

Elijah's Calling: 1840-41

Margaret Young and Darius Gray

The following chapter is excerpted from One More River to Cross, the title of the first novel of a trilogy to be called Standing on the Promises being published by Deseret Book beginning in August 2000. Young and Gray's historical fiction explores the experiences of Elijah Abel, Jane Manning James, and other early African-American Latter-day Saints.

BROTHER JOSEPH'S VOICE was never angry and never hopeless. Nothing could get Brother Joseph to lose faith in God or in the Mormon people. And in that certain, peaceful voice, in one easy sentence, he asked Elijah wouldn't he like to live with him and Emma? And would he mind serving as Nauvoo's undertaker?

Yes to the first, lemme think on the second.

Undertaker! But he was trained in woods!

"That's why. The saints should have the best coffins in North America." They were standing in a weed-spiked field which would one day house a whole block of stores, according to the prophet. It was late spring now. The weeds were mostly young thistle and jimson, but the land was so boggy there were some random cattails too, and clumps of swampgrass.

"Bury my gifts, you mean?" Elijah said. "Do my best work I can and then put it under the ground?"

"It's always been considered a great calamity, Elijah, not to obtain an honorable burial."

"I know that, Brother Joseph."

"One of the greatest curses the ancient prophets could put on any man was that he should go without a burial."

"That so?"

"Will you?"

"Undertaker!"

Death had spooked Elijah since he was six years old and stuck in Massa's parlor keeping watch over a life-gone girl, her skin pale as birch bark, her mouth hung open. And oh how he remembered his first

experience as an undertaker: building his first coffin and burying his Mama somewhere in the Lion's Paw. It wasn't an activity he had thought of taking on as a career. Besides, he knew the deaths he'd deal with in Nauvoo: from the summer Ague that brought chills and fever and nose-bleeds, then twisted air out of the lungs until there was no air left—the ague that was contagious as pollen off the goldenrod.

"Will you?" This was Brother Joseph, those brilliant green-blue eyes already certain of the answer.

But Elijah didn't want to give that answer just yet. So he looked at his boots, which were much in need of blacking. He kicked a pebble gently. "Aw, why you want that?" he asked.

"You think I'm the one who wants it, Brother?"

There was going to be no way around this. Elijah rolled his eyes, still watching his boots. "It's God?" he said, already resigned.

Joseph didn't reply, just smiled when Elijah finally looked up at him.

Elijah sighed. "Awright. If you bless me I don't get sick, Brother Joseph, I do what you and God wants." He looked at his boots again. "All right, even if you don't bless me, I do it."

Later on, Joseph laid his hands on Elijah's head—not in the field, because that was no place for kneeling, but in the simple frame house Joseph had put up as his temporary place. Elijah's soul got peaceful as the prophet blessed him. There was some reason he was being called as undertaker, and, given time, he'd know it.

So here he was: Elder Elijah Abel, black man, carpenter for a temple of the Lord, former minister of the Mormon gospel, now called by the prophet to carve out coffins from pitch pine because God said.

It was babies first—those that didn't make it out of the womb breathing, and those that caught the whoop before their cheeks got fat. Then it was the old women and old men. Come July, with the steady hum of the mosquitos down the swampland and the jeers of cicadas, it was everybody dying.

Elijah didn't have to do the laying out; the midwives did that most often—almost always when it was a woman dead. Sister Sessions was the best. She'd get the body cleaned up even under the fingernails, dress it in good clothes, get coins on the eyelids to keep them shut, tie a cloth around the face to keep the mouth closed, and everything would be set by the time Elijah arrived with his wagon, hauling a coffin so new there'd still be sawdust in the corners. He'd pick the body up, lay it in its box, then—alongside the family men—carry it first to the sitting room (if the family had one) where mourners could weep over the corpse and snip off mementos of hair before the lid was nailed shut, then to the grove, finally to the grave.

