

THE TENDER TIES

HISTORICAL SERIES



*A* Name  
of Her Own



JANE KIRKPATRICK

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR of *ALL TOGETHER IN ONE PLACE*



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Details that cannot be historically verified are products of the author's imagination.

The floral design on the cover is reminiscent of the Iowa Nation beadwork and is used by permission of the Museum at Warm Springs, an entity of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Warm Springs, Oregon. The design is from a beaded bag in the permanent exhibit gallery.

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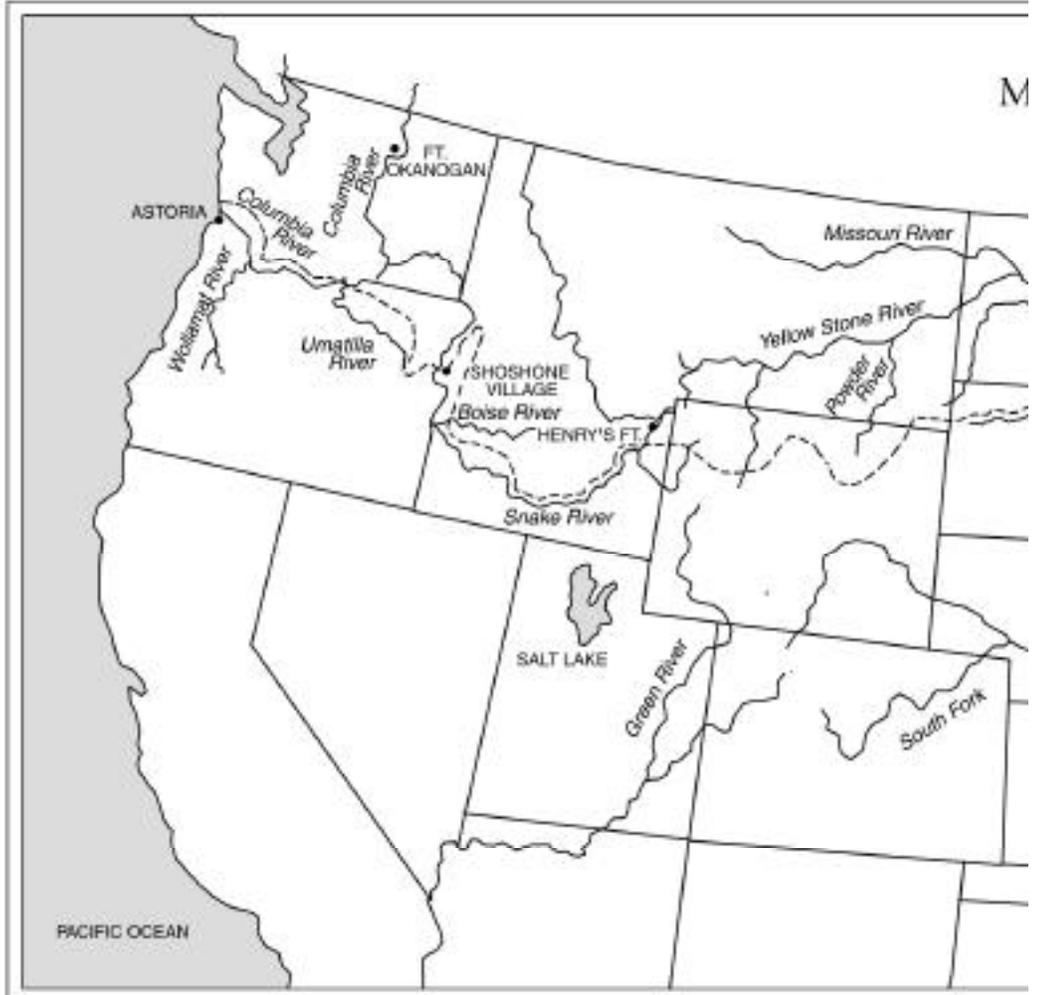
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This book is dedicated to  
the People of the Iowa Indian Mission  
and  
Blair Fredstrom.





