

Beyond the Prairie

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“If it weren’t for the ocean, I would walk back to Denmark.” Juli swiped a loose hair from her eyes, leaving a smudge of soil on her damp forehead. Her fingernails were black with earth, and her sunbonnet, once pink, was faded from long hours in the sun. With her blue eyes narrowed, she seemed to see beyond the eastern expanse of grass, brown and crackling in the August heat. I eyed her tentatively, unsure whether to offer comfort or to stay out of her way.

Afraid that she would turn on me in anger if I interrupted her thoughts, I decided to busy myself brushing dirt from the pile of turnips I had collected. While I worked, I watched smoke rise from the fire pit outside the dugout where Mama was canning beans. The dugout itself would hardly have stood out from the landscape if I hadn’t known it was there; hollowed into a dip in the prairie and supported by bricks of sod, it seemed as though it could have sprung from the land without our assistance. Mama’s sleeves were rolled up past her elbows, and I wondered if she was as eager as I was to wash up in the cool water of the creek come suppertime. The lush green of the ravine where the creek ran called to me, its winding path lined by cottonwoods. I caught a whiff of their sweet scent, tossed to me on the hot winds that caused their first leaves to dry and flutter free.

Juli hadn’t cried since we boarded the ship. She hadn’t laughed, either. In fact, her entire life and any emotion she had left seemed to be focused on dutiful, physical labor, working in the prairie heat for hours without rest, her once fine hands seeming too rough to ever again play the harpsichord the way she had learned from our *Bestemor*. I loved my sister, but I didn’t know how to bring her back to the way we’d been.

“Stena,” Juli said, her eyes still on the horizon, “Why do you like it here?”

It was rare for Juli to initiate conversation these days. Taken by surprise, I was silent for a moment before answering. Why did I like it here? Perhaps because it was a place where I, the ever-clumsy Christena, could do no harm. Unlike Juli, I had failed miserably at such talents as playing the harpsichord or tatting lace. Even our sweet, patient *Bestemor* had despaired of me at times, sending me off on invented errands while Juli remained engrossed in difficult scales or awaited instructions for a new handkerchief border. I preferred to spend my time outdoors rather than in, and had always

been more interested in following Papa around than helping Mama at home. These traits that had been so awkward in Denmark went unnoticed here on the homestead, and that, I felt, was a blessing.

"It's exciting." I chose my words with care. "I never thought I would help to plant a field, or see a red man, or pick so many wildflowers. I never thought I would be able to look in every direction without seeing another soul. I never thought I would leave Denmark."

"I never thought so, either," Juli said, bitterness in her voice. "I wrote to Mads, begging him to join us when he is able, but he said that it will be his responsibility to take over his father's shop and to care for his parents in their old age. I will never see him again."

"Oh, Juliane." I took a step closer to her, and put my arm around her thin shoulders. We had known Mads Jorgensen since we were children, and some of my earliest memories were of him pulling our braids and chasing us home from church. Later, his devotion to my pretty, older sister became clear. Instead of pulling her braids, he gave her red ribbons to tie them with. Instead of chasing her home from church, he offered her his arm. We all knew that one day they would marry, and Juli grew up content in this fact.

Except that now, it was not to be. When Papa had announced that we would leave Haderslev for America, Juli began to cry. She cried through the next month, as we packed our things and sold her precious harpsichord. She cried through her last day at school, as her girl friends walked her home down the familiar cobblestone path. She cried through our hugs with *Bestemor*, as we combed her fine white hair and ate her *rollepølse* on rye bread for what would be the last time. She cried through our goodbyes to the Jorgensens, as Mads slipped a thin silver ring onto her finger as a keepsake. She cried until we boarded the *Allemannia*, and then, abruptly, she stopped.

By now, the sun was lowering in the sky, and puffy white clouds seemed almost to dance across the horizon. Juli had always cared for me like the good older sister she was, but ever since we left Haderslev, our roles had been reversed. I tried to present a brave face as I took on the chores that she neglected through her daydreaming so as not to cause Mama and Papa to worry. I spoke only about the aspects of our life on the prairie that delighted me, and never mentioned the loneliness I sometimes felt.

It seemed long ago now that Juli and I had confided in each other, whispering late at night of how we would one day be neighbors. We would wave our children off to school in the morning along the same cobblestone path that we had always taken, and we would then visit the baker's together for a fresh slice of *kringle*. To be neighbors now, of course, would mean

to be as far as we were from our Uncle Jakob's homestead. We hadn't seen either him or Aunt Anna in weeks, and only when the air was very still could we see the smoke rise from their cabin.

