

FROM

Prairie Fever

BY MICHAEL PARKER



In the warm months, Elise ran barefoot in the fields with the Bulgarian boys from the neighboring farm.

“They speak gibberish, you speak gibberish, why don’t you marry them?” said Lorena. “You could get yourself in the paper once and for all.”

The four Bulgarian children and their parents had lived in a one-room sod house, but now they had a real house with two rooms aboveground. They stored potatoes and onions and sometimes bales of hay in the sod house. Elise liked to huddle there out of the wind with the newspaper. She would read to the three boys—Andon, Andrey, and Damyan. There was also a girl named Blaguna, but she had married and moved to Gotebo. She was a year older than Lorena, and for some reason, Lorena admired her, though Elise found her haughty. Her breath smelled of paprika.

“Is paprika a first cousin once removed to pepper?” Elise asked her sister once.

“*Of* pepper, not *to* it.” Lorena was particular about her prepositions.

Maybe Elise preferred the company of the Bulgarian boys because her own brothers, Elton and Albert, had died from prairie fever.

Lorena blamed their father for their brothers’ deaths. She said he stored water in barrels and allowed the cows to drink from it and then dipped Mother’s pitchers in the tank and set them out on the dinner table.

Elise said that their father did not know that prairie fever had gotten into the tank, and Lorena chose not to tell her that prairie fever was a euphemism for typhoid. Elise was led, by omission, to believe that her brothers had died from an allergic reaction to the prairie itself. She did not understand what in their constitutions made them susceptible to such an allergy when she and

Lorena, who drank the same water, as did her mother and father, survived. Maybe certain people are supposed to keep out of the wind was all she could figure. But the wind blew also in Axtell, Kansas, which is where they had been before they came to Lone Wolf. Maybe Axtell was not considered prairie? Her memories of it were dim as she was five when they moved. She remembered only the house they lived in, which Lorena called nothing but a shack. The walls were also lined with newspapers, and a ditch ran behind the house where men did their business in daylight.

Her mother had gone for two years to Knox College in Illinois. There she learned to play the organ. Every night before her boys died, she had combed their hair. Mother of Pearl, Elise called her, though she had no daughter named Pearl. That was just Elise's name for her, or one of them.

Where her parents met, or how, was not a story told to Elise. She knew that her father came to Axtell to work on the railroad, and that he was born in Pennsylvania, and that he had many ideas. He called himself an "idea man." Other idea men would stop by to talk to him. Elise's mother would watch them from the kitchen window, the one above the sink, as if keeping an eye on small children.

One of the men, Wilbur Shilling's father, Bud, was big. Elise and Lorena called him Big Idea.

Apparently one of their father's ideas had led them to Oklahoma. First to nearby Hobart, the county seat, along with thirteen thousand other people. Their father had read in the Marysville, Kansas, newspaper about a land lottery in Hobart. They lived for a month in a tent. Elise did not mind the smell of moldy canvas, which reminded her of bread, Madame Curie, and bugles. At dusk she and Lorena took their baby brothers in strollers to the edge of the camp called Ragtown to see the Kiowa. They came every night to stare. People described them as "proud," but they appeared to Elise very curious. Elise had never seen Indians. If they had them in Axtell, Kansas, they kept them locked up somewhere or made them take back alleys.

On the day of the lottery, their father's number was called. He threw his hat in the air, which made Elton, who was four years old then, whoop and clap. Eleven thousand people were turned away that day. He had won, "free and clear," he said, 160 acres in Lone Wolf.

“This is the happiest I have ever seen Father,” said Lorena.

“Yes,” said their mother. They waited for more, but she tended to the baby, Albert, who would die because of their father’s happiness. Their father was happy over winning the right to work acres of matted sod that proved so resistant to the dull plow he bought off a German that he had to straight-away use all the money they had saved for a windmill to hire a team of men with a special steel plow to break it up. A windmill to draw clean water from the ground would have saved her boys. This was what their mother meant by yes.

“Where is Joe McNutt? I heard someone inquiring about him,” Elise quoted from the *Kiowa County News*. They were almost home. They could tell they were almost home by their horse Sandy’s breathing. He breathed differently when he was close to being put up and allowed his fill of hay.

“It’s an interesting question,” said Lorena.

“Do you happen to know Joe McNutt?”

“I have probably made his acquaintance,” said Lorena. She reached up to mess with her hair, getting it ready to pearl-handle. Probably she was pursing her lips. Elise wanted to pinch her. It wasn’t too cold to play in the barn. Sandy *lived* in the barn. Her father had only twenty head of cattle left because of an outbreak of something, who knew what, but the cows *lived* in the snowy fields. Sometimes they had icicles hanging from their noses.

