

Fool's Gold

The plains continued to stretch, no hint of the Rockies, this great unimaginable wall, only the soft grasses and butterflies a flutter. A radiant sun staring them down, with only the caress of a soft breeze to cool them. Riches awaited for they had not woken up yet.

“Oh get us out of the rut will ya,” Burton groaned, his eyes closed, arms crossed, a nodding head starting to support it's own weight.

The left side of the wagon had both wheels dinging back and forth, skipping the valley of the rut tracks, causing a relentless shake and wobble.

“It's this dang wagon you stole us,” Larry grumbled, “who makes a wagon a foot-width short? Bustard.”

“Width be damned it's a wagon ain't it? But if you don't get it out, you'll be sorry. Wheel'l drop right off from the chatter. Fuck'ter right off.” Burton now wide awake slammed his hand down by his side like a timber falling. “Bang on in the dirt. You wanna walk?”

“No siree.”

“Then you better git.”

Larry was still left with a sour taste in his mouth. Burton could tell he was trying to spit it out, but couldn't manage letting him speak the grievance away. “Yeah I still think this is for that swindle you pulled on that ole coot back in Lawrence. Bustard.” Larry was always misusing bastard, trying to sound tough, but still afraid of offending God, which he was still on the fence about even all these years after leaving catholic school.

“Who you calling a coot?” Burton gargled, his short temper and thick fists the loudest thing on the plains.

“Not yer, the other. Trade him a satchel full of cherry pits for water and whisky. Devil be laughing. The man was blind Burt.”

“Sure was. Heh.”

“No I mean I think he really was blind. Ain't no one catch a break in this world.”

The two fell silent, a chirp of some pretty blue birds passing over head kept watch on them. Clouds stretched from the horizon starting to dazzle and sparkle their eyes with leaking rays.

“Well are ya?” Burton muttered.

“Are ya what?”

“Gonna jump us out?”

And with a quick lash on the rein, “Gee up!” Larry hollered, and as the mule kicked into speed the left rein was pulled tight veering the wagon up, out, and over, the left side now rustling through the patches of shrub-grass that bordered the road they were on, and the other side in between the two true tracks.

“And it was only half full of pits,” Burton said defensively calling way back when. “We left him juicy ripe ones on tha top.”

“Sure. Well. Only cause we was getting sick after eating so many when we left that farmstead we camped out at.”

“See, didn't I tell ya, brilliant idear sleeping in the offseason orchards. No one to find ya.”

“When we gonna find this gold anyhow Burt?” Larry jumped topics.

“Oh I can't 'spect it'll be any further now. Country can't be too big. Why, what you thinkin'?” Burt continued on, “We'll run into someone soon and they'll say, why boys are you interested in some gold, and we'll say yes sir we is. Well right this way then. And we'll say thank you kindly, and then tip our hats. Sure 'nuff.”

Larry's face twisted and became fuzzy, thinking just maybe that was going to happen. “Whenever's I try to think you wrong Burt you prove me right. Yeah, we musta been in California by now right? Certainly by your wheezing.”

Burt's muddied eyes turned to slivers, “And what's that supposed to mean?”

“What'dya mean?”

“What'dya mean what'dya mean. Wheezing you says?” And Burt crossed his arms in a huff, hating to hear anything about his health, age, or sign of weakness, especially from the only friend he could remember having.

“Well the way I see's it, worse your wheezing gets the farther away we get from St. Louis. The closer we must be getting to that wondrous nature, them golden rivers, with shiny nuggets just trickling down those rocks. Can't you smell it? We must be-a getting there. Surely.” A nugget twinkled in Larry's eye. Burton wanted to reach into those ponds of blue and pluck it out and hide it away.

Instead he looked out to the prairie trying to see these so called great green trees or sparkling granite rocks, pine cones the size of dogs. But nothing came to mind. Too much time in St. Louis, and certainly no time reading or looking at pictures. Just figured mountains were these

big rocky pointy things, easy enough to saddle around.

Not one for imagination he wasn't sure what it was all supposed to look like. "Nuggets down in the river rocks? No, they ain't no fish. You gotta dig for 'em. In the dirt." Burt chuckled to himself the superior as the wagon ambled on.

"No. Nuh-uh that's not what Johnny Testosterone said. Said men was pulling them right from the river with their bare hands, as big as ape-ree-cots. Or you can use a frying pan to scoop 'em up they're so big."

"Now how would Johnny Testosterone know that? He ain't never been past Fourth St."

"Said his uncle had." Larry said plainly.

"I thought his uncle was doing five to eight upstate for armed robbery?"