At the moment, however, it seemed as though our homestead was alone on the prairie. The wind caused the tall prairie grasses to rustle endlessly; it howled through the fence posts on the oxen's corral, and more than once in the past months I had seen Juli turn abruptly, thinking she had heard voices on the wind. I would tease her, telling her that she was becoming a madwoman, but the truth was that sometimes the sound of the prairie winds caused even me to shiver. Juli and I stood together, the wind blowing against our skirts, until she broke away from me with a gasp.

"Mads' ring! It's gone!"

Her right index finger was bare, with only a slim band of smooth, untanned skin as evidence to what was missing. We had been harvesting the garden since sunup, digging deep into the earth for turnips and beets, pulling up dried bean stalks, turning the soil in preparation for spring. The ring could have been anywhere. With a low moan, Juli lowered herself to her knees, her fingers splayed over the ground, as though she could raise the ring to her by will alone.

I ran to the sod dugout, calling for Mama, and then took off for the wheat field waving my arms to attract Papa's attention. My blond braids slapped heavily against my back and the seeded tails of the prairie grasses whipped my face as I struggled back to the garden. Work for the day was abandoned as, united, the four of us crouched there together, sifting soil until our legs cramped and the sunlight waned. Long after Papa had retreated to water the oxen and Mama had gone to start supper, Juli and I continued to dig for the ring. Her face was a still mask of anguish. I knew that Papa and Mama's expressions mirrored my own; we were afraid that the loss of the ring would make us lose Juli even more than we already had. No one had expected her to take the separation from Denmark as hard as she had. To Juli, that ring was her last link to the lives we knew.

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In the days that followed, we all did our best to comfort Juli. Mama coddled her, allowing her to sleep later and later in the mornings, which meant that I was left to take care of most of the chores on my own. Papa traded for a small plate glass window that had traveled all the way from Sioux City, and I heard him confide in Mama that it had come dear, but he hoped Juli would like the sunlight it brought indoors. Juli paid the window little mind, but I polished it each morning until it shone. I chattered unnecessarily

in an attempt to bring more smiles to the homestead, and it was only when no one was watching that I narrowed my eyes in Juli's direction. Mama had no need to remind her that "Silence is golden," as she was still to the point that we were all made uneasy.

For breakfast one Sunday, Mama made *ebelskivers* with some of the last of the white flour. She beamed with pride when she presented them to us as fluffy and golden as always, despite the fact that she had cooked them over an open fire. Papa and I praised them with every bite, though Juli ate silently, her head bowed and her eyes on her plate. It was only when Papa announced that he had received a parcel of letters from home that she looked up. A bite of *ebelskiver* clung to her fork.

"Did Mads write to me?" Juli said. Her voice was high with anticipation. I wondered if she would leave all of us behind to go back to him one day.

Papa slammed down his tin cup with such force that coffee sloshed over the brim.

"No, Juliane!" he all but shouted. "Don't you care whether we had news from *Bestemor*? You know her health has been poor. Do you give a damn about this family anymore, or do you give thought only to yourself?"

"Lars..." Mama said, wringing her hands in distress. I sat as though frozen to my stool. Juli began to rise beside me, her jaw set, but Papa was not yet finished. He placed a firm hand on her shoulder, and she sat back down hard.

"Juliane, Christena," he said, addressing both of us, "you know that our family did not prosper after the Prussians gained control of Schleswig." Of course, he had explained this to us this many times, but it occurred to me now that perhaps I had been the only one listening. We were Danish by heritage, but as close as we were to the border with Prussia, it had hardly come as a surprise when we learned that Haderslev was no longer under Denmark's rule.

"When your Uncle Jakob wrote of his happiness here with Aunt Anna, the profit they made from their wheat fields, and the one hundred and sixty acres that is soon to be their own, I knew that to join him here would provide a great opportunity for our family."

"Opportunity?" Juli spat the word back at him, and Papa let out a slow breath.

"Yes, an opportunity. This territory is fresh, untainted. A man can dream as big as he chooses! You, girls, are a part of this new life, and if that must come at the price of some difficult partings, then so be it. I want what

is best for this family, and going back to Haderslev is not an option.”

When Juli stood to leave the table a second time, Papa did not try to hold her back.

I barely awoke one night a few weeks later as I heard the door of the dugout creak shut and felt Juli slip into bed beside me. I had been sleeping soundly after spending the day helping Papa bring in the last of the wheat, and didn't bother to ask Juli where she had been. We were still lucky if she spoke more than a few words each day. Though both of us were too scared of wolves to go outside after dark, she brought with her the coolness of the night air and the faint scent of smoke. Juli turned her back to me, and her breaths came quickly. My eyelids flickered shut, and I was asleep without giving her another thought.

