

A Small Part of History

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Extract

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Sarah

MY PAPA ALWAYS told me it was best to start a story at the beginning when I confused him by jumping into things somewhere in the middle, so I am not going to talk about where I am today or even last month, because it all really begun back in June of 1845. A whole lot has happened since then, but when I close my eyes, I can still conjure up that June day in the summer kitchen.

It was more a porch than a real room, open on three sides. The sunlight poured through the poplars in the afternoon and reflected off the bottoms of the pots hanging on the side wall so bright I had to squint. I recall the smell of the fresh-picked peaches laying on the table, mixed in with the scent of alfalfa in the field out back, and just a trace of that moist, musty odor that wasn't there later in the year when it got hotter.

And I remember how the old oak table smelled, too, after all the years of spilled gravy and bacon grease and pastry flour settling down into the wood. Papa was one of the more prosperous farmers in Vermillion County, Indiana, and that table was long enough to seat well over a dozen

at harvest time, and bore the nicks and scratches of thousands of meals and their preparation.

I can see me and Rebecca there in the summer kitchen arguing, which doesn't take much talent to remember since we were always arguing. By and large, I came out on top when we had a set-to. I had figured out that Rebecca didn't feel right lecturing me, since she was not my real mother, only my stepmother for just four months, and me already fifteen.

I never knew my mama. Never knew if I had had a mama whether I would have turned out different. My papa raised me the same as my brothers, though it was said by some he spoilt me. I don't see how just leaving a person be to do what they have a mind to is spoiling. I call that using good sense.

The fact is, I didn't think about not having a mother much. I had my brothers to look after me.

With Daniel, who got married when I was twelve, his eye was more or less only on me out of the corner, since he had other responsibilities, these being his wife Elizabeth and baby Betsy, who was named after her mama, Betsy being short for Elizabeth.

My brother Matthew was near Daniel's age, though he still liked to have fun now and then. Him and Daniel had a different mama than us – us being Willie, Joe and me.

Willie was only one year older than me, and I had been following him around ever since I could walk. Papa said I would jump off the top of the barn if Willie told me so and I got mad and said Willie would never be so

mean or foolish. Later I understood he was just joshing, but I guess I *would* have done just about anything for Willie short of jumping off the barn.

Joe was three years younger than me and the apple of everyone's eye, with golden curls which he wished had been burdened on someone else. The rest of us all had Papa's black hair and dark complexion, but Joe had managed to have something of our mama. He may have been the youngest of the lot, but he never needed looking after, not minding being off on his own for hours at a time, even when he was a baby. He didn't cry and ask to go along with Willie and me, and since he was no bother, most always we did count him in.

If I had had an ounce of charity in me, I'd have owned there was no justifying getting mad at Rebecca for trying to take the place of somebody who had never been there in the first place. But I am ashamed to admit that by making her squirm, I could generally wiggle myself out of any task I found distasteful.

Rebecca wanted me to learn all the things a woman needs to know to run a household. Now, I not only didn't want to learn woman things, I didn't even like being a *girl* all that much. I liked to do the things a boy can do without much comment, but which are considered improper for a girl to do.

Nobody had made me stay at home and learn to cook and sew. My papa didn't stop to think that I'd be needing to, not having any woman around to point it out to him. Matthew and Daniel weren't but two and five when their

own mama died, so Papa got married again soon so they'd have a woman to look after them. After Mama died having Joe, he didn't marry again so fast, even though the three of us were so young – I guess he felt he was a man plagued by bad luck.

We got along fine for many a year with Poor Lucy Marble coming to the farm two days a week. I reckon I was almost nine before I realized 'Poor' wasn't one of her Christian names. I was civilized enough to always call her Miss Marble, but one time the 'Poor' slipped out. I figured then that she didn't hear me so I got away with it, but I am wiser now, so I think maybe she did and pretended she didn't.

Poor Lucy had been kicked by a mule when she was a child and she drug one leg badly. It was also said she was slow. Whatever she was, no farmer would have a wife who couldn't share his work, so Poor Lucy was also Poor *Spinster* Lucy. Not a happy position in our community, where everyone agreed that the proper order of things was two by two.

