

The Mechanicsburg Stationmaster's Daughter: A Letter To Elizabeth

Dearest Cousin Elizabeth,

In anticipation of your visit, I have written the arrival date, 20th of June, 1872 on my slate at school. I shall barely contain myself until you and Uncle Daniel arrive on the train from Maryland. In your last letter, you said I was fortunate to live in the Mechanicsburg Stationmaster House. I suppose so, but this is the only home I can remember. I was just three years old when we moved into the brick house built by the Cumberland Valley Railroad. Mama said I couldn't even reach the top of the telegraph desk. Now six years later, I am tall enough to see the train schedule above the desk, and I know my letters so well, I can read papa's name aloud: George A Zacharias, Stationmaster. I can read Mama's name too, Mary Ann Riegel Zacharias, for she wrote it in our family Bible that is kept on the wooden stand in the parlor. Mama smiles when I read or recite my lessons, but not Frank. Are older brothers always so grumpy? Ever since Frank turned eleven, he spends most of his time doing figures and telling me to go away. Let us hope he will be more fun during your visit.

Maybe we can sing parlor songs? I can play the piano, and Mama ordered us the sheet music for "I Love You Truly" by Carrie Jacobs-Bond. Sometimes Papa invites Mr. Carmany, the publisher of *The Cumberland Journal*, for dinner on Sunday. It is the one day Papa does not have to sell tickets, arrange freight, or check on matters in the passenger station. Often Mr. Carmany brings printed music, and he said it allows people in Mechanicsburg to sing the same songs as people all over the country. He thinks you may know the popular tunes, too.

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I like to watch Mama when she sings, for she laughs and claps. But there are times when she speaks sternly. She says I must keep my hair tidy at all times, for it is an honor to live in the Stationmaster's House, and we have prestige in the society. Since our home is right beside the passenger station, people often watch how we take care of our appearance. I am scolded if I get messy. My favorite hairstyle is pulled back in braids, for that is the easiest way. My clothing must be clean and neat, too. Mama says I am fortunate to have a closet where I can hang my dresses on the pegs inside. Not many houses are built with closets. And I heard Mama tell Papa I will need to new shoes, so we will have to walk to Uncle Levi's shoe store on Main Street. It is not far, for I can look out of the window in the small, front room and see his shop. How I love going there! The sweet smell of leather is very enticing to me. Uncle Levi said I can get lace-up boots instead of button-up boots this time!

The thought of your visit helps me as I do my chores. Mama and I must always be cleaning the house. The dust and grime from the passing trains gets in the house even when the windows are closed. There is smoke and soot from the exhaust of the train. Twice a day, I sweep with the broom that Mama helped me make, and I dust with our nice, feather duster. Mama tells me I am lucky to have it, for most people just use a cloth. Also, I empty the chamber pots in the morning, and put them back under the beds. We will sleep in the tick bed in my room during your stay. It has a rope frame that Mama says is very strong, and it can hold the two of us.

When I'm not at school or helping Mama clean, I love to read and play with dolls! My favorite magazine is *The Little Pilgrim*. Although it is no longer published, Mother saved all the old copies the train brought us. Mama used to read it to me, and now it is exciting for me to read it myself. Even Mama reads it sometimes! She said it reminds her of when she attended classes

at the Cumberland Valley Institute. Had it not closed, I would go there, too, but Mama is pleased Frank and I walk together to our school on Locust Street. Mama encourages me to read stories, for they are entertaining, and they teach me some great lessons. My favorite story is "Dotty's Beads and Tea." I act it out with my dolls. When you visit, we can perform a skit for the family.

I absolutely adore playing with dolls. Recently, Papa got me a bisque doll! She is so precious! Sometimes Papa's railroad connections are so wonderful and helpful! I am very careful not to break my bisque doll, whom I've named Annabelle. She has blond hair that cascades down in perfect ringlets, and the most beautiful, piercing blue eyes. Her best dress is a soft blue that matches her eyes. Mother and I have made her two other dresses. We crafted smaller versions of the dress patterns in *Godey's Ladies Book*, and they look much like my dresses. One is yellow, with little blue flowers sprinkled across it. It has a square neckline and collar. The other dress is a pretty pink, with a white apron. We made a chemise, too. If you have a doll, please bring it, and we can play with them together!

How thrilling for you to ride the train! Even though we live beside the track and passenger station, I rarely get to ride a train. When I was younger and unaccustomed to living beside the railroad, I was petrified of the loud whistle. But now I will await its sound for your arrival. I will see you in two months.

Your Cousin,

E. Gertrude Zacharias

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