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Seeing the Elephant

Olive!”

The sun was barely up. Why was Lucy shaking her? And what was the commotion outdoors? Olive remembered waking to barking dogs during the night, but before she could work out what was happening, it was morning and her sister Lucy was dragging off the coverlet.

“Get up. Get dressed. Help Mary Ann get ready. And then get Charity Ann dressed. We have company.”

“Company?” Olive stretched, reaching her arms way above her head and extending her toes as far as they’d point. How could they have company this early? Their cabin stood on an isolated Illinois homestead a full five miles outside Fulton. It wasn’t on the way to anything.

“Yes, you *lay-ahed*, we have company,” Lucy said, excitement tingeing her words. “The Wheelers and the Pounds stopped late last night on their way from New York to the West.” Lucy gave Olive one final shake before leaving. “You

must get up. I need to help Ma and the ladies prepare breakfast. Lorenzo is chopping wood, and Royce is helping him.”

Olive threw off the coverlet and sat on the side of her bed, lifting the edge of the curtain and peeking out the window. The yard teemed with activity. Two canvas-covered wagons had pulled in the yard during the night. It looked like a regular frolic with children running, dogs barking, and Pa standing by the wagons talking with two men.

Had they brought those wagons all the way from East Bloomfield? New York seemed so far away, almost like another country. Olive remembered that her mother and father had been married in East Bloomfield.

Once, when Pa and Lorenzo were away, Ma told the girls all about her wedding in the old East Bloomfield Congregational Church. She had carefully lifted her *watered silk* wedding dress out of the chest. As Ma told them all about the day, she let Lucy, Olive, and Mary Ann unfold the gown, showing them the puffy *gigot sleeves* and the heavily weighted skirt. She unrolled her *Mary Stuart cap* and the delicate lace *ruff* from the linen in which they were lightly rolled. The lace was so fine it looked like cobwebs. Ma confided that she had waited to marry until the very end of April in the hope that the lilacs would force a bloom. The wedding supper had been at the home of the Wheelers.

Why, it must be the same Wheelers who were whooping it up in their yard!

Olive woke her little sister, Mary Ann. Putting a finger over her lips, Olive pointed Mary Ann toward the outhouse. Normally the girls would have taken care of their entire *toilette* in their room, but Olive didn't relish having to clean the

slops bucket while company visited. The girls managed to slip back inside before anyone saw them.

Olive poured water from the pitcher into the basin. She washed, wrung the cloth out, and repeated the procedure, helping Mary Ann wash up.

“Do we wear our Sunday dresses, Olive?” Mary Ann loved her new Sunday dress.

“No. I think we have work to do. Let’s wear our next-to-best dresses.” She put a *pinafore* over Mary Ann’s and an apron over her own. “Can you tidy up the room while I take care of Charity Ann?”

“Oh dear, I can’t empty the basin.” Of late, the words “oh dear” had peppered much of Mary Ann’s conversation. She overheard a neighbor use the phrase and had enthusiastically adopted it.

“We’ll leave it for now.” In a large family, they’d long ago learned to pitch in and help each other out. They’d also learned that taking care of people came first and chores must sometimes go by the wayside.

Olive readied three-year-old Charity Ann for the day. She would follow Olive the rest of the day.

“Olive Ann.” Ma followed her out onto the doorstep, setting the white glazed stoneware crock on the step along with her pair of pruning shears. “Fill this crock with lilacs, will you? When you are finished, put it on the table that Lucy and Lorenzo are setting up under the oak.”

Lucy and Lorenzo had laid a pair of wide boards across two sawhorses, and Lucy was smoothing one of Ma’s best Belgian linen tablecloths over the makeshift table. Some of the other young people carried dishes and utensils to the table.

Olive hurried to cut an armful of lilacs. Ma's lilac bush scented the entire yard, and, despite the early hour, Olive had to gently brush bees away as she cut. They started work early when lilac nectar scented the air. She remembered to scrape the blade along the woody stems before putting them into the crock so the lilacs could soak water deep into the marrow of their flesh. When she couldn't squeeze another stem into the crock, she carried the lilacs to the center of the table and went to fetch water to fill the crock.

"Why, Mary Ann Sperry!" One of the women carrying out a platter of flapjacks stopped short of the table. "I mean . . . Mrs. Oatman." The woman blushed to have resorted to Ma's maiden name.

"Whatever is wrong, Mrs. Wheeler?" Ma looked concerned.

