

THE WEDDING TRUNK

by

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VISION

THE WEDDING TRUNK is an adaptation of true stories about women who settled in the American West.

MARGARET is the narrator. She gives each character's background and explains the events that led up to her photographs. She can stand aside from others or interact with them as needed. Initially, she opens the trunk and sets up her camera equipment. At the close, she puts things away, leaving the photos alone above the stage, like memories suspended in time.

When a woman's story is told, she goes to the trunk and takes from it what she needs. The other characters have a costume piece or prop that identifies them. Projected overhead is a corresponding photograph of Margaret. When Margaret snaps her photo, the woman comes to life by telling her story.

The sets are minimal and representative rather than realistic, with lighting used to indicate changes in time and place. The main prop is a large wooden trunk. In each scene, the box is turned or added to, representing something else; a wagon, a doorway, a window, a seat on a train, a washtub, a riverbank, a church pew, a coffin, or a desk.

CHARACTERS

(In order of appearance)

MARGARET	(68) the narrator, is a frontier photographer. The other women and girls have been subjects of her camera.
LILLIE WILSON	(17) is a prospective bride and recipient of the wedding trunk.
ANTOINETTE CONSTANT	(50) is a missionary
PAMELA FERGUS	(32) is setting out with her husband and small children to cross the prairie with a wagon train.
ELIZABETH SCAGGS	(18) is a runaway bride.
MARY MC CONNELL	(16) is Elizabeth's younger sister and a substitute bride.
ABIGAIL HOLSTON	(50) is the bride's mother.
OLIVE OWENS	(15) is a young schoolteacher.
MOLLIE	(35) takes in washing.
MISS ELLA	(38) a madam.
EDNA AHRENS	(78) is an Oklahoma homesteader.
MALINDA JENKINS	(28) is a run away mother.
MARY JANE HORNE	(9) is a little girl with a new stepmother.
ETHEL HORNE	(15) is Mary Jane's older sister.
NAOMI	(40) is grieving the death of her little son.

MARGARET

You're looking at this camera, aren't you? You're thinking, (beat) it is old, and so is she. You're damn right. It is old. It's a square bellows camera from the Anthony Company, I bought it the same year I married Marcus, and we went west. He told me to buy the very best, which I did. We traveled from Illinois to California that first time pulling a two-wheeled wagon. I rode on horseback all the way.

(Photographs continue to fade in and out over the top of the stage. MARGARET looks up and sees them.)

Those pictures, they're mine. I took all of them. Oh yes, Marcus got the money, but I did all the work. It was always like that — me doing the work and him taking the credit. And that's how we did the job — on credit. I kept the books and handled the finances. Somebody had to take care of the business. God knows Marcus didn't have a head for it. Oh, he had grand plans, all right. We were going to be regulars for Horace Greeley.

(MARGARET stops and looks at the audience as if they might not understand.)

Horace Greeley? The newspaperman—"Go west, young man" and all that blather. Greeley hired us to send back our photos to his eastern papers, and they used them to make the fancy line drawings for their stories about the wild, wild West.

It was one of my husband's moneymaking schemes — gold in California, a ranch in Texas, silver mining in Colorado, and selling horses in Oklahoma. I went along taking the pictures with this old camera of mine, lassoing it all in black and white. I tried to take the photos the way I saw them. I got started in Iowa, studio portraits. I used an old flatbed view camera. I remember one pretty girl. She was having her picture taken for her fiancée in Nebraska. She didn't say much (beat). Her father did most of the talking.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on MARGARET and up on LILLIE)

LILLIE

He's nothing like my father. I could tell by his letters.

(LILLIE takes out a letter from her apron pocket.)

Father says these letters are filling my head with foolish thoughts. And he won't read them to me anymore. But I've listened carefully like I do when Father reads the Psalms, and I have them mostly memorized. Even if I can't make out the words, I can see his writing is solid and firm— like how he writes my name with a large L for Lillie. This letter says that he's a carpenter by trade. The Bible says Jesus worked as a carpenter before he met up with John the Baptist. Father reads the Bible to my sister Alice and me. We've heard the Bible four times, from Genesis to Revelation. Father also quotes Proverbs and Psalms *(beat)* over and over again. I've taken to memory some of those passages. Father says I have a gift for the scriptures.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on MARGARET and up on LILLIE)

MARGARET

A gift for scripture. *(pause)* now that's a real helpful tool for earning your way. I think a young woman needs a skill— sewing, or baking, some way to earn a little money. Times were changing, and women could choose. In the boomtowns of the West, they could have a fifteen-dollar-a-week job of their own or a twelve-dollar-a-week husband. But scripture? I don't see how it comes in handy. Unless you're a preacher's wife or one of those fine ladies, that's always starting churches *(pause)* or a missionary.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on MARGARET and up on ANTOINETTE C. CONSTANT)

ANTOINETTE C. CONSTANT

It wasn't my husband's fault. I take full responsibility for what happened to us in Oklahoma. Our recommendations show that our work with the Seminoles was beyond reproach *(pause)* his and mine. *(beat)* Yes, of course, I know that he was the church's representative, but I went too *(pause)*

ANTOINETTE C. CONSTANT (Contd.)

Doesn't it say in your papers that I taught Bible classes and sewing? That's how I got to know about the old woman in the first place. *(beat)* Oh no, she wasn't in my classes. I taught the younger girls at the mission school. But I saw her around the town, and I agree she was a bit peculiar, talking to the wind, pretending to cast the evil eye. But surely educated Christian people shouldn't believe in witches.

The woman was old, without a family, no sons or daughters to take care of her, so horribly alone. But she wasn't a witch, and the trial that proclaimed she was didn't make it so. The Chief and the elders decided that she should be shot to death. No women were on that council *(pause)*. It would have been different if there were. Women understand compassion and forgiveness. It's buried deep in our bones. I had to do something. I went first to my husband, but he was against us becoming involved. So you see, it wasn't his fault, and he shouldn't be penalized. I'm the one who wrote to The Rev. Mr. Ramsey. He served the reservation before us. I asked him to save the woman's life by using his influence with the Chief and the Councilmen. He told me there was nothing he could do and warned me that I could lose my position if I interfered with Indian affairs.

I replied to him, "Mr. Ramsey, if my tenure as a teacher depends on my remaining silent when one of my sex, a helpless old woman, is condemned to death as a witch, I do not care to remain longer among the Seminoles."