# MARIE'S OVERLAND ROUTE

MARCH 1811 - FEBRUARY 1812



## *Cast of Characters*

### **Yankton Sioux Village**

Holy Rainbow

### ASTOR'S OVERLAND EXPEDITION

#### **Pacific Fur Company**

Partners:	Wilson Price Hunt, expedition leader Donald Mackenzie Joseph Miller Ramsey Crooks Robert McClellan
Hunter/Interpreters:	Pierre Dorion Marie, Pierre's wife Jean Baptiste and Paul, their children
Camp Boys:	Jean Louis Toupin George Gay
Clerks:	John Reed
Hunters/Tappers/Mountain Men:	John Day Robinson, Hoback, Jacob Reznor
Scientists:	John Bradbury Thomas Nuttall (Le Fou)
French-Canadian Voyageurs and Engages:	Antoine Clappine Michel Carriere Giles LeClerc Etienne Lucier

#### **Women Named Along the Journey**

\*Angelique  
\*Winter Blanket  
\*First Wife  
\*Calming Water  
Earth Eater Woman  
\*Josette  
Sally

\*denotes fictional character

MISSOURI FUR COMPANY

Partners:	Manuel Lisa William Clark Reuben Lewis
Interpreters:	Toussaint Charbonneau Sacagawea ("Janey"), Charbonneau's wife Eduard Rose
Scientist:	Henry M. Brackenridge

ASTOR'S OCEAN EXPEDITION

Partners Arriving on The Tonquin:	Duncan McDougall David Stuart Robert Stuart Thomas McKay
Clerks:	William Wallace Alexander Ross John Halsey Ross Cox Alfred Seton Gabriel Franchere
Hunters:	Ignace Shonowane Sarah, Ignace's wife two sons
Duncan McDougall's Chinook Wife:	Ilchee
Sandwich Islanders:	Paul Jeremie Poi, Paul's wife

NORTH WEST COMPANY

Fur Traders and Factors:	David Thompson John George McTavish
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We name ourselves by the choices we make...  
To name is to love. To be Named is to be loved.

—MADELEINE L'ENGLE



There is love...within Doors and while that is the case  
many a bitter blast may be born from without.

—GEORGE BARNSTON, FUR TRADER



The beloved of the LORD shall dwell in safety by him;  
and the LORD shall cover him all the day long,  
and he shall dwell between his shoulders.

—DEUTERONOMY 33:12

# Prologue

1803, somewhere along the Des Moines Riv

The mother ran like a wounded doe, breathing hard, mouth open. She stopped once, gasping. A green cast from the north sky sent light like a flickering snake across the snow. She had to keep going. To stop long meant death for her daughters. She had to keep going, though her heart pounded and a tight slice of pain pierced her chest. Fever-weakened, she moved on, her hair hanging from the knot at the back of her neck. Behind her, in the snow-covered hut, her daughters lay wrapped in a robe, alone, their lives slipping away. She had to get help. The friars would help. She'd told the girls that the black robes would help.

The mother gulped in the cold air, pushed past the fever, her tears dried on her cheeks. She ran through willows, her face scratched by their supple branches. Spring. It would soon be spring if only her daughters listened to her, obeyed her, and stayed in the safety of the robe. The death pox oozed around them, sucking life from those she'd loved. But her daughters lived, might stay living if she got help. She had to keep going. A mother kept going.

She ran on, her legs weak as wet cattails. Then like water from a spilled copper pot, she gave out. The friar's words from a psalm came to her as she fell, "I am poured out like water."

JANE KIRKPATRICK

The mother heard a cry, her own voice? An echo? Her daughters? She turned to look, stumbled. Her fevered face hit the hard snow, cracking the bone of her cheek. "My heart is like wax; it is melted..."

Her eyes lay open and the image of her younger daughter's face came to her, a last longing before the mother felt lifted to light.

# *Part 1*

*Je Viens Apr s Lui*  
*or I Come After Him*

1811, eight years later in St. Louis, on the Missouri Riv

The young mother stirred the soup with the iron ladle, sending the scent of cooked meat into the cabin's close quarters. She inhaled, ready. Her husband laughed with his son, playing on the hard-packed floor, and Jean Baptiste laughed back. Good. Her elder son was a solemn soul, not a brother to joy, so this giggle was a gift to both her and his father.

