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Little House in the Rye

November 15, 1846

Sexliwal—Deer-Running Season

Why, Mrs. Spalding, I declare, that child is the next thing to a pure savage herself.”

Eliza pulled back behind the door so the two women couldn't see that she'd been listening. She knew without having to look that her mother would wince at the word “savage.”

“Mrs. Willard,” Mama began in her soft voice, folding her apron in her lap. “We work here among the Nez Perce. If we are to bring them the gospel, we must be ever sensible of their ways. We were not called to school the Nez Perce in what they call ‘white man ways.’”

“I don't know how you do your missionary work, but I do know something about raising girls, even out here in the wilderness.” She took a deep breath as if storing up enough air

for a sermon. “Girls should be taught the womanly household arts—sewing, cooking, cleaning, fancywork, maybe a little music and drawing.” She made a *harrumph* that resonated loudly. “Even here in this God-forsaken place.”

Eliza crept backward on bare feet as she slipped through the door to the yard. God had not forsaken this place and she knew her mother would gently make that point to Mrs. Willard. She silently thanked Noah, her Nez Perce *Yat’sa*—big brother—for teaching her how to move without a sound, like an Indian. It made for a safe escape sometimes.

Mama always said that eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves, but Mrs. Willard’s comments echoed what many travelers said about her. Was she growing up wild?

As she moved into the yard, she looked out at the fields surrounding the mission. Most visitors couldn’t believe what the Spaldings had accomplished in ten years. When her mother and father had chosen Lapwai as their mission station, there was nothing but grasslands as far as the eye could see.

Now they had a cozy log house, several outbuildings, a gristmill, a print shop, and acres of cultivated fields, a garden, and orchards. Papa said it was important to farm their own land if they were to help the Nez Perce learn to farm.

The vegetable garden was nearly spent for the season. The only remaining plants were pumpkins and squash. This year the garden produced bushels of vegetables. Mama put up as many of the vegetables as she could. She used every crock they owned, including the cracked one, filling them with

brined vegetables and sealing each one with wax. She waxed brown paper and tied it over the top of each crock before putting them in storage. She had even traded fresh vegetables at the fort for some new glass jars with tin lids and filled those as well. She salted down some of the vegetables and dried others. The smell of vinegar from the crocks of pickles lasted for days and, at first, made Eliza's nose itch every time she came into the house.

The apple orchard still hung heavy with fruit. Apples kept well for a long time, so Mama didn't have to preserve them in crocks. Barley chaff had already been spread thick on the floor of the root cellar. The apples would be piled onto it when the last of them had been harvested. Papa and his workers would then cover them with more chaff and chopped straw, poking the straw into all the crevices. Papa insisted that they pile at least two feet of chaff on top of the apples to protect them from freezing. The last step was to cover the whole pile in soft moss. Then the apples would keep well into the spring. When the weather warmed up, Mama would dry whatever was left.

All winter long they were able to give gifts of apples to visitors. Nothing is so appreciated, Mama would always say, as fresh fruit in the middle of winter. It was Eliza's job to go to the root cellar to fetch apples out of the pile, but she wished she could talk her brother, Henry, into doing it. Every time she opened the door she heard scurrying sounds. And each time she pushed her arm into the pile to extract an apple, she half expected a mouse to surprise her.

The rest of the fields around the mission were already harvested. The wheat and barley had been cut, ground into flour, and stored. Just beyond the fields were miles and miles of rye grass. During the hot months of the year it turned brown and dry. Mama always worried about fire danger, but Eliza loved the dry grasses. When the wind blew, the grass rustled, sounding like soft murmurs. When she was little, Eliza believed the rye told secrets. If she could just listen hard enough, she could eavesdrop on those secrets. Sometimes it sounded like they were just whispering “shhhh,” over and over again.

A sound from the building that housed the printing press caught her attention—the clack, clack, clack of Papa setting type. It was a Saturday, so Mama didn’t have school or have the Nez Perce women coming for needlework lessons. This past year Mama often saw close to two hundred adults and children in the schoolroom Papa and the other men had built. Only on Saturday did Mama have time for visitors or doing household chores. On the Sabbath they held services for the Nez Perce in the schoolroom.

Papa worked on Saturdays just like every other day. His favorite place to work was at the printing press. As he so often reminded them, how many young mission stations in the wilderness have a printing press? The native peoples of the church of Honolulu had sent it from the far-off Sandwich Islands as a gift to the mission. Eliza liked to think about how far it had traveled to come to them. It came on a freighter across the ocean and then was shipped by barge up the Columbia

Gorge and finally carried over land by wagon to the mission. The printing press meant that the Nez Perce could have books printed in their own language. Little by little they would have the Bible and, because of the mission school, they could soon read it themselves.

