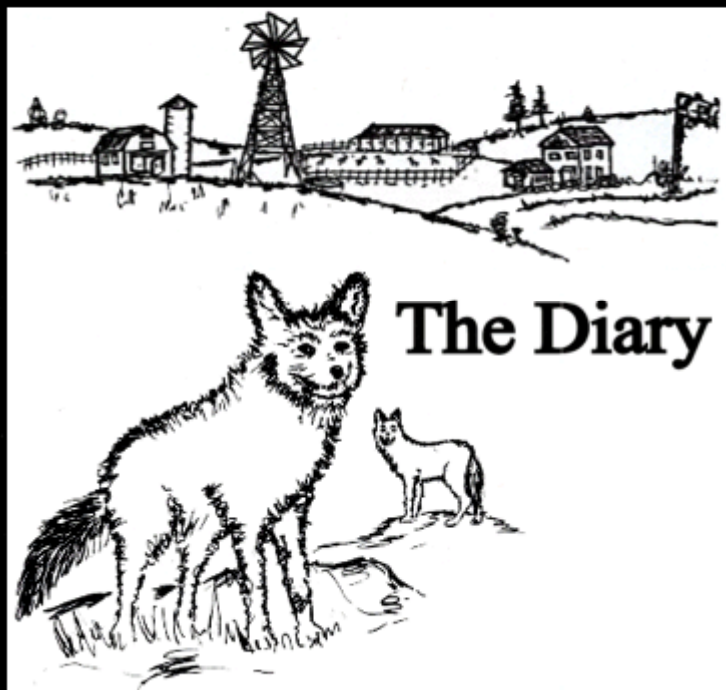


**THE RANCH ON THE
TALL GRASS PRARIE**



Joann Klusmeyer

THE DIARY

Joann Klusmeyer

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Two Hundred Years Before "THE DIARY"

It was late spring.

The coyote's summer coat was golden, trimmed with long, brown guard hairs, and the tufts of hair on his ears were a pale cream. As he bounded through the Tall Grass Prairie, his coat perfectly matched the gold of the ripening buffalo grass, and the cream color of his ears picked up the pale cream of the seed plumes on the bluestem.

The grass was high, so the coyote leaped higher as he bounded through it, the better to see in the distance. His mate ran beside him today, but they must not run far because of the pups sleeping in the lair, but in the joy of the spring day, they ran together.

The four pups slept, twisted together for the comfort their bodies furnished to each other. Their stomachs were distended, comfortably full from their mother's milk, and their eyes were not yet opened, so they lived in the dark softness of warmth, fullness, the caress of a mother's tongue and the squeaks and grunts of each other.

Together the coyote pair ran, enjoying the exercise of their muscles, lean and long, and smelling the smells of spring. Smells..... Yes, and there on the breeze was the scent of a jackrabbit.

Ah! and the female squealed with pleasure. Cottontail rabbits were tasty, and easy to catch, but for a challenge, the jackrabbit was clearly the best. Long bodied and long eared, it relied on its even longer legs. Its strides were as long and as high as those of the coyote, and the coyote could never be certain of a catch until the body of the rabbit was between his teeth. The tricky rabbit could pause behind a tuft of grass, and turn as the coyote leaped over him, and while the coyote searched the grass for the rabbit's next leap, it would be running and leaping in the opposite direction.

But today the coyotes were two instead of one, and they leaped and ran after the rabbit, the song of the hunt coming in yips and whines from deep within their throats. As the rabbit began to tire, the male leaped high and over-jumped the rabbit, allowing the female to pounce upon it, severing his neck vertebrae in an instant. It was a quick and painless kill and the rabbit lay at their feet as they panted for breath.

They shared the meal, eating all of it, and the female turned and loped back to the babies in the den. It was not good to be gone very long. The male watched her for an instant, then went on his way. The jackrabbit had been satisfying, but tomorrow there would need to be another meal for the mother of his pups.

Near the den, the female sensed danger. Moving slowly and placing her feet carefully, she neared the tree and saw the black-footed ferret watching the pups. Watching, in the strange way a ferret always did, pausing to gather its muscles for a leap onto its victim.

Exploding into a ball of fury and noise, the female coyote sprang at the small weasel-like animal, snapping her teeth in rage. The ferret flinched and ducked, then ran, rippling its lithe body through the tall grass. It was not a great disappointment to the ferret to be chased away from the meal. Young coyote pups were not as tasty as prairie dogs, and there were dogs a-plenty in the burrows of the prairie dog town.

The coyote curled around her pups and cleaned the remains of the jackrabbit from her muzzle. The pups settled against her and slept again.

The ferret ran on its short legs through the clumps of grass to the burrow of the prairie dogs. The tall grass did not grow over the burrows because the dogs did not give it the chance. When the blades were a few inches tall, the rodents clipped each blade at its base and nibbled it, holding it in tiny clawed fingers as though it was an ear of corn. The fresh grass made a good meal, and the bare ground that resulted, made a good view of the dog town, the better to see approaching danger.

The prairie dogs were not the only animals that liked to eat the tender young grass. A family of muledeer, consisting of three does and five fawns, walking on still-shaky legs, moved over the burrows, nibbling the tasty,

young blades of grass. The deer stepped carefully to avoid the chattering rodents.

Above the chatter of the burrows came a high-pitched series of clicks and squeaks as a lookout dog saw the rippling shape of the ferret approaching. At the first sounds of the warning signal, fear flowed through the veins of the prairie dogs and like water through a sieve, the prairie dogs were gone, each having leaped, face-first, into the nearest hole.

The ferret did not hurry. A dog in the burrow was an easier meal to catch than a dog on the open prairie, though neither were much of a challenge to a hungry ferret. He slid into the mouth of the nearest burrow and after a few squeals and a scuffle, he emerged, pulling his meal up after him. He ate his fill and cleaned his whiskers before lifting the remains of the prairie dog and carrying them away.

The box turtle walked on bent legs and nosed about in the leaves beneath the blackjack oak tree. The ground was soft and fragrant, and the turtle dug with her rear claws, scooping out a shallow hole, and she dropped her eggs into the depression. Again with her rear claws she pushed dirt into the hole and scuffed the leaves around about to appear to have been mussed by a large animal. Then without a backward glance, she walked away.

A blue jay scolded from the limbs of the oak, chattering at the departing turtle. Then the bird swooped beneath the limbs and gathered the last of the winter acorns, which had been hidden under the leaves, flapping away with the prize.

With a flash of blue wings, the bird carried the nutritious food to his mate who was building a nest in the tall cottonwood tree by the river. He carefully placed the nuts on a limb beside his mate and burst into a series of raucous calls and much fluttering, bragging about the quality of the gift he brought her. With hardly a pause, the female swallowed the acorns and continued weaving the twigs and sticks into a nest. It was high time her eggs were placed, and their incubation begun.

Below the cottonwood tree sat a wrinkled old woman, rocking to and fro as she watched three girls working with the clay. Bluebird and Quailwing sat with Small Flower by the edge of the river, working their hands into the clay

soil of the river bank. Their tan skin was stained red from the clay and their bare feet were wet from wading in the edge of the river.

It was spring and time for the making of new clay pots to replace those that had been broken in the course of the winter, and to try new designs. The tight balls of clay were mixed with water and poured through a loosely woven straw basket. The thick mud oozed through the mesh of the basket, but the small stones, sticks and other trash were held behind. The smooth mud was caught in a large bowl and set aside to be evaporated in the sun.

The old woman blinked her eyes and nodded as she sat in the warm rays. Small Flower saw the nods and knew old Grandmother would be ashamed if she nodded off to sleep and then woke up to realize she had not been attending to her job of watching the girls. Small Flower nudged Bluebird and pointed. Bluebird nodded her head in understanding.

Up from the water she climbed, crossing over the slippery grass and coming near to the old woman. Picking up a small stone, she pitched it into the water causing a splash, then she busied herself arranging the bowls of thick mud.

Old Grandmother startled and blinked her eyes, looking quickly around. All she saw was the back of Bluebird's dress as she knelt on the ground, and the two younger girls pulling clay from the river bank with their hands. She rubbed her eyes, almost hidden within the wrinkled folds of skin, and adjusted herself to get more of the warm sunshine on her feet. She spread her bony, wrinkled fingers over her skirt so the sun's warmth could draw out the coldness of winter and the pain in her joints. It was shameful to sit in the sun and sleep, and not be attentive to the girls at work.

Bluebird adjusted the bowls of mud, and selected one they had prepared yesterday. The sun had pulled the water from the mud and the clay held together nicely when it was squeezed. Yes, this one was ready to use today.

"Grandmother?"

"Yes, Bluebird."

"Can you tell us a story to pass the time? We must mold this clay before it becomes too hard." She knew if Grandmother was set about to tell a story, then she would not doze and sleep, and be ashamed that she did so.

The old woman nodded agreeable and looked out across the river, thinking of a story to tell.

She began, "There was a painter in the long days when the earth was new. He was never happier than when using his paintbrush. He painted on shirts and other clothing, tipis, pottery and even on his own skin.

"He used purple from berries, white from the chalk earth. He made blue from powdered stones and green from plants. Yellow he made from tree bark. When he saw his colors, he was happy. But when he looked at the evening sunset, he knew that what he wanted most of all was a red color as bright as the fire that blazed across the sky in the evening.

He gazed at the red sky with such longing that he fell asleep, dreaming that the Great Spirit came to him and gave him one wish. Without a thought, he said, 'I want the red of the sunset for my people to use when they paint.'

