



Starring:

The father

The son

The girl from the farm

The train

Death

1.

The journey west was troublesome to say the least. Men spoke of gold in the earth, but few told of the dangers of getting to it.

I had scraped and scrambled to collect the funds for two tickets on a clipper to California, but at the last hour a dear friend of mine, George Loom, advised against it. He said he had it on good word that the gold in California was running out, but there was still untapped ore along the Colorado River, so me and my boy packed up everything we had into two wagons, sold our house, and made for Colorado.

We lost one of the wagons crossing the Missouri. Damn near lost my life, but my boy was quick with a rope, and my hands might be old but they're not weak.

I think something about that day changed something in him. He's quieter, doesn't talk much unless I talk to him first. When he sees that first lode of gold come up out of the river or out of a rock wall, he'll be back to his old self.

That thought don't make it easier on me. Jackson hasn't been this quiet since his mother died. I just hope he remembers what we're doing this for.

Colorado is so close I think I can smell it; but I hear thunder in the distance, and it sounds louder every time. Be a shame to survive the Missouri only to succumb to a storm. I perish the thought. I should have not written it down.



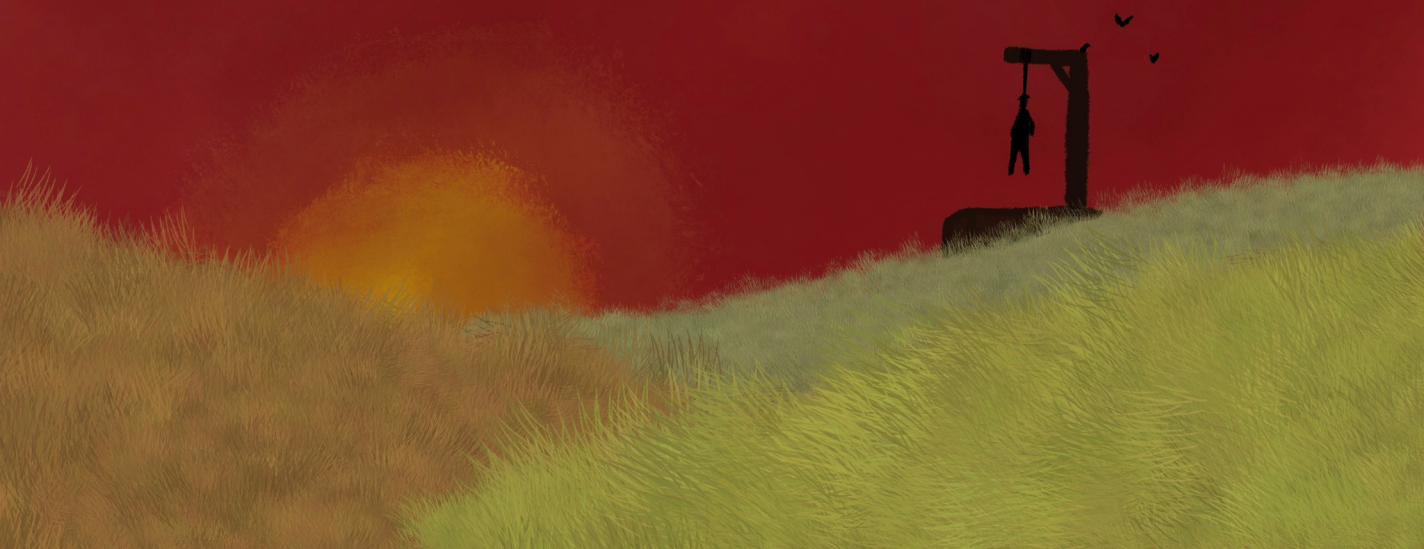
2.

That storm damn near destroyed our second wagon. To make matters worse, as we rolled into town, still soaked and absent most of what we came out here with besides a horse and the clothes on our backs, there was a hanging at the edge of town. We didn't stop to watch but we saw most the whole thing just passing by. Jackson tried to not look, but I met the hanging man's gaze. For better or for worse, a man deserves to look another person in the eyes when he dies, if he chooses to.

I asked around the next morning and heard a few different accounts. One said he was a raper, another a thief and another a murderer.

I've never believed in superstition, but the look in that man's eyes just didn't say any of that to me. He just looked like he wanted help and nobody was coming to help.

God, sometimes I see that look in Jackson's eyes. But we've made it all the way out here, so there can only be good fortune ahead for us.





3-

We spent the first few weeks searching the river and came up with nothing but water. Soon enough it was clear we'd need a supplemental source of income, and Jackson and I both applied at the local coal mine. They'd been up front that it's all coal and no gold down there. I have a hunch they're lying to keep it for themselves, and every day I slip away at lunch hour and search through some of the farther passageways, and even some caverns nobody has been through yet.

I know there's gold in that mountain.

I tried to get the boy to do the same, and God bless if he doesn't slip away at lunch, but only to waste time with the farmer's daughter from up the road.

I've told him time and again that farming is a weak man's work. You spread seeds on the ground and you wait, you pick the fruit and you wait for people to come clamoring wanting to buy it off you. It's all sitting and waiting, far as I can see.

Some days I don't see the boy much at all, and he'll tell me he's been at the shop or taking extra hours in the mine, but I can see the dirt on his clothes, I can smell the stink of pigs and horses on him. That farmer's daughter may as well be some kind of witch put a spell on him.

Well, when he sees gold he'll come around. That farmer and his daughter can keep throwing seeds at the dirt, and the boy and I will be long gone from here, living free in a mansion in California, or maybe back in Virginia or up in New York.

