

THE LONELY MAN

by

Sally J. Walker

© 1998, Sally J. Walker
All rights reserved.

Sally J. Walker
8032 Main Street
Ralston, NE 68127-3724
Phone: (402) 592-1597
Email: sjwalker@probe.net

FADE IN:

EXT. 1865 PRAIRIE - NIGHT

A flaring torch is held to the canvas of a prairie schooner. The flames consume the household contents in the wagon. A blanket-strewn pallet, water basin with soiled rags, two frilly toddler nightgowns draped over open trunk containing a lithograph of Nolan Marks in a Yankee uniform, and a tiny rag doll are shown.

A man's trembling hand hesitates, then grabs up the doll. NOLAN MARKS, tall and lean to the point of thin, staggers back from the burning wagon.

Nolan numbly moves to a second wagon. He stuffs the doll into his shirt then jerks a leather-bound volume from an open, book-filled crate on the tailgate. He looks from book to torch to crate-filled second wagon then turns to shuffle to camp fire.

He sways at the fireside, stoop-shouldered, disheveled, disconsolate. At his feet is the blanketed form of his three-year old daughter, AMY. He throws the torch into the fire and drops to his haunches. His shaking hands open book.

INSERT

Book's inscription in fancy script: To my son Nolan, May your children give you as much joy as you have given me. Your father, Dr. Ezra Marks, 1 May 1859

ON NOLAN

He violently slams the book shut. One hand pulls doll from his shirt and presses it against his face, as he fights sobs.

EXT. COLORADO PRAIRIE - NIGHT

Six war-painted CHEYENNE DOG SOLDIERS approach but stop at the edge of the burning wagon's light. WARRIOR LEADER rides to the campfire. Nolan looks up, the firelight showing the streaks of tears down his face. He doesn't react to the warrior. The indian uses sign language to signal his men to take the horses tied to the wagon.

When Nolan merely drops his chin again, the warrior reaches out with his lance and lifts Nolan's chin with the tip.

Nolan numbly pushes the lance aside to look at the form at his feet. Leader moves his gaze to the form. He lifts the blanket aside with the tip of his lance.

The dead Amy's face is blotched with smallpox.

Leader yanks his horse backwards, screaming at his braves. Confusion reigns as they leave their equine prizes and race back into the night.

Leader hesitates, staring at Nolan. After one fearful glance at the end of his lance, he rams it into the middle of the fire then follows his men.

Nolan tucks the doll into his daughter's hand then carefully replaces the blanket fold.

EXT. CLIFFTON, COLORADO CEMETERY - NIGHT

A lantern sits on the red clay ground beside the toddler's blanketed form. Nolan stands in an nearly completed grave, dug a little deeper than usual. The hitched wagon waits beyond.

EXT. CLIFFTON MERCANTILE - DAY

Nolan rearranges crates within the wagon parked on the wide, almost deserted street of the mountain town. While assessing the newcomer, the mercantile owner, MORTON SALSBURY, fumbles with his keys to open for business.

EXT. CLIFFTON CEMETERY - DAY

A rickety farm wagon slowly rolls past. KATHLEEN STALARSKI, a pretty 22-year-old, unkempt in over-sized clothes, jumps from the back of the wagon. Her cascade of hair shields most of her face.

She is watched by her three ragged, solemn siblings, TOM age 10, CARRIE, age 8, and SAMMY, age 5. Bearded and burly ROMAN STALARSKI, a 45-ish, pseudo-mountain man, drives the wagon toward town.

Kathy pulls a cloth-wrapped bundle of flowers from her pocket as she runs. She trips over the new grave, frowns at its presence, then runs on to drop the flowers on a months-old grave. A quick pat of the mound and she's running back toward the moving wagon.

A roughly carved marker reads "Bella, Our Mother."

INT. CLIFFTON MERCANTILE - DAY

Nolan ignores Mort as he looks over his short list and stacks his purchases on the counter. The door bell JANGLES as Kathy and her siblings enter. Mort scowls at them.