The Great Spirit told him, 'That is a hard wish but it can be granted. You may have as much of the sunset as you can hide before daylight. You must put it where it cannot get back into the sky.'

"So the old painter worked all night. He knew he could only hide the sunset by burying it in the ground, and he hid as much as he could and then daylight came.

Then painter awakened and was weary with disappointment. 'It was only a dream,' he told himself, sadly. But his hands were sore and blistered and when he looked at them, they were as red as the fiery sky.

"He ran to the spot where he had stood in his dream and dug into the earth with his hands. There it was! The sunset was still in the ground and had colored the soil fiery red. He added water to the dirt and painted on his shirt. There was the color on the sunset, the very color he had requested from the Great Spirit!

The painter was overjoyed to find the Great Spirit had given him patches of sunset all over the land he traveled. So it came about that the land of the tall grass held the treasure of the red color, and he could use it whenever he wanted it."

The girls laughed and looked at their hands, which were stained bright red from the clay they were shaping. Their feet were red from climbing the bank, and the bowls were filled with the red of the sunset. It was a good story.

The old woman looked at the flat stones at her feet and saw that they were covered with small bowls and cups already hardening in the sun. The fast and nimble fingers of the girls had shaped the bowls, one after another, just the way she would have shaped them when she was a girl. Such good girls, and such skillful ones! Why had she come with them when they needed no one to show them what to do?

She watched their fingers, and asked, "Why did I come with you? You do not need to be told how to make bowls? I am a useless old woman. I cannot even help you. My fingers are too wrinkled and old. I am worth nothing. How is it you can do this work so well?"

Bluebird smiled as she answered. "Grandmother, have you forgotten that you taught us last summer? We were slow and clumsy, but you were patient and we were able to learn. Now we know how to make bowls, but we do not know how to tell stories. Will you tell us another one?"

The younger girls looked at the old woman and nodded in agreement. The old woman wondered, had she really taught them last summer and forgotten about it? If Bluebird told her that, it must be so, because Bluebird would not say what was not true. But look how skillful they were? She must have taught them well, because it seemed the skill of her own fingers had made the attractive bowls setting before her, but her hands were not red, so she had not helped. It was good that she had emptied the knowledge from her mind before it was lost within her years, and now these three beautiful girls could use her knowledge and add their own, and they would be even more skillful than she had been. She had done a good thing, and now she would tell them another story.

She began, "There was a bear who was very proud of his shiny fur coat....."

Back on the high meadow beneath the roots of the cottonwood tree, the blind coyote pups smelled the scent of their mother and felt the coolness of her shadow of her body. With tiny voices they squeaked and mewed and on miniature feet they pushed toward her to be rewarded by her warm, comforting tongue over their faces.

The first pup to reach her, a sturdy male, lifted his face to the wonder of his mother's caress, and as her tongue passed over his squinched-up eyes, the tiny eyelids separated like the opening of flower petals, and the first sight of his mother imprinted on his mind. Before the day was over, all pups had partially opened eyes.

Then it was night in the tipi village. Old Grandmother wearily stretched herself on her comfortable bison skins, just as the moon broke free of the eastern trees. There had been a time when she could work all night, and now it was a burden just to sit and watch the bowl making with a group of young girls. Pains pierced her knees, and her fingers drew themselves into a fist, forcing her to massage them straight again. She had seen too many snows. It was now the time of the sunshine, but the wings of time were so swift that soon there would be another snow.

"I must sleep," she told herself. "It is time."

And she slept. It was while she was sleeping that the crows, called ravens, flew over the point of her tipi, calling to each other, and one of them flew into the door of the tipi. He stood on the ground and grew tall very suddenly, reaching up to the height of a man. He looked at Old Grandmother, and did not speak. He did not need to speak, because she knew why he was there.

"You've come for me, I know. I would be ready, but my family must be told that I will be gone. Can you wake them?"

The raven looked kindly at Old Grandmother and spoke softly. "I have come, but not for you. I must go three sleeps beyond the village, and when I

return, you will be ready. You will tell your family last words." Then he was small again and flew out the door.

Old Grandmother sat up in the bed and watched, not knowing whether she was asleep or awake.

Then it was morning, and Old Grandmother could not tell the family. She had always been there in the tipi and had never been in another place, so it seemed untrue that she would be going away. There was a time when she had a sister and the two were close friends. Then came the powwow dance, and a handsome young man had taken her sister away and she had not seen her again. Her sister lived only three sleeps away, but there was never a time that was right to go visit her. Duties within her tipi pulled her from one day into the next with nothing in between, and there was not a time that she had three days to go there and three days to come back, and her sister never returned home.

The young girls gathered around her. "It is time for the firing, Grandmother. You must come and show us."

"You do not need an old woman. You know what there is to be known, and you knew how to make the bowls."

"Yes, Grandmother, we made the bowls, but we have never made the fire. You must come, and we will help you walk down to the river and back."

Old Grandmother believed Bluebird's words, and allowed herself to be helped down the rocky path to the river. Rows of red bowls sat on the flat rock, dried and warped from the sun. That would not do. The new bowls must be smooth and even.

"There will be fire, but first there will be work. The oldest girl must make the fire, and the others will rub the bowls. You must place the coal of fire on the dry leaves, and look to the east where the sun is. Remember, the coal of fire is a child of the sun, and you must thank the sun for the fire, or your bowls will surely crack. Now, you other girls, look for sharp leaves from the acorn tree, and soft leaves from the tobacco mullein. Each bowl must be rubbed in every place with the hard leaves, then dusted off with the soft

ones. Then the bowls must be scraped against the flattest rock so their bottom is smooth and flat. Then they can be put in the fire."

The old woman dozed as the girls went about their duties. Bluebird placed the twigs carefully on the fire and the younger girls rubbed the bowls smooth.

The warm air from the fire arose in the cool morning air, carrying heat and smells with it. A flock of ravens swooped playfully through the heated air. Bluebird saw the birds and turned fearful eyes to the old woman.

"Look away, Grandmother. Do not look! They mean nothing!" but the old woman leaned back her head and watched the black wings swoop, circle and dart around.

"They have come for me, but not today," she told the girls, but Bluebird ran to her and put her hand across the old woman's eyes. Old Grandmother lifted her gnarled hands and gently drew away her granddaughter's smooth hand. "It is not today, because there is firing to be done. When there is nothing more to do, they will come back to take me away."

With wet eyes, the girls went on with their work, and finally the tiny flame was a raging blaze.

"It is ready. Now push the wood aside as far as you can and set the bowls on the hot ground. Then lift the coals with your sticks and drop one in each bowl. Then you must drop in another. The fire must be shown what to do, or it will become angry and break all your bowls."

Slowly they filled the bowls with live coals, one at a time, heating them gradually so as not to anger the fire spirits. When the bowls were filled, they tucked the rest of the coals around the bowls and put more dry sticks over them. When the blaze was high, the girls were instructed to gather armfuls of grasses and dip them into the river to soak them, and then they must pile them on the top of the coals, making the fire spit and sputter. Then came the wet leaves. The pile smoked and the smoke spiraled upward, but the ravens were gone.

The morning of the second day, the girls used bright colors to paint their bowls, and then they repeated the firing, but the ravens did not come. It was not time, because only two sleeps had passed.

The third day the wet leaves and grass were removed, and the brightly colored, hard-fired bowls were washed in the river and carried to the village. An important duty had been done, and there would be bowls for food for the next year. The old woman looked at the bowls and knew her last duty had been completed.

She watched the sun sink low into the treetops beyond the box canyon, and thought of what she would say to her family. She thought and thought, but no words came to her. She had lived a long time and she had been loved, and had said every word she had ever wanted to say, so she closed her eyes and waited.

It was when the moon was high that the raven came, and he stood in the door of the tipi and grew tall as he had before. "Come," he told her, "it is time."

Yes, it was time. She got up from her bed and walked toward the raven.

He was smiling and he said, "I have someone here who will go with you."

She looked behind the raven and there stood her sister, as young and beautiful as the day she had gone away from the powwow with the handsome young man. Old Grandmother looked at her own hands, and they were as smooth as the hands of a young girl, not wrinkled and old, and when she lifted her hands to her face, her cheeks were smooth.

She held out her hands to her sister, and together they followed the raven. The night breeze tossed their silky, black hair and they sang with voices that were like bird songs until they could be heard no more.

Then it was morning, and Old Grandmother did not stir from her bed. It was Bluebird who first came to her. "It was the raven!" she wailed. "I saw them in the heat of the firing! Grandmother has gone!" And she had.

Grandmother was wrapped in the blanket of sunshine yellow, brown and orange and lifted to the burial platform. It was not proper to allow the ground to have the body until all spirits had a chance to be gone. For the three days she waited, high on the platform, while the flutes were played and songs were sung. Then when there was nothing left of her body except the red soil from whence it came, so it was returned.

Bluebird and Quailwing looked at the painted bowls and thought of the Old Grandmother, and when there are thoughts that remain on the earth, how can the person be really gone?

The female coyote brought feathers, sticks and bones to the den for the pups to play with, and then there was the day she signaled them to follow her. With the male coyote bringing up the rear, the family went to the place of the prairie dogs so the young ones could be taught to be sly and crafty and be successful hunters.

The pups were made to sit and watch as their mother walked to the center of the burrows, and the noisy animals were standing at each hole watching, barking at the coyote and preparing to scramble down the hole if she approached. So intent they were that they did not even see the male as he calmly and slowly walked over to the nearest hole. With his sharp teeth, he nipped through the neck of the rodent and brought it back to the pups.

