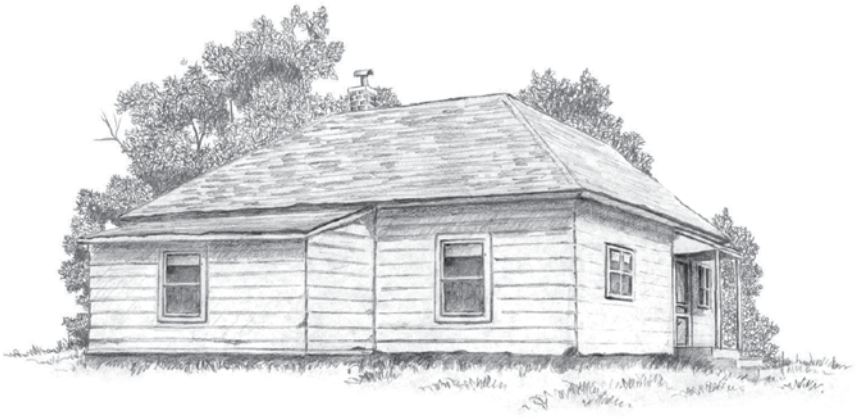


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1. Little Eli

1939

Long ago and far away, in the wide, wide land of Oklahoma, there lived a little Amish boy named Eli. He had bright blue eyes and a mop of brown hair that would not lie flat at all. He lived with his almost-thin Dad, Ben; his almost-plump Mom, Mary; his big brother Sanford; his baby brother Harvey; and five chattering, smiling sisters in a weather-beaten house whose paint had faded long ago.

All around Ben Yoder's homestead, the prairie grasses grew wild and free, and breezes grew into blustering gales. Only a narrow yard and a row of trees kept the winds from blowing the little house and barn away. Eli's home sat in the middle of this sheltered spot and looked quite satisfied, though it wasn't much to see at all.

Eli's brother Sanford and his big sisters remembered the days when they had lived in Kansas, with Amish farms and neighbors on every side, but not Little Eli. He had been born in the faded little house in Oklahoma. It was all he knew of home.



Little Eli had no games to play except the ones he made up, and no toys except spools and sticks. Eli's house had no refrigerator, no running water, and no electricity—just an old cookstove, an icebox on the front porch, and a water bucket by the door. Beneath his feet was a worn wooden floor, and in a little corner of the closed-in porch was Eli's bed. But this did not make him sad. Oh, no! Something else made his eyes grow cloudy and turned down the corners of his mouth. Little Eli was so very small.

He was too small to harrow the fields with Dad. He was too small to milk the cows with his older sisters. He was too small to hold the lines when Mom took the buggy to go visiting. But often he wished he could try.

"Du bischt zu glae. You are too small," his sisters would say when they left for the hills to pick blackberries. "Wait till you get a little bigger."

"Du bischt zu yung. You are too young," they would say as they drove away in the buggy to help Uncle Tobe's family butcher chickens. "Wait till you have another birthday."

Eli heard the same words when his big brother Sanford climbed the lone cottonwood tree in the pasture, or rode Mabel down the path to fetch the cows, or hunted for frogs along the pasture creek.

"When will I get big enough?" Eli sighed as his sisters skipped out the lane on the opening day of school. Leading the way was twelve-year-old Lovina. She was followed by eleven-year-old Esther; then Lucy, who was ten. After them hurried nine-year-old Sanford and Fannie Mae, who had just turned eight. Only Lena and Harvey were smaller than Eli and must also stay at home.

Grossmommy Nisly, Mom's mother, had come to spend the day. She stood behind Eli at the window of the little house.



“Look, Bowser can’t go either,” she said, taking Eli’s hand in hers. Bowser stood in the lane, his tongue hanging out and his plummy tail drooping. Grossmommy smiled. “You’ll get bigger by and by. It just takes time. You have to wait to do bigger things.”

So Eli sat down to wait. But soon Mom was calling. “Run along,” she said to Eli. “I need water to fill the teakettle.”

Eli sighed. Of course he could pump water. Anyone could do that.

