



Independence, Missouri, the start of my trials on the trails. Our arrival by riverboat three days past had felt genteel and serene, like my life at home in New York. But now the din and clatter as I stood in front of this other means of transportation, my prairie schooner west, served as such a brief transition from there to here to hither and yon, to the unknown, to what lay ahead. Anxiously I looked at the large pile of household goods that had accompanied us this far crated on the boat, but now stood free, waiting to be winnowed out. And yet I presented the face of the Eastern woman, stoic, prim, hoop skirt supporting the yards of cloth in my dress, which I clutched tightly, holding it just above the dirt as I waited for my husband to return from the meeting to elect the head of the wagon train. My parasol lay in front of me, my Sunday hat perched jauntily, I thought, on my head. It provided no shade from the noonday sun. I felt myself flush in the heat. *Where was he? What was taking so long? I looked at the pile. What could I leave behind?* Not all of this would fit under the canvas of the wagon.

Behind me I heard the familiar call, "Prudence, you'll never believe it." I dropped my skirt as I turned. My husband Jonas smiled as he approached, pulling two oxen behind him. Why did he seem so pleased?

"I've got more oxen to bring later. I got them at a fair deal." He looked at the pile by the wagon. "Oh, they've uncrated our goods. Have they delivered our provisions from the store yet?"

"Our provisions? There's more?" I recalculated and mentally tossed a few more items from the pile.

Jonas tied the oxen by the side of the wagon. I looked at them, two sturdy, ugly animals, drooling and chewing, nostrils flaring in and out. I looked beyond my initial view, and my conception of them changed from ugly behemoths to living rudders for our schooner. First impressions often change.

"Of course there's more, we've just begun to collect what we need. I'm so sorry, Prudence, I didn't realize we wouldn't be able to take all of what we've brought." He touched my shoulder. "I would have left things with your mother. We'll decide together what more we'll leave here." Jonas took my hand and kissed it, his way of saying all would be well. I looked at the pile and for the first time I questioned whether his kiss told the truth.

A buckboard drawn by two chestnut horses preceded a cloud of dust billowing down the street toward us. The driver pulled back on the reins and shouted, "Whoa," and the horses stopped, snorted, stomped the earth, calmed. "Howdy, ma'am." The driver touched the brim of his hat with his hand. "Your husband about? These here's your provisions."

Jonas appeared from the front of the wagon. "I've been expecting these, just put them in a pile next to the other pile. We're getting ready to sort it all out."

I walked toward the buckboard to get a better angle on the amount of provisions. Seeing them, knowing we needed all of

them to survive our journey West, I wondered, *What else I must leave behind. Why did I bring so much?*

A splash and scream drew my attention from the piles. "Mother, Mother, Jed fell in the water." I lifted the hoop of my skirt and ran toward the dock leaving the questions behind.

At the pier, I looked out over the river. Jed floated on his back, fully clothed, his arms and hands moving in gentle back and forth pushes and pulls, his feet kicking a steady rhythm as they churned the water and he moved toward shore. I wondered whether Jed fell in

the water or overstepped the dock because of the heat of the day. "Jed, you wait on the beach," I yelled as I turned to leave the pier. He raised his right hand slightly to acknowledge.

Jonas reached Jed before me. I saw them talking, watched them hug. "Mother," Jed said as he ran to me. I patted his head. As he stood dripping, wrapped in my billowing skirt, I knew. I pushed back his wet hair from his forehead, feeling the cool of the water myself. The river was inviting on a hot day. *What would provide the invitation to a curious nine-year-old on the trail?* I stopped the worry. "Go change your clothes so you can help load the wagon," I said. Jed squeezed me and raced off.

"Guess he wanted to get cool," Jonas said.

"Jumping in the river fully clothed is not the way to do it," I said as I returned to the task of sorting. I hoped I sounded less amused than I felt.

Two piles. One held provisions for moving forward and the other memories of the past. Without the canvas, the Conestoga teased that I could combine the past and the future, but Jonas declared otherwise. "We



have no choice about the provisions the wagon delivered, Prudence. We have to take all of that. We need the food and supplies for the trail. We can bring some of the things from home, but we'll have to leave much behind."

"Oh, Jonas," I said as I held back my tears, "this is not the life of excitement I anticipated. Why must this be so difficult? Will you talk with me, help me to decide?"

