



2021 First Place

# LILA'S SONG

*Jane Coletti Perry*

Pa was troubling her.

He hadn't always been like this, and she didn't know what to do. She was grateful he had slept in the barn last night. Small mercies. Lila pulled the door shut on the empty house—if you could call it that—and willed the worry to leave her mind. No time to fuss now. She hugged her wool cloak tight and ran across the yard, her auburn curls tangling in the wind, the muddy earth soft under her boots. The sky dappled pink in the first light of morning, and the damp spring air filled her lungs. She opened the back door to the Beatty's house and hurried down the stairs into the basement kitchen. They would be overwhelmed with hungry travelers soon enough.

"Mornin', Mrs. Beatty," Lila managed a smile and hung her cloak on a peg.

The Beatty family owned the two-story home set on acres of rich farmland that served as a stagecoach stop thirty-five miles west of Independence. With wide front steps flanked by white railing around the front porch and green shutters at the windows, the limestone house was like a blooming flower on the Kansas prairie, standing out from all others. The Santa Fe Trail ran along their property line, affording commerce with traders, trappers, homesteaders, and adventurers heading west. While a fresh team was hitched up to the coaches, the Beattys provided fare for the passengers. Some days they served as many as seventy-five in their basement dining room while living with their five children on the first and second floors.

"Good morning, Lila." Mrs. Beatty was mixing biscuits, her plump cheeks flushed from the warmth of the cookstove while the children finished cleaning the chimney lamps.

"I'll start the johnnycakes." Lila dropped the apron over her head, grateful the loose muslin hid the curves of her blossoming figure, and tied the strings behind her waist.

Mrs. Beatty glanced at Lila. "You all right, dear? You look a bit peaked."

"Oh, no, I'm fine, thank you." Lila reached for the sack of corn meal. "Just overslept this morning."

"Those dark circles under your eyes say different. Take care of yourself, you hear? After so much sickness this past winter..." her voice trailed off.

They both ignored the awkward silence that followed and continued their work. Lila was sure Mrs. Beatty had not meant any unkindness in reminding her of the sickness last winter. And Mama's death two weeks before Christmas.

Lila heaved a tray of tin plates and cups to set the trestle table that stretched the length of the basement room. The white-washed kitchen at one end was small but efficient—two counters, a large cookstove, a wooden cupboard, and shelves stocked with canned goods and supplies. The dining room walls were the same white limestone as the house and caught the warm reflection of the kerosene lamps hanging from overhead beams. Mrs. Beatty prided herself on a tidy room and tasked the children with chores to keep it spotless.

"No dillydallying!" Mrs. Beatty shoed the children into action. "Time you brought in the eggs."

Lila welcomed the sanctuary of the kitchen, a relief from her worries, especially on mornings like this. Learning family recipes and culinary secrets from Mrs. Beatty brought enjoyment. They prepared simple, tasty fare and were known on the trail for setting high quality board.



"When you finish the johnnycakes, start the bacon." Mrs. Beatty brushed aside a wisp of graying hair, and Lila set the iron skillet on the hot stove.

The Beattys had been good to her family. She had moved with Pa and Mama from Indiana two years ago after the crops failed. Her older brothers stayed behind, determined to make a go of it, but Pa was sure his dream was out west. He was good with animals, and the Beattys hired him as a stableman to care for the teams of horses and mules so vital to running the station. The Beattys had a crumbling cabin on their property Pa said he would fix up while he "got back on his feet," and then they would find a place of their own. But he never got around to fixing it up, and last winter when the cold and snow came in through the slats, Mama got real sick. The tin canister on the shelf in their makeshift kitchen had a thin roll of bills in it, but the roll never grew, and Pa hadn't gotten back on his feet.

Lila heard horses thunder into the stable yard, the reinsman barking commands to the blowing, whinnying team as the coach came to a stop. Through the window she glimpsed the passengers climb out of the coach and stretch, some heading to the privy out back and others washing up at the pump outside the door before coming inside.

"Breakfast is coming right up." Mrs. Beatty greeted the arrivals as they found chairs at the table. Lila tended thick slices of bacon sputtering in the skillet, then piled them onto a platter and brought them to the table.

