

1823: It is a time when a wife's dowry, even children, automatically becomes her husband's property. Slavery is an economic advantage entrenched in America but rumblings of abolition abound. For a young woman to confront this culture is unheard of, yet that is exactly what Elizabeth Cady does. When she becomes a leader of the women's rights movement, her secret diaries threaten to discredit her. She destroys them, but are they really lost to history?

The Lost Diaries Of Elizabeth Cady Stanton

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SARAH BATES

THE
LOST DIARIES
OF

*Elizabeth Cady
Stanton*

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February 1875
Massillon, Ohio

A chunk of wood in the potbellied stove splinters and pops, startling the white haired woman dozing by the fire. For a moment, Elizabeth Cady Stanton cannot recall her location. She shivers, uncomfortable in the strange opera house near the center of Massillon, Ohio. An ice storm pelts the windows of the red brick structure, glazing tree branches and snapping them off in the wind. As an enormous gust rattles the window of the room where she waits, Elizabeth pulls the wool blanket over her knees tighter.

A much younger woman hovers nearby. She rushes to poke at the stove embers stirring up a fury of sparks. “Oh dear,” she says. “I must have arranged the fire too high.”

Mrs. Stanton shakes her head and sighs. She is so dreadfully tired. She plucks at the stack of handwritten speech notes in her lap. They have grown worn and creased from years of use.

“The time, Amelia?”

“Five o’clock, Mrs. Stanton. You have one hour to rest.”

Elizabeth settles into the lone wingback chair then frowns. Her long black taffeta dress has twisted around her. “Bothersome clothes!” She tugs at the garment’s voluminous skirts and pokes at the bustle behind her back.

“Do you need something, Mrs. Stanton?” the young woman asks. “Can I help you in any way?”

The woman’s gaze of pure adoration proves off-putting.

“No, Amelia dear,” she says summoning what little patience remains. “Wait, yes I do. A cup of very hot tea will go down nicely.”

“I’ll fetch it straight away,” Amelia says. Her hand on the parlor room door, she looks back at Mrs. Stanton, appearing reluctant to leave her for even a moment.

Elizabeth adjusts her glasses to focus on her notes and noticing Amelia pause, waves her hands at her in dismissal. “Go, my girl,” she says. “I will be perfectly fine while you are away, but desperate for that cup of tea.”

Would this young woman ever leave her alone? She tries to concentrate on the address she will give for what seems like the hundredth time. Can she make it fresh—if not for them, for her? She tosses the notes aside and reaches for her diary. When she glances at the pages, the events of the last few months flash through her mind in confusion: incessant travel, lumpy mattresses in drafty rooms, greasy boiled beef. The lecture tour has taken its toll on her health.

Even at sixty years old, she rarely rests her body and her memory, overwhelmed by fatigue, occasionally fails. Yet she persists. State after state, she presses on. The notes flutter to the floor. She longs for the comfort of her husband and the cozy seclusion of her home in Seneca Falls. An enormous wave of sadness engulfs her as she imagines the commotion of family life and pictures her daughters struggling to put dinner on the table.

She cannot give in to this self-pity. This is the path she chose.

“I have returned,” Amelia says. She sets a tray beside Elizabeth’s chair then stands before her rigidly, her hands clasped tightly against the bosom of her gray dress.

“Oh dear girl, do not act so subservient. And no more dithering around me, either,” Elizabeth says, immediately sorry for her cross remarks. She closes the diary over her hand marking its place.

“But I am so grateful Mrs. Stanton. I want to do a good job because you are my heroine. Do you not know that? Everything you say? Everything you stand for? I want to be strong—just like you.” Moved to tears Amelia kneels, her head bowed.

Elizabeth reaches out to cup the younger woman’s face in her hand. “My dear, pull yourself together and share the tea with me.” She motions to a tufted hassock nearby. “Sit there and enjoy the few moments I have with you.”

When Amelia lifts her eyes to Elizabeth, her expression pleading for understanding, she says, “I know everything about you. That’s why I respect you so much.”

Elizabeth contemplates young Amelia, taking in her wide blue eyes and the bloom on her cheeks and for a moment she decides to dismiss her. Changing her mind, she leans back against the chair cushions, firelight softening her still unlined face. She narrows her eyes and gazes into the stove's embers, recalling the life that has led her to this room. "My dear," she says, flipping the diary open to its first page, "You do not know the whole story."

