

**GOLD
RUSH
GIRL**

Gold Rush Girl

Avi



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For Isabella and Zeke



HAVE YOU EVER BEEN STRUCK BY LIGHTNING?
I have.

I write not of the sparkling that bolts from the sky, but of *gold*, the yellow metal buried in the earth and the shatter-wit world of those who seek it. That world turned me topsy-turvy, so that I did things I never dreamed I would or could do.

It began, fittingly, in a leap year: 1848. I was thirteen years old.

My family—Father (Randolph Blaisdell); Mother (Abigail Pell Blaisdell); my younger brother, Jacob; and I, Victoria, most often called Tory—was residing in the smallest state in these United States: Rhode Island. We had a home in Providence, the state's major city, with its fine buildings, wealth, tranquility, and a population of forty thousand.

Our home was 15 Sheldon Street, a modest but agreeable wooden house on the east side of town. It stood upon “The Hill,” as it was smartly called, above commercial Wickenden Street. We had a cook and one servant, both of whom lived in our attic.

Our lives were comfortable, with nothing unusual *ever* happening. Indeed, my early family life was untroubled, as smooth as Chinese silk. I questioned nothing, not about the world or about myself. My entire universe was Sheldon Street, which meant I knew everyone as they knew me. As for my social life, it consisted of calling and receiving among a small group of proper neighborhood girls.

As one grows up, it can take a while to understand that sometimes it is *not* your mother or father who have the greatest influence on your life. Thus it was but gradually that I came to realize that the person who shaped my life more than any other was my mother’s older sister, Aunt Lavinia.

Since the two sisters were from the distinguished Rhode Island Pell family, Lavinia already considered herself quite the queen. Then, before I was born, she married Quincy Fellows, a wealthy Pawtucket cloth-factory owner. That made her—in her mind—an *empress*.

A tall, big woman, with hanging coils of braid alongside her puffy face, which peered out from a deep, dark bonnet, she wore long, wide gowns with bulging sleeves, a shape that

made me think of her as a walking mountain, and a volcano at that. Indeed, she constantly erupted with lava-like judgments, advice, and instructions as to how my family should live our lives. All of which is to say, while my mother and father raised me, their words were almost always prefaced by “As your aunt Lavinia suggests . . .”

One of Aunt Lavinia’s judgments—which I was shocked to discover—was that my mother had *lowered* her station in life by marrying my father.

Father was a man of middle age and modest height. Quite portly, he had a round, smooth, shaved face and fair hair brushed with care. His soft pink hands—somewhat ink stained—were what you would expect of someone who wielded pen, not pickax. At home or at work, he attired himself in common gentleman’s fashion—English frock coat, vest, knotted neck cloth, tan pants, and tall black silk hat.

He worked as an accountant for Pratt and Willinghast, a respectable trading business, which had its offices on Peck Street in the middle of Providence. Significantly, it was a position secured for him by Aunt Lavinia’s husband, a fact which she did not let Father (or Mother) forget.

Still, after ten years of service, Father received a silver pocket watch in recognition of his good work. He liked to bring it out at regular intervals so as to suggest that he was a busy man. In fact, I came to understand it was displayed

mostly to show Aunt Lavinia that he was worthy. But then, as I came to realize, Father's highest ambition was to become acceptable to Aunt Lavinia, and he chose to do so by agreeing to all her advice and judgments.

As for my mother, she had a kindhearted, loving nature and looked after us all, trying her best to shield us from her sister's dictates. By way of personal occupation, other than supervising her children's upbringing and managing the household, she had her reading (popular romances such as *The Betrothed*) and needlework to do. Yet while Mother was a quiet soul, sometimes, when I watched her sewing, it seemed as if she were frustrated with her life and used her needle to pierce the fabric of her world.

Exasperated by my parents' constant deference to Aunt Lavinia, it was upon my younger brother, Jacob, that I bestowed my deepest affections. More than anyone else, he was willing to listen to my endless prattle. Most of all, he didn't criticize me. We were as close as kin can be, and I enjoyed his company greatly.

Jacob—four years younger than I—had a pleasing, apple-cheeked sweetness. An earnest, serious, almost solemn boy, he was not given to mischief. When he played with his school friends, he did so quietly, without much zest.

He was fond of music and enjoyed whistling the popular songs of the day. That said, his whistling told me that he

was troubled. Whereas Jacob considered me hot-brained, he fretted far too much, and worry made him agitated.

Jacob appeared to be the least bothered by how much our lives were governed by my aunt. But then it was Jacob of whom Aunt Lavinia most approved. She, who had no children of her own, once said, “Jacob is a perfect child. He is quiet and does what he is told. We should all encourage Victoria to be more like her brother.”

Once she informed me, “You should know, Victoria, that someday Jacob will be the head of the family and you will need to defer to him.”

Young though I was, I was much distressed and replied, “Jacob shall have his life. I shall have mine.”

To which Aunt Lavinia scolded, “Nonsense. A girl’s life should be solely dedicated to taking care of others.”

I’m sure that made me pout-mouthed.

Because I resisted my aunt’s dictates, she was particularly harsh on me, finding me too independent, too bold, and far too free with my opinions. But the truth is, there were few aspects of my life which did not come under her firm declarations.