Outside, horses stomped with impatience, and beyond at the wharf, she heard the thump-thump of wooden barrels being loaded in bateaux. She blew on the broth, tasted it, then stood to her full height. Her back ached with the weight of her youngest son nestled in a deer-skin sack between her shoulder blades. The toddler, just over one year old, reached up to brush against her copper earrings. "Non, non," she whispered. "Attends un moment." She patted Paul's small hand, wondered if he sensed her disquiet. Children could feel what their parents felt, wasn't this so?

She took a deep breath. She'd been putting it off, not wanting to be demanding on this last day, and yet the gray-snow sunset would soon arrive. The last meal of the day would be served to the expedition

partners, and her husband would be asked to join them. There was much she still didn't know, much he still hadn't said.

She had to make plans, for her sons if not for herself. As soon as her husband ate, she must settle this.

"Papa, non! Non!" four-year-old Jean Baptiste shouted as he scampered from his father.

Pierre Dorion grinned, sat like a bear on his haunches. He leaped up toward the boy, hands formed like paws, and grabbed for his son, who squealed as though trapped. The father lunged, his mouth almost a sneer in the midst of dark beard. He captured the child, held him tight. "Baptiste!" Pierre said as the child twisted, squirmed over his father's arm. He tickled the boy. Was Baptiste laughing or crying? she wondered.

"Non, no, Papa!"

Her son cried. Pierre's wide fingers dug deeper. "Are you weak?" he said.

"Can't you hear? He gets frightened," she said. Her voice distracted Pierre enough that the child wiggled free and ran behind his mother's skirt. She could hear his puffing, felt his pull on her dress. Soup spilled from the ladle. "Leave him, now, Pierre. Come, eat." Her words had a lilt to them, a mix of her Ioway mother's scolding blended with soft French, the language she knew best.

"You tell me what to do, femme? Non," her husband said, pushing himself to stand. He pulled up his wool socks, adjusted the leggings, tight below his knees. "This is not the way. Not on my last day." Pierre moved like a ferret across the room.

Though she stood nearly as tall as her husband, he loomed over the three of them now, and she stepped back. Paul began to cry as Pierre stretched around her, bumping the toddler cradled on her back as he grabbed for Baptiste's arm. Her elder son shouted, a sharp slice of sound in the air. She turned as Pierre's fingers twisted the leather fringes hanging from Baptiste's hide shirt, the boy's slender arm twisted too. Pierre pulled the child to him. "We are amusing ourselves, n'est ce-pas?"

Baptiste's breath came in quick bursts.

“Non,” she said to calm the child, then to her husband said, “You go too far. He needs a rest now.”

Baptiste wailed then, and Pierre shook the child, held his palm up as though to strike. “No weeping,” he said. “You are too much like your mother.”

“J’en ai assez!” She stepped between them. “Enough,” she said, her quickness surprising and breaking the father’s hold on his son.

Baptiste fled then, slipped between his parents, and pushed open the peeled-log door, leaving it wide to dusky sky.

“You make the boy weak with your interruptions,” Pierre said. “I will bring him back. Teach him not to run from his father.”

“Non,” she told him, her small hand on his sleeve. Her eyes dropped. “You eat. Let me bring him back.”

“I teach him how to be strong, nothing else. It is a father’s right.” He pulled away from her hand.

Paul wailed then. She reached behind to bounce him, gently lifting his bottom. He was wet. She should change him.

“It is a father’s right, eh?” She nodded, agreed. “Good. You go find him.” He reached for her chin, lifted it, pinched it only a little before she pulled free. His heavy black brows over narrowed eyes rose as she stared at him. “What else will you deprive me of on my last day, eh, femme?”

“What do you deprive me of?” she said, her jaw lifted and firm. She handed him the ladle. “Eat now.”

He paused before taking the iron spoon from her. “You are mule headed, femme.”

“I am unbending as an oak,” she said, lowering her eyes as she brushed past him. She grabbed a two-point trade blanket as she pushed through the door, her baby bouncing on her back.

A breeze floated from across the Mississippi River, arrived as March air. The young mother squinted in the distance, barely catching her four-year-old son’s buckskin-clad back as he raced toward the fur-trading fort’s log gate.