"Nothing is wrong, but, I declare, if that doesn't look like the exact same crock of lilacs you used to set on your table in New York."

"It's most nearly the same," Ma said with a laugh, putting small pitchers of syrup on the table. "The crock is the salt-glazed one your folks gave me as a wedding gift, and that lilac bush was started from a slip off a slip off a slip of my grandmother's bush from the Berkshires."

"Well, I'll be . . ." Mrs. Wheeler said. "How did you manage that?"

"My mother started one off grandmother's bush. When Mr. Oatman and I set out to move west, Mother gave me a slip off hers. It was wrapped in moss and tied with linen. I kept it moistened during the whole journey. By the time we reached

LaHarpe, it was already well rooted. I left the moss and the linen around the root ball and set it into the ground.”

Olive couldn't help seeing the sadness around Ma's eyes when she spoke of LaHarpe. Many a dream had died there.

“How did you move the bush from LaHarpe way out here to the country?”

“We didn't move the bush. In fact, we've left a lilac bush at every place we've alighted on this journey.”

Ma motioned for the men to come sit down with the ladies. Lucy and Olive shooed all the children into the house to eat around the big kitchen table. After they got plates filled and little ones settled, they took food out to the big boys, sitting near the back door. Between mouthfuls, they replenished the platter of flapjacks on the adult table.

Ma flashed them a grateful look. They could see weariness in the set of her shoulders. Any day now she was expecting the seventh Oatman child.

“So, when you left LaHarpe, where did you go?” Mrs. Wheeler was intent on catching up with all the years she'd missed.

“You do know we lost our *mercantile* in the depression of 1842, don't you?” Pa spoke quietly but seemed relieved to get the words out.

“Why, no, Royce, we did not know.” Mr. Wheeler seemed uncomfortable and gave a look to his wife that seemed to fault her for prying.

“Too many folk lost everything,” Mr. Pound said. He quietly folded his napkin. “You must be right proud to have built up another farm and taken such good care of your family.”

Pa seemed to relax. “Thank you for that. It hasn't been

easy. When we lost the store, we first went back to Pennsylvania to be near relations. The only things we took with us were our household belongings.”

“And a slip off my lilac bush,” Ma said smiling. “Does anyone care for more coffee?” She looked toward Lucy who carried the big *graniteware* pot steaming with freshly brewed coffee.

Olive began clearing plates as Lucy poured and the adults visited.

“We didn’t stay long in Pennsylvania,” Pa said. “The wide open spaces of the West had already settled in our blood, and it was too late to be satisfied back in the East.”

“And you two coming from such established Yankee stock?” Mrs. Pound pretended to be shocked. “Mrs. Oatman, don’t I recall that your Sperry kin settled in Connecticut just a few years after the Mayflower landed?”

Ma laughed. “You don’t think those fine Yankees ventured all the way from England to land on these shores because they were content to stay at home, do you?”

Olive could see Pa squeeze Ma’s hand under the table.

“Mrs. Oatman is right,” Pa said. “We both have a touch of *wanderlust* in us. We left Pennsylvania and made the trip out West again. I had to teach school in Chicago for a time to save enough to homestead a piece of land and start all over. We finally ended up here in Fulton.”

Ma touched the lilacs on the table. “I went over to our old place in LaHarpe and snipped a piece of the Sperry lilac. When it sprouted, I knew we were home again.”

“We met your children last night,” Pa said. “Let us introduce you to our family.” He signaled to the children to come.

Charity Ann was already following Olive again. "This is our eldest daughter, Lucy. She is 16 now and a great help to her mother."

Lucy gave a proper curtsy.

"This is Lorenzo, he's 14; Olive Ann is 12; Royce here is 9; Mary Ann is 6; and Charity Ann is 3."

No one mentioned the soon-to-be-expected baby since a person never mentioned such things in polite society. It was one of those things one pretended not to notice.

The younger children ran off to play.

Olive hovered nearby to offer coffee or to clear things off the table. Charity Ann dogged her every step.

As Olive poured coffee into Mrs. Wheeler's cup, the woman turned to Ma and said, "I declare, Mrs. Oatman, if I didn't know Olive was your daughter, I'd say I was looking at you twenty years ago."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Pound. She turned to Olive. "Did you know your mama was reckoned to be the beauty of Ontario County?"

The comment made both Ma and Olive blush.

"Olive has her father's shiny dark hair, but those intense eyes and fine features are pure Sperry." Mrs. Wheeler seemed not to notice Olive's discomfort at being singled out. "And how ever does she keep that lovely fair skin living out here on the prairie?"

