

A Fitting Memorial

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Ballard had already been sitting on the store porch more than an hour before Ep left his house across the creek for their regular morning conversation. While Ep had been dawdling at home, Ballard had been thinking and arrived at a plan for a grand course of action which would take not only Ep but the entire community of Wide Spot by surprise. It had been formulating in his mind since early January of 1981 and it was nearly complete. He looked across the creek as Ep's front door swung open and his friend stepped out on the porch.

Ep made the crossing of the little bridge and the highway, climbed the store steps and sat down in his regular hickory bottom chair and leaned it against the wall. "Well, how are you this morning, Ballard?"

"Fair, fair to middling I reckon. How are you? Did you wake up late today?"

"No, I woke up early. But I was listening to the radio news. I swear I don't know what will happen if somebody don't do something to stop Ronald Reagan from doing all that crazy stuff he does. How in the world did we ever end up with that fool in the White House? He ain't nothing but a bad cowboy actor. We would sure be better off if he was still trying to sell Twenty Mule Team Borax."

Ballard responded, "Well, I have to agree with you. We still watch 'Death Valley Days' sometimes when the television line ain't been blown down somewhere between here and the antenna on the ridge. But I have to admit, Ep, it bothers me too to see how that fool is trying

to destroy everything Roosevelt and Truman and Johnson ever built. Let's talk about something happy for a change. The grocery truck runs today and I'll finally have some more fifty-pound cans of lard. I swear when I run out of lard at the first of the month it spoils a whole week of business. These women around here won't buy a five-pound can and wait a week for nothing. They all run down the creek to that big IGA and buy that off-brand lard and then complain to me till they can use up a fifty-pound can of it."

Ep laughed and responded, "Yep, I remember that time the Widder Higgins got Hobert Tutt to run her down to the IGA and got stuck with that lard that smelled like a boar hog in heat when it fried. She come in here for over a month cussing about lard every day and blaming you because she bought bad lard at the IGA."

Ballard wavered between a smile and a grimace, "Yep, she stayed mad over that a long time and I never could get her to understand I wasn't the one who sold it to her. But the worst time I ever had with lard was when I first bought this place during the big war and got stuck with that truckload of bad black market lard. Do you remember that?"

"I sure do. I helped you and that gypsy who sold it to you unload it off of that truck. He had it hid under a load of hay to keep the ration officers from finding it. You sold that lard like hotcakes for a week until these women got deep enough in the cans to find out it was beef tallow from the bottom to about four inches from the top of the can and then covered up with real pretty white, creamy lard. That traveling man sure laid it to you on that one, Ballard."

"Yes, he did, Ep. I just about didn't survive that one. I lost a big wad of money on that and had to feed it to my hogs mixed in with

other stuff to get them to eat that tallow. Do you remember that old brood sow's face the first time she bit into a leftover biscuit soaked in that stuff? If she could have talked, she would have probably cussed me worse than the old Widder Higgins. I wish I could have had my hands on that rascal. But I swear I'm more worried about going under now that Reagan is in Washington than I ever was over that load of lard. I'd like to see him greased with that beef tallow and rode out of Washington on a rail." They both laughed and moved on to other conversations until Ep left for home at lunch time.

As soon as Ep's door closed across the creek, Ballard walked inside the store and set his plan in motion by calling the lumber company in Carpenter. He ordered several items including a small bundle of rough oak lumber, a case of 12 penny nails, a wheelbarrow, a round pointed shovel, a mattock, a roll of chain link fence wire, a dozen twelve foot posts, a box of heavy staples, five large heavy duty tarps, and a pickaxe. He smiled as he hung up the telephone and muttered, "I can't wait to see Ep's face when I pull this one off on him."

Shortly after Ep arrived on the porch the next morning, the lumber company truck pulled in and the driver yelled out the window, "Where do you want me to unload this stuff, Ballard?" Ballard advised the driver to unload the materials in the back side of a small vacant lot he had just bought beside the store and went inside to get the money to pay the bill. Ep was eagerly awaiting him when he came back to the porch.

"What on earth are you doing, Ballard? You know you can't sell lumber here. The lumber company delivers and they can undercut your price. You can't sell that stuff and if you leave it there long somebody will steal it all if you don't guard it all night long."