"Well yeah, maybe he robbed a miner of his nuggets."

Burton gave him such a look.

"Ok maybe it was his other uncle."

"And if that is true, how come his uncle ain't got him out of the factory? Glam bam thank you ma'am! Hmmm?"

"Well maybe they don't get on too well."

"Ha yeah'd make sense to me. Ain't no one can stand Johnny Testosterone for more than an hour 'cept you."

Larry grinned at the thought, but also didn't argue it was probably only a minute after the hour he didn't want to talk to Johnny Testosterone neither. "What a bastard." he said under his breath.

So the two of them lolled on down the road, Larry whistling, humming, letting out random lines, “The only gold in my life was my baby. But the river gone swept her away.” And Burton kept harumphing and wheezing, as if all this fresh air were somehow a burden. The mule would bray, and the two would cuss and spit til it quieted down again.

“I don't get it Burton, I never heard ya's wheeze like this when we was back in St. Louis. Not once, and now all of a sudden outta the factory, here you is wheezing. What'dya s'pose it is?”

“Allergies, dammit. There's nothing to be allergic to in St. Louis. Ain't no life there to be allergic to. Glad we left that nothing town. No life at all.”

“No love neither.”

“Yeah, keep on.” Burton shot a loogie.

“Ain't no adventure.”

“You said it.”

“Ain't no fight neither.”

“Amen. You know I reckon we is the two toughest sons of bitches who ever come out this way.”

“Ye-ha toughest this side of the Mississippi. We haven't met no one we couldn't take by wits or force. Fear of the frontier my backside.”

“Say it again Larry.”

The mule yipped at a particularly luscious patch of dandelions nearby.

“Oh no you don't,” Larry corrected, “Hey, and who was that last bastard we come across?”

“That grump who's face looked to be blown half off?”

“Yeah! No ear on the left side of his face.” Larry let out a long whistle that pricked at the ears of the mule.

“Ain't no manners. Getting all snappy at us.” Burton slouched back into the unforgivingly hard wooden perched seats, dreaming of their plush couch cushions they had left behind when they up and sold the shack the two had been living in near the steel mill.

“How was we supposed to know which way was west? Damn idiot, thought he had us pegged. Not like we ever been out this way, or any way. And now, now look at us, open road, heading towards gold, the sun in our eyes.”

“Yeah Lar, the sun in our eyes, about that.”

“Right.” The two hunkered their hats down further, put there hands over there eyes, squinting into the face of destiny. “Buzzing the hell out of me. We got any of that water left?”

Burton simply shrugged, unmoved by the question.

Larry took the reins to one hand, and craned his neck back to search. “Let's see... a punch of water and a punch of whiskey.” He drew two stoppered leather bags forward. “Not much of either left though.”

“Don't worry, that ole coot said we'd run into a river down the road, it should be any nearer.”

Larry made motion to cheers, “To what's in front of us!”

“Forgetting our own behind.” Burton agreed. The two pulled out both stoppers and took a hearty swig of what was given.

And sure enough, Burton who wanted whiskey was given water, and Larry who desperately needed water had the whiskey, not that either would disagree with fate or show the other a weakness for it. Neither were happy but neither wanted to admit it, so there they sat, Burton just wanting to make his lousiness even more lousy with the prospect of falling asleep drunk, had a head all too clear, and Larry, mouth parched, stomach feeling something empty with no amount of brown stuff to fill it, hiccuped through the plains.

Larry, a bit buzzed by now, wiped sun blazed tears from his chin and called, "Looky there," pointing a finger out a ways.

"Whatchou talking about Larry?"

"I mean look at them flowers. You ever see something so purty than them prairie flowers, blowing, rustling, dancing in the wind. See it Burt, they're doing a waltz."

"Dancing flowers, put down the whiskey you ingrate."

"Naw I mean it. Just makes ya want the wind to take ya and dance too." Larry put a hand out to the wind's caress, his eyes shut for a moment, before he lost his balance and tumbled out onto the road.

"I said you was an ingrate Larry and dammit now I know youse and injit too." Burton saved the reins and yanked the mule halt. He wanted to be angry, wanted to raise hell, but as he saw Larry in the dirt sniffing and sniffing a warmth arose in him, and he just wanted to make sure all was well. "Now there's a dancing flower, I call youse a pansy. Come along and get back inter here before I leave ya."

Larry achingly got to his feet, using his knees to pick himself back up to lean on the

wagon. "You wouldn't do that, would ya Burt?"

"Nah, shame I can't."