Kathy backs the children against the wall, pointing a warning finger in each face. They stand like statues, but their eyes watch everything. At the counter, prudish, well-dressed MRS. HILL wrinkles her lip at the Stalarski brood.

MRS. HILL

At least the new school teacher will be spared the likes of those urchins.

MORT

If their own pa can't stomach being around 'em, maybe a proper teacher's what they need.

MRS. HILL

Need and want are two different things. No sense in paying a man to waste his time and effort on those who don't want learning and can't use it anyway. He'll make readers and speech makers of those who need to make their mark.

Kathy stares pointedly at MRS.HILL, her hand creeping up to the ugly scar angling from her throat to her jaw.

Arms loaded, Nolan bumps into her. He drops his things and catches her before she falls to the floor.

MORT

Sorry about that, Mister. She can hear but is mute and dumber than a post. All them Stalarski's are dumb. Get it from their worthless pa, but ain't got his temper, thank God.

(Expansive over purchases)

Well, sir, that'll be--

Ignoring the man, Nolan slaps down a twenty dollar gold piece, gathers up some of his goods, heads out the door.

MRS. HILL

Another rude tramp!

MORT

So? He paid in solid Yankee gold.

Door bell JANGLES as two young cowhands, STILLER and HANKS enter. Stiller carries Kathy's flowers.

STILLER

I'm gonna give 'em to Betty on our way outa town.

Kathy sees the flowers, her expression turning livid. Little Tom starts towards the cowboys.

Nolan reenters.

TOM

You stole those flowers offin' my ma's grave!

STILLER

You got an ugly mouth, kid. It matches your sister's face!

Grabbing for flowers, Kathy freezes.

Nolan crosses to the counter to stand between the boy and the cowboys, stacking his purchases in a box. Nolan stares a moment at Stiller, who releases the flowers to Kathy.

The cowboy locks gazes with Nolan. When he turns, Stiller looks him over. The red clay on the cowboy's boots match the clay on Nolan's pants.

STILLER

I found 'em ... on the road, passing the cemetery. Noticed a brand new grave. Too short to be another coffin from the War. Know any kids who died lately, Mort?

Kathy looks from Nolan's pants to his face. The stoic man continues filling his box.

Roman enters. A jerk of his thumb and the three children run out the door.

ROMAN

What the hell ya doing, gal? One a' these three give ya flowers?

Hanks and Stiller raise their innocent hands and shake their heads, obviously afraid of the man.

STILLER

No way, Roman! Ain't interested in nothing she has. She grabbed 'em outa my hands.

MORT

That's a fact, Roman. Acting crazy again, Kathy is.

Roman knocks the flowers from her hands and grabs a fistful of her loose dress front to drag her toward the door.

ROMAN

Ya couldn't understand just getting beans and bacon?

(Throws her out)

I ain't having ya embarrass me again. Git to the wagon!

Nolan picks up his box and walks to the door. He stares at Roman until the man steps back and allows him to walk through the doorway.

EXT. CLIFFTON STREET - DAY

"BILLY" NIGHT WATCHER, a 30-ish, ostracized Cheyenne alcoholic subsisting as a saloon swamper, struggles up from his alley bed. He watches Kathy start to climb into her wagon.

She stops to make eye contact with Nolan as he climbs onto his wagon seat.

Billy's attention focuses on the impressive Cheyenne lance propped behind Nolan's seat. Billy staggers forward as if drawn.

Roman charges into his path, tripping him.

As Billy rolls into the dirt, barkeep BEAU JENSEN emerges from his saloon.

ROMAN

Beau Jensen, can't ya keep your Injun off the street?

Roman starts to kick Billy. Beau points a warning finger.

BEAU

No reason for that, Roman. Go on your way.

Roman grunts in disgust, steps over Billy, climbs into his wagon. A vicious slap of the reins starts his team.

BEAU

Billy, get your ass back in that alley before Mel Evander locks you up for public drunkenness.

An unsteady Billy stands and watches Nolan drive past him.

EXT. COLORADO CAMP - NIGHT

Nolan drinks from a bottle of whiskey beside a campfire. He stiffens, then shifts so he's casually looking over his wagon and picketed horses.