2

March 1823
Johnstown, New York

“Elizabeth, whatever are you doing?” Her father’s voice echoed off the mahogany paneled walls of his law library.

Startled at the distressed sound, Elizabeth dropped the scissors she gripped in her plump fists. They fell clattering to the tabletop where a heavy legal book lay open. She looked up at her father Judge Daniel Cady with a smile.

Her father loomed above her, his eyebrows drawn together over deep-set eyes. Military bearing and knowledge of the law made the judge a courtroom adversary to fear. He did not intimidate his confident eight-year-old daughter, however.

Kneeling on the leather seat of the chair at the table, Elizabeth studied his concerned expression. “Father, I have found a way to help Mrs. Campbell keep her farm.” Her dark eyebrows arched, animating her face. “Look,” she said, her

voice rising. She tapped her finger on the paragraph from the book that she planned to remove.

Judge Cady peered at the parchment page and the law that allowed Flora Campbell's squandering husband to mortgage the farm and her inheritance. When Flora's husband died, Flora's mother-in-law decided to let the creditors take it all.

"I listened to Mrs. Campbell in your office last week," Elizabeth said. "She told me she would be on the street if creditors took the only home she and her family ever knew. You told her you could do nothing, so I vowed to find a solution."

She leaned forward and traced the sentences on the page with a finger. "You see, Father, if I just cut these words out of the law book, Mrs. Campbell and her children will be saved." She lifted her chin with a self-satisfied expression.

"It is not that easy, Lib."

"Why do you encourage me to visit your office if not to help? I do not understand everything, but when men treat their families with disrespect I know it is wrong. Why do laws protect men and do nothing to help women and children?"

"Lib, even if you cut up my books there are hundreds of others. Removing the words from the law books in my library does not change anything."

"Why?"

"Because all the law books have the same information. There are hundreds of copies just like this one. Until the laws change, if they do, I must uphold them."

“But Father,” she said, her enthusiasm replaced by resentment, “this is unfair.”

Elizabeth looked at her father for an answer. He smiled, his expression softening. But when he spoke, she knew he’d dismissed her.

“It is the law, Elizabeth. It has always been that way.”

She closed the book with a bang and jumped down. “When I grow up,” she said, “I am going to change these abominable laws!”

*

March 15, 1823

Dear Diary, I got in trouble trying to help Father. I wish I were older—or a boy, so people would listen to me. It would be different. Boys get so much praise. Like Eleazar. He is only seventeen. Father thinks my brother is smart and asks for his opinion on things. No one asks for mine. I am smart, too. I hate being a girl.

3

Spring 1825

Two years later, the spring bloomed full of uncertainty in Johnstown New York. The season was fine, though, with tall oaks and elms leafing out alongside the gray brick Cady home on the corner of West Main and North Market Streets. Cherry trees in the orchard behind the home released their perfume to the warming air as usual, and the clipped shrubs edging the garden paths had burst into bloom. While the Cady mansion at the center of Johnstown appeared to be its most imposing building and visitors on their way to their lodging at the Cayadutta Hotel next door remarked on the home's stately features, would it always be so? The Erie Canal had just opened, diverting stagecoach travelers from the roads that ran through Johnstown, and business was suffering. Worried over changes they could not fathom, shopkeepers, innkeepers and farmers began to stop by Judge Cady's law office for advice. Since the rooms were adjacent to his home and accessible from the street and from the Cady home vestibule, a flurry of

worried callers continued to stream through the Cady front door.

Disregarding of the lovely spring weather and the comings and goings of townspeople, Elizabeth's tall self-reliant mother supervised the annual housecleaning in a commotion of dust and scrubbing. Margaret Cady reveled in her conservative family life, moderating her orders with a queenly elegance and a gentle sweet voice. Like Elizabeth's father, she had gained the respect and admiration of the servants as she administered the affairs of her family and household with a firm but fair hand. While Margaret tended to the housekeeping chores, the judge's brisk step on the wood floor and cheerful whistle echoed through the house.

Elizabeth eagerly anticipated these vigorous cleaning events with the household in turmoil, because her mother's customary strict domestic routine relaxed for a while. Though Elizabeth had her own task of sorting her winter clothes into piles for mending, the housecleaning gave her a chance for freedom and adventure.