The female returned and together the parents watched the pups pull and tug at the body of the prairie dog, and they knew the pups had learned a lesson, but there would be many more to teach them before they could take care of themselves.

In the sheer happiness of a sunshiny spring day, the male lifted his nose to the air and sang a joyful song, which echoed out across the tall grass prairie and over the box canyon.

It echoed all the way to the tribal village and the people said to each other, "There is the voice of the song dog. It will be a good year!"

THE DIARY

High on the mesa sat the large ranch house, square and solid against the blue of the sky. Beside it were guest cottages and a long bunk house. Farther away were the buildings for the animals. Fenced corrals surrounded the large barn, and many horses grazed in the pastures or stood dozing in the sun.

Thirteen year old Caitlyn Bradford yawned and rubbed her eyes. The bright sunshine called to her when she looked away from the blue of the computer monitor. The lesson she had downloaded, Beginning Algebra, was a little bit confusing, so she had put on the tape of the teachers instructions, and now the lesson was no clearer than before. She decided she had studied long enough.

Home schooling from the Internet had its plusses, and it also had minuses. It meant you could study when you wanted to, and you could take a break when you got tired. It even meant that you could make the teacher "repeat" the instructions twenty times if you had trouble understanding something. That's what it had, but what it didn't have was other students. She was always alone. Her bedroom was her classroom. The closest she got to other students was email, except on picnic or party days held several times a year.

It was time for a break.

The sun was startlingly bright after the dimness of the monitor, but that was not unusual for western Oklahoma. The BB Ranch could count on having too much sun, too much wind or too much snow. Sometimes there was too much rain, but not often.

The "BB" name of the ranch was for her great grandfather Bradford and his brother, but the neighbors had other names. Sometimes it was the "BumbleBee", the "Bouncing Betty", and "Bouncing Bee" and even worse names, sometimes. The official name was now The Bradford Guest Ranch, but nobody cared.

Caitlyn passed the bunkhouse and went to the stable where her horse might be. Then, again, she might be in the corral, or in the near pasture. Josh Hunt would know. He always knew where every horse was at every minute. He knew because it was his job to know. He was the head wrangler, in charge of the string of trail horses that were rode by the ranch guests, and all of the work horses. Probably forty in all. Maybe more.....it was not her job to keep u p with them.

A loud whinny beside her ear told her where her palomino might be. The horse poked her golden head out of the half-door and whinnied again. She was ready for their afternoon ride.

"Hello, Golden," Caitlyn greeted the pony. "Are you ready?"

What a question! Of course she was ready. She had been ready and waiting for hours.

Caitlyn tossed the light saddle over the back of the palomino. She had saddled her horse so many times that she could do it in her sleep. It had been one of her father's rules. If she was big enough to ride, she was big enough to saddle and care for her horse. Even her little sister, Nelda, only ten years old, could saddle her horse. The girls had been told that Josh, the wrangler, had a job and was not their servant, and the girls must care for their own horses. So the girls brushed their horses and cleaned the stalls. That was the small price to pay for having their own horse.

It seemed to be a good afternoon for a long ride, so Caitlyn put an apple and the cell phone in the saddle bag and tossed it over the golden back of the horse, just behind the saddle. On impulse, she put in the camera. She was not a very good photographer, but one never knew what they would see when riding out over the mesa.

The sun shown warmly on her yellow hair and the breeze fanned against her face, waking her up from the boring bout with Beginning Algebra. The tall grass reached to the belly of the pony. It was a mixture of yellow-green buffalo grass, and gray-green stems of the prairie bluestem grass. Flat as a table top the meadow spread, all the way to the lip of the huge box canyon.

A small river flowed down from some far off foothills and poured over the lip of the canyon in a waterfall that would be the envy of the wedding veil in any bridal shop. The water was made up of snow-melt from the mountains and it cascaded over the lip of the canyon, falling with a roar into the rock-bottomed pool. From there it gathered itself back into being a river, and wound its way across the floor of the canyon. After that, it flowed away, maybe all the way to the Mississippi.

Caitlyn loved the box canyon. It was located on land leased by the ranch for the horses and longhorns, but a lot of other animals claimed it as well. Wolves and foxes and small animals were often seen, as well as bison they called buffalo, and a herd of elk.

The only reason she was allowed to ride out alone was that she carried the cell phone and could be located, and also could call for help if she should need it.

Across the tall grass Golden trotted, joyful to escape the stable. Caitlyn bounced happily on her back, just as joyful to escape, temporarily, the bondage of Algebra.

At the narrow trail that led down into the canyon, Golden slowed, picking her way on careful hooves. The steepness of the trail tried to pitch Caitlyn over the pony's head, but she had ridden this trail many times. She knew how to hold on.

Finally on the canyon floor, the palomino lowered her head to grab a bite of the juicy grass, but Caitlyn reined her up. "You can eat later while I climb on the rock ledges."

The pony trotted around the wall of the canyon, stopping by the rock outcroppings where Caitlyn often brought her. She lowered her head and began to graze, as she had been promised.

The girl leaped to the ground and ran to the rocks. It was fun the way the flat stones jutted out from the wall of the bluff, and she could climb from one to the other, though some of the steps were quiet a long stretch for the legs. Today, the stretching felt good.

High on her favorite ledge, she sat down and swung her feet over the edge while she watched her grazing pony. Then she looked at her feet. In her haste to be gone, she had not changed into her riding boots and here she was, climbing the rough rocks in light casual loafers. Bad idea. The slickness of the soles was a bit dangerous and she could get hurt. The climbing and scuffing was not doing the shoes any good, either. Oh, well.....

And it was at that moment that one of the loafers dropped off her foot. Oops! Toe over heel the shoe tumbled, kicking dust puffs here and there, and it came to rest of a small ledge closer to the canyon floor than the ledge where she sat. Well, she'd get it when she came down, and now she would just have to be sock footed on one foot. She'd have to watch out for the cactus stickers.

Caitlyn climbed about on the rocks until the sun lowered to the canyon lip, which was her signal to head for home. Working her way down, she reached the place where her shoe waited.

The shoe was full of dirt, so she whacked the heel against the rock to knock out the dirt. It was then that a chunk of the clay between the rocks slid away, revealing something behind it.

She had been warned never to poke her hands into a strange place, so she used a stick to work the object out from under the rock. It was something wrapped in cloth and the old cotton fabric was rotten, and it broke into crumbles when it was touched.

An idea! Jumping to the ground, she rooted around in the saddle bag for her camera. She took a snapshot of the package from the ground, then climbed back up and took another picture. The hiding place was hardly more than eight feet high.

Now, to get it down without tearing it up.

Good idea! She slipped off her shirt and then her undershirt. Putting her shirt back on, she carefully slid the crumbling package onto her undershirt. Folding the soft knit around it, she slid down the bank and put it on the ground. Then she climbed back up again and got her shoe.

Crouching on the ground, she carefully peeled back the rotted fabric and what she saw made thrill bumps raise up on her arms. A little shiver of suspense played up and down her back. Before her on the old cloth was a small book, and a tiny rag doll, hardly longer than her hand. The cloth fabric of its body was not much better than the wrapping, so she lifted the doll carefully with both hands and slipped it into the loafer beside her. So what if she rode home with one sock foot in the stirrup?

Carefully she put the shoe into the saddle bag so it would not tip over and spill the fragile toy. The book was in somewhat better condition, though it was yellowed and crumbling. Beside the book was a stub of a pencil, which appeared to have been sharpened by a knife.

Slipping the wooden pencil into her shirt pocket, she carefully opened the book. On the fly leaf was printed, This Book Belongs to, and then there was a line. Still readable was the name, Annie Jo Cantrell.

The shiver of thrill bumps again raced down her back. A diary! It was a diary of a girl named Annie who, for some reason, hid her book in the rock ledges of a box canyon on the tall grass mesa of Oklahoma. This was clearly the beginning of a mystery, and no one loved mysteries more than Caitlyn.

Carefully she lifted the fly leaf of the small book, and a chunk of the yellowed paper broke off in her fingers. She would have to be more careful, but first she needed a picture of the fly leaf. Raising her camera, she snapped two shots, just to be sure one was good.

With a stiff blade of grass she lifted the fly leaf and turned it over. The words said, "They gave me a book to write in so I would have something to do while I ride. I would rather not have to ride, but Pa says it is a thing to be done."

Ride? Was there another girl who came here to play on the rocks? Probably not because no one could write while they rode horseback.

Golden snorted, startling Caitlyn, and she noticed the sun had passed the canyon rim. It was past time to be on her way. Closing the undershirt carefully around the book, she slipped it into her other saddle bag and climbed aboard.

"Let's go, Golden," she commanded, and the pony galloped across the canyon and climbed the narrow trail. At the rim of the canyon, they could see the many buildings of the BB Ranch appearing tiny in the distance, and the palomino lifted her tail and raced across the grass, her golden brown mane flying in the breeze.

At the stable, the girl wanted nothing more than to run to her room with her treasure, but that was not what her father's rules had said. A horse that was ridden was a horse that must be rubbed down, so Caitlyn flung off the saddle and reached for the brush. Down the pony's neck and across her back came the brush. Around her belly and down her legs.....there!

Easing the shoe and the folded undershirt from the saddle bag, she hurried to her room and put them on her bed.

"CATE! CAITLYN!"

"What, Mom?"

"Time for supper. Come and get washed."

Caitlyn sighed, but she left her treasures and obeyed.

The baked ham and sweet potatoes were welcome after the activity of the afternoon, but it was Caitlyn's turn to clean up the kitchen. Everything took time. Precious minutes were gone before she could get back to the wonderful book.