"Ep, I'm doing my civic duty. I'm starting a building project. But it's top secret and I can't tell anybody, not even you or the old woman. This is sort of government business, I guess you could say."

"Don't lie to me, Ballard. With Reagan in Washington and John Y. Brown in Frankfort, you couldn't get a government contract if your life depended on it. You fit both of them like a hungry coon hound and lost this precinct both times. I don't think you could get John Y. to buy you a three-piece chicken dinner if you was on starvation. What's up? You know you can tell me. You tell me everything. I even know your first girlfriend's name and where you hide your doctoring whiskey."

"Ep, this is serious business. I can't breathe a word to a soul. The whole county will find out at the same time on February 6. It's a Saturday and we are going to give away free pinto beans and cornbread here when I unveil what I'm working on. You always liked pinto beans and free groceries of any kind. You'll be here won't you?"

Ep growled in response, "You know I'll be here. But I'm going to find out what you're up to long before February 6. You can't keep a secret from me. I know stuff neither one of your wives ever knew."

Ballard smiled his best smile, loaded a fresh chew of Red Man and walked off the porch to pay the driver who also asked what the supplies were for. He got the same answer, "It's a top secret government project and I can't say a word until February 6. You are invited to come here that day for the great unveiling and free pinto beans and corn bread. Tell everybody you know. They're invited too."

After the truck headed back to Carpenter, Ballard surprised Ep even more when he said, "Ep, I hate to run you off but I need to go inside and work on the plans for this project. I'll see you in the morning I guess?"

Ep was obviously offended but said, "Yep, you'll see me in the morning. But I'll probably know what's up by then anyway. You ain't got enough lumber here to build a good school bus stop. This can't be no government project. I'll figure it out."

Both men were up at sunrise the next morning and as soon as Ballard stepped out on the store porch Ep's door swung open and he headed across the creek with questions in his mind. They did him no good and Ballard remained as close-mouthed as possible. After they drank a cup of coffee together and loaded their first chews of the day, Ballard said, "Ep, if you want to, you could help me with the first stage of this project. Are you interested?"

Ep quickly jumped to the conclusion he could decipher the plan if he helped, so he allowed himself to be volunteered. Ballard stepped into the feed room and came back with two shovels and two sets of post hole diggers. He led Ep to the vacant lot behind the lumber pile and laid out a square about twenty feet by twenty feet, marked off post holes every ten feet and handed Ep one set of the post hole diggers. Ep snorted and asked, "How much does this job pay, Ballard?"

"It pays what the little boy shot at, Ep. But I'm going to throw in lunch and a little free education with the work. Are you digging or are you leaving?"

Ep grumbled but stayed in the interest of learning more. The two of them spent the rest of the morning digging the holes and setting the posts and Ballard diligently refused to tell Ep a thing about the project. At lunch time, he offered Ep a sandwich of Kentucky Border Bologna, an Ale 8 One, and a Moon Pie. Ep ate the meal and asked for more. "I think working all morning for lunch deserves a better lunch than this, Ballard. What else do I get?"

"I guess I can give you a Zagnut bar, Ep. But you need to go in the store and get it yourself. I'm not delivering lunches. I'm working."

Ep got up off the pile of lumber and quickly returned from the store with a second Ale 8 One, a Golden Delicious Apple, a can of Armour Potted Meat, and an individual pack of crackers. "Good Lord, Ep, I didn't take you to raise. You're trying to eat me out of house and home. I don't think the budget for this project allows me to have any overpaid laborers. You know Reagan hates government waste." Ep just opened the potted meat and crackers and began emptying the can. Ballard grinned a knowing grin and thought to himself, "I can't wait to see what he says when he finds out what he's working on."

After lunch, Ballard got Ep to help him string the chain link on the posts and hang an old gate from the feed room on the fence. As they hung the gate, Ep said, "You're getting you a guard dog ain't you, Ballard. That's all you're doing. You're just building a dog lot."