He didn't know most of the people he confined, so their deaths didn't melt or wreck him. He simply stood back and watched grief settle into

the mourners' face lines. Death was the ultimate slavery, that was it. A living, breathing soul became a thing to get boxed up, not even human anymore. And he, Elijah, was supervising the process: measuring the remains, cutting the wood, putting the box together with strong nails to withstand the weight of centuries. He was the carpenter measuring out the division point—brothers divided from sisters, husbands from wives, children from parents. He took the money for his pains and theirs, and watched the white folk become one mass of weeping humanity, hardly any distinctions between them: all dressed in black, all teary.

Elijah had always loved open space and hated boxes, and now he was building them. It got so he was shocked by color, as when he left the shop before dusk and saw calico dresses, green polka dot slippers, magenta silk, peacock hues swirling around the Mormon women—especially around the English converts. There was a whole world of greens and blues and purples outside his door, and for days at a time, he hardly saw it.

Inevitably, he got too used to death. He became gentle but unemotional as he took still babies from their mothers' arms, lifeless husbands from sobbing wives, lifeless wives from sobbing husbands. And he never did get sick, even when Brother Joseph and Sister Emma got sick in the bad summer and lived in a tent on their homestead. Elijah's health showed more of God's mercy: keeping him whole so he could care for the ones Jesus was claiming. He saw heaven's mercy in Brother Joseph too, for Joseph looked ready to go under one moment and was healed the next, then blessed the ones still sick, sending his red handkerchief when he couldn't get to a bedside himself.

Elijah got fast accustomed to funeral sermons too—and learned a thing or two in the process, including more scripture stories and new revelations.

After Brother Seymour Brunson's death, Brother Joseph told the Saints they could do baptisms for their loved ones who had died without it, which they commenced to perform in the Mississippi. Elijah, unconnected to about everyone, couldn't think of any dead folk he'd want to stand in and go under for—excepting the two Delilahs who surely had kept watch over him: his mama and his baby. So he walked into the river holding their names in his heart and let another elder immerse his live body for their dead ones.

When Zina Huntington passed, he heard Brother Joseph tell Zina Diantha, the dead woman's daughter, "You'll see your mother again—and you'll see your eternal mother, the wife of your Father in Heaven." Elijah had never thought of God being married, though it made good sense, and made him think he ought to find him a wife too.

In time, he learned the undertaker's words and tones of comfort, though mostly he kept quiet. He certainly didn't use his powered talk when he was prying a woman's fingers off her gone baby (mothers

would often grab the body when it came time to box it), but spoke softly of God's love—if he spoke at all. In Nauvoo, God was as real as a neighbor you saw only occasionally, but whose presence you felt by the lantern light in his window, which was always burning. Elijah took to addressing God just as he would that neighbor—usually in an out-loud voice, because he didn't want to trouble the almighty into mind-reading. "Now, God," he would say, "what do you think of this? What need did you have of this child, God Sir, that you'd take it away from its earth-mama?" He didn't picture a face for God, just the brilliance of the sun that warmed a body through and burned away any impurities. That brilliance was God to him, though he understood and accepted the doctrine that somewhere at the nub of all that radiance was a flesh-and-bones body. He did not picture that body with any particular pigment, just beams of light for eyes and sun-struck clouds for hair. And Elijah knew God wanted him serving as the undertaker because that warm peace filled him whenever he questioned his job. "Now, God, Sir," he might say, "there must be occupations a lot more fun than this one here, Sir. But I ain't turnin' my back on anyone in need of my services, Dear Lord, which you know." And peace would come as answer.

Maybe Elijah was called to build coffins so he could see the saints in their tenderest, most vulnerable moments, so he could expand his store of human pictures to include white faces alongside the black ones. He pitied them, these poor white slaves of death. He knew their faces, and he did pity them.

But he surely never thought the teary faces would include the Smiths, or that he'd tend the corpse of Father Joseph.