“Victoria should dress this way.” That meant, for example, that I must never go outside without gloves and bonnet.

“Victoria should have proper acquaintances.” This meant that the Misses Biggs were *not* suitable friends whereas the Misses Colchester *were*. I was never told the reasons.

“Victoria should be taking dancing lessons from Mrs. Coldbrett’s Academy of Dancery.”

I attended weekly.

And: “To call Victoria *Tory* is vulgar.”

Once—I was no more than ten—she told me, “Unless you change your opinionated ways, you will not find a suitable man willing to marry you.”

My retort was “I intend to remain self-governing.”

When Jacob turned six (I was ten), he began to attend a school selected by my aunt: the Rhode Island Institute of Instruction, in Providence. She further proclaimed that it was sufficient for a girl to be educated at home, save Sunday church school. My parents did as she advised. I did *not* go to school.

Whereas Jacob went to school tamely, I objected to *not* going and did so strongly. Why, I argued, should I not get an education? Was I not the eldest child? Was I not quick-witted and eager?

Father consulted his pocket watch and said, “We shall do what Aunt Lavinia advises.”

While I did not go to school, my mother sympathized with me. She took it upon herself to teach me to read and write (as, she told me, her mother had taught her).

Additionally, I secretly persuaded Jacob to share all his school lessons with me. That allowed me to be educated on my own—furtively. The truth is, I far surpassed him.

I was therefore soon reading a great deal. Alas, the books in our home were too few, too limited. Having a desire for more knowledge, I took such small monies as I had saved (birthday and Christmas gifts) and, telling no one, walked downhill to the Providence Athenaeum, the city's fine library. But when I placed my sparse coins on the counter and informed the white-haired gentleman secretary that I wished to purchase a membership, he told me I had not nearly enough.

Disappointment must have clouded my face.

The secretary considered me with a kindly smile, paused a long moment, and then leaned down and whispered, "Since you are so young and eager, I shall give you a free subscription. But," he added, finger to his lips, "you must not tell anyone."

I went from rejection to rapture.

I borrowed books and hid them in my private room. At night, while the whole house slept, I read voraciously by candlelight and learned that stealthy reading is absolutely sublime. Reading became my other world. I discovered and consumed volumes by Mr. Poe, Mr. Dickens, and Miss Austen. Did I understand them all? Of course not. But then people do not generally grasp the true value of reading: It is not to learn about *others*. It is to learn about oneself.

Thus it was that I came upon the recently published autobiography of *Jane Eyre*. That book transformed my life.

I ADORED *JANE EYRE*, THE PERSON AND THE BOOK. In that book—it was as if I were reading a mirror—I read about Jane Eyre’s aunt, the tyrannical Mrs. Reed, who, I had no doubt, was much like my aunt Lavinia.

More than that: I revered the narration for its wisdom, ardent emotions, and beyond all else, the heroine’s fierce independence. How Jane suffered. How cruelly she was treated. How much she overcame. How splendid were her impulsive emotions. Her bravery. Her courage. Wisdom. Her great love. Oh, how I yearned to live just such a life, full of trial, rebellion, and adventure.

(Only much later would I learn that the book was a work of fiction. When I first encountered it, I truly believed it to be

the memoir of a real person and was thus enthralled the more. Since then, I have come to regard fiction as fact without dates.)

Most important, it was in *Jane Eyre* (chapter 23) that I found this extraordinary sentence:

Your will shall decide your destiny.

Those words became my guiding light, my ideal. Oh, how I wished my will could decide *my* destiny.

The more books I read, the more convinced I became that I must become up-to-date in all my thoughts and live a life of independent and heightened sentiments. I began to appreciate that the smartest thing I could do was to acknowledge how ignorant I was. I saw old Providence as far too passive, with nothing spirited or fresh. I yearned to be free of Aunt Lavinia's rules. How grand, I thought, to be caught up in mystery, strong feelings, and adventure (like *Jane Eyre*), to live a life written with exclamation points!!!!

Increasingly resistant to my aunt's opinions and rules, I came to think of her not merely as a controlling force but as a bully.

When I turned thirteen, I looked up the word *teen* and was much pleased to discover the early meaning of the term was "angry, vexed," and "enraged." Thus, being, as it were, licensed

by my dictionary, I chose to become fully *teen*, which to me meant that I had to move beyond Sheldon Street.

How can I best express this?

Since Rhode Island is a seagoing place, the state's symbol is an anchor. However, in Latin, an anchor—*ancora*—is a symbol of hope. Thus the state's motto is *Hope*. Observe the jest. An *anchor* is something that keeps you in place, whereas *ancora/hope* suggests change.

As you can see, I began to desire not Rhode Island's *anchor*, which held me in place, but Rhode Island's *ancora*, which meant *hope*. My desire was to be free of Aunt Lavinia's directives.

I began modestly. One day I informed my brother that I was going to walk downtown to the Arcade to buy a ribbon.

"Alone?" he said. "Across the river?"

I said, "Alone. Across the river."

"Without a chaperone?"

"Without a chaperone."

"What," he said, "would Aunt Lavinia say?"

Jacob's words stiffened my resolve. I said, "I don't care what she says. But you mustn't tell."

As I left the house, I could hear Jacob whistling.