When I saw that Reverend Ramsey wouldn't help, I wrote to the Indian Agent, Major Taft. I told him the Chief had already signed the "Death Warrant" and appealed to him to do something to save the poor woman's life.

On the day of the execution, people began to assemble early in the morning. I saw them lead the old woman to the church. Her coffin was ready *(pause)*, a rough little wooden box and the men were standing around with loaded guns, just waiting to be part of the firing squad. All morning, I waited, and still no word from the Indian Agent *(pause)*. The Government was my only hope. At noon, there was a loud rap at my door. My little boy went to see who it was. "Mama," he called.

ANTOINETTE C. CONSTANT (Contd.)

There's a white man here to see you! "To my great joy, a United States soldier was standing at the door holding an official envelope. My husband took the letter to the council house and delivered it to the Chief. The letter ordered the Chief to stop the execution and warned him that the entire Seminole Council would be held responsible if the old woman were executed. The Chief was very upset and asked who wrote to the Agent. My husband replied that I had (beat) with his approval. The Chief didn't say another word. He signaled to set the woman free and walked away.

I thought it was over, and I had no idea how upset everyone would be. First, the Indians demanded my husband's resignation, and then the church reprimanded us for getting involved (pause). Reverend Ramsey said they had to let us go. That's why this job is so important to my husband and me.

(pause)

The old woman? Yes, I saw her again; she passed by my house on her way home. No, she didn't thank me; she didn't even speak. *(Laughs to herself)* Maybe she thought I shouldn't have become *(beat) involved*.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on ANTOINETTE and up on MARGARET)

MARGARET

Not being a religious person myself, I still admire those first women missionaries who came out West. When news got back, they'd made the crossing safely. It spawned a whole a rush of women who felt they could do the same. Between 1840 and 1869, some 350,000 people flowed through the South Pass gateway to the far reaches of the West. Tens of thousands of them were women. Why did they do it? Some realized the scarcity of their sex on the frontier. Others yearned to be rid of society's shackles and be themselves. Even without Marcus, I might have gone. Yep, even without him.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on MARGARET and up on PAMELA FERGUS)

PAMELA FERGUS

Back the wagon up close to the porch. That way, I can load it first thing in the morning. Oh, I'm not worried, I've laid awake for the past couple of nights thinking about it, and I've got the list your father sent me. He's divided what I'm to bring to Montana into sections, Teams, Provisions, Clothing, Stationary, and extras for use on the road. I have to get everything in this one wagon, along with you children, and drive it to Illinois. That's where we'll meet up with Mr. Rockwell,

one of your father's friends. He will provide us with two more covered wagons, six more yokes of oxen, and a good milk cow. Oh, there's no need to fret. Haven't we been on our own for nearly four years waiting for your father to send word? You boys are old enough. I'm sure we can manage.

Getting everything into this wagon (*pause*) now that's going to be a problem. I've given my better things to my Aunt to keep for me, like my Grandmother's velvet settee and my china cabinet. I can send for them later after we get settled (*pause*) or not. My piano and the mahogany music stand, I had to sell. (*sigh*) Your father is right. There's no sense in taking all those fancy things. I won't be needing them in a place like (*pause*) Montana.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on PAMELA FERGUS and up on

LILLIE takes out another letter)

LILLIE

This is his first letter. It came seven weeks ago last Friday. In this one, he introduces himself as Matthew Wilson, age 28, a Christian man in thought and deed. He says he attended Father's church service nearly three years ago and still remembers Father's sermon on the Prodigal Son. Father liked that part. He read it to me twice.

(LILLIE opens the letter)

In this letter, Mr. Wilson first stated his intentions about marrying. He mentions Alice, but she's already married to Chester Pettit. They wed last winter and left in the early spring for Oregon, and father has yet to hear from her. I guess Chester isn't much of a writer. Frankly, I don't remember Mr. Matthew Wilson, but he remembered me.

LILLIE (Contd.)

In this second letter, he tells Father that he saw me, and I was just fourteen, and Alice was two years older. He remembered me wearing a blue dress. I guess I was. I only have three dresses, and the two better ones are blue.

(LILLIE looks down at what she is wearing)

I wouldn't be wearing this old thing to Sunday service. Father must have written back to him in the next few days because in this letter—

(LILLIE pulls out a third letter from her pocket)

He says he appreciated knowing about Alice and how he's thought it over and wants to marry me!

(Music Transition as Lights go down on PAMELA FERGUS and up on MARGARET)

MARGARET

Wedding pictures were my stock and trade. One of the few times a woman had a new dress and her picture taken at the same time. I saw so many faces full of hope, counting only on good things to come.

Their heads chock full of stories their husbands told them and grand plans for a new life. Later on, when they were worn out and beaten down, they weren't as eager to stand still for any camera, and on the frontier, women wed as young as fifteen, sometimes as old as twenty-three. Some children were spoken for at eleven and twelve. So desperate was one man for a bride that he rode from house to house with a long pole, tapping at each door and crying out from horseback. "Are there any daughters within to marry?"

(Laughs) Damn foolishness. One fourteen-year-old bride, about to marry a Colonel, clung to her dolls at the altar. Just another child who would be a grandmother before she turned thirty-five. It's my job to compose the picture. I am an artist of sorts. And I keep my eyes open. One couple, Mr. and Mrs. John McConnell *(pause)*, well, few marriages were sweetness and honeysuckle back then.

(Musical Transition as Lights go down on MARGARET and come up on two sisters, MARY and ELIZABETH, and their mother, ABIGAIL, ELIZABETH holds a bouquet)

MARY

On the day of the wedding, people from all over the territory came to see Mr. McConnell marry my older sister Elizabeth. Mother had decorated the front parlor with wild daisies and roses from the garden. The ceremony was to begin precisely at six o'clock.

ELIZABETH

Mr. McConnell was very exact about the time. He's a very serious man.

ABIGAIL

The groom rented a room at the hotel for the evening—the next day, he planned to leave for the Dakotas, taking my daughter Elizabeth with him, of course.

MARY

He was a widower and old –almost forty.

ELIZABETH

I can tell you. I pitied his first wife. On the nights he came calling, the clock in the front parlor just folded its hands-time went so slow.

ABIGAIL

If only Elizabeth had spoken up before Mr. McConnell talked to her father. My husband is a reasonable man, and she knew that.

