

Word Count: 3442

The Badlands of west Texas will steal your soul if given the chance. This statement had been driven into my mind long before the Model-T rattled its way up to the small house that my mother had often referred to as The Miller Shanty. It wasn't much of a house and it never would be but surrounding it was all of the mysteries and hopes of a failing family. Scattered throughout the yard stood the chiseled anguish of all who had fallen before, some older and some whose names were given much like a parting gift.

From behind me the alarm of rusted hinges signaled that my father was now watching the motorized carriage, as well. These were dark days and the fear of an uncertain future hung over us all like a slow spinning storm. This land was the third generation hand me down and although it had once been free of any bankers hold the reality of epidemic poverty had forced my father into doing the unthinkable. I remember that day very well; it was the first time that I ever saw my father cry but it wouldn't be the last.

The vehicle rolled closer, reminding me of a viper sensing its way towards its next meal. The motor stuttered into silence and from out of it stepped two finely dressed men. The driver began to pat himself, causing the results of a two-month drought to cloud around him. The man to his right seemed to care less, he just continued to come towards the porch, a smile plastered across his face.

“Bill,” he said, stopping just short of the steps. “How's everything?”

My father looked down at him for a moment and I could see that whatever friendliness the man was trying to convey was lost on him.

“What do you want, Tom?”

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Tom stood there for a moment, his smile unwavering and then pointed at the man who was with him.

“This is Mr. Giles, he’s from Boston.”

“Then he’s a long way from home,” my father said.

The man stepped forward and offered his hand. My father took it briefly and then drew away as if he had just touched a flame.

“What can I do for you?” said my father.

“I represent an organization that has taken an interest in this land. Now, we know the hardships you people are facing out here and we’d like to help. We would like to make you an offer.”

My father turned and gave Tom a look with an expression that I had often seen when I had done something disappointing. A sudden gasp came from behind us and I turned to see my mother staring out through the auburn-colored screen. For a moment I thought that she was going to rush through that door like Hannibal at the gates. She was in her life, as she now remains in death; a complete mystery to me. Her beauty had once surpassed even those of the Hellenic fables that she had so often read to me by candlelight with an education ranking as high as some of the professors who had taught her at her childhood home in Austin. But that was before The Badlands had their way with her, aging her as only endless waves of a hard life coupled with grief can do. And yet, for her, this was heaven; a place where one of her children tucked now forever underground had but only to wait.

My father held up a hand and I watched as my mother receded back into the shadows.

“We’re not interested,” he said.

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Mr. Giles tried to smile and it seemed to me as if he were rehearsing some role that he could never play.

“We are offering you a way out,” he said. “And you’ll have enough money to start over wherever you like.”

“This is our home, Mr. Giles,” said my father, crossing his arms over his chest like a sentinel statue. “Why would we leave our home?”

“Bill,” said Tom. “You’re already a month behind on your note and soon it will be two months.”

“That may be true,” said my father. “But I know for a fact that there are some people who are six months behind and they still have their land, why is that?”

“No one’s saying anything about taking your land, Bill,” said Tom. “They’re just wanting to make you an offer.”

“Why is that?” said my father. “Why are we the lucky ones?”

Tom gave Mr. Giles a sideways look and then shrugged his shoulders.

“I represent Standard Oil, Mr. Miller,” said Mr. Giles. “and we have reason to believe that this entire area could be useful for our nation’s recovery.”

“You mean that you think there’s oil on our land, right?” said my father.

“It’s very possible,” said Mr. Giles. “But we need to test it.”

“So you would rather offer me pennies on the dollar now instead of testing it first and then making me an offer?”

Mr. Giles just stood there looking at my father.

“And your company is willing to go in blind?”

Mr. Giles managed to nod his head but remained silent.

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My father turned to Tom. “And what’s in it for you and the bank, Tom?”

Tom ignored the question and said, “Bill, it doesn’t matter why they want the land, it only matters that they want the land. Look around you, your cattle are starving and what little grass is left is dead. There hasn’t been a drop of rain in over two months and we’re just now getting to the dry season. You won’t make it another year.”

My father suddenly leaped off of the porch causing both men to step back, he then walked over to where a beaten down mound of dirt held a few struggling patches of prairie grass.

“Look, Tom,” he said, pointing down. “This is where Linda was laid to rest. Do you remember her? You should, we all used to play together back at the schoolhouse in ‘09.” He then pointed at another mound resting just a few feet away.

“That’s my firstborn son, Joshua. He died from the flu a couple of years back, do you remember that, Tom? Does any of this mean anything to you?”

“Now look,” said Mr. Giles. “I don’t thi..”

“I’m not talking to you, sir,” my father snapped. “Your offer has been heard and rejected.”

“Bill,” said Tom. “We have all lost people, but they’re dead, we still have to live.”

“That’s true enough,” said my father. “And we are still free to choose where we live and we choose here. Now, I would appreciate it if you both left my property.”