Finally, she returned to her room and closed the door. On impulse, she flipped the lock. This was not the time to have someone wandering in.....like Nelda being lonely, or her twin brother, Cal, wanting to check his Algebra against hers. Nelda had gone visiting for the week, but that had slipped Caitlyn's mind. Sure, the family would know about it sometime, but the first peek was hers and her hands fairly trembled in anticipation.

Carefully she lay back the folds of rotten cloth. There was the book, its faded cover stained. Maybe its original color was blue, but it could have been green, or maybe even gray. With the spatula she had brought from the

kitchen, she lifted the cover and laid it back. There were the words, Annie Jo Cantrell.

The first page began, "They gave me this book to write in so I would have something to do while I ride. I would rather not have to ride, but Pa says it is a thing to be done."

Caitlyn sighed with pleasure and anticipation, and stretched out on her stomach beside the book.

"Everyone is busy getting ready. My old Gran doesn't want to go, either, but there is no place to leave her. If I was older, I could stay, and when I got married she could live with me. She wants to take things, but Pa said she could only have two things because the wagon was not big enough for everything."

Wagon? Maybe a covered wagon? Caitlyn licked her dry lips with her tongue and continued to read.

"They said I could take two things, and one will be my doll and I haven't decided on what else. I think I might take my hair brush and mirror, but that is two things. Suzie gets to take whatever she can get in her doll cradle, but she's little.

"Ma made new dresses for us, and used up all the dress material we had. We will not need coats because we will be there before winter. Ma argued with Pa and says she will take our coats anyway. She says they will be good to sleep on if we don't have to wear them. Ma has never lived south of Ohio, so she says winters are all cold. Pa says Californea is always warm."

Californea? Could she mean, California? Caitlyn read on.

"Ma says there ain't no place like that where it don't get cold. They talked all night, just like Suzie and I weren't in the loft, trying to sleep. Suzie finally got to sleep, but I kept thinking of things to take. Gran didn't sleep, because I kept hearing her out in the lean-to, coughing and coughing. She always has a cold."

The last words were crowded together on the last line, as though Annie was trying to put as much as possible on the page. With the spatula, Caitlyn lifted the next page, and it broke off crisply and lay on the blade of the turner. The old paper was too brittle to turn. Was there some other way to open the pages that wouldn't damage them? But there was the next page open before her and crowded with words from Annie's pencil.

"March 22." Wonderful! There was a date! "Pa brought the wagon and the four horses they said we had to have. Clyde wants to take our dog, but maybe they won't let him. He thinks Old Blue could hunt for her own food. I hope he gets to take the dog, because he can't take Amy. She thought they could get married, but they won't. She will be in Ohio and he will be in Califernea.

"Gran said she would take her rocker, the one that folds up and hangs on the wall, and the other thing will be a root from her rosebush. Gramp gave her the rosebush when they married because she loves flowers and her name is Rosie. That bush is bigger than a double bed, but she will only get to take a part of it."

It was again time to turn a page, and Caitlyn dreaded to lift the brittle yellow sheet and see it break away. The paper was so old..... Was there a way to do that, or was there something she could do to keep the page from breaking? She'd try once more and be more careful.

Slowly, carefully she lifted the page. A little more..... Aw! There it broke again!

Annie had begun to write on both sides of the page, and the words were a bit blurred and the pencil lead smeared. Caitlyn strained her eyes to continue.

"March 24. Clyde is happy because Old Blue can go. They say she might be a help when Clyde has to guard the horses and cows at night. There will be 7 other big boys like Clyde and the nighttime guarding will be their job. Old Blue is big and gray and almost looks like a wolf, but she is a good dog."

Clyde must be Annie's brother. Maybe he was 17, like her own brother, Roger. That is a thing Roger would want to do. He would want to take his dogs even if it meant he had to leave his clothes behind. The other thing Roger would want to take would be his 22 rifle.

Caitlyn read on. "They let Clyde take his shotgun and a lot of bullets. He can carry the gun because he is going to have to walk, but the bullets can go in the wagon. Ma keeps drawing pictures on paper to decide how to load everything in such a tiny space. There has to be room for Gran to sleep in the wagon. If it gets really cold, and Ma says it will, Suzie will sleep with her to help her keep warm."

Caitlyn rubbed her burning eyes and strained to make out the smeared words. It was dark outside her window and she should be in bed asleep. She'd just finish this page and then put the book away.

"Pa dug up a part of Gran's rosebush and wrapped it up and nailed the package to the bottom side of our wagon. He said we could water it through a hole in the floorboard. I thought that was a good idea. He put a big hook on the outside of the wagon to hang up the folding rocker. Gran is ready. Clyde is ready, and I can't make up my mind. I might take my Bible Story Book they got me when I got to be twelve. It is almost new, and it is big and thick and full of stories. Most days I think I might not care how I look, but I might want a book to read. Suzie likes to listen to the stories, and I think I could use it to teach her to read, so the book would be better than the mirror. I have another idea of what I might do. If I put the book in Suzie's doll cradle, we could put her doll and other things on top. That way I could take my hairbrush and mirror."

The last three words were squinched into the corner and very hard to read. Caitlyn looked toward the dark window and smiled. She was proud of Annie for figuring out a way to take the book. After all, it was for Suzie, too. How old was Suzie? Maybe five or six. Annie would be older than twelve but not very much or she would have read all of her Bible Stories. A new idea hit Caitlyn like a cannonball from a cannon. The Bible Story book! What happened to it? Would there be a way to find it, and what shape would it be in?

She sighed with weariness and lifted the fragile fabric under the diary and put it on her nightstand. The diary lay invitingly open but she forced her eyes away from it. She had to get some sleep.

She did, however, give in to the temptation to take a last peek at the doll. Quietly sliding open the drawer, she lifted out the loafer, which still cradled the ragdoll. She eased her fingers under the head and lifted gently. The old fabric was almost as stiff with age as the pages of the book. The doll seemed to have been sewn from some kind of heavy cloth, almost like canvas and its blue button eyes were still firmly attached. The pink thread that made the embroidered mouth still retained a touch of color. Brown strings were attached to the doll's head for hair, and they were so close together, it must have taken days to get them all sewed on. Could Annie have made the doll? More likely it had been made as a gift from her Gran, judging from the way she felt about her grandmother.

The doll wore a dress that was still somewhat blue, and the white collar and cuffs on its puffed sleeves were stained, but still in good shape. The doll's feet wore embroidered shoes that laced up and tied with a string that was frayed, and probably rotten. Caitlyn was afraid to touch it for fear something would break and drop off. The legs and arms were a bit lumpy as though the doll had been played with a lot. Annie had probably had the doll for years, and taking it along with her made the going seem a little less painful. Anyway, the doll had made the first cut to go along. Where was the hairbrush and mirror? Where were more things in the canyon to find?

With a sigh she returned the loafer cradle to the drawer and slipped under her bed covers. She simply had to get some sleep. More Algebra tomorrow, and she had to get the lessons over if she was to get to go back to the canyon.

The golden brown coyote loped gracefully through the tall grass. It was a dark night, and hard to see movement, but it was still a good night to hunt. The wind blew through the grass whispering its stiff blue green blades against each other. Night birds called and insects screeched, covering the small sound of the coyote's feet in the grass.

His sensitive nose cast about from side to side, searching for a scent. The warm air of the daytime caused the scents to rise, but with the coolness of the night, they settled like a rope of smells hanging just over the tops of the grass. The coyote lifted his nose to search the air. His golden coat contained gray guard hairs among the tan ones, unusual for a coyote, and the fringe of soft hairs that rimmed his ears were dark with gray and black fur. He was definitely a coyote, but he was one that if a person saw him the second time, they would remember him as being a bit different. Even his solid, sturdy lope was different from the delicate footsteps of most coyotes. His way of hunting was different. Rather than the leap and the pounce of a coyote, he depended on the fast rush and the attack. He used his strong muscles to catch his prey.

The scent he finally caught trailed past his nose and he leaped into it, filling his nostrils with the smell of the jackrabbit. Stopping instantly to get his bearings, he cast his nose into the scent and turned toward the stronger smell. Placing one solid foot after the other, he took several steps. Yes, this was the way to go.

Holding his nose high, he trailed the scent as it became heavier with the musky smell of the rabbit. When the odor could get no stronger, he plunged into the grass clump to flush the animal. The sleeping rabbit startled suddenly, and paused to decide which way to flee. The pause was his doom, and the crunch of the powerful jaws closed on the neck of the large rabbit, measuring fully a yard long from ear tip to rear feet. It was easily a meal for two.

Dropping the rabbit into the grass, the coyote lifted his head and started the sound low in his throat. The soft growl built in pitch and strength ending in an eerie whine, which echoed over the high meadow and the canyon. As the sound died away, the coyote cocked his head and listened.

From somewhere past the grove of cottonwoods came the answering call of his mate. He lifted his head once more and repeated his growling whine. He would wait, now, and if she did not soon appear, he would call again. They would eat the rabbit and then they would rest until daylight.

The girl in her upstairs room was fast asleep in her weariness, and the sound of the call of the coyotes was a familiar one, and she did not stir.

Most nights of her life she could have heard the voice of the "song dog" as it hunted.

Once more his howl sounded across the grass, and was answered by a whine from nearby. The slight, delicate female coyote parted the tall grass and nosed a greeting to her successful mate. He began to gnaw on the haunches of the rabbit, leaving the more desirable head part for her. Within minutes there was nothing left of the rabbit but the faint scent of it, still hanging to the blades of grass.