The old man hadn't been well since he and Mother Lucy arrived in Nauvoo. By September, he was vomiting blood. Consumption, maybe, brought on by all the pain and pressure of the Missouri time. And it was bad. Elijah had experience now; he knew death was come stalking. He sat at the bedside, September 12, 1840, not so much waiting for last moments as just keeping the patriarch company.

The day was muggy hot, air so stale you could taste it. It hung on the skin, compelling water from every pore, inviting mosquitos, which hummed everywhere. You could flap them away or slap them dead, but there were always others troubling your ankles or tempting you to hit your ears. Elijah's clothes were wet, face dripping. Father Smith, lying there, seemed too dry and cold to perspire much, though a film of sweat gleamed on his forehead. Elijah would wipe it, but a moment later it'd be back, though never drippy.

Most of the Smiths hardly noticed him sitting in the room like a shadow, and never asked him to leave (which he didn't, except to answer nature's call in the outback shed), so he heard every last word between

them, heard Father tell Mother Lucy in a strangled breath: "The world does not love us. Hates us because we are not of the world." Which was all truth, and something Elijah understood. The old man tried to lift himself up in bed, and Elijah, calling him "Father," said, "You best not try." Joseph Sr. moved his eyes towards him. They were glazed blue, lit up with last lights; his eye whites had taken on bile. The old man moved his gaze to Lucy, who was weeping without a sound, and he said, "Such trouble and affliction on this earth. I dread to leave you surrounded by enemies." No one offered reassurance that he wouldn't be leaving anytime soon. They all knew what was ahead; no use pretending otherwise.

Brother Joseph came in towards dusk, hardly recognizable for being so sad, head down, shoulders stooped like he had been preparing to kneel the whole day, which he did now at the bedside, collapsing to his knees. Tears and sweat rolled down Brother Joseph's face, and Elijah whispered to him, yes, it looked bad, then watched Father Smith raise his hands high as he could—which wasn't high—and pronounce a last blessing on his son: "You are called to do the work of the Lord. Hold out faithful and you shall be blessed, and your children after you. You shall even live to finish your work." The blessing spoken, Father's hands dropped like the life had gone out of them, though Elijah saw he was still breathing.

That was the first time he saw Brother Joseph weep like a baby, bowing his head to the blankets, crying out, "Oh, Father, shall I?"

In a thin breath, Father Smith promised: "You shall live to lay out the plan of all the work God has given you."

Elijah stood, wiped the sweat film from Father's brow again, and told him to rest, no use straining himself. The patriarch looked straight at him and said, surprised, "I can see and hear as well as ever I could."

"Now that's a blessing," said Elijah. "You best lay you back down, though, Sir."

The old man didn't pass until two more days had come and gone. Elijah, with all the Smiths, was with him when the final summons arrived. Father said he'd live seven or eight more minutes. Then his breaths got deep, then further spaced, then they clean stopped. As the women wailed, Brother Hyrum told Elijah to do his best job for this particular dead man.

Which Elijah did, measuring the body like it was sacred—as it was. This was his own father by adoption, the man who had laid hands on his head and blessed him—beyond what any Black in this slave-loving nation had ever received, he supposed. This was the man who had joked with him, fed him, prayed with him, hauled temple rocks with him. This was the man who had looked at the woodwork Elijah had given the Kirtland temple and called it "consecrated." Remembering, Elijah's eyes got as wet as the rest of his face. Tears dripped down his cheeks with the sweat as he gave his own blessing to the old man, consecrating the body

as he noted its dimensions for the coffin. This was the first time he had ever wept so hard doing his duty.