“Baptiste,” she shouted. He often found hiding places away from

his father's excesses, but he'd been told not to go inside the fort. He'd get in trouble there.

The boy sent two men carrying fusils off balance as he scurried on by. One went down on his knee in the mud, the wet turning the tanned hide of his leggings dark. "Dorion's kid'll be our death," she heard the man say as he pushed the rifle butt into the earth to help him stand. He scowled at the woman as she approached, her slender hand shadowing the setting sun from her dark eyes.

"Or his ma's," said the other, though he laughed through his snarled whiskers.

"You want I should catch the little savage up for you?" the first asked her.

She shook her head. She heard the word savage as sauvagesse. For her, it meant someone close to wildness, free, connected more to rivers and trees than to the presence of people spitting out words with foul meanings. Her sons were like that, free, or could be, away from this St. Louis town.

Paul bounced on her back as she moved. She didn't need a troubling child now, not when she had so much needing bargaining. Her husband had said nothing about the advance, the money he must leave her if she and her sons would be safe these two, maybe three years he'd be gone. Nothing! Yet she knew he'd been promised more money than any of the French Canadians, more than any interpreter could hope for. Three hundred dollars with two hundred given before the expedition departed. She had seen none of it.

She stopped, slid Paul out of the sack at her back, and held him to her chest, wrapping the blanket around them both. Her sons were usually the wings to her heart, making her soul soar with their smiles and soft touches. But today, when she had so much to make happen, they both felt heavy as bone.

In the thawing mud and snow, she could see that Baptiste's small feet had not gone inside the fort, but around it, heading toward the wharf. Perhaps he'd get halted there, attracted by the activities, what

with the expedition so close to leaving. She settled Paul at the front of her and stood straighter, adjusting the knot of fine black hair at the back of her neck. Paul reached up to play with the copper coils at her ears. "No," she said, pushing his little hands back inside the blanket. He whimpered. "Not now, sweet one," she said and smiled.

Maybe she did make the boys weak.

She had to remind herself that Pierre was a good father, even if he did frighten the boys with his rough ways at times. It was not because he meant to hurt them. He always settled down in time, did the right thing. If he hadn't been drinking. He didn't know his own strength, that was all. Hadn't he said as much those times he'd left bruises on her?



Pierre Dorion, a mixed-blood man, crossed his arms over his wide chest. That woman could rile him so! He watched now as his épouse, his wife, moved like wind through the willows, swaying as she walked-ran after their son. She was a beauty. Strong, long legs that allowed her to jump fallen logs without effort. She rarely let Baptiste race far before she caught him. She just didn't always know her place as a wife. She'd probably sweet-talk the child into coming back when what the boy needed was a firm hand. But she'd be alone soon. She may as well do it her way, since she would when he was gone anyway.

Pierre was hungry. He pulled the latchstring and walked to the trammel where the copper pot hung on the S-shaped iron at the hearth. She'd put the flour biscuits beside it, and he ripped a chunk and dipped it into the stew. The scent made his mouth water. A delicacy. He hadn't seen buffalo meat since his Sioux village days. Clerking at this St. Louis on the Missouri these past two years kept him from hunting for their own fresh meat. She must be trying to tempt him before he headed out. He caught a dribble with his left hand, stuffed it into his mouth, then wiped his palm clean on his leather pants. She was softening him up for something, serving buffalo, making biscuits instead of lye-soaked hominy.

Maybe she thought he'd forgotten to give her the advance money and that he needed sweetening to remember.

He winced. She'd have the advance money, all right. When she found out the attachments to it, she would be furious. But he would be long gone by then. He would not have to see the fire in her dark eyes, nor cover his ears against the sharpness of her tongue, a sound that pierced him, though the worry of it never stopped him in time from acting and doing things that brought on her outrage and his later deep regret. Pierre Dorion knew his country wife well, and he knew what she would think of that Spaniard Manuel Lisa saying Pierre Dorion still owed money.

The debt had been unfairly charged, a manipulation, as only Manuel Lisa knew how to do. His femme would realize this, in time, when she calmed down. She'd find a way to keep the advance money. She might need to leave town, but she'd never liked St. Louis anyway. Manuel Lisa had the ear of William Clark and Reuben Lewis, brother to the former governor, Meriwether. Now, there was a man who'd taken St. Louis by storm. He had everything, that Meriwether Lewis—money, influence, fame. But he'd taken his own life the year before. Who could make sense of that?