I walked down the hill, then across the Providence River to the city center, a distance of more than a mile. I had never walked alone so far from home.

Despite my resolution and my desire for rebellion, I was quite nervous and walked with care, acutely aware that I was an unchaperoned girl, rare for someone of my station. Also, everyone was a stranger, and these strangers mostly men.

Feeling that every male eye was upon me—and those eyes malevolent—I kept my gloved hands clasped and my eyes straight forward, pretending not to notice anyone.

I managed to find a shop, quickly purchased a yard of blue ribbon, and went straight back home, altogether thankful when I reached it. Upon my return, such was Jacob's relief that he hugged me.

"You were gone so long, I almost went to save you," he confessed.

I did not tell him of my own unease, or my sense of triumph. Yes, that dictionary of mine told me there were many synonyms for *freedom. Liberty. Self-determination. Autonomy.* But as far as I was concerned, the most exciting meaning was *boldness.*

Perhaps the best illustration of my life at that time was my weekly dancing lessons.

As I have set down, Aunt Lavinia had insisted I attend lessons at Mrs. Coldbrett's Academy of Dancery. There I was expected to learn to dance while absorbing proper social etiquette, which is to say, how to conduct my social life.

The classes were instructed by a Mrs. Coldbrett, who

always reminded me of a giraffe (I had seen a picture of one in a book) in a long black dress. She used an ebony cane to beat the time while crooked-backed, speechless Mr. Coldbrett plucked the piano keys.

The quadrille, the grand march, and the waltz were taught. The polka — of which I had only heard — was considered unrefined and was *not* taught.

Though young, we girls were always dressed in good fashion. White gloves for all, high-necked, long muslin dresses of checked design with three-tiered sleeves. Boys came in cut-away jackets, black cravats, and narrow trousers. Some even wore top hats.

Of course, we had dance cards, which listed, by number, one's partner for each dance. They were filled out by Mrs. Coldbrett, who was most careful to make *proper* matches.

(Note: I was told to bring these cards home so that Aunt Lavinia might inspect and evaluate my dance partners.)

The byword at the dancing school was *serenity*, with no displays of emotion. I can well recall Mrs. Coldbrett reminding us that:

“Attention should be particularly paid to giving the hands in a proper manner, to the avoiding of affectation in doing so, to keeping the united hands at a height suited to both parties, shunning the slightest

grasping or weighing upon the hands of another, to avoid twisting your partner.”

The lessons were followed by a formal tea, during which we were required to make polite conversation. Needless to say, we girls were *never* to initiate a conversation. Mrs. Coldbrett had directives about conversations too, such as:

“Don’t talk in a high, shrill voice, and avoid nasal tones. Cultivate a chest voice; learn to moderate your tones. Talk always in a low register, but not too low. Avoid any air of mystery when speaking to those next to you; it is ill bred and in excessively bad taste.”

Aunt Lavinia thoroughly approved of such ideas. For my part, I desired nothing more than to acquire that “air of mystery.”

One day in the winter of 1848, I was attending my dance lesson. Having danced, it was teatime, with delicate china cups, and we girls and boys were chatting in the required way.

“Miss Victoria, how pleasant to see you. How are you this day?” This was asked of me by a snub-nosed, big-eared, twelve-year-old boy named Archibald Ackroyd, who was a head shorter than me.

“Most fine, sir. Thank you.”

“Have you had an agreeable week?”

“Most certainly. And may I inquire about you, Master Ackroyd?”

Though I spoke so, I was feeling most disconnected, bored, barely listening to the mindless chatter of the children around me. I suspect my indifference was because the night before I had been reading Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, wherein are such glorious such passages as:

“To me the walls of a dungeon or a palace were alike hateful. The cup of life was poisoned forever, and although the sun shone upon me, as upon the happy and gay of heart, I saw around me nothing but a dense and frightful darkness.”

You can understand, then, how struck I was by the nothingness of the youth surrounding me, how thoroughly empty of vigorous ideas, how void of real emotions, how complacent, how potato-headed these *suitable* children all were.

That evening, with great indignation, I shared such thoughts with Jacob. To my frustration, my brother was puzzled by my reaction to that dance lesson. Of course, he had not read *Frankenstein*. In truth, if I had told him it had been written by a nineteen-year-old *girl* he would have been horrified—not so much by the monster but by the girl.

“You had better,” he warned, “not tell Aunt Lavinia what you read.”

I informed Mother I would *not* go to dancing classes again. Among my grievances: “Why must I always do and think as your sister says?”

“She is wealthy, older, and wiser.”

I replied, “She opposed your marriage to Father.”

Mother assured me that her marriage had been a love match. Then she smiled, patted my hand, and said, “All too soon you will grow up, and *then* you will understand the ways of a girl in the world. Be patient, Tory.”

As far as I was concerned, *patience* was merely the *pretense* of good-mannered waiting — another anchor — when, in fact, one is actually in a hurry. More and more I wanted a change. Alas, I had come to realize that the more contented a family *appears*, the more often the parents fail to notice when the eldest child changes.

But as it happened, I did not have to wait long for enormous shifts to happen. That was because something unforeseen occurred, something that transformed our placid lives.

Father lost his position — and all his wages.

