

## iGoin' to the Territory

I decide to get outta bed when I see the first hint o' daylight. No use tryin' to sleep. I been tossin' and turnin' most the night, anyway. Might as well get dressed and ready for the day.

Mighty big day it is, too. I'm goin' on a trip all by myself, ridin' sixty whole miles. Don't know any thirteen-year-old boys who get to travel by themselves. Guess that means I'm nearly grown.

My clothes are laid across the chair where I left 'em so's I'd be ready this mornin'. I get dressed, then snap my suspenders in place 'fore I head to the kitchen. My stomach feels a little funny, like there's somethin' flyin' 'round ticklin' my insides with its wings. Guess I'm a little nervous. But I'm excited, too.

I smell the coffee's rich, warm scent 'fore I see my sister-in-law Laura brewin' it. Her big, brown eyes are sad with dark circles under 'em, and her face is pale as milk. Looks like she didn't sleep any better'n I did. She sees me and says, "Yer up early, Marion. I didn't expect to see ya for another hour or so. Breakfast won't be ready for a while. And I'm makin' ya some food fer yer trip."

"Thank ya. Lo out in the barn?"

She nods. "Yeah, he's doin' the chores."

"Guess I'll go give 'im a hand." I walk into the lean-to and put on my jacket and hat 'fore I open the door. The cold January wind almost takes my breath away as I step outside. I stand a moment on the back stoop and look at my brother's farmyard. The flat Kansas prairie seems to go on forever into the horizon. The sun is paintin' the sky all sorts o' colors. Sure looks a lot different than the ground. It's all brown. And dead. Like my mama. But I can't think 'bout that right now, I got work to do.

I walk to the barn and call as I open the door, "Lo, y'in here?"

Lo sticks his head out of a stall. "Yeah, I'm finishin' up the milkin'. How 'bout ya water the stock?"

"Sure thing," I walk to the trough and start pumpin' the well handle to fill it full. When that's done, I lead the animals to the trough. I start with the horses 'cause they're my favorite. The last horse is a buckskin mare we call Daisy. She's sweet and real pretty with her black mane and tail. After she finishes, I tackle bringin' out the mules. Least they're in a good mood today. They can be a handful when they don't wanna do somethin'. Then Lo and I turn out the cattle. They walk to the trough, get a drink, then go back to their stalls. We finish up the chores and head back to the house.

As Lo and I walk together, I think about how tall he is, a little over six feet. I'm startin' to catch up to him, but I still got a ways to go. I'm only up to his shoulder right now. Lo has dark brown hair like me. Folks can tell we're brothers, even if he's more wiry than me. I'm real solid. My shoulders are already broader than Lo's.

'Fore we reach the house, Lo looks over at me and says, "Marion, you'll be back here 'fore you know it. Spring plantin' ain't but two or three months away and ya know I'll need yer help. Wish we could go too, but I gotta stay here and take care of this farm and the home place. And Laura's feelin' poorly right now."

"I know all that."

"Just think, you'll get to see almost all the rest o' the fam'ly. B.R., Streeter, Crystal, they can't wait to see ya. And they're real excited that yer gonna go to school there for the winter term."

My oldest brother B.R. lives in Ochelata. That's in Indian Territory, 'bout sixty miles south o' here. Lo's the next in line after B.R., then there's my two sisters, Maude and Crystal.

Then Streeter, me, and Cash. His real name is Cassius, but no one ever calls him that unless they're upset with him. Crystal and Streeter live with B.R. right now. Maude's stayin' over to Cherryvale here in Kansas, and she's got Cash with her.

"I wish Maude and Cash could come, too."

"I know ya do, but Maude's gotta tend to the folks in the boardin' house, and Cash is only ten, too young to travel by hisself."

We go into the house, take off our coats and hats, and stop at the basin to wash up before breakfast. I stand in the kitchen door with my mouth hangin' open. Laura has my favorite breakfast on the table. None of that boring oatmeal, no sir! She has pancakes with sorghum molasses, fried sausage, and scrambled eggs sittin' on platters. Even though I'm a little nervous 'bout my trip, I'm still hungry as a bear.

After we sit, Laura looks over at Lo and says, "Did ya tell 'im yet?"

"Nope, not yet," Lo says between bites.

"Well, when ya gonna tell 'im?" Laura asks. She's not eatin' much.

I'm curious, so I say, "Tell me what?"

Lo sets his fork down. "You're gonna ride Daisy to Ochelata."

I'm so excited I can barely breathe. "Really? You're not gonna make me take one o' the mules?"

Lo laughs, "No, neither of them ornery mules are fit to ride on a trip like that. Can't have 'em sittin' down in the middle o' the road while you're tryin' to get to B.R.'s."

