

TINDER

Louise Udall

A TRUE STORY FROM THE LIFE OF THE WHITING FAMILY

Place: Near Cedar Ridge about 40 miles from Lee's Ferry.

Time: Late afternoon, summer 1881.

Characters: Arthur Whiting, age about 12 years
John Whiting, age about 10 years

Scene: Brush, wagon, desert, etc.

Curtain Opens: (Song "Say Not I Journey Alone")

(Boys climb out of the wagon.)

ARTHUR: Ouch, my legs are sure tired from being in that wagon so long. Come on, John, and let's walk around a little. (Stretches) We might go and see how Old Paint is doing, too.

JOHN: We can't stay in that old wagon all the time. This old sand gets in your shoes every time you move, though.

ARTHUR: I never did see such a long afternoon. It seems like a week since they left. I sure do wish we could have gone with them. I wish they hadn't left us out here alone.

JOHN: It was bad enough to have poor Mae be so sick; and then, to have one of the horses get sick too... Why does everything have to happen to us, I'd like to know?

ARTHUR: I guess they just had to leave us here to look after Old Point and this trail wagon, or they wouldn't have done it. Ma said they would have to hurry on as fast as they could with Mae, to try to get to one of the towns.

JOHN: They can go a lot faster now, without this heavy trail wagon, and all the stuff they unloaded here. It was hard pulling through this sand, and the horses went pretty slow. They can walk right along now.

ARTHUR: This grass is sure scant. No one would every think of camping here unless they just had to.

JOHN: Like us.

ARTHUR: Plenty of that old shadscale though. It's the poorest feed there is for horses, I heard 'em say. Plenty of greesewood, too, and sand.

JOHN: I guess that's about all that could grow in a sandy waste land like this.

ARTHUR: It would be enough to make a well horse sick, to have to eat this kind of feed. Poor Old Paint, I wish I could get him some good grass.

JOHN: Ma said we could give him a little grain tonight, didn't she?

ARTHUR: Yes, and a bucket of water from the barrel. That ought to help him a little.

JOHN: Oh Darn! What did we ever go to Arizona in the first place for, anyway? I never did like to live there.

ARTHUR: I'll tell you why. It was because Ma thought that Mae's heart would be better in some other place, and the doctor said Arizona was best. It has been two years since we moved down. I can remember when we passed this very place on our way out here.

JOHN: But it didn't do her any good. She's worse.

ARTHUR: For a while they thought she was getting better; but then she got lots worse and they were afraid she was going to die, and Ma said Mae just couldn't stand to think of being buried out there on those dry hills around Brigham City; so they're trying to get back to Utah now, before she dies.

JOHN: Poor Mae. She's only 18. She never did get cross with us. It will be lonesome if she dies. I wouldn't want to be buried out there on those hills either. They are so dry and bare and the wind blowing that red sand around all the time; and the coyotes howl so awful. Do you think they will get there in time?

ARTHUR: No, I'm afraid they can't make it back to Springville now. I think Mae is going to die. I heard Ma say that she would leave one of the big boys here, but she would need them both if the worse came.

JOHN: I think the Johnson family might have stayed.

ARTHUR: They only had food enough and grain to see them through if they kept going; so--we just had to stay alone, that's all.

JOHN: I sure didn't want to stay, and I wouldn't either if I hadn't had to, but now, I guess the only thing to do is to be brave and stick it out until they come back for us like they said.

ARTHUR: They couldn't stop on account of Mae and Old Paint just couldn't go on.

JOHN: How long before they will come back d'ye think? Three or four days?

ARTHUR: It will be longer than that. I heard them say it will take two days to get to the river, and then two or three more to get to Karab. We will be here for a week. Maybe longer.

JOHN: A week! Oh, gee! I hope the Indians don't come!

ARTHUR: I guess they won't. Ma thought we'd be safe...said they were mostly friendly Indians around here, and they don't come over this barren country very much.

JOHN: Poor Mae. She sure was sick. When I went to tell her goodbye she looked so still and white. She opened her eyes and tried to smile and say something, but just couldn't.

ARTHUR: I wonder how she is now. The sun is getting low, see?

JOHN: Do you think they are about to make camp?

ARTHUR: No, they will travel as long as they can. But we might as well make us a fire and have some supper. I'm hungry.

JOHN: Me too, and I'm thirsty too. Can I have a drink now?

ARTHUR: We will have a drink after supper. We'll not have enough to last us if you have to be drinking all the time. If we find that spring tomorrow, then we can drink all we want.

JOHN: Well, I'll wait, but I am sure thirsty and hungry.

ARTHUR: If you are so darn hungry, help me get this box out of the wagon, and you can be getting things ready while I gather a little wood for the fire. (They get out the chuck bow.) The first thing to do is to make the fire, so we can have some coals to cook with. You can peel the potatoes, I guess. (Exit Arthur.)

JOHN: Arth!

ARTHUR: What you want?

JOHN: Where are you?

ARTHUR: Right here.