Burt grappled with Larry's arm and pulled him back to, knowing that they had never left the other, and surely it couldn't be now. No way to fix stupid, no way to free smart. Neither had finished school, and neither saw the reason to. They had made their first honest dollars on the very same day they skipped school. Burt chuckled to himself, well they was honest, even if the dollar wasn't. One of the many times the two had skipped school, they had run smack dab into a police officer. Thought they was done for, and instead the cop, who turned out to be crooked, told them to stand guard, and when the time came say they saw nothing. He flipped them each a dollar coin and left them there in front of a grocery store confused and beaming.

Well when the time came the boys were not in fact out front but inside the shop ready to buy some candy. A robber came in, snatched their dollars away, and everything in the till. When the police came round sure enough they identified the officer who had disappeared on duty, and identified the robber as the cops brother-in-law. Nothing had gone their way, and it was certain nothing ever would.

Burt washed the memory away with their last glug of water, hiding his smile from Larry. "Nah my eyes ain't as good as yours Larry, but what do you reckon that is up yonder? A last remaining stump of a tree?"

"Can't be. I 'spect it's a person."

"Nooo. Looks like an upside down tree don't it I mean the trunk one way up, the branches and leaves other way down. Say what's a redwood s'posed to look like anyhow?"



“Not that. For sure.”

“Well hell I don't know, my eyes ain't special like yours. How 'bout we get up to it then?”

Larry clucked, “Giddup,” the mule kicking into a disgruntled trot.

As they came closer and closer, a man was found standing on a boulder. He had a large brimmed hat, far larger than theirs. He wore a deer skin vest, his jacket haphazardly placed on the ground at the foot of the boulder. His jet black hair was tasseled over his eyes, and yet his chin was as clean as can be. And his boots had Larry stare in awe, so shiny and detailed surely a man of status out here. A loose cigarette dangled from his lips yet remained unlit, as if he were waiting for something.

“Wooooah!” tugging at the reins Larry pulled the mule up fifty feet or so. “Well what do we say?”

Burton frowned, “I don't like this one bit.”

“Yeah, how'd that boulder get out here?” Larry thumped.

“No not that you!” Burton slapped his hat.

Mumbling to himself still stuck on the boulder Larry lamented, “Did he roll it out here?”

“I wonder what he's been – ”

As if on cue the man on the boulder put out a hand and waved them in. “Come on now. I don't bite.” He hollered.

Larry softly let the reins fall and the mule moseyed at it's own pace til they were fifteen feet away. The man had turned about face away from them, letting the sun wash across his face, his eyes closed.

“Scuse me sir,” Larry inquired.

“Larry don't,” Burt sharply cut, “We should just get on and git.”

“No, we's got a right to know don't we?”

“Do we?”

“Afternoon fellas.” The man turned to them, a deep rumbling cracked voice as if he had swallowed dynamite.

“Afternoon.” Larry said wearily. Burton only glared, the sun directly behind the man casting a bright glow around his figure.

“Why, I've been waiting for you two.”

“How come?” Burton jumped at the words.

“Burt maybe this is the guy to tell us where the gold is at.”

“Don't be a fool Larry.”

“Well as a matter,” the man croaked, “that's exactly why I'm here. Come. Lemme give you the way to gold. Just yonder these Rockies here.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder into the distance.

Larry's face turned bright at the thought, a kid introduced to a candy shop. Burton peered into the distance speechless. Through the evening haze he could see for the first time what mountains truly meant.

Well Larry had already hopped off the wagon, tossing the reins carelessly, although it didn't matter much with the mule already preoccupied, munching on a nice patch of grass a few feet off trail.

Burton angrily followed, stomping his way over to the boulder where the man had hopped down himself. “Come. Sit.” The man gestured to the dusty ground as if it were an arm chair in his living room.

With his finger he began to draw in the rusty dirt, the dust parting this way and that intricately before a well formed map had appeared. It showed the trail they had taken, pebbles representing towns and important points, broken twigs to show the Rockies that lay ahead, some lesser twigs he mentioned were the Sierra's, and then the map stopped.

“Why'd ya quit drawing? You forget?” Larry asked.

“Ha, no my friend, that's the great Pacific.” He made some waves in the dirt.

Neither raised an eyebrow.

“The ocean? Now don't tell me you ain't never seen or heard the ocean?”

“We're from St. Louis, born and raised.” Larry weakly explained.

“It's just water ain't it.” Burton charged.

“Just water!” The man dumbstruck didn't know if he should laugh or cry. “My boys you have no idea how much water. Twinkling, glittering, as far as the eye can see, a blue you've never even dreamed of. Waves crashing in, and the sounds, the smells. Don't you underestimate it now. It's...it's like seeing the warmth of your soul projected in front of you as far as you can see, in all its magic and wonder.” And his eyes looked beyond them as if it were right there, the breeze at his face, a salty misty air touching his clean cheeks.