Side by side the coyotes settled down into the softness of the grass, signing and lowering their eyes. Cradled in the darkness they slept.

In the upstairs room the sleeping girl sat up, suddenly wide awake. What was that documentary she had once seen on Egypt, where great care had been taken with old papyrus and leather scrolls? Wasn't something done to keep them from breaking? Would it work on the diary? How would she go about getting information?

She lay back down and pulled up the covers. There would be no more sleep for her tonight. The thought of the diary on her nightstand filled her head and opened her eyes as if they were on springs. After twice turning over pillow and pounding softness into it, she sat up and turned on the light. If she was going to be awake, she might as well work on the Algebra and have more time tomorrow. She had calls to make.

There was a bookstore in Guymon that sold old books and that might be a good place to start. Finally the night was over.

The blocks of sunshine that shone through her window called to Caitlyn with an irresistible tug, leaving her to make a decision. Because of last night's work, her lesson was finished early. She could read more of the diary, call the bookstore, or go back to the canyon. Which?

The book won. Carefully lifting the page, she tried to peek between the leaves without turning them over, but the smudged pencil words were too dull, and Annie had taken to crowding her words close together as though she knew she had more words than she would have room to write them.

Carefully, Caitlyn eased the pages apart and this time the page split right down the center. Oh my! That was bad! Now she had to lift the broken page and it broke again in the crease, the same as the other pages. Not only was the page broken, but it was in two pieces.

Carefully lining up the halves she could make out the words. "March 27." What year? Caitlyn's mind begged the book for information, but the pages had other things to say. "I wrapped the Bible Story book in a towel and told Suzie it was a mattress for her doll, and I told Ma that the brush and mirror should count as one thing, shouldn't it? She told me to go ahead and pack them, but not to tell Pa. He had enough to worry about. I wish Pa had never heard about that gold. We are living good where we are. Ma and Gran say gold fever is a sickness, and men don't get over it."

Gold? It must be shortly after 1849 and Annie's Pa must be part of the gold rush.

"They say there are two ways to go. If we go the north way, it is quicker, but the mountains are taller and if anything happens to slow us down, the weather is colder. Ma was right to think about our coats. And if we go the south way, it is flatter but it will take longer. We are late in the year already, they say, and there is a good chance of something happening. I think they will go the south way but I think I don't care because my head aches from thinking about it, and Ma doesn't want to talk about it. Gran keeps coughing but she says she is ready to go. I told Suzie she couldn't say anything about the Bible Story book or maybe we couldn't take it. I'm afraid she will slip and tell Ma, but if she does, maybe Ma won't be listening. She doesn't seem to half hear anything I say.

"Clyde is very happy now. Amy's people have decided to go on the train with us. They have to hurry because we will leave the first of April. The wagon master said we would leave in a snow storm if that was what happened on the first of April. The wagon is loaded and Pa painted the canvas with another layer of grease. He says the cloth has to be waterproof and that tar cracks in cold weather. The grease smells a little like fried chicken, but the smell will go away. That's what Pa says. Ma keeps thinking of another thing to take, and Pa says she can't put in anything else. She has a tin cracker box that has needles and thread and a lot of buttons. She made

me go buy more needles and I have to keep the box with me. She is afraid she will forget it with so many things to think about. She says I must put in the scissors, the thread knife and the bottle of sweet-oil for Suzie's earaches. I put in a ball of string and the stinging salve for cuts and sores. Ma didn't notice, so I may think of another thing to put in, if there's room."

And that was the end of the page. Caitlin agonized over her decision. There would be no more words until the page turned, and every page had broken at the spine. It was time to call the bookstore.

Yes, said the voice at the bookstore, there were things that could be done. How old was the book? More than a hundred years? How much more? What kind of a book was it?

Caitlyn told the voice on the phone she would have to call back. Slowly she hung up the phone and thought. He was very nosey. Why was he asking all those questions? He either had a way to soften the pages or he didn't. What was the big thing about telling her what to do?

The sun was bright and she was unable to resist the call of the canyon.

"Mom? I'm going for a ride," she called as she went through the kitchen.

"Wait! How about the lessons?"

"I've finished."

"All ready?"

"Yeah. I couldn't sleep last night, so I worked."

"All right. Go have fun. Remember the cell phone."

"I always do, Mom. Bye. I love you."

Golden was in the near corral, her beautiful head hanging over the fence. When she saw Caitlyn, she tossed her head in greeting, waving her toast-brown mane. Nelda's horse came to the fence and whinnied in greeting.

"Not today, Vanilla. Nelda has gone visiting to the neighbors. You'd better find something else to think about."

Minutes later the girl and the pony were galloping down the lane and under the tall iron gate with the huge "BB" worked into the metal. Across the tall grass toward the canyon they sped, the cool wind whipping the mane of the pony and the long hair of the girl. Should have tied up my hair, Caitlyn told herself, but no matter. She had plenty of combs and brushes, unlike Annie.

Leaving Golden to munch the grass, the girl searched the ledges. There were so many it was hard to get to them all, and some were high on the cliff where there was no place to stand. It was impossible to tell where something could be hid. She didn't even know how or why Annie had decided to use the one she did.

Today it was easier to climb, because she wore boots. There was a lot of prickly pair cactus on the canyon floor and a lot of other things that grabbed and clung to shoes and clothing, snagging and tearing at them. Blackberries and dewberries aplenty, small stickery weeds and old rose bushes.

Rose bushes! She glanced across the river where the spot of pink told her the valley roses were blooming. It was a huge bush, spread all along the bank of the river and the bush was so thick the grass didn't grow there, so animals did not trample it. Lifting her foot to the stirrup, Caitlyn jumped up into the saddle.

"Let's go, Golden," and she urged the palomino into a gallop. Across the flat valley the horse went, her dainty hooves flying. At the edge of the river she reined her in, and Golden stepped into the water to get a drink. Noisily, she sucked in huge gulps and raised her head to look around, the water drooling from her lips. Then into the water again.

Caitlyn looked across the river at the bush covered with roses and buds. It was always such a pretty thing, and bloomed for weeks every spring. It had been so pretty that she and her brothers (Nelda had been too little) had come here and dug up a root of the bush to give their mom one Mother's day. It had been their favorite present, and nothing they had given her since had seemed so nice.

The bush they had given their mother still bloomed on each side of the iron gate with the "BB".

As she stared, a strange feeling began in the pit of her stomach and spread up into her head, making her feel just a little bit dizzy. Hmmmm, but it couldn't be! No, there was absolutely no connection between this bush and the one belonging to Annie's Gran. Still.....

Golden's head turned toward her with questioning eyes. Where did she want to go, now? The girl guided the reins to bring them back to the canyon wall. Continued poking and digging only revealed more layers of red dirt and crumbled shale from the ledges. Finally, disappointed, she headed back to the ranch house.

Uncle Raymond Red Hawk lived in one of the guest houses, and he was sitting in front of his cabin in his lawn chair. He waved a greeting as she passed. He wasn't really her uncle, but if he had family, other than the son in Oklahoma City, she didn't know about them. He was the storyteller when guests came to vacation at the Ranch, and on the trail trips when Cook took the chuck wagon out to campsites, Uncle Raymond always went along to help. There was no telling how many stories he had in his head, and some of them might even be partly true. Maybe someday she would write a book about all of his stories.

What she would do someday was not the first of her concerns just now. There would be college first, and then who knew? Roger wanted to be a veterinarian and fly a small airplane or helicopter to the outlying ranches, and maybe line camps, to take care of animals. He was already very smart about treating animals, and he would get his flying license when he was 18. Her twin brother, Cal, still thought he wanted to work in the rodeos, roping for prize money. And he wanted to fly. Maybe he would be a pilot. Roger had thought about the rodeo, too, for a while, and maybe Cal would change.

And Caitlyn, herself? When she thought of it, sometimes she could see herself as a photographer. But first, there was college, and before that was the Algebra. She and her friend, Emily, from the "Focus" ranch 27 miles away, sometimes thought they would do something together. Then they wouldn't be lonesome all the time like they were now.

When Golden was safely back in the near corral, Caitlyn entered the kitchen.

"You had a call from the bookstore in Guymon."

"Oh?" How had they called her back! Oh yes, the caller ID on the phone.

"He said you might bring the book in, and he'd be of more help. Are you having trouble with something?"

Caitlyn hesitated. She was not quite ready to share her wonderful secret with anyone, not even Mom.

Mom continued, "Because if you are having trouble, shouldn't you call the teacher? He would be more likely to know how to help you. Algebra may not have changed, but the teacher is the one getting paid."

Caitlyn nodded. "You're right, Mom. Thanks."

As she started up the stairs to her room, her mom added, "But if the call was about something else, maybe I can help. Remember, I'm a few years older than you." That was supposed to be a joke, so Caitlyn chuckled.

"Sure, Mom. I'll let you know."

The truth was, she'd probably have to. It wasn't like she could just walk over to the store in Guymon. From where she lived, she couldn't walk over to anywhere when her closest neighbor was 27 miles away.

Closing the door behind her, she stared at her night stand and the little book containing Annie's secrets. Sighing, she slid her drawing board beneath the fabric and carefully picked it up. Slowly she went down the stairs to the kitchen. It was the only way.

"Mom, I guess I need help. I found something hidden in the wall of the box canyon. Do you want to see?"

"Certainly. Let's see what it is."

But now it was mom's time to stand and stare, speechlessly, at the book.

"Honey, I'm not sure what comes next, but I know we must not touch this little book."

"Why not? It's mine."

"No, darling, it isn't. It belongs to the nation. Certainly not just to us."