JOHN: Arth, don't go too far away, will you? It sure will be good to have a camp fire and cook some supper and eat it. I sure am hungry.

ARTHUR: I won't go far, and you be careful and peel them potatoes thin, cause Ma said to eat only two for each meal, and then maybe they would last; and keep 'em clean cause we can't spare any water to wash 'em with.

JOHN: All right (Gets potatoes). I guess I'll find the bacon tin and have it ready. And here's the skillet. (Takes it from the box.) Arth! Arth!

ARTHUR: I'm here, right close by.

JOHN: These potatoes are sure going to taste good, (peels). I'm glad we don't have to make bread tonight; but we will have to cook bread in the morning. Ma only left enough for one.

ARTHUR: (Enters with wood) There's some wood around here. I saw a dead cedar over there a ways. After supper we will go and get it and have plenty of wood for a fire tonight.

JOHN: I hope it's not too far away. Let's hurry and get the fire made and cook supper.

ARTHUR: (Begins to lay sticks for fire) Come on over here, John, and help me with this fire first, then finish the potatoes. First thing to do is to make the fire. Break off a little of that dry greasewood for me. Now, we're about ready. Get the match and we'll start the fire.

JOHN: Where are the matches, Arth?

ARTHUR: In the match box in the chuck box is where they ought to be.

JOHN: (Looking in the box) I can't find any match in here, Arth. I can't ever find the match can.

ARTHUR: Have you looked good? Oh well, I'll come and find it. (Searches) There's no match in that old chuck box, not a one. Let's see. I wonder if they are in the jockey box on the wagon.

JOHN: Or somewhere in the wagon?

ARTHUR: I'll look there. You take everything out of that chuck box and look careful for a match. (Arthur goes to wagon) (John lays out tin plates, cups, sack of flour, etc.-- rubs hands through hair. Arthur comes back.) There's not a match anywhere in that wagon, not a one. Did you find any?

JOHN: There's no matches in that old box.

ARTHUR: There's just got to be. (Both boys search in the box. Empty box and comb through the litter with their hands.) There's no match in there.

JOHN: They've gone off and left us here without ever a match to start a fire. What will we do? (Rubs sleeve across eyes.)

ARTHUR: We'll just about starve, I guess. Gosh. I helped Charl get the box ready. We thought we put in everything we needed. I guess it is cause we were so worried about poor Mae being so sick, is how we missed putting in any matches.

JOHN: Maybe I've got one here in my pocket; I had one once, a long time ago. (Pulls things out of pocket, string, etc.)

ARTHUR: I might have one in my pocket. (Turns pockets inside out.)

JOHN: What will we do, Arth? No fire to cook with, raw potatoes and raw bacon and flour and water, ugh! And Indians and snakes and coyotes and things. We've just got to have one match! We could save coals for other fires if we just had a start. I'll just die without a fire. Maybe we'll both die, and then who'll watch the wagon and look after Old Paint?

ARTHUR: Well, crying won't do any good nor get us any match.

JOHN: Maybe if we hunted around in this grass we might find one that somebody had lost, here on the ground somewheres.

ARTHUR: You'd come as near finding a million dollars as to find a match here. No one has ever camped here before; maybe no one has ever walked here before; and besides, people are careful with their matches and don't go dropping them around on the ground, they cost too much. And if we did find one it would be old and rained on and wouldn't strike anyway.

JOHN: Well, I'm going to hunt around for one. We just got to have a match.

ARTHUR: 'Taint no use, I tell you. There never was any match out here in this grass, and if you did find one, it wouldn't strike.

JOHN: We've just got to have one match so we can have a fire. (They sit dejectedly. John rubs his eyes with his sleeve.)

ARTHUR: Indians make fires without matches. Maybe we could. I saw Pa do it once. Let's see...that string in your pocket might help. (They fasten it to a long stick like a bow). Find a stick and fasten the string tight to each end. I'll sharpen this one. (Gets knife from box.) Then we'll need a flat piece of wood to rub it on and one for a socket and tinder, a rat's nest is best for that. Get some of that dry grass and smash it fine and we'll have to use it for tiner. Come on now, you hold this stick here, and I'll saw with the bow. (Action to suit words.)

JOHN: Don't look very hot does it, Arth?

ARTHUR: I'll try faster. Hold that good now. (More friction) There must be something wrong. It don't get hot. I guess we don't know how to do it.

JOHN: Let me run the bow a little while. That stick is a little warm.

ARTHUR: Run it if you want to, but it will have to get real hot. I'm afraid it won't get hot enough to start a fire. My hand's blistered already.

JOHN: But we've just got to have a fire, Arth.

ARTHUR: Well, tain't no use, we just can't have one.

JOHN: Arth, we could pray for a match, couldn't we? Maybe the Lord could help us find a match.

ARTHUR: It wouldn't do any good. There's no matches out here.

JOHN: Let's ask the Lord to help us find a match, Arthur. Let's pray for one.