Every chance he got, Papa set type and printed pages. He worked quickly with a click, click, click as each piece of movable type was slid into place on the frame. Papa had to put every single letter in the proper order for each page.

“Papa?”

Her father stopped and smiled at her. “All alone, ’Liza? You are usually trailing Henry or Noah.”

“Noah hasn’t come today. Maybe he’s working with the horses.” She pulled up a stool close to the table where her father worked. “Henry is minding Martha Jane today since Mama has a visitor.”

“Hmmm.” Her father put his hand on the open page of the Bible and pulled his handwritten pages closer and began to fill the type tray again.

“Do you think I’m wild?”

He looked up. “Why would you ask that?”

She didn’t know how to answer. She shouldn’t have been eavesdropping on Mama and Mrs. Willard. She took a letter E out of the letter case. She pressed it into the skin of her hand, leaving the imprint of the letter on her hand.

“Why did you name me Eliza?” She knew her father was used to her changing the subject.

“You know the story. I wanted to name you for your mother.”

“Two Elizas in one family.” She breathed in the smell of paper and ink. “Will I ever be like Mama?”

Papa set the tray aside and took her hand. “I can tell something is bothering you.” He looked at her for a long minute. “Your mother is an extraordinary woman. Along with Mrs. Whitman she was the first white woman to cross the Continental Divide.” He smiled. “Think about it. They were the first white women in the whole of the Oregon territory.” He was quiet again. “But you are a pioneer just like your mother.”

Eliza knew that story. She begged her mother to tell parts of it whenever there was time in the evening. That wasn’t what she meant. Her mother could draw and paint. The Nez Perce loved her drawings. Her needlework was the finest in the territory. The settlers who visited always commented on it. She cooked, gardened, taught Indian School, taught the Nez Perce women, and took care of her family.

“Does this have to do with being wild?” her father asked.

She nodded.

“You are not wild. Your mother and I came to this territory to bring Jesus to the Nez Perce Indians. We wanted to teach them some of the things we knew, like farming and needlework. But we also wanted to learn from them.”

“Like all you know about horses?”

“Yes, but that’s just one thing. I think I’ve learned far more from our Nez Perce friends than they’ve learned from us.” He

turned back to the letter case and Eliza moved her stool closer. “It is more important to us that you learn from the Nez Perce than that you turn a fine seam or study watercolors—at least for now.”

Eliza thought about that. So that was why Mama and Papa allowed her to spend so much time with Timothy and Matilda in the Nez Perce village and play with her friend Noah.

“Do you know how many white settlers can speak Nez Perce?” He didn’t wait for her answer. “Precious few. But you not only speak the language, you’ve helped me fashion a written language so we can give our friends the Bible in their own language.”

Eliza breathed in deeply through her nose. Maybe what looked like wildness was being the good missionary her father always said they must be.

Her father continued to set type.

“Would it help if I read the passage to you while you set the type?”

“It would. I could go much faster. Then I’ll just have to double-check our spelling and punctuation when I’m finished. I’m redoing Genesis since we refined some of the spelling. Start at 1:1.”

She picked up his paper and started to read slowly. “*Uyít-pa Akamkiniku-m pa-háni-a uág uétas-na, kauá kuníg pa-háni-a úikala-na petú-na úilákz-zíkiú uéutukt.*”

“Good. I have that correct. Now continue.”

Eliza read the passage until he finished the form. He then

took the paper she had been reading and checked each word against the type he had set. “There,” he said, “we’re ready to go.”

She watched him put the form on the bed of the press and ink the type. He put the paper between the two frames—her father called them the frisket and the tympan—and rolled the bed into place. She loved to see the paper press against the type, knowing the words would print on the paper. Papa took the paper off and hung it on a wire to dry while he repeated the process to print page after page.

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. This was a lesson the Nez Perce already knew. They knew about the Creator long before the white trappers had come. And they knew about the Bible before her parents had ever decided to come to the Oregon territory. She loved that story.

As her father worked the press she wandered out into the yard. It was a beautiful, cool fall morning. The last of the leaves on the trees still showed color. When the sun shone, like today, the color took one’s breath away.

Several Nez Perce stood outside the makeshift gristmill with grain or sacks of flour. Timothy stood in the middle of the men. She ran toward him. Timothy was one of the first believers at the mission. He stood tall even among the Nez Perce. His hair was mostly black, tied back in a thong of rawhide. The gray color along his temples was the sign of an elder—a respected one. Even since before she was born, Timothy had been one of her family’s closest friends. He helped her father learn the language and encouraged his people to come to the mission.