FATHER'S PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT, PRATT AND Willinghast—which did a great deal of trade with France—went bankrupt. This unexpected and catastrophic event was the result of the violent revolution that occurred in that distant European country. When Father lost his position, he lost his entire income, which is to say, our whole means of living.

Let me be fair: it was not just Father who experienced unemployment. Rhode Island—a commercial, manufacturing, and international shipping port—suffered an economic panic. *Many* professional and wage-earning men were unable to find work.

My father's predicament distressed him greatly. "I have failed my family," he told us, while clutching his pocket watch as if to display the evidence that he *had* been of value.

Then, fairly groaning, he added, "Aunt Lavinia must not know."

"I don't intend to tell her," agreed Mother. And she gave Jacob and me a severe look, which told us not to say anything either.

As the days passed, Father kept insisting, "I shall find something," but in fact, he did not. It was as if a failure in one part of his life spread to all. His lack of gainful employment shamed him into total inaction. As his joblessness continued, he sank into a deep, despondent melancholy and did little more than sit in the parlor, licking his thumb so as to go through the newspaper.

One night, wanting to encourage him, I felt best to remind him of something I learned in Sunday school. Citing Proverbs 13:4, I said, "The soul of the sluggard desireth and hath nothing: but the soul of the diligent shall be made fat."

"You sound like Aunt Lavinia."

I was horrified. Was I, against all desire, all hope, becoming like her? No. I studied that proverb and decided it was much like the brave words in *Jane Eyre*: *Your will shall decide your destiny*.

That said, we hardly knew what would happen to us. Father's spirits, already low, sank lower. As you might guess, his situation caused tension at home. I believe it was that which caused Mother to become ill. Endlessly fatigued, she

had severe headaches and constant feelings of stress. Dear old Dr. Laxton said she was suffering from an illness I could hardly say: neurasthenia. He insisted she rest in bed.

With funds dwindling, we dismissed the servant. Let go the cook. Unable to pay the fees, Jacob stopped going to school. Since Mother was infirm, I—who did not believe in false pride—cooked and cleaned.

Nonetheless there soon came a time when our funds were so depleted that Aunt Lavinia had to be informed.

How did she respond?

“It must have been your husband’s fault,” she told Mother. All the same, she provided some monies that we might live. That made things worse. Now there was *nothing* she did not oversee. One of her orders: “Victoria must take care of Jacob.”

Thus it was that Jacob came under my exclusive care. I fed him, laid out his daily clothing, solved whatever problems he encountered, heard his woes, his worries, and tried to smooth the wrinkles in his life.

This was truly a change of living for me, but not the one I desired. I confess I found my life increasingly yawny. To choose your younger brother’s day-to-day clothing, to stir his pudding, is *not* stimulating. As for living under the restrictive tyranny of my aunt, that was insufferable. Oh, how more than ever did

I desire greater change, something that would truly alter *my* entire life.

Having decided I would *not* be like my father, and do *nothing*, or give way to weakness like Mother on her sofa, I extended my life outside Sheldon Street. That is, I took the rash and unusual step—for one of my condition and age—of securing a position in a dressmaker's shop—the proprietress being an acquaintance of Mother's. I did so on my own. This employment—sewing dresses—let me earn ten cents an hour. I told Jacob that when I was working, he would have to take care of himself. He was not pleased.

Need I say it? We kept my employment a secret from Aunt Lavinia.

Aside from the close work of sewing, I was given the task of arranging bolts of cloth. To my shock, they were quite heavy. At first I despaired that I could ever do the work. But determined to shrink from *nothing*, I found myself equal to the lifting task. I actually became stronger.

Was I happy doing this? Of course not. But had not, I reminded myself, Jane Eyre been confronted with a cruel fate— orphaned, ill-treated by *her* aunt, abused at boarding school—only to rise high above it all? I chose to take my circumstance as a test of my will.

While Father did not object to my working, his pride was

such that he refused my earnings. I, therefore, saved my money and imagined solving our family crisis by someday saying, “Here. I have labored hard. Take the money I have earned and hoarded. We shall not starve.”

I constantly practiced that speech.

But before I could give it, our lives changed once again.

It was late November of 1848 when reports began to swirl through Providence that *gold* had been discovered in the West, in California. (California is the immense territory which had just been annexed by the United States after our recent war with Mexico.) The rumors insisted that this California gold could be acquired by merely bending over and plucking nuggets from the ground.

As you might imagine, this prospect brought considerable excitement to Rhode Island, an economically distressed community. As a result, many an unemployed man decided to rush west. The sudden furor exemplified the saying, “Wealth inspires many, but *easy* wealth inspires multitudes.”

When these reports of California gold first began to circulate, Father dismissed them as no more than wild-goose gabble. “Such fabulous stories cannot be true,” he insisted.

Not long after, however—it was in early December of 1848—Father gathered us round Mother’s sofa. With barely suppressed excitement, he read aloud from the Providence *Journal* what the president of the United States, the Honorable

James Polk, had stated to the United States Congress about California:

“The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service.”

Father put down the paper, looked around at his mystified family with a face flushed with excitement, and said, “Did you hear those words? ‘Gold of such an extraordinary character.’

“The president,” my father stressed, “would *not* lie.