Yes, she'd have to leave St. Louis. Pierre swallowed. These things could not be helped.

Manuel Lisa was a partner in Lewis and Clark's fur trading company. John Jacob Astor's rival, or so Manuel Lisa thought. Pierre grunted. Lisa's company would only be a rival if they still had Pierre Dorion to interpret for them, which they didn't. Astor's company would trample them all. After they reached the Pacific, Pierre Dorion's name would be remembered by more than just his sons. And his wife would then forgive him.

Lisa would charge her with the debt, no doubt, but it would be like taking a deer's leg from the mouth of a mother dog. Pierre grinned at the picture of it, his strong, firm-jawed femme, withstanding the likes of that dark-faced Manuel. In the end, she'd defeat him with tears and

toughness. Keep the money and be the stronger for it. She'd forgive Pierre then for not telling her of it earlier. She always forgave him.

Wilson Price Hunt, the Astoria expedition's leader, had promised the cash would be delivered just before they left. He had been paying their expenses ever since Pierre signed on in February. Hunt had committed to Pierre's price—three hundred dollars—because he knew that only with Pierre Dorion serving as interpreter could the mission succeed. He'd receive two-thirds of the advance before they left. Any day now, he'd have it, though he wondered if Hunt might have heard the rumors of the Lisa debt and waited until the last moment to provide the advance, worrying perhaps that Pierre might spend the money in some bar.

Pierre chewed, opened the door again. A trillium pushed its way through the leaf-spotted mud beneath the oak trees, casting long shadows over the fort's log walls. The scent of wet earth met him. It was nearly spring. They should have left earlier to make it to the Columbia and the Pacific before autumn. Pierre had urged Hunt to hurry, as best he could. But not having the clout of a partner or clerk, at least not yet, Pierre had been ignored. Or maybe his mixed blood kept his ideas shadowed. Hunt had a way about him, his own timing. He tended to details that would've been better left to underlings. Astor had put his faith in Donald Mackenzie and Wilson Price Hunt, though the latter, at twenty-six years of age, was young to have a partnership, younger than Pierre by some five years.

Today they would load the last of the bateaux. Tomorrow, he'd have his money, give it to his femme, and the expedition would head out, hopefully before Lisa even knew they'd left. Pierre washed the bread down with cold water, wiped his beard with the back of his hand. He stood in the open doorway now, leaning against the post, the sun still warm on his face. Voices rose in song from the wharf. The French-Canadians always sang as they worked.

Yes, he would help the fur trade push west, and if Astor's plan succeeded, the Pacific Fur Company would own the Asian trade. Anyone affiliated would be rich beyond measure. This was a good thing he was

doing for his femme, even if she didn't understand it all yet. He'd help her understand tonight. Their last night together.

He'd miss the woman though she could irritate him at times, the way a sparrow troubled a hawk, flying at its tail as it swooped and soared. But this was no trapping expedition where women and children came along, salting hides, tending their men. No, this journey of all men would establish routes through unknown areas, make a way for future trade. Women would only slow them down.

Pierre wiped his brow of the warmth of the stew and the fire. He felt sleepy, and the buffalo robe spread on the floor beckoned. He'd take a quick nap, eh? He lay down thinking still of Lisa encountering his femme after the expedition left. He yawned. Pierre always had a plan. Sometimes he couldn't carry his efforts to resolution, but he always knew someone else who would.



The young mother scanned the wharf, irritated that she hadn't seen this coming, hadn't prevented it. But here there were no sisters or grandmothers to help. A mother here worked alone. "Baptiste!" she shouted, trying not to sound so angry that her son would stay hidden, but not too friendly that he'd think it was a game. This mothering was a constant negotiation, as much as her husband's work interpreting between tribes. She smiled to herself. Mothers could teach those Astorian partners something about bargaining. "Baptiste! Come now!"