Lucy was the one most people accounted a beauty because she had Pa's round face and Ma's light-colored hair. Mary Ann favored the Oatman side as well, though she was of a frailer build. Little C. A. was simply a cherub of a girl, as Olive always liked to say. And the boys? Well . . . they were

boys. Olive thought Lorenzo a taller version of their father, serious-looking and solid. He was the one who always looked out for his sisters. You could always count on Lorenzo. Royce was a round, playful, rosy-cheeked version of his mother.

“So tell us about your journey,” Pa prompted the men, anxious to change the subject.

“All we hear about in the East is the opportunity in the West,” Mr. Pound said.

“Mr. Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, has been hammering us with editorial after editorial. Surely you’ve heard his famous words, even out here on the prairie . . .” Mr. Wheeler put a serious look on his face, puffed out his chest and said, “Go west, young man. Go west.”

“Yes, and we’ve not only read his words, we’ve seen wagon load after wagon load heeding the call.” Pa stood up to stretch his legs. “Where will you go?”

“We are going to take the Oregon Trail,” Mr. Pound said. “At least that’s the plan. We will head for Council Bluffs. That’s where we’ll rendezvous, purchase all our supplies, and join up with a wagon train.”

Ma and the ladies stood up and shook out their skirts. They picked up the last of the dishes and went into the house to begin planning dinner. Since there were no children her age, Olive stayed close to the table so she could hear the talk of the West. The men talked about word of a gold rush in California and land to be had for the taking. They discussed the different routes and the best time of the year to start.

Olive watched her father as he listened to his friends. They pored over Mr. Wheeler’s copy of *The Emigrant’s Guide to California*. They walked over to the wagons, and she could

see Pa running appreciative hands along the canvas stretched over the ribs and squatting down to look at the strength of the axles. By the time the women had dinner prepared in the early afternoon, Olive saw a yearning in her father's face.

During dinner, the men continued to talk about the journey west. The children ate and cleared away the dishes, and still the adults talked.

"Do you fear going?" Ma asked later, as the women and the girls worked to bake enough loaves of bread to hold them until they reached Council Bluffs.

"Sometimes," admitted Mrs. Wheeler. "But look at them." She pointed to the men. "Once they make up their minds to see the elephant, there is no stopping them."

"See the elephant?" Ma asked.

"It's a figure of speech. Remember when we were children and the circus came to town? We couldn't think about anything else until we had been able to see the elephant." Mrs. Wheeler sighed as she looked out the door at the three men earnestly examining the wagon wheels.

"You asked about fear, Mary Ann." Mrs. Pound lowered her voice and lapsed back into girlhood names. "The term 'to see the elephant' actually comes from a story of a farmer who came to town with his whole crop of vegetables in his wagon. He arrived just in time to see the circus parade being led by the elephant." She gave the bread dough a hearty thump on the floured board. "He was thrilled to see the parade, but his horses startled and bolted, overturning his wagon and spilling his entire load of vegetables into the ditch." She continued to knead as she talked. "When the townspeople expressed their

regrets for his loss, he just slapped his thigh and said, ‘I don’t give a hang, for I have seen the elephant.’”

“Isn’t that the truth,” said Mrs. Wheeler. “Once a man’s got a hankering to see the elephant, the cost doesn’t seem to matter.”

That night, they ate a supper of wild strawberries, crusty baked bread with newly churned butter, and glasses of cool milk. The grownups talked long into the night. The children continued to run and play in the dark, trying to trap fireflies and listening to the far-off sounds of wolves. Nobody stirred to put the children to bed—they sort of drifted off and fell asleep on one bed or another, hoping someone would eventually tuck them into the proper bed.

Early in the morning, before the sun had barely risen, the Pounds and the Wheelers packed the last of their things into the wagons and headed out of the Oatman yard. Children walked alongside the wagons, careful to stay to the side since the horses tied onto the back kicked up a lot of dust. The Oatmans walked alongside for a ways, calling out good-byes as they walked.

When Ma could no longer keep up, she called out, “God be with you, dear friends.” When Ma said it, she meant it. She believed God walked with them every step of the way.

As the wagons pulled away, the Oatmans continued waving until all they could see was a cloud of dust on the horizon. Olive heard her mother sigh deeply and understood the reason—her father stood there staring after the wagons with a look of stark longing. At that moment, Olive knew the truth—Pa would not be satisfied until he saw the elephant for himself.