We had three families of tenants to help on the property, but only Poor Lucy in the house, which by most standards I guess was sorely neglected. Poor Lucy gave things a lick and polish, but most energy went into her 'days'. Friday was washday, and one of our chores was to start the fires in the kitchen yard early in the morning. Then me and Willie and Joe would haul buckets of water from the pump, it taking quite a few trips to fill the big tubs simmering over the coals. Then it was more hauling

for the rinsing. Our farm sat in a valley, which tended to trap the mist, so some washdays you could scarce see the hand in front of your face, with steam rising from the tubs mixing with the fog. When it rained, we went dirty another week, except when it caught us late, at which times we had to put up with dripping washlines strung all over the house.

Monday was baking day, and even though Poor Lucy Marble was a sorry baker, by the first of the week everyone was starved for fresh bread and sweet doughs, and it was all she could do to prevent us 'wild injuns' from making off with whole pies.

We had a hideaway under the roots of a big old oak where the creek had washed the soil away in a hundred-year flood. A thick grove ran all the way down to the banks of the creek, with wild grapes, plums and berries tucked in among the trees, growing so thick there was a sweet rotting smell all around from the droppings, and the bees and other bugs got drunk from their feasting, so didn't do us any harm. We would sneak cream from our dairy and weigh the pail down in the creek where it could stay nice and cool while we went berrying.

We'd end up covered in prickles and dust from crawling around in the bushes and there wasn't any cure for that but taking a swim, seeing who could swing the farthest out on the grape vines before we let go. Joe broke a bone once that way.

Afterwards, we'd make a feast with the fruit and cream

or the pies we'd stole, while our clothes dried on our backs.

Oh, but those were fun times! And I am not going to cry. Rebecca said she wrote things down so they wouldn't be forgotten, and I don't want those times to be forgotten.

We had other chores beyond helping Poor Lucy. We drove the cows to pasture and then back home, which gave me real pleasure as I was always plum crazy for animals and didn't even mind feeding the chickens, which most people do not like at all. From an early age, I pailed the cows, which I loved, but I also had to churn the cream, which was most tedious and hateful.

But after chores, we'd be off again all over God's creation, hunting for beehives or tracking each other in the woods or looking for arrowheads along the creekbeds. We found some in a cave one time. Shells, too. Once we saw some injuns, but they were tame ones. Tippecanoe beat the injuns in 1811 and the white people in Indiana haven't had any trouble since.

The best game was pretending we were spying against the British army. That meant crawling around under folks' porches and other places we shouldn't be, laying comfortably on our backs on the cool soft dirt and straining to hear what was being said over our heads that wouldn't be said if spying was suspected.

Bees made for good spying occasions. Though Papa claimed the county was becoming 'too d***ed crowded', it took nearly half a day to get to the nearest neighbor, so the women in the community looked forward to a

bee, where they could have a good long gossip together, only they called it ‘catching up’.

One time, when the women were husking corn in the kitchen while the men tended to hog-killing, the talk above the floorboards turned to our papa.

‘I don’t know why John Springer never married again.’

‘Maybe two wives in a row was too much for him.’

‘John Springer is a very self-sufficient man.’ I recognized Miz Macklin’s voice. She could always be relied upon to look to the positive.

‘He can take care of just about everything on that farm by himself but his own loneliness,’ put in Miz Parrish, whose husband ran the General Mercantile in town and who believed in grabbing a bull by its horns.

‘There’s something about being a man that makes him incomplete unless he has a woman with him,’ said another lady, who had always been spoken of as being somewhat romantical in the head.

‘Amen. It’s in the Bible.’

‘The Bible says the same is true for a woman, but I’m not too sure the Good Book’s right about that,’ piped up old Miz Jenkins, who had lived eighty years and said just about anything she felt like saying.

All the ladies cackled over this, since there weren’t any men present to disapprove.

‘Perhaps the Good Lord was speaking in practical terms. It is awfully hard for a woman to get along in the world on her own,’ said Miz Parrish, in an effort to turn the conversation back toward gentility.