I chuckle as I picture that in my head. Me tryin' not to fall off Jack with his hind end on the ground, mouth open, brayin' for all he's worth. I get so tickled, I nearly snort milk up my nose while I'm takin' a drink. Lo laughs, and even Laura's mouth turns up into a grin.

Lo looks at me and says, "Ya got the letter B.R. sent ya?"

"Inside pocket of my coat." I drag a bite of pancake through some molasses that dripped on my plate. "I won't need to look at it 'til I get to Caney." Boy howdy, I sure love pancakes.

"Remember to be respectful to folks you meet 'long the way, but be careful," Laura adds. She's not drinkin' coffee today, just some tea. And she still isn't eatin' much. I hope she feels better soon.

"Yes'm." I finish eatin', thank Laura for the good breakfast, and get my gear ready for the trip. I'm comin' back into the kitchen when Laura hands me a wrapped bundle.

"Here's some biscuits and bacon for ya." She turns back to washin' the dishes.

"Thank ya, Laura."

She looks over her shoulder, "I'll be out to the barn directly to say goodbye 'fore ya leave."

I nod as I head out to the barn with my bedroll and food. Lo's got Daisy saddled and ready to go. I tie the roll with my bedding and other gear to the back of the saddle while Lo puts the pack of food in one side of the saddlebags.

"Well, Marion, ya got yer food, the canteen, and yer bedroll. And yer dressed good and warm. Almanac says weather should be clear for your trip. Need anythin' else?"

"Shouldn't I take a gun?"

"You ain't goin' huntin', so you don't need no gun."

"Ya sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I put some extry matches in your saddlebag for yer campfire. Make sure them saddlebags don't get wet when you're fordin' the creeks."

"Yessir."

Laura walks up to us. She gives me a hug and says, "I knitted this cap for ya to wear under your hat. It'll keep you warm."

I take the package from her. "Thank ya, Laura. Take care of yerself. I hope yer feelin' better soon."

She waved her hand at me. "I'll be fine. Don't you worry 'bout me."

Lo hugs me and slaps me on the back. He holds on for a while. When he steps back, his eyes are a little misty, "Take care, Brother. And tell B.R. and them to come visit soon."

My throat's a little tight, so I swallow and say, "I'll sure do that. I'll be back soon."

Lo leans forward and puts his hand together to give me a boost onto Daisy. I'm big enough now that I don't need any help, but I put my foot in his hands anyway. He boosts me up, and I throw my other leg over Daisy's back as I hold the reins. I look down and see tears runnin' down Laura's face. My throat starts to workin' again, so I turn Daisy around and head for the road. I turn back and wave my arm to Lo and Laura.

"Keep yer coat buttoned! You'll catch yer death if ya don't!" Laura hollers as she waves and dabs her eyes with her apron.

"Godspeed, boy!" Lo waves and puts his arm around Laura.

I give 'em one more wave 'fore I put my heels into Daisy's flanks to get her goin'. I feel a little wetness on my cheeks, but I'm not gonna look back.

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Daisy canters a few miles until we're outside Sycamore headin' toward Independence. I see our old house and farm ahead. As I stop Daisy with a "Whoa!" I look at the old brick house. It's only been empty for 'bout a month or so, but it sure looks lonely. The curtains are all drawn,

and a black ribbon still hangs on the front door. I guess we all forgot to take it down after Mama's funeral.

I close my eyes, and I can still see her. I picture her 'fore she gets real sick. 'Fore she moves into town to be close to the doctors. Least she ain't bleedin' no more. I open my eyes and shake my head to clear out them bad mem'ries. As I look at the house, in my mind I can see Mama workin' out in the garden, hummin' a little tune off-key. Now she's dressed in her second-best and takin' us all to town on Saturday. She's gonna sell some eggs and butter, then treat us all to a soda pop.

"I sure do miss ya, Mama," I whisper. My throat's all thick-feelin' again. Daisy's ears twitch, like she thinks I'm talkin' to her. I take her hint, gather up the reins, and holler, "Giddap, Daisy. We're burnin' daylight!"

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I travel on for awhile, thinkin' 'bout Mama. I skirt 'round Independence. I'm not in the mood to fool with people right now, and I don't wanna think 'bout the times we all went to town with Mama. The sun's almost directly overhead by the time I reach Coal Creek, south of Independence. I think it's a good place to stop to eat dinner since I'm 'bout halfway to Caney. The creek's not completely frozen, so Daisy can get a drink and munch on the dried grass near the bank. I find an old sycamore log to sit on while I eat some of the biscuits and bacon Laura packed for me. The wind's not blowin', so it's not too cold. The sun feels good shinin' down. I stretch my legs out in front of me and rest my back 'gainst the tree behind me. 'Tween my full belly and the warmth of the sun, I start gettin' real sleepy.