MARY

Sister also knows that when Father gives his word there is no changing it.

ABIGAIL

It's true. He's full of determination once he sets his mind to something.

ELIZABETH

Before the ceremony, Mother served plenty of food and strong drink. Guests came early in the morning and it was well into the afternoon before anyone showed the slightest interest in my nuptials. The hall clock had just struck half past the hour when Father came upstairs to get me. *(pause)* I wasn't there.

(MARY gives ELIZABETH a hat and satchel from the trunk. The sisters hug one another goodbye. ELIZABETH, unsure what to do with the flowers, hands them to MARY at the very last moment)

MARY

I watched them ride away on horseback. It was so romantic.

ABIGAIL

She left with Eli, our hired hand. It seems that they had been sweethearts for nearly two years.

MARY

They left me to tell Father and Mother, which I was glad to do. The way I saw it, Father was wrong to make the contract with Mr. McConnell without talking to Elizabeth first.

ABIGAIL

At first, he didn't say a word. He just stood there the longest time looking out that open window. As if staring into the night sky could bring the two of them back. Finally, he turned and said, "There are people downstairs waiting for a wedding and I won't be shamed. If John McConnell is willing to marry a younger and prettier bride, there will be a wedding tonight as planned." Like I said, once he makes up his mind about something. I followed him downstairs and saw him motion for Mr. McConnell to come into the front hall. I watched Mr. McConnell's face turn red as a garden tomato when he heard about Elizabeth. Then just like that, he nodded to my husband, and it was settled.

MARY

That's all. With just a quick bob of the head like this, my whole life changed. I ran back into my room and hid under the bed.

ABIGAIL

I tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't hear me.

MARY

When the door opened, I could hear the people downstairs still drinking and celebrating. No one even knew that Elizabeth was gone.

ABIGAIL

He gave her five minutes. He said that Mr. McConnell had waited long enough. After he left, I pulled her out from under the bed and helped her put on Elizabeth's wedding dress.

MARY

That was my punishment—for helping Elizabeth. I cried all through the whole ceremony.

ABIGAIL

We both cried.

MARY

That's why my eyes are puffy and red in the photograph. I couldn't stop my sniffing.

ABIGAIL

After it was over, everyone praised my husband on how he handled things. They said he was doing what was best for Mary and Mr. McConnell. They may be right. It would be a shame to lose such a fine son-in-law. They just need some time. Things are going to work out. They always do—

MARY

But he's almost forty. Mr. McConnell is a serious *(beat)* old man.

(Musical Transition as Lights down on Mary up on Lillie)

LILLIE

In this letter, Mr. Wilson told me about his wagon train trip to Nebraska. The journey took them nearly eight weeks, lots of sickness— cholera. He wrote that crossing the Platte River was so dangerous that people had to unload most of their belongings to make it to the other side. Mr. Wilson says: "The Platte is hard to ford, destitute of fish, too dirty to bathe in, and too thick to drink."

(Laughs) Mr. Wilson certainly has a way of saying things, not like Father. He's been living in Nebraska for almost two years, plenty of time to make improvements and claim his land. He says the Nebraska prairies remind him of an "ocean of grass." I've never seen a real ocean, let alone one made of grass.

LILLIE (Contd.)

(LILLIE crosses over and touches the top of the trunk)

When this trunk arrived, I hadn't said, "Yes." I was still thinking about Mr. Wilson's proposal. In fact, I couldn't think of anything else. But Father had already decided. He wrote back and gave his word. Then yesterday, the depot man who lost his leg in the war brought this trunk over. He carried it up the porch steps and right in here to the front parlor. The man called it my wedding trunk, without even knowing who it was from or who it was for. He wiped his brow and said, "This is a damn fine piece of work. I felt so proud. I wanted to tell the man that Mr. Wilson had made this trunk for me. But that's prideful. *(Whispers)* "Damn, fine piece of work." Father didn't say anything. He doesn't approve of swearing.

PAMELA FERGUS

Once I get to Council Bluffs, that's the jumping-off point for the trip across the plains. Your father says I need to get everything on this provision list: 600 pounds of flour, 300 pounds of meal, 50 pounds of beans. *(beat)* Oh, that sounds like a mighty lot of beans. One hundred pounds of rice, 50 pounds of cheese, 60 pounds of butter, and 400 pounds of sugar plus two barrels of crackers, 20 gallons of syrup, and a goodly amount of black tea, coffee, salt, and bacon.

We'll be building a new home in Montana *(pause)*. I must bring some padlocks, two half-boxes of window glaze, two kegs of assorted nails, screws, and a packet of miniature shoe tacks along with a shovel, hoe, and bucksaw. We need assorted ammunition, five cartridges boxes, shot, powder, and caps. *(whispers)* While I was ordering, I bought some marigold seeds. I'll stuff them in my stockings and apron pockets. Your father won't mind *(pause)*; they don't take much room.

MARGARET

(MARGARET rummages through photos in the trunk)

Look at these sod houses. One more sorry than the next. Shabby, dark little places no better than gopher dwellings. A leaky roof, dirt floor. When it was dry, you could scrub it like a wood floor, but everything turned to muck when the rain poured in. I was never in a sod house where the woman didn't try to make it homier. Women papered their walls with old newspapers or tacked

MARGARET(Contd.)

up cloth to make the house snug and cheery; rags for a rug, old dresses for curtains. A keg became a footstool, upholstered with a used pair of pants. And outside women planted flowers and trees from seeds they had brought with them, always trying to make it look like their homes back east. And once the house was done, they started building schools.

PAMELA FERGUS

Your father asked me to bring writing paper. He plans to write about our experience in the Montana Territory, and I am to bring along two reams of good white letter paper and five dollars worth of stamped envelopes. He's asked for two gold pens for your children to learn to write, two large bottles of ink, and two-dozen lead pencils, along with four slates and books for your schooling. I do want you all to be readers like your father.

