

Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie

James sat praying beside Harold, who was asleep on his bedroll. The two of them were in Harold's tent, hidden away from the night outside. James focused on Harold's breathing, not wanting to look at his gaunt face, which looked so old now, older than it had any right to be, framed by long stringy brown hair, and an unfamiliar beard.

They were young unmarried men, members of a team of surveyors, sent out west to scout out terrain for the railroad, to be explorers, to find themselves and adventure out on the frontier. Harold and James, both the sons of preachers were the only two men who could read in the team, and so they took turns reading the Bible aloud at night to their fellow travelers, but most of all, reading to one another. They'd stay up late at night planning together about what to read the following day. On one of these nights Harold reached out and touched James's hand, he needed to know, needed to know if his hands felt like snakeskin. They didn't. They were soft and smooth. James jerked his hand away from Harold and looked into his eyes, understanding. "It wouldn't be right... Wouldn't be... Christian," was all he could say before exiting Harold's tent. James stayed away from Harold after that, and soon Harold stopped his readings altogether with James reading from the Bible twice as much to fill the time.

But a flurry of fevers had filtered through the team, leaving them trapped for days on the open plains with less than half their original number. When James learned that Harold was sick, he went straight to his tent, and had kept coming there day after day.

Harold woke as if he was taking his first breath and spoke with a hoarse voice. "Don't let them bury me, James." His eyes looked mad and he couldn't seem to focus on anything in particular. "Don't let them bury me," he repeated faster this time.

"Of course I won't, Harold. Wouldn't be right to bury a breathing man, now would it?"

Harold grunted, an attempt at a laugh. The two of them were quiet for awhile. All that could be heard was the wind whipping against the tent. “I had a dream, James. A vision. God himself, spoke to me. I’ll be dead by tomorrow.”

“You can’t talk like th—“

“He told me in the dream, he told me not to be buried. He ain’t want that for me. He wants me set out ‘neath the open sky.”

“It was just a dream, Harold. I’m not going to leave you there to rot. I—“

Harold lifted his arm to reach for James, but couldn’t summon the strength, instead flailing his arm before letting it fall limp at his side. “Don’t abandon me in the dirt. Please. Leave me in the warm sunlit grass. Leave me for the scavengers of the world. Leave me so that I can crawl with the insects, run with the coyotes, and soar with the vultures. That’s what heaven will be for me.” Harold took in a deep unfulfilling breath. “And James, you would never have to fear death again, knowing that when you pass I will always be close by to guide you to the next world. Please promise me, James.”

James leaned in and kissed Harold’s feverish forehead. “I promise,” he whispered.

James stepped out of Harold’s tent, holding his torn hat, looking away from the bright prairie sun smoldering above. The other men of the camp sat around fireless logs, shifting their sweaty thin bodies, averting their dirt smattered faces. After more than a minute had gone by, one turned, a tanned wiry man named Daniel, who asked, “Harold gone too?”

James, fixated on the dirt, nodded without looking up.

Daniel spat, stood up and walked over to James and patted him on the shoulder. “I know you two were good friends.”

James stayed silent.

“You go ahead and set yourself down over there and rest some. We’ll get the grave ready.”

“N—No,” James said, looking up at the man. “He asked me not to.”

“Not to what? Who?”

“Har—Harold he asked me, us, not to... not to bury him.”

Daniel took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. “James...”

“It’s... it’s what he wanted.”

“James, why don’t you sit down?”

“I can’t.”

“He could spread the fever, James. We got to bury him.”

“I’ll take him. I’ll take him myself from here and find a place for him. I promised him, he made me promise I wouldn’t bury him. He had a dream, a— God spoke to him. Told him not to be buried.”

Daniel patted James on the shoulder again. “James, friend. Those were just the fever dreams of a dying man. A man gets all sorts of thoughts in his head towards the end. My grandfather also fell ill with the fever ‘fore he died, and he told us to throw him in the river and that he’d be restored.”

“But...I promised him.”

Some of the men started standing up, adjusting their suspenders, putting their hats on their heads. One of them called out, “You can’t leave your friend to rot like that, eaten alive by all manner of filth. T’wouldn’t be the Christian thing to do.”

Years later, James sat on the porch of his home, wanting to get away from his wife, staring out at the night sky, at the full moon, when he saw vultures flying overhead. He watched the wings of the great birds as they swooped down, landing not ten feet away from him. He observed that there was nothing for the birds to feed on, they just stood there with their red faces standing out against the dark night, watching him. He stood up. He fled back into his house.