Then it was gone and he was all business again. “Ya see I'd say that's about St. Louis there near that beetle, and this is where we are now.” His finger traced the map from a chunk of

rock west towards a bundle of brush twigs. “If anything out here kills ya it'd be these. The Rockies.”

Burton's eyes grew wide at this. And Larry sputtered, “Wait, we're only now just getting to the Rockies, and now you're telling me there's them Sierras too.

“Oh no not yet my friends. But very soon now, you can see the white peaked tips behind me. You can be on the highest point in the world. Just imagine, but hell if you go too high you dead, and if you hit the ocean you've gone too far.” He barked out a guttural laugh sitting all high and mighty with the information shared.

A well of courage and determination filled in Larry, and Burton could sense it, could see it in his eyes the way they shrunk and pierced the future. “By jove I think I can get there. Can you Burton?”

“No...” he grumbled.

“Alls you gotta do is follow this pass here.” The man continued, “At the base of the mountains is a wonder little stream, you follow that as long as you can and sure 'nuff you'll get good. At a certain point there is a fork, veer away, head right on that fork and it'll saddle you up and over and get you to Grand Junction. Do not take that left side or you'll end up round near Phoenix on your way to Mexico and the Pacific. And do not for any reason leave that river side or that trail head. Smarter men than you have been lost forever.”

“But after the Rockies, when we in the Sierra's, then we'll find gold.” It was as if Larry hadn't heard a hard word.

The man laughed again, “Yes boys, by then, yes you will find your gold.” The man gave

a great grin and whether he meant to or not showed a gleaming gold tooth.

Larry took this as a good omen. But it left Burton with an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach like when he used to smell burnt flesh in the mill.

“Say mister? Why you telling all of us this? What's in it for you? If you know how to get there, why isn't you grabbing this gold then?”

“Oh I can tell you two are the toughest two to come out here and if anyone can make it I know it to be you. But honest as heaven,” the man paused and lit the cigarette that had been dangling from his lips, flashing the gold tooth again as he exhaled. “There ain't no money in gold.”

Larry's look of confusion spread to Burton.

“The money's all *around* the gold, but not in it. And honest as heaven two times over, why it's your wagon.”

The three peered over at the mule who had pulled it some distance off trail following all the tasty purples and yellows he could get. One eye on the group, afraid they'd force it back to pulling.

“What do you mean – ”

There was a close click behind the two of them. Larry and Burton both wheeled around to see a brilliantly gorgeous red headed woman at their backs.

“Easy now,” she said, “why you two numbskulls ain't even carrying is you? Ha,” She chirped. She too had wonderfully crafted boots, with silver gilded spurs attached, a rough set of tasseled pants and a deerskin vest as well, her freckles shaded by a wide brimmed hat too. And

even further behind her was a broad and proud pinto standing quietly at attention.

“You son of a bitch.” Burton spat unsure which way to turn.

“Sorry boys.” The man let out a puff of smoke. “Hard times out here on the plains. Prairie dog eat dog.

Larry had no idea what a prairie dog was but he imagined something big and fearsome, worse than a pack of wolves.

The man continued, “Now if you can remember what I was saying that was no lie. The road ahead or the road behind leads to salvation if you can make it before the critters get to ya's.”

Burton's anger rose, “Why should we trust a damn word you said?”

“You don't have to. All's I can say is the map was true. I just needed a distraction, and the glint of gold is always so foolish to those who've never seen it.”

The woman whistled and lightning fast her steed came over and in a swift motion she hopped on it's back. The man spryly jumped to the wagon's seats, sitting on their old theft, the king of a new wagon. The mule being tugged away from the flowers looked miserable.

Burton hurled as many insults as he could as the two rode around them in a circle.

“Have some water,” and the man tossed a punch to them, but Burton knew it to be the last of the whisky, something he wanted but now knew he did not need.

“But what about the gold!” Larry flashed, leaping to the woman on the horse as she came too close. The horse reeled up and with her gun pointed she shot Larry who keeled over, face down in the dust. The horse and woman sped off west, but the mule in tow would not budge. It did not submit to the lashings of the rein nor the yellings of the man.

Burton in a long cry jumped at the back of the wagon, “Oh no you don't you bastard!” trying to boost himself up and in. The sudden jolt from behind scared the mule which kicked into high gear finally, racing down the road into the falling dust from the pinto.

