

# ACROSS THE WIDE AND LONESOME PRAIRIE

a play for young people

By  
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Based on the novel by Kristiana Gregory

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### **CHARACTERS**

HATTIE..... A young woman, 13, eager to be famous, somewhat troublesome and willful. Having some difficulty with her mother. Prone to jealousy, in spite of herself.

PEPPER..... An obedient young woman, also 13, eager to please, easily frightened, a natural caretaker. Acts older than her age.

### **SETTING**

A wagon fully packed with gear and food stuffs, trunks, tools, bedding, etc. In general, there is as much gear as would conceivably sustain a small family on the trek west. This gear is packed, unpacked, used, discarded throughout the play. The wagon is something the characters push, pull, move over complicated terrain and with great effort. In addition, there should also be a couple of trees with branches attached, several rocks, ramps, maybe a step unit. All of these items can function as obstacles, stools, hiding places.

### **PRODUCTION NOTE**

Before each scene, there is a complicated physical score carried out by the two actors, indicating the terrain and the difficulty of the passage. We should understand weather, mountains, deserts, water, heat, cold, a myriad of sensory details. This score embodies the work of the trek: pushing, pulling lifting, wading, climbing, dragging, packing, unpacking, repacking, cooking, eating, caring for wounds, bites, blisters, burns. It's the physical detail of this journey. This business should not be "faked." If the actors are lifting a trunk, it should be full. If they're carrying bundles of bedding, they should not contain foam rubber. Accompanying this physical score, there should be a sound score indicating a large train of people, stock, wagons and gear on the move.

SCENE I: INDEPENDENCE, MO

April 14, 1847

*[HATTIE and PEPPER, as adults, are setting up the stage. When they finish, they sit down.]*

*[NOTE: Lines that are underscored are meant to be addressed to the audience.]*

PEPPER

This whole adventure took place when we were thirteen.

HATTIE

The most difficult age, they say. Or at least, it was difficult for me. Not for Pepper, though. Nothing was difficult for her.

PEPPER

Hattie, that's just not true.

HATTIE

Because Pepper was perfect, and I was flawed.

PEPPER

*[Deciding not to take her on.]* Anyway, we had to get across two thousand miles of the most treacherous territory. And we had to do it on foot.

HATTIE

From Missoura to Oregon. Prairies, mountain ranges, rivers, and deserts. And I did it all bare footed. But I ain't supposed to tell that yet.

PEPPER

What's most important is that we grew up on that trek.

HATTIE

Started out as children; six months later we were adults. This here's how it all began. We're just outside Independence, Missoura, waiting to start out. But not everybody's got the right gear. My pop's gotta get more flour. And Pepper's family's gotta trade their horses for oxen, cuz oxen are stronger. Anyway, I just met Pepper yesterday because her family's outfit is next to ours. The best thing about Pepper is that I can scare her and make her do anything I want.

PEPPER

She can not!

HATTIE

This here's how it all happened.

*[HATTIE runs off stage.]*

*[PEPPER picks up the remains of a small tree. She drags it in with difficulty, then sits down and pulls out a book.]*

*[After a beat, HATTIE comes running in, breathless.]*

My mother's on another tear.

PEPPER

Yeah. I figgered as much.

HATTIE

Pop says I'm supposed to look the other way and pretend she ain't talking to me. But that just makes her madder. They ought to be a law against her.

PEPPER

Maybe you gotta work harder to please her.

HATTIE

Not when she's in her hornet behavior. Flying around. Buzzing and stinging.

PEPPER

But she gave you that book for writing. So's you can become a famous. That ain't hornet behavior.

HATTIE

Yeah, she give it to me, all right. Then she yells around and ruins my mood when I'm thinking about what to write. And now I'm supposed to be gathering wood. But they ain't no wood. She gives me only the most impossible jobs. You probably got a perfect mother.

PEPPER

She's pretty good. Most of the time.

HATTIE

Anybody'd name their daughter Pepper, that's amazing, I think.

PEPPER

It's short for my real name--

HATTIE

I would like to have the name of Pepper. It would fit me, I think.

PEPPER

Yeah, it would fit you.

HATTIE  
You wanna trade names? You could be Hattie. And I could be Pepper. You could have my mother. And I could have yours.

*[They laugh. PEPPER gives HATTIE a good-natured slap.]*

PEPPER  
You are supposed to be gathering wood, ain't ya?

HATTIE  
I'm gathering wood.

PEPPER  
No you ain't....

HATTIE  
Everyone does their own work in their own fashion. *[Pause.]* Pepper, you see that fat woman come into camp today?

PEPPER  
Yeah, I seen her.

HATTIE  
Is she the hugest person you ever seen?

PEPPER  
Don't speak against people. You'll get black marks on your slate in heaven.

HATTIE  
Well, listen to this. You know what her name is?

PEPPER  
No.

HATTIE  
Mrs. Biggs.

PEPPER  
No!

HATTIE  
Honest.

PEPPER  
Mrs. Biggs?

HATTIE  
Mrs. Biggs.

*[They both laugh.]*

PEPPER

Oh no, I ain't supposed to be laughing at people.

HATTIE

And her husband ain't got no legs. You seen him?

PEPPER

My pa says they can't make it all the way to Oregon. They probably gonna go out a few hundred miles and settle there.

HATTIE

I tell you, they scared me, first time I laid eyes on em. They scare you?

PEPPER

Hattie, you better tend to your mother. She's calling for you again.

HATTIE

I know. I know. I gotta get wood. *[An idea occurs to her.]* Pepper....

PEPPER

Yeah.

HATTIE

You got any extra wood?

PEPPER

No one's got no extra wood.

HATTIE

Why don't you give me some of the branches off that tree you got there?

PEPPER

I worked hard to get this back here.

HATTIE

Pepper, what's the lesson to be learned from that party that got stranded in the Sierra Mountains last year?

PEPPER

Donner Party? What's this got to do with them?

HATTIE

They was selfish and didn't share, so they perished and ate each other.

PEPPER

Them are just stories. They didn't eat each other.

HATTIE

Eat em up, eat em up. Yes they did.

PEPPER

Quit talking about that, Hattie.

*[HATTIE chases the frightened PEPPER, chanting a children's rhyme.]*

HATTIE

Chewing on a finger bone. Num, num, num.

PEPPER

Don't. Please don't.

HATTIE

Biting through a shoulder bone. Num, num, num.

PEPPER

No, no, no!

HATTIE

Sucking on an ankle bone. Num, num, num.

PEPPER

All right, all right. You can have some of this wood. But if you so much as mention the Donner Party again, I'm taking it back.

HATTIE

Thank you, Pepper. You are a true friend. But--and this is an important thing--you are lacking in bravery. And that means that during the westward trek, you're gonna have to work on that. And I will assist you.

PEPPER

Why you?

HATTIE

Because I am three months older than you, and because of that I know a lot about facing down fears.

PEPPER

You might be a little bit older, but I am a twin.

HATTIE

No. You're a twin?

PEPPER

Yep. I got a twin brother. Name of Wade.

HATTIE

Pepper, that is probably the finest thing I have heard about you so far. I wisht I was a twin.

PEPPER

Yeah. It's usually a pretty good thing.

HATTIE

But you still got to be working on your bravery. So let's name our five scariest things.

PEPPER

No, I don't want to.

HATTIE

This is for your benefit, Pepper. To make you braver.

PEPPER

Very well, but quick. Donner Party, one.

HATTIE

Yes. Because last year they was on this same trail as we're gonna take. Except they took a wrong turn and ended up in the mountains over the winter and had to eat bark, shoes, and each other.

PEPPER

Water moccasins, two.

HATTIE

Water moccasins and boa constrictors. Cuz they squeeze the life out of you. What's three?

PEPPER

Indians, three?

HATTIE

Indians, yes. Because they can take off young girls and turn them into Indians themselves.

PEPPER

Cholera, four.

HATTIE

Cholera and swamp fever. Cuz cholera kills in a day. Swamp fever kills in a week with awful fever....

PEPPER

Now I gotta go, Hattie. It's almost dark.