Wagons Ho

Olive.” Ma held out a piece of linen and a spongy clump of moss. “Cut about a six-inch stem off my lilac. Choose the healthiest branch near the tip. Soak the moss, and then use the linen to tie the damp moss around the cutting.”

Ma went back inside to finish scrubbing every inch of their house. Olive couldn’t understand what drove her mother to clean a house that would probably stay empty until dusty cobwebs festooned each rafter. When she asked, Ma simply looked at her in that way that said, “I don’t wish to discuss this any further.”

While Ma silently scrubbed, Pa hopped from one detail to the next—checking and oiling harnesses; running his hands over the legs of the horses; and checking his lists of provisions, farming implements, and bags of seeds.

Ever since the day spent with their Oregon-bound friends a year ago, Pa had seemed restless. At first Ma had been busy with the newest Oatman, an ever-hungry little boy, but, before

long, Olive noticed that she became quiet and pensive when Pa complained about Illinois weather or the creep of civilization toward their homestead.

Four years ago, during their second year of farming at Fulton, Pa injured his back moving a boulder while helping a neighbor dig a well. The injury had bothered him ever since, especially in the extreme cold of winter. Sometimes when his back pained him it made his knee and the side of his foot tingle and become numb. Over the last four years, he'd worked around it, resting when the injury became inflamed and doubling up on the work when it subsided.

Last year, however, all Pa could talk about was how much the intense cold affected him.

"Mary Ann," Pa whispered. "Are you awake?"

Olive sometimes heard her parents talking long into the night.

"I fear that if I am to somehow live long enough to educate my family or even to enjoy tolerable health, we must make a move." When Ma didn't answer, he went on. "I need to seek a climate free from the extreme changes of weather."

Olive strained to hear Ma's answer.

After a long silence, Ma asked, "Does this have anything to do with all those strange pamphlets you've been discussing with Mr. Thompson and others about a colony—a promised land—near the Colorado River?"

"I don't know about 'strange.'" Father cleared his throat. Olive recognized the gesture as the one her father always made before launching into a lecture or an argument. "I don't agree with all the beliefs of the man calling for this journey, but I do believe the destination to be a Promised Land—filled

with tall grasses, abundant water, rich soil, and warm climate.”

“I’ve never stood against you before, Royce, and I won’t do so now. You’ve provided well for us over the years. The job God gave me is to follow your lead and care for this family.” Ma laughed a quiet laugh. “Besides, for as long as I’ve known you, you seem to have an incurable tugging westward. I might as well be prepared to follow you to the edge of the Pacific Ocean and get it over with.”

So that was that.

Pa began planning. Olive had never seen him so happy. When he finally sold everything, he announced that they had fifteen hundred dollars to outfit themselves for the journey and to make a new start near the Rio Colorado in California.

They purchased near home most of the things they needed for the journey. Pa knew that if he waited until they arrived in Independence, prices would triple. He bought a sturdy Studebaker wagon—the kind that pioneers called prairie schooners. A canvas bonnet covered the curved ribs of strong oak. The heavy bed of the wagon was tarred to make it watertight so that it could float down a gentle stream if needed. The sideboards were beveled outward so that rainwater couldn’t seep in between the bonnet and the bed.

A jockey box attached to the side of the wagon. Pa kept checking and rechecking to make sure he included everything they might need inside the box. It carried extra iron bolts, *linch pins*, *skeins*, nails, *hoop iron*, a variety of tools, and a jack. Also slung on the side of the wagon were two water barrels, a butter churn, a shovel and axe, a tar bucket, a feed trough for the livestock, and a chicken coop.

Ma packed the interior. She used every inch of space to bring as many of the family treasures as she could without weighing down the wagon. They needed clothing and yardage goods to make more. She had to include all the cooking utensils needed to make meals along the trail, as well as the tools she'd need to set up housekeeping in California.

She tried to pack and discard without becoming sentimental, but it was impossible. In the end, her family linens, the salt crock, her wedding dress, and all the family books were tucked into crevices in the wagon.

One of the last things to go into the wagon was the lilac cutting Olive had carefully prepared. Ma wanted it where she could keep it moist, so she placed the rooting end in a small oilcloth sack tied round with twine and set on the shelf near her Bible. She had also made an oilcloth sack for her Bible in case they took a drenching.

All the rest of the space held food supplies, farming implements, and bedding. Down the center of the wagon, Ma arranged a bed of sorts. She and the little ones would sleep in that nest, along with Lucy and Olive at times. It would be a tumble of bodies in a cramped space, but it provided safety and warmth.

