

Sagebrush Schoolhouse

By Erin Fanning

In memory of my great-grandmother Dolly Jennings Yaryan (1880-1965) and all pioneer women.

No more school, Dolly," Papa said. He paused to take another bite of fried chicken and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt. Something I'd never seen him do before.

But everything had changed since Mama's death. Our lives were slowly unraveling as if Mama had held them together with the finest of threads. Now a gash tore its way through our family, and I feared that we would never be mended again.

"And that's final," Papa said, staring at his plate. He tried to lessen the pain of his harsh words by adding, "It's a fine meal, sugar." But I still felt as if I'd been pecked by a foul-tempered rooster. I ached all over.

He glanced up, as did Mike, the oldest of my three brothers. John and Matt, the two youngest, didn't seem to notice the tension that had thundered into the room. They munched on drumsticks and slathered mashed potatoes onto their plates. John poked Matt in the ribs with his fork. The boys started to tussle, but Papa gave them a stern look and they quieted down.

Mike continued to stare at me, and Papa followed his gaze. They must have seen the tears crowding my eyes. I couldn't hold them back. One slipped down my cheek, and I turned around. Leaning against the kitchen counter, I studied the woodstove and butter churn. These everyday objects stilled my wandering emotions.

I looked out the window over the sink. Tumbleweeds whirled past our house, and the wind stirred dirt into mini-tornadoes. I felt as empty as the land that surrounded our homestead. Even the setting sun and its reflection

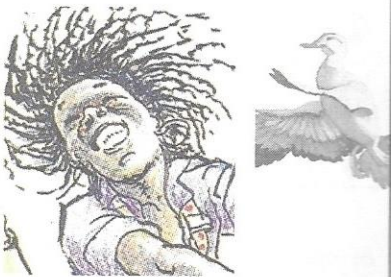
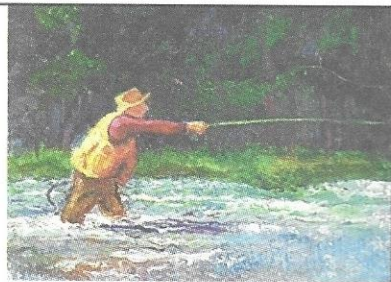


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against the clouds, pink islands in an enormous ocean, didn't make me feel any better. It only reminded me of Mama. We used to share the sunset together, talking about it as if it were a friend. I missed her so.

"Oh, Dolly," Papa whispered, then I heard him scoot away from the table. His boots tapped out of the kitchen and up the staircase. His bedroom door creaked open, and the music of his footsteps ceased.

Silence floated down upon my brothers and me. Sparks of light danced across the wall and then were gone. Suddenly night was with us. Darkness pressed into the kitchen, unwelcome because of those moments between wakefulness and sleep. The time of day when my hands stilled and the chores ceased. When my mind turned to Mama and I yearned for her presence.

Mike said, interrupting my thoughts, "Mrs. Cooper will miss you." I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped my eyes. Turning back to him, I tried to smile, but I'm sure it didn't reach very far across my face.

"I'll miss her too," I said, then whispered, "Along with Mr. Dickens and Mr. Twain."

Mike said, "Maybe Mrs. Cooper will let you borrow some of her books." She was the teacher of our one-room schoolhouse. She taught everything from penmanship to geography, first through eighth grades. I was one of the oldest in the school and would have graduated from eighth grade that spring. Mike was two classes behind me, while John and Matt were in second and third grade.

But now I was needed at home, had been all through Mama's illness. She had tried to hide it from us, even Papa, until one afternoon, three months ago, when I had come home from school and found her lying on the sofa in the parlor. I couldn't remember ever seeing her nap.

She always rose before the rest of us, readying Papa's coffee and cooking our breakfast. She tucked us in at night while Papa usually dozed in his armchair, a week-old newspaper—they were always out-of-date by the time they reached us—blanketing his legs.

Even though she worked all the time, laughter followed her everywhere. She even made Papa chuckle, not an easy feat. So when I saw her lying there, I knew something was wrong. I had rushed over to her, my stomach seizing a little,

as if I already knew the tragedy that was marching toward us.

She had struggled to a sitting position when she had seen me. "I'm fine. I'm fine," she said, smiling, but it didn't hold its usual luster. I sensed she was keeping a secret.

"Don't tell the boys you saw me sleeping," she said as Mike, John, and Matt tumbled into the room behind me. They all ran to her, not seeming to notice that she wasn't in her usual place—the kitchen. They shouted over each other, hurrying to tell her about their day at school. But they didn't wait for Mama's response, and jostling each other, they sprinted out of the house to do their chores and help Papa in the fields.

Quiet had descended between Mama and me. She held my hand, and I rubbed my fingers over the calluses on her palms. She looked at me, and I felt as if I were looking at myself in twenty years time. The same white-blond hair pulled into braids on top of our heads, the same corn-flower blue eyes.

Her eyes usually danced with fun, making cooking and cleaning seem like an invitation to a ball, like something I had read in one of Miss Austen's books. But at that moment, they were dull, as if all of the life in them was seeping away.

"It's cancer, Dolly," she said, not trying to soften her words. "I don't know

how else to say it. I'll tell your Papa tonight." She stood, wobbling a little, and smoothed her skirt. "Now, we have a dinner to prepare." She smiled and reached out to me. "I have a lot I need to teach you, honey." Then she laughed—a hollow sound not her usual rippling giggle—and added, "Things don't always turn out how we plan."

