

One

Mary Ruth Eversole's Account of Naomi Wise
- begun June 1841 -

Gathering up paper, India ink and the quill pen my eldest son Davey made from a turkey feather, I opened the door of my Randolph County farmhouse and hurried outside this morning.

Sunlight already drips through tree branches. The scent of lilacs stirs on a breeze. How easy it would be to lollygag, savoring the sights and sounds of early summer, but my heart binds me to a nobler task.

My plan, ambitious for certain, is to come here each morning, writing down the sad but true account of Naomi Wise, the orphan who nearly thirty years ago, a time when I was barely more than a child myself, came to our farm to help with cooking and housekeeping. While on this earth, she worked, as well, alongside my husband Garland Eversole, planting wheat, cotton, beans, corn, yams and squash. The

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poor child rarely complained, not even when tending messy chickens, but she did avoid the wild hogs roaming our land.

All who lived here in our small Society of Friends community knew of her. Most still recall the words describing her downfall—*Oh, Omi, who wasn't wise/got took in by a mustached man/spinning sticky lies/down by the riverside.*

As I sit here, thankful for the blessed shade of the chestnut tree, the most valued tree on our property, I pray for God's help before I begin. Pausing to summon up the right words, I observe squirrels lured here by falling nuts. Deer, fox, even bear stalk the wooded areas, sometimes venturing onto our property. A few of the Friends in our society, those who arrived decades ago, claim that in the mid-1700s, a few buffalo still inhabited Randolph County. Thankfully, I was spared the fright of ever encountering those odd looking beasts.

Before my husband died, he shot many a creature nibbling in this spot. Yet, God forgive him, he sorely resented the attention I paid to this chestnut tree as well as to the colorful wild flowers growing so abundantly here. My propensity for beauty perplexed his Quaker heart.

'Tis true, I veer a bit from our community's emphasis on plainness. Oh, I dress simply enough, always wearing a shift in a muted shade of brown over my corset, and, of course, a white apron as well as a white modesty piece around my neck to hide my chest. My small feet are shod with sturdy black leather shoes, and on my head, I keep a mob made of cotton to protect my hair while tending an open fire. Though this traditional clothing is sometimes uncomfortable, I am grateful for it. Especially my mob, for we women seldom wash our hair, particularly during the cold days of winter.

Despite my plain clothes, I'm still drawn to pretty things—a blue bird's nest filled with tiny eggs, a feather from a peacock, or the finely stitched quilt Naomi once made for me, the one

Sandra Redding

formed of bold green, blue and purple patches now covering my bed, providing solace despite the chill of dark memories.

How I wish Naomi could have embraced plainness. It might have saved her, but when I behold the glorious redbud trees, now in full bloom, my heart, too, succumbs to all that's delicate and bright.

Indeed though few other women in the community ever praised her for it, Naomi's loveliness rivaled nature's splendor. Despite the grime beneath her fingernails and that head of tangled hair, I immediately spotted a beguiling sparkle in her dark eyes on the warm June day in 1800, the very first time I beheld her. She stood proud. No head hanging for that one, though she had doubtless witnessed more meanness than most children could endure. She wore a moth-eaten dress and the tops of her shoes, completely worn through, revealed crusty toes. Though she was barely twelve then, I fancied her avid stare attested to a keen awareness of the sights and sounds around her. Did I glimpse fear in her eyes? Sadly her brazen gaze almost convinced me none existed, but, as I learned later, particularly for survival's sake, Naomi's eyes as well as her bow-shaped lips lied.

I had stooped down that day to pluck daisies for myself and Nellie Haskins, the widow woman living next door. Nellie had been our neighbor since my husband and I traveled here from Pennsylvania in 1794. Newly wed, we trusted God and the red clay earth to provide all we might need. Those outside our faith considered our community peculiar, for unlike most North Carolinians, Friends opposed slavery and war. Peaceful folk, we usually stayed to ourselves relying on one another.