“Blaguna probably has an icicle hanging from her nose,” said Elise.

“Blaguna is well married,” said Lorena.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that she married well.”

“What are the degrees of marriage, I would like to know?”

“*Well* would top anyone’s list, obviously.”

“Did Mother marry well?”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“Why do you like to do the same thing every day?”

“Are you referring to washing beneath my armpits?”

“Mother of Pearl,” said Elise. Lorena did not know that this was one of Elise’s names for their mother. She thought Elise was referring to the handles of the comb and mirror and she wasted no time informing Elise that mother-of-pearl was not pearl but a cheap imitation of.

“I think that is insulting to mothers everywhere.”

“I didn’t name it.”

“I named Sandy.”

“Not everyone calls him that, you know,” said Lorena.

“But when I call him, he responds.”

“He is responding to your voice. He does not speak English.”

“He speaks island.”

“What is island?”

“Just never mind,” said Elise. Explaining gave her a mild headache and made her sleepy at once. The Kiowa were a proud people and a curious tribe at once. Pride and curiosity somehow did not seem to go together in Elise’s mind. Maybe because her mother did not like gossip and if you asked a question about someone—for instance, if you were to march right in the house, because they had reached the house, because Elise heard the screen door slam shut by the wind, which meant her mother was struggling across the yard to unpin them—and asked her where was Joe McNutt, she would say it was none of their business, even if told that someone was inquiring about it in the newspaper, therefore making it more of a public notice than idle gossip.

Her mother’s pride did not permit curiosity. It only permitted her to say yes when she meant, What has your father gone and done now?

In the barn, combing the snow from Sandy, wiping him down with the blankets her father had bought from the Kiowa, Elise wondered if she would do well to marry one of the Bulgarian brothers. She tried to think which one. Andon was closest to her in age and he did not have a thing wrong with his nose, or his entire face, for that matter, but Damyan, whom the boys at school called Damn when the teacher was not around, paid closest attention when they met in the old sod house and she read aloud to them from the newspaper. He liked hearing who visited whom, the part Lorena and Damyan’s brothers and sometimes even Elise liked the least. The others were bored by it, but the section made Elise sad, for no one ever came to visit her family from Hobart of a Sunday, much less some famous relative who carried in his possession at all times a stout old-fashioned walking stick previously owned by a statesman. Only Big Idea and the other idea men came by their place, but their visits did not make it into the paper.

The Bulgarians worked in the fields in fair weather, which meant that winter was the only time Elise got to play with them. If it was particularly cold, like it was out today, her mother would tell her not to go, but Elise was able to change her mind.

“I will take Sandy,” she said, for it was a little over a mile across the fields to the Bulgarians’ farm, and if the snow blew up, it was easy to get lost. But Sandy knew the way.

Her mother wrapped her in her grandfather’s greatcoat, or perhaps it was her great-grandfather’s coat? It was huge and itchy and Sandy did not care for it. “Leave before the sun drops behind the trees,” her mother would say, but she must have been thinking about Kansas, because in Lone Wolf there were no trees to speak of. To the east, south, and north was the ocean of prairie and just to the west ran the worn but noble Wichita Mountains, rising from miles of flatness as if discarded, like the detritus cast off by wagon trains of old. The Kiowa thought the mountains sacred, but Elise found them depressing and would prefer nature to speed up its course and wear them down to pebbles, so her view would be unencumbered by lumps of rock and dark brown dirt.

“Sometimes when we arrive at Oklahoma we burn cow dung,” said Damyan one day in the abandoned sod house. His brothers shushed him. He was often caught staring out the window by Professor Smythe, who preceded Mr. McQueen. Elise would stare at him staring. His eyes, like hers, could see beyond the playing field, the stable, the outhouse. He was the only person she had ever heard say that barbed wire was a bad idea. She thought to ask her father about it, but if it wasn’t his idea, he wasn’t that interested.

But Damyan did not like Mr. McQueen.

“He is not much,” said Damyan that day in the sod house.

“Not much what?”

He shrugged and grabbed the paper, as if he could read it. She snatched it back.

“I do not have time to teach you English, by the way.”

“I speak English good.”

“Perfect,” said Elise. “But back to Mr. McQueen. He is not much what?”

“Something is in his belfry,” said Anton.

“Well, I should hope so,” said Elise. “I would think they made sure of that before they hired him.”

She learned from the Bulgarian brothers that none of the boys at school cared for Mr. McQueen. But none could say why. If only they had said *why*.

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