HATTIE

All right, but after dinner, we got to execute the plan.

PEPPER

What plan?

HATTIE

The plan about Mrs. Kenker. I got a plan.



PEPPER  
What plan?

HATTIE  
Where to stand.

PEPPER  
What?

HATTIE  
Where to stand in order to get a good look at her.

PEPPER  
Good look at who?

HATTIE  
Good look at Mrs. Kenker.

PEPPER  
I don't like to be outside the camp after dark.

HATTIE  
We have to catch her, Pepper. She is stealing things.

PEPPER  
She's doing nothing of the sort. She's a very nice woman.

HATTIE  
Thirty Bibles, she's stealing stuff.

PEPPER  
Stealing what?

HATTIE  
I told you. She stole a spoon out of my Aunt Jane's wagon. She leans over to kiss my Aunt Jane because my Aunt Jane's feeling sick on account of gonna have a baby. And when Mrs. Kenker leans over she reaches for a spoon and slips it in her apron pocket. Kiss and steal. Quick as that.

PEPPER  
I don't believe you.

HATTIE  
You will believe it when you see it. That's why we got to spy on her.

PEPPER  
She's my mother's friend.

HATTIE  
Things of your mother's are gonna start turning up gone.

PEPPER  
You think so?

HATTIE  
I know so.

PEPPER  
What you gonna do about it?

HATTIE  
What are we gonna do about it.

PEPPER  
We are gonna go spy on her?

HATTIE  
Yes.

PEPPER  
I don't' know if i can.

HATTIE  
We have to catch her red-handed.

PEPPER  
With the stolen goods in her hands?

HATTIE  
Yes.

PEPPER  
All right.

HATTIE.  
All right.

PEPPER  
Except.

HATTIE  
Except what?

PEPPER  
Except I don't know if I can do it.

HATTIE  
Why not?

PEPPER  
Because of something.

HATTIE  
Because of what?

PEPPER  
Because I don't have a strong enough bladder.

HATTIE  
Oh, Pepper, that is pitiful.

PEPPER  
Don't make fun.

HATTIE  
I don't know if I have enough patience for you to grow up.

PEPPER  
It always happens when I play hide and seek. Every time I get hid, I have to go.

HATTIE  
You are gonna have to get trained then, because this is important, and we have to do it. You have to do it.

PEPPER  
Why me?

HATTIE  
Otherwise, Mrs. Kenker will go on and on like this, stealing everything from everyone, and what will that mean? What's the main lesson from the Donner Party?

PEPPER  
Don't use no cutoffs.

HATTIE  
The lesson of the Donner Party is if you share with each other, you won't eat each other.

PEPPER  
I am not being friends with you if you are gonna talk all the time about the Donner Party.

HATTIE  
All right. All right. But you got to help me. We got to take care of this before we set out. Otherwise she could live and we could die.

PEPPER  
All right, I'll help you. But now I gotta go.

HATTIE  
Help me with some of these branches first, Pepper. Because if I go back without firewood, I'm gonna be punished, but serious.

PEPPER  
Oh, Hattie.

HATTIE  
God's truth. She is capable of anything these days.

PEPPER  
She's probably got her reasons.

HATTIE  
She's got her reasons. *[Pause.]* She didn't want to leave the graves.

PEPPER  
What graves?

HATTIE  
The graves of my sisters. Four of em. They all died of swamp fever last summer.

PEPPER  
Four of your sisters all died?

HATTIE  
One right after the other. So now I am the oldest.

PEPPER  
I don't know if I believe you.

HATTIE  
Truth. Stack of Bibles. This here locket's for their memory. Got all four of their pictures in it.

PEPPER  
If you lie, you go straight to hell when you die.

HATTIE  
I ain't lying.

PEPPER  
Four of your sisters all died?

HATTIE  
All in one summer. First they come down fevered. Then raving, not knowing where they was or who anyone was. Then they come to for a time, and they got scared cuz they knew they was gonna die. So I had to lie to them.

PEPPER  
Lie about what?

HATTIE  
That they *wasn't* gonna die. "You gonna get well. And we gonna ride our stick horses in the back pasture just like last year." It was all a lie. *[HATTIE tears up.]*

PEPPER

You will see your sisters again.

HATTIE

They died, Pepper.

PEPPER

In the next world, you will see them.

HATTIE

I don't care about the next world. I care about this world! And they ain't in it!

PEPPER

Hush. Look out at that field. We gonna go through that field as far as that stand of trees. That is the Platte River. Winding west. And we are gonna follow it mostly all the way to the sea. It's gonna be so much like heaven out there by the sea, your sisters might be waiting for you there.

HATTIE

You think so?

PEPPER

Yep, I do. And if I was you, I'd be writing something about your sisters. In that book your ma give you. That's where I'd start, if I was you.

HATTIE

Yeah, well, maybe I will.

PEPPER

Yeah.

HATTIE

[Pause.] Pepper, you think you can still meet me after dinner? So we can spy on Mrs. Kenker?

PEPPER

Yeah. I probably can.

HATTIE

Cuz we might be leaving tomorrow.

PEPPER

We might.

HATTIE

And we have to catch Mrs. Kenker before we leave.

PEPPER

Yeah.

HATTIE

*[Pause.]* I hope we do leave tomorrow. I think my ma will be lots better when we get out of Missoura.

PEPPER

Probably will be.

HATTIE

Yeah.

*[Lights fade.]*

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Perusal Copy

EntreScene I

*We watch the two girls push and pull the heavy wagon through a circuit.*

*They come upon various obstacles and must negotiate the wagon either over them or around them.*

*They run over a large bundle that falls from the wagon.*

*Twice they ford the river by sitting in the wagon and pushing it along with poles.*

*The heat is excruciating.*

*The mosquitos are annoying. They stop once to sit in the shade and apply grease to their arms, legs and face to keep the mosquitos away. Then they must go again.*

*HATTIE carries a large bundle on her back. It's her brother. He's tied there like an African child to its mother.*

*Midway through this circuit, PEPPER disappears. HATTIE is left to do the rest of the work by herself.*

*Accompanying all of these scenes is a soundtrack which suggests a large group of people, wagons, stock on the move.*

SCENE II: ALONG THE PLATTE RIVER

May 14, 1847

*[HATTIE, carrying dirty dishes, comes in limping badly. She takes off her shoes and puts her feet in the river. PEPPER, a few yards away, is washing dishes with fine grain sand. Throughout the scene, they are slapping mosquitos and scratching bites.]*

HATTIE

How many times did we cross this damned river today?

PEPPER

No need to curse about it, Hattie.

HATTIE

I have blisters the size of silver dollars.

PEPPER

I know. So do I.

HATTIE

And we only made seven miles today. Gotta do better than that or we could slip behind. And you know what that means.

PEPPER

Hush up, Hattie, I ain't listening to you make up dire stories.

HATTIE

I tried to count the crossings for my little brother. But we both lost track after eight cuz Ben can't count no higher than that.

PEPPER

Lucky for us it's a shallow river.

HATTIE

I guess so.

PEPPER

The Platte River. That is French for plate. Did you know that?

HATTIE

No, I didn't. But where you been all day?

PEPPER

Walking in dust, then wading in the water, just like everyone else.



HATTIE  
Walking and wading with who?

PEPPER  
*[Grinning.]* No one in particular.

HATTIE  
*[Nudging her.]* Someone that knows the French word for plate?

PEPPER  
There's nothing wrong with meeting new people, Hattie.

HATTIE  
Never said there was. What's his name?

PEPPER  
His name is Gideon. Ain't that a beautiful name?

HATTIE  
What's it mean in French?

PEPPER  
It's someone in the Bible, Hattie.

HATTIE  
*[Bluffing.]* Yeah, I knew that. So what's he like?

PEPPER  
He's tall. And strong. And he's easy to talk to.

HATTIE  
Sounds real nice.

PEPPER  
He is. He is real nice.

HATTIE  
You sweet on him?

PEPPER  
No, Hattie, I ain't sweet on him. I just met him.