Ballard laughed and said nothing more. He got Ep to help him place the heavy duty tarps on the chain link with zip ties. He even got out his step ladder and used it to place a tarp over the top of the fenced lot. "We can't let nobody know what's going on here., Ep. I told you this is a top secret project. And I hate to tell you this, but I'm going to have to lay you off now. In the morning, I start on the most classified part of this mission and I can't have no prying eyes, not even yours, pardner."

For the next three days, Ballard got up at sunrise, left his wife to run the store, unlocked the gate before slipping quickly inside and locking it behind himself. The sounds of digging, shoveling, and flying dirt were all Ep and the customers could hear that day. Word had

spread all over Wide Spot and nearly everyone came by to guess what Ballard was working on. Ideas, theories, and rumors abounded. None came close to the eventual truth. Ep worked studiously to hide his outrage that he wasn't in on the secret and every time he could speak to Ballard he made an effort to get answers. He got none.

On the second day, the sounds of digging stopped, and sawing, hammering, and obvious construction could be heard behind the tarps. By lunch time that day, Ep was standing outside the fence constantly yelling questions at Ballard. He got few answers. The visitors were becoming more intrigued and when word spread that the project would culminate with a free meal nearly everyone in the county came to inquire. Curiosity was in the process of killing several cats.

On the third day, Ep was nearly frantic and the visitors, who generally knew the closeness of his relationship with Ballard, had begun to accuse him of being in on the secret. This made him even more desperate to know the truth. He never left the fence and even offered to carry Ballard's lunch to him in an attempt to learn more. Nothing worked and Ballard held tight to his secret. Late that afternoon, he came outside and announced that the construction phase was over. He created a large cardboard sign which announced the "Grand Unveiling 10am February 6" and hung it on the fence across the gate.

On February 5, Ballard asked Ep to help him peel a fifty-pound bag of onions and set up a large cast iron kettle over a fire pit he had dug between the fence and the highway. Ep peeled onions, cried from the task, and said, "Ballard, I swear it ain't right to do your best friend this way. Please tell me what's going on." Ballard refused.

At daylight on February 6, Ballard built a fire under the cast iron kettle, filled it with water, and poured in a twenty-pound bag of pinto beans and added an entire smoked and diced hog jaw. He managed to induce Ep to stir the beans and watch the fire. Ballard's wife had baked a hotel-pan full of corn bread and paper bowls and plastic spoons were set up on a table near the fire. A dishpan of diced onions sat on the table for those hearty enough to spice up their beans. The crowd began arriving early and by ten a.m. nearly half the county was waiting, eating beans, and buying sodas, candy bars, and other snacks. Business was booming and Ballard was grinning.

At noon, Ballard climbed up on the remains of the pile of lumber after testing a rope rigging he had devised behind Ep's back, which was intended to drop the tarps simultaneously when the trigger rope was pulled. Ballard broke into his best public speaking voice, "Neighbors, friends, people of Wide Spot, I know all of you are very interested to know what this project has been about. As you know, last year the country elected Ronald Reagan to the White House. Since then, just about every county, state, and city in the country has created some monument in honor of Ronald Reagan. There are bridges, schools, court houses, and jails all named after Ronald Reagan. Today is Ronald Reagan's birthday. I have seen what he has done in the time he's been in office and I decided it was time for Wide Spot to have a memorial for Ronald Reagan too."

Ep roared from his spot by the bean kettle, "Ballard, you have lost your mind. You fit Ronald Reagan tooth and nail. Just yesterday, you were telling me what a sorry rascal he is. You have lost your mind, Ballard. No wonder you wouldn't let me know what this was about.

You know if I had known what this was I wouldn't have dug one post hole."

Ballard waited for Ep to run out of breath before continuing his speech. "Ladies and Gentlemen, here it is, Wide spot's memorial to Ronald Reagan. I have built a fitting memorial." With those words he pulled on the rope and the tarps fell to the ground to reveal a wooden building about six feet square with one narrow door. It took a few moments for most of the crowd to realize there was a half-moon cut near the top of the door and over it hung a sign lettered with the words "Ronald Reagan Memorial One Hole Outhouse." At last, Ep regained his composure and began laughing and clapping.

"Ballard, I love it. It is a fitting memorial," Ep roared above the crowd, "Can I be the first one to break it in? I want to leave Mr. Reagan a gift." □