I lost interest in the thread of things for a while, but then Miz Parrish upped and said, ‘Sarah is far too old to be traipsing all over the county without a chaperone.’

Joe and Willie both gave me a poke in the ribs and I had to poke them back and make them shush or we’d be found out.

Miz Parrish’s daughter, Letty, was my age and we were best friends at school, but she lived in town where her mama kept a close eye on her. There wasn’t much of fun to do in town anyway, with people always around to tell you to stop whatever you were doing or even thinking about doing.

‘Someone should talk some sense into John Springer. It’s not natural for him to be living the way he has all these years.’

‘Try talking to a turnip,’ snapped Miz Parrish. ‘You ever heard John Springer do anything other than listen to his own mind? And take his own sweet time about it, too.’

‘Well, I’m sure a man like John Springer can be choosy and take his time,’ Miz Macklin noted in her usual optimistic way. ‘He is just about the most prosperous farmer in the county.’

So you can see I am not just bragging when I talk about our property.

‘Maybe he hasn’t found anyone yet he can fall in love with.’ This was from Miz Macklin’s niece Dora, who was visiting from Illinois, where it was known there were forward ideas.

Miz Macklin quickly set her right. ‘You know very little about love, Dora, and less about practicality. Marriage is a matter of practicality.’

‘Marriage is an absolute necessity,’ all the women agreed.

Most of that talk just rolled off my back as I didn’t give any thought to my papa marrying again. This was before Rebecca, of course. She wasn’t even at that bee. Being the oldest in her family and the only girl meant that when her mama got sick, she was the one who took care of the little ones along with her mama too.

But it wasn’t too long after the bee that Miz Stevens finally passed away and I have a hunch that somehow Papa became convinced of Rebecca’s good qualities the very day of her mother’s funeral, because it wasn’t long after that he upped and married her – which wasn’t his nature at all. He always said it was important to give all alternatives equal time, and it sometimes seemed to me he took his own sweet time doing his considering over these alternatives. There had been no hint Rebecca was an alternative and my first reaction was to consider Papa marrying her was an act of charity on his part, as Rebecca was past twenty-five and would probably never have another chance.

I couldn’t really see the sense in it. Even if Papa was being charitable, wasn’t it just the same thing to Rebecca all over again, but this time taking care of children that weren’t even her flesh-and-blood kin? At least none of us was sickly, though, so in balance she might’ve felt she was better off.

But I was uneasy: I just knew the coming of Rebecca would mean changes, and a charity or not, Rebecca's notions of how to run our household turned out to be no charity to me. At first she left me alone as she was busy getting a handle on all there was to do about the farm, which was much bigger than her father's and the house more grand, with both summer and winter kitchens, a formal parlor and a wing added on for Daniel and his family.

After rearranging the entire kitchen, Rebecca went through the bed linens. Then the kitchen garden wasn't to her liking, so she set Joe and Willie to replanting it. I would have been happy with that chore, but she set me to tasks largely of the domestic variety, an area in which I had no knowledge or interest, and in which she was determined to enlighten me.



Sarah had been in the barn, playing with a new litter of kittens, when she heard Rebecca calling her name. She pondered ignoring the summons, but knew that trick was growing old. She prolonged the journey of less than fifty yards along the well-trod path from barn to house as long as possible, shuffling her feet to watch the dust clouds rise.

Rebecca had set three bushel baskets of early peaches on the table, which had taken a lighter hue after daily scrubblings and applications of beeswax. Sarah was used to everything in the kitchen being dark and homey and

the new era of sanitation needed her. She was the only article in the room not yet spic and span, and Rebecca's attention now seemed to be focused entirely upon her.

'Mind your feet. I have just done a mopping.'

Sarah took Rebecca's words as a challenge. In response, she shook out her skirt, sending a cloud of dust to join her muddy footprints on the floor. She waited for Rebecca to say something sharp, which would give Sarah the advantage, since her papa always said that he who lost their temper lost the argument. But Rebecca only nodded toward the peaches, her lips set in a tight line.

'We talked about doing something with these today.'

'It was just you doing the talking.'

