someone would think he didn’t know who The Red Baron was. “What’s he have to do with you?”

“I’m the one who killed him. The damn Germans have been out for my head ever since.”

There were a quiet few seconds when all that could be heard was the hum of tires on the highway and the enraged howl of the relentless wind. Then Woody began to chuckle. It grew into a hearty laugh and Paul couldn’t help but crack a smile. Jumpy didn’t seem upset that he was being mocked. Instead, he just nodded his head as if he’d been expecting this reaction all along.

“See? That’s why they’ll get me some day. Because no one will ever believe me.”

Paul’s grin vanished and a sudden chill stole its way up his spine.

“You know some Canadian flyer shot down the Baron, right? They say it was either that or some Aussie ground gunner. Which one are you?” Woody tore one of his sandwiches apart and gave some to everyone. Paul could tell he was feeling guilty for making fun of Jumpy, but it was just too hard to resist.

“Neither,” Jumpy said, taking the offered sandwich and sniffing it like it might be poisoned. “I’m a born and raised American, and I’m the one that killed him. No matter what the papers say. Why else would the Germans be after me?” As if this circular logic verified his every claim, Jumpy shoved the sandwich in his mouth and began chewing.

Paul and Woody exchanged amused glances, then Woody offered his hand to their traveling companion. “Well, I guess you did the free world a service then. What’s your name?”

“I prefer to keep that confidential,” he said, shaking Woody’s hand. “You understand.”

“Sure, sure. Best not to make it too easy for them.” Woody winked at Paul. “You can tell me *your* name, can’t you?”

“It’s Paul.”

“Not Paul Bunyan?” Jumpy’s eyes grew wide and bits of sandwich flew from his mouth.

Paul was disturbed that this stranger knew his name, but he nodded.

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No sense lying. If Jumpy was a Jack, he already knew the truth. “How’d you know that?”

“You being a giant sort of gave it away. I mean, everyone knows who you are. My mother used to read me a book when I was a kid that told all about you. Shit, you’re really *the* Paul Bunyan?”

“I suppose so.” Paul hadn’t known someone had written a book about him and it distressed him mightily.

“Did you really put out a forest fire by pissing on it?”

Woody choked with laughter. Jumpy’s eager eyes stared at Paul and he could tell the man wanted the story to be true, even if it wasn’t. It was no different than his obviously fabricated tale of killing the Red Baron. And Jumpy was no different than the loggers Paul had known nearly a century ago. For the first time in years, he thought of Charlie Blade, and he remembered the man saying that sometimes men just need to know great things are possible. Paul watched Jumpy squirm in his rag clothing, caked with grime and beaten flat by the world, making up stories to give his life some color. If ever a man needed hope, it was Jumpy.

“Yes I did,” Paul said, and Jumpy hooted like a kid who’d just stumbled across Santa Claus filling his stocking with candy. “Good thing I drank a couple of lakes that morning or I’d have never been able to douse it all.”

“Paul Bunyan! Can you believe that? I’m riding to California with a real live legend.”

Woody’s knowing smile was so wide it looked like his face would split in half. “Well, hell. I didn’t know you was a celebrity too. Tell us what else you done, Paul.”

“Yeah! And tell us about Babe!”

And so Paul did. He spent the next hour recalling every fantastic thing he’d supposedly done, allowing Jumpy to steer him toward the stories he’d forgotten. He spiced up the narrative with a few new twists that drew sparkling smiles from Woody and childlike laughter from Jumpy. He spoke of the water palaces that used to hang in the skies of Albion and how the sun drew golden sigils on the wings of visiting angels. He described the peculiar scent of memory, and spun tales of the faerie lands, destroyed centuries before by the absence of true belief. He even told them about his constant flight from the Jacks and the way they had started to organize in hopes of rooting out the last known giant in America. Pulling together to

trample on the world he loved just because they could.

His companions didn't know the lies from the tall tales. Jumpy swallowed it all and Woody didn't believe a word of it. Yet they both seemed immensely satisfied when Paul's narrative drew to a close.

"See, this land was made for anyone who wants it. And I'll be damned if I let those bastards take it from me." Paul ended his speech with a bow of his head, and his companions broke into applause.

