

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a long, dark brown, long-sleeved dress, stands on a dirt path in a wooded area. She is looking back over her shoulder towards the camera. A dark bag sits on the ground next to her. The background is filled with trees and foliage, creating a soft, natural setting.

The
Daughter's Walk

A NOVEL

JANE
KIRKPATRICK

Prologue

Mica Creek, Washington State, March 1901

“Go back! Just go back!” The woman glared at the dog, who stopped, his tail down, ears tipped forward in confusion.

“You can’t come with me,” she said. “I’m not part of this family anymore.” Her voice cracked at the truth that would now define her life. Heavy, wet snow fell on the solemn pair. The dog failed to obey. Even in this she was powerless. She looked at the window, hoping her mother or sister might wave. No one. She returned to the dog.

“Go back. Please.” She pointed, her voice breaking. “Go, Sailor. Go home.” The dog curled his bushy tail between his legs and then turned, walking toward the farmhouse now shrouded in snow. He looked back once, but she pointed and he continued back to the family as she’d ordered.

The woman bit her lip to keep from crying, then stuffed the packet close to her chest to keep the papers dry. She pulled her fur coat around her. Maybe she shouldn’t have worn it; maybe her success offended them and that’s why they’d refused.

The wind shifted and drove pelting snow into her face. She’d forgotten her umbrella at the house. It mattered little; she’d left so much more behind. She trudged toward the railroad tracks, taking her first steps into exile.

Part One

Family

Decision

My name is Clara Estby, and for my own good, my mother whisked me away. Well, for the good of our *family* too, she insisted. Trying to stop her proved useless, because when an idea formed in her Norwegian head, she was like a rock crib anchoring a fence: strong and sturdy and unmovable once it's set. I tried to tell her, I did. We all did. But in the end, we succumbed to her will and I suppose to her hopefulness, never dreaming it would lead where it did. I certainly never imagined I'd walk a path so distant from the place where I began.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, telling stories out of sequence, something a steady and careful woman like myself should never do.

It began on an April morning in 1896, inside our Mica Creek farmhouse in the rolling Palouse Hills of eastern Washington State, when my mother informed me that we would be walking from Spokane to New York City. Walking, mind you, when there were perfectly good trains a person could take. Walking—nearly four thousand miles to earn ten thousand dollars that would save our farm from foreclosure. Also to prove that a woman had stamina. Also to wear the new reform dress and show the freedom such garments offered busy, active, sturdy women.

Freedom. The only merit I saw in the shorter skirts and absence of corsets was that we could run faster from people chasing us for being foolish enough to embark on such a trek across the country, two women, alone.

We were also making this journey to keep me “from making a terrible mistake,” Mama told me. I was nineteen years old and able to make my own decisions, or so I thought. But not this one.

Mama stood stiff as a wagon tongue, her back to my father and me, drinking a cup of coffee that steamed the window. I could see my brother Olaf outside, moving the sheep to another field with the help of Sailor, our dog, dots of white like swirling cotton fluffs bounding over an ocean of green. Such a bucolic scene about to reveal hidden rocks beneath it.

“We are going to walk to New York City, Clara, you and I.”

“What?” I'd entered the kitchen, home for a weekend from my work as a domestic in Spokane. My mother had walked four hundred miles a few years earlier to visit her parents in a time of trial. We'd all missed her, and no one liked taking over her many duties that kept the family going. But walk to New York City?

“Why would we walk, and why are we going at all?” I had plans for the year ahead, and I figured it would take us a year to make such a trek.

My father grunted. “She listens to no one, your mother, when ideas she gets into her head.”

“Mama, you haven't thought this through,” I said.

My mother turned to face us, her blue eyes intense. “It’s not possible to work out every detail in life, but one has to be bold. Did we know you’d find work in Spokane when we left Minnesota? No. Did we think we’d ever own our own farm? No. These are good things that happened because we took a chance and God allowed it.”

