

## The Road

For Joan

Elisa lived in a village at the end of The Road. The Road was wide enough for two wagons to pass each other easily, and it was made of grey, seamless material that was rough to the touch, but pleasant to ride or walk on. Nobody knew who had made The Road, though the people in the village remembered very well who had built the bandstand on the village green, and who had dug the duckpond at the edge of the green, where the children skated in winter, and who had begun the fashion of painting the doors of the houses bright colors. They remembered these things because the poets put them into their songs along with the wonderful old stories.

Elisa's father was a poet, as well as a weaver, so she knew the songs better than most, especially because she hoped to be a poet someday. It was a tricky craft, because not only did the poets have the job of making sure everything was remembered, each poem also had to be new. Each time the poet told a story, he had to invent original jokes about the people in the audience and fit them in. To be a truly good poet, a singer had to make up new songs sometimes. The story could be new or old, but a puzzle or a pattern was always hidden in the words. It might be a complicated acrostic. The poet might make each line eight syllables, and each stanza eight lines, and the total number of lines would be a multiple of eight. And the singer had to remember it and perform it along with the little bowed dulcimer. The very best poet could improvise jokes during a performance and fit them into the pattern. Elisa's father was not a very good poet, but he was the best the village had, and they tried to be contented with him. They had to be, for there were no travelling minstrels in that country.

Indeed, there were no travellers at all. Nobody ever went farther along The Road than the next settlement, because if they did, The Road would take them. Whoever went too far along The Road was caught, and could never go home or stay for more than a few months in any place. The Road forced those it caught to wander along its length, always

away from where they started. Nobody knew how long the road was. Many stories told of the misery of those who had been taken by The Road. So goods and stories travelled from one village to the next, always in relays.

For her twelfth birthday, Elisa wanted a new song. Her father tried, but he could not manage one. All day as he sat at his loom he thought, but none of the patterns he tried worked out. He did not want to disappoint her. Elisa was generally a good girl, but she was a little spoiled, and when things did not go as she wished she sometimes sulked for a long time. She knew she shouldn't, but she didn't seem to be able to stop herself. Also, he knew she was more talented than he was, and it seemed only right that she learn as many songs as she could. So her father, unable to face her misery—for he loved her very much—took her to the town on market day, where several poets always came. There were three or four villages that circled the town, each linked to it by an ordinary road made of dirt and pebbles, and their poets would all come to the monthly market.

Elisa sat all day in the coffee house, first with her father, and then by herself while he went to buy wool, all day and into the evening. At last she was tired with all the new songs, but by then her father was happily drinking with his friends. She whined, and finally he told her to go back to the wagon and go to sleep on the bags of the wool. She snuggled down on one and covered herself with another, and when she awoke, it was morning, and the wagon was coming into a village that was not hers. There was no duckpond, and the houses had no gables or brightly-colored doors; the houses were cross-timbered and their roofs were thatched instead of tiled. Elisa knew immediately what had happened. In the darkness, she had climbed into the wrong wagon, into a wagon belonging to a weaver from another village, that was full of wool like her father's. And the wagon in which she was riding did not rock or jolt. She was not on one of the little roads; she had gone to the next village along The Road, and she would never be able to go back.

People were always kind to the victims of The Road, and the weaver's family took her in. For a few days she sat in a corner of the kitchen, as she would have done at home if

something had gone wrong. But then she began to think about her misfortune as a subject for a poem, as indeed it would be, and she began to put the song together in her. It was a triangle poem, where in each stanza the first word rhymed with the first and last words of the last line, and the last line of the whole poem had two rhymes for the very first word. She thought about it for two whole days, and then asked her hosts if they would like to hear it. They were extremely pleased, for they were extremely tired of her gloom, even though they had tried not to disturb her because they did feel sorry for her. They ran and got a dulcimer, and were delighted by the song, which was clever, had no trace of self-pity, and showed in the teasing improvisations that she had been watching them when she seemed to be completely sunk in herself.

So she stayed with that family for a few months, and practiced her weaving and her singing. Then the sickness of The Road came, as she knew it would. She began to be unable to sleep, and she lost her appetite. She knew she had to go. She said goodbye to her friends in the village, and sat in the cart of a man with an errand one place further along the road.

The next village had no weaver, but bought its cloth from the villages on each side. Elisa stayed with the poet, who was a cutler. He made splendid knives, which were traded for a very long way along The Road. Elisa taught him some songs from her village, for already the traditions were a little different, and learned his, and he taught her the first rudiments of making knives and swords. And then, a few months later, The Road took her, and she went on.