"Smells good enough to eat."

Lila turned to the young man seated at her elbow as he rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Yes, sir," she nodded.

Lila sized up the travelers. There was a young couple—she in calico and bonnet, he in a woolen shirt and hunting jacket. She was sure the three men with greasy beards, wearing slouch hats and stained canvas pants stuffed into tall boots, were trappers. One had let loose a stream of tobacco juice before coming inside. The appearance of the young man who had spoken to her didn't indicate his intentions on the trail. He wore a workingman's clothes, but his brown hair and beard were clean and neatly trimmed. Before she returned to the kitchen, she noticed his hands were not hardened with calluses.

The travelers relished the biscuits and gravy, johnnycakes, and bacon without uttering so much as a word. Lila and Mrs. Beatty shared a quick smile of satisfaction while keeping the table well supplied.

"Ma'am, any more biscuits?" asked one of the trappers. "They're right tasty."

"On the way." Mrs. Beatty handed Lila a pan warm from the stove.

"Mosta the biscuits we git are hard as round shot." Two of the men laughed.

"You should be here in summer when berries are ripe and cobbler is hot from the oven," Lila offered with pride. "Best you'll have anywhere."

Breakfast concluded in twenty minutes, the team was changed out, and the passengers gathered their belongings for the next leg of the journey. Lila watched them board the stage through the open door and felt the spring air gust cold. She shivered. The men secured their hats and the lone woman leaned close to her husband.

Smokey, the reinsman, climbed into the box and eyed the clouds in the west. One of the best drivers on the trail and a veteran of the Civil War, he always kept a sharp eye on his surroundings. "Weather's comin'." He gathered the lines. "Best be on our way." Lila saw Pa beside the team, holding the harness of the lead horse until the coach was loaded. He stepped away and with a crack of the whip the stage rattled out of the yard onto the highway, leaving a heavy silence in its wake.

Lila closed the door against the chill, but her thoughts continued down the road with the coach. "Ever wonder about folks like them?"

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Beatty poured water from a bucket into a dishpan.

"Where they're headed . . . what they're looking for." Lila brought a tray of dishes to the kitchen counter and rolled up her sleeves. "I usually don't pay any mind, but don't you sometimes wonder how it turns out for them . . . searchin' for their dreams. I think everyone should have a chance for that."

"I've no time for searchin', Lila. Busy enough with work right under my nose."

A crack of thunder split the peaceful morning. Lila jumped. "Gracious! Where'd that come from?" Rain suddenly pelted the house.

"Those folks are headin' right into it," Mrs. Beatty said. "Don't envy 'em that."

They scrubbed down the table and stacked the tin ware into the cupboard as the wind whipped rain across the yard. The oldest Beatty children swept the floor until a rattling sound drew them to the window.

"Look, Mama," said Jerimiah. "Corn snow."

Mrs. Beatty peered over his head at ice pellets hitting the window. "Oh, Lordy. Thought we were done with winter."

An hour later they heard a coach pull into the yard, the booming voice of Smokey halting his team. Moments later the door burst open, and passengers surged into the dining room, the same passengers who had just left. The men were drenched; their clothes were splattered with mud.

"Sakes alive. You're soaked!" Mrs. Beatty exclaimed. "Take your coats off." She pulled chairs close to the cookstove where they draped their soggy garments. "Lila, get the coffee goin'. Jerimiah, Samantha," she called up the stairway. "Fetch towels." The onslaught of muddy passengers and drenched clothes upended the room; it looked and smelled more barn than dining room.

Smokey joined them after seeing the team to the barn and peeled off his rain-soaked coat and hat, ice crystals dripping from his thick beard. "Made no sense to go on." He told how the stagecoach had driven directly into the rainstorm and one of the wheels had sunk into the mud. "Took all the men on board to push the coach free. Gonna put us behind schedule, but the road's like muck and thunder spooks the horses."

When the coffee had boiled, Lila brought steaming cups to the table where the passengers settled in, some drying off with rags and towels, all of them unsure how long they'd be waiting on the weather.

"Much obliged," the young man took a cup.