She thought she heard a distant shout. Should she walk the dock or head toward the boardwalk of the town? Paul whimpered in her arms. "Sh-h-h now. Silence absolu," she whispered. She peeled her son's fingers from his grip on the copper earrings she wore. He struck at her with his fist, pulling on the gurrah muslin that filled the bodice of her scooped-neck dress. She should put him onto her back again, but he was easier to keep quiet when carried in front. Paul must be hungry. He pulled at the gurrah, his fingers wrapping easily inside the soft striped cloth.

"Later, Paul," she told the child. He was only fifteen months, but she talked to him as though he were an adult so Pierre would not accuse her of making him weak, like a girl.

"We must find your brother," she said, drawing dark hair from Paul's eyes. He clutched at her face again, and she held his fingers. "Non!" she told him. How had she raised such a demanding child? Her eyes scanned beyond Paul's head, seeking Baptiste.

Baptiste might have raced toward the town rather than the wharf. She stood at the edge of the fort squinting to better see to the end of the muddy street. A horse clopped into view, passed so close in front of her that she stepped back. Her eyes caught those of a woman, seated behind a man, sideways, perched on her pillion, the small pillow attached to a man's saddle for just that purpose. The woman's fingers awkwardly gripped the side of the pillow. She held her knees together, her calico dress long, her feet dangling over the side of the scruffy-looking mount while the man faced forward as though unaware a woman sat behind him.

*Je viens après lui*—I come after him—she thought. Women always went after their men. In these towns, they were stuck there behind their men as though on pillions, as though they were nothing more than rolled-up saddle packs. Here, a woman couldn't even mount a horse without someone else's help.

The woman's eyes stared out at her, the face solemn, judging, before turning away. Did she know that woman? Something seemed familiar about her.

Maybe Pierre hoped she would take the children and return to his Sioux village where things were freer; expect her to live with his mother, Holy Rainbow.

No. Mixed-blood sons belonged with their fathers. They needed their fathers. Even if Pierre gave her the money, how would two hundred dollars protect her sons from robbers and ill-spirited men for three years, protect them from those in power in a place where mixed-blood children without a benefactor lived in risk? Sacagawea had her husband and Captain Clark.

Who would she and her children have? No one. Pierre was not thinking. He couldn't be.

Pierre's wife stopped short. Perhaps he planned to set them all off, to disclaim that he even had a wife and sons, the way some European traders did. Perhaps he tired of her and her unbending ways. Maybe that was why he had given her no advance money. Her heart pounded. Could a wife so misjudge a husband? Maybe Pierre believed she was a poor mother and he would find another for his sons when he returned! If he returned. Paul cried. She loosened her hold.

She was a poor mother. She frightened her baby and had lost her elder son!

No sight of the child in the streets, she turned back toward the wharf. Was that woman judging her, the one riding behind her husband while she merely walked? Everyone judged mothers from the way their children ranged or clutched at clothing. Usually they were European eyes, fur trappers and traders, clerks and shopkeepers, who judged. Sometimes, more often than she wished, other mothers' eyes watched her, the eyes of small-waisted women. She tried not to notice, but she did, even now as she fast-walked down the wharf, calling out Baptiste's name.

Her moccasins scraped on the wooden dock where canoes and pirogues thumped against the water-splashed pilings. French and English words from the French-Canadian voyageurs filled the air.

"Baptiste!"

She shifted Paul to her hip. While she retightened the two-point trade blanket, Paul struck at her breast. "Non!" she said aloud, more to herself than to Paul. She must not let the thoughts of the mother on the horse or any others distract her from finding Baptiste, bringing him home so she had time to talk with Pierre.

I am no good at this mothering, no good!

A narrow shadow fell on the bales of supplies loaded onto Hunt's pirogues. She heard a shout; someone called her. A bustle of big-armed men wearing red knit belts around their waists hovered near the dock,

no longer loading. Hat tassels folded over their dark, long hair. The camp boy—what was his name? Toupin, yes, Jean Louis Toupin. He called to her. “Madame Dorion,” Toupin said. “I believe I’ve found what you look for.”

He motioned her closer, then had her stop, put his finger to his lips as though to quiet her. He dropped down onto his stomach, leaned over the dock toward the water. He reached up under the board slats, then pulled out her son, dangling him by the arm. Still holding the boy, he rolled over and sat Baptiste on the dock. Baptiste lowered his head.