"You gets this back in the resurrection," he said, though this version of the body didn't seem much worth reclaiming. Grey skin hung on the bones; all the blood had stopped, the veins gone flat. The angry fight Father had put up against the sickness seemed carved into his face—around the half open mouth especially, like a frown—though he had been an easy smiling man, just like Brother Joseph. Serious about the work of restoration, but easy-smiling. In his prime, Father had weighed near two hundred pounds like his sons—and he was a wrestler too, as was Brother Joseph. The last ague, Elijah guessed, had stolen fifty or more. "Only you gots to wait some before resurrection happen. It be worth it, though. This old body goin' get young again, ever' hair put back in its place." In the resurrection, the two Josephs—father and son—would most likely look like twins. "And health in the navel and marrow to the bones," Elijah said. There was no anger in his tones or in his heart—none of that now, just a quiet, hazy sadness. Elijah had gone soft.

Though he didn't need to, he sat with the body after the mourners had left, being scared only once during the night, when a blast of wind came at him through the window and lifted Father's white hair like the life had come back to it.

At the graveyard, part of his own self got buried with Father Smith—not just the coffin, which was the best one he could make, but a portion of his heart. By the time he ate the funeral meal, he realized he had hardly touched a morsel since Father started dying. He was hungrier than a hog, and Isaac Lewis James—another black Mormon living by the Smiths—brought him pork roast, fried corn, and gingerbread, and talked to him about everything that had gotten buried in that grave with Father's body.

It proved a short conversation, as the two of them didn't have all that much in common.

Notes

That Elijah Abel was given "'the calling of an undertaker' by Joseph Smith" is substantiated by Walker and Van Wagoner in *A Book of Mormons*, pg. 7, and by Newell Bringhurst in "Elijah Abel and the Changing Status of Blacks in Mormonism."

I referred to Donna Hill's biography, *Joseph Smith, The First Mormon*, in recreating Joseph Smith, Sr.'s death scene. Ms. Hill called partly upon Lucy Mack Smith's biography of Joseph for her text (Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, Preston Nibley, ed. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958]). Indeed, Elijah Abel recalled being present at Father Smith's deathbed "during his last sickness" in 1840 (Newell Bringhurst, "Elijah Abel and the Changing Status of Blacks in Mormonism," in *Neither White Nor Black*, Bush and Mauss, eds. [Midvale: Signature Books, 1984]).

In the early baptisms for the dead, performed in the Mississippi River before the Nauvoo Temple was completed, men often did the work for women, and vice versa. We have a record of Elijah Abel having been baptized in the instance of "Delilah Abel, rel: Mother," and for "Delilah Abel, Rel: Dau." (Bush and Mauss, p[p].).

Joseph Smith's description of a Mother in Heaven as given to Zina Diantha Huntington [Smith Young] is taken from Susa Young Gates, as quoted in Richard and Jeni, Holzapfel, *Women of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, p. 200). Since Zina and Eliza R. Snow were great friends, one often speaking in tongues and the other translating, it is quite likely that Zina shared Joseph's words with Eliza. Or, since Eliza was a plural wife of Joseph Smith (as was Zina), she could have heard the doctrine directly from him. In any case, there is clearly some foundation for Eliza's poetic description of a Heavenly Mother in the hymn, "O My Father."

The introduction of baptism for the dead at Seymour Brunson's funeral is as quoted in Holzapfel, p. 90.

Accounts of the many deaths in Nauvoo from malaria (called "ague" by the Saints) can be found in any history of the church. I relied heavily on the Church Education System text, which describes the undrained swampland around Nauvoo, the ubiquitous anopheles mosquito, and the consequent contagion.

My descriptions of funeral customs and an undertaker's duties were drawn from Barbara Jones, *Design for Death* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), and Habenstein Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing* (Milwaukee: Bulfin, 1962). Indeed, it was quite common for carpenters, such as Elijah Abel, to take on undertaking duties as well as upholstery. Sometimes the undertakers did "lay out" the bodies (though embalming didn't begin until the Civil War years), but it was far more common to have family members or midwives attend to those duties. Patty Sessions, the Mother of Mormon midwives, mentions laying out the dead numerous times in her journal (Donna Toland Smart, ed., *Mormon Midwife* [Logan, UT: USU Press, 1997]).