HATTIE  
Well, I could have used your help today. I had to carry my little brother the entire way. That's why my feet are all swolled up.

PEPPER  
Little Ben, is he sick?

HATTIE

Yeah, he's sick. Got the croup. Ma's yelling I gotta do something, get him out of the dust. Cuz she ain't watching no more of her children die. So I put a wet rag over his face. And when we stopped midday, looked like a mud wall he was breathing through.

PEPPER

You got garlic on his chest?

HATTIE

He's got garlic on his chest. Drinking turpentine mixed with whiskey. But he's bad off.

PEPPER

I'm sorry. I'll help you tomorrow. *[Pause.]* Did you know we lost our milk cow Penny and her calf, Little Sheeba, this evening. Little Sheeba's only two days old. They just walked off into the tall grass. And can't be found. Did you hear that?

HATTIE

Yeah, I heard.

PEPPER

Penny was born on the day me and Wade turned nine. We all had the same birthdays, me and Wade and Penny.

HATTIE

Mighta been Indians run em off.

PEPPER

You think?

HATTIE

Tall Joe says we ain't supposed to call attention to ourselves, cuz of the Indians. But we ain't no secret, putting up as much dust as we do.

PEPPER

The whole train is more than a mile and a half long, when it's moving, that's what Gideon says.

HATTIE

A mighty big target for Indians.

PEPPER

What's you mean?

HATTIE

They're watching us all the time, Pepper, that's the way they work. Then when the time is right, they strike.

PEPPER

Strike?

HATTIE

Kill us all and take what they want. That cow and her calf you lost is only a start.

PEPPER

I am changing the subject now.

HATTIE

These plains Indians known to swoop down on a train like ours and take off with a young girl. Make her their own. Then many years later she is seen wearing Indian clothes, married to a very old Indian man.

PEPPER

Hush up, Hattie.

HATTIE

It's the truth. And by the time she's grown, she don't even remember her family or none of her white ways.

PEPPER

Hattie, I swear, you just enjoy scaring me.

HATTIE

I am only trying to get you prepared, Pepper. That's the way you have to do when you're older. Be prepared for danger. You can't always be living silly with boyfriends and the like.

PEPPER

I am changing the subject right now. Gideon was out with one of the hunters this afternoon. They think they seen a couple of buffaloes.

HATTIE

Yeah?

PEPPER

And he says they're much bigger than a cow. Might even be as big as a wagon.

HATTIE

Sing hoo-la, hoo-la.

PEPPER

Hattie, that is rude behavior.

HATTIE

Well, I do not like Gideon very much.

PEPPER

You don't even know him.

HATTIE

Yes I do. He is...he is dull-witted.

PEPPER

That is untrue and uncharitable. That is not Christ-child behavior.

HATTIE

You talk about him too much. It is not inter-esting.

PEPPER

What if he said such things of you?

HATTIE

I would not care. Because I do not value his opinion.

PEPPER

Listen here, Hattie. I can't be your friend no more, less you act with Christian charity.

HATTIE

Well, maybe it don't matter if we're friends no more.

PEPPER

Maybe it don't.

HATTIE

Because I am getting sick of a lot of things around here.

PEPPER

We're all getting sick of things.

HATTIE

Except I am gonna do something about it. For example, these shoes. I have tolerated these shoes for thirty-one days. Three hundred and twenty-seven miles of these shoes.

PEPPER

We have all walked the same distance.

HATTIE

But I do not intend to walk another step in these shoes.

PEPPER

And what's you gonna do about them?

HATTIE

I know precisely what I'm gonna do. [*She throws her shoes in the river.*] *Then with mock sorrow.*] "Oh mercy, I have lost my shoes. I have lost my shoes in the river. And now I will have to go barefoot the rest of the way."

PEPPER

Hattie, you did not throw your shoes in the river.

HATTIE

No, I lost my shoes in the river.

PEPPER

You coulda give them to someone else.

HATTIE

I have tried to give em away, but Ma says they was too good to give away.

PEPPER

Course, they ain't too good to throw in the river.

HATTIE

Pepper, I swear, sometimes you sound more like a mother than a mother.

PEPPER

That's just because you act more like a child than a child. You know, you might try sometime, just try, to think about someone other than yourself.

HATTIE

What should I think about, your cow and her calf?

PEPPER

That's a start.

HATTIE

What's you want me to think about em?

PEPPER

They went off three hours ago. If they ain't found, we ain't got no milk for the rest of the trip. And that is serious, maybe even dire.

HATTIE

They'll find them, Pepper.

PEPPER

But if they don't find em by morning, we'll have to leave them. Remember Tall Joe's rules. No stopping for births, no stopping for deaths. No stopping for nothing in between.

HATTIE

But they got bells on. Penny's got a bell.

PEPPER

No, she ain't. Leather strap wore through last week.

HATTIE

They can't get far. They'll find em.

PEPPER

Little Sheeba, only two days old. And Penny. Like a member of the family.  
[Pause.] What if it was me? What if I wandered off and couldn't be found?

HATTIE

If it was you, I'd come looking for you. In fact, everyone would come looking for you, Pepper. The whole train would come looking for you.

PEPPER

And what if it was you? What if you wandered off?

HATTIE

If it was me, well, I would expect to be left.

PEPPER

[Long pause.] Do you think you could help me with these dishes? I need more fine sand for washing these pans.

[HATTIE wades out, finds sand, returns. Pause.]

HATTIE

I got something pretty serious on my mind, too, you know.

PEPPER

What is it?

HATTIE

Mrs. Kenker.

PEPPER

Oh, don't tell me nothing about her. It's all made up.

HATTIE

Made up, not so. Listen to this. She come over last night to borrow some bacon. They was trying to fix their squeaking axle. While my mother's slicing the bacon, Mrs. Kenker puts my brother Ben's blue sweater under her apron. I seen it plain as rising sun.

PEPPER

Hattie, you can't be talking about people like that. It's against God's will. Mrs. Kenker is a nice woman. And I don't want to hear another thing about her.

HATTIE

Just as she was slipping that sweater under her apron, her eyes look up. She sees me seeing her.

PEPPER

And....

HATTIE

And now she knows I know. As a result, I could get killed because I am a eye witness.

PEPPER.

Your mind is full of such nonsense.

HATTIE

I just thought I'd let you know, Pepper, because if I get caught alone with her, it could mean my early death.

PEPPER

She wouldn't kill you, Hattie. How would she kill you?

HATTIE

She would smother me.

PEPPER

Hattie....

HATTIE

Or she could give me poison like when they lay traps for coyotes....My tongue would be hanging out and this brown matter running out of my mouth. And I would be dead. Stiff and dead.

PEPPER

If you don't stop with your imagination, you're going to be in real trouble when you grow up because you won't be able to tell the difference between truth and lies. It's a disease.

HATTIE

Mrs. Kenker is stealing, and that is wrong!

PEPPER

Why don't you put all this in your book? Quit troubling us with it.

HATTIE

I think she might be stealing food, too. If she ain't, Mrs. Biggs probably is. Because that woman ain't lost one bit of weight.

PEPPER

I don't want to talk about this no more.

HATTIE

I got a real good place to spy on Mrs. Kenker from.

PEPPER

I ain't doing that again, Hattie. It never worked last time. We just hanging out in a tree, watching a shadow go to bed. Besides, I got other things to do tonight.

HATTIE

What?

PEPPER

I'm going to the dance with Gideon.

HATTIE

*[Crestfallen.]* Oh.

PEPPER

That is, if they have a dance. If they've found our cow and her calf.

HATTIE

Right.

PEPPER

You could come too. My brother Wade might come.

HATTIE

No. I don't like them dances much.

PEPPER

Why not?

HATTIE

Too dusty, I guess.

PEPPER

Well, if you change your mind, let me know.

HATTIE

Yeah.

PEPPER

Now I gotta go. Help them search.

HATTIE

Yeah. Good luck.

PEPPER

Yeah.