ARTHUR: (Walks around). The sun is clear gone down now. It will soon be dark. Well, I don't think it will do any good, but anyway it won;t do any harm--maybe you'd feel better. I remember when Mother prayed so hard that the Indians wouldn't kill Pa, and he came home all right when a lot of others were killed.

JOHN: I've prayed for a lot of things and got them.

ARTHUR: Well, come on over here by the wagon and we'll try it. (Kneels.) Go on. You can pray for a match if you want to. Go ahead and pray.

JOHN: Father in Heaven, please send us a match. They have left us, me and Arthur, here alone--without a match to even start us a fire, and we're hundry and afraid, and we have no one to help us but YOU...so please help us find a match ...and bless poor Mae. Amen.

(They get up and John starts walking through the grass slowly, looking down. Arthur watches him. John stoops and picks up a match.)

JOHN: Here it is, Arth. Here's a match! I've found one right here in the grass. See?

ARTHUR: Let me see it. Give it here. Sure enough, and a new match. Never been rained on or anything. Thank the Lord for this one match.

JOHN: Oh, I'm sure glad I prayed for it. Now we can have a fire. I'll never forget this as long as I live.

ARTHUR: Come on and let's start the fire. Here, you hold your hat on this side and mine over there to be sure no wind blows it out, while I strike this match.

(Use canned heat for blaze effect. As the fire begins to burn, the boys stand on either side of it, looking at each other smiling.) Theme song: Oh, Say Not I Journe Alone is heard.

CURTAIN

(COPY OF LETTER)

Charlston, Utah
May 24, 1941

Dear Elda:

Sometime ago you wrote asking me to write the story of the finding of the match. Well, the bad habit of never doing today what can be put off till tomorrow is one of my strong points. When we received your dramatization of the incident I decided it was time to do something about it.

There are some inaccuracies in the personnel of your characters; but it is probably of no consequence. It was Uncle Art and I, instead of Fred and I, who were left with the sick horse and wagon. I might suggest that the climax, the finding of the match lying there in the grass, of which there was very little, but plenty of scadscale, greasewood and sand, seems to be the expected solution.

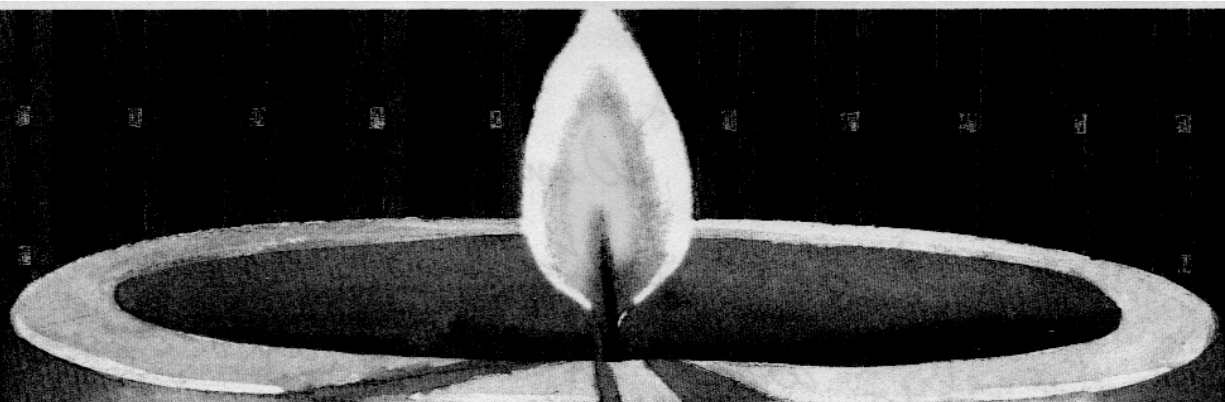
The real fact is that after we had searched our pockets and emptied the wagon of everything, combing with our fingers the litter that had accumulated, and had vainly tried to start a fire by using a bow and string, Indian fashion, we gave up in despair. There was no reason to expect matches to be lying around in that sandy waste, away from any campground, where no one would ever think of stopping, unless compelled to. I had no more idea of finding a match there than of finding a million dollars.

Although I have had many fine spiritual experiences in my life that one stands out more than any other. I knew that the Lord had sent that match to us.

We are always glad to hear from you folks. Write again.

Your Uncle

John C. Whiting



Judy included me in on
the note she sent you
about the Whiting Reunion
50 years ago held where
Mae Whiting died.

"My Mother write plays
and ordered plays through
the mail for 24th of
July events (date Brigham
Young arrived in Salt Lake
and said "This is the
Place.") This is one
she wrote,

It is a true story. Mae did not want to die in Winslow Arizona. They did not get back to Kanab so she is buried in a lonely area. John's grand daughter lived in Albuquerque. I showed this to her and she said it was accurate. She grew up with John living next door.

Enjoy

^{xo}
E. Case

Charl later marries Verona Snow

and is Fred Whitings father

↓
one of the older brothers
who goes on with Mae