“He hangs like a possum underneath,” Toupin said in French. “His little fingers and toes grip up through the openings of the boards.” He patted where he’d seen them. Toupin stood up. “They look like little ticks at first. Lucky I don’t step on them. He must have strong fingers. He’ll make a good cordeller someday, pulling the heavy boats with the ropes.” The young man grinned as he pressed Baptiste’s hand into hers.

The boy didn’t smile, but he didn’t resist, apparently not minding that gentle Toupin had found his confidential place.

“Merci,” she said. “Merci, merci.” She kissed Baptiste’s head.

“It’s my pleasure, Madame Dorion,” Toupin said. He nodded his head once.

“Merci,” she said again, then to her son she made herself scowl. “You might have fallen into the river, been squashed like a bug by the boats. You see them?” She pointed to the heavy wooden canoes. “They are loaded. They will take your father away tomorrow, and we waste time here looking for you.” Baptiste hung his head. “You must come when I call. I have much to do to keep you safe; more, once your father leaves.”

“Best you listen to your mother,” Toupin told him. “See if you can clutch as firmly to her hand as you did to the boards.” Toupin’s smile forced creases into red cheeks revealing just a hint of dark beard. He stood, his hands at his hips. “I leave seven brothers and sisters behind in Mackinonge, Canada,” he said. “Your garçon will be all right, madame.”

She thanked him again and it seemed to her he blushed. She turned. Madame. No one had ever called her that before. It was a word

reserved for the wife of someone who headed a fur factory, a bourgeois wife. She was far from that. At least right now she was. Someday, if Pierre chose wisely, she might have such a title. But now she could barely claim the name of mother with one son hungry at her breast and the other just found, pulling against her hand. She brushed at her eyes that wept with so little nudging.



“Woman, strong you may be but you have not wagered well this night,” Pierre said.

“Non?” she said.

Pierre’s wide hands pressed against her shoulders. His fingers sunk into the buffalo robe she laid on that just moments before had wrapped them in a warm embrace and kept them from the cold night air. “No,” he said. “I have you now where I want you, eh?” She surprised him with the flick of her bare legs twisted against his. A fire burned low in the hearth; wood crackled. “Whoa, now!” he said as she slipped her legs up and pushed back against his chest with the flat of her feet.

In an instant, she had keeled him over and now straddled him, her dark hair loose from its knot at her neck falling over her shoulders. The gurrah underdress twisted at her hips. The boys squealed in laughter, cheering their parents on.

“Just this night, that’s all I have left,” she said. She breathed hard, tossed the hair from her eyes, and straightened the thin linen so her bare knees showed. The copper earrings tinkled. “Then you will be gone and we are left behind, oui?”

“Femme,” Pierre cooed, his voice deep. He reached up and gently rubbed the sharp bones beneath her eyes. “So beautiful,” he sighed. “I would take you with me, but Astor would not permit it. Hunt would not permit it. Even Donald Mackenzie would object, eh? You would have trouble keeping those boys safe on such a long journey. See how hard it is to hold Baptiste, even here?”

“They could burrow like marmots in the bateau,” she said. “He wants to go with you.” She swallowed. “We all want to go along.”

“Where do you get such ideas? From that Sacagawea who took her son on that dangerous journey?”

Sacagawea! That’s who the woman was who rode behind the man on the horse. The woman who saw the ~~the~~ western sea and came back to speak of it.

He moistened his lips. “We have talked of this. Accept this, eh? Clark took her because she was a good tool. She knew the language farther along. You do not know the words to help an important expedition. I do. You stay behind this time. We don’t trap. We take no furs with us. We go west to find a route to take pelts straight from the Columbia River to Canton, so they don’t have to travel back this way. Astor’s fort at the Pacific will be talked about everywhere. It will save time and money and change everything, femme.” He ran his finger over her cheekbone, his eyes moist. She’d remember those eyes always. The color of gray snow—what her people called themselves, Bah-Khi-Je, the gray snow people. “You do as you’re told,” he said.

“You leave us behind for other reasons, then,” she challenged. “I know. I hear.” She crossed her arms over her breasts.