(Musical Transition as Lights go down on PAMELA FERGUS and up on MARGARET

MARGARET

I used to take school photographs. There was always a joker or two in the back, too fidgety to stand still. And the schoolmarms—many of them were just a few months older than the youngsters they were teaching. Most schools were only in session three months out of the year. Schoolteachers had to scramble to keep themselves going with other jobs or live for 12 months on three months' salary. They were paid twenty dollars a month to teach, keep the schoolhouse in repair and provide the necessary fuel. They stayed at local boarding houses or with one of the families. I photographed one schoolmarm when I was in Shawnee County, Oklahoma. Her name was Olive Owen, and she was a firecracker—

(Musical Transition as Lights go down on MARGARET and up on OLIVE OWENS)

OLIVE OWEN

I'm only fifteen, a might young to be a teacher, but — I consider myself old for my age. I've completed common school and taken some work at the academy. This job helps my family, so I send most of my money home.

(OLIVE turns to speak to a child off-stage)

Walter, we need more wood for the stove. Please go out back and get some.

(OLIVE turns back to the audience)

OLIVE OWEN (Contd.)

In October, I went around the neighborhood and gathered the children for a subscription school, everybody paying something. We opened with nineteen pupils. Since we needed a proper school building, the families decided to use this dugout. The walls and floor are plain dirt, not even adobe plaster. The fathers made those benches for the sides of the room, but there needs to be more money left for blackboards or other supplies.

I asked the children to bring all the books they had at home.

(OLIVE raps a ruler on the desk)

Jonathan Baker, stop talking or I'll have to move you. The parents can't afford to pay me much, so I stay with different families as part of my pay. Now, I'm staying at the Watson home—earning my board by rising early each morning and making breakfast. Mrs. Watson—she's a cripple, not able to do much, even to dress herself. But she's a good manager and a planner, which is a great help. After breakfast, I wash the dishes and put the beans on before going to school. At recess, I run down to make the cornbread. At noon I finish the dinner, eat and run back to school to teach the afternoon. After cleaning the school, I go back to the Watson's to make beds, wash the dinner

dishes, then mop, iron, and patch all that's necessary. On Saturday I do our washing. Sunday is my day of rest, of course. The parents set the subjects, reading, writing, and arithmetic. I'm determined to teach geography, despite the objections of one member of the school board.

(OLIVE mimics a school board member by lowering her voice and spitting on the ground)

"Miss Olive," he says, "It wouldn't be so bad if it was just boys. But I think too much of the girls to have 'em "spiled" with too much "learnin." I think their religion can be "taken" away by teaching "joggerphy." I am teaching it anyway (beat) with singing. *(Sings the states' names to the tune of "Twinkle, twinkle, little star")*

Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, and Florida. That board member is a powerful singer, and once he heard the states put to music, he joined right in. From that time on I taught "joggerphy" without further complaints and no apparent corruption of the children's morals either.

(Musical Transition as Lights go down on OLIVE OWENS and up on MARGARET)

MARGARET

School teaching wasn't the only thing a woman could do. When money was tight, they did the work that women always do; cooking, washing, and taking in boarders. Making money any way they could. *(Beat)* Now there were lots of different ways for a woman to make money. For instance, Miss Ella *(pause)*

That's what she called herself. I doubt if that was her real name. Women in her line of work most often changed names with each town they went to. Marcus was dead set against me taking these pictures. He called these women "soiled doves". But I took them as remembrances. The way I saw it, they were as much a part of the early West as the mines, the canvas shacks, and the saloons.

I didn't see that taking their photographs reflected on me any. And their money was as good as anybody else's. I remember this day because Miss Ella had me walk down the road a little way and take another photo, this one here, of the town laundress. I remember because above her tub was this sign that said "Laundry By the Lake." Miss Ella thought a lot of her. After I took their photos, I sat and visited for a while. Something was going on between those two. I don't know what it was exactly, but I could sense it. Like I said, I kept my eyes and ears open—

MOLLIE

I just heard the news. The saloonkeeper came over and asked if they could use my tent here for the service. Seems his establishment suffered a shoot fest and was unfit for a funeral.

MISS ELLA

When I first heard there was a death, I thought it was another accident in the shaft. But when I heard it was Mayor "Shaky" Pat, I was truly saddened. I told Dorwin to ask you for the use of your tent-- I knew you'd be upset about "Shaky." He's been real good to you. And I thought the rent would help. If you don't tell your husband, he won't even know you have it.

MOLLIE

(MOLLIE holds up a man's shirt)

My husband, who is a sensible man when he's sober, bought us a trading post through the mail. Used all our savings. Took us three days journey by riverboat and two days to walk down that steep canyon trail to get here. We had to tie the back of our wagon to a tree to keep us from rolling out of control. When we got down here to, "Mudtown," that's what I call it. We were swallowed up in the mire: no wells and no lights except tallow dip, which is no brightness at all. But there's eight saloons and *(pause)* Miss Ella's Dance Hall.

MISS ELLA

(Laughs) There ain't too much dancing over at my place other than the horizontal kind, if you know what I mean. But it ain't no brothel! This here's a parlor house. We serve drinks and a little food. The men talk to the girls and have to ask them nicely before going upstairs.

(MISS ELLA motions to a place across the street)

Over across the street, a girl makes about ten dollars for her services, not even after the "lady in charge" takes her percentage. She makes them turn the rooms as fast as they can. No, sir, my place is no brothel, and I'll get out of the business before I go that low.

(MISS ELLA holds up a mirror and primps a bit.)

I've been at it for ten years, and I still got my looks. After a few years in a town, I move on. That's the way I keep my youthful charm. Stay too long in one place, you become an "old-timer." Always keep moving, I tell my girls. That's how you stay youthful and maintain a successful "career."

MOLLIE

(MOLLIE takes out a pair of lady's underpants).

We've got a livery, a bank, a blacksmith, and an assayer who's better at sampling spirits than ore. Most people live in tents and log cabins if they strike it rich.

MISS ELLA

Me, I live above the house with my girls. The first summer I was here, I set up tents outside the mine and brought up some girls who worked with me in Colorado City. The girls got a change of scenery, and the miners appreciated the service. After a couple of years, I had enough to open a place of my own.

MOLLIE

(MOLLIE looks into the wash tub)

Water comes up from the creek. Twenty cents a bucket hauled by a Chinaman. But it turns my laundry drab, and it has this metallic taste.

MISS ELLA

Who cares? Most people here in Ruby don't drink water. And nobody digs wells. They're too busy claim-jumping. So far, there's been five killings—all acquitted. The court is upstairs in Dorwin's saloon. Most times, the jury feels the need to "sequester" themselves in the barroom to ponder all those pressing legal questions.