It could have been minutes later, or it could have been hours. The air in the dugout was stifling. “Fire!” I cried, not knowing where or how. Hadn't Mama put out the cooking fire after supper? Papa was on his feet in an instant, pulling on his pants and stumbling to the door. When he swung it open, a red glow filled the room. A prairie fire was on the horizon.

Papa made a quick evaluation. “There's no use digging a guard. It's moving too fast. We'll need to build a back fire.” By now, the oxen were lowing in their pen. They, too, could hear the distant rumbling. Mama moved like a blur, tying a scarf over her mouth and nose and rummaging in the trunk for sulfur matches. I wasn't aware of moving myself, but there I was outside, the fire before me. All the world seemed to be overtaken by the dark heat. I stared back at Juli, silhouetted in the doorframe, and felt a sudden tightening in my chest. The fiery glow shone upon her face as she emerged from the dugout.

Papa and Mama were close behind her, efficient in the face of disaster as they shouted out instructions. Juli and I complied, though my hands trembled so that I could hardly light the matches. I realized that it wasn't only the smoke that was making it difficult for me to breathe, but also the thoughts that I was struggling to suppress. Juli remained impassive, almost as though she was sleepwalking, and the strange look in her eyes didn't ease my fears. Tears streamed down my face, the product of both the sting of the smoke and my own intense emotions, and I saw that Mama was crying, too. Her tears left pale streaks in her otherwise blackened face, and her eyes were rimmed with red.

We were hot, exhausted, and weak from coughing when, just before

dawn, the winds turned in our favor. As we watched the fires recede and, finally, disappear into the smoldering blackness of the earth, Mama and I collapsed into Papa's broad frame. When I lifted my head from our embrace, I noticed Juli's absence. She had gone back to bed.

Juli slept until long after the rooster's first crows. The rest of us went about our duties quietly, subdued by the thoughts of what could have been. It was fortunate for us that the harvest was in, and we were grateful when Papa reported that the areas of burning had not spread far. No one else had been affected.

"Perhaps the Indians lit the fire," Mama said, her eyes wide. "You know they don't want us here." We had seen Indians on their ponies in the distance, and though Papa and I found them fascinating, Mama had insisted that we hide indoors until they disappeared into the horizon.

"With the weather as dry as it's been, who knows how it started?" Papa said. "A spark could have blown in from a cooking fire, or we could have slept through a lightning storm."

"I suppose there's no point in placing blame," Mama said.

I was mixing batter for biscuits, and her words caused me to pause mid-stroke.

Papa nodded. "I've heard tell that prairie fires can be good for the land. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise. I just hope that if there are any more fires in the future, they'll stay a little further from the homestead!" His laugh was weak as he attempted to make light of the situation.

When Juli awoke, we took turns braiding each other's hair as we had done every morning since we were children, but she avoided meeting my eyes in Mama's mirror. I tugged her hair more sharply than usual as I twisted it back, but she sat stiffly and didn't pinch me like she would have back in Denmark. She knew that I knew, that much was certain. What she didn't know yet was that I never intended to tell another soul.

The smell of smoke seemed to linger in my hair for days, a constant reminder of the secret I held. It hurt me to keep it from Papa and Mama, even though I meant only to protect them. I knew they wouldn't understand Juli's reasoning any more than I did, and I didn't even think I wanted to. Had Juli wanted to kill us? Herself? I couldn't bring myself to think of such things. Had she hoped to discourage us from staying on the homestead? Who knew what madness the winds had whispered to her. I suspected that she might not know herself. I finally scrubbed my hair clean with Mama's strong lye soap, but I couldn't wash away what I knew.

The cold isolation of winter followed. Autumn had been our time of hectic preparation as another dugout was fashioned for the oxen and our home made as snug and comfortable as one room could ever be for four people. The walls were covered with newspaper, and sheets were tacked up against the ceiling to catch the dust and vermin that lurked in the sod. Mama had announced time and again that she would never recover from the fright of seeing a garter snake watching her one morning as she awoke, its eyes gleaming and its forked tongue flickering, and so she covered the sod with a grim determination that caused Papa to chuckle behind her back.