"Why?"

"Well, for starters, it was found on government leased land. We only rent the meadow and the canyon. But even if it was on our land, there are laws about things that are very old, like the artifacts found in the mounds, and old stone inscriptions."

Caitlyn bit her lip in disappointment. She already felt as though Annie was her friend and that she had been disloyal in sharing her secret with Mom, and ultimately, the whole nation.

"But how can I know what it says?"

"I'm not sure, but someone will know what it says, and then you will know. Right now we need to get on the phone and determine what to do with this."

Mom got started with the calls, and seemed not to notice when Caitlyn left the room. Surely, she could find something to do to get her mind off the way she felt.

She walked past the stable and on to the emu hatchery. The strange birds looked like walking haystacks with a snakelike neck and head. Raising emus was one of Roger's projects, connected with some subject he had taken in school. The emus and the llamas were his idea, though the whole family had fun with them, and they had become valuable as entertainment for some of the guests.

The inquisitive birds poked their skinny heads through the fence, hoping for a handout. She didn't feed them, though, because she could only give them what Roger had weighed and told her she could offer. He had to keep

records on ratio of weight gain to food eaten, and a lot of other things. Anyway, no snacks today.

Into the brooder house she went. The air was warm and moist and fans blew it around. The huge cantaloupe-sized eggs lay on the shelves covered with soft cloths. The clipboard was annotated in Cal's handwriting, giving the time of day the eggs had been given a quarter turn. Cal liked helping with Roger's projects.

She ran her hands over the smooth surface of the eggs. They were not due to hatch for a day or two, and it was such fun to watch the ugly chicks come out of their shells that Emily had wanted to come over to watch. It might mean that she could stay two or three days, and that would be fun.

Also, now that the secret was out, she could tell Emily about the book and maybe the doll, and they might ride down to the canyon to look for more things.

Sighing, she turned away from the shelves of eggs and came back to the house. Mom was excited about the news.

"People from the university are on the way out to get the book."

"To get it? But I found it! Don't I get anything?"

"We'll have to talk to them about that. You'll get credit for the find, they said, and we'll just have to go on from there."

Caitlyn was less than excited when the van from the university passed under the "BB". Yes, there were things they could do, they said as they unloaded this and that from the van. It turned out that they had ways of hydrating the old pages that kept them from breaking, and one by one they took camera shots of each opened page. They even let her hold to the pages, and the camera took pictures of her fingertips.

Every page was crammed with writing, smeared and smudged, and when they reached the last of the book there were two blank pages. Had Annie run out of something to say? Not likely.....

There was not time to take the university people to the canyon to show them where she found it, so they made arrangements to be back tomorrow. With that, they drove away taking her precious diary, but they did not have the doll.....or the stubby wooden pencil. No one had asked her if there had been anything else, so it wasn't really wrong not to tell them, was it?

The fun was gone from the day, so she might just as well work on the Algebra. The interesting thing about home schooling on the Internet, she could choose her subjects and work on them one at a time. She had to get permission from her parents, of course, on which subjects she took, but they all had to be taken sooner or later. Mom had suggested she take an easy one, then a hard one, so she wouldn't get discouraged. One thing she could do now was look at the list and decide what to take next.

What would it be.....painting?.....cooking?.....weaving? The weaving could be fun, because the course told how to do everything from clipping the wool from the backs of the sheep to knitting it into fancy things. Or there was photography.....why not? She might as well learn it now. By the time she got through with that course, she would know if she liked it well enough to be professional.

The people from the university came early the next day, and they handed her a tape. Your copy of the pictures of the book, they told her. Cool! Her own copy, and it that had her fingertips on it! Now that was something to tell Emily, and they could read it together. Hey, she could copy it so she could read it to Emily much quicker without having to stop and figure out the words.

Life wasn't so bad as it could be.....and besides, she still had the doll.

Crows filled the sky over the canyon. The birds were as bad as packrats for wanting to pick up interesting items to put in their nests. The large, noisy flock of the glossy, black birds darted here and there in the canyon, calling to each other and performing aerial ballet acts in the warm breeze.

One black bird flew across the river and caught a glint of sparkle in his eye. In a moment the sparkle was gone, so he circled around again. There it was! Something shiny on the ground.

Darting down, he caught a small bush with his strong orange feet and leaned forward to inspect the strange shiny thing. There on the ground was a print of a horse hoof. The hard hoof had scuffed the dirt aside and a shiny, flat thing was beneath.

The bird hopped down for a closer look, and saw another crow looking up at him from inside the ground. At first he startled back, then, being a nosy creature, he looked again, and there was the bird again. He could only see the beak and the head, but he knew it had no business being there.

With a fast foot, he scratched in the dirt and the bird came loose under his claw. It was just a tiny piece of the bird, but the crow scooped it into his beak and flew high.

When he thought he was high enough, he dropped the other bird so it could fly away, but it plummeted to the ground. It must be wounded. Back down to the ground went the crow and again he gathered the wounded bird in his beak and headed for his nest in the oak tree.

Placing the part of a bird in his nest, he looked at once more. Yes, it was still there. As reassurance, he moved his beak toward the part of a bird, and it moved its beak toward him. He waited, but still the bird did not fly, so the crow flew away. It was clear the other bird needed rest to get over whatever was wrong with it, and he had done all he could, so he went back to the games in the canyon.

Caitlyn slipped the tape into the VCR. There was the picture of the book pages.

Flipping past March and on to April, she looked for the next date. It was April 2.

"It is snowing, and we are moving. We rolled all night trying to get past the weather, but then we had to stop and let the horses rest. Ma won't say anything she doesn't have to, and her eyes are red. We all rode in the wagon

with Gran, and Clyde and Pa walked. I'm so cold that I don't think I'll ever be warm.

"April 6. Suzie got the sniffles and then she coughed all night. Gran rubbed her chest with camphorated oil and put all the coats on her and put one over her head. I thought she might smother so I kept looking under. Gran said stop letting cold air get in. Ma didn't say nothing. Suzie seems better today and she wants me to read from the book, but I'm afraid to let anyone know we have it.

"Ma made beans with chunks of fat back, and we had them cold for lunch. I sure don't like cold beans but I'm hungry all the time. Clyde says he can get squirrel meat, but he hasn't found any. I don't think he looks for them. He walks with Amy.

"When we got to the river, there was a flat boat that took us over, and we had to pay money. They wanted more than the master told us to have, but we paid him. There were a lot of wagons waiting for us on the other side and we all started out together. I can't even see from the front wagon to the back.

"April 7. Suzie is still in bed, and I crawled down into the coats and got out the Bible Story book. I read in a soft voice, and Gran smiled but didn't say anything. It was good to have something to read again. We are traveling on a place called Missouri, and where we camped there were a lot of nut trees. Little nuts called hazelnuts were all over the ground, and I picked up a lot. Ma helped, and Suzie wanted to, but Gran wouldn't let her get out on the wet ground. I think the nuts might be the best ones I ever ate, and I worked until dark to get as many as I could. Ma had to quit helping and stew up the squirrels Clyde finally got.

"Old Blue got someone's chicken and ate it before we could get it away from her. Ma felt bad about it. I picked up some of the reddish feathers for Suzie to play with. There are some other girls in the train but I don't know them, yet. Ma doesn't want me to leave our wagon."

"April 10. Suzie got to get up and we walked until she got tired. Gran keeps coughing. "

Caitlyn looked away from the screen and rubbed her eyes, making black and silver zigzags dance all around inside her eyelids. It was time to do something else. Maybe she'd check the emu eggs.

Passing the craning necks that reached out to her for handouts, she went into the incubation room. The fans blew the warm moist air over them, and she checked that they had been turned. It was Roger's handwriting. She had twice turned the eggs, when her brothers were busy, but generally that was not her job.

She ran her hands over the huge eggs, feeling the faintly warm smooth shells. Oops! There was a rough spot. One egg was hatching! Roger was gone and she'd better call him and tell him.

Where was Emily? She was to be here for the hatching. Running to the phone she dialed. Yes, Roger and Cal would head on back. Yes, someone would bring Emily over right away.

Roger and Cal had gone to the back side of the ranch, checking the fence line. They had taken the four-wheel drive and a load of poles, but the hatching started. But she could handle it until he got here. She could write down the hatching time for each of the eggs. She just had to match up the number on the egg with the number on the pad. When Emily came, she could help.

She got out the pads and two pens, and waited. The rough place on the egg cracked a little way, and then split open. The damp-feathered pink and blue looking chick sat in the half shell, lopping its heavy head over. It looked dead, for sure, or at least very sick, but she knew it wasn't. They always looked that way.

Another shell cracked, and by the time she wrote down the hatching time, the first chick was standing. Quickly she pulled the little foil leg band off the egg and wrapped it around the leg of the chick.

Seven of the chicks had been tagged and moved to their pens, when the door burst open and there was Emily.

"What shall I do?" she demanded.

"Follow me and put the leg bands on them. I'm trying not to miss any but they are so spread out, and they all seem to want to hatch at the same time."

"Yeah, I know. I saw a film of ostrich eggs, and they all opened together, because the daddy ostrich had to get them on the move together. The first ones started running around, and he couldn't wait for the others, so they all had to hatch together."

"He needed to have pens, like Roger has."

"Yeah, right!"

"What I don't know is, why did they hatch today? If I hadn't been here, Roger would have lost a lot of records. I guess he'll just have to figure out what happened. Come and get this one....both of them!"

"Look at these eggshells! Some are in big pieces. They look like something that could be painted on."

"Speaking of paint.....what are you going to take after we get through the Algebra?"