Sarah had no way of knowing that Rebecca had resolved not to react to either her sassiness or her surly behavior. It was but the latest in a series of resolutions when it came to coping with her new life.

'I thought you might find it interesting to learn how to make preserves,' she said, feigning a cheerfulness that immediately made her feel self-conscious. She was acting as if she were offering a taffy pull – why did Sarah have this effect on her?

'I have more interest in eating 'em than making 'em.'

'They can't get eaten unless they get made,' Rebecca replied, sharpness edging its way past her resolve. 'Taking the hard as well as the easy is part of life, Sarah.' The resolution was crumbling. Now she had begun to lecture!

Sarah sat with bad grace, plopping down heavily and tucking her legs around the rungs of the chair. With a

scowl, she attacked a peach, turning it quickly into pulp. She licked the rich juice from her fingers, then wiped her hands on her smock, inviting criticism.

Rebecca pretended to examine the edge on a knife while she wrestled with her own sharpness. She had no heart for confrontation. Instead, she was quick to find fault with herself and make excuses for those who punctured her thin skin. It was no wonder Sarah was unruly, being allowed to run wild with her brothers instead of taking the hour's ride to the schoolhouse.

Not that regular attendance would have advanced her education that much: Mr Duggin, the schoolmaster, was largely incompetent, but the best Vermillion County could afford, being so far from any metropolis. Rebecca steered her wandering mind away from making excuses for Mr Duggin; it was Sarah's future that concerned her.

In most households, mothers made up for irregular schooling, but Sarah would not stand for Rebecca drilling her in math and spelling if she would barely tolerate peeling a peach at her behest! The solution suddenly dawned on Rebecca: it lay beyond herself.

She sat down opposite Sarah. 'Somehow we have gotten off on the wrong foot with each other, Sarah. I would like to do better – to know where your interests may lie, whether you believe me or not. I am not just talking about cookery or housekeeping. I am not a fool; I know you have no interest there. But there's a lot to be learned of good benefit if you take a chance. If you had the opportunity, Sarah, would you be willing to take a chance?'

‘Depends on what I’m taking a chance *on*, I guess,’ Sarah replied warily.

‘Your future.’

Sarah felt her suspicions confirmed. ‘You mean my chances to turn into a proper lady so I can make a good marriage for myself?’

‘Right now, you don’t have to think about that. You are blessed that your father has been so successful. He can afford you the opportunity to attend a proper school.’

The expression on Sarah’s face told Rebecca how much she had miscalculated. Too late, she realized she had unthinkingly put Sarah in her own shoes, assuming this wild girl possessed some of her own aspirations at the same age. A ‘proper school’ meant an academy in Oberlin or Columbus; to Sarah it wouldn’t mean the escape such a dream had meant to Rebecca. It would be an indication that Rebecca wanted her out of the house. How foolish she had been!

‘Is that what Papa wants?’ Sarah stammered.

Rebecca tried to find a way forward instead of slipping further. ‘I wouldn’t talk to him about it without discussing it with you first.’

‘There’s nothing to discuss! I’m not going!’

‘Don’t be so quick to make a decision, without weighing the advantages along with the disadvantages.’

‘There’s no advantages to me! I already know everything I need to know!’

‘Then I am certainly admiring of you. Not many can say that.’

There was a pause between them; they had both gone too far: Sarah knew she had said something stupid and Rebecca knew she had compounded her own error by pointing it out to her. But while Rebecca made yet another resolution to measure her words more carefully in the future and find a way to repair the damage, Sarah chose to throw all caution to the wind.

‘Just because folks aren’t prepared to go along with your ideas doesn’t mean they are in the wrong! There wasn’t nobody found fault with the way things were around here until you came along. Why are you trying to ruin everything?’

Sarah had inadvertently opened the door to real discussion for the first time, and Rebecca considered her response carefully. Should she admit to dressing Sarah in her own lost dreams? She had kept her frustrations to herself her entire life. How could she voice them for the first time to someone who seemed determined to hold power over her?

Sarah waited, trembling with rage. Rebecca hesitated, feeling her face flush.