At that, the two men turned and made their way back to the Model-T. Mr. Giles walked over to the driver side while Tom paused at the front. It was then that I saw Mr. Giles’ face change. It was as if he had suddenly shed away his cordial mask leaving only a shadow and within that darkness were two slits that seemed to pierce through like a pair of rifled sights.

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“You know, Mr. Miller,” he said. “All we really have to do is wait.” He then looked at Tom and said, “Crank it.”

I stood there watching with my father as the motorized carriage bounced back to the dirt road and waited until the clattering engine was lost to the western wind. My father tilted his head and took in a long breath.

“It smells like rain,” he said. He then turned and made his way back into the house leaving me alone to wonder about all that I had just witnessed.

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That evening we sat around the table, the three of us tastelessly eating the scarce produce of our own ranch. Across from me was the empty chair where my older brother used to sit and make faces as I struggled not to laugh with a mouthful of whatever dinner we could manage that day.

A sudden pain washed over me and I had to look away.

“Do you think there’s oil here?” my mother said, suddenly.

“I do,” said my father. “I’m sure of it, just as I’m sure that they already know.”

“But how could they?” said my mother.

“I have a feeling this isn’t the first time that group’s been on our land,” he said.

“You think they already found some?” she said.

“Why else would they want it?” he said. “They wouldn’t gamble like that.”

“Maybe we should just sell it to them,” she said.

The sound of my father's fork hitting the wood floor echoed throughout the small room.

“I’m just saying if we're going to lose it anyway.”

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“We’re not going to lose it,” my father said, reaching down and picking up his fork. “Things will change, they have to.”

“But what if they don’t?”

A silence shrouded over us as I continued to finish the boiled potatoes on my plate. A sudden gust of wind slapped the side of the house and was soon followed by a distant roll of thunder. It was a sound that should have brought with it a feeling of joy, for soon there would be rain and at least one less thing for us to worry about. But for some reason, a fear had seized me as if the thing approaching The Badlands was something more than just some out of season storm. It was a dragon and with it came desolation and loss.

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That night there would be no stories by candlelight. I lay on my makeshift cot lost within my young thoughts. It is during these hours that my imagination takes hold, flashing projected images like a silent film, often they lead me into the realm of dreams, guiding me as if on some sub-conscience safari. Yet, even trapped within this mist, I could still hear thunder racing down the fields, I could feel the drops of water falling from the sky, their paths temporarily illuminated by bluish light that suddenly filled the coal like canopy.

It was during one of those flashes that I realized where I was. Below my feet was the burial ground of my brother, its weathered mound now pocked by the falling rain. I fell to my knees just as a gust of wind struck me from behind, knocking me over, causing me to brace myself with both hands. Suddenly the dirt began to ripple and I tried to let out a scream just as another crash of thunder roared from above. It was then that I felt something cold lock onto my wrist. I tried to

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jump to my feet but was quickly pulled back towards the ground. Again I tried and this time I did manage to stand only I wasn't alone, with me was my brother. His face was drawn into what only death can create but his eyes were still there and in them, I saw no evil, no malice of any kind, only sadness.

I stood there with my brother looking up at me, his damp hand tightening around my wrist while his other hand slowly rose and began to point. I looked over to where his gnarled finger stuck out like an ancient limb and heard myself gasp. There just to his side was another grave, its chasm unfilled and at its head stood a stone with water glistening off of its freshly chiseled label. My heart was pounding in my chest and for a moment my only wish was that I could turn away before the next strike of lightning confirmed what I somehow already knew, but I couldn't. The blue light hit like a flashbulb, lingering longer than I would have liked, causing the words on the stone to imprint themselves deep within my mind.

William Miller, it said, just as I knew it would. From deep within the grave a distant rumble began, growing in strength. I felt my brother's hand tightening to the point of pain, pulling me closer. Suddenly a fountain exploded out of the hole, spewing upwards and then falling to the ground in black nauseous clumps. I tried to turn around, to run back towards the house but felt my feet slip out from under me.

"Get up," my brother said, squeezing my arm. "Wake up, Zachary."

My eyes flew open and I quickly sat up to see a face flickering from the flame of a lantern. It wasn't my long-dead brother who was now hovering over me but my father.

"Get dressed," he whispered.

"What's going on?" I said as a strike of lightning filled the house with a burst.

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“I think I know where they went,” he said.

“Where who went?” I said, reaching for my britches.

“The oil men,” said my father. “I think I know where they were at, it’s the only place they could have gone.”

“Where?” I said.

“Down by the cottonwood,” said my father. “It has the softest soil.”

“Shouldn’t we wait until morning?” I said.

“No, I want to get there before they come back.”

“But what about the storm?” I said.

“To hell with the storm,” said my father. “Our future can’t be stopped by a little rain, boy.” And that was the end of it.