Uncle Jakob had advised us to fill our root cellar to the brim, so Juli and I helped Mama preserve jar after jar of vegetables while Papa and the oxen lugged a hundred-pound bag of wheat thirty miles to Vermillion. There, he tethered the oxen, and carried the bag across the already frozen Missouri to a mill where the wheat was ground into our winter supply of flour. The moment he returned, I begged Mama for more *ebelskivers*.

By the time the first snow came, we were settled in. I didn't enjoy reading from the Bible and mending clothes as much as working outside, but the quietness of our days seemed to soothe Juli. Her anger gone, she was now a subdued version of the smiling, fun-loving sister I'd known in Denmark. As she helped me weave straw stars to decorate for Christmas, I sometimes saw her absentmindedly stroking her bare finger, her thoughts far from the homestead. It was times like those when I remembered the fire.

We hoped to visit Uncle Jakob and his family for Christmas, but winds came that blew the snowdrifts so deep Papa could hardly make his way to tend the oxen. Our celebration was small, and the straw stars a meager reminder of what the holiday had been for us in the past. It was New Years' when, in the middle of kneading bread, Mama suddenly straightened.

"Do you hear that?"

Papa looked up from his sketches for the log house he would build in the spring. I threw my knitting aside and ran to the door. Even Juli looked up from her letter writing. She no longer wrote to Mads, but she was always anxious for news from *Bestemor* and her classmates. Her closest girlfriends had sent her small braids of their hair as keepsakes in the latest fashion, and she had dutifully done so in return.

"Sleigh bells!" I said. "It's Uncle Jakob and Aunt Anna and..."

With them were two men, their faces concealed by woolen scarves as they disentangled themselves from heavy buffalo robes. Carrying baskets heaped with food and parcels wrapped in brown paper, the group called

out their greetings as they made their way to the door. We all hugged Uncle Jakob and Aunt Anna, whom we hadn't seen since autumn. To the others we gave our warmest welcomes. The Olesens, they introduced themselves.

"These two are batching it a couple of miles west of us," said Uncle Jakob. "I don't know how they manage without a woman to cook for them!"

Erik, the elder of the two brothers, laughed and explained that his bride would be arriving in the spring.

"And from then on you can expect me for supper every night!" said Peter. Red-cheeked and merry, the brothers made themselves at home, exchanging stories of mishaps on the prairie and sharing in the array of food that was assembled before us. Mama nudged me when she noticed Peter's attempts at conversation with Juli; she was polite, but elusive, her short responses followed by uncomfortable pauses. Exasperated, I plopped down beside them. Even if Juli didn't remember how to talk, I certainly did, and so I peppered Peter with questions about his homestead, his life in Denmark, his brother's bride.

They had been settled longer than us, he said, and already had a wooden floor in their cabin. I could hardly imagine such a luxury, and laughed when he told of their excitement the first time they were able to sweep. Mama had attempted to sweep our dirt packed floor, out of habit more than anything, but had little to show for her efforts. They hailed from Aalborg, the youngest sons in a large family, and hadn't known a soul when they first reached the Dakotas. When Erik's bride arrived, they would be married by the minister who passed through the area every month or so. Peter said they would host a picnic for all of the neighbors. Perhaps they would have a barn raising. Though Juli remained quiet, I saw that she was listening closely.

As the time for visiting drew to an end, Peter tugged my braid playfully before a sidelong glance at Juli. Then, after the buffalo robes were tucked in and promises were made to gather again in the spring, the sound of the sleigh bells grew softer and softer as our guests disappeared into the white distance. Mama and I busied ourselves packing away leftovers and straightening the dugout, laughing as we went over the events of the day. I noticed Juli staring out the plate-glass window, a small smile playing at her lips.

Three months later, it was the first week of April, and the grass was beginning to green. Juli and I were barefoot as we raked the garden plot in preparation of our first planting, and my toes delighted in the soft, cool

earth. My mouth watered just at the thought of having fresh vegetables again, and I imagined trips to Uncle Jakob's and the Olesens' to share our bounty come summer. A meadowlark trilled, and I whistled back at him. I could hear Papa out back, sawing away at logs for our new cabin. Mama was hanging out the linens to bleach in the sun.

With a grunt, Juli knocked apart a solid clump of earth that marred our almost-smooth black surface, kicking it with her bare toes to force it to crumble. As it scattered into pieces across the garden, I heard her take a quick breath. The wooden rake fell from her hands, settling into the ground with a muffled thud. There, nearly hidden within a web of soil-covered roots, was a tarnished silver ring.

Juli cried that day for the first time in over a year. As she placed her arm around my shoulders, I cried too. Together, with the wind blowing against our skirts, we looked one last time beyond the prairie.

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