She started when she heard the distinctive creak of her husband’s wagon. Was it already that late or was John early? Automatically, her hand went to her hair. She always attempted to greet his homecoming with a freshly washed face and neatened appearance.

‘Your father’s home. I’ll get supper going.’

She started to clear the peaches from the table, tossing

them back into the basket so briskly, she bruised more than one.

When John Springer appeared at the door, he didn't seem to notice either his wife's agitation or Sarah shrinking into her chair, unsure whether Rebecca would get her in Dutch with her father. His two oldest sons, Daniel and Matthew, entered close behind John. All three men seemed to share the same high spirit, something almost mischievous in their expressions – astonishing in such solid farmers.

'We need to sit down and do some figuring,' John announced. 'Daniel, fetch me writing material.'

Rebecca had to rescue her preserving jars before John swept them off the table as he cleared a work space. What had possessed him? She was still too shy of him to inquire, but she had no need as he was bursting to inform her.

'Rebecca, we are going to Oregon!'

For once, Rebecca and Sarah were in harmony, their gasps almost in unison.

Rebecca sank into a chair, astounded. 'I had no idea you were even thinking of Oregon . . .'

'I have been considering it for some time.'

Sarah instantly embraced the idea. 'And you were just waiting until you got all the facts, right, Papa?'

'That's about the size of it.' John smiled, pleased that Sarah had heeded his lectures on prudence.

'It was really me had it in mind first,' Daniel added with pride. 'Then Matthew said he wanted to be in on it, so we decided to ask Papa what he thought.'

Daniel drew a thick pack of papers from his jacket pocket and spread them on the table. Sarah eagerly snatched one up: a handout illustrated with snowy mountain crests and giant fish leaping skywards from a waterfall.

Matthew added a stack of guidebooks: *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*; *A Route Across the Rocky Mountains, with a Description of Oregon and California*; *Mr Lansford Warren Hastings' Traveler's Guide*; *Overton Johnson and William H. Winter: A Journey West*.

As John made his own contributions, the table became covered with glowing statements from trappers of the Hudson's Bay Company, Oregon societies and missionaries; government reports containing columns of statistics; and copies of letters of endorsement. With the exception of the government documents, each tract was punctuated with stars and exclamation points.

Sarah was absorbed with wonderment over the assortment, but Rebecca remained sunk in her chair, struggling to find the right words.

'But the *farm*, John . . .' she finally ventured cautiously. 'You are contemplating leaving the farm?'

'There's not enough acreage here to provide for Daniel and his family, let alone the other boys.'

'You have spent half your life building this place up . . . it is a fine property and you talked about adding on . . .'

John pulled a chair next to hers, sat down, and took her hand. 'Haven't I been telling you it's not the same

any more? People are settling all around here now, right under our noses. Winters it's frost and snow to freeze a body solid and summers the overflow from the river drowns half my acres.'

'The weather's a wonder in Oregon, Rebecca!' Matthew exclaimed. 'The Captain's seen it for himself!'

Rebecca was confused. 'What captain?'

'Captain William Stokes,' Matthew explained. 'He was with General Harrison in 1812. He went out west to fight the injuns and wound up going all the way to the end and settling there. Now he's come back to get more people to go to Oregon.'

'Specifically *anti-slavery* people, Matthew,' John pointed out. 'The Oregon country could tip the scales on the side of right one of these days.'

'And if there's more people out there, there won't be any problems with the injuns,' Daniel added.

'Don't go frightening Rebecca and Sarah with talk of Indians,' John chided. 'The native population in Oregon is small and devoted to fishing, according to Captain Stokes.'

He turned back to his wife. 'In Oregon, I can get a square mile for myself and a quarter section for each of my sons. They even say there's talk of allotting partial sections to women, but I don't know if anything will come of that. But the time has come to move on.'

'There ain't nothing like it!' Daniel enthused. 'They say in Oregon country, they got wheat so high you have to stand on the back of a horse to see over the top.'

John frowned. 'And the pigs come already cooked, with knives and forks sticking in them. I choose to concern myself only with facts, Daniel.'