BILLY

(From darkness)

Warriors do not look at fire when enemy comes.

NOLAN

Are you an enemy?

Billy steps from beside the wagon, the lance in hand.

BILLY

Was this man?

NOLAN

Don't know. He left it.

BILLY

Or you took it.

NOLAN

No. He stuck it into my fire after he touched . . . something.

BILLY

A Cheyenne Dog Soldier would not--

NOLAN

(Interrupting)

Smallpox. My baby girl . . . He touched her with that.

A horrified Billy drops the lance.

NOLAN

The fire took the sickness. I burned everything else, too.

BILLY
Not everything.

NOLAN
This part of me doesn't matter
anymore. It's...something I don't
care about now...but I gave my
word, worthless as that is.

Nolan holds up his bottle toward Billy.

NOLAN
You look like another . . . man
who doesn't care.

Billy carefully sets the war lance against the wagon and
steps forward to grasp the bottle. Nolan doesn't let go
immediately. They stare into one another's eyes.

BILLY
When a warrior's honor is dead, so
is the man.

NOLAN
So, do we drink to lost honor or
no one caring?

EXT. COLORADO VALLEY - DAY

Berry buckets in hand, the three Stalarski children work on
a wooded hillside. Tom looks up, frowns, walks to edge of
tree line where Kathy hides watching scene below her.

Nolan and Billy lift heavy packing crates from the wagon
before a weathered old cabin near a stream in the breath-
taking valley. Billy looks up. The Stalarkis duck down
then creep back up the hillside.

EXT. COLORADO VALLEY - LATE

Unshaven Nolan sits on old tree stump, sipping coffee. He
stares into the meandering stream, his eyes following a
trout. Billy lounges on cabin porch, drinking from a
bottle.

INT. NOLAN'S CABIN - NIGHT

Nolan fries trout over the fireplace grate. The one-room cabin is a shambles with unopened crates everywhere, his pile of blankets on the floor beside the fireplace, his supplies scattered.

When Nolan stands with the pan of fish, he is eye-level with the lance lying across the mantle.

He turns to slide the fish onto Billy's extended plate. Billy slyly surveys the crates. When he catches Nolan's stare, he focuses on his plate.

INT. NOLAN'S CABIN - DAY

Tom cautiously pushes open the door. Sammy hangs onto his shirttail and the two tiptoe in, looking at the crates.

TOM

Maybe these are guns for the Cheyenne, Sammy. With Pa gone, I could ride Old Crow to the Army camp and tell 'em. Bet they'd pay to know.

SAMMY

Why?

TOM

To come and get 'em before the Injuns could.

SAMMY

Why?

TOM

So the Injuns won't get to shoot us dead. And Kathy thinks you're smart! Go hide by the wood pile. Keep watch while I open one. Howl like a coyote if you see him coming.

SAMMY

It's not night. Coyotes howl at night.

TOM

Pretend you're a dumb coyote.

Sammy shrugs, exits. Tom looks around for something to pry with. He spots the lance, but must shove a crate to the fireplace to reach it.

The heaviness of the box surprises him, but he is determined. Lance in hand, he begins to work on the crate he had moved.

Intuition makes Tom look to the doorway as Nolan steps in. The boy's eyes widen when he sees Billy holding the struggling Sammy, one hand clamped over his brother's mouth.

A gutted rabbit dangles from the Indian's hand, its blood splattering the little boy.

NOLAN
(Grabbing lance)
Need help?

TOM
Ah . . . No!

Billy releases Sammy. The youngster throws himself, painfully hitting his cheek on the doorframe.

SAMMY
(Trying not to cry)
We're gonna tell on you and your
guns!

Tom pulls Sammy to his side.

NOLAN
Guns?

TOM
Yeah, for the Injuns.

Billy looks instantly serious and interested. Nolan uses lance to pop the crate's lid.

NOLAN
(Reluctant)
What's in here is for one kind of
savage, that's for sure.

Billy and the two boys come closer as Nolan kneels and takes up a book, his affect melting to awed appreciation.

NOLAN
The blank mind of an ignorant
human, the savage in us all.