As the creaky wagon sounds faded and the only thing to be heard was the reemergent twitterings of prairie birds, Larry groaned and rolled over, face up to the sky.

“Well God, I don't think I'm dead,” he whimpered, sitting up slowly waiting for a shot of pain or blaze of blood pour. No, he realized tears falling and swallowed by the dirt, he hadn't been shot at all, he had crumpled in cowardice, and now Burton was gone. The thing that scared him the most was how alone he was, for the first time in a long time.

*How quick would death come?* Larry wondered, chasing the thought from his mind, concerned and afraid for what had come of Burton. A deep and harrowing breath released from Larry, an acceptance that perhaps this was in fact how it was always supposed to be all along.

“Nothing gained is nothing lost I guess.” he muttered stepping west down the road, the only thing he could think to do. “Oh Burt, where'd you get to...” With one foot in front of the other the only thing Larry held onto was, “Maybe there is gold just yet,” but he knew he wouldn't live long enough to see any.

Walking into the sunset the heat lessening the further the colors blossomed, Larry began to talk aloud to himself. “Well Burt, what do ya reckon it is?” Something had caught his attention in the distance along the road. “Nah I know you don't care, but let's see anyhow. I hope it ain't no boulder.”

One dirty cracked boot in front of the other the dying light staring him in the face he

made his way to the object that lay ahead, the only “other” from the continuous grassy plains.

“Don't worry Burt I'll be more careful this time.”

Without a hint of surprise a sudden warm feeling no amount of whisky could match spread ferociously through Larry. The “other” had become the “only.” There was Burt sitting cross-legged a brush stick in his hand, jotting something down in the dust.

“Watchya writing Burt?”

“My will.”

“Your will?”

“Well yeah Larry.” Burt gruffly and resentfully spoke, “With you dead and me alone, I spect I'll die out here too. Ain't seen no one else out here have we? Can't go on talking to a dead man in the middle of nowhere. I don't think I'll last, not without you.”

And with those words the wind picked up and carried them away.

“Trouble is I can't seem to finish the will without the wind blowing and doin' that.”

Burton paused, “Also...I realize I ain't got nothing left to leave, it's less of a will and more of a goodbye. Every time I get to the part where I want to leave something I can't think of nothing. Then it gets blowed away. So I's start over.”

Larry shook his head, “I ain't got nothing to leave neither. But Burt this'd never work anyhow. You need a binding contract, with a witness present, a legal man to properly divvy up your estate and titles.”

“How'd you know that Larry?” And Burton turned 'round bewildered, both at the accuracy and intelligence of this statement, but also because Larry was in fact standing there



behind him.

Larry shrugged.

“Well I can't do a damn thing like that out here. But best contract I know is this.” And Burton spit in his hand and stuck his palm out.

Instinctively Larry spit in his and did the same, a strong grip helping him up, both eyes met. “I'd leave everything to you Burt. Because you're all I got.” And he could feel Burt's grip falter if only for a heartbeat. And in that heartbeat of silence, an understanding was made.

“Well then, I guess we better get you something to give me then you ole coot.”

“You bustard Burt.”

“What's that even mean Lar?” Burton started walking west.

“Where you going?” Larry watched and waited.

“To gold town my friend. Didn't you hear, gold awaits for us. And we should get your share finally. Maybe if I get enough I won't have to kill you for yours.”

“Ha like you ever killed a man.”

“Oh it weren't no man, it was a bear. Biggest bear I'd ever seent.”

“No don't start with that bear story again. It was the circus Burt.”

“Oh I'll start, and I'll finish it. There he was meanest sumbitch you ever saw, and I was the toughest sumbitch I ever knew.”

“You know Burt, I'd sure like to see that ocean.”

The two looked at one another, “You know what Larry, we are in total agreement. Me too.”

“Sounds wonderful don't it.”

“Yeah, well maybe if we make it to that fork we take the left instead of the right.

Whatdya say?”

“I'd like that.”

Sure enough not too far down the road a little stream appeared. The two gratefully drank the coolest, clearest, and tastiest water imaginable, twilight fast approaching. With their bellies full they kept walking, coming to their their wagon, split broke, the left wheels popped off in the road, the rest crashed off to the side.

“Told ya.” was all Burt said.

There was no sign of the man, his wife, or her horse, just a happy mule munching on some wild flowers, trotting up to them, welcomed as a friend. The three trickled and chuckled through the wagon ruts, with a compass set for some sort of gold, and no way of knowing if they'd ever get where they was going, just following their hearts to find it.

Give Larry and Burton's appearance?

Give “the man” a name?