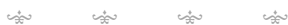
Once they reached Independence, Pa hoped to buy a couple of small army surplus tents for extra sleeping. Until then, he, Lorenzo, and Royce planned to unroll their bedding under the box of the wagon.

They had a team of six oxen to pull the wagon and tied their two horses and a milk cow behind. As far as humanly possible, they were ready for the adventure ahead.



Pa took the Bible out of the oilcloth and opened it. “This passage comes from the thirty-third chapter of the book of Genesis.” He looked down at the page and read, “And he said, Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go before thee.” He closed the Bible and led them in prayer, asking God to walk alongside them on the journey.

The wagon rolled out of the Fulton homestead toward Davenport, Iowa, where they planned to meet up with their Illinois neighbors, the Thompsons, for the journey to Independence, Missouri—the jumping-off place to the West.



Independence teemed with activity. To Olive it seemed as if the whole country was headed west. It looked like the encampment of a vast army on wheels.

So many *emigrant* wagon train companies met up and pulled out of the town that the wagons either sank into dusty soil halfway to the axle in dry weather or got stuck in the thick clay mud they called “gumbo” after a rain.

The fields around the city had been stripped to bare dirt by hundreds of thousands of grazing cattle funneling through Independence. With thousands of campfires, not a twig of firewood survived in the entire region—every downed tree or broken branch became a treasure.

The Brewster Party—the one Pa had decided to join—agreed to meet four miles south of town. When all assembled, there were twenty wagons and fifty-two people in the party, most of them children. That suited Olive just fine. She hoped

to find a girl her age, since Lucy's best friend, Susan Thompson from Fulton, traveled in the same party.

Olive met boys and babies, toddlers and little girls, but apparently she was the only 13-year-old girl. How she wished Pa could wait for a different wagon train, but she knew that the careful timing of their departure was critical. Had they planned to take the Oregon Trail, the Bozeman Trail, or the California Trail, they'd be obliged to wait until spring. The mountain passes would be closed by snow long before they could arrive. But, because they chose the southern route—the Santa Fe Trail to the Gila Trail—cold weather would not be as much a problem as heat and drought could be in the southern deserts.

“Want to walk over to that ridge with Susan and me?” Lucy asked.

Olive couldn't believe they would ask. She looked over toward Ma, nursing the baby. C. A. was taking a nap, and Royce and Mary Ann were playing with the other children. A moment before she had felt lonely—now she felt like skipping across the prairie.

“Yes. Let me get my bonnet.” She ran to the wagon. Ma smiled with a quick wink of her eye. She understood the reason for Olive's sudden excitement.

Maybe this trip would be an adventure after all.

The girls walked to the ridge and found an outcropping of stone on which to sit.

“My pa says to enjoy these ridges and rock outcroppings while we have them,” Susan said. “At times, the land will be so flat we'll not find a single spot offering privacy.”

Olive knew what she meant by privacy. There would be

no outhouses along wilderness trails. It was not just grooming privacy that they craved. Because of the time they'd already spent on the road from Davenport, Olive knew how important it could be to put a little space between you and a whole wagon train of people.

"Don't fret." Lucy laughed. "My mother already thought of that. She brought old blankets to tie between two trees to offer some little privacy on the plains."

Olive should have known Ma would think of a plan.

"And if there are no trees or scrub bushes tall enough," Lucy continued, "we'll tie our makeshift curtain between two wagons."

The girls giggled at the thought of some of the inconveniences they'd experience before they reached the Rio Colorado.

Susan changed the subject abruptly. "My cousin said that nothing makes hair softer and shinier than washing it in a cold running stream." Susan lowered her voice to a whisper. "And she said that if we find elderberries, we can crush them and stain our lips reddish."

Before Olive could say anything, both girls started laughing, and Olive realized Susan was teasing. Sort of. *Surely she wouldn't think of using face paint, would she?*

"Don't look so worried, sister," said Lucy. "Susan loves to talk nonsense."

The afternoon passed with light talk and laughter. They went back to the camp to spell their mothers with the little ones and to help prepare the meal. The first couple of nights they prepared a large communal meal for the whole *emigrant* party, but they soon settled into their trail routine of separating into family groups for meals.

That night, August 9, 1850, everyone gathered after supper to set regulations for the long trip west and to get acquainted with each other. Besides Mr. Brewster, who organized the party, the party consisted of Susan's family (the Thompsons), the Lane family, the Kelly family, the Wilders, the Metteers, the Brinshalls, the Oatmans, and others.

