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## ***1. Brave Enough to Follow***

***Spring 1950***

**T**he air was mild as Eli slipped out the back door and trotted toward the barn. Across the greening lawn robins ran, stopping and tipping their heads to one side before running again. The whole yard sang when the robins arrived.

When he reached the fence, Eli held his fingers to his lips and whistled. Around the barn came Pedro and Frisco, ears pricked forward. Eli patted Pedro's flank. "Good boy," he said, holding the gate open just enough for the horse to squeeze through. "I'll hitch you up for Dad, but Sanford can worry about his own horse." Clanging the gate shut, he led Pedro to the buggy shed and grabbed the curry brush.

His thin shoulders hunched as he curried Pedro's neck and withers and then down his back. "Just wait till you shed your winter coat—then you'll shine," he said, running the brush with quick strokes through Pedro's mane and scratching around his ears. Pedro turned to nibble at his sleeve.



Eli laughed under his breath. “Quit your foolishness. You must look your best on a Sunday morning. You might be old, but you’re still a champ.” He grunted as he lifted the harness off the wall.

While he pulled the shafts into place, slid the traces through the clasps, and fastened the backing straps, his mind ran in circles. This morning he planned to follow the ministers into the counsel room for instruction on becoming a church member. He wasn’t the only one. Cousin Leo, Noah Yoder, and Sam Swarey were also in the class.

Their first baptismal class had been at Uncle Ed’s when a visiting minister had preached on a weekday. But this time Eli would have to stand before the whole congregation in the meetinghouse. The thought made his insides quiver. He had many questions—questions he never dared ask Dad or Mom. Was he really God’s child—he, who struggled so often?

“There, old boy,” he said, leading the horse and buggy to the hitching post by the back door.

His older brother Sanford appeared. “You mean you didn’t hitch up for me?” He laughed. Eli shrugged as he tied Pedro fast. Soon he heard Sanford out by the barn, coaxing his horse along with sweet talk.

Eli ducked in the back door. Grabbing the soap, he scrubbed at the sink before dashing upstairs to change clothes. His younger brother Harvey was there, snapping on his suspenders. Harvey dropped onto the bed, humming, as Eli stood before the mirror plastering down his hair.

“Are you scared?” Harvey asked, grinning.

Eli grunted. His hair seemed dead set against being parted in the middle. Recently he had tried combing it straight back, which felt more grown-up. But that hadn’t helped.

The door opened and Sanford slipped in. “You want to go with me?” he asked, pulling on his church clothes.

Eli’s scalp tingled. “If that’s okay with you.”



“Long as you’re ready,” came the muffled reply.

Ten minutes later Sanford’s buggy whirled out the lane, and Eli sat stiffly, watching Frisco’s satin ears. The horse had balked only once before starting out. His coat gleamed in the sun, and his hooves beat a steady rhythm on the road. A faint green was taking over the fields, while far across the valley, the mountains were dusty blue under a clear sky. Goldfinches sang from the fence along the road.

Sanford glanced at Eli. “This fellow looks striking, wouldn’t you say?” He looked critically over Frisco’s back. “As long as he settles down. He’s been pretty temperamental so far.”

The words swept over Eli and were gone. He wasn’t thinking of horses; he was thinking of instruction class. Goose bumps rose on his arms as he pictured himself getting to his feet before everyone. Yet, surely, if he took this step, God would give him more courage. His voice was changing, though he looked younger than his fifteen years. He was still little Eli.

A shiver passed over him as they turned in the church lane. It was more crowded than he had expected. As they came up the knoll, Preacher Eli’s buggy was stopping at the women’s entrance. Up the porch steps walked his daughters Ruthie and Grace. Eli swallowed and stared straight ahead. Even so, he could imagine Ruthie’s calm brown eyes and quiet smile.

Women in black shawls and bonnets crowded the porch, talking and laughing quietly among themselves. Sanford’s buggy circled past men unhitching and parking their buggies by the fence or among the orchard trees. “Whoa!” Sanford pulled up to the horse barn, and Eli leaped over the side to help him unhitch.

“Hey there,” came Noah’s voice as Eli walked toward the men’s entrance.

Eli swiveled to join his friends. “Hey, yourself,” he said, grinning lamely.



*Stuarts Draft Amish church, circa 1950s*

“Ready for today?” Leo asked.

Noah stuck his New Testament in his pocket. “I guess. I wonder what we’ll have to say?”

Sam grinned. “Mostly listen, I guess. Reckon I know how to do that.”

Eli tried to chuckle along with the rest. But inside, his heart beat with a strange rhythm. The boys followed the men through the back door, and Eli hung up his hat with the rest. The worship room was overflowing. Eli almost stumbled, following the boys up to their bench. He dropped thankfully into his seat.

His stomach churned as the minutes ticked by. He restrained himself from wiping his clammy hands on his pants. From the front bench, the song leader cleared his throat and called out a number. His voice rose and held, and then the whole room filled with voices carrying the melody. Eli could sing the words without a book. Ahead of him, Dad’s head tilted back as he sang.

Eli counted the moments. Now! Leo and Noah were rising, following the ministers. Eli clumsily pushed himself to his feet, keeping his eyes on the shoulders in front of him. The boys trailed after the girls into the counsel room.



When the last one squeezed in, Preacher Eli closed the door. The boys lined up tightly on a bench on one side, the girls on the other. Eli was glad his spot was against the corner.