At present she hid from the nurses, the three harried women who looked after her and her two younger sisters, Madge and Kate. They were smaller versions of Elizabeth, but with coppery rather than chestnut curls. The nurses were strict and disapproving of the three girls whose antics caused no end of grief.

Still in her nightdress, Elizabeth crawled onto the roof from her second floor nursery window. This perfect vantage point to spy on the gardeners overlooked the back garden as far as up to the woods behind their property.

The nurses would be angry if they found her, but she didn't care. The fine day abounded with adventure.

For a while she watched ebony-skinned Abraham and his husky grown son Peter break up the thawing garden soil. Their hoes lifted and tumbled damp black earth into soft mounds. After a bit, she crept a little farther out on the roof ledge to peer at the young groom Jacob, who was repairing worn rails in the stables near the street. Sunlight glinted on the hammer he swung, and his dark skin and tightly curled hair gleamed with sweat.

She stretched out on the cool slate roof tiles, crossed her arms under her head and looked up through the canopy of budding elms at the bright sky and clouds skittering overhead. A spring breeze fluttered the hem of her linen nightdress, baring her legs to the balmy sunlight.

She started to daydream when a low whistle interrupted her reverie. She raised her head to look about, scrambled to peer over the edge of the roof, and saw Abraham and Peter drop their hoes and beckon to Jacob. The three men ran across the meadow behind the garden to disappear into the dense thicket of woods. A few moments later, they returned, with Abraham struggling under the weight of a lumpy burlap bag slung over his shoulder. Elizabeth continued to watch them as they hurried along the path to enter their quarters. They emerged almost immediately to return to their work. Whatever could be in that bag?

"Lib! Can we come out?" Madge's high voice piped from behind her.

The sisters poked their heads through the open window with mischievous smiles.

She nodded, choosing play for the moment, postponing an investigation of the contents of the mysterious burlap bag.

Madge and Kate wriggled out, and in whispers the girls began to plan their day.

“Take us into the woods, Lib! I want to look for bird’s nests.”

“Oh, yes,” said Kate. “There might be ripe blueberries, too.” Elizabeth smiled at her youngest sister who was always hungry.

The girls dared Elizabeth, knowing they would never get permission to do that. She debated the risk. Perhaps no one would miss them with their nurses distracted by the cleaning whirlwind.

There might even be baby toads to play with. She liked to use her hand to make little curved homes for them in the soft earth.

“All right, we will go, but let us hurry. We must return before Mother and the nurses finish their tasks.”

They slipped into their identical red dresses with the starched white collars that scratched their necks, then sneaked out the kitchen door and stole off through the back garden, past the stables, into the woods.

A worn path led to a narrow stream cutting through the back pasture beyond the woods. Elizabeth had been there once or twice with Eleazar, but never alone or with her sisters.

“I don’t like the shadows,” Kate said pointing toward the clutches of huge ferns that grew beneath the old trees. “There might be a rat.” She hung back to grab Elizabeth’s apron hem.

“The barn cats keep the rats away,” Elizabeth said.

“I don’t like it anyway.” Kate’s voice quavered.

“Don’t be so scared,” Madge said. “Here, take this stick and smack the ferns. Anything in there will run away.”

Each armed with a broken tree branch the girls marched into the shadowy woods, poking at the shrubby plants that grew along the path.

When the path curved into a patch of sunlit meadow, Elizabeth whooped. “A fairy circle place,” she said. “Let’s pick white daisies and make crowns so we look like fairies.”

When Kate’s stubby fingers struggled with the pliant stems Elizabeth showed her how plaiting them kept the flowers connected. Once the daisy crowns were finished, Elizabeth grabbed her sisters by their hands and pulled them around in a circle until they were running, singing, “Ring-around-the-rosie, A pocket full of posies, Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down.” Finally, out of breath, they flopped down on the grass and looked up through the trees.

A rustling noise came from the woods nearby.

“What’s that?” Madge asked. She sat up and peered into the underbrush. Elizabeth jumped to her feet and poked her stick into the dense foliage where the sound appeared to be coming from. A big toad jumped high in the air.

Kate screamed and began to cry.