"I haven't decided. Are you going to take painting?"

"No, probably photography. I don't think I would be good at painting."

"The course is supposed to show you how."

"I don't think that would help. Why don't you take photography?"

"I might not be any good at it. I get things off center."

"I guess the course is supposed to help you with that."

"Should we be saving the shells for you to paint on?"

"Maybe."

"You're serious!"

The girls stayed in the hatchery until Roger arrived. Was he ever worried but relieved she had been there! He had been months collecting the eggs and marking them, and he would have had incomplete records if Caitlyn had not just happened to check on them, just because she was needing a break.

After supper, the girls went to Caitlyn's room, and she brought out the wonderful doll.

"Imagine! At least a hundred fifty years! Maybe there's something else. Let's go look tomorrow."

"Do you want to read the book?"

Emily thought a minute. "No, I'll wait till you get it copied, and you can give me a copy. I know I'll want to read it all at once, not in pieces like you're having to do."

The next morning the girls checked on the emu chicks. All had been hatched sometime during the night, and had been put in pens. They were scurrying around and making a terrible racket, wanting to be fed. What a noise!

It was a relief to leave the hatchery and close the door behind them.

"Shall we go to the canyon?"

"I thought you'd never ask. You can ride Vanilla. She'd suffering from jealousy while Nelda's gone."

The girls and the two palomino ponies set out across the meadow toward the canyon.

"I can't believe you really found something that old. Just think, if you had worn your boots like you were supposed to, you would never have found it."

"Funny how things happen."

They worked their way down the narrow trail and onto the canyon floor. Golden led the way to the rock ledges, and the girls poked around a lot but found nothing but red dirt and more rocks.

"Come, Emily, I want to show you the rosebush over the river. I think it has something to do with Annie, but I haven't got that far, yet."

The ponies walked toward the river, grabbing mouths full of grass as they could. The girls didn't seem to be in a hurry so neither were they. Their hooves bent aside the shorter grass of the valley, stepping on small stones and stickery weeds. Golden led the way, followed by Vanilla carrying Emily.

"Hey wait up, Cat! There's a quartz rock down in the path. I want it for my collection."

The horses stopped and Emily slid to the ground.

Where the horses had pushed aside the grass there was the fresh print of a hoof where it had shoved the dirt aside.

"It's not quartz," decided Emily, as she stooped down. "I was certain it was by the way it caught the light."

"What is it?"

"Come help me dig it out."

Caitlyn joined her friend as they pushed back the dirt. There on the ground before them was the splintered fragments of a broken mirror. Caitlyn stared at it, speechless, from the eerie feeling running up and down her arms.

Emily decided, "It almost looks like an old hand mirror, but what would it be doing down here?"

"I think I know. Here, let's pick up the pieces because I want to take it home. Oh look, a big piece is gone, and it isn't laying anywhere around close. Why would it be gone, and the rest of it still be here? Hmmm."

Laying the pieces of the mirror in a pile, she pulled up the rusted metal back of a small hand mirror. Sadness covered her like a warm shower. Finding the mirror was not good news for Annie, because she would never have let it drop out of the wagon.

"What's the matter, Cat?"

"I can't tell you. You'll want to read the book."

"Oh." Emily bent to look at her friend's face. "You're not going to cry, are you?"

"I guess not, but I don't feel very well. Let's go home."

The ponies carried the silent girls back to the ranch house, trotting under the "BB" gate and back to the stable. Caitlyn put the scraps of mirror on a shelf in the stable. She'd deal with it later.

The two days Emily stayed over were fun, but now it was back to the Algebra, with two lessons to be made up. Emily had been sworn to secrecy about the rag doll, and they had giggled far into the night about the wonder of it all, finding something that old. But now Caitlyn was beginning to feel guilty.

At the end of the week, ten year old Nelda would be home, and she was very nosy, often going through Caitlyn's things. Something had to be done about the doll, but not right now.

Caitlyn had read through the many pages of the diary describing the trip and all the troubles of Annie. Summer heat had come down on them and everyone suffered. Water was scarce, and when they found small streams, the many animals almost drank them dry.

Then the land became so flat that she could see for miles, and Old Blue caught more rabbits and squirrels than she could eat, and Clyde began tacking the animal skins to the wagon to dry. Surely there would be a use for them somewhere. Gran said if they didn't make better time on the trip, they might need to sew them together for a quilt or maybe a fur coat to keep themselves warm.

It was late summer, then, she said, and the men were worried, and some wanted to stop somewhere for the winter so they wouldn't be in the mountains when it snowed. Others wanted to go on, so every day they went a little farther. They came into a patch of good, tall grass, and stopped for a day to let the animals eat. Then they saw that the field of grass went on and on. The master had trouble keeping the train together, and the days were so warm it was hard to be worried about snow.

Annie told about the yelling and shouting when the men could not agree on what to do, and no one wanted to listen to the wagon master. They finally had a vote, and those who wanted to go on were separated from the rest, and began to roll practically day and night. The animals got tired, and wagon wheels became weak and squeaky, and it very late in the year.

Clyde had to stand guard at night and still travel in the day, until one day he just couldn't go on. Gran made him lay down beside her and ride, and he went to sleep and slept all day. Gran said maybe it saved his live because he was just about dead on his feet. They let him sleep all that night, and that was the night the coyotes called to Old Blue. Annie wrote about it.

"12 October. Gran was awake all night listening to the coyotes. She remembered hearing words about them when folks called them song dogs. She said she'd wager they was calling to Old Blue to leave the wagon and come to them. I watched Old Blue, and she looked out into the tall grass, higher than her head, and tried to see where the coyotes were. One time she lifted her nose and howled. She didn't sound like they did, but they answered her.

"Gran said we should tie her up if we wanted to keep her, and Pa said what good would a guard dog be if it was tied, so we didn't. Ma cooked up rabbit stew, and we all ate all we could hold. I'm a little tired of eating rabbits but they do fill up my stomach good. I hate the way an empty stomach feels."

Caitlyn read those words and stopped to think about them. She had to say that she truly did not know how an empty stomach felt, but just to make sure she never did, she went to the kitchen and brought back corn chips, hot chocolate and a container of strawberry yogurt. That should keep her a while.

"14 October. Clyde left to find Amy and he didn't come home. After he slept so long, he went to see her and her wagon was not with us. He thought her folks might have trouble and he'd help, and bring them on. We stopped and tied down the wagon and let the animals graze, saying we'd catch up to the train by rolling all one night. We waited but Clyde didn't come home, and the train was two days ahead of us, and Pa said he would have to go after Clyde, and Ma finally had something to say. She said to Pa that if he left us, she would take Suzie and me over to the big canyon, and push us over and jump in after us. She told Pa if he left, he needn't come back because we wouldn't be here, and Gran said to Ma would she pitch her over the bluff, too.

"So Pa didn't go, but he wanted to hunt for something, and he couldn't find Old Blue. We listened and called, but even the coyotes were not close, and Gran said she told us what was going to happen. Pa sat up all night, and I got worried and climbed out of the wagon and went to him, and he had tears in his eyes. I never had seen Pa cry, and it made me cry. He put his arms around me and said what did he do to his poor little girl. Then he made me get in bed because he had thinking to do.

"The next morning Pa was gone and I got scared, but then he came climbing up out of the canyon. He said we were going to drive around the edge of the canyon and take shelter behind the bluff. He was not going to leave without Clyde and we were too far behind the train to catch up. He said here was where we were when Clyde left, and when he came back he would find us here. Ma didn't say anything, but when she cooked the beans, she didn't cook very many."

"16 October. Pa hitched up the horses and took us a long way around the edge of the canyon, and we tied down by the side of the river. I thought about all the times we were thirsty and here we had all we wanted to drink. Suzie and I played on the rocks while we waited for Clyde. Ma walked around looking for something to cook. Sometimes what she found tasted good. We wished for Old Blue, and then one day she was back. She stayed by the fire, and slept and the coyotes howled. She caught two rabbits and we were glad to get them, but when morning came, she was gone.

"20 October. Old Blue didn't come back, and Gran said not to expect her. I wish I didn't believe Gran, but I do. Gran keeps being sick, and she has a fever. Ma stayed by her and washed her face with river water, and Gran said to Ma don't use her strength, because Gran was not going on with us. Ma said hush up that talk in front of the girls (Suzie and I) and Clyde would be back before the week was out.

"Gran didn't eat anything else, and she hugged Suzie and me, saying what good girls we were. She says don't worry because we would be all right. Then she whispered in my ear and said when she was gone, I should crawl under the wagon and tear off the wrapping of the rosebush and plant it over her. I said Gran don't say that, and she says, "Annie, I have to say it. I have to tell you because you and Suzie are the only ones here who have any sense, and Suzie is too little." I laid down beside her and went to sleep and when I woke up, Gran was cold and gone.

"Pa dug her grave beside the river and put her in there, and Ma said for me to get my Bible Story book and read a story over here. I read about baby Moses being in the blanket in the basket by the river, and about the princess who found him. I wanted God to send someone to find Gran, and maybe He did. The next day I crawled under the wagon and pulled off the package that had the rosebush. I didn't say nothing, and just got the shovel and did what Gran wanted. Neither Pa nor Ma saw me do it. I hope it grows because if God didn't send someone for her, maybe she will know it was there."

Caitlyn sighed long and loud, and closed her eyes. She could see in her mind the huge patch of pink roses that had bloomed every year that she could remember. She had often wondered how they got there because clearly they were not wild. Poor, brave Annie. It sounded like her grandmother might have been right, and that Annie had the most sense of anyone. Annie hadn't want to make the trip.