"Drink it down," Lila replied. "You must be chilled to the bone—best get warmed up before you catch your death." He took a long swallow. She noticed his trousers were thoroughly soaked and wondered if the Beattys had extra. "Some of the men could

use trousers while theirs dry out, don't you think?" Lila whispered to Mrs. Beatty.

"I'll see what I can find." She hurried upstairs.

By afternoon a blizzard had taken hold. Mr. Beatty and Pa came in from the barn, red-faced and snow covered.

"Don't think you'll be going anywhere today, Smokey," Mr. Beatty said, stomping his boots.

"Sure 'nuff a bad one," Pa added, brushing snow from his coat. "Your team is watered and fed. No need to worry 'bout them."

When it was obvious the travelers would be staying the night, Mr. Beatty and Pa brought straw from the barn for bedding, and Mrs. Beatty gathered blankets from upstairs. It was a crowded table as the entire Beatty family and Pa took

supper with the travelers. Lila and Mrs. Beatty baked a double batch of cornbread, added extra carrots and potatoes from the root cellar to the pot of stew, and sliced a platter of ham. After supper the men brought in armloads of wood to keep the stove supplied for the night. The trappers lit their pipes, and smoke hovered over the trio while they played poker from a deck of dog-eared cards. The young man turned up the wick on a kerosene lamp and opened a book from his satchel. Curious, Lila paused beside him while offering coffee refills as she made her way around the table.

"More coffee?"



"What?" He looked up. "Oh, yes, thank you."

She filled his cup and glanced at his book. "You're reading Whitman's verses."

He couldn't hide his surprise. "You know Walt Whitman?"

Lila felt the color rise in her cheeks. "Why, yes. I—we studied him in school back in Indiana." She cleared her throat. "You seem to know him, too."

"I suppose I do." Lila found his steady gaze unsettling.

"Did you enjoy his poems?" he asked.

"Very much. I remember one especially—about America singing. It's my favorite." Lila still thought of herself as "the girl sewing or washing" in the poem. Those words had leaped from the pages into her heart, making her feel part of something important, something greater than herself. She suddenly caught herself staring into the young man's brown eyes and quickly looked down at the coffee pot. "I didn't mean to bother you."

"Not at all, Miss—" he raised his eyebrows.

"Bonner."

"Miss Bonner, I'm Mr. Reynolds. You obviously enjoy reading, and I find that commendable. Certainly not a bother." His mouth turned up in the slightest smile.

Lila felt the color in her cheeks deepen. Not only was his appearance different, so were his manners.

The wind rose in a fierce howl, rattling a loose shutter, and Mrs. Beatty stuffed rags under the door and across the windowsill to keep snow from blowing in. The travelers gravitated toward the stove in the kitchen as it struggled to keep the room warm. The trappers eventually folded their cards, and with the others, spread straw on the floor and wrapped themselves in blankets for the night. Before Lila and Mrs. Beatty left the kitchen, Mr. Reynolds approached Lila.

"Miss Bonner, I know there's not much left of the evening, but since we're going to be here for the night, perhaps you'd like to borrow my book."

"I couldn't . . . I . . ."

"Please, I insist. I have other books with me."

"You don't mind?"

"Here." He handed her the slender volume.

"I'll be very careful with it and return it first thing in the morning. Thank you, Mr. Reynolds." Lila hesitated. "If you don't mind me asking, where are you travelin' to?"

"Council Grove, Kansas. About a hundred miles from here."

"What will you do there?"

"I'm taking the position of schoolteacher. Their teacher fell ill, and they've closed the school until I fill the vacancy."

Lila ran her hand across the book cover. "That explains this," she said wistfully.

"Now that I answered your question, perhaps you'd answer mine." Mr. Reynolds gave Lila a perceptive look. "You were obviously a good student. Any opportunity for you to continue your education?"

Lila gave a harsh laugh. "Too many demands to keep body and soul together, sir." She tucked a stray curl behind her ear and in a gentler tone added, "But I thank you kindly for lending me your book. I look forward to reading it."

"You're welcome. Good night, Miss Bonner."

"Good night, Mr. Reynolds."