“We didn’t expect me to become injured, to mortgage the farm because we needed money to plant and live on,” my father said. It sounded like they’d had this argument more than once but never in front of me. “Bad things can happen, and this...this is a bad thing, I tell you.”

“There is nothing certain in this life,” she said to both of us. “We must grab what is given. ‘Occupy until I come,’ Scripture tells us. ‘Multiply’ is what that word *occupy* means. Here is our chance to do that, to save this farm, and all it requires is using what God gave us, our feet and our perseverance, our effort and a little inconvenience.”

“A little inconvenience?” I said. “I have plans for the summer, and I’ve worked out a way to go to college in the fall and work part-time. I can’t leave my job.”

“I, I, I... Always it is about you,” my mother said. “You won’t have money for school if we lose this farm. You’ll have to work full-time to help this family. You see your father. He can’t do carpentry as he did before. Sometimes one must risk for family. We must trust in the goodness of human nature and God’s guidance.”

“But who would pay us for such a thing? Do you have a contract?” The wealthy Spokane people I served often spoke of contracts and lawyers and securities as I dipped squash soup into their Spode china bowls or brushed crumbs from their tables into the silver collectors before bringing chocolate mousse for dessert. These were businesspeople who would never try to *multiply* by walking cross-country without a written contract.

“These are trustworthy people. They have the *New York World* behind them and the entire fashion industry too.”

What Mama proposed frightened me. “If we make it, how do we know they’ll pay us?”

“If we make it? Of course we’ll make it,” she said.

My father sagged onto the chair at the table, held his head with his hands while my mother flicked at the crumbs of a *sandbakkel* cookie collected on the oilcloth. I wondered if she thought of my little brother Henry. He’d loved those cookies.

“Who says these sponsors are reliable?” I said. I was as tall as my mother but had a rounder face than either of my parents. My mother and I shared slender frames, but her earth-colored hair twisted into a thick topknot while my soft curls lay limp as brown yarn. My mother set her narrow jaw. She didn’t take any sassing.

“Never you mind.” She brushed at her apron. “They’re honest. They’ve made an investment too. They’ll pay for the bicycle skirts once we reach Salt Lake City, and they’ll pay for the portraits. They’ve promised five dollars cash to send us on our way. The rest we’ll earn. Can’t you see? It’s our way out.”

“So you say,” my father said. He ran fingers through his yellow hair, and I noticed a touch of white.

“But why do I have to go?” I wailed. “Take Olaf. A man would be safer for you.”

“It’s about women’s stamina, not about a man escorting a woman. And you... You’re filled with wedding thoughts you have no business thinking.”

My face burned. “I’m not,” I said. “He’s... I work for his family, Mama.”

How she knew I harbored thoughts of a life with Forest Stapleton I'd never know. I was sure I'd never mentioned him. Well, maybe to my sister Ida once, in passing.

"I know about employers' sons," Mama said. My father lifted his head as though to speak, but my mother continued. "Besides, family comes first. You can go to college next year, when we have the money. What we need now is that ten thousand dollars so we can repay the mortgage and not lose this farm. It could go to foreclosure if we don't do this." My father dropped his eyes at the mention of that shameful word. "Ole, God has opened a door for us, and we would slight Him if we turned this down," she pleaded.

"How can you leave your babies?" my father said then, his voice nearly a whisper. "How can you be away from Lillian and Johnny and Billy and Arthur and Bertha and Ida and Olaf—"

"I know the names of my children," my mother said, her words like stings.

"Ya, well then, how can you leave them?"

"It is only for a short time, seven months, Ole." She sat next to him at the table, patted his slumped shoulder. "They will be in good hands with you and Ida and Olaf to look after them. It is a mark of my trust and confidence in you that I can even think about doing this thing." She looked at me now. "When I walked before, that four hundred miles in Minnesota, you did well, all of you. It made you stronger. And I came back." She patted my father's hand. "I'll come back. We will, Clara and I. Everything will be as it was before but with the mortgage made. The entire farm paid off, money for each of my children to go on to college when they want. No more worries about the future." She took his silence as agreement. "Good. We go into Spokane later this week for our portrait," my mother said to me, relief in her voice. "These will be sent to the New York papers and the *Spokesman-Review*."