After hearing footsteps, I looked up into the pleading eyes of the unkempt urchin. When I handed her a daisy, the corners of her lips slowly responded, twisting upward. Nothing about her appeared familiar. No, her skin was definitely too

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dark to be one of us. Keyauwee Indians had once settled in the area. Perhaps their blood coursed through her veins, but, if so, not enough to make her full-blood. Could her parents be gypsies? Occasionally we heard rumors of tribes moving through North Carolina.

“M’am,” she said. “Could you spare a crust of bread for a poor orphan child?”

Hearing the word orphan touched a cord. I had birthed two children, one born too early to survive; the other, a full-term girl who failed to take a single breath before leaving us. To keep tears at bay, I bit my lip so hard it hurt. I reached out, but stopped short of embracing her, for didn’t I owe it to my husband to protect myself from diseases that might course through her thin body? At least her color was good, not pale and wormy. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“I’m Naomi. Naomi Wise. I live over yonder, on the other side of Deep River. My maw lived up in Hyde County. After she took sick with a bad cough, they brung me here to live with my uncle.”

“How old might you be, Naomi Wise?”

“Twelve.”

Though obviously poor, there was about her a sense of entitlement. And with a bit of cleaning up and decent clothes, the child might actually be presentable.

“Where is your uncle now?”

She moved the toe of her shoe side to side before answering. “He gone hunting with kinfolk.”

“What happened to your father?”

“Ain’t never had one to speak of, M’am.”

I closed my eyes to still my heart. “I’ll see what I can find.”

A few minutes later, I handed her a tin plate filled with warm field peas, alongside a triangle of cornpone. I pointed

to a tree stump. "Eat there. I'll fetch water."

As I lowered a gourd dipper into the bucket, I wondered what the orphan's story might be. Since I knew nothing of her uncle, except that he wasn't one of us, a member of the Society of Friends who met once a month to meditate and wait for God to speak to our hearts, he most probably would be one of the men who came from the Eastern edge of North Carolina, those men with loud voices and booming guns, boisterously invading this peaceful Eden we called home.

By the time I returned, she'd already cleaned her plate. She didn't speak. Instead we eyed one another like two suspicious dogs, deciding if we'd come upon friend or foe.

"You have an interesting name. Have you heard the Bible story of Naomi? She was a virtuous woman, a woman much loved by her family."

"Maw said she liked the sound of it. That's why she gave it to me."

"So, you've never read the Book of Ruth?"

"No M'am. We had a Bible once, but Maw give it back to the traveling Preacher man."

"I'd be more than willing to share the story with you."

She toed the dirt with her foot again and wiped her runny nose on the sleeve of her shabby dress. "I ain't supposed to be here. If I'm not back before my uncle, he'll whoop me."

When I noticed the red marks covered her thin legs, I bit my lip and looked away. "I'd be happy to share the story anytime you want to drop by. Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth had a special relationship. They loved and trusted one another."

A butterfly landed on Queen Anne's lace growing nearby. Grinning, the child chased the fragile creature, squealing with delight until the insect turned, heading for her outstretched palm. I held my breath as it remained there for a few seconds,

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pumping exquisite wings of yellow elegantly edged in black. Naomi stood still as a post until the butterfly flew away once more. As if celebrating the moment, the orphan sang, "Lavender's blue, dilly dilly; Lavender's green, dilly, dilly..." in a high sweet voice. She continued to leap about, and then circled, turning around until collapsing on a bed of clover. Looking up, she giggled.

For that brief while, I completely forgot she was a poor orphan totally lacking prospects. With the butterfly clinging to her hand, she'd appeared utterly charming, poised, in charge.

Because Naomi did not ask my name, I did not reveal until later that I went by Mary Ruth. But that day, looking across my yard, where buttercups and sweet smelling honeysuckle grew in abundance and elm and birch trees were so tall they seemed to be touching heaven, I thought of the most quoted passage in the Biblical story, the reply that Ruth made to Naomi: "Whither thou goest, I will go; and whither thou lodgest, I will lodge...." I recalled making that vow to my husband Garland twice. First, when we married and again when we sojourned to this wilderness in a covered wagon, bringing our hoes and strong backs to tame the land.