A small room off the kitchen stored sacks of flour, cornmeal, cooking pots, a box of old boots and clothes, and a cot used in emergencies for sick travelers. When weather was especially bad during the winter Lila often slept there. Wrapped in the warmth of her cloak, she carried a lamp into the storeroom along with the book of verses. The room was frigid. Lila propped open the door for heat from the kitchen and settled onto the cot under a quilt. If cooking was a respite from her daily worries, reading was the opening to another world altogether, a world of wonder and delight she had only caught a glimmer of through the borrowed books of her former teacher. Now she held one of those treasured books she could read until tomorrow. Between blowing on her hands and rubbing her ice-cold nose, she read page after page until the words swam before her tired eyes and she nodded off to sleep.

"Lila!" A rough hand shook her hard.

Lila opened her eyes. A dark figure bent over her. "Pa? Is that you?" She pulled up on her elbow. "What's wrong?"

"I been lookin' for you." He leaned into her face, stinging her eyes with the stench of whiskey.

Lila recoiled, fearful of what was to follow.

"Why didn't you come to the house?"

"Weather's so bad . . . it was late . . ." She pulled the quilt closer, and the book fell to the floor.

"What's this?" Pa swayed as he bent over and picked it up. "Where'd you get this?"

"Pa, lower your voice. You'll wake the guests."

"Don't be tellin' me what to do, missy." He looked at the book with disgust. "Stupid girl." His lips curled in a sneer. "How many times I told you don't waste time on books?" He waved it in the air. "Nonsense is what this is. I need you workin', not readin'."

"Alright, Pa, I will. Just, please, give me the book." Lila reached for it, and he clamped down fiercely on her wrist, wrenching her hand backward, and ripping one of the pages.

"Pa!" Lila cried out in pain.

"Now look what you done!" Pa slammed the book to the floor.

Lila stared in horror at the book, her wrist throbbing, and burst into tears.

Pa stood silently over Lila, watching her sob. Suddenly he was on his knees begging forgiveness, his own tears flowing. "Lila, honey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean nothin'. Please don't cry. I need my sweet Lila. I need you darlin'." He buried his face in her lap and wept, pulling her close.

Lila suppressed a gag against the smell of whiskey and the revulsion of his head pressing against her chest. "Pa, stop it." She choked back a sob. His arm reached to stroke her hair, and she pushed it away. "Pa, stop." She forced steadiness into her voice. "You must be really tired, Pa. You should rest a spell before breakfast." He didn't argue, and she angled his sagging body onto the cot. He fell to snoring as Lila retrieved the book and fled to the kitchen.

This is how it had been since Mama died—outbursts of rage followed by deep despair and depraved longings. At first Lila had blamed his behavior on grief. Mama was the heart and soul of their family, and they were both desperately lost without her. Then Lila blamed the whiskey. Now she didn't know what to blame, but she knew living in that shack with Pa couldn't go on. It would be the death of her, one way or another.

Lila wiped her cheeks, hung her cloak, and found her apron. With shaky hands she lit a kerosene lamp and added kindling to the embers in the cookstove, but Pa's drunken rant

lingered to taunt her. *Stupid girl. Stupid girl.* Moments like this Lila clung to Mama's praise, "You're a clever girl, Lila Bonner, and don't you forget it," first spoken to her the day she won the spelling bee when she was in third grade. Those words sustained her now through every day with Pa.

"You're up early."

Lila whirled around. "Mr. Reynolds, I didn't know anyone was awake."

He smothered a yawn. "Truth be told, I'm not sure I ever went to sleep. Wind howled most of the night."

Lila avoided his gaze and looked down at her fidgeting hands. "Mr. Reynolds, I have some unfortunate news."

Even in the dim light, Lila couldn't hide the red mark Pa had left, and she fumbled to cover it with her hand.

"Oh?"

"I'm afraid . . ." Lila raised her chin. "I've spoiled your book. I'm deeply sorry, and I will repay you for the damage." She fought back tears.

A frown creased Mr. Reynold's forehead. "Surely, it's not as bad as that, Miss Bonner, to cause you such worry. Perhaps it can be mended. It wouldn't be the first time one of my books has needed repair." He followed her gaze to her hands clasped in front of her and inhaled sharply. "Your wrist. Miss Bonner, what happened?"