“It seems to me,” he went on with more life than I had seen from him in weeks, “that since I cannot solve our financial problems here, I should go to California, where I can gather my share of this *abundant* gold. As soon as I do, all our problems will be solved. It will also show Aunt Lavinia the kind of man I am.”

How like Father, the ever-careful man. It took someone of the highest authority—the president of the United States, higher even than Aunt Lavinia—to give him, as it were, *permission* to radically change his situation.

I had once seen a footprint at Jacob’s school in which a man

began the contest by shooting off a pistol. Father's decision to go west was a pistol shot for me. When I heard Father's unexpected words, my heart thrilled. Here was adventure and excitement delivered directly into the bosom of my family. Here was a way I could escape Aunt Lavinia. Which is to say, from the moment I heard Father's words, I discovered my destiny: I too *must* go to California.



THAT FATHER WOULD BECOME A FORTUNE HUNTER is something I would never have predicted. His habits had been altogether regular, his attitudes predictable, and his conversations, dare I say, were, to me, like lump-filled oatmeal. Not a soupçon of enchanting ideas. Or action. Caution was the fabric from which his soul had been fashioned.

An example:

Like many in Rhode Island, Father believed in slavery's abolition. So in the fall of 1848, he attended the Anti-Slavery Conference held in Providence. I begged to go along but was refused permission. But after he had gone, I slipped out of our house (dressed as much as a lady as I could), walked into town, and mingled midst the crowd at the back of the auditorium.

Oh, the terrible tales I heard about the suffering of black people. It made me ill. I also learned about an organization called the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women.

That night I announced that I wished to join this women's group immediately and *do* something about the scourge of slavery. Not only did my father absolutely forbid me from doing so, but I was also severely scolded for even attending the meeting.

"All very well for you to have noble *thoughts*," he lectured me. "But young ladies are meant to stay home, not fix the world. What would your aunt say?"

Burning with righteous anger, I replied, "You, sir, though you attended the convention, are *doing* nothing to rid the world of this evil." Then I turned my back and walked away.

Not long after that scolding came Father's astonishing announcement about going to California. It was as if he, hitherto a man glued to the earth, was prepared to travel to the moon.

"I don't intend to change our lives *completely*," he informed his astonished family. "Once I go and collect some of the gold from the *extraordinary* abundance, we shall simply relocate ourselves in California. Have no doubt; business establishments with the growing Pacific trade will need double-entry bookkeeping. We shall return to our regular life. The only thing that will change is our geography. But if I'm to regain

our fortunes, I must hurry. Many are already going.” There was no debate. Father *was* going to California.

From that day forward, Father’s only interest, concern, talk, objective was *gold*. He was caught up in what, along the East Coast, was soon known as gold fever.

But I saw it for what it was: Father wished to go to California because he thought finding wealth would be *easy*. That wealth, he thought, would enable him to take up a position *exactly* as he had at Pratt and Willinghast. He was not so much seeking the *future* as he was trying to regain his past.

Even so, when my mother’s sister heard of Father’s plan, she was strongly opposed. “This is unthinkable. Utter folly. It must not happen.”

If I’d had any doubts, her words convinced me that it *should* happen. I did everything to encourage Father’s decision, praising him for his courage and his wisdom.

As for Mother, though she was at first much taken aback by Father’s decision, she soon became accepting and supportive. Perhaps, she told me, California *would* solve all our problems. Upon that expectation, her health improved somewhat. It was only then that I began to grasp that she too resented her sister’s interference and control of our lives. I loved her more for that.

Jacob, who had become bored with not going to school, was swept along by Father’s venture. Father’s new great wealth, he informed me, would allow us a new house—most likely

better than our Sheldon Street home, and with more servants. It would also put him in the best school, with proper friends.

He therefore pleaded that he be allowed to go west and share in what he deemed a grand adventure. Father said he could go.

I trust you have noticed that in all this hubbub there was no mention of *me*.

I have thought hard about families, and I think they are rather like the United States. That is, there is but one union, but each state is different and each has its own government. As far as I was concerned, I was my own state. My own government. For make no mistake, I saw Father's decision as a way to remove myself from the anchor that was Rhode Island, and thereby embrace *ancora*—hope.

I began by announcing that “I believe I too should go to California.”

To my delight, Jacob agreed with me. True, I quickly realized it was only because he fancied the notion that once we were there, I would take care of him.

To that, I groaned but took care to do so only *inwardly*.

Mother, more reasoned, told Father that there was nothing I could do for her which a servant could not accomplish.

“But once you,” she reminded Father, “are at the gold mines and have found a comfortable home—which I assume you'll do quickly—you'll need someone to keep it clean and

in order. As a girl, Tory is best suited for that. She'll be much more helpful to you there than being here with me."

I was not pleased by those *domestic* prospects, but once again decided silence should be the preferred disguise and therefore kept my thoughts to myself lest I be left behind.

Alas, even then, Father's response was "Is not Tory's greater obligation as a young woman to stay and care for her ill mother? I am sure Aunt Lavinia would say as much."

As you might guess, *that* was reason (however *unreasonable*) enough to pitch my desire to go west even higher.

"Besides," continued Father, "as your aunt has said, a girl is too frail to undertake such an arduous expedition."

I—who had spent days sewing and lifting heavy bolts of cloth—was mortified.