Elisa went on for twelve years, always travelling along The Road. She went through plains and mountains, woodlands and fields. The countryside was always changing, but The Road was always the same. It was not always completely straight, but she could always see it before her, and it ran through the middle of every village. In each place she taught songs and learned songs, taught the ways of weaving and cutlery that she knew, and learned those of the places to which she came. She came to love people in each town and village,

but sooner or later she always left them. Soon she was expected wherever she went, and each place had a home ready for her. She was famous, and rich, for her skills were valued. She had her own horse and wagon, with her own looms and tools. Often she sent letters back to her own family, never knowing whether they would arrive safely through the long journey from hand to hand along the chain. Once or twice in the earlier years, a letter came back. Her brother had married, and her sister had had a baby. Her father had painted the door green.

Then, one night, she was driving along The Road. She had left her last village after a late farewell party, and she began cheerfully enough. The last village had produced a very curious grey dy, and the wagon was crammed with yarn of this color. Despite its full color, it drew the eye, and seem constantly to change very slightly, like the sea or the sky. She had bought a huge supply, unable to stop herself. It was freezing, and she was looking at the stars. A song went through her mind about the seasons and how to find the time of year by the sky, and she realized that it was her birthday, twelve years to the day since she had fallen asleep in the wrong wagon. She thought about all the people in all the towns and villages she had visited. They had homes and families, and she had nothing. She taught them everything she learned as she travelled, and they had the use of it, but she was all alone. She began to cry in self-pity, even though she tried to stop herself. She wanted to think about the beauty of the evening, but concentrating on her surroundings just made her feel cold. She wondered whether at last the melancholy that seized the victims of The Road was taking her. Nobody in any song had travelled it as long as she had. They went mad, or killed themselves, or refused to keep going and died of the sickness.

There was a village just ahead of her, with brick houses, for the soil here was heavy with clay. A banner on one house showed where she was expected. She did not stop, though, but drove past the far end of the village, out past its field to where the woods began. She wanted to be alone. Until sunrise, she sat on the seat of the wagon, and then she looked

towards the wood, and realized that directly in front of her, the road stopped. It simply went to the edge of the woods, and ended.

Elisa looked for a long time. She still felt terribly sad, but also compelled and dizzy. After letting the horse loose to graze on the grass that grew along the edge of the woods, she went into the wagon and took out her best scythe, and began to hack through the undergrowth where the Road stopped, exactly the width of the Road. Using first the scythe and then cutting the weeds along the ground with a sharp knife, she cut until she was exhausted. Then she returned to her wagon and ate a quick breakfast, and then she set up her big loom. It was half the width of the Road. She set up a warp of her grey wool, and wove. There was no intricate patterning, and so the plain cloth grew quickly. As soon as she had enough to cover the ground she had cleared, and carried it over to the edge of the Road and spread it, and it seemed as if it had always been part of the Road. The cloth perfectly covered the area she had cleared. Then she ate again, and cleared more ground, and wove, and slept. From the village, she could sense that the people were watching her, but when she turned to look, she felt the Road sickness coming, and she went back to work. She could not think clearly about what she was doing. After three days, the Road disappeared into the woods. She hitched the horse and drove along her road, and it was as smooth as the Road always was. When she came to the end, she stopped, fetched some hay for the horse, and went back to work.

For days she worked, advancing slowly into the depths of the woods. Finally she ran out of food for herself and for her horse. Over and over she had to stop to sharpen her scythes and knives. The horse she sent by itself back to the village, knowing that the people there would find it and take care of it. She herself went on working, walking back and forth from the wagon until she was worn out with hunger. At last, there was no more of the grey wool. She spread the last segment of Road. Her head began to clear. Faint with hunger, she thought of turning back to the village behind her, but she wondered why the Road had driven her forward. She pushed her way through a few more feet of tangled woodland, and

there before her were fields. Beyond the fields was a village with a green in its center, and skaters were gliding over a frozen pond. She walked, slowly and painfully, over the hard winter ground. As she came closer to the houses, she saw that their doors were all painted in different bright colors. She had come home.

Later, Elisa's friends helped build the rest of the Road. From then on, the Road was only a road, magical enough, but harmless. People could travel as far as they liked in any direction, and if they felt the need to wander, it was only because the wandering was in them. Elisa composed the great song of the circle of the road, and the poets travelled with it, and soon there were different ways to sing it, and it always changed, moving with the singers, and this is only one way to tell the story.