*[PEPPER picks up her dishes and leaves.]*

HATTIE

Would you just look at me. I don't even look like a girl no more. I look like a animal. Feel like a beast of burden. Pa says not to worry, I got beautiful eyes. But eyes is a pretty small part of the entire human body. I tell you, sometimes I feel a million miles away from the human race. I would write about all this in my journal but I can't figure out how.

*[HATTIE picks up a pan, throws a handful of sand into it as lights fade.]*

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EntreScene II

*The girls repack some of the items on the wagon, tie them on better, make them steadier.*

*Then they pick their way through the rocky, rough path. There are innumerable obstacles in the way: rocks, branches, puddles, etc. Because they cannot get the wagon around most of these obstacles, they have to get the wagon over them.*

*It is excruciatingly hot. They wet rags and wipe their faces, then tie them on their heads.*

*They stop once and drink from a jug of milk.*

*They have to ford the river at least once, for which HATTIE lifts bundles from the side of the wagon, holds them over her head and wades through the river. PEPPER punts the wagon.*

*Then PEPPER trips and falls trying to push the wagon over a large stone. She hurts her ankle. They check to make sure it is not broken. Then they get a ragged garment from the wagon, rip off some strips of fabric, and wrap her ankle. She limps but must continue on.*

SCENE III: REGISTER CLIFF

June 14, 1847

*[HATTIE and PEPPER are struggling up to the landing of a cliffs.]*

HATTIE

This is the most greatest place you have ever been, Pepper. You got to see it.

PEPPER

It's plenty hard getting up here. I got a sprained ankle, you know.

HATTIE

But it's worth it. Believe me.

*[They arrive at the landing.]*

Look at that, would you? You can see where we come today. Them two narrow places in the river. That's where we crossed.

PEPPER

It's like looking at our past from far away.

HATTIE

"Looking at our past from far away." That's beautiful, Pepper. I'm gonna write that down in my journal. And them buffaloes we seen. That's them, the black part out there with the dust above them.

PEPPER

I like em better when they're far away.

*[She sits and unwraps her ankle, then wraps it again, but tighter.]*

I didn't like waiting for them to pass. Wasting a whole morning, in the heat, no moving, no loud talk, afraid to spook them, and cause a stampede.

HATTIE

More than half a million of em. That's what Tall Joe says.

PEPPER

We could have made fourteen or fifteen miles today, if it hadn't been for them.

HATTIE

Still, we made eleven and three-quarters.

PEPPER

*[Laughing.]* And so much manure left, couldn't walk for stepping in it.

HATTIE

But Pepper, look at that. Ain't never been no sunset like that one. Not ever.

PEPPER

Looks like blood on the sky.

HATTIE

*[Yelling with mock seriousness.]* "Help us, help us, the sky is bleeding." But this is the best part. We can scratch our names in this here sandstone. We'll be famous forever, if we do it right.

PEPPER

Famous forever?

HATTIE

Every person that goes west will see our names. Let's put our names and a big circle around them.

PEPPER

Our names and a heart.

HATTIE

No. No hearts, Pepper.

PEPPER

Our names and the date.

HATTIE

Yes, the date because we are among the first white people to cross this way. But there will be many more, because of Manifest Destiny.

PEPPER

What's Manifest Destiny?

HATTIE

What we're meant to do.

PEPPER

What we meant to do?

HATTIE

Be a country from sea to shining sea. From Atlantic Ocean to Pacific Ocean. President Polk declared it. Manifest Destiny.

PEPPER

What about the Indians?

HATTIE

They can be in it too. But they must do what we say.

PEPPER

But they already got their own Manifest Destiny. Why would they want ours?

HATTIE

I don't know, Pepper. I don't know about the Indians.

PEPPER

But they was here first.

HATTIE

I know, but they don't speak English.

PEPPER

So what? Neither do the French or the Germans.

HATTIE

Pepper, you've got to learn to quit bringing up subjects that are off the subject. Now then, let's put our names, the date, and where we come from. "Hattie Campbell, June 14, 1847, Booneville, Missouri, age 13."

PEPPER

Why are we putting our age?

HATTIE

Because we represent the youth of America.

PEPPER

The youth of America.

HATTIE

Let's get to work.

*[They work diligently for a time.]*

PEPPER

Nice up here. Can't smell them dead oxen left behind by that train ahead of us.

HATTIE

Out of the dust too.

PEPPER

Them oxen died from the buffalo.

HATTIE

No they didn't. They was killed from lack of feed.

PEPPER

Because the buffaloes ate their feed.

HATTIE

Well, yes....

PEPPER

That could happen to our stock, too.

HATTIE

It's an exchange, Pepper. Buffaloes eat the grass for the stock and we eat the buffaloes.

PEPPER

But what about our stock? They'll die if they don't get good feed.

HATTIE

We'll just have to rely on the hunters and the fishers for our food. Your brother Wade and my pa caught 200 fish in one evening. This is a land of abundance.

PEPPER

They ain't no wood in the land of abundance. Ain't been no wood for a week.

HATTIE

There's an example of it right there. Instead of wood, there's buffalo chips. You're just scared because your milk cow and her calf went off. But lookit, that's a month ago, everyone shares with you, and you're doing just fine.

PEPPER

Yeah, I guess we are.

HATTIE

Sure you are.

PEPPER

I swear, Hattie Campbell, something must be the matter with you. You're being down right comforting.

HATTIE

Yeah, I know. It is caused by this beautiful place.

PEPPER

*[Looking at their work.]* Hattie this is too hard. I ain't putting Pepper. I'm just putting P.

HATTIE

We can't do that. They'll think we're boys. I want them to know we're girls.

PEPPER

I'll put Miss P. Lewis.

HATTIE

I'm putting my whole name because after I'm famous as a writer of the most amazing book ever written, people will come up here just to see my name and where I was on this day of my life.

*[They return to their work. Great focus and concentration. Pause.]*

Guess who put their wagon next to ours last night.

PEPPER

I already know. The Kenkers.

HATTIE

The Kenkers, yes. And you wanna know what happened?

PEPPER

What?

HATTIE

I was on my way to get some water for morning. I hear this voice, "Come over, dear, have some tea with us." And it's her. It's Mrs. Kenker.

PEPPER

Did you go?

HATTIE

I did not.

PEPPER

What did you say?

HATTIE

"No thank you, Ma'am. I've got other business."

PEPPER

That's what you said?

HATTIE

Yes.

PEPPER

That's rude.

HATTIE

She is rude. She is stealing things. I ain't talking to her, sitting down and having tea. Like everything is normal. Besides, my mother's lace collar is missing. The one that belonged to her mother. Her mother who is dead.

PEPPER

You have got to work on yourself, Hattie. You ain't got one bit of the Christian spirit in you.

HATTIE  
Eye for an eye, that's the Bible.

PEPPER  
Turn the other cheek, that's also the Bible.

HATTIE  
You can turn the other cheek, I'm having the eyes.

PEPPER  
I'm using this belt buckle for scratching.

*[She takes off a belt and sets back to work. The two of them are working away.]*

HATTIE  
Did you see Cassia today, the little Anderson girl?

PEPPER  
Yeah, I seen her.

HATTIE  
I made that little dress she had on. Out of a dish towel. Did you see that?

PEPPER  
That child just loves you.

HATTIE  
Didn't you think that was a good dress?

PEPPER  
Where'd you get them buttons?

HATTIE  
Tips of deer horns.

PEPPER  
And the lace?

HATTIE  
Off one of the dresses belonged to my sisters. I wisht Cassia was my little sister.

PEPPER  
Well, she almost is.

*[Pause. HATTIE stops her work to take note.]*

HATTIE  
Don't you love how it sounds, after everything's stopped?

PEPPER  
Yeah, I guess I do.

HATTIE  
Quiet sounds. End of the day. And it smells good, too. The smells of fires and cooking food. I like it, this time of day.

PEPPER  
I wisht Gideon was here.

HATTIE  
What for?

PEPPER  
He could put his name here, too.

HATTIE  
I found this place, and I didn't invite Gideon. I didn't invite no boys of any sort.

PEPPER  
I might invite him if I saw him.