Please, do not misunderstand: I love my father, but he is one of those men who rarely change their ideas. Then, when he *does* alter his views, he claims he has *always* held such thoughts and hews to the new ones as rigidly as the old. It was apparent to me that these new ideas were designed to get only what *he* wanted.

Thus it was decreed I *must* stay with Mother in Providence. The two of us would join Father in California *after* he gained his fortune.

Ah! But recall my motto: *My will shall decide my destiny*. I had already decided that California was my destiny.

Not allowed to go? I reminded myself that, just as for Jane Eyre, each new problem was but a riddle-me-ree to be solved. I would have to act for myself. I, therefore, waited for my opportunity.

Meanwhile, for Father, the first great question was, How might he travel west?

It appeared there were those who actually walked across the entire continent by way of the Great Western Desert. It was the cheapest way, but surely the most strenuous.

Or he might take a ship to Panama, and then find a way to traverse the isthmus and thence (again by ship) to California. That route held the grave danger of jungle illness.

Or he could sail around the Horn of South America. That journey covered fourteen *thousand* miles and took as long as *seven* months. Nonetheless, while it was the longest journey—in time and space—it was considered safest. Also, Father could take a direct passage from Providence, which was a major seaport at the head of Narragansett Bay. The bay, in turn, led to the Atlantic Ocean.

Father, ever the prudent man, chose to sail from Providence and go around the Horn.

The next question was that of cost. The newspaper was full of advertisements for passenger tickets to the West Coast that cost at a minimum two hundred and fifty dollars. Of course, once in California, he must have other expenses: the

right clothing, mining tools, and housing. At the moment, our family funds were exceedingly low. To raise enough money for his trip, he decided to sell our Sheldon Street home, his only source of ready cash.

“Since we shall all resettle in California,” he informed us, “we’ll have no need for this house. I shall sell it and use the money to carry us west.”

Sell our house! Hurrah for being *plucky*. How exciting all these alterations.

Alas, Mother’s health did not yet allow her to leave her sofa and travel. Dr. Laxton’s word was law. Only when he deemed her fully recovered might she voyage out.

“Women are by nature weak,” the doctor proclaimed with all the gravity of his Harvard Medical School degree. Clearly, he had not read *Jane Eyre*.

Therefore, it was agreed that Mother should stay in Aunt Lavinia’s house until such time as she regained her vigor. It was further commanded that I should stay there with her. I was horrified.

Ah, but don’t think me idle. I kept trying to find a way to travel west.

Meanwhile, Father, swept up in his enthusiasm (as were so many other Providence men), arranged to sell our house and used some of the money to book passage on a vessel, the *Stephanie K*. A ship of 450 tons, she was scheduled to leave

Providence for California in February of 1849. Father selected sleeping berths that, he said, were big enough for him and Jacob.

“Are these berths big enough to accommodate *me*?” I asked, making one final plea to be included.

Father replied, “Tory, as I have told you many times, you must remain in Providence with Mother.”

I did not ask again.

Happily, there was another *magnificent* idea in *Jane Eyre*, which came to my rescue. I beg you to go to chapter 34 and find this sentence. It reads:

I would always rather be happy than dignified.

This unfearing sentiment was the key to solving my difficulty.

Recall: Jacob and I had been conspirators in the matter of my schooling for some time, so we knew how to do things without our parents’ knowledge. Is there anything sweeter than siblings’ secrets?

Also, had I not joined the library on my own? Had I not been reading secretly? Studied school in secret? Walked alone to downtown Providence?

The plan I devised was simple: when the *Stephanie K.* left Providence, I would be on board—as a stowaway.

WHEN I TOLD MY BROTHER WHAT I INTENDED to do, he became a willing—if wide-eyed—accomplice. I also think he felt better knowing that I would be with him in California.

Still, my plan had considerable risks.

I might be noticed by my father and put ashore.

Being a stowaway, I might be accused of a crime and the captain might lock me up in the ship's brig, thereby bringing shame to myself and my family.

I might so distress my mother as to set back her recovery.

I might be discovered by the crew of the *Stephanie K.* and once at sea tossed overboard and (God preserve me) drown.

Worst of all? I might fail in my endeavor and be forced to remain in dull Providence with my aunt.

But I had read widely. Thus I had also come upon what that great American Benjamin Franklin wrote: “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

I presumed that most passengers on the ship would be men. Would I not be able to steal my way aboard by being dressed as a young man? Did that make me uneasy? Fearful? Of course! But I, choosing happiness rather than dignity, was so determined to go to California that I pushed all such worrisome thoughts away.

How was I to do it?

Recall that I had been able to save my earnings, such as they were. Recall that Father had refused them. My honest wages became my means to find my dishonest way.

Once again, I ventured into town. This time, with Jacob at my side, I searched out a shop in the Providence business district that sold used articles of clothing. I told the shop clerk that I wished to purchase inexpensive work clothing for my (nonexistent) *older* brother.

“Since he is about my height,” I added, “and I being tall for my age, I can try them on.”

The shop assistant eyed me with a blatant suspicion, but I explained: “My brother is too busy working to come himself.”

I bought a man’s collapsible tall hat, shirt, trousers, jacket, and boots and carried them away. They were previously used, and visibly so, but that only added to their value. A disguise

does best when dingy. As soon as we returned home, it was easy enough to stow the clothing at the *bottom* of Jacob's trunk.