When night came, loneliness settled back into Paul's soul and he knew all his talk of fighting back against the Jacks was empty bravado. They seemed to have their hand in every aspect of the world—he wouldn't have been surprised to find they'd caused the dust storms just to flush him out of his comfortable life on the plains. They'd come so close to killing him on so many occasions, he found himself sometimes wondering if it would just be better to give up. But always there was a new horizon. And with it hope. He just wasn't sure that would be the case much longer.

"Nice stories," Woody whispered. Jumpy lay asleep on his back, hands folded across his chest like a dead man.

"Not all of them were stories," Paul said.

"Near enough, I guess," Woody said. "Not that it matters anyway. "It's hard to tell the truth from the lies sometimes."

Paul simply nodded. Woody's statement encapsulated his entire existence. The giant closed his eyes and kept them that way, not wishing to dwell on the dying frontier that he'd once found so ripe with possibility.

When he opened them again, he saw California stars.

#### 4. *The Spirit of the West—1950*

Paul sat in the corner of a rumbling boxcar, trying to remember what magic was like. The memory of it lined his throat like the aftertaste of cheap beer and lingered in the air like the mostly forgotten scents of childhood. How long since he'd seen the brilliant threads of light that connected this land to the land of magic? How long since he'd heard the conversations of ghosts?

The Jacks had done their job well, squeezing it out with industry and urban sprawl, keeping Paul forever on the road, running, trying to cling to the last embers of enchantment that still flickered in the hidden wild places.

A plain-faced man dangled his feet out the boxcar's open door,

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watching nighttime rise above an endless stretch of unspoiled farmland. Unshaven and ripe with the stench of travel, the man spoke to himself in a persistent, frantic whisper like air leaking from a car tire. His hands were in constant motion and sweat poured down the back of his neck despite the cold temperature.

Paul watched him nervously. The guy probably wasn't a Jack, and he certainly wasn't *the* Jack who'd been on his tail in recent years. But paranoia kept Paul alive.

The man suddenly climbed to his feet, like he'd just remembered something he'd forgotten to do. He whirled to face Paul, focusing his bloodshot eyes on the giant for the first time since he'd hopped the train in Wyoming. One hand rubbed absently at his belly, the other pointed at Paul like the accusatory hand of God. "You like the lonely places, don't you?"

Paul found the stranger's statement to be both the most random and most trenchant observation anyone had ever made regarding his character. He watched the man sway back and forth in anticipation, then answered. "Yes."

"Yes, yes! I knew it! I could tell it by your eyes. Point 'em out the door and take a look. That's the last of it we'll see in our lifetime. The last dying hunk of the old lonely West, turning belly up right before our eyes. People like me and you, we appreciate that. Nobody else gives a shit this country's beat. But you understand, don't you?"

"This used to be land of possibilities. Ideas! Oh, man I got ideas popping in my head. Can't even keep up with all of them. I don't care if she's dying, I want to see every inch of this bitch before they bury her. You dig that don't you? Yes! Yes! Aw, shit. Even if I could live forever I couldn't do it though. She ain't got that many days left."

Paul would have jumped into the one-sided conversation, but he might have drowned in the stream of consciousness.

"One thing she's still got is *magic*. See it out there?" The man crossed to the door and pointed out across a field of tilled earth, and beyond that to the snowcapped peaks that surrounded Denver. "Gorgeous, man. You can taste that shit." The stranger plopped down and dangled his legs again. His dialog had seemingly run its course, but his head still bobbed constantly like he was listening to music the rest of the world couldn't hear.

Paul remembered the days when he could hear that kind of music, and he wondered if the man really was tuned in. Several of the old stories told about mortals who'd found various ways to connect with the magic of creation, and it never ended well for them. For a time it was wonderful—seeing colors freshly escaped from the dreams of the gods, feeling the core of your soul touch every spot in the universe at once, and best of all, the music. The sound of every living thing striking a single endless chord, whispering and howling, crying and whistling through branch and flesh and stone. But the human mind could only cope with that type of glory for a short time. The magic would overcome them, twist their thoughts into obsessions, color their sight with unknowable visions and turn the sweet symphony of life into the shrill, painful wail of burgeoning insanity. Paul had never seen a mortal who'd stumbled upon the magic. But the wild-eyed man in his suit of rags might be the first.