HATTIE  
You're always inviting him places: going out for buffalo chips, hunting for watercress.

PEPPER  
It's a thoughtful thing to do.

HATTIE  
It's not as fun with three people.

PEPPER  
Sure it is.

HATTIE  
I don't like him around. That's my vote, and I'm half of all the people here.

PEPPER  
I'm half too.

HATTIE  
I don't know why I put up with you.

PEPPER  
Because if you didn't have me, you'd have no friends at all.

HATTIE  
Whereas, you have Gideon and me. You're rich as a Queen of England.



PEPPER

We got to keep everyone close. The world is full of danger. Look at what happened to Mrs. Riley. She had a baby and it died. Then she died. And what about that Grimshaw boy got shot by accident? We got to keep everyone close. Besides, I like Gideon. I like his little sideways smile.

HATTIE

That's a smile? I thought he had a troubled stomach.

*[PEPPER laughs and tosses a small stone at HATTIE.]*

Remember one thing you promised.

PEPPER

What's that?

HATTIE

If you ever kiss him, you gotta tell me.

PEPPER

I already did kiss him.

HATTIE

No!

PEPPER

Yes.

HATTIE

Well, what's it like?

PEPPER

It's like...it's like...it's like drinking water from your hand.

HATTIE

No....Is that all?

PEPPER

Yeah. That's about it.

HATTIE

What's all the fuss about, then?

PEPPER

Well, it's pretty good, I think.

*[HATTIE studies PEPPER, then shrugs.]*

This is taking too long. Let's just put our names and the date, not hometowns, not age.

HATTIE

No, I'm writing the whole thing. I owe it to posterity.

PEPPER

Miss P. Lewis, 1847. Or...Mrs. G. Thompson, 1847.

HATTIE

Hah. Hah. Hah.

PEPPER

Gideon did ask me to marry him.

HATTIE

He did not.

PEPPER

He did.

HATTIE

You can't do that, Pepper.

PEPPER

Why not?

HATTIE

You are only thirteen.

PEPPER

My mother got married when she was twelve. My aunt got married when she was eleven.

HATTIE

But this is the modern world. Them days was just barbaric.

PEPPER

Many girls get married this age. Nothing wrong with it. Besides, Gideon is seventeen.

HATTIE

It is a awful idea, Pepper. You will miss out on your youth. The best years of your life.

PEPPER.

I'm getting married. I'm not dying.

HATTIE

You're married a very long time. That's what my ma says.

PEPPER

Maybe yes, maybe no. Who knows what's gonna happen tomorrow. Life is full of tragedy and loss.

HATTIE

You'll just turn into someone miserable and angry. Look at my mother.

PEPPER

And I ain't listening to you.

HATTIE

I am smarter than you. You should listen to me.

PEPPER

You ain't one bit smarter than me. You just think you are. And if you can't act better, I'm going back down.

*[She moves to get up. We hear a buzzing sound.]*

HATTIE

Shhh. *[Quietly.]* What's that sound

PEPPER

What sound?

HATTIE

Buzzing sound.

PEPPER

Crickets.

HATTIE

Crickets don't sound like that.

PEPPER

Different kind of crickets. Western crickets.

HATTIE

Listen. It's stopped.

PEPPER

Yeah. They stopped.

HATTIE

But crickets don't stop.

*[HATTIE sees something. Freezes.]*

*[Quietly.]* Pepper.

PEPPER

Yeah.

HATTIE

Listen to me. Stay--absolutely--still. Do--not--move.

PEPPER

What is it?

HATTIE

Do not move. Still. Still. Still.

PEPPER

Is it a rattler?

HATTIE

Stay still? Don't move.

*[Long pause. They watch as it moves in front of them.]*

All right, now.

PEPPER

Is it gone?

HATTIE

Yeah.

PEPPER

Are you sure?

HATTIE

Yeah, I'm sure.

PEPPER

It was a big one, wasn't it?

HATTIE

It was very big.

PEPPER

How did you know to stay still?

HATTIE

It's just what you do. They strike when they are took by surprise.

PEPPER

But how did you know that?

HATTIE

It's just one of the things I learned being older.

PEPPER

You saved my life, Hattie.

HATTIE

Yeah, Pepper, I did.

PEPPER

I could have rolled on it. Put my hand on it. Old man Willison, he died of a rattle snake bite. It come out of the wood pile and got him on the hand. His arm went tingling, then numb, then his whole body. And he got sick. Then sicker and sicker. Finally died. That was back in Jefferson City.

HATTIE

Are you scared?

PEPPER

Yeah. I am. Let's go back to camp.

HATTIE

Not yet.

PEPPER

Please, Hattie.

HATTIE

First I gotta talk to you about something.

PEPPER

What?

HATTIE

I'm afraid I won't never have you for a friend no more cuz everything's gonna change you getting married and all.

PEPPER

I will still be your friend, Hattie.

HATTIE

But there will always be someone else in the way. Someone else between us.

PEPPER

You want me to promise?

HATTIE

We had that plan to live next door.

PEPPER

We can still do that.

HATTIE

Are you sure?

PEPPER

Of course, I'm sure. Who's gonna save me from rattle snakes unless you're around?

HATTIE

You promise?

PEPPER

Promise.

HATTIE

The Royal Oath of Sacred Promise?

PEPPER

The Royal Oath of Sacred Promise.

HATTIE

Thank you, Pepper.

PEPPER

Thank you for saving my life. Let's go back to camp now.

HATTIE

We can't go. We ain't finished carving.

PEPPER

I don't want to do it no more. Besides, I gotta tell Gideon about the rattler.

HATTIE

See there, I keep losing out to him.

PEPPER

Hush up, Hattie. You're just being a child.

*[PEPPER leaves.]*

HATTIE

A child, listen to that. How did she suddenly get older than me? I got to go write in my journal about saving Pepper from the jaws of death. I guess I ain't gonna finish carving my name. I just leave it "HC 1847." And probably everyone that passes thinks I was a man.

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EntreScene III

*The terrain has changed. They are now going uphill. That challenge is distinctly more demanding than before. It takes both of the girls to move the wagon, one pushing, one pulling. When they stop, they must put rocks behind the wheels to prevent its rolling back downhill.*

*The weather is also cooler. Both girls wear sweaters, jackets, and scarves. They blow on their hands. Their posture, their gait reflects the colder weather. HATTIE wraps her feet in rags because of the cold.*

*As the day wears on, the weather becomes hotter. They doff their sweaters and jackets.*

*At one point they stop the wagon and move away from it to pick black berries from bushes scattered around the area. They eat most of what they pick, very hungrily, then they play games with the berries, throwing them into each other's open mouths. Finally when they've eaten their fill, they pick more and carry them in their skirts back to the wagon.*

*The trip resumes until sunset when they stop. It's cold again.*

SCENE IV: THE POISONING

July 4, 1847

*[HATTIE is huddled under a blanket. It's cold and dark. She is upset, distracted.]*

HATTIE

I have done something awful. More awful than sassing my mother. More awful than cussing at my brothers. Truly awful. More awful than I have ever done before. More awful than anyone has ever done.

There's one that's dead. Cassia. You remember her. The one I made the little dress for. She's dead. And there's three people down. All children. One of them is Pepper's twin brother, Wade. They got em all swallowing ashes. Eating charcoal to soak up the poison.

Me and Pepper, we was supposed to gather buffalo chips for the fire. And we run onto this patch of something. Near a little stream going down the mountain. We thought it was wild radishes or wild potatoes. We pulled up a half dozen of em and brought em back for the stew.

We never cut em up yet. We never put them in the stew yet. We just left them there to add to the stew.

A bunch of little guys come by. They stole some of the leaves, not the radishes, just the leaves. And they ate them. If they would have had just one bite of the radish part, they would have died straight away. That's what Tall Joe says. He's seen it before.

Cuz it wasn't radishes or wild potatoes. It was hemlock.

*[PEPPER enters. Gets under the blanket with HATTIE. Pause.]*

You brother Wade, is he...is he....

PEPPER

He's holding his own.