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My father’s lantern was helpless against the ongoing tempest. The wind-fueled rain felt like a barrage of tiny daggers against my face as we plundered our way through the darkness, our only relief coming by way of sporadic flashes followed by ear-rattling explosions. On we went until it felt as though a thousand pins had been placed within my saturated shoes and still we trudged on. Finally, the battered weeds began to become thicker and to my right, I could see the looming silhouette of the cottonwood tree. The southern woods were close, and soon we found ourselves tripping through shaking brambles and razor-like thorns. A sudden gust of wind sent out a shriek from the branches, sending a shiver down my spine, and for a moment I swear that there was more than just my father and I in those woods. As a small child, my brother would often bring me down to where the prairie grass and the forest met just as the sun was beginning to set. He

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would tell me stories about fierce Comanche warriors and how all of this land had once belonged to them before they had been driven out by the white man.

“Although,” he would say watching me carefully, “many of their ghosts still remain and when the Comanche Moon rises it’s best to be as far away from here as possible.” He would then laugh as I stood gazing into the creeping shadows of the ominous oaks.

My father came to an abrupt stop and I struggled not to run into him. He stared down at the blackened floor while the wind pushed the leaves past our feet. Within that darkness was an object that lay just ten feet away. It was small but the perfectly round shape could be nothing but man-made.

“I knew it,” my father said, walking over to it and bending down. “They’ve been here.” He stood back up with a canteen clutched in his hand. He then went a little further and stopped.

“They did it here.”

I walked over beside him. There on the ground was a hole no more than a foot or so wide that had been hurriedly refilled.

“What did they do?” I said.

“They took some of our dirt,” he said. “They know we have oil on this land.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked. By then the rain was pouring through whatever leaves remained above our heads and although it was the beginning of summer I was shivering.

“We’re going to go back to the house and get out of this storm,” he said and began to laugh in a way that scared me. My father looked at me, misunderstanding my apprehension.

“We’re going to be alright,” he said, patting my shoulder. “Let’s go home.” We then turned and began to stumble back the way we came.

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“Are we going to be able to stay?” I said.

“Oh, we’re going to stay alright,” he said. “And not just stay but I think we’ll build your mother a bigger house.”

I thought about that for a moment forgetting about the pins in my shoes and the shower falling on my head. My father seemed like a new man, invigorated and I was struggling to keep up with him.

Suddenly he reached down and took my hand, it was the first time since we had buried my brother that he had done that. We cleared our southern woods and again felt the onslaught of the open plain wind. My father hardly seemed to notice, he just grabbed my hand a little tighter and we began to make our way past the cottonwood tree.

The sudden light was blinding and for a moment I could hear the air begin to sizzle as the hair on my body began to stand on end. I can still feel my father pushing me away from him and me falling to the ground just as the cottonwood exploded above us. The following crash rattled my skull and I watched in horror as a large branch fell from the sky. My father lay on the ground trying to crawl towards me, unaware of the descending danger. I tried to scream, and maybe I did, but the bombing thunder had deafened us both. The torture of what I was forced to witness still haunts my dreams even to this day; so many years later. The branch struck my father across his back, crushing him to the ground. Maybe it was just imagination, or maybe it was something more, but the ring that was muffling all other sound seemed to pause just long enough for me to hear the snapping of his spine.

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I rose to my feet, my head swimming, and stumbled over to him. He lay there motionless and I felt my knees un hinge. His face was contorted with both pain and fear. His eyes rolled up and captured my tear-filled gaze.

“Go back to the house and get your mother,” he said, his voice as fractured as his body. “Hurry.”

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The wind suddenly seemed to shift, pushing at me from behind as if it had somehow become an ally to my cause. I ran the two miles back, my body as numb as my mind. My father's pain-stricken face lingering out in front of me much like a carrot to a starving horse. The storm was beginning to move on, the flashes were now distant and the rain had turned to drizzle by the time I found myself leaping onto our porch and bursting through the door.

A single flame was floating down the hall, moving towards me.

“Where’s your father,” my mother said. I was not the only one who had been having dreams that night.

“He’s at the cottonwood,” I managed to get out. “And he’s hurt.”

I expected her to explode into a fit of rage, angered by the foolishness of our actions but she only looked at me, her sad eyes burning orange from the flame of the lantern.

“Take me to him,” she said.

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My father's grave was, indeed, placed next to my brother and I was surprised by how many people came to offer their condolences. Even Tom was there although he didn't stay for long. Perhaps he was needed back in town where I was sure that a man with rifled eyes was anxiously awaiting confirmation of my father's demise.

We covered him with the soil of The Badlands and soon all that was left was my mother and I. The orange sky was beginning to darken before we made our way into the house. Another day had passed and with it went my father and to me, it seemed like a trade. For there was oil on our land and we profited greatly but it came with a price. It is not the death of my father that I speak of, we all run that risk out here. I speak of the pieces that have been viciously ripped away; those parts that were taken and will never be returned. This was the price for surviving The Badlands. These holes within us, much like the covered holes scattered throughout the yard, are like silent voids of warning; The Badlands of west Texas will steal your soul if given the chance.