“Don’t be afraid,” Elizabeth said pulling her little sister close to her side. “Let us return home, and we can eat wild blueberries along the way.”

With the sun at their backs, the three girls emerged with mud-caked clothes and torn stockings.

“Madge, you’ve got berry juice stains on your mouth. Spit on the corner of your apron tail and wipe your lips,” Elizabeth said.

She had made sure they got back to the house before dinner, but until this moment she hadn’t thought much about how they would appear to the nurses.

Kate’s hair looked a fright, a tangle of bedraggled ribbons and fading flowers from the garland she wove in her curls.

“Do let me tidy your hair ribbons that have come undone. Nurse will surely notice,” Elizabeth said to her.

“Stop pulling,” Kate whined.

Once Elizabeth made sure her sisters’ aprons were tied neatly she led them back home through the garden to the kitchen entrance. The sun had set leaving cool blue shadows stretching across the garden. As they approached the door, their dirty hands clutching wildflowers, a handkerchief full of berries, and a bundle of pussy willows, a disapproving alto voice boomed.

“Girls. Look at you!” said Polly, the oldest nurse who had been with them the longest.

The sisters exchanged frightened looks.

“Elizabeth, this is your doing. I know it.”

Polly grabbed Elizabeth’s shoulders with her gnarled hands and bent down to confront her with a scowl.

Elizabeth flinched.

The other two nurses stood beside Polly's substantial figure, bearing equally sour expressions.

Elizabeth knew she had led her sisters into the woods without permission. As the oldest of the three, she shouldered the guilt. It was not the first time she'd gone against her mother's wishes and the nurse's instructions. Every time she found something truly fun to do, it seemed wrong to her mother. The things that her mother deemed *right* weren't fun at all. If Elizabeth could find the answer to this puzzle, she might be able to stay out of trouble, but with Madge and Kate urging her on, she forgot about trying to solve it.

She stepped in front of her sisters to face the angry nurse, but didn't dare speak. Her mouth set, she looked down and steeled herself for the scolding.

"Miss Elizabeth. You have caused us no end of problems. We have all been frantic with worry."

Elizabeth stood impassive, her face a mask, looking past Polly's round red face and her quivering chins. She bit her upper lip.

"Your dear mother has been desperate for fear you were lost and I have suffered her anger." Polly's tirade continued. "Shame on you for provoking her." She shook her finger in Elizabeth's face, while Madge and Kate cowered in fear behind their sister. "In the house, all three of you and I do not want this to happen again," the nurse shouted, her outstretched arm trembling as she pointed to the door behind her.

Elizabeth, Madge and Kate silently filed past the stern figures, all the while staring at the floor. When they were safe and alone in the nursery they burst into wild giggles. The girls threw their souvenirs of the day on a table, tore off the scratchy collars they hated and tossed them into the air. They unbuttoned their muddy dresses and, whirling them around their heads, began to run around the room until they collapsed in a panting heap on the floor, gulping for breath.

That night while Elizabeth lay in bed looking up at slivers of moonlight crisscrossing the ceiling, she remembered Abraham and Peter's hurried trip into the woods. What could be in the mysterious burlap bag? Perhaps Abraham was still awake. She got out of bed to pad over to the window and look down onto their quarters, but the windows were dark. She'd investigate tomorrow first thing.

The next morning, when she sought out Abraham to ask about his trip into the woods and the bag she'd seen slung over his shoulder, his answer seemed reasonable.

"Just deer meat, Miss Elizabeth," Abraham told her. "A hunter friend passed by."

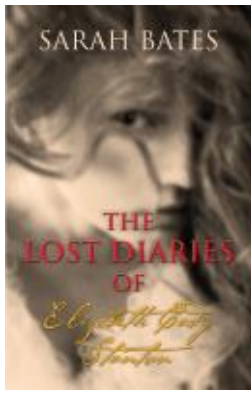
She noticed the momentary look of alarm on his face, but said nothing. He was up to something. Of that she was certain. But what?

*

June 10, 1825

Dear Diary, I got in trouble again. Madge said she would take the blame, but she didn't.

Harriet is five years older than me and she should take care of us all, but she is too dainty, Father says. She isn't. She pretends. So it is my fault. Always. Bah. Just because I am older I get the blame every time. Polly is mean and always blames me for everything. She hates me and I hate her.



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