Daniel reddened. 'I am not a fool, Papa. I am just repeating what they are saying . . .'

'They have been saying a great deal, that is for certain,' Rebecca cut in. It had not taken her long to note that her husband and his oldest child were like oil and water, with conversations turning into arguments if someone didn't step in to turn things in another direction. Rebecca seemed to have a natural ability to temper their disputes, perhaps because she had so often arbitrated her brothers' squabbling.

With her husband's careful nature, she felt certain the idea of Oregon must have been going around in his head for some time. She felt no resentment that he had not chosen to share his ponderings with her; it was a man's business and a man's decision. And she didn't know him well enough to expect confidences.

No doubt the fact that Daniel had caught the Oregon fever first had caused John to think about it even longer. The two were opposite sides of the same coin; they even looked alike, with thick brows, turned-up noses and large hands. And Daniel was beginning to develop the same furrows in his cheeks.

'There has been a great deal in the newspapers for and against Oregon,' Rebecca went on in her attempt to deflect argument. 'Some say Americans have to get there so it won't go to the British.'

It was easy to sidetrack John, who was in the habit of bringing home the news and debating it, taking both sides himself if necessary. ‘And others claim the USA is big enough and it’s a fool’s mission to try to get over the mountains,’ he quickly responded. ‘Well, the Captain has seen those mountains and he says they are nothing much to speak of.’

Daniel also took Rebecca’s bait, resentment of his father’s reprimand forgotten. ‘Captain Stokes came back from Oregon to collect the rest of his family and he’ll be leading a new wagon train back out of Independence, Missouri, next spring.’

‘But still . . . I can’t imagine it can be that safe . . . and it is so empty . . .’ Rebecca shrugged helplessly, feeling she had become argumentative herself, which was not proper for a wife, particularly a new one, even though her world was being torn apart.

Haltingly, Sarah read aloud from one of the brochures: “‘In 1841, Jesse Applegate led nine hundred people overland to the Pacific slopes and the very next season, twelve hundred more followed.’” Reading wasn’t easy for her, but she had to refute Rebecca’s naysaying.

‘There’s a whole heap of folks going this year, Rebecca,’ Daniel encouraged, ‘and if we don’t pick up our traces soon, the best land will be gone!’

‘Don’t be exaggerating, Daniel,’ John advised, but not crossly. ‘It will take us close to a year to get ourselves ready for this trip. Oregon will wait.’

Rebecca removed herself from the conversation and

began to string beans into a bowl braced between her knees. There was nothing more she could say.

When Willie and Joe arrived from their chores, Sarah took delight in announcing the news to them; being first to know was a real feather in her cap.

A dark shadow had lately appeared on Willie's upper lip, and he now took pains to behave in a way he felt befitting a man. He tried to restrain his enthusiasm, but Joe held no rein to his and peppered his father and older brothers with questions. Sarah still had plenty of her own and it didn't take long for Willie to break down and add to them.

It was Matthew who noticed Rebecca trying to clear a place on the table for her dishes and suggested they set it in order for supper. No one could deny Matthew. It was never openly acknowledged, but he made a strong link between John's first set of children and his second.

From his seat at the head of the table, John delivered a special grace for the projected undertaking, then continued to answer questions. He had agreed to meet Captain Stokes in Independence the following March, and the preparations necessary to move nine people from one end of the country to another would take up every minute in between. While Mr Lansford Hastings said it was best to travel light, Mr Overton Johnson took exactly the opposite view.

'Once we are on the trail,' John mused, 'we will find that much of what has been written is bogus. We will

have to separate the wheat from the chaff and use our own heads.'

'To ride comfortably, we'll need four wagons,' Daniel considered, 'so right off, there is no traveling light.'

'How many oxen for each wagon? Eight?' Matthew asked.

'That's right, and a team to spare. How many does that make in all?'

John directed his question toward his younger children. Sarah and Joe looked sheepish, not having spent much effort in arithmetic, but Willie rose to the challenge, forgetting for a moment not to appear eager.

'That's five times eight which is forty!'

'That's a lot of animals!' Joe whistled.

'And don't forget the riding horses,' Matthew added.