MOLLIE

(MOLLIE points to the shingle Laundry by the Lake)

My sign? It was Mayor Shaky's idea. He used to drop by and look in on me, ask about the children--and my husband. "How's that husband of yours?" he'd say. "All healed up after the accident?" My Mister went into the mine after he lost the trading post, and he was being hauled out of the shaft when the chain link broke. Fell 50 feet and broke every bone in his knee. We don't have much to live on now.

MISS ELLA

And what they do have her no-account husband spends over at my place.

MOLLIE

I started taking in miners' laundry. A dollar a load. Mending's extra.

MISS ELLA

It was "Shaky's" idea to help Mollie by spreading the word, him being mayor and all.

MOLLIE

I do Miss Ella's high-necked, long-sleeved blouses with a sinful amount of silk decoration. I warm the iron on the cook stove and use the point here to get at each of those tiny scallops. It takes me over an hour to press each one. When the saloonkeeper brought the news this morning, I was here ironing Ella's chemise, laundered and sweet-smelling all to her specifications.

MISS ELLA

I'm really particular. I like everything just so much. Like this house here. The girls clean their rooms every week and wash the sheets, and we make the men wash too. There's a charge of course for the soap and cloth.

MOLLIE

(MOLLIE holds up fancy underwear)

It's strange; while I was ironing this little bit of a thing, I was thinking about my husband over there at Miss Ella's, his busted leg up on some bar stool. And Miss Ella running around with nothing on, getting the men drinks, letting them look her up and down. When I try to talk to him and tell him me and the children need the money for food (*pause*), he goes crazy and takes to slapping me good. He says it's none of my business. He says he needs the liquor to help him "re-coo-per-ate." I get so mad thinking about him.

MISS ELLA

Maybe you should do something about it.

MOLLIE

Some people might talk, me washing and ironing for a woman like Miss Ella (*beat*) her being with my Mister and all. But I don't blame her. He's the one that went catting around. She's just doing business, pure and simple.

MISS ELLA

Me? I don't waste no thought on Mollie's Mister or any man. He's a real no-account. I had to bar him from my place for over a month for roughing up one of the new girls.

MOLLIE

When all that happened, Miss Ella didn't hold any hard feelings against me. She brought over the washing and ironing just the same, and she knows my laundering helps the kids and me.

MISS ELLA

I'd help you in any way I can.

MOLLIE

"The Honorable "Shaky" Pat McDonnell has succumbed," that's how Dorwin said it. "The first man in this town to die of natural causes." After he left, I thought about that for a long while. And I should make a visit over to Miss Ella's and have a little talk with her about accidents (*pause*) how a man with a busted leg, especially if he was filled with drink by some by some fancy dance hall girl, might fall and hit his head coming home at night on one of these dark streets.

MISS ELLA

(MISS ELLA smiles at the audience) That's right (*pause*); accidents happen all the time here in Mudtown.

MOLLIE

This old iron is so heavy, and it could really hurt a person if it happened to hit them upside the head.

MISS ELLA

No man or woman here is going to question what happened. No one will even miss him.

MOLLIE

No one I know of.

(MOLLIE smiles and goes back to washing)

(LIGHTS go down on MOLLIE and MISS ELLA come up on LILLIE)

LILLIE

Mr. Wilson sent a picture, and Father sent mine.

(LILLIE takes out a photograph from her apron pocket photograph appears overhead)

He looks kind (pause); see, he's almost smiling. His eyes are squinted up tight from the sun or maybe the wind. The wind can be quite fierce in Nebraska. I think he's mighty fine-looking. I always told Alice that I'd marry a handsome man. Alice said she didn't give a whit about how a man looked, as long as he could provide a decent home and food on the table. She said she was tired of being poor and wearing other people's hand-me-downs. Standing around after church saying, "Yes ma'am" and "No ma'am" to all the ladies in their fine Sunday dresses.

When Chester Pettit came calling last fall, Alice said yes on that very first evening. Then she wouldn't rest till Chester made his intentions known to Father. She told me she'd rather take a chance on Chester up in Oregon than live another year with Father and all of his rules and sermons and Bible verses. Even the ladies at the church think Father's too strict and old fashioned when it comes to raisin' us girls. Now, my Mr. Wilson, he's real forward-thinking. He isn't anything like Father. After I arrive in Nebraska, the justice of the peace will marry us. Then we'll go directly to the land office so I can make my claim. He wrote that he had 160 acres all picked out for me.

(Musical Transition as Lights go down on LILLIE and come up on MARGARET)

MARGARET

(Music plays softly under this monologue)

I took that photograph of the land rush in Guthrie, Oklahoma, in April 1889. There were nearly two million unassigned acres ready for the taking. Marcus had plans to make a run for our own; 160 acres for him and 160 for me. We brought our own horse and wagon. Good thing because by the time we got to Oklahoma, a few days before the land rush, there wasn't a four-legged creature for hire in a hundred miles. While Marcus was looking into the papers and making the necessary arrangements, I wandered around town with my camera, trying to capture some of the excitement

MARGARET (Contd.)

in the air. We had such high hopes; we wanted to secure a suitable tract of land to build ourselves a real home. Some people wanted farms. Others wanted to settle in towns. I saw wagons loaded with hardware, tools, and even printing presses.

And the dust that was stirred up by so many people and horses and all types of moving contraptions. Whew! I could barely breathe. That morning I felt like I was part of some big adventure, almost as big as the land itself. The bugles were to blow precisely at noon, and I wondered if anybody would hear them considering the noise and the confusion. That's why this young woman stood out. I took her picture in her fancy clothes sitting under a tree. She seemed like she was about to break down into tears at any moment.

EDNA

(EDNA enters laughing)

Even after all these years, I'm still shocked at what I did. My Aunt was dead set against me coming out to Oklahoma, and she called the place "A God-forsaken wilderness full of savages." I went to live with my Aunt and uncle after my parents died. They were good to me, but they had a hard time making ends meet, having seven children of their own. I felt I was a burden to them, and I couldn't see any future for myself in Kentucky.