“Femme.” He smoothed the thin cloth, his hands following the contours of her hips and thighs. “How did we go from being warm and sweet together to...this, eh? It is our last night for maybe three years. But I will return. You know this.” His voice was smooth as a lonely loon’s. “Come. Let us not frighten our sons.”

She leaned down as though to kiss him.

“This is better,” he whispered. He relaxed, reached his arms around her shoulders, pulled her to him. His breath felt warm.

She bit his lip instead.

He cried out, twisted his head, pressed his mouth with his fingers. He looked to see if she’d drawn blood, then rolled her over so he laid beside her, his arm across her chest, pinning her there. He was as strong as a voyageur from his years of paddling and pulling upriver, though now

he clerked in the fur factory, wrote numbers, and carried slender lead to make his way in the world instead.

“Our sons fear only their mother being set off,” she said, “left behind by a father who does not care for them, who brings them into this world but does not keep them at his side.”

“No, femme, no, no. It is not like this. I go for you, for them.” He loosened his grip. “Believe me now. As soon as Hunt gives the advance you will have it, and you will be safe here. You’re a good mother. You will be enough for them for the years I’m gone. This is something I must do. Something...my father...”

“There is talk of war,” she said.

“Just talk.”

She decided. “If I win this wrestle, you take us with you.”

He laughed. “What kind of mother would risk les garçons, eh? Put her children on a knife’s edge?”

“You risk by going away,” she said. “You risk by setting us off, as though we were nothing to you. I hear this.” She felt herself starting to cry. She pulled away from his caress, but he pushed her back onto the robe, pinned her.

“You rush to judgment,” he said. He brushed her cheek with his whiskers, hard enough that it hurt. She knew she’d have red cheeks in the morning. “I don’t set you off like some rich trader who wants a European wife. I don’t do this. You are all the femme I want.” He kissed her then, his mouth hard on hers.

She felt his thumbs sink into her, and she twisted away, stood. She yanked the buffalo robe, spilling him onto his side and threw it around her, intending to run out into the night. “I win this wrestle,” she said. “You take us along.”

He caught her ankle, jerked her back to him, and pulled her down. Quick as a lynx he straddled her, his knees pinning her arms to her sides.

“Femme,” he said, his fingers pressed hard against her chin, his voice soft, the pain piercing. He leaned over her, blew out the oil lamp. “You

will stay behind as you are told. It is not your decision, femme. Some things you can't choose."

Her mind drifted. He had known her since her thirteenth winter, his gray ash eyes finding hers inside a pox-laden lodge. She had had a name then, had softly asked that he use it. He never had. Femme, he called her. When he claimed her as his wife three years later, he still had never used her given name, still called her femme. He was lazy, using the same name. Femme—I come after him. Never beside him; always after.

Just this last night, that was all they had left. Then, only memories and an uncertain future. She struggled. He held her firm. There was no use in fighting him; she didn't want to. She felt like melted wax with him. She was weak, so weak. She had to find a way to make him take them along, even if it was *je viens après lui*.

"Ah, femme," he mumbled into her ear.

"You do not even know my name," she said. Her voice cracked. "I am only femme to you, nothing more. Even on our last night."

He leaned his head back. She could see the firelight reflected in his eyes, the profile of his straight nose, the outline of his strong jaw covered with a black, curly beard. "What should I call you?" he said. "What my mother does? 'Her to Be Baptized'? You like that better?"

"No. It says I am unfinished."

"You are my wife, my femme, nothing else."

"I am more than that," she said. "Femme means 'I come after you.'"

"You do."

She struggled. He held her quiet. She could hear his breathing, smelled smoked hide lingering on his chest.

"You are the mother of my sons, eh? I trust you to take care of them."

"Then use my mother name," she said.

"Your mother name?"

"Marie," she whispered.

He paused as though thinking.

"Have I known this name?"

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“It is what I choose to call myself,” she said. Tears spilled from her eyes, eased into her ears. “A mother name. But sons need a father with them.”

“No more talk now.” He pressed the back of her neck, pulling her to him. “Give me reasons not to forget you.”

“Say I won the wrestle,” she persisted.

He laughed, a deep laugh that shook his chest against her. “You win with words, femme. I give you that.”

“I win this wrestle then.” She smiled. She was Marie, a word that meant mother, and a mother always found a way.

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