My father winced.

"People in Spokane will read about this?" I said. The thought humiliated. What would Forest think? What would our neighbors think?

"People across the country will know of it," my mother said. She almost glowed, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"American women listen to their husbands," my father said in Norwegian. "Or they should." He rose from the table, shoved the chair against it, and stomped out.

I wanted my father to forbid her to go so I wouldn't have to leave either. I didn't dare defy her; I never had. We always did what she wanted. I was stuck.

"He'll come around," my mother said more to herself than to me. "He'll see the wisdom of this. It'll work. When we succeed, then, well, he'll be grateful I did this for him, for the whole family."

"Maybe he will," I said. "But don't expect me to ever be."

The Plan

Two days later, on April 26, we stood in city hall “to receive the blessing of the mayor of Spokane,” Mama said.

“Mayor Belt,” I said, curtsying to the rotund man standing before us in his walnut-paneled office.

“My daughter Clara,” my mother said after she’d introduced herself. She wore a small hat with a single feather that topped off a dress with wide sleeves, a high neck, and a velvet throat ribbon. She had sewed everything herself. She had made my dress as well, and we looked like fine ladies worthy of a meeting with the mayor of Spokane even though I didn’t feel we were. “She’ll be making the trek with me. I can’t thank you enough for your support.”

“And how do you feel about this extraordinary if not dangerous journey, Miss Estby?”

I hesitated.

“Well, answer him, Clara.”

I wanted to say I felt awful. I wanted to say: *My life is coming to an end with this ridiculous scheme. My father is upset. My brothers and sisters will be when they find out, especially Ida, who will be left to cook and clean and tend the youngsters we’re abandoning. I think the whole thing is foolish, without any real certainty we can survive the trip let alone receive the elusive money at the end of it that my mother puts such hope in. I can think of dozens of things that could go wrong. I don’t want to be separated from my family for so long or my own budding life to satisfy my mother’s plan to rescue the farm. There must be another way.*

That’s what I wanted to say.

“We’re very grateful for your support,” I said instead.

“Hmm. Not exactly an answer,” Mayor Belt said. “But then, young ladies aren’t expected to be articulate.” My face burned and my mother frowned. “You should thank my wife for this,” he said then, holding an envelope marked *For Mrs. H. Estby*. “She’s found the...romance in this entire thing. Two women, walking their way across the country to prove their stamina.”

“And promote the new reform dress,” my mother added.

“Yes, indeed.” He looked at our ankles, well covered with our long skirts, and I imagined him visualizing risqué hemlines raised above the tops of our shoes, the leggings we’d have to wear, waistlines without corsets. I scratched the back of my leg with my foot and he looked away.

“Until a woman is in charge of her ankles, she’ll never be in charge of her brain,” my mother said in her cheeriest voice.

He smiled. “I suspect easterners don’t understand the strength of the western woman,” the mayor said. “Why, my mother walked the trail carrying me, worked side by side with my

father to clear fields, helped build a house and barn, planted fields, handled mules. She once outran a wheat fire started by dry lightning. Remarkable woman. She grabbed my hand and—”

“Did what was necessary for her family,” my mother interrupted. Everyone knew of the mayor’s tendency to go on and on telling stories. “Is that the letter of introduction?” He still held the envelope.

“Yes. Indeed.” He withheld it from her. “How did they happen to pick you, Mrs. Estby?”

I wondered that myself. It amazed me that I often found out important details affecting my life by listening to my mother talk to someone else. “On behalf of the sponsors who are in the fashion field, the newspaper asked for essays, statements of why I thought I could make the walk and why I must succeed to save our family’s farm. I was chosen for this from many entries I was told.”

She told them of the pending foreclosure.