It was the advertisement posted at the general store that got my attention. It read, "Begin a new life in Oklahoma. President Cleveland proclaims two million acres of rich, beautiful land just waiting to be claimed." I hurried to the newspaper office and bought copies of all the issues about this beautiful Garden of Eden. From what I read, I thought all I had to do was come out here and claim my land. Using the little bit of money I'd saved from selling my parent's farm, I bought a one-way ticket to Arkansas City, Kansas. That was the last stop before the unassigned lands. The rest of my inheritance I spent on a new traveling costume. You can see it here in the photograph. It was a moss-green velvet dress with a matching hat. I arrived two days early to make a run for my homestead. I was all "pepped" up over the idea, never dreaming that you had to provide your own means to make the run. As proud as could be, I stepped off the train, gathered up my bags, and just started walking down the road looking for a good hotel or rooming

EDNA (Contd.)

house. But every place I went was filled to overflowing. There were thousands of homesteaders in that little railroad town. The grocery stores and hardware stores were sold out. The livery stable had leased all their horses and wagons. Every blacksmith in town was busy shoeing the horses to make the run. I was tired from walking because my grips were heavy. So I made up my

mind to stop at the first shady spot I found, even if I had to sit on the ground. I sat there so sad and disappointed I felt like crying. Then down the road came this man, Mister Martin Arens. He said, "Lady, can I help you?" I said, "You sure can. Just tell me where I can find someplace to stay." "Are you alone?" he asked. And I said, "Yes. I came to file a claim. But from the crowded condition of everything, I'm afraid a lone woman has mighty little chance."

Mr. Arens was real friendly, and pretty soon, we were talking like old friends. He said he was a widower with two boys, aged eleven and thirteen, and a little girl of nine, and he was there to try for a homestead, too. Then he leaned over, looked me right in the eye, and said, "If I was to be lucky tomorrow, would you think of marrying me?"

So I said that I guess I would. Then Mr. Arens took my hand and led me over to where his wagon stood. He had left the children in the care of friends camped by the roadside.

Some might think it strange, having known one another less than a day. But I had a real good feeling about him after meeting his children and his friends. I felt that God was guiding me. So I married him that night. He ran for our land the next day. We were happily married for the next forty-seven years.

MARGARET

She was lucky. Marriages didn't always work out like that.

(MARGARET looks through a handful of photos)

Marcus had this idea of owning a cattle ranch, so we went down to Texas. That was after we tried our luck in Colorado before we ran for land in Oklahoma. All that moving around, sometimes it got to be too much. I thought about striking out on my own plenty of times. And I could have. Life in the West gave women a new kind of freedom. Out from their father's thumbs, away from family and the "proper" way of doing things. Don't get me wrong. It didn't often happen — most of us stayed. But every once in a while, there'd be a woman with gumption who would move on. ...one of them was Melinda Jenkins.

MALINDA JENKINS

You've got to understand, Henry. I didn't want no more children. I had my home, my work, and everything a woman raised like me could wish for. The two of you were enough. There wasn't a quarrel with Willie, no words. I was his good wife in every respect—but I wasn't going to have no more babies. And when I said that, it meant something because I understood things. The many times I lived with my sister Betty, the doctor, I was poking my nose in medical books. I knew more about how things than most girls my age.

Then we went to visit your Aunt Annie on a Saturday night. I didn't carry anything because Willie promised to behave himself, and he didn't, and that's where our troubles commenced. When I found out I was having another baby, I had an awful bad feeling toward Willie. I had one thought: to run for it, get clear away from everybody, and live among strangers. That fall and winter, before I delivered, I spun and wove four blankets, made up all the clothes, jeans, and flannels for the whole family, and knitted all the stockings and everything. I was expecting in six weeks.

I must have been a glutton for punishment, Henry. I set the loom just four weeks before my time--and wove a rag carpet with the breast piece of the loom rubbing against me and a greased cloth tied around my stomach to keep it from hurting. I finished the rug and tacked it down. Sunday, I cleaned the house and got ready. Monday, after dinner, I had an eleven-pound baby, your baby sister.

All that time, carrying your sister and working so hard, my health began to fail. I fell sick with pneumonia. Up to then, we'd been doing middling good, what I called blundering through. I know how I caught it—milking the cow in the cold.

I didn't take care of myself—never had no time, the way Willie dawdled and loafed and left things undone. Doctor Tinkler watched over me through this spell. I had five bedsores that ate into my flesh like holes. We didn't have no cabbage like the doctor

MALINDA JENKINS (Contd.)

ordered, but your Aunt Annie, bless her heart, had it growing, and she came and showed Willie and you little ones how to manage it, drawing the corruption out with the wilted green cabbage leaves.

I suffered terribly. I'd be crying and asking Willie to put on some fresh cabbage. "I will," he'd say, "soon as I finish my pipe." I couldn't bear it (*pause*) a man who would let me suffer while he toasted his feet in front of the fire. I lay there crazy with worry. I saw how it was. I thought everything Willie's ever had in life was given him. He ain't the sort to go to the bottom and climb up. It was up to me to take care of you little ones! I made up my mind it was sink or swim and saddled to Willie we'd all sink. I had to leave him. Staying there meant hardship and want for the rest of my life. I wanted something better for the three of you.

On Ollie's birthday, the twenty-fifth of May, I made you children as nice a birthday party as I could. I knowed it was the last meal of vittles I'd be fixing for you.

Mind you. I had never been away from you a day. I washed your little feet and cleaned you up like always before I put you to bed and kissed you goodnight.

The next morning, I said as how I was going to see their Aunt Mary down in Texas. Then I was coming back to fetch you. Ollie was standing, leaning up against the mantle piece. You asked him, "What are you doing? Are you crying?" You were about five years old. You couldn't understand. "Well don't you feel bad?" he said. "Don't you know that Mama's a leaving us and going away? Ain't I got plenty to make me feel bad?" Ollie was nine. You said, "She'll come back to us. She told me so. And Aunt Annie will take care of us in the meantime."

MALINDA JENKINS (Contd.)

You gotta understand, Henry, I couldn't stand Willie's laziness and mistreatment another day. I wanted to get away from him so bad I'd do anything. I expected to gather up you children later on. I didn't know how, but I was sure I could find a way. But the years sort of went by after that. I worked in taverns and bars around Texas. The men I met didn't want no extra younguns. Time got away from me. Willie couldn't take care of you, so he farmed you out, and you grew up so fast. By the time I got myself squared away, with money in the bank and a place of my own, it was too late, and you *didn't need a mama no more*.