Even in the dim light, Lila couldn't hide the red mark Pa had left, and she fumbled to cover it with her hand. "Not sure how it got there—you know how it is—

always somethin' happening in the kitchen." She feigned a smile and handed him the book. "If you could let me know what I owe you for the repair."

After breakfast Mr. Beatty and Pa cleared a path from the main door to the privy. Through the frosty window Lila watched Pa gather an armload of firewood, seemingly unaffected by last night's drinking. Mrs. Beatty tried mightily to tidy up the disheveled dining room enlisting all five children to sweep up the straw and fold blankets. By mid-morning the snow had stopped, and although it wasn't deep, the relentless wind kept the travelers bound inside.

"Miss Bonner, might I have a word?" Mr. Reynolds rose from the table while Lila cleared the last of the noontime dishes.

"Of course."

"You owe me nothing to repair the book. I've mended much worse. You should see some of my classroom books at the end of the term."

"But Mr. Reynolds—"

"Please." He held up both hands. "The matter is closed."

Lila paused. "Thank you. I appreciate your generosity." She started to leave. "Do you mind, Mr. Reynolds, could you tell me about Council Grove?"

"What about it?"

"Is it the kind of place where someone like me could find work? Folks on the trail been talkin' about the Hays House Restaurant there the past few years. It's getting quite the reputation. Sounds like a place I could get a job."

"Is your family thinking of moving there?"

Lila's head dropped. "It's just me and Pa now, but," she whispered, "he's not my real pa."

"I see." Mr. Reynolds glanced at her wrist, then looked at her with concern. "Surely, you're not thinking of going there on your own?"

"No, of course not. But if I did go, what would my prospects be, do you think?"

"The town is growing fast. You might find employment, but I wouldn't recommend you go by yourself. The West isn't a place for a young woman on her own."

"But I can do more than cook." Lila leaned forward, making her case. "I can read. I could help teach in a school like I did back in Indiana." Her voice rose with conviction. "I know there's a school because that's where you're going." The trappers engaged in their card game looked up. Suddenly self-conscious, Lila lowered her voice. "What about fare for the stage? We've been saving up, but I don't know if we have enough."

The rest of the afternoon Lila's mind whirled while she thought about the meager roll of bills in the kitchen canister. Wrapping herself in cloak and hat, she stepped outside and found the wind's fury had receded, its biting teeth reduced to an occasional gust. A feeble sun hung behind the clouds as she trudged across the frozen yard to the little shack. The stove was cold; dirty dishes littered the table. She went to the bedroom and pulled out Mama's carpet bag from under the bed. It didn't take long to gather her things—an extra dress, a nightgown, and her most precious possession, a daguerreotype of Mama. She removed money from the bottom of the carpet bag where Mama had secretly stashed what little she could over the years. There wasn't enough for the fare to Council Grove, but she could buy a ticket as far as Overton and take her chances there. She slid the bills into her skirt pocket and left the shack without touching the money in the canister.

She would have to board the stage without Pa knowing—he'd never consent to let her go. But how would she accomplish that? Sometimes he stood with the team until all the passengers boarded. Could she board at the last minute and hope Smokey would drive away against Pa's protests? Every nerve in her body was frayed when she entered the kitchen. Lila stuffed her carpet bag under the cot in the storeroom, hung her cloak and turned her attention to supper.

By late afternoon a lone rider arrived from the west. When he took supper in the dining room, the stranded travelers gathered round eager to hear his report on the travel conditions. The wind had blown the road clear, he said, and he figured they could travel west just fine. "Signs of moonlight, too," he added.

"I like the sound of that," said Smokey. "Once we have our supper, I say we harness up the team and head out." The

travelers heartily agreed, and their excitement grew at the prospect of resuming their journey.

*This evening?* A wave of panic swept over Lila. The stage was leaving in just a few hours! Her heart hammered in her chest. *I can't go*, she thought. *I don't have a ticket—I can't leave Pa—I can't leave Mrs. Beatty without help—I can't do it!* Then she looked down at her hands working the dough and saw them trembling. The red mark on her wrist had faded, but there would be other marks, other humiliations—or worse, she was sure of it.

