

Seneca Falls
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On many days, Mrs. Mary Thomas could be found sitting quietly in her living room, reading, or working on her embroidery. Of course, this was after she had overseen the supervision of the kitchen being cleaned, the floors swept, and the house tidied for when her husband returned home.

On this particular morning, though, Mary Thomas was just beginning her daily embroidery when heard a knock at the door. She sighed heavily then rose to answer it. A serving man stood in the doorway with a newspaper under one arm and a tray in his free hand, on which balanced a cup of hot tea.

She thanked him, gently closed the door, and then set the tray on the table next to her chair and sat back to read the afternoon news. She noticed with interest that the newspaper was the *Seneca Country Courier*, which was not the paper she usually received. The young women stared at the newspaper for a while, searching for something that would catch her interest. Then, as she turned the last page she saw a caption in big letters reading, "*WOMEN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION*" and continued by saying, "*A convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women will be held in Wesleyan Chapel, at Seneca Falls, N.Y., on Wednesday and Thursday the 19th and 20th of July.*"

What would William think? What if she decided to slip down to Wesleyan for the afternoon? She knew from experience that her husband was not a reform minded man and would not likely support her decision to go. What could she say to make him agree? The convention would take place later in the afternoon, so if she wanted to go, she

would have to leave soon. Just as these thoughts were running through her head, she heard the door of the front of the house open.

William was home. He must have come home for lunch, as he did on some lucky days during the week. She sighed, then rose swiftly and walked into the entrance way, just as her husband walked through the door. She smiled nervously at him, as he closed the door and hung his coat on the hook.

After welcoming him home, Mary walked into the kitchen and set a kettle on the stove to heat, as her husband sat down tiredly at the kitchen table and looked around. Mary started preparing their noon meal then looked around to find William's eyes following her as she moved around the room.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing, it's just that you look worried about something. . . ." He looked at her, waiting for a reply.

"Well," she began carefully. "There is something I wanted to talk to you about. It's—I was distracted by something I found in the afternoon newspaper that I found interesting. I. . . ." but she didn't continue, instead waiting for a reply.

William simply stared at her.

She was forced to continue. She mustered herself. "I found a news announcement in the *Seneca Country Courier* today; it was announcing a convention that is being held this afternoon in the Wesleyan Chapel. The convention is to discuss the unfair treatment of women. The clipping says that Mrs. Elizabeth Stanton will. . . ."

He slapped his hand down hard on the table, making her jump.

“And you want to go to this ‘convention’?” he questioned in an exasperated tone. “About the unfair treatment of women? That’s silly, Mary. You know I treat you just as well as I would anyone else.”

Mary Thomas stared at him, suddenly annoyed. She hadn’t been too serious about the convention, but if this was the way he—

She replied: “The same treatment at home and from you, maybe. But you and I both know that women do not have the same privileges and rights that you and other men do!”

“Mary. Look—”

“Besides,” she continued, “at the convention they are going to discuss this issue. The speakers are even going to bring forward a petition to grant women the right to vote!” Mary stopped for a moment, contemplating the idea, but was abruptly brought back to the current situation by her now angry husband.

“Mary, what will this do to our reputation?” He stopped suddenly, stood up, and strode over to her, placing his hands tightly on her shoulders and looked her straight in the eye. “People may start to think that I have no say.”

After a long and tense pause, Mary finally responded: “William, this convention is important to me and I want to go. I should at least be able to see what these women are saying.”

The two stared at each other, not a thing moving in the room besides the steady rise and fall of Mary’s breath next to the ragged uneven one of her enraged husband. Sweat broke out on Mary’s brow as she watched the changing expressions on her husband’s face. Annoyance, frustration, and then last of all anger.

“Mary, you are not going to this convention and that is final!” He slammed his fist on the table and roughly pushed his chair away as he stood up. “I will not allow you to go wandering around the street just so those crazy women can fill that head of yours with all manner of strange ideas.” Saying this he turned around angrily and walked out of the kitchen. The slam of the front door, as it closed behind him, made Mary flinch.

Mary watched the kettle boiling on the stove. She could see the rocking chair in the other room, with her needlework sitting unfinished on the seat. The flustered woman rose quietly. She took the kettle off the stove, then grabbed her handbag and headed to the front door where she retrieved her coat and hat. Without a second thought, Mary Thomas opened the door to her cozy house, stepped out, and shut it securely behind her. She wrapped her scarf around her and headed deliberately off in the direction of Wesleyan Chapel.

She pushed through the crowd of people surrounding the little chapel. Apparently she was not the only one that had decided to come to the convention. It did appear however, that she was one of the last people to arrive, which meant that by the time she reached the chapel, a crowd was gathering. She was happy to see that there were other women there, many around her own age. She noticed a small child standing by his mother, who was focused on the Chapel, a look of excitement plain on her face. Now that she was looking for it, Mary noticed that there was a general feel of anticipation in the air, a feeling of excitement among many of the women that was hard to repress.

Then, she noticed with bewilderment that another large group of people stood in a tight circle away from those entering the chapel, surrounding something she couldn't

see. She frowned, then pushed and shoved her way through the group of angered people to the center of the gathering. A black man stood in the center before the angry mob, fear and defiance plain on his face as the throng stood over him. The sound of booing surrounded her, all directed at the black man in the center of their circle of criticism.