On the walk back from a particularly hard day down there in the mountain, I bought a paper when I glanced at a headline: *George Loom Finds Gold!*

I could hardly read the damn thing, my hands shook so hard. They're still shaking, but at least I can write.

Seems my "friend" George Loom spun a fable and I fell for it. Not long after Jackson and I left, he hopped aboard a clipper and made his way to California, and somehow got his hands on an ore vein nobody had found. He probably bought the same ticket I would have.

There's a train coming out from St. Louis. The company is shipping in new workers thinking our troupe is too old or just lazy. They don't believe when we tell them the coal is running out just like the gold did before it.

My gold is still under there, though. I can feel it.

Still, part of me wants to take what we have, buy two tickets for that train's return trip, and head back to where we started from. But what's the good in that? There's nothing in Virginia for us now, and at least here we have hope.

Would that I could have afforded to take the rail out here; we wouldn't have needed the horses we lost anyway, and maybe Jackson wouldn't be so quiet now.

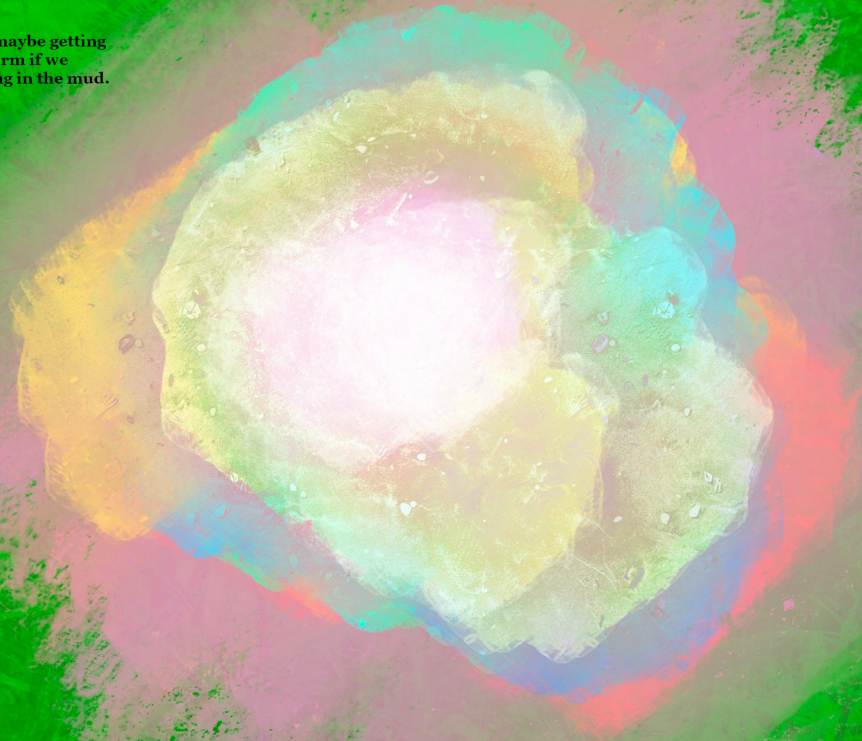
Except for when he's talking about that farm girl. Then I can't make him stop.

5.

I found out the boy has been skipping shifts to be with the farmer's daughter. I went over there and told that smelly farmer to keep his daughter away from my boy. We had a lot of words, and truth be told the man was kind and, dare I say, even made some sense. But I told him to keep away and he told me he would do what he could, but might as well have said he can't do anything.

I told Jackson about the train and about us maybe getting replaced. He said we could go work on the farm if we needed. Imagine me doing farm work, playing in the mud. Why did my boy have to fall for a farm girl?

Where's my damn gold?





6.

He's gone. My boy is gone.

After our argument he started picking up extra shifts in the mine. I woke up one morning and he wasn't home, and I thought he might've taken my words to heart and worked through the night.

Come to find he was working late with a crew of a few other men, and in the wee hours of the morning there was a cave-in. Two of the men made it out, but the rest were lost. My Jackson was among them. I reached for gold and I lost everything I ever had.

I'm a hard man, but I must've cried for hours. Days maybe. Didn't eat. Didn't sleep. After a while something about this grief seemed off, and that's when I remembered I wasn't the only one who lost him.


I went up to the farm to talk to the farmer's daughter, to give her my condolences, to give her my thanks for giving Jackson at least a bit of happiness in this cold, hard life of ours before he went, and to give my apologies for trying to put a stop to it.

She asked what I was planning on doing now, and I told her the truth: I had no idea. She told me wait right there at the fence surrounding the farm, and she ran off. I waited for a while, almost feeling a fool, but then she came back with her Pa, and he told me there was room and food and work on their farm for me, if ever I needed it, and Lord did I need it.

Seems to me we spend most of our lives falling. I fell for a woman, she fell below the earth. I fell for a ruse, I fell in a river, my boy fell in love, and I let him fall so far I'll never find him again.

But at least for right now, I've got solid ground to stand on. Maybe for the first time since I lost my wife.

I guess sometimes that's enough. I guess sometimes it has to be.

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- The background is a painting of a landscape. The sky is a vibrant, textured blue with white, wispy clouds. In the foreground, there is a field of tall, green grass. On the left side, there is a white, conical structure, possibly a teepee or a small building, with a prominent red chimney. In the middle ground, two simple wooden crosses are visible in the grass. The overall style is impressionistic and evocative.
- 1. Thunder on the Open Plain**
 - 2. Sun Hangs Low**
 - 3. Gifts from the Land**
 - 4. The Last Train Out of Old St. Louis**
 - 5. More to Life**
 - 6. Gold Dust**

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