(Music transition)

(Lights go down on MALINDA and come up on MARGARET)

MARGARET

The frontier gave us women some choices—good or bad. We had some say about what we would do with our lives because the West needed men, and men needed wives.

Wouldn't you know it was a woman who noticed the dearth of females and went about setting things right? Her name was Elizabeth Farnam. It seems she needed to go to San Francisco to see about her dead husband's estate. She was a practical woman, and since she knew about the female shortage, she decided to organize a company of prospective brides. Nearly 200 women wrote to her about going west. The men took a liking to the idea. Some enterprising ones even took out ads of their own. There was one I saw that said,

SLIDE: Widower, good health, stable government job, twin sons (age 11) two daughters (age 15 and 9). Looking for a clean Christian woman for a housekeeper and possible marriage. Will send passage to the Northwest Territory. Contact Luther Horne, Riverbend, Washington.

(ETHEL enters carrying two large water buckets. MARY JANE tags along behind her sister, mimicking every move)

MARY JANE

I don't know what to call her. What are you going to call her?

ETHEL

You heard what Father said.

MARY JANE

I heard.

(MARY JANE looks around and discovers two plates and a cup with a missing handle)

MARY JANE

I love to play down here, don't you, Ethel? This whole meadow is filled with treasures.

ETHEL

That's cause it's a floodplain. Every year when the river overflows, it drags people's things from upstream and drops them off down here. Nothing anybody can use.

MARY JANE

We can use this cup. We need an extra one now that she's here. She can drink her English tea. *(MARY JANE takes a sip of tea, holding her pinky in the air.)*

ETHEL

The handle is missing. She won't like it.

MARY JANE

Here are some good plates. We could use these.

(MARY JANE holds up two plates for her sister to inspect. ETHEL looks them over)

ETHEL

Maybe we can. Give them a good wash before you take them back.

MARY JANE

The lady brought a lot of things with her. I peeked inside her trunk. She has quilts, bed linens, and a couple of fancy nightdresses. Do you think she brought them for us?

ETHEL

Of course not. She'll use the linens in the bed she shares with Father. And the nightdresses—well, all brides have fancy nightdresses.

MARY JANE

She's not a bride. Brides are young and pretty.

ETHEL

Not if you get one through the mail.

(MARY JANE and ETHEL giggle)

MARY JANE

This old wooden rocker is still here. Can we use it? Maybe Father could fix it. The wood is good.

ETHEL

No. It's water-warped. Leave it there.

We can't stay long. I have to help her in the kitchen.

(ETHEL leans back to close her eyes and rest)

MARY JANE

Ethel, will you tell me what you remember?

ETHEL

Not again.

MARY JANE

Please, please. Father never talks about her, and the boys were too young to remember.

ETHEL

All right, but this is the last time, and I can't go telling the story in front of her.

The year was 1888. Father, his two partners, their wives, and all their children came by horse team, driving overland to the Washington territory. Just past Umatilla, our horse stumbled, fell, and broke his neck.

MARY JANE

And they had four children and no money.

ETHEL

You weren't born yet; it was just the twins and me. Are you telling this or me?

There were three children and no money. Father used mother's sewing machine—our only valuable other than the plow—to trade for another horse.

MARY JANE

Did mother cry when she had to give up her sewing machine?

ETHEL

I don't remember. Maybe a little, but mother was no crybaby. She was brave and strong and good.

MARY JANE

And beautiful.

ETHEL

Oh yes, she was truly beautiful. At Ellensburg, the other women came down with measles. They had no doctor or medicine – they died. Mother and Father and the men and their children arrived at Mallott's place in terrible shape. They had abandoned our wagon by then, and Mother and Father were carrying us. The Mallots took us in and were good to us. Mother said Mrs. Mallot was an angel of mercy, and they became lifelong friends.

MARY JANE

Like you and me.

ETHEL

We're not friends—we're sisters. There wasn't a trail into the upper valley. Mrs. Mallot loaned mother her sidesaddle to ride up the canyon.

MARY JANE

And the horse was black, the same color as Mother's Singer sewing machine.

ETHEL

(ETHEL looks at MARY JANE strangely)

Yes, I guess so (pause), but that's not important.

It was so cold in August that the water in the washbasin froze. Father built us a one-room house with a dirt floor and a dirt roof. Then he planted apples.

MARY JANE

I love this part. Father planted red Junes and yellow bells—because they were mother's favorites

—

ETHEL

Father knew the farm wouldn't pay for years, so he had to go to work for the apple harvest up in the valley. He was gone a long time. But when it was over, he bought a year's worth of provisions and headed home.

MARY JANE

It was wintertime.

ETHEL

No, it was Christmas, and Father couldn't make it home because of a terrible blizzard.

MARY JANE

What did Mother do?

ETHEL

You know this part. I've told you a thousand times.

MARY JANE

Say it again.

ETHEL

On Christmas Eve after all of us kids were in bed, Mother decorated the tree with scarlet bags. She used the velvet material she'd been saving for a fancy vest. And she filled those scarlet bags with sugar.

MARY JANE

And on Christmas morning...

ETHEL

And on Christmas morning, we ate them.

MARY JANE

Oh, all that sugar! How wonderful that must have tasted!

(Voice from off stage) Eth-el, Eth-el,

ETHEL

You were born in the spring after the ice melted and named for one of the women who died of measles.

(Voice from the stage) Eth-el?

ETHEL

(Hurriedly) A neighbor came to nurse Mother who was already sick and worn down from birthing you. She caught a cold and died the next morning. Father buried her in the orchard.

(ETHEL hurries to fill up the buckets, looking off-stage nervously)

MARY JANE

Where the apples she never tasted fell across the grave. And then, because you were nearly seven you took over.

(ETHEL nods)

The neighbors taught you how to take care of the twins and (pause) me.

(Voice from off stage) ETHEL! MARY JANE! You better come now if you know what's good for you!

ETHEL

It's going to be all right. Father says we'll get used to her. He says she makes wonderful apple candy. And that in time—well, (beat) in time we'll be like a family again.

MARY JANE

But what will I call her?

ETHEL

Call her? Call her "Mother."

(Music Transition as Lights go down on ETHEL and MARY JANE and up on MARGARET)

MARGARET

Children, children, there were always so many children to photograph. Marcus didn't want children. And me? I didn't care because I had all this.

(MARGARET motions to the trunk and her work.)