HATTIE

How about the others?

PEPPER

No more deaths.



HATTIE

I wisht I was dead, Pepper.

PEPPER

We made a mistake. We didn't mean it.

HATTIE

Don't matter if we meant it or not. We done it.

PEPPER

It was a accident, Hattie. That's different.

HATTIE

The results are the same.

PEPPER

Think of it this way. She's in a better place, Little Cassia.

HATTIE

Don't say that. You don't know.

PEPPER

But I do believe it, Hattie.

HATTIE

I don't believe it. That oxen of ours that died this afternoon, Tom? Is he in a better place?

PEPPER

Don't be ridiculous.

HATTIE

If that oxen ain't in heaven, they ain't no heaven.

PEPPER

You're just upset.

HATTIE

Whatever you got to say, it ain't one bit comforting.

PEPPER

[Pause.] It's cold out here. Don't you think we ought to go sit by the fire?

HATTIE

No. We got to suffer. Besides, I don't wanna see Mrs. Anderson.

PEPPER

I already seen her.

HATTIE  
She say anything?

PEPPER  
She didn't say nothing. My mother says she's still in a daze. The truth ain't set in yet.

HATTIE  
I wish she'd yell at us. Come after us with a switch. I wish she'd punish us good.

PEPPER  
Nobody told us. We thought we was gathering wild potatoes.

HATTIE  
Ain't no such thing as wild potatoes.

PEPPER  
We know that now.

HATTIE  
You know what wild potatoes is?

PEPPER  
*[Rocking gently.]* Hushhhh. Here, let me warm up your hands. *[She rubs HATTIE's hands.]*

HATTIE  
She was most nearly my favorite person in this whole train.

PEPPER  
I know she was.

HATTIE  
I made that little dress for her.

PEPPER  
And that little doll out of a squash.

HATTIE  
And now what?

PEPPER  
Well, it's like with your sisters....

HATTIE  
Shhh. Tell me something about Wade.

PEPPER  
He's all rigid like a board. Ma's putting warm packs on his face, see if she can get his jaw to relax. Then she puts broth in his mouth mixed with ashes to soak up the poison. And rubs his neck to get him to swallow.

HATTIE

Let's pray. Let's pray for Wade.

PEPPER

Let's.

HATTIE

And let's promise if Wade gets better...we'll...we'll what? Let's promise something big.

PEPPER

If Wade gets better, we'll go to church every Sunday for the rest of our lives.

HATTIE

You already do that. It's got to be something more. If Wade gets better, we will face down everything that scares us.

PEPPER

Good. That's good.

HATTIE

Now name them.

PEPPER

You first.

HATTIE

Hemlock, first.

PEPPER

Yes. Rattle snakes, second.

HATTIE

Yes. Indians, third. Even though they give us food four times, taught us how to make buffalo jerky, and showed us the path up this here mountain. What else? What's fourth?

PEPPER

Typhoid fever, fourth.

HATTIE

All the kinds of fevers including Swamp and Rocky Mountain Spotted. Yes. We will face down all these fears.

*[They both kneel and pray silently. Then they return to their blanket.]*

PEPPER

Think of it this way. It could have been a lot worse. What if we would have put the hemlock in the stew and served it up. Everyone would have died. We'd be dead, too.

HATTIE

That would be easier than this.

PEPPER

We got to get our minds off it.

HATTIE

We are not allowed to get our minds off it. We have to live with this for the rest of our lives. Everyday, every minute. We have to atone for what we done.

PEPPER

Shhh. *[Pause. In an effort to distract her.]* What did your mother have to say?

HATTIE

She said her Shakespeare speech. "Thou knows tis common. All that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity."

PEPPER

That's very beautiful. Also true.

HATTIE

I guess it is.

PEPPER

Your mother can be very wise, you know.

HATTIE

I guess so.

PEPPER

But remember this, we're on the Continental Divide. All the water falls over there goes into the Mississippi River, and all the water falls over here goes into the Pacific Ocean. Ain't that something?

HATTIE

I guess it is. But I can't get very excited about it.

PEPPER

We're half way to Oregon. Ain't that something?

HATTIE

Yeah. I guess it is.

PEPPER

A thousand miles.

HATTIE

Yeah.

PEPPER

And they gonna have a little party for Mr. and Mrs. Biggs because they made it this far. Cuz no one thought they would.

HATTIE

But ain't no party now because of little...because of us.

PEPPER

Let's focus our minds on the future, think about something we're gonna do when we get to Oregon.

HATTIE

I ain't in the right mood. You go first.

PEPPER

I'm gonna marry Gideon and live in a little log cabin. With yellow curtains in the window. Your turn.

HATTIE

I ain't marrying no one.

PEPPER

Of course you are.

HATTIE

No I ain't.

PEPPER

That's what you say till you fall in love. Then you won't be able to resist it.

HATTIE

Love changes people from interesting, funny people to serious, boring people. I ain't doing it.

PEPPER

I want to hear you talk first time you fall in love.

HATTIE

I want to own a farm and write novels on the side. I figger I can do it too if I ain't tied down by love.

PEPPER

Ah, but what would you write about?

HATTIE

I ain't writing about love.

PEPPER

And how would you get your hay stacked and your crops brought in?

HATTIE  
Hire some of your children to do it.

PEPPER  
You're just feeling peevish because of the poisoning.

HATTIE  
*[Exploding.]* Yes, Pepper. I am feeling peevish. This here is awful. The most awfullest thing I ever done. Yes. I am. Feeling. Peevish.

PEPPER  
Wanna go out and hunt for buffalo chips?

HATTIE  
No.

PEPPER  
Wanna go to the river and do the dishes?

HATTIE  
No.

PEPPER  
Wanna go up on the mesa and look for Indian fires?

HATTIE  
No.

PEPPER  
Wanna go spy on Mrs. Kenker?

HATTIE  
No.

PEPPER  
Bet we could catch her red-handed.

HATTIE  
I already caught her red-handed.

PEPPER  
But not today.

HATTIE  
Yes, today. She was unraveling the yarn from my brother's blue sweater. The one I seen her take a couple months ago. She was unraveling the yarn to knit it up into something else.

PEPPER  
Shall we go out an spy on her?

HATTIE

You and Wade got the same kind of eyes. Same color. What if I'd killed you instead of Wade?

PEPPER

You haven't killed Wade.

HATTIE

When I first met Wade, a little thought crossed through my mind. That I was gonna marry him. Now I might have killed him instead.

PEPPER

You're always so dramatic. It's the way you do everything. Loud. Big. There are other ways, you know. Life hands you a cup of dirt. You can either raise something in it or complain that you ain't got a field.

HATTIE

Ridiculous in the extreme.

PEPPER

I'm going back to camp, check on my brother.

HATTIE

Here. Give him something for me.

PEPPER

What is it?

HATTIE

It's a piece of mica. I found it last night. It's supposed to be lucky. The Ohio Indians think it's magic. Give it to him.

*[HATTIE fishes something from her pocket and hands it to PEPPER.]*

PEPPER

I will, Hattie. He'll like it, I'm sure.

*[PEPPER leaves.]*

HATTIE

The next day, when we buried little Cassia, I give my sisters' locket to her mother. We buried her on top of the hill. On the Continental Divide. And it feels like this is the divide. The divide in my life. Yesterday and all them other times and days. That's when I was a child. I ain't a child no more. And not ever again. And that there is what I'm gonna write about now--and maybe forever.

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EntreScene IV

*It is early morning. We see HATTIE rise for the day. She has slept under the wagon. It is chilly. She must get water, make a fire, and make coffee. With a cup of coffee to warm her hands she looks out at the view, then readies the wagon for the day's trip. That involves unpacking and repacking the gear and the goods. She stuffs a biscuit in her mouth as she works. Later she has another.*

*Finding no one else to help her, she moves the wagon by herself. It takes great effort. She is going uphill.*

*Later the path flattens out. The weather becomes hotter. She takes off her sweater.*

*Something is stinking. She ties a kerchief around her face and resumes the travail.*

*Periodically she takes a switch to prevent the oxen from drinking the water they're traveling beside.*



SCENE V: DESERT NEAR HOT SPRINGS

August 15, 1847

*[HATTIE has a switch made from a willow. She is keeping thirsty cattle away from the river. PEPPER enters from the opposite direction.]*

PEPPER

Did you see what your pop made for us, for me and Gideon?