With my masquerade at hand, my scheming was almost done. All I needed to do was wait for Father to embark upon the *Stephanie K.* and sail to California.

But there was one other precarious thing which I had to do: I must tell Mother about my intentions.

Why did I have to tell Mother? Because I could not simply *vanish*. My disappearance would upset her to the extreme and be harmful to her health. No, she needed to know about the secret enterprise upon which her courageous daughter was embarking.

But what if she said no?

It was a hazard I had to risk. If a girl *must* put faith in *one* person, it should be her mother.

By then, our house having been sold, Mother and the rest of us were installed in my aunt's house on Benefit Street. Stuffed as it was with heavy furniture in drab colors, heavy drapes at the window made it feel as if we were living in a dim and crowded mausoleum. There, Father all but waited on my aunt, always agreeing with whatever she said. It made me ill.

Then too, Aunt Lavinia checked my clothing daily, looked to see if my hands were clean, asked me what I intended to do each hour.

"You are not my mother," I protested, often.

“Your weak mother is ill because of your foolish father.”

If I required any more motivation to escape Providence, my aunt supplied it every moment of every day.

Finding a time when Mother and I were alone—she resting in bed, her red shawl around her, me holding her hand—I told her what I had conspired.

As I revealed my plan to her, she looked at me with astonishment, until the moment came when she outright cried. “And do you,” she said, “truly think you can do this?”

“I will do it,” I said, working hard to show only eagerness, not my private unease.

“Won’t you be in great danger?”

“Father will be there, and of course, Jacob will be too.”

“But—”

“Mother, you know how Aunt Lavinia stridently disapproves of me, everything I do and say. She makes this a distressed household, a source of continual irritation to your health. And remember,” I reminded her, “you originally agreed that I should go with Father.”

Mother did not contest my view. Rather she said, “But what could I tell your aunt as to your whereabouts?”

“Tell her that at the last moment Father changed his mind and brought me along.

“Mother,” I pressed, “remind her that Father and Jacob know nothing of housekeeping, cooking, nor cleaning. I can

do all those things. She will approve of that. Besides, we both know I am of no use to you here.”

Then I added my decisive argument: “Mother, I prefer to be happy rather than dignified.”

Mother smiled and squeezed my hand as much as her strength allowed. “Young ladies today,” she said, “are much more daring than they were when I was your age. Yes, I can see you being of assistance to Father and Jacob. They will certainly need a woman to run our fine new home.”

That was hardly my desire or plan, but once again I kept my thoughts to myself.

I went down on my knees and put my hands in a prayerful position. “Mother, you will join us as soon as possible. In my heart, I believe all will go well. May I?”

She gazed at me for a long while with sad but loving eyes. Then, with much tenderness, she said, “Happy the mother who can admire her daughter. I give permission.”

I leaped up and hugged her. Then she unwrapped her favorite red shawl from her shoulders and presented it to me. “Wear it so I can always embrace you.”

In other words, Mother agreed to keep my secret. Of course, having a clandestine plan is one thing. Putting it to work was quite another.

FEBRUARY 12, 1849.

If you have never taken part in the departure of a great ocean sailing ship, I pity you. One cannot begin to comprehend the commotion and exhilarating chaos that prevails. It is like a Fourth of July and New Year's Eve in one, and in my view, all great changes in life should be celebrated.

Consider the Providence wharf that cold and blustery day, with bits of confetti-like snow flecking the air: Crowds of people going on and off the great three-masted ship *Stephanie K.* People joyfully or tearfully wishing one another well. People with faces full of sorrow. People with faces full of glee. People engaged in heart-clinging farewells. People making hasty goodbyes, as if separation could not come fast

enough. On the wharf, men's tall hats so numerous it was like a city of smokeless chimneys.

Faces full of expectations. Faces full of dread. Faces pale. Faces flushed. Tears and laughter bucketing from the same hearts. Need I say more? An entire encyclopedia of emotions.

Or, if you prefer (as I did) a perfect melodrama, complete with music, for there on the wharf was a church choir that sang an optimistic hymn that God should bless us all.

There was, too, all manner of cargo—trunks, bales, and boxed belongings—which needed to be brought aboard. Food and water were likewise carried on.

Of course, midst the mingling multitudes of immigrants was the sailing crew, which for the *Stephanie K.* numbered thirty-two, plus officers, including a captain with an elegant black beard.

In other words, a swirling, swarming, and scintillating ship.

The anticipation was intoxicating. Even I, who *never* touched ardent spirits, knew that.

Father, being forty-nine years of age, looked to be the oldest passenger. Most of the travelers on board—there were about one hundred and seventy in total—were young men going to California for gold. Gold fever at the highest temperature. Indeed, the word “gold” buzzed in my ears as if I were standing amidst a swarm of bees in search of summer's golden nectar.

On board, there were only a few women and fewer children. That, I admit, gave me new feelings of trepidation. But I was bolstered by a resolve that was churning like a nor'easter about to burst.

Father and Jacob had made their leave-takings to Mother at her bedside in my aunt's house. Those moments were truly tender, with as much sentiment and clear declarations of love as my parents were capable of expressing.

“Dear wife, I shall think of you often.”

“Beloved husband, I shall pray for your success.”