“Run along,” Mom said a little later. “I need corncobs from the hog pen to start the morning fire.”

Eli sighed again. Anyone could gather corncobs for Mom.

Then the days turned cold and wild ducks flew high overhead and Eli had a birthday—a birthday that made him five! But had it made him any bigger? Dad stood his son against the wall that held the mirror and shaving shelf to measure him. “M-a-a-y-b-e a *glae bislie*. Maybe a little bit,” he said, and squeezed Eli’s arm. “Keep pumping water, and you’ll grow big before the moon rises.”

“Not so?” Eli looked up. “*Ach*, Dad,” he said. Dad was laughing. He knew it took more than a water bucket to grow a boy.

As the nights grew long and the days short, the wind rose to a howl, and snow and freezing rain scoured the little house. The pond beyond the fence grew hard with ice, and the bare tree branches rattled and moaned. Water froze against the sides of the water pail on the porch, and high, thin clouds crept across a cold blue sky.

1940

All through the slow winter days, Eli ran errands for Mom. He carried scraps for Bowser. He carried wood from the woodpile. He brought potatoes from the cellar and eggs from the henhouse, and before he knew it, spring had come!



It took Eli by surprise. One night as he crawled into bed, the prairie was the duller shades of tan and brown and gray. The next morning when he awoke, the prairie had taken on the faintest hint of green. He did not have to put on his coat when he pumped water at the well!



Now each day the sun grew a bit warmer than the day before. Jackrabbits ventured out of their burrows and meadowlarks returned. Tiny new leaves filled the branches of the big elm tree, and the cherry tree buds grew fat and round. Dad's field of winter wheat began to stretch toward the sun. Bobwhites flew up from among the prairie grasses, singing in the sunshine. Gentle rains fell.

"Time for spring planting," Dad said one day as he and Sanford went out the door to hitch the horses to the plow. "Let's give Lela a good workout. She's been in the barn long enough. Field work will take the sass out of her."

Eli's ears tingled. Sometimes Lela tossed her head and fought the bit. Wouldn't that be a sight, now! He kicked his shoe against the porch post. "May I come along?" he asked.

Sanford straightened his shoulders. "Why, you wandered off once till your nose was almost on the road." He laughed. "You'd just be in the way."

Mom shook her head. "You almost got lost in the corn rows once. I need a boy to haul water for washing clothes."

Eli sighed. "Ya, Mom," he said. He was just a water boy again. Always a water boy.

He watched as Mabel and Lela trotted past the house on their way to the field. He stood on tiptoe as Lela thrashed her head to and fro. That Lela! She *was* sassy! But soon Dad had her going smoothly out the lane, and away they went.



Day after day, Dad and Sanford plowed and disked and harrowed the land. They planted barley and oats and kafir corn.¹

Mom and the girls were busy as well. They washed and aired the comforters, folded them, and stored them away. They scrubbed the windows and washed the ceiling above the old cookstove. They made long furrows in the garden and planted potatoes and carrots and onions and corn. “May I help?” Eli asked, tucking his hands behind his back.

“I want the planting done *just so*,” Mom said, busily covering up her row of seeds. “But you can come after me and pour a drink of water on the carrots and corn.”

Eli sighed. “Ya, Mom,” he said. He pushed his hat back on his head and walked to the pump.



Soon the days grew longer and the sun warmer. Primroses bloomed along the roadside, and spring beauties filled the hollows. The oat field grew from a faint green sheen to a vast green sea that rippled in the wind. Dad stepped onto the porch. He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. “Maybe this year will be different,” he said.

Mom came to the door. “Ya, maybe,” she said, “if God so wills.”

Eli saw them look at each other, and he knew why. They were remembering the day Dad had driven the buggy to the bank in town. Dad had sat down, and with the stroke of a pen, signed his name—Ben D. Yoder—to get a loan. If they could make the payments, the farm would be theirs. They had never done that in Kansas—oh my, no! In Kansas, land sold for a hundred dollars an acre. They had been much too poor to buy a farm in Kansas.

1 Kafir corn: a sorghum grain grown in dry areas