It was as if he'd reached into Paul's mind and yanked out his thoughts - - possible, perhaps, if they both shared a connection to the magic. Yet Paul's connection had dwindled over the years; the absence of magic haunted him like a missing limb. But if this man still felt it, then maybe it was still alive. Attainable. Maybe Paul could find it again.

He sat down next to the stranger in the boxcar's open doorway. His legs should have touched the rapidly passing ground, but he noticed they were hardly longer than the stranger's. In fact, he was only a foot taller than the man; he'd been shrinking right along with the rest of the country.

"What makes you think there's magic out there?"

"Man, how couldn't there be? Aw, it's not any of that fairy tale stuff; this is home-grown American magic. The stuff of freedom. Yes! Yes it is. That old kind is gone and this kind is fading fast, but you can still see it if you stare out at the mountains long enough. Look out there, Paul! Take a whiff of your own history."

"How'd you know my name?" Paul asked, but he was pretty sure he already knew the answer. No doubt, this guy was hooked up to the other plane, and his straight-through connection to Paul's mind meant the giant hadn't entirely lost touch with the land of creation.

"American magic! Best goddamned stuff there is! Aw hell, and I know you're worried about it, worried the Jacks are going to tear all of it away and leave the country naked and broken. Shit, man, that's their job! Of

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course that's what they're going to do. So quit worrying about it. Take a peek from another direction.

"You *are* magic. They can't kill it all as long as you're still on the move, one step ahead, fighting hard and pissing on their plans. You're a living breathing tall tale. A creature of the West. I got a friend who says the West just takes you over. And then you become it. That's you, man. You're the spirit of the goddamned West. That's me too. That's everybody that ever watched Kansas pass by from a train car or stood out in a summer thunderstorm with his thumb in the air hoping to hell somebody would pluck him up off that deserted road and *talk* to him for a while. That magic reaches farther than you think. There's a little of it in all of us. But you? You're the wellspring. The Jacks keep draining the creek and you keep filling it back up."

Paul stared in amazement at this boxcar prophet. Paul could feel him digging around in his head, working his brain like a lump of clay, trying to reshape it into something that resembled hope. He'd always felt like a coward, running from the Jacks but never actually doing anything to stop them. But if what Neal (the name popped into his head as if the prophet had left it there for him to find) said was true, the mere act of staying alive stoked the embers of the American fire.

"Neal? Do you travel a lot?"

Neal nodded vigorously. "Yes, yes. I know what you're wondering. Do I know the fellow keeps following you from place to place, from one end of the country to the other? Guy named Jack? You figure he's on the hunt."

"Isn't he?" Paul's heart thundered in his chest. The way Neal could pick up his thoughts was spooky, and it was more frightening still that he knew the man who'd been chasing him. Paul had almost written it off as paranoia. But here was the proof.

Neal smiled. "Guy's name is Kerouac. Sometimes he calls himself Sal for no goddamned reason. Beatest cat I ever saw, but he's a friend of mine. He ain't one of the one's on your tail; he's just another restless soul like you and me. We all have the spirit in us. As long as we keep moving, it keeps on pumping through the country's veins like fresh clean blood. Once we slow down then entropy sets in. America starts to wind down. It's plain to see that there ain't too many movers left in the world."



Neal patted his shirt pocket, sweat pouring down his face, life popping like firecrackers in his wide eyes. "Say, you got any tea? I'm fresh out."

Paul shook his head. "Sorry."

"Ain't no problem. Once we get to Denver I know a guy who grows it in his garden. He's got a place near downtown not too far from the train station. Oh man, just wait till you see the bop cats they got in Denver. Yes, yes! Places open all night and if they don't have something to make you jump we'll commission a car and head out to Frisco. That's the real shit out there! You're getting off in Denver ain't you?"

"Actually, I think I'm going to keep moving."

Neal nodded sagely. "Yes. You do that. I think you understand it now. I'm getting off in Denver."

Paul would miss this frantic, enigmatic citizen of the road like he missed all the other transitory people in his life, but he was used to being alone.

"Freedom's a lonely road," Neal said.

Paul didn't answer.

##### *5. The Giant and the Knoll – 1963*

Paul leaned against the back of the picket fence, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. He kept his rifle hidden under a heavy wool trench coat—hot as hell for Texas, even in November, but it served its purpose. Beyond the fence, green grass tumbled toward Elm Street, and a number of excited onlookers buzzed like honey bees in the crisp fall sunshine.