It was time for Caitlyn to go to bed. The story would still be there in the morning, so reluctantly she shut down the VCR. In her mind she could see Annie, just her age, and her little sister, obviously a lot younger than Nelda, playing on the rock ledges with their dolls, and sitting in the tall grass reading and listening to the Bible Stories.

She opened the drawer and peeked again at the doll. She had taken it from the loafer, and put it in a box that just fit it. Tomorrow she'd have to find a place to hide it, because if Nelda found it, she would surely tell Mom.

The coyotes, (song dogs?) yowled and sang all around her. Did Old Blue have fun with them, and did she ever go back? She had never given a thought to the coyotes, but they must have sounded strange to a girl from Ohio.

She was so tired! She was asleep before she had hardly shut her eyes. Then she saw another girl in her room that had scraggly brown hair and a pink, rosebud mouth. Something looked familiar about that girl, and then Caitlyn noticed she had round, blue-button eyes that did not blink. Her dress was blue and shiny, and hung without wrinkles. Her feet wore pretty, soft-soled crocheted shoes and she stood looking at Caitlyn.

After a while, the brown-haired girl asked Caitlyn, "How did I get here?"

Caitlyn answered. "I found you in the canyon, and brought you here. Don't you like my house?"

"I like it but I can't stay. I have to go."

Caitlyn nodded and agreed. "I know you have to go. Where do you want to be?"

The girl smiled sadly and said, "I have to stay with the book."

Caitlyn nodded, and then the girl was gone. Throwing back the covers, Caitlyn jumped from the bed to see where the girl went, and woke herself up looking down the hall.

"Just a dream. But I have to let the doll go, and I knew it all along. I have to take more pictures, though, because I might write a story about her someday, and I want pictures from all sides of her to use as illustrations."

Back in the bed once more, she was soon asleep. After that she did not dream again.

The next day she was back with the book.

Annie continued, "I found a good place for my book and the doll. I put them under a rock ledge where they would stay dry. Ma said it was a good place, because we would be might be here a long time. Even if Clyde came home today, it was too late to go on. Here in the canyon was the best place to spend the winter.

"November 1. It was rainy and cold yesterday and we stayed in the wagon. Pa said he would hollow out a cave in the wall, but it looked cold and wet, and so we stayed in the wagon where it was almost dry. I hate staying in the wagon now that Gran is gone, and I keep thinking we are using a place that should be hers. I didn't feel very good yesterday, and I don't feel any better today. Something kept being back in my mind to say to Ma but I knew she wouldn't like it. I finally had to say it, and I told her to remember where I kept my diary and my doll, so that if I was not here when Clyde came back, she would remember to take it along for Suzie. I want Suzie to remember the fun time we had, and when she can read, she will want my book. Ma says hush my mouth, do I want to drive her crazy? She said I had to stay with them so I could teach Suzie to read because nobody else could.

"November 3. Ma keeps looking at me like she wants to say something. She wants to rub me with camphorated oil, but I say to save it because I ain't that kind of sick. She says she should have listened when Gran wanted to tell her about plants that made people better, but she didn't listen and now it's too late. She says like as not there would be something that would make me better. I don't know about that."

Caitlyn rested her hands in her lap and felt a drop splash on her wrist. She touched her face and was surprised to find it wet with tears. What was going on here? It was just a book and it happened over a hundred years ago.

She shut down the VCR and went out to stable. Golden was not there, nor was she in the near corral. Caitlyn looked around when she heard hoof sounds and saw Josh Hunt, the trail wrangler, riding up from the far corral.

"Hello, there," he greeted. "This lady was so lonely, I thought I'd let her take me to the far corral to check on one of the mares. You've been so busy she thought she was forgotten. I've been using Vanilla while Nelda was

gone, and Goldie was feeling jealous. What has it been, three days since you've been out here?"

"Maybe not that long, but certainly too long."

Caitlyn patted the velvet nose and Golden tossed her mane and whinnied with pleasure. "I'll take her. Thanks for working her for me".

On went the saddle bag behind the saddle and away they went, sailing over the sea of grass. Without direction the pony flew to the canyon, picking her way down the narrow trail. Caitlyn guided her pony downstream to the shallow, white-water narrows where Golden could wade across. After pausing to drink, the little horse walked through the river. Up the other side they came to the patch of roses. The bush was obviously one that was healthy and spread fast, because it was at least 30 feet wide and maybe a hundred feet long, stretching out the length of the river. It was a really big bush, but then it had been over a hundred and fifty years since it was planted. She picked a rosebud and sniffed it. The aroma was very strong, and bees and butterflies hovered over the bush, the sound of their wings making a continuous hum.

Where was Gran's grave? Under the bush? It sounded as though Annie had planted the bush in the soft, recently-dug earth. She walked along beside the bush, bumping her toe on a strange rock that rolled. Bending down she saw something that made her heart sink down to her feet. The "stone" was the old rust-pocked hub of a wagon wheel. The wooden spokes had long since rotted away, and a spider had made a web across the opening intended for the axel.

While Golden grazed, Caitlyn worked her way around the hub and found another one. Likely there would be four if she continued to look. She had stopped reading the diary because she dreaded what she was sure would happen. She wanted to believe that Clyde came back and when spring came, the family would be on their way. But, of course that couldn't have happened, or the book would not have been there.

She found all four of the wheel hubs, which surely belonged to Annie's family wagon. She would never know what happened, but she put them together beside the bush, all together, as though she thought the family

might come for them. Sadness settled over her shoulders with a weight like a warm blanket.

Back on Golden's back, she re-crossed the river and climbed the narrow trail. The sun was low, but she was in no hurry. Her thoughts were piled upon each other. She felt she must write something down or the sadness would be with her forever.

Being a photographer might be nice, but so much could be done with words. Look what Annie had done? What she wrote about were everyday things, but they had carried Caitlyn back to her covered wagon and allowed her to ride along. Through Annie's words, Caitlyn knew little Suzie.

The university people who took the book would make it available to so many more people. Hmmmm.....

Mom was in the kitchen putting food on the table.

"Cate! I was just going to call you. You did have the cell phone, didn't you?"

"Yes, Mom. Mom, I have something to tell you, but I can wait till after we eat."

Mom looked up quickly, "Are you sure, honey?"

"I'm sure, Mom."

Later, in her upstairs room, Caitlyn opened the drawer and took out the ragdoll and handed it to her mother.

"Why, honey, it's lovely! You found it with the book, didn't you? It must be so hard for you to let it go! I'm so proud of you! I know how you must have wanted it, but we will do the right thing, won't we? The book was a wonderful find, but with the doll beside it, it will more than double its worth."

"I guess so."

"Cate, darling, put it back in the drawer until tomorrow. You can keep it one more night."

"Thanks, Mom. Mom, there's something else."

"There is?"

"Yes, I found Annie's mirror and I hid it in the barn. I'll get it tomorrow."

Then Mom hugged her and left.

Caitlyn felt drained of all energy and slumped on the bed. Doing the right thing was very hard sometimes, and now the book and the doll could exhibited together, and maybe they could do something with the broken pieces of the mirror. And they would be noted with her name as the finder. Many people would see them, because they belonged to the nation.

But there was one thing they did not have. In another drawer, wrapped in a lace handkerchief was the stubby lead pencil, and it still had the red dust from the canyon caked around the well-used eraser. The pencil was hers. She knew in her heart that Annie would have wanted it that way. The book had Annie's words, the doll and the mirror were part of her life, but the pencil? That was a tool Annie had used, and it now belonged to Caitlyn. Someday she would write special words with it.

She turned on the VCR and cued up the last of the book. Annie wrote, "I feel worse today and I don't want to get up. Ma cooked something but I don't want any. Suzie brought my book, because I wanted to write down how I feel, and I wanted her to know what I want done. Sometimes I think she is the only one here with any sense.

"I still have a few pages, and I want to write on all of them. I'm tired, but when I said to Ma, be sure to take my doll and book, she says hush up. I want to talk to someone who will listen, and it will be Suzie. I know what I will say to Suzie. I will say, 'Little Sister, when the wagon moves, you reach up and get the book and my doll and take them along. If I have to leave you before you get to Califernea, the book and the doll are for you. They are my present to my favorite little sister.' I will say that and she will listen, because

she knows I want to say it. I have a few more things to say, but I must wait until tomorrow, when I feel better."

Caitlyn clicked off the machine and the room was dark. Her face was wet and her stomach felt all squinched up. She was glad Annie had Suzie, and she was glad for her own sister, but why was she so sad for Annie? Even if she had made it to California, neither she nor Suzie would still be alive. But it was still sad to think about.

It was near noon when the people came for the doll and the mirror, and were so grateful to get them that no one thought to scold her for not giving them sooner.

The van from the university left, pulling away under the iron "BB" gate just as the neighbor's car entered bringing her sister home. What a long time she had been gone! A whole week, and it was good to get her back!

Nelda bounced out of the car, and the neighbors left. They had a long way to go.

With a happy shout her little sister yelled, "We have baby emus, don't we? I want to see them. Go with me, will you?"

The long necks poked through the wire mesh, looking for handouts, but the girls ran past them and into hatchery, excited to pat the hairless heads of the emu chicks. Surely they were the ugliest thing God ever created, and they did not get any better looking as they got older.

The coyote with the dark-trimmed ears loped along with the smaller golden animal with cream colored fur on her belly and tail. Together they ran, just for the pure joy of running, flexing their smooth muscles and lolling out their tongues with pleasure.

The tall grass had always belonged to them and it always would.