

Jean Van Leeuwen

Bound for Oregon



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pictures by James Watling

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One

“Louvina, are you awake?” I whispered.

Silvery light from the full harvest moon streamed in through the curtains. My sister Louvina was curled up next to me in the bed we shared, a small, still lump beneath the bedcovers. It wasn't she who had awakened me. Was it the bright moonlight?

Then I heard voices through the thin floor below. They were talking about Oregon again.

All that fall it had been happening—ever since my father had gone to town one Saturday morning and heard a stranger talking about this marvelous country out west. Standing up on a box in the middle of the sidewalk, the man had held forth about the wonders of this western paradise: the beautiful valleys of rich black soil, the outstanding timber and water, the mild climate that could not be beaten anywhere. A farmer could take up free land out there, he said. Six hundred and forty acres of the best farmland in the world.

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“And they do say, gentlemen,” the man added with a smile, “that out in Oregon pigs run around under the acorn trees, round and fat and already cooked, with knives and forks sticking out of them so you can cut off a slice whenever you are hungry.”

We all had laughed when we heard this, and the rest of us had forgotten about it. But not Father.

Now I could hear his voice and that of his cousin Will, along with the deep solemn voice of our neighbor down the road, George Kimball. They were talking about Indians.

I couldn't help myself. I had to know what they were saying. Usually my little sister slept so deeply that even the cannons fired off on the Fourth of July would not wake her. Just to make sure, I wormed my way over to the edge of the bed and waited a moment. Louvina did not stir.

Carefully I slid out from the warm sheets and crept to the edge of the sleeping loft. I could make out a rough triangle of the room below: the tall stone fireplace, one of the splint-bottomed easy chairs that Father had made, a pair of dust-stained boots stretched out on the hearth rug.

“Surely, Todd, you have not forgotten the Whitman massacre. Fourteen killed, including women and children. And that was only four years ago.”

I could imagine our neighbor's face as he spoke, long and wrinkled and mournful-looking, like one of his old hound dogs.

“They say the Indians are quiet now,” Father replied mildly.

“Ah, but for how long? The Pawnees are the worst

tribe. They will steal your horses, your stock." Mr. Kimball's voice rose, then abruptly faded so I had to strain to make it out. "Even, I hear tell, your women."

Beneath my thin nightgown a cold shiver traced its way down my backbone. *Indians. Massacres. Stealing women.* How could Father even think about making such a dangerous journey?

And why would he want to move again? I wondered. It had been less than two years since we had packed up everything we owned into a wagon and made our way from Indiana to Arkansas. Back then it was the ague that had made us move. I could still remember that sickness; with its awful chills and fever, as if I had had it yesterday.

First our bones would start to ache. Then we would grow so cold that we had to go to bed. We would lie there, shivering and shaking so hard that our teeth chattered and even the slats on the bed rattled. The next minute we would be burning up with fever. After a few days the sickness would go away, but then it would come back. Louvina and I swallowed so much bitter quinine, the taste was always in our mouths. Our relatives in Arkansas wrote to Father that they did not have the ague much there. So finally he decided to make the move. And none of us had been sick hardly a day since.

"The journey can take six months or more," Cousin Will joined in now, his thin voice filled with doubt. "Across endless plains and over the most difficult mountain ranges. It will wear out your animals."

Again Father answered quietly. "I understand the difficulties of the journey, and its dangers. But thousands are making it each year. We know how to prepare for it better than they did in the forties."

Grandma, I thought suddenly. My tiny, smiling, white-haired grandmother, who had taken care of me for six years after my own mother died, until Father married again. Only a few months ago she had come from Indiana to be near us. How could I possibly leave her again? And there was the schoolhouse just two miles down the road, with its smells of chalk and lunch pails and old wood-smoke. I loved everything about school, especially reading and committing my favorite poems to memory. And the meetinghouse, where we sang hymns each Sunday. I was partial to singing too. In that wilderness out west there would be no schoolhouses or meetinghouses, I was sure.

"Out on the plains," pronounced George Kimball in his slow, sorrowful way, "the storms are terrible. Thunder and lightning like you have never seen, hailstones as big as hens' eggs. And if you don't cross the mountains before the snows begin, blizzards will get you. You remember what happened to the Donner party."

I had overheard Father and Mother once talking about these unlucky travelers, trapped without food in the snowy mountains. They had stopped when they saw me. But from Mother's hushed voice and Father's slowly shaking head, I knew that whatever had happened to the Donner party was dreadful.

Father was silent. Surely, I thought, this meant that he was reconsidering. He would not really put his family through hardships like these. Straining to catch a glimpse of his face, I leaned over.

"Mary Ellen! What are you doing out of bed?"

It was Mother's face instead, surprised and stern, at the foot of the ladder. With her skin as white as china and her pale hair pulled back from her face, she looked ghostly in the dim light.

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I knew it was useless trying to explain. Mother had her rules, and she didn't take kindly to anyone breaking them.

"Back to bed," she ordered, frowning. "Quickly now."

"Yes, ma'am," I whispered. And quick and quiet as a rabbit, I crept back to my bed.

In the morning it seemed to me I must have been dreaming. The sun shone through the curtains onto the quilt that Grandma had made for me, creamy white with a sprinkling of deep-blue stars. The smell of apples and crisp fall leaves was in the air. Next to me Louvina still slept peacefully, looking as if she had not stirred all night long. From downstairs I could hear my baby sister Cynthia laughing.

Stretching, I looked up at a tiny black spider spinning a web in the chink between logs in the corner. All that talk about Indians and snowstorms couldn't be real, I thought. This was real: our snug log house, the barn out back where Father had his pottery wheel, Mother's flower garden. And Grandma, with her smiles and hugs, just down the road. There could be no better place to live than this.

The spider, busy at its work, reminded me that it was time for our morning chores.

"Louvina." I touched her with my bare foot, and immediately her brown eyes fluttered open. It always amazed me how my sister could go from a sound sleep to wide awake in an instant. And she awoke every morning with a smile.

"Maybe if we finish our chores early, Mother will have time to work on our dresses," I told her. Mother was sewing new Sunday dresses for us out of the soft wool she spun and wove herself.

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Will the Todd family ever see the green grass of Oregon?

With only a guide book to show them the way, the Todd family sets out from their Arkansas home on a two thousand mile trek to claim uncharted Oregon Territory. Crossing rough terrain and encountering hostile Indians, the Todds show their true pioneering spirit. But as winter draws near, will the Todds have the strength to complete their journey? And if they make it, will Oregon fulfill their dreams?

“A fine, fictional introduction to life on the Oregon Trail.”
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