'And a milch cow so's Betsy can have her milk,' Sarah volunteered.

John jotted yet another column of figures, a pencil stub in one hand, a fork in the other. 'The wagons, oxen and tack should cost a bit more than four hundred dollars . . . and supplies another two hundred . . . powder and shot maybe fifty . . . and we'll need cash for repairs and supplies during the first winter . . .'

Willie shook his head. 'That's a powerful amount of money.'

'We'll be selling this property and everything on it, and I'll be calling in my debts as well.'

Sarah was impressed. 'I didn't know we were so rich.'

'The truly rich have no need to go to Oregon, Sarah.'

And the poor couldn't raise the money. It is people like us who are going.'

Rebecca took her husband's words without question, but if she had not been so caught in the turmoil of her emotions, she might have mentally amended them to 'men like us', and wondered what restlessness there was that caused that sex to seek the outward boundaries of the world while women clung to the comfort of familiar borders.

Women did not choose to go west. They went because their husbands or fathers chose for them. And as much as possible, they attempted to bring their homes with them.

It was a daunting task, but Rebecca would not have to tackle it alone. She had Daniel's wife as an ally. Even though she was the mother-in-law, the two were of the same decade. Elizabeth was of a timid nature and it took effort to bring her out, but she offered female companionship in a household filled with men – and one recalcitrant girl. Having a husband at her side would give Rebecca courage during the journey that lay ahead; the company of another woman would provide comfort.

Rebecca had her own timidity when it came to 'wifely matters'. She hoped one day she and Elizabeth might grow close enough for confidence, though some matters could only be couched in hints. Rebecca held anxieties she could scarcely form into words in her own mind. John overwhelmed her with his masculinity, and thoughts of those strong hands touching her privately in the dark

sometimes crept into her mind during the routine of her daily chores.

Her mother had not prepared her; Rebecca had never known her other than sickly and involved with her own discomfort. A few cryptic comments were made by the more forward women when she was finally free and John had asked for her hand, but they only concerned forbearance and duty. No indication was given of what lay in store after the first painful nights had passed and she began to experience pleasure when his hardness entered her and she grew wet as his thrusts became deeper and faster. Was this shameful? She had no frame of reference.

It was easier to focus on familiar domestic chores than worry that her marriage was not normal.

For all her insecurity as a wife, Rebecca was confident when it came to domestic chores. Even with her heart not in it, there was comfort in efficiently executing the myriad tasks necessary to prepare for the journey. The kitchen was filled with the smells of canning and preserving and cluttered with jars and sacks, as well as looms and spindles. Neighbors filled every chair around the table most days, and some days there were enough women working to fill the good ones from the parlor as well. There was a constant murmur: spinning wheels whirring, boiling water bubbling, glass jars gently clinking together, the tea kettle whistling, and always the sound of women talking.

‘Surely not dark blue for the sheeting!’ Leticia Parrish always had something to complain about.

‘The guidebooks recommend dark calico for pillows and sheets,’ Rebecca explained. ‘White goods won’t be suitable with the dust and dirt on the trail.’

‘It goes against the grain not to sleep on white,’ Leticia sniffed.

‘I agree,’ Rebecca nodded, ‘but the advice is sensible and we might have to bend a few of our housekeeping rules. But there are limits.’ She paused to pass the scissors.

‘The guidebooks have no use for finer things,’ she continued, ‘but there is no reason not to have a few linen coverlets and tablecloths decorated with close work to remind us we are still civilized people.’

‘The guidebooks were all written by men, who don’t know anything about the proper way to maintain a household,’ Aggie Macklin said, and the other women tittered as there were no men around to hear her impertinence.

‘Elizabeth and I are determined to hold on to as much of our life as possible,’ Rebecca said, taking care to include her daughter-in-law. ‘When we are thousands of miles away from all we knew before, we will still use the same tablecloths we have used here at home and lay out our good dishes and candlesticks on the Sabbath, even if it will be celebrated in a desolation. We can still stick to our regular routine and urge our family to not be lax in that regard as well. That way, it will seem we have brought a sense of home with us.’