“It’ll bring fine fame to Spokane if you do it,” he said. “And if you don’t, well, what can one expect from a woman?” He grinned. “You really have nothing to lose and everything to gain. A perfect wager.” He handed her the envelope, and she thanked him again without looking at what he might have written.

We made our good-byes and began the walk to the portrait studio where our picture would be made and sent to the *New York World*, compliments of “the sponsors.”

“May I read what he wrote?” I asked.

She handed me the letter. I stumbled while opening it and she grabbed my elbow. I was forever tripping, the clumsy one in a family of light-footed souls. “Wait until we’re at the studio, Clara. You don’t want to be like me and fall and break your pelvis.”

“Mother!”

“There’s no shame in the word, Clara. If the city had kept their streets repaired, I wouldn’t have fallen and there wouldn’t have been the lawsuit.”

“Which told everyone of your...female problems.”

“Yes, but I won, and the money allowed us to buy our farm. Besides, I located a good doctor because of it and had the surgery and met a fellow suffragette in the process. It all worked out. Out of something bad came good. Remember that.”

“Then maybe if we...couldn’t pay the mortgage, if we lost the farm, something good could come of that too.”

My mother stopped as though struck by lightning. Her shoulders stiffened and she looked like she might slap me, something she’d never done. “Clara. How you talk. Nothing could be worse than a foreclosure. Nothing. Give me that letter.”

She read it then. “Please, sirs, give kindly considerations to Mrs. H. Estby, who has been a resident of this city and surrounding area for nine years and is a lady of good character and reputation.”

“Why does he call you Mrs. H. Estby? Shouldn’t you use Papa’s name?”

“A woman has a name of her own, Clara.” She looked at the letter and nodded. “It’ll be enough. We have to get the signatures of dignitaries when we visit a state capital or large city, to verify that we’ve actually been there.”

I looked at her, aghast. “The sponsors won’t sign a contract, but they expect us to show that we’ve done our part? Mama.”

“We have signed a contract.”

To my surprised gaze she said, “Well, I do listen to you.” She nudged me with her hip. “We have seven months to make the trek. We start out with five dollars and must earn the rest as we go. We can accept no rides but must walk the entire way. And we can accept meals and lodging from friendly supporters but not beg for it or money.”

“Beg? We might be so destitute we’d need to beg?” I could hardly swallow, the bow at my throat as tight as a noose.

She waved her hand to dismiss my worry. “I expect we’ll sleep most nights at the railroad stations, at least until our journey makes the newspapers and people are curious to meet us. They’ll discover we’re ordinary women doing something extraordinary. We might like a bed in their haymow or their attics. There’s even a provision in the contract to make time adjustments if one of us becomes ill. So you see, it’s not such a big risk.”

“And the money?”

“They’ll provide ten thousand dollars if we arrive on time and have met the conditions. Oh, Clara.” She grasped my gloved hand. “It will be the trip of a lifetime. You’ll see.”

“If we die, it’ll be the last trip of our lifetime.”

“Nonsense. Where’s that Estby spirit of accomplishment?”

She said nothing to my scowl.

The spring breeze lifted the soft curls at my face. I hoped we could wear our hats in the photograph, as I hadn’t brought my curling iron along to spruce up, and a hat turned my hair flat as a deer’s bed lying in the meadow.

My mother hummed as we walked along. “Remember the story I told you, Clara, about when I was a young student in Oslo? In religion class they told of Jonah swallowed by the whale, and then I went to science class and learned the whale has a narrow throat? Too narrow for a man. So I—”

“Challenged the religious teacher the next day,” I said. I’d heard the story numerous times.

“Yes, and he said to me, ‘Don’t you know, Helga, that with God all things are possible?’ So you see. We will pass through the narrow throat of uncertainty. We’ll succeed, get the money, and pay off the mortgage.”

“With the mayor’s letter?”

“With all of us doing our part. That’s what families do, Clara. They sacrifice and serve, and then all will be well.”

I wished I could share her enthusiasm, but it wasn’t in my nature.

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