HATTIE

I ain't got time. I got to stand guard along this here stream, make sure the cattle don't drink it.

PEPPER

Your Aunt Jane crocheted a set of pillow cases. More beautiful than royal linens. And Tall Joe give us a buffalo robe that he got from the Indians at Fort Bridger. My brother Wade made us a quirt--that's another name for whip--made out of braided rawhide. But the best of all is what your pa made us. Don't you want to come and see?

HATTIE

*[Exploding in frustration.]* I guess you know we made only three miles today, and we're losing stock, including oxen for pulling the wagons.

PEPPER

I know, I know. But you don't have to dwell on it.

HATTIE

Not everyone has the luxury of thinking about their wedding at times like this. Other people gotta work.

PEPPER

Hattie, don't be such a spoilsport.

HATTIE

You see what this water does to the animals that drink it? They vomit their organs, and within an hour, they're dead.

PEPPER

That's why everyone says it's good we got the wedding to look forward to. This part of the trip being so dreadful.

HATTIE

And you didn't know, but my little brother Ben fell off the wagon this morning and a wheel rolled over his arm.

PEPPER

Oh, no. Not little Ben.

HATTIE

My ma had to put a board on his arm and tie it there to mend it. And I had to carry him all day long.

PEPPER

And you could have used some help.

HATTIE

I coulda used some help, but you was no where to be found.

PEPPER

I was not with Gideon.

HATTIE

I guess I passed the back side of certain rock where we stopped midday. Me and Ben, both.

PEPPER

Good for you. But I wasn't there.

HATTIE

You're very good at lying, Pepper Lewis. You always look so earnest, so innocent, but I know you. I know your insides.

PEPPER

I am choosing to ignore you right now. Because I am an adult. Not a child in a pout. And so I will begin again. Did you see what your pa built for us?

HATTIE

No. Because I have been too busy.

PEPPER

Well, your parents had to abandon that cherry chest, the one where your ma kept little reminders of your sisters that died. Remember that chest?

HATTIE

Yeah.

PEPPER

Well, your pop took apart that chest, hid a few pieces of the wood, and now he's made a wagon box from it. Solid cherry wagon box. Most beautiful wagon in the entire train. It's a wedding present for Gideon and me.

HATTIE

Good for you.

PEPPER

Wanna come and see it?

HATTIE

I can't.

PEPPER

Why not?

HATTIE

We lost two cows and an ox today because they drank the water. Couldn't keep them away from it. And it killed em. All three of them.

PEPPER

We get off this desert within the next couple of days. That's what the map shows.

HATTIE

Yeah, but we could easy kill all our stock before that happens.

PEPPER

What is wrong with you? Got a big cloud over your head. A stinking river in your mind. You don't even seem one bit happy about the best event of my life so far. Not one bit happy.

*[There is no answer. HATTIE is in a funk.]*

All's I can say is when you start feeling better, come and find me.

HATTIE

Go on, then. Go off and find Gideon. Finish up all your "wedding plans."

*[PEPPER exits on the run.]*

This is the way it's gonna be for the rest of my life. [She picks up her journal and begins to write.] All by myself, no friends. And everything stinking like this sulfur desert. [She looks up.] Just then, a remarkable thing happens. I hear this voice, "Come over, dear. Have a cup of tea with us." It's Mrs. Biggs and her little husband who ain't got no legs. So I go on over there. Figger, I might just as well be having tea with other outcasts like me. That's when I decide to tell them about Mrs. Kenker. How she stoled a spoon, my mother's collar, and the sweater belonging to my little brother. Next thing I know, Mr. Biggs is telling me that them Kenkers used to live next door to them back in Missoura. And right before they left to come west, a fire took everything they owned. Including their son. "And it permanent changed em both." That's what Mr. Biggs says to me.

Well, I try to imagine what it would be like to lose everything in a fire. And for a little slice of time, I feel sorry for Mrs. Kenker. But I got to admit, it don't last very long. Because the truth is, I can't tolerate her.

And then, right shortly after that, I run into Wade, Pepper's twin brother. The one I almost killed with the hemlock. He says he knows a joke that he'll tell me if I won't repeat it. It's a off-color joke. So from that I know he's thinking I'm all right. Then he asks me if I want to go with him to the wedding of Pepper and Gideon tomorrow. I tell him I guess so except I ain't got no shoes. He says that's all right with him. He don't much like shoes.

And that's how it all turns out different from what you think it will. I don't know who does all this. It could be the work of my dead grandmother who is always watching over me. Or maybe it's the work of God, Pepper's God.

*[HATTIE closes her journal, grins and runs off.]*

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Perusal Copy

EntreScene V

*There is a terrible storm. Rain, wind, the sounds of disaster. The two girls struggle with the wagon.*

*They try in vain to keep the contents of the wagon dry. The struggle is futile.*

*Things drop from or are blown from the wagon. The girls must keep moving.*

*It's a difficult terrain, nearly impossible. Most of it is steeply downhill.*

*They signal one another and other people in the train. All of it seems futile. They cannot be either heard or seen.*

SCENE VI: COLUMBIA AND THE CASCADES

September 15, 1847

*[HATTIE and PEPPER drag themselves in. They are breathless, wet, and exhausted. They each carry a large bundle, also wet, which they throw down and collapse upon. They are completely spent.]*

HATTIE  
You all right?

PEPPER  
I think so.

HATTIE  
What's the name of that river?

PEPPER  
Columbia.

HATTIE  
I hope that means big and awful.

PEPPER  
It's the worst crossing we've had.

HATTIE  
Gideon all right?

PEPPER  
Except that we lost our wagon and killed both the oxen. Your family all right?

HATTIE  
Lost the wagon, lost the stock. Like most everybody in the company. And I lost my journal.

PEPPER  
You lost all your writing? *[HATTIE nods.]* You think you can remember to write it again?

HATTIE  
No. That ain't how it's done.

PEPPER  
Bet you feel awful.

HATTIE

Yeah, I do. But everyone's lost something. Some people lost everything.

PEPPER

Watch yourself, Hattie. You're sounding downright grown up.

HATTIE

Did you see what happened to the Biggs wagon?

PEPPER

I don't know if they made it.

HATTIE

What do you mean?

PEPPER

*[Pause.]* Mrs. Biggs was in the middle of the seat, so's not to tip the load, Mr. Biggs beside her, strapped in place. But the current was much swifter this time.

HATTIE

"That river's mean as a mountain lion." That's what Tall Joe says. And he's right.

PEPPER

Soon as the wagon hit the current, it tipped sideways. Mrs. Biggs slipped off and into the water.

HATTIE

Mrs. Biggs?

PEPPER

Floated away out of sight.

HATTIE

No.

PEPPER

Like she was sitting on a chair in the water.

HATTIE

She was floating.

PEPPER

Like a leaf.

HATTIE

Maybe the Indians saved her. They pluck people out of these rivers all the time.

PEPPER

Indians got a special skill with these rivers.

HATTIE

Or she could run right into the shore. Indians could help her up and get her on the path to Oregon.

PEPPER

I guess they could.

HATTIE

Mrs. Biggs could be waiting for us there. When we arrive.

PEPPER

Yeah.

HATTIE

Sitting there, side of the road, saying, "Hey, where you been all this time?"

PEPPER

Tall Joe says we shoulda waited for the Indians before we set out.

HATTIE

I'm taking them off my list of scary things. The Indians.

PEPPER

I took em off weeks ago when they taught us how to catch rabbits with a net.

HATTIE

What about Mr. Biggs?

PEPPER

Made it through. Tall Joe fished him out of the river. But he's a broken man. Says the sun's been pulled from the sky.

HATTIE

But he's gonna get to Oregon.