As she drew near, she heard Timothy speaking with another man. She knew it was impolite to interrupt, so she stood waiting nearby. She could hear most of the conversation. It was about the Cayuse over at *Wai-i-lat-pu*—the Whitman mission. She'd been there many times.

When her parents came west, there was another missionary couple with them, the Whitmans. They settled near Fort Walla Walla on the Oregon Trail to work among the Cayuse. Mama and Papa continued on and set up their mission near Lapwai, the home of the Nez Perce. Secretly, Eliza was glad. She loved the Nez Perce people. From the earliest time—some say the days of the Spaniards—they had been horse breeders and were respected by most of the tribes. Their horses were the best. Papa always said he'd take a Nez Perce pony over an eastern Thoroughbred any day.

She sighed just thinking about their horses.

Eliza loved horses. Noah had a pony and sometimes he let her ride. But she longed for a pony of her own. She even had a name picked out—*Ayi*—if she ever got a pony. Every time she asked Papa about it, he'd answer, "In due time, Eliza. In due time." If only he'd say "in six months," or in "one year," she could count off the days, but "in due time"? What did that mean? Sometimes she pretended he'd said dew time. When she woke up to dew on the ground, like this morning, she'd think, maybe today is the day *Ayi* will come. But so far, the dew never brought *Ayi*.

She watched the men talking. Timothy mostly listened. She couldn't hear it all but she heard enough to worry her. The

short man talked of jealousy and unrest. He said the Cayuse were concerned about the growing numbers of white settlers that crossed through their land on the Oregon Trail. Because the settlers stopped at the Whitman Mission, they believed the mission was bringing the people to take over Cayuse land.

Timothy said little but he promised the man that he'd speak to Eliza's father about it.

When Timothy turned and saw her, a smile broke on his worried face. "Little one, have you come to say *Tats Meywi* to Timothy?"

"*Tats Meywi, Piimx*. Good morning. Are you grinding wheat today?" She and Henry called Timothy *Piimx*—uncle—out of respect.

"Yes. Last grain before snows come."

"Timothy," she hesitated. Should she mention the conversation she'd overheard? "Are the Cayuse angry with us?"

"Not you, little one. Much change in the land. I talk with your father."

Eliza wished she could listen in. She didn't know why everyone couldn't just get along. Whenever people argued, it made her stomach hurt. But surely Timothy and her father could work this out.

"You see Noah today?" Timothy asked.

"He hasn't come."

"You ride back to village with me. Special day. Henry, too."

It was a special day—her birthday. Today she was nine years old.

She ran to ask her mother. As she entered the house, Mrs. Willard seemed to be taking leave so Eliza moved to her corner of the house and pulled on stockings and her sturdy boots. Even though it was November, she often still wore her moccasins around the mission grounds. The dirt was packed too tight for grass to grow so she didn't have to worry about hidden snakes, and she rarely stayed in one place long enough for her feet to get cold. But if she were going to the Nez Perce village, she'd need her shoes and stockings.

Her brother, Henry, had been minding Martha Jane. She had only been walking for about six months but she could get into everything. Henry was almost seven years old and there was nothing he liked better than playing with the baby. He and Eliza took turns watching her while Mama taught Indian School or entertained visitors, but Henry was happiest when it was his turn. He would put a stocking over his hand and play puppets with Martha for hours.

This morning he'd worn the baby out. She slept on a pile of quilts in the corner.

Eliza whispered, "Timothy will take us to the village if Mama lets us go."

Henry didn't need convincing. He sat down and pulled on his stockings and boots as well. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. Let's see what Noah is doing."

Mama came in after seeing Mrs. Willard off. "What are you two planning?" she asked with a smile.

"Timothy is over at the gristmill but he said he'd take us to

the village when he's ready to leave. Can we go?"

"I cannot see any reason for you not to go, especially since I have something special to do this afternoon."

Before Eliza could ask about this special task, her mother continued. "Your father is going to the village to meet with some of the men later this afternoon, so he will bring you back home." Her mother turned to get her sewing basket. "Will you take this floss to Matilda?" She handed Eliza a card with a sunny yellow thread wound 'round.

Eliza took the thread and tucked it deep into the pocket of her apron.

"Now have a little food before you go." She cut slices of bread off the loaf she baked the day before and spread some of her berry preserves on them. She poured two cups of fresh milk to go with the bread.

While they sat at the table to eat, Mama left to take food out to Papa so he didn't have to stop working. On days like these when noonday dinner was quick, they often had their warm meal at suppertime.

As Eliza rushed through the small meal, her mind flitted in different directions. Should she be worried about angry Cayuse or about the settlers thinking her wild or about the special task her mother needed to do?

It was her birthday. She'd think about secrets. The rest could wait for another day.

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