In the expectant silence, Bishop Simon Yoder<sup>a</sup> spoke with feeling as he had at their first gathering. “I do believe this is the largest class we’ve had up to this point.<sup>b</sup> God bless you, each one, for taking this step of obedience.”

Sunlight streamed in the window as the minister opened his small book and began to read the articles of faith.<sup>c</sup> Eli felt the words wash over him, words he had heard from childhood, yet now carrying new meaning. *These are now my own beliefs*, he mused.

He took a deep breath. His heart slowed, and he felt calmer. He kept his eyes mostly on the floor, conscious of the girls facing him. But he listened carefully, taking down references and things he wanted to think about later.

When church dismissed, Eli rode home feeling as light as the vapor that hung along the mountain ranges at dawn. The air was invigorating. He held his slim shoulders straight and even, bracing himself for the wonderful change to come into his life as it had for Sanford. Inside Eli was singing. He had two classes behind him, and the summer lay invitingly before him.



After chores and breakfast Monday morning, Dad pushed back his chair. “Eli, since Sanford’s helping Sam Yoder put a roof on that barn south of town, why don’t you start plowing the lower field?”

Eli’s heart stopped, then began beating again. He stood up, feeling taller than usual. Him—plow? He had raked, hauled manure, and even disked with the tractor. But he had never





plowed. "Okay," he said, reaching for his shoes. Dad turned toward the living room to rest.

Eli grabbed his hat and slipped out the back door. Frisco's hoofbeats faded as Sanford disappeared around the curve in the lane. Eli pulled himself onto the tractor, craning his neck to back up to the plow. Whistling, he jumped down to yank the lever, sending up a quick prayer as the pins slipped into place. Then, hopping onto the seat, he shifted into gear and drove with tingling hands through the gate.

The sky was as blue as a china plate, and along the woods serviceberry trees were blooming. Eli slowed, the plow point touched the earth, and he let the lever drop all the way. But instead of digging in as it was supposed to, the point merely dragged along, scratching a rough line in the dirt.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" Eli growled. He tried again. Heat flooded his face. He glanced toward the house before backing up and again lowering the plow. No matter how many times he tried, he could not make the plow point bite into the ground. He had seen Sanford do it countless times. It had looked so effortless.

At last he turned back to the barn, disgusted with himself. What had he done wrong?

As he slid off to open the gate, Eli felt confused and let down. He had thought things would be different now that he was in the baptismal class. Sanford had been a transformed person after he had repented of his sins. How well Eli remembered!

*Why aren't things going the same for me? Why do I feel upset? Is my experience not real after all?*

Eli unhitched the plow and headed to scrape out the barn. He gripped the shovel handle with more force than necessary. The shovel's rasp against the concrete grated in his ears.

That night he lay in bed staring at the ceiling. At last he turned on his side, pulled his Testament close, and opened



it to the Book of Romans. His lungs felt heavy, and his head hurt. He struggled through a chapter, trying to take in what it said. At last he gave up, pulling the string to cut off the light. He couldn't explain what had happened. And he didn't dare ask.



The following week, after spring rains had softened the ground, Sanford showed Eli how to begin a furrow. "Adjust the plow point so it starts in at an angle," he said, cranking the drawbar.

Sure enough, as Eli started across the field, the plow dug deep into the earth, lifting and spilling the furrow over onto its side. Eli took a deep breath, fixing his eye on a tree on the opposite end. He turned up the throttle. It was working! His arms relaxed. Slowly he worked the field, turning it a rich brown, ready to be planted in corn. The air breathed of nectar and growing things.

But as the hours went by, his thoughts flittered along ahead of him.

The plow problem was solved, but his other questions dangled like an immense wheel, rotating just beyond his reach.





## 2. *To the West*

**T**he farm grew mellow with rain, and the apple trees blossomed, their petals dropping on the lane. The emerging tree leaves unfurled like small linen candles, flickering with green heat. Eli was kept busy doing fieldwork because Dad was laid up with another spell of congestion.

One evening as the family pulled chairs around the table, Dad cleared his throat. “Mom and I have been talking,” he said. “Perhaps since I’m not strong enough for fieldwork this spring, I could take a western trip.” He glanced around the table. “The West might help my lungs. Could you boys keep things running? I’d be gone several weeks.”

Eli looked up, startled. Keep the farm going? All winter Dad had struggled with lung trouble. Once Eli had come in to find Dad coughing up blood. But he couldn’t have guessed this was coming. His eyes flew to Mom’s face. Wouldn’t she want to go along?

Mom was filling three-year-old Mary Beth’s bowl, her lips fixed in a smile. She did not look up.

“What about Mom?” asked Fannie Mae, Eli’s older sister.



"I'll stay home to keep the house and garden going," Mom answered calmly. "I can go another time, though I wish Dad wouldn't be alone."

Thirteen-year-old Maggie stared at Dad. "Where would you go?"

Dad reached for a slice of bread. "I'd like to visit Oklahoma and Kansas—maybe stop in Iowa." He spread butter in thin even strokes.

Sanford speared a piece of chicken. "We boys should be able to do anything that needs doing."

Dad looked at Mom. She kept feeding Mary Beth. He took a spoonful of peas. "Well, maybe that will work out then." He smiled, his face open and cheerful. "I'm stronger than I was last week, I feel sure."

In the days before he left, Dad joined the boys at chore time, washing off the cows' udders, squeezing out the rag, dipping it up and down in the steaming water. One afternoon



*Stuarts Draft train station, circa 1950*