PEPPER

Of course he is. Riding in the supply wagon with Tall Joe rest of the way.

HATTIE

Sorry you lost your cherry wood wagon.

PEPPER

No one's got wagons no more. We carry what we own the rest of the way.

HATTIE

Over that mountain range ahead of us. Two hundred miles to go. And this is what faces us. Straight up and then straight down.

PEPPER

Sorry you lost your journal. It was pret-near full, wasn't it?



HATTIE  
Yep, it was.

PEPPER  
I might just have to get you another one when we get to Oregon.

HATTIE  
*[A bit flat.]* Yeah.

PEPPER  
Wade lost his ox named Jane. Just before we set out to cross the river. She give out and laid down. So he just unhooked her where she dropped.

HATTIE  
He always said more to that ox than he ever said to me.

PEPPER  
They was great friends, him and Jane. Now poor Wade, he's quiet as a stone.

HATTIE  
Only two wagons left from the entire company. The supply wagon. And Kenkers'. I for one am waiting to hear the wail of pain from her when she has to give up that wagon. Surrendering all her stolen loot.

PEPPER  
She has suffered quite enough. Just like the rest of us.

HATTIE  
She stole us blind. She even stole the little cart that belonged to Mr. Biggs.

PEPPER  
You better put your behavior in order before we get to Oregon. Cuz people in Oregon ain't gonna behave like this. People in Oregon gonna behave in a whole new way.

HATTIE  
Who told you that?

PEPPER  
They ain't gonna be selfish and they ain't gonna be vengeful because everyone will have enough. That's what Mother says.

HATTIE  
All people's the same, no matter where they are.

PEPPER  
Mother says no. They reach higher when they don't want for nothing.

HATTIE  
That's like you, Pepper. Always believing the best about people. Not me, I see clean though em. *[Pause.]* We don't gotta go no further today. Let's lay back on our bundles and look up at the sky.

PEPPER  
I suppose I could do that for a time.

*[They arrange themselves on their bundles. Long pause.]*

HATTIE  
Pepper...Ain't it about time?

PEPPER  
Time for what?

HATTIE  
You promised you'd tell me what it's like, and I ain't heard one word from you yet.

PEPPER  
What what is like?

HATTIE  
It. IT!

PEPPER  
Oh, Hattie.

HATTIE  
You promised. A promise is a promise.

PEPPER  
I can't explain it to you.

HATTIE  
Why not?

PEPPER  
It ain't a thing to be explained.

HATTIE  
We had a solemn pact, Pepper Lewis Thompson. Whoever done it first would tell the other one. Everything. Ever thing.

PEPPER  
I don't care. I ain't telling you about it.

HATTIE  
You have just broke the Royal Solemn Oath.

PEPPER

I ain't telling you about that. But maybe I will tell you something else.

HATTIE

What?

*[Pause. HATTIE figures it out.]*

No!

PEPPER

Yes.

HATTIE

You're gonna have a baby.

PEPPER

I'm gonna have a baby.

HATTIE

No.

PEPPER

Yes.

HATTIE

So you done it?

PEPPER

Yes.

HATTIE

Well, don't do it again.

PEPPER

Why not?

HATTIE

It ain't good for you, Pepper. Just look at this predicament you're in.

PEPPER

It ain't predicament. It's pregnant.

*[HATTIE laughs. PEPPER joins her.]*

HATTIE

But I'm scared for you, Pepper.

PEPPER

Scared about what?

HATTIE

Lookit how many women die in childbirth. It's a dangerous undertaking.

PEPPER

We'll be in Oregon, time the baby comes. Nothing bad will happen to us there.

HATTIE Promise me something.

PEPPER

What's that?

HATTIE

Promise me you won't get so busy with the baby that you don't have no time for me.

PEPPER

We'll always be friends, Hattie. And besides, you gotta be the godmother.

HATTIE

What I mean is, I'm almost better friends with Wade now than I am with you.

PEPPER

Why don't you marry Wade, then?

HATTIE

Because he feels more like a brother than a husband. Besides, I almost killed him, remember. *[Pause.]* And so you think we'll always be friends?

PEPPER

Always and forever.

HATTIE

Good.

*[They lay back on their bundles and look up at the sky.]*

Ain't it good looking up at the sky?

PEPPER

It's very good.

HATTIE

Makes me feel so small.

PEPPER

Makes me feel closer to God.

HATTIE

I wonder if they're the same thing.

PEPPER  
They probably are.

*[They wait a moment, a terrible cry goes up.]*

HATTIE  
What's that sound?

PEPPER  
Could be a mountain lion.

HATTIE  
Could be my Aunt Jane giving birth.

*[HATTIE jumps up and look out.]*

It's Mrs. Kenker. Tall Joe has just told her she's got to leave her wagon behind.

PEPPER  
Is that what you wanted to see?

HATTIE  
That's it. Only it don't look so beautiful as I thought it might. She's just weeping away under that tree.

PEPPER  
She deserves your compassion.

HATTIE  
I know.

PEPPER  
Cuz we've all lost something more than we could bear.

HATTIE  
And we're all more alike than we are different.

PEPPER  
That's right. You should write that down...when you get a chance.

*[They both eye each other and grin. They move down to the edge of the stage and sit. They are now their adult selves.]*

PEPPER  
Time to tell them what happened after that. You go first.

HATTIE  
By the time we made it to Oregon City, we were the raggediest group of people you've ever seen. We didn't own a thing except what we wore, and that was in rags. All of us in tatters. None of us had shoes. Not even Pepper.

PEPPER

And Hattie, she never had shoes after she “lost” em in the Platte River. Came the whole way bare foot.

HATTIE

We just...wandered into town.

PEPPER

Waded into town is more like it. Everything was wet and muddy.

HATTIE

Pepper and I wanted to have a party in honor of arriving. But Ma said no, there was too much work ahead to build a house before winter. But we’d have a party at Christmas, she said.

PEPPER

And we did. And at that Christmas party, Hattie gave Mrs. Kenker a present.

HATTIE

That’s right, I did.

PEPPER

What was it?

HATTIE

Can’t tell you that. It was just between the two of us.

PEPPER

And Mrs. Kenker give all the children a hankie she made with a penny tied up in the corner.

HATTIE

But in all the hubbub of the party, me and Ben left ours behind. And Pepper, she didn’t get one. That’s because by the time of that Christmas party, Pepper was great with child, her first of seven.

PEPPER

And Hattie was married to Wade by that time, a bigger achievement, all in all.

HATTIE

Aunt Jane had a baby boy just days after we arrived. She was relieved that the baby was born in Oregon instead of the trail. And so she named him that. Oregon.

PEPPER

Oh, and Mr. Biggs took up residence with the Andersons, little Cassia’s parents. And he became a tailor.

HATTIE

That next winter Mrs. Kenker died alone, in her house, surrounded by all her possessions. Of course, by the time they found her, she'd been dead two weeks.

My mother still has bouts of grief now and then about my sisters. But she's easier with it, all in all.

I never had children. But Wade and I adopted a set of twins when their parents were killed in a buggy accident.

PEPPER

Oh yes, Hattie and me built....

HATTIE

*[Correcting her.]* Hattie and I.

PEPPER

Hattie and I built houses next door to each other, and all our lives we shared a garden plot. Friends for life, just like we promised.

HATTIE

Was it all worth it? Well, yes, of course it was worth it. A remarkable thing. Quite an achievement for a couple of thirteen-year-old girls. And I'll tell you this. There is nothing that scares us anymore. Pepper and I, we made ourselves brave in the course of that trip.

PEPPER

Oh, and Hattie wrote a book about the trek. Published last year. Now she's working on her second.

HATTIE

I sure wish some of you could, maybe just a few of you, could make a trip like that. Just to give you some appreciation of all you have. *[Sound of a child crying.]* That's Pepper's youngest. She's got to tend to him. And I've got to pick the string beans today, before the heat of the day.

PEPPER

And she always tends the garden without her shoes. Thinks it makes her feet more beautiful.

*[They laugh. HATTIE takes PEPPER's hand, and they go off together.]*

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