By now, that crazy loon Oswald would be setting up shop in the School Book Depository, relishing the task at hand. The man approached murder with a failed military mind and a misplaced sense of patriotism. Paul wished for the hundredth time that he'd never met Oswald, never fallen in with the Cubans. They knew exactly what to promise. His dreams, served up on a platter for that taking. And yet, he was starting to think the price was too high.

Paul looked at his watch and pressed his transistor radio to his ear. The motorcade was crawling down Main, and they were about to turn onto Houston. Paul had a very serious decision to make in the next thirty seconds.

Paul had taken Oswald for a kindred spirit. The guy was always on the

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move—Russia, Mexico, Dallas, New Orleans. Paul couldn't help but accept the invitation to Florida. It was one of the few places in America he'd never visited. But he hadn't been expecting the meeting with the Cubans, and he damn sure hadn't been expecting them to know all about the Jacks.

Paul looked over his shoulder to make sure nobody was around before loading his rifle. Through a clutch of low-hanging tree branches that still held their leaves, Paul saw a convertible Lincoln Continental turn onto Houston Street. The crowd below cheered. Parents raised kids up on their shoulders, a couple of cops clapped; one man followed the car's progress with an 8mm camera.

Was he being used? The president had the right name, but how could he know the man was really a Jack? The Cubans had their own reasons for wanting the man dead, but they'd done a good job of building Paul up to the task. They'd spoken of magic and the fey folk—*los niños de la tierra*. They knew about Paul's connection to the source. And they knew the Jacks wouldn't rest until they'd killed every giant, paved over every enchanted glen with concrete and severed every string between this world and the other. How could they have known these things if they weren't telling the truth?

And yet, Paul couldn't help but feel he was nothing more than a disposable weapon. Oswald might relish that role, but he did not.

The motorcade turned left onto Elm Street and drew closer to the kill spot. Paul raised his rifle, pressed the stock against his shoulder and notched the barrel in a crook between two pickets. The Lincoln crawled closer. The president and first lady waved at the onlookers from the back row of seats. He wore a polished smile; she wore a pink dress and a pillbox hat. Another couple occupied the next row of seats—presumably the governor and his wife—and a pair of secret service agents sat in front.

Paul stared down the rifle's scope and found the president's head. The man he was supposed to kill. Paul's hands trembled; the crosshairs leapt from the president to his wife, then back again. If Paul decided to pull the trigger, the target had less than three breaths left. No more saber rattling at the Russians, no more space initiative, no more hobnobbing with Marilyn and Frank. Just a lifeless body that may or may not have belonged to an immensely powerful Jack. Tears welled in Paul's eyes.

When the sudden bark of gunfire broke the peace, he was just as shocked as everyone else.

Paul met Oswald at the Texas Theater in south Dallas. He slouched in his seat, staring blankly at the Audie Murphy flick that played to a nearly empty room. Oswald leaned toward him, reeking of sweat.

"I'm surprised you came," he said.

"Why? We agreed to meet here afterward."

"Yeah, but you chickened out. I figured you'd already be in Mexico by now."

Paul bristled. "I didn't chicken out. I changed my mind."

"Same damn thing. Why the hell didn't you shoot?"

"The more I thought about it, the more I figured those Cubans were just using us."

"Of course they were. You're just figuring that out." Oswald shook his head and snorted. "Hell, I knew all along they were using us. But what does it matter if everybody wants the same thing. They wanted him killed, we wanted him killed. What's the problem?"

"I'm not sure I wanted him killed."

A look of frustration crossed Oswald's gaunt face. "It's a little late for that."

Paul closed his eyes and listened to the projector clatter behind him. "I'm not even sure he's a Jack."

"Of course he is. You told me what they're trying to do. Look at all he's responsible for and tell me he ain't a Jack."

"That's just it. He hasn't really done anything."

"Aw, he's done plenty. He just doesn't let the media get wind of it. It's all under the table stuff, see? That man was running this country into the ground."

Paul wasn't convinced, but he nodded to shut the guy up. What had he been thinking? Even if the president was a Jack, he knew better than to try to kill him. That sort of thing never ended in a giant's favor. And if he was innocent, then killing him would make Paul no better than his enemies. Either way, the man was dead and Paul was glad he hadn't been the one to pull the trigger. A minor consolation, but it couldn't assuage his guilt.