She walked slowly to the kitchen,

and I followed, unable to speak. For the next three months, I followed her as the doctor came and went; as my brothers tried to understand what was happening; and as anger swallowed Papa, making him blame the world for Mama's illness. If it

hadn't been for my brothers and Papa, for them needing me, I sometimes think that I would have followed her into death too.

School became a memory while I learned to do everything that Mama had done and tried to be a mother to my younger brothers. Still, it pained me to think about Mrs. Cooper and our little schoolhouse on top of the hill, with its views of the Owyhee Mountains. It had hurt me so much that I had finally asked Papa if maybe I could start attending school again, just one or two days a week.

And that's when he had said, "No more school." His words pressed on my heart.

Mike penetrated my thoughts. "I should be the one to stay home," he said.

"You're so good with books and all. Remember how Mrs. Cooper said that you should go on to high school?"

I nodded. How could I forget? But the high school was so far away, it would require boarding in the nearest town. Even our one-room schoolhouse was a forty-five-minute horseback ride. I forced myself to smile at Mike. "You're a jokester. Your cooking is so bad, we'd all starve."

And that was true. Mama had taught me how to manage the house. It wasn't that the boys weren't willing to help, but their chores had always taken them outside with Papa. It was just the way it was. Right or wrong.

I noticed our water supply was running low. "I'm going out to the well," I said, scooping up the bucket.

"I'll do it, sis." Mike jumped to his feet, followed by John and Matt. "Us too!"

"No, no," I said, already moving to the door. "You three need to start your homework." They protested, but I wagged a finger at them and hurried outside. I craved a few minutes alone.

The sky unfolded above me in an endless quilt. Swinging the bucket, I looked up. The night brimmed inside me, and I was sure if I opened my mouth, stars would come out instead of words. Constellations told stories, but now without schooling, I feared I would never fully learn their tales. I continued to the well and dropped the bucket, but for some reason I didn't stop. My legs kept going, putting more and more distance between myself and our house. I passed our fields, which struggled in Idaho's high desert, and kept going, sagebrush tugging at my skirt. Juniper,

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our mare, whinnied in the barn.

Finally, I sank to my knees. Tears dampened my cheeks, and I cried for all I had lost. I hardened toward Papa. I resented my brothers. I crouched in the dirt and wept. The wind fiddled with the strings of my apron and blew dust in my face.

As pity saturated my heart, I heard a chorus of coyotes howling and just below their song rang soft laughter. The wind's playing tricks, I thought. Then I realized that the laughter was coming from inside me. It was my mother's giggle, laughing at my brother's antics, at life itself—its crazy plotlines, its unpredictability.

The laughter filled me until my tears ceased. I remembered how Mama had still made jokes during her illness. The cancer might have won, but it didn't kill her spirit. Ashamed, I plopped backward. Mama wouldn't have sat in the dirt feeling sorry for herself. And with that thought, my resentment melted away, soaking into the desert.

I stood and scrubbed hard at my face with my handkerchief. I marched back to the well, filling the bucket, and returned to the house. I glanced one more time at the constellations and reminded myself to write a note, requesting a book about astronomy, for Mike to take to Mrs. Cooper. My school

was here on this sagebrush plain, with my brothers and father.

I flung open the door and set down the water before looking up. My brothers stared at me and fear flashed across their faces. Mike said, "We was worried."

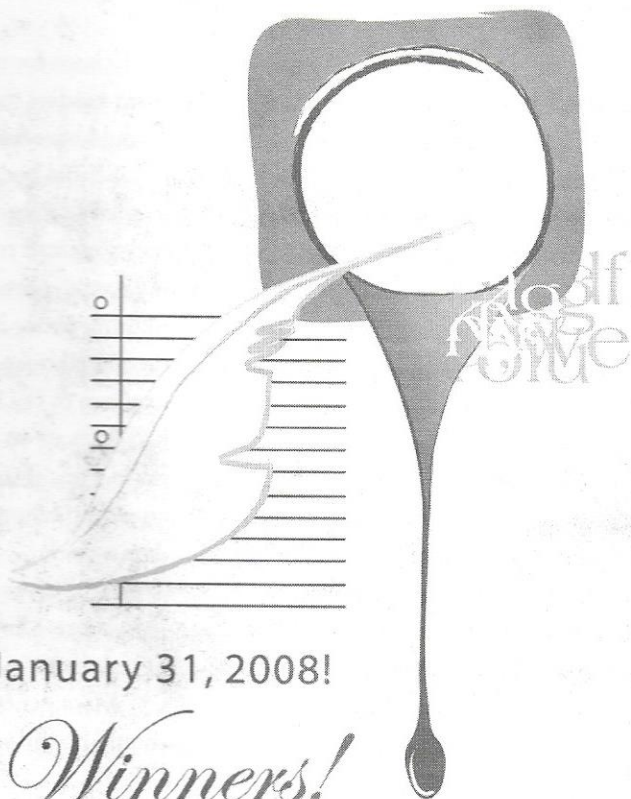
Papa stood behind him. "I was just on my out to look for you." He stepped toward me and surprised me with a quick hug and kiss on top of my head.

I smiled, feeling Mama's laughter tumble out of my mouth. She was inside me forever. "Just admiring the stars," I said, sitting down across from Mike and nodding at his schoolbooks. "So tell me what you learned today." ■

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