In secret, I had made my own goodbyes to Mother the night before. I think Mother had begun to relish this family intrigue as much as I did. I rather suspect she was finding being a convalescent—under the imperial eye of her sister—ever drearier.

Indeed, Mother, now very much wishing to travel west, spoke of embarking on one of the fast new clipper ships as soon as she could. As for the undoubted assurance of my father's great wealth to come, it lifted her spirits and was a buffer against Aunt Lavinia.

“Come as quickly as you can,” I urged her.

“Everything will be better there,” she said, as much to herself as to me.

“Dearest Mother, thank you for believing in me. Know that I shall always have you in my thoughts and heart.”

On the day of departure, I accompanied Father and Jacob upon the *Stephanie K.* There was no hindrance to my boarding since many people were going on to say goodbye to passengers. Midst all that churning of emotions and embraces, no one questioned why I was there.

Once on board, as planned, I asked that Jacob be allowed to show me the sleeping place Father had reserved.

“Of course,” said Father.

In haste, my brother led me below. I quickly learned that upon these large ships there is the main deck and the bottom hold, wherein cargo is carried. Between these two areas was the “tween deck,” where passengers had their belongings and sleeping compartments.

I was surprised that these compartments consisted of nothing more than what looked like crudely constructed shelves for library books, the shelves hardly more than twenty-five inches wide. All the same, I was much relieved to see Jacob’s luggage stowed there, in particular his trunk, which contained my disguise. I now knew where I could find it. When Jacob and I saw the trunk, we exchanged self-assured, conspiratorial grins.

“Where is the ladies’ dressing room?” I asked.

“I’ve no idea,” he returned.

While that unnerved me considerably, there was absolutely no time to pause and investigate, so we hastened back to the main deck. Once there, the three of us—Father, Jacob, and

I—went to the gangway, where I spoke what I hoped *sounded* like heartfelt adieus to both Father and Jacob.

As soon as that was accomplished, I walked down the gangplank to the wharf, turned back, and waved a flamboyant farewell. After they, in turn, saluted me, I took a few steps away.

Immediately Jacob did as I had instructed him. He pulled at Father's greatcoat and dragged him away to see some far corner of the great ship. Then came the most *thrilling* moment—up to that time—of my entire life.

I rushed *back* onto the ship via the same footbridge. Once on board, I raced down to Jacob's berth. Had I not learned the way? But since I had not discovered where the women's quarters were, and with my heart beating like an uncaged bird, I had no choice but to open Jacob's trunk and withdraw from its bottom the clothing I had purchased.

The tween deck was teeming with people—passengers, families, and crew bidding farewell. Thus it was that no one cared when I flung a blanket over myself. Beneath it, I dressed as a man, in trousers, shirt, and boots, my long chestnut hair stuffed into a black top hat which sat low upon my brow. When I stepped free and assayed my appearance, I had to suppress my glee as to how I must look. Did ever a girl's heart flutter so?

Leaving my girl's attire in Jacob's trunk, I returned to the main deck, there to mingle among the multitudes of young

men. Let it be said: it is fine to be noticed, but it is *delightful* to be *invisible*.

Warning whistles began to be piped. Ship departure! Passengers who were embarking lined the rails and waved to those who retreated to the wharf.

At the library in Providence, I had read Mr. Poe's story "The Purloined Letter," which had impressed me with the idea that the best hiding place is right in the open. I, therefore, remained at the top rail in full view—in my costume, of course—and waved to people on the dock as *if* saying goodbye to kin. Sure enough, although I stood boldly before all, I went completely unnoticed.

Despite the snow, the crew climbed the rigging like sprightly spiders. Sails—from flying jib (at the bow) to spanker (at the stern) to main royal (the topmost sail)—were loosed and sheeted home. The lines that bound the *Stephanie K.* to the east coast of the United States were cast off. Our ship was warped into Narragansett Bay. Having wind and tide in our favor, off we went. *It was absolutely thrilling* so that I fairly tingled with delight. No one—save my brother, Jacob—knew I was a stowaway.

I suppose it is immodest to say, but I was exceedingly pleased with myself. There I was, engaged in a true adventure. None of my mother's romance books equaled this. I was the heroine in my own story.

We sailed down Narragansett Bay with a colony of seagulls as our airborne escort. To my ears, their squawks sounded as if they were laughing with glee, echoing my own delight. Above, the bulky, billowy sails were our own soufflé of clouds. With the bay waters smack-smooth, there was little in the way of disturbing movement.

Shortly after we embarked, all passengers were called on deck, and the captain welcomed us by reading out his rules.

“All passengers must rise by seven a.m. unless excused by the ship’s doctor. Bedtime is no later than ten p.m. No breakfast until all decks are swept and your bedding stowed. No liquor allowed. The use of gunpowder is strictly prohibited. A religious service will be held every Sunday morning by our chaplain. All are required to attend. My first mate shall make sure these rules are enforced.”

You may easily imagine how impatient I was, but I had to stay in disguise until we were fully out to sea. Mind, I needed to hide for only the first two days of a seven-month voyage. It greatly helped that during those first days the ship was in a state of continual disarray as passengers learned their way about. In addition, the *Stephanie K.* was fairly packed with young men, a great many of whom were beardless youths, and