After the formalities concluded, Susan took out her violin to play. She started with "Money Musk" and "Zipp Coon." The dogs barked, the oxen stepped nervously, the children hopped, and some of the men grabbed their partners to dance. As the night wore on and the breeze picked up dust off the prairie and swirled around the revelers, Susan ended by playing "The Old Oaken Bucket." Every voice joined in singing the words:

*How dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood
 When fond recollection presents them to view,
 The orchard, the meadow, the deep tangled wildwood,
 And ev'ry loved spot which my infancy knew—
 The wide spreading pond, and the mill that stood by it,
 The bridge and the rock where the cataract fell;
 The cot of my father, the dairy house nigh it,
 And e'en the rude bucket that hung in the well.
 The old oaken bucket, the iron bound bucket,
 The moss covered bucket that hung in the well.*

Olive glanced at her mother to see the glisten of tears reflecting the moonlight. Ma pulled a handkerchief out of her apron pocket. Looking around the circle, it was apparent she was not alone.

*The moss covered bucket I hailed as a treasure,
 For often at noon, when returned from the field,
 I found it the source of an exquisite pleasure,
 The purest and sweetest that nature can yield.
 How ardent I seized it, with hands that were glowing,
 And quick to the white pebbled bottom it fell
 Then soon, with the emblem of truth overflowing,
 And dripping with coolness, it rose from the well.
 The old oaken bucket, the iron bound bucket,
 The moss covered bucket that hung in the well.*

Susan put her violin away as someone led in prayer for a safe journey ahead. Families gathered sleepy children and headed off toward their wagons for the night.

Sleep was a long time in coming for Olive. She tried to be still, listening to the melody of the night—sounds of lowing cattle, soft nickers of horses, the far-off howl of the coyote, a chorus of sputters and snores, and the muffled weeping of a homesick pioneer. Eventually she must have fallen asleep, wedged tightly between Lucy and Mary Ann.



After morning prayers, Pa and Lorenzo hitched the oxen to the wagon as Ma and the girls finished cooking the food that must take them through the day. They wouldn't halt until suppertime. Olive hoped the tasks of getting underway would eventually become routine, but for now, they had to remember each step. Ma would handle the reins, if needed, and either Lucy or Olive would take turns inside the wagon caring for

the baby and C. A. while the other walked. Mary Ann and Royce could walk alongside, play with their friends, or ride if they became tired.

When they first began to talk about the trip all those months ago, Olive figured the family would ride comfortably in the wagon from Fulton to California, just as they did in Illinois when they rode to church. She laughed now when she compared her expectation to reality.

The wagon weighed some 1,300 pounds empty. With all their belongings, supplies, and foodstuffs added, the prairie schooner lumbered along at a snail's pace. Most *emigrant* parties covered only about fifteen miles a day. Even when walking alongside, the pace seemed too slow. Children would spend the whole day running up ahead and running back to check on the wagon. The men of the party often rode on horseback, riding far ahead to scout the trail and coming back to check on the progress of the train. Olive guessed that much of the "scouting" took place because the men *chaffed* at the plodding pace.

Riding in the wagon bounced and jostled the passengers until they were bruised and sore. None of the axles on the Oatman covered wagon had springs—the only springs on the whole wagon were those under the driver's seat. The rutted dirt roads of the trail were regular washboards. Sometimes Olive thought her teeth would rattle out of her gums.

They hadn't been long on the road to Davenport when they found a purpose for the bumps and jumps. Ma discovered they could fill the butter churn with fresh milk in the morning, and, by night, they only had to pour off the butter-milk and they scraped out a lump of sweet yellow butter, ready for supper without any further churning.

And many a mother claimed that the jostling of the wagon cured a colicky baby. Olive knew it had the opposite effect on her—riding inside made her downright cranky.

But none of that mattered. It was August 10th and at long last, they were hitched, loaded, and ready. The children stood expectantly, as James Brewster raised his horn to his lips and let out a shrill note followed by the shout, “Wagons ho!”

One by one, the heavy wagons creaked, swayed, and rocked as they pulled out of the circle, straightening into a long line to stretch across the vast prairie.

Unexpectedly, Olive felt her scalp tighten and chills run across her shoulders. Just a moment before the trip had held promise of great adventure. What changed? What caused a jagged shard of fear to pierce the excitement? Olive tried to shake off the eerie feeling, but it persisted as the wagons moved farther away from the safety of home.