The West was a harsh place to raise young ones. Families were large, and a house full of twelve children was common. People had more children than good sense calls for. Maybe because there were so many early deaths, like this photo here.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on MARGARET and up on NAOMI)

NAOMI

I blame myself. The older boys were too young to care for him. I should have been watching more closely. He slipped out of the kitchen and down to the river for water. It was my fault. I wasn't paying attention that day. He wanted to go when the older boys said they were going out.

Did I tell him yes? Did he think that he had my permission? He wasn't a child who would go without permission. I must have said yes. I was busy—with the wash. Washday tires me out so. It takes all day, and I was boiling the clothes and scrubbing shirts. The river was high from the winter rains (*pause*) the ground was slippery (*pause*). He was playing by the water, and then he was (beat) gone.

They brought his little body to the house and placed him in my arms. I could not bear to have him out of my sight, and I held onto him for the next four days. He didn't change that much in his appearance, which comforted me because I could caress and hold him as long as he looked natural and sweet. Later we bathed him in river water and buried him in the clean clothes I had been washing that day.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on NAOMI and up on PAMELA FERGUS)

PAMELA FERGUS

To cook on the trail, I'm taking a camp stove, a tin reflector, and some frying pans. My regular stove and all my cooking pans are too cumbersome to carry. Your father says he's seen whole kitchens abandoned on the trail because they got too heavy. Your father was firm. I'm to bring just the necessities, the washtub, a washboard, two flat irons, starch, and concentrated lye for making soap. He's ordered me to get an assortment of threads, yarns, and a good strong sewing machine. Your father thinks I can make extra money if I tread my way across the plains. He wants me to sew flour sacks along the way so we can sell them in the Montana Territory. (*exasperated*) If you ask me your father has spent way too much time on this list of his.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on PAMELA FERGUS and up on LILLIE)

LILLIE

Last Sunday after church I heard some of the ladies talking among themselves. They were saying how they'd never want to be second fiddle and how sorry they felt for me, with Mr. Wilson choosing me after Alice. Her being prettier and smarter than me.

I picked up my skirts like this, turned on my heel, and walked away. I don't have to care what they say about me anymore. Mr. Wilson remembered me after three whole years, and that's when I was skinny and plain and not the least filled out. In his last letter, Mr. Wilson said he just knew

I'd grown up to be a fine Christian woman who knows her place as wife and daughter. My face turned red just hearing those words. Father likes to say the Devil flatters too. And not to put too much into what a man says in his courting letters. Mr. Wilson has plans, big plans. He's plowing the land and digging a well close to the house. Mr. Wilson wants to build a good barn and a fine log home. And every piece of furniture he's going to make himself. That's why he needs a wife.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on LILLIE and up on PAMELA FERGUS)

PAMELA FERGUS

Your father has thought of everything. There could be breakdowns on the trail so I have a list of emergency items-- ox shoe nails, tongue bolts and wagon grease, tar, spirits of turpentine, oxbows, and an extra yoke and chain. I'm to bring extra whiskey for dosing cattle poisoned by bad water. If we don't use it, I can sell it in Virginia City for medicinal purposes (*beat*), of course. Finally, James wants me to bring out extra gold pans, a pair of gold scales a new pair of spectacles for him.

Wait, what's this?

Here, at the bottom, he's written ever so lightly. "If some of these articles should be forgotten it will not matter a great deal because they can all be purchased here, only at higher prices. Don't fret about anything. Just hurry and come."

(Music Transition as Lights go down on PAMELA FERGUS and up on LILLIE)

LILLIE

(LILLIE walks over to the trunk)

I've never had anything so fine. The smooth wood, the sheen so deep I can almost see my face. Look along the front where he made these carvings of tiny flowers on a twisted vine. Father says that was foolishness, and he worries that my young man is full of pride. *Proverbs 16:18 "Pride goeth before the fall,"* Father says. I'm glad he took the time to make these tiny carvings. It took a delicate hand and a keen eye to carve the petals of this rose. See here, the way he made the vine twist and turn around the outside? The carvings tell me he cares about little things and sees their beauty.

The first thing I'm going to do when I get to Nebraska is ask him to read me the Psalms and then, maybe when I know him a little better, the Song of Solomon. I want to hear his voice saying those words instead of Father's.

Next time this week, I'll be on a wagon train headed west. Mr. Wilson paid my fare. I've still so much to pack in here. I want to take my sewing, Mama's wedding dress, and her old sunbonnet. I've finished three quilts, and I have bed linens, a blanket, and a rug, and I made them all myself. "Idle hands are a...

What's this in here? It's more of Mr. Wilson's carvings.

(LILLIE looks inside).

Why it's a small heart, surrounded with flowers. And he's written my name, just as plain as anything. Well, I never!

How ever did he do that? He must have put them here when he was building it. No, then it would have been Alice's name, not mine. Did he add the carving afterward? After he wrote his letter and Father said "Yes"?

(Laughs)

It tickles me thinking about him all bent over carving my name in here.

LILLIE (Contd,)

But why would he spend so much time making it look pretty here when nobody is ever going to see it? Nobody will look inside this trunk (*beat*) except for (*pause*) me.

(LILLIE looks at the audience and whispers) Oh, he's not at all like my Father.

(Music Transition as Lights go down on LILLIE and up on MARGARET)

MARGARET

(MARGARET places the photographs back in the trunk along with the camera)

Musical transition underscores the rest of the play)

So here are the last fifty years of my life in this trunk. These photographs are the only evidence left that these women lived.

(Each woman turns as her name is announced)

Antoinette Constant, Pamela Fergus, Miss Olive, Mary Jane Horne, Mollie, Miss Ella, Malinda Jenkins, and Lillie.

I had so many dreams. I wanted to make my mark on Mr. Greeley's newspapers as a photographer. But the stories I wanted to tell, the stories of everyday women, never made front-page news. I guess it's because the women I met and photographed were doing the things women always do, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, raising children, caring for the sick, planting gardens, teaching school, starting churches, and founding communities. But even the most heroic people lead ordinary lives 99% of the time, don't they?

(MARGARET looks into the trunk)

So many photos and so many stories yet to be told, but for me, these ordinary lives ARE the extraordinary stories of the West.

MARGARET joins the other women and turns to watch the new slides appear until a photo appears of her with the camera, and the stage goes to black)

END OF PLAY

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