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I have the same dream I've had many times before 'bout this little boy playin' inside his house. He has a little wooden toy horse his daddy carved for him. He hears his mama scream as she runs to the front door. The little boy toddles up beside her and sees some men comin' up the lane in a wagon. Then he sees his daddy's black-and-white paint horse behind the wagon.

"Mama, why Domino saddle empty? Where Daddy? Why he not ridin' Domino?"

His mama can't answer him 'cause she's cryin'.

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I wake up with a start. My face is wet, but I don't see any rain clouds in the sky. The sun ain't moved much, so I guess I was sleepin' for only a few minutes. I hear a dog barkin'. As I get up off the log, I see this black-and-white herdin' dog. It runs right up to me and licks my hand.

"What's yer name, boy? You live 'round here?" He just wags his tail. "You better git home 'fore yer family starts missin' ya." He sits down and looks at me real pitiful-like. I see he's awful skinny, like he hasn't eaten in a while. I rummage through my food and find him a biscuit and a little bacon. "Here, boy. This oughta tide ya over." The dog gobbles down the food faster'n anything I ever seen.

"You lost, boy?" He wags his tail again. "Well, ya better come with us, then. I'd sure 'preciate yer comp'ny." The dog barks and turns in circles. "If yer gonna travel with me 'n' Daisy, I better call you somethin'. How 'bout Domino?" He jumps up and turns circles in the air. "All right, Domino. Let's get ready. We've got a ways 'fore we make it to Caney. And I wanna be there 'fore sundown." Domino gives a little yip as I untie Daisy and mount up.

The three of us are headed southwest 'long side the railroad line as we work through the rollin' hills and flatlands. I talk to Domino and Daisy and they answer with whines and nickers. The sun keeps movin' to the west. After we've gone 'bout fifteen miles or so, that ole sun begins to drop in the sky. I start lookin' for Cotton Creek. That's outside Caney. I been there with my brothers huntin' quail. We got a lean-to we put up for shelter from wind and rain. That's where I plan to spend the night. But I can't find the big ole cottonwood that's near the creek. Where'd it go? I'm lookin' ev'ry which way, and my nerves are a-janglin'. What am I gonna do? Maybe I shoulda stayed with Lo and Laura. Maybe I'm not as grown as I think I am.

Daisy neighs, and then I see it. Looks like that ole cottonwood got struck by ligh'nin' or somethin'. Maybe a prairie fire come through here. It's scorched all up one side, but not the other. Whew! I started breathin' normal again.

The sun is barely startin' to set when I spy the lean-to a few yards away from the burnt cottonwood. When we reach it, I hop off Daisy and start to take off her saddle and bridle. Lo always says to care fer yer horse 'fore ya make camp. I take out the currycomb and run it all over Daisy's tan coat. She nuzzles me, and I give her the apple I packed in my bag. I was gonna have it with supper, but she deserves it. I tie her to a low-hangin' branch near the lean-to while Domino watches. Daisy's close enough to the creek to get a drink and graze.

I gather some sticks and bigger chunks o' wood to build a fire in front of the shelter. My fingers are gettin' numb so I better get this fire lit. I fumble with the matches but finally get a little fire goin'. Domino curls up next to the warmth like he's done it a hunnerd times. I warm my hands, then I get out my food. I figure I've got enough for me 'n' Domino to eat tonight and maybe a little bite in the mornin'. We'll be to Ochelata by tomorra late in the afternoon. I'm sure Crystal will have a big supper cooked up, so I'm not too worried 'bout missin' my noontime

meal. Poor Domino needs to get some meat on his bones. I sure hope B.R. lets me keep Domino when I get there. He likes dogs. So does Crystal.

I share more biscuits and bacon with Domino. I find a little jar of molasses tucked in the bottom corner of the pack. That sure tastes good on biscuits. I don't think it's a good idea to share that sticky stuff with Domino, so I keep it to myself. The sun's down now and the stars are comin' out. Looks like it's gonna be a three-quarter moon tonight. 'Tween the moon and my fire, I can see pretty good. I'm gettin' awful tired, so I arrange my bedroll and use the saddle for a pillow. Domino is as close as he can be to me without layin' on top o' me. I close my eyes and I'm asleep in nothin' flat. Sure didn't know ridin' all day makes ya that tired.

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I don't know how long I been asleep. I feel Domino stiffen next to me. He starts to growl real low. I hear twigs poppin' like someone's walkin' up. I sit up and see Daisy rearin' with her front hooves beatin' the air. Then I see him. There's a man tryin' to grab Daisy's rope.