Jonas touched my hand. "I will. I'm attached to these things, too, dear wife, but my attachment to you is stronger. We'll decide together." When I rested my head on his shoulder, he embraced me. I felt the strength rise between us, and I was ready.

"How shall we start?" I asked.

"Let's begin with the provisions. We'll lay them out. On these we must agree and it will be easier. All of this, we are taking." I smiled. The necessary. Decisions made for me. I looked at the other pile. The trunk I'd brought to our marriage, the trunk that held my trousseau, the one Jonas had carved our initials in. *Could I part with this?*

"And after the provisions that I agree upon because I must, can we talk about the trunk?"

Jonas rubbed his hands together creating friction. "The trunk? Could we leave the trunk for later? Call the children and have them help us sort the pile into clothing, kitchenware, books, dust catchers..."

Dust catchers. The small knickknacks on my shelves in our home in the East, each a reminder of a precious event in our lives together, our marriage, births of our children, our first home. I called the children. Jed noticed me and came running along the road kicking up dust, his clothes now dry. He turned back and waved at his sister. Margaret began to walk more slowly toward us.

"Before the children come, I want to tell you that I almost was elected as trail boss for our train," Jonas said. I turned around to face him. He stood, hands on hips, grinning.

"Almost. Thank heavens, almost. I need you to help me, to help us. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Jonas dropped his hands from his hips and his grin left. "I still said I'd help out. The vote was close."

Did that mean I must do this thing, this traveling, this moving to a place I didn't know by myself mostly? "But, I need..."

"Mother, Mother, look at all of our old belongings and all of the new belongings. How will they all fit in this wagon, Mother? How will they?" Jed asked. I knew Jonas and I would have to talk later. I looked at Jed and shrugged my shoulders.

Jonas instructed the children to separate the pile into smaller piles. We all helped and soon my previous life laid scattered in a somewhat illogical order, randomized, on the ground before us. So we could discuss more readily, Jonas set the children to putting order to the provision pile by dividing them into several smaller piles. When they were finished, they were told they could return to their playing.

Jonas and I moved in front of the piles of our belongings. The trunk stood sentinel on the perimeter. I decided to talk about other items first. I knew Jonas wanted to avoid talking about his leadership position. I could save that for later as well. We each had our Achilles heel. I started with what I knew we must have and could easily agree on.

"This frying pan was a present from Aunt Fay, but more importantly, it's sturdy and well-seasoned. We'll need a frying pan, Jonas."

"Of course. Excellent choice. And it's the bigger of the two. Where did we get the other one?"

"From my childhood home. My mother cooked our breakfasts on Sunday mornings — bacon, eggs, and often potatoes. I knew it was Sunday by the smell wafting to my room."

"You don't want to take this one instead of the other?" Jonas asked.

"I still have much from Mother, and this is all that I have to remind me of Aunt Fay. Besides, it is ours." I felt practical as well as loyal in this decision.

"And the cutlery, and the plates. Not the china, the everyday ones," Jonas said.

"Why not the china? That was a wedding gift from your

grandmother."

"The china is impractical. Too delicate for the trip. No way to protect it. My grandmother would understand. She was practical."

"Your grandmother was one of the most practical women I ever knew. And yet she did like luxury. She once told me that we need luxury to remind us that we can be practical," I said. "Can't we take the china?"

Jonas looked at the dishes. The practical, sturdy, everyday dishes. The delicate china. "No, we'll need the practical. Grandmother would have made the same choice." He moved the china to the 'leave' pile. When he turned to check on the children, I snatched one place setting and hid it under the sturdy dishes. I needed the reminder. I did not have his grandmother as long as he did.

We bantered back and forth over the past. We reminisced and put away. The dust catchers took the most protracted discussions, the longest time to come to the more practical decision. The dust catchers heralded our past events, promises kept. The 'leave' pile grew.

I don't know why the rocking chair had not caught my eye before. But when it did, I was unable to focus on anything else. The nights I'd spent in rhythmic movement, calming or comforting my children, myself, came to me in vivid images. I looked at the wagon wheels. They reminded me of two rockers wedded together. I knew the rocking chair must not be left.