"If he was a Jack, they're going to be hunting you."

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Oswald laughed. “They won’t have to look far. I’ll be in jail. Speaking of, you better get moving. You don’t want to be seen with me. I think I killed a cop.”

“I’m serious,” Paul said, rising to his feet. “Watch your back. The Jacks won’t forget something like this.”

“Sure thing,” Oswald said, grinning. Paul knew he’d never believed any of the tales about Jacks and magic. He wondered what line the Cubans had used to snare *him*.

Paul left the theater and stood for a few seconds in the blinding sunlight, wondering where to go next. Unsure what else to do, he started down the sidewalk, hands stuffed in his trench coat pockets. Police sirens wailed in the distance, and a minute later, two cruisers sped past, lights flashing. People stopped to watch and speculate about where the cars were headed. Paul kept his head down until he reached the bus station, then he bought a ticket for the next one leaving town.

Paul spent the next few hours watching America speed past his window, listening to news of Oswald’s arrest on his radio and wondering what would happen to the man. He kept expecting to hear himself named as an accomplice, but it never happened. As the sun began to set, Paul clicked off his radio and pressed his head back against the bus seat. He fell asleep wondering if he’d ever really know the truth about Jack Kennedy.

The next day, Jack Ruby answered his question.

#### 6. *A Jack by any Other Name*—2007

Paul waited in the terminal, one hand clutching his boarding pass. The plane to Heathrow was scheduled to board any minute and he looked forward to his departure with a mixture of resignation and nostalgia.

When he’d first crossed the clouds from Albion, he could never have imagined going back. But the American Jacks had proven even more horrible than their old world counterparts, and Paul was ready to admit defeat. There was nothing left of the untamed nation he’d grown to love nearly two centuries ago, and his foes had taken on new identities.

The Jacks weren’t always named Jack anymore.

This startling revelation had occurred to Paul after nearly a decade without encountering one of his ancient enemies. Yet a Jack by any other name—Microsoft, Enron, Halliburton—could still slay giants. Giants like

Paul and giants like America. No more boundaries existed to slow their ambition, no magic to allow the wide-open spaces to flourish. No memory of better days when the world was large enough to get lost in. That sort of freedom had been driven from the country years ago.

A lady with a faux British accent informed the swarm of passengers it was time to board. Paul took his place in line, mobbed by the incessant chatter, the harsh ringing of cell phones, the droning newscaster on the CNN monitor, the coma-inducing Muzak. The greasy odor of fast food and bath-deprived humanity assaulted his nose and he fought the urge to run screaming from the terminal in hopes of escaping the throng. He kept his composure, and ten minutes later, Paul was in his seat.

He buckled his seatbelt—a perfect fit. Paul had shrunk along with the rest of the world and he doubted he'd ever regain his former stature. America, however, might still have a chance. Paul whispered an apology to his adopted country as the plane taxied down the runway. What might she have become if he'd stayed in Albion? If he hadn't led the Jacks across the ocean?

Leaving this place might give the Jacks reason to leave it too. It could be they no longer cared enough about giants to follow him, but his presence had fueled their destruction for far too long. His departure might be too late to change anything, but it was the only avenue of hope left to walk. Great things might still be possible.

Paul wouldn't linger long in Albion—she had her own share of Jack troubles—but he would continue on until he found some untouched land, a place where Jack boots had not yet soiled the earth. If the Jacks followed, then America would be allowed to thrive. And if they didn't, at least Paul would have a new home in which to wander.

The plane left the ground with a lurch and hurtled skyward. Paul gave a gasp when it punched through the clouds and emerged into a world of pure sunshine. It had been so long since he'd seen the land of his fathers that tears formed in his eyes and trailed down his bristly cheeks.

The plane leveled out and turned toward Albion.

And so it was The Spirit of the West left America for good.

## JOSH ROUNTREE



JOSH ROUNTREE is a lifelong Texan, but regardless of stereotype, he doesn't ride a horse very well, he never says ya'll when referring to a single person, and he can count the number of oil wells he owns on no hands. Josh lives in Austin with his wife and two sons, all of whom think he's sort of weird. His short fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Lone Star Stories*, and other cool markets. His story "Wood on Bone" received honorable mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror #17*. For the complete scoop, visit [www.joshrountree.com](http://www.joshrountree.com).