Domino leaps out of the lean-to barkin' like he's a real big dog. The man stops grabbin' for Daisy and starts hollerin' at Domino. I ain't never heard words like that before. I'm so mad I can hardly see straight or have the good sense to be scared. I jump up from my bedroll and holler, "Hey, now! Don't you hurt my horse! And quit cussin' my dog!"

The man turns and looks at me. He's 'bout my height but wiry, like Lo. Part of his dark hair is plastered to his head while the rest of it's standin' up ev'ry which way. He has dark, beady eyes that make him look real mean, and he don't look very steady on his feet. He turns his head and I see a long, red scar runnin' down one cheek. Then he spits some tobacco juice out the

side of his mouth and says, "Looka here, boy. I'm takin' yer horse, and there ain't nothin' you can do 'bout it." He reaches for Daisy's rope again.

I take a step toward him. I don't know what I'm gonna do, but I know I can move faster'n him. And I outweigh him by a good twenty pounds or so. But 'fore I take another step, Domino jumps in front of me and starts growlin' somethin' fierce. If I didn't know that dog, I'da been scared.

The man drops Daisy's rope and starts toward Domino. I grab a branch stickin' out of my fire and head to that man. 'Fore I get there, Daisy sinks her teeth into his arm. He's cussin' a blue streak, takes a step back, loses his balance, and falls flat on his backside. Me and Domino go up to him. Domino's soundin' so mean and I'm wavin' that big ole branch at him.

"Get up!" I tell him. He struggles to his feet. Then I smell him. Now I know why his balance is off. "Get out o' here, ya ole good-fer-nothin'!" I wave the torch at him with Domino barkin', and that ole rascal stumbles off in the other direction fast as he could in his condition.

I watch until he's out o' my sight. Domino barks a few more times, then we head back to the camp. I go to Daisy to make sure she's all right. I stroke her nose and tell her, "Thanks, girl. If you hadn't taken a chunk outta his arm, I don't know what woulda happened." I'm feelin' pretty proud of us for takin' care o' each other. We licked that mean ole man! Just like I was full grown.

I get back to my bedroll and sit down. I start to shake, thinkin' 'bout all the terrible things that coulda happened. Domino comes up next to me and I all I can do is throw my arms around 'im and cry like a big ole baby. Guess I ain't as grown as I thought.

Next mornin', I'm awful stiff and my behind is sore from ridin' the day before. But we gotta git on our way. We all have a little breakfast, drink some water, then break camp. I load up my gear, saddle Daisy, and mount. Oooh-wee, that hurts! Domino is jumpin' around, all excited to be on the trail again.

Daisy canters through the gentle swells of the hills, and we pass by the line 'tween Kansas and Indian Territory 'bout mid-mornin'. It's kinda hard to tell, 'cause it's cloudy and the sun's hid itself. But I see the sign for Polson, so I know we're in the Territory now. B.R.'s letter said to stay 'long the east side of the railroad line outside Polson. And just like he wrote, we go by Coon Creek. Matter of fact, we stop there for a little break and get us a drink. I ain't got no more food, so we just rest a little. My hind end is glad for the rest. I know it's past midday, prob'ly 'bout two o'clock or so. Only a couple more hours then we'll cross the bridge over the Caney River and be in Ochelata. I'm gettin' kinda excited to see ev'rybody, so I gather up Daisy's reins, get up into the saddle, whistle for Domino, and we're on our way for the last leg o' the journey.

I pull out B.R.'s letter when we're over that bridge. I read it again, fold it up and put it back in my pocket. I hear the cattle lowin' at the stockyard, so we head toward the sound. Once I find the stockyard, we turn south onto Second Street. I count the houses—one, two, three, four—then I spot Crystal on the front porch of a little yellow shotgun house, just like it says in the letter.

Crystal starts hollerin', "B.R., Streeter, come on out! Marion's here!" And she runs down the steps to meet us. I pull Daisy to a stop and slide off to give Crystal a big ole hug.

I see Streeter come out next. He looks me up and down. "Well, look-a-here. Yer gettin' some size on ya, boy!" He gives me a hug, then steps back to let B.R. in our little circle.

B.R. takes Daisy's reins in one hand, slaps me on the back with the other, and says, "Get on inside, Marion. I'll take care of yer horse. Where'd ya get the dog?"

"That's Domino. He found me over by Cotton Creek."

Crystal *tsks* and says, "Poor thing. We need to fatten him up."

I grin. "I was hopin' you'd say that."

"Well, get on in the house. I've got supper all ready for ya."

It sure is good to be with family again.