

Elizabeth Zappa

### First Impressions

Leona crawled across the plush red seats and looked out the window just as the train was pulling into the station. She could hear the shrill whistling of the steam and the screeching of steel- on- steel; could feel the jerking and tugging as the cars settled into place.

It was night outside- December- only a few days before Christmas. There was snow on the ground, in the air, falling silently, softly, as if the flakes were afraid of being heard. It was the snow you knew was there *because* it was so quiet. The whole world stands still when it snows like this.

Outside the window the world was dark and lonely, populated only by shadows. The buildings of Main Street were a mass of black. Dark, thin shapes protruded from the ground— streetlamps left unlit. The only light was the soft yellow glow coming from within the train station.

“Come along, dear.” A smooth hand, long fingers bare except for a wedding ring, reached out for Leona. The voice was soft, like the snow, afraid of being heard. Mama was tired from having to hold on to little baby Herman, who was one-year-old and cranky from the long journey.

Leona hesitated. The world outside was cold and gloomy. Empty. Once they left the station that was all there would be; an endless abyss of darkness in the eyes of the six-year-old girl.

But Papa was there, in the station waiting for them. She had not seen him in so long and had grown a lot since he had left New York. She hoped he recognized her.

She took her mama’s hand and clutched her small suitcase with the other. Mama carried Herman and her travel bag; the porter would get the rest.

They stepped briefly into the bitter cold as they walked across the platform towards the warmth of the station. The arctic air bit at Leona's cheeks. She wanted to push her wool scarf further up her face but she didn't want to let go of Mama or her suitcase. They were soon inside, though; all of them tangled up in the tender embrace of Papa, who had lost weight and now had a thick brown beard. He laughed at everything and Leona felt a little better. Mama beamed with joy for the first time since Papa had left. Even sleepy Herman perked up a little when Papa took him into his arms. In that moment, with them all united as a family again, everything felt just right. However, as they headed towards the door to leave she shrunk closer to Papa, who was carrying a lantern to guide them to their new home. That moment of happiness was brought to an abrupt end as the door closed behind them and they were walking back into the night.

Back into the cold and wind; a wind that never seemed to stop. It had come out of no where and it blew and blew the whole time they were walking to their new home.

"It's because there's nothing out here to stop it," said Mama, adjusting the blanket covering Herman so that the wind would not get to him.

Leona knew that tone in Mama's voice. It was the same voice she used back when they were still all together back in the cities, in New York, when Papa wanted to move out west. Mama had insisted that there was nothing out there: no people, no opportunities, nothing. But Papa had been in contact with a friend of his who had told him about an opportunity to buy a dry goods store in a small town in the Dakotas. The town was on the rail line, there was a space above the store for them to live, and the population was (slowly) growing. Papa won the debate, pointing out that this could be the only opportunity they could have to get out of the dirty, smelly, crime-ridden city. Out west the land was unspoiled, the air clean, and the people good. Papa had won, and obedient, genteel Mama had let him head out west first to get things prepared for their arrival.

Leona had been excited when Papa talked about moving out west. There would be new places to explore, new animals to watch, and new friends to make.

But she had been frightened, too.

“The Indians will get you and scalp the golden curls right off your head,” said her cousin, Edmund, tugging on her pigtails.

“You’ll get lost in a blizzard,” said Grandmama Bertha, “or sucked up in a tornado. The wind will swoop down right outta the sky and whisk you away.”

“Just don’t get trampled by a herd of buffalo,” said Uncle Harvey.

So many scary, bad things that could happen! Did Papa really think it would be safer out there? But Leona had even less choice in the matter than Mama.

Now, looking around the town, Leona wondered about Papa’s choice. Mama was right: there was nothing beyond the town. The road they were on seemed to come from nothing and end in nothing. The buildings on Main Street were so small and short compared to the tall buildings of the city! They were all made of wood, too. There was no brick or concrete in sight. The town was absolutely silent. Back home there was always dogs barking, babies crying, and traffic on the streets with people shouting and wagons clattering, even in the middle of the night. And it was never so dark! It was as if the train station and Papa’s lone lantern were the only lights around from there to the cities. The swinging glow from the lantern barely pierced the darkness, avoiding any dark nook or cranny, not even straying to the porches of the post office, tailor, or bank. It only lit the way immediately in front of them, seeming to cling to Papa just as Leona did.

Finally, they reached their new home. It was a two-story, wood frame structure, with the store on the first floor and their home on the second floor. Papa had kept the stove going so that by the time they

got there it was toasty and warm. The top floor was not much larger than their apartment back in the cities, with a kitchen, sitting area, and two bedrooms. It was strange not to hear neighbors through thin walls. The rooms and furniture were simple, but Mama would fix that up soon enough. She had always been able to make any space look pretty. Leona stood at the front window, looking out into the snowy night and down onto the empty street. She thought she saw an Indian creeping around, but Mama told her not to be silly and Papa said there were no Indians nearby. That made Leona feel a little better, but not much, especially when Papa added that it could just be a coyote.

Leona could not sleep that night as she lay in bed in her new home. The silence of the new town was too loud for her ears, and the questions that plagued her mind were no help: What was there going to be in the morning, when the sun finally came up and wiped away the darkness? What about Indians and buffalo and tornadoes? Or *coyotes*? And could they really be happy being surrounded by nothing after being surrounded by everything?

Only the future held the answers, and the future, with all of its answers, seemed as far away as the empty horizon in the distance.