Mary leaned over to a woman next to her who stood slightly out of the way of the jeering crowd, and asked about the man. She replied that he was Frederick Douglass, the ex-slave who had been asked personally to speak at the convention. He had spoken about the right to vote for not only women, but black people. Too. The crowd had booed him off the stage.

Mary shook her head in amazement and pushed through the mass of people and headed for the door of the chapel, a feeling of disgust towards the crowd's actions rising in her. Trails of sounds drifted after her as she went in and quietly closed the large wooden doors behind her.

The chapel was stuffed to the brim, nearly every seat full, with many people standing along the walls of the room. The temperature of the room was nearly as hot as outside, and the number of people standing close together only made it worse. Despite this, she noticed that there were looks of excitement on many of the faces of the people in the chapel.

Mary quietly pushed her way to one side of the back wall of the chapel and squeezed in next to an older woman who was holding a baby girl in her arms. The women's eyes and those of everyone's in the room were riveted on the woman who had just risen from her seat in the front row and was approaching the podium.

Mary thought she looked familiar, but couldn't place who she was. She puzzled over it for a few minutes, and then it hit her. This must be Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the woman who was the main organizer of the women's rights convention.

The woman at the podium began to speak. "We have met here today to discuss our rights and wrongs, civil and political, and not, as some have supposed, to go into the detail of social life alone. We are assembled to protest against a form of government existing without the consent of the governed—to declare our right to be free as man is free, to be represented in the government which we are taxed to support. . . ."

The convention seemed to go on for hours and each minute on the clock passed slower than the one before. Stanton talked for a long time, though exactly how long Mary didn't know. She listened to what the woman had to say, but after a time, her mind began to wander and the words became a constant droning in the background. Maybe her husband had been right. There was barely room to stand in this place, and there was nobody talking, but Stanton. What did Stanton know about her life, or about William, for that matter?

Mary sighed. She quietly headed toward the door, pushing past people as she went, receiving many puzzled looks as she left.

Mary opened the door and was blasted by the hot July heat, making her sweat. She stood outside the chapel for a moment, not sure where to go. Then she remembered the café that was not far from Wesleyan Church.

She headed in that general direction, taking her time in the hot summer heat. She noticed that the flowers around her were in full bloom, a sign that summer was at its high point. And it's hottest, she thought. Relief washed over her as she stepped into

the small café. Mary noticed that no one looked her way as she entered. They all continued eating and talking in quiet voices. The room was full of people, crowded, and hot from the July heat. With downcast eyes, she quickly walked to the back of the café and sat down in one of the farthest tables from the front. It was darker here and much less crowded than the rest of the restaurant. She quietly sat down at the table, and before she knew what was happening, tears began to brim over and she finally let herself cry. She let herself feel the disappointment of the day, and of the loneliness that had only gotten worse as the day went on. She watched woefully as one of her tears spilled onto the piece of warm blueberry pie that sat untouched in front of her. She cried silently, trying to avoid attracting attention, then wiped at her tears, and with shaking hands reached for her glass of water, but never found it. Instead, her large handbag was knocked off the table, spilling the contents over the restaurant floor. The few belongings she had hurriedly gathered, when she left her home and her angry husband were now spilled everywhere.

Most of the people in the cafeteria seemed oblivious to her predicament, but her eyes were met those of a kind face that watched her quietly. She noticed a softness that caused her to hold his gaze. It was sometime before she became aware that this was a black man. He was also seated away from the center of activity in the café, as if to remain unnoticed.

But now he rose and slowly and quietly walked toward her table. Pausing a short distance from her, he pointed to the floor.

“May I?” he asked?

She realized that she had nowhere else to turn, besides to this unexpected source of kindness. She nodded “yes” without a word. He bent down before her and gathered each of her belongings, setting them on the bench beside her. He avoided eye contact with her, as if to respect the privacy that had already been spilled publicly across the floor.

She stared at him in bewilderment, wondering at this kindness, that she was experiencing for the first time that day.

The black man paused as if noticing the question in her tear streaked face.

“I understand,” he said, smiling at her slightly as he sat down across from her.

He hesitated, before continuing on with his story. “When I was younger I was moved around a lot.”

Mary placed a hand on her ice water. She turned it on the table while he talked.

“I was a slave for most of my youth. I was sold from one landowner to another, never staying in one place, and never truly accepted. None of the other workers were even around me long enough to get to know me.” The black man looked saddened, and his eyes looked as if they were in another world, far away from the table in the small, dark restaurant.

Mary listened to his story in amazement, of being moved to a plantation in Maryland after the death of his grandmother at the age of ten. Of soon after the death of the overseer of the plantation once again being shipped off to serve a man living in Baltimore. His story continued, from one plantation to another before finally escaping on a train to Maryland and reaching his ultimate goal of freedom.

Mary listened, but didn't share the story of her own expulsion from her home earlier that morning. No, instead she just sat there, listening to Douglass talk. While he spoke, her mind wandered as she gazed out the window of the café, on into the street. Through the glass she saw there was still a crowd of people milling around Wesleyan chapel, unable to get in the door.