The trunk I'd brought to our marriage, the trunk that held my trousseau, the one Jonas had carved our initials in. *Could I part with this?*

"But if you take the rocker, you cannot take the trunk," Jonas said. We had come down to this.

"And if I cannot take both the trunk and the rocker, you cannot take yourself away from me for even one moment."

"But, Prudence, taking the trunk and the rocker is not practical."

"Neither is you leaving your wife and children to help run the wagon train. You were not elected. Toby is capable. If he needs advice, he can ask for it. I need you."

The rocker we put inside the covered wagon inverted on top of the flour and rice. The trunk we roped to the back of the Conestoga. Originally, I wanted to use it for storage of clothes and such, but Jonas was firm that the trunk remain empty. In the moment I didn't think to ask him why. And so, oxen yoked, provisions and belongings sequestered inside our wagon under the canvas, I cracked the whip to follow the wagon in front of us through the dust of the town. I turned and saw my pile of belongings, my treasures from my past, being carried away by townspeople who didn't know the stories of those treasures, but who valued them in some other way. I turned back and cracked the whip one more time.

At the end of the first day, we had traveled eight miles beside a river. Tomorrow we would cross it. Before the sun set, Jonas started a fire. I went to the back of the wagon holding my hoop skirt up when a gust of wind caught under it and nearly knocked me over. Although I was fashionably dressed, this hoop was just not practical for the trail. I reached under my dress and unhooked the hoop skirt and stepped out. I set it down and another gust of wind took it and spiraled it across the land. Jed sprinted after it. He wrangled it to the ground and brought it back to me. "Throw it in the back of the wagon. I'll decide what to do with it later."

I hitched my dress up and attempted to climb into the back of the wagon but the trunk blocked my way. "Jed, get me some rice, the soaked beans, flour, and the frying pan." He handed them to me one by one. I stacked the rice, beans, flour, and frying pan in my arms, hitched the yards of material no longer contained by the hoop, and walked toward the fire. I put them on top of the barrel and dropped my skirt. When I turned to chop the onions we brought from the town, the yardage of my skirt swept over the fire. "Mother!" Jed yelled. I turned to see the material smoldering. Jonas rushed to me and stomped it out. My daughter, Margaret, ran toward me. "I am well, don't worry," I said as I caught her in an embrace. So many things to learn about this new life. So many cautions. So many changes.

Before I turned in for the night, by the light of the fire, I cut some inches from my dress and sewed up the hem. I kept the remnants to use in some other way I did not yet anticipate. Margaret's dress, made without a hoop, didn't need any modifications. She helped me place the sleeping tarp on the ground, and we soon feel asleep. This first day toward the future had been adventuresome and tiring. I wondered what would befall us tomorrow as we crossed the river.

Toby had the wagons lined up at the shallowest part of the river. He guided the first wagon across without mishap. As the second wagon entered the water, the oxen stopped. No amount of encouragement worked. After pulling and pleading and whipping and pushing, the oxen stood. The wagon began to float to the side. The oxen stood fast.

Jonas sat astride his horse next to our wagon. I could tell from his clenched teeth and set jaw and the muscles tight on his arms as he held the reins that he was holding back. Holding back for my sake. Something clicked in my mind. It was not time to hold back, it was time we moved forward.

"Hold onto the reins, Margaret. Jed, help me down." I climbed off the wagon and walked around to the back. I untied the rope from the trunk and let it fall. I climbed into the back of the wagon and found my hoop skirt. I tucked it under my arm and jumped to the ground. Walking away from the line of wagons, I tossed the hoop skirt toward the chaparral. A gust of wind pushed it along with three tumbleweeds. A contrast in brown and white.

I strode toward the wagon and climbed up onto the seat. Margaret handed me the reins. Jed stared at me. I noticed his muscles were relaxed.

"What did you do?" he asked, as if he knew it was more than it looked. I love that man. He knows.

"I am still not giving up the rocker," I said. He smiled. "Jonas, Toby needs your help and he's too stubborn to ask." Jonas laughed and kicked his horse. Our turn to cross would be soon. I cracked the whip to move the oxen forward. They inched along. The trunk lay on its side on the ground, inert.

I reached under my dress and unhooked the hoop skirt and stepped out. I set it down and another gust of wind took it and spiraled it across the land.

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