Supper was finished. Lila had forced down only a few bites of biscuit, partly from lack of time but mostly because her stomach was in knots. She pulled Mrs. Beatty aside.

"You've been good to my family. I want you to know how much I appreciate your kindness."

"Why, of course, dear. But why are you telling me this now?" Mrs. Beatty frowned, confused.

"Because I need you to do something for me."

"What is it?"

Lila handed her the bills from her pocket. "This is for my ticket to Overton. If you'd give it to Mr. Beatty, I'd be grateful."

"You want a ticket to Overton? Whatever for?"

"Just give it to him. I have to leave tonight, on the stage. Before Pa knows . . ." Lila backed away from her to the storeroom and returned wearing a man's coat, her skirt stuffed into britches, her curls tucked in her woolen hat, carrying the carpet bag.

The passengers were filing out the door to the stagecoach. Lila could see Pa standing beside the team of horses, and she hurried into line behind the last passenger, Mr. Reynolds. He turned and his eyes widened.

"Miss Bonner?"

Lila put her finger to her lips, pleading with her eyes. She leaned in with the other passengers and inched toward the stagecoach.

Mr. Reynolds frowned in disapproval. "Miss Bonner—"

"Please. Don't say my name," she implored in a whisper.

"But surely, you can't—"

"I have to." She watched Mr. Reynolds leave the line and walk over to Pa. *Please don't tell him. Please don't tell him.* Lila kept her head down and took another step toward the coach.

"Mr. Bonner, good evening to you." Mr. Reynolds positioned himself in Pa's line of sight. "Just wanted to thank you for everything you and the others have done for us while we've been stranded."

Lila felt a hand on her arm and turned. Silently, Mrs. Beatty pressed coins into Lila's hand and held her gaze with eyes

brimmed in tears. Lila squeezed her hand, blinking back tears of her own.

Only one passenger stood between Lila and the coach door. *Hurry. Please hurry.* Mr. Reynolds continued to talk, and Pa remained beside the team of horses. Lila reached the door, hoisted herself up into the carriage and sat, her heart thudding so, she was certain everyone could hear it. Moments later Mr. Reynolds climbed aboard, squeezed in next to her, and closed the door.

Smokey hollered at the team and snapped the whip, jerking the coach into motion. Lila leaned toward the window and could just make out Pa in the twilight as he walked toward the barn. If her brothers could see him now, they wouldn't recognize what he'd become. Her heart ached at the loss of her family, of her brothers back in Indiana, but especially of Mama and Pa when their family had been whole and happy before it was diminished and corrupted. She turned to Mr. Reynolds and whispered in a barely audible voice, "Thank you kindly."

"Where are you traveling to?" he asked casually.

Lila took a deep breath to calm herself and felt the tension ease from her shoulders. "Overton. I hope to find work there as a cook." The coach swayed as it picked up speed.

"Overton? There's nothin' in Overton but a couple a homesteads and a stable for changin' teams," said one of the trappers. "Aint nobody hirin' a cook there."

Lila frowned. "But I thought . . ." Her heart fell to her stomach at the realization of her plight just as the Beatty farmstead disappeared behind the rolling prairie.

"I've heard Council Grove is a satisfactory destination," Mr. Reynolds interrupted. "If you need an extension on your ticket, perhaps someone onboard could assist you."

Lila heard the empathy in his voice. She spoke earnestly as she searched his face. “Mr. Reynolds, that would be the kindest thing anyone’s ever done for me. I would repay this person in full as soon as I’m able.”

“I’d expect nothing less.” He smiled, his eyes full of encouragement.

“Oh, and did I mention,” she continued, “I did well in school? Perhaps someday I could be employed as a teacher. I’d like that.”

Something stirred deep inside her, something buried but not forgotten from a poem read years before.

“I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear . . .

Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else...

.....their strong melodious songs.”

It lifted and circled and hummed until it sang full-throated with the turn of the wheels and brought a smile to her face as the coach rocked its way west.

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