

So Through the Night Rode Sybil Ludington  
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FOREWARD

*I would like to note that Sybil Ludington, daughter of Henry and Abigail Ludington, is a real, historical figure, who made the perilous journey for which she is named “The Female Paul Revere.” Sybil lived from 1761 to 1839 in the state of New York, amidst the tumult of the American Revolution. Some liberties have been taken as to the details in this short story; however, this retelling of an exciting event in Sybil’s life remains as historically accurate as possible.*

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1777: Sybil Ludington squeezed her heels at the sides of her horse, Star, as her right arm clutched the letters which she had just retrieved from a trusted neighbor of the Ludingtons. The slow, methodic *clomp* of Star’s hooves quickened to somewhere in between a trot and a gallop. The low rumbles of thunder warned Sybil that a storm was coming quickly, and she knew her parents would worry if she wasn’t back in time before it began to rain. Her eyes always stayed alert on the path ahead of her – some might say it was as if her life depended on it – an observation with more truth to it than one may realize. Colonel Henry Ludington, Sybil’s father, had taught her to watch for skimmers and cowboys, rebels and loyalists who lurked along main roads looking to pilfer from citizens. He taught her to watch for men who had rotten intentions. He taught her to use a gun. He taught her how to ride a horse, a skill at which Sybil was proficient. Most importantly, Henry Ludington taught his daughter to use her head.

Sybil and her sister, Rebecca, who was younger by about two years, frequently ran errands for their father. Except for the Colonel, Sybil and Rebecca knew the area better than

anyone. The Ludington home was positioned right by a main road of travel which New Yorkers would take if travelling to Connecticut or other southern colonies. The home was twenty miles away from West Point. The Ludingtons were right in the middle of the chaos of the American Revolutionary War. Furthermore, the Colonel was a wanted man. Henry Ludington fought on the side of the British during the French and Indian War. He swore allegiance to King George III in 1763, when he was appointed as sub-sheriff of a New York district. However, once the strife between the Tories and Patriots broke out, Sybil's father decided to fight for the cause of independence. Many who were once his friends were now his enemies. The Tories wanted to capture him. Colonel Ludington was in constant danger and under constant surveillance. Sybil and Rebecca would sometimes act as sentinels at night to report any suspicious activity near the family farm.

Sybil had no idea what was contained in the letters which she held close to her chest. They could contain something that would get her father executed for treason. For all she knew, they could contain some sort of valuable information as to the whereabouts of the redcoats, which Commander-in-Chief George Washington would have received from spies further north. Regardless, Colonel Ludington trusted his daughter with these confidential duties and taught her from an early age that her ignorance in such situations would be far better than her knowledge of them.

Sybil turned into the dirt driveway of her house, sliding down from Star in one fluid motion. Star headed towards the family stable, so familiar with her surroundings that if even a branch was out of place, it would make her uneasy. Sybil hardly ever bothered to put a saddle on Star. Star was well trained and incredibly loyal to the Ludingtons. It didn't require a bit or a bridle to keep her in line.

Sybil quickly followed Star to the stable and rested the letters on Star's back as she tied her to a post of the stall. After making sure Star was secure, Sybil tucked the letters under her arm and raced out of the stall. She double checked that the latch was locked. Although she had no idea whatsoever of the urgency of the letters, Sybil ran as fast as she could to the house. The rain began to fall in fat droplets as she ran. Sybil hunched over the papers to keep them dry and legible. She approached the door where her sister, Rebecca, was waiting for her. Rebecca threw the door open after spotting Sybil through the window next to the door.

"There you are!" Rebecca exclaimed, balancing her two-month-old sister, Abigail, on her hip. "Father is in his office. I told him you were coming when I saw you ride up the drive."

Sybil nodded, breathless, and hastened to the Colonel's office. She was glad that he was home. His militia was on furlough since it was springtime – planting season. It was meant to be a sort of break for everyone, but the Colonel never seemed to understand that. She knocked on the door and her father opened it.

"My dear girl, America thanks you," he said, taking the letters from Sybil's hands. Sybil smiled as he shut the door. The letters must have been important if all of America would thank her for them. She slumped against the door, wishing she could be in the office with Father. Household duties seemed so pointless with a war being waged right outside.

"Sybil! Would you put the plates on the table?"

"Yes, Mother," Sybil said, rising reluctantly, and walking to the china cabinet. She took out ten plates, eight for herself and her siblings, one for Father and one for Mother. Father did what he liked for supper– whenever he was home, that is. If he was too busy, he ate in his office. He made family supper a priority, but sometimes there was just too much work to be done.

“Is Father expecting anyone tonight, Mother?” Sybil’s hand hesitated on the stack of plates. They rarely set ten plates at the table. Either Father was gone from home, he was buried in his work, or there was someone who was in a deep conversation with him that lasted through supper, requiring an extra place to be set. The family would speculate that Father’s guests purposely drew out their stay just so they could partake in the food prepared by the Ludington’s renowned cook, Sally. Mother said she would never deny service to such men because other housewives had to provide a place at their table for Father sometimes. Sybil did not necessarily mind it – often it meant hearing news of the War, which she found extremely exciting – it was just that she missed spending time with her father as she used to. But those peaceful times were figments of the past – times that some of her brothers and sisters never knew.

“Expecting anyone? Not that I know of, my dear,” said Abigail, Sybil’s mother, coming to the china cabinet holding a basket of freshly baked rolls for the table. “Would you bring those plates and join us in the dining room?”

“I assume Father cannot join us tonight.”

Mother sighed, and said, “Aye, Sybil. Perhaps tomorrow. Furlough should last another few days yet.”

Sybil put a plate back. Tomorrow. What an awful, awful word. Sybil was sick of it. People were always claiming that things would be better when it was *tomorrow*, or that something or another would happen *tomorrow* that would end the war, the oppression and suffering that plagued the young nation. Two years of war had come and gone. When would the *tomorrow* come that would put an end to it?

Sybil looked up at her mother, who wore a grave expression. She bent her head. “I know, my dear. Even so, we shall trust in the Lord and make the best of it.”

Putting down the plates, Sybil walked to the shelf of books on the other side of the wall and pulled a large, worn book. Finding the marked page, she read, “*Audentis fortuna iuvat.*” That’s what Father says, isn’t it?”

“Fortune favors the bold,” Abigail Ludington said, smiling. “That’s right.” It was the first genuine smile Sybil remembered seeing from her mother in months.

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The rain fell harder as the night progressed. Sybil went to the window and looked outside, making out a few shadows cast by the large dogwood trees at the front of the house. She drew the drapes to shut out the gloomy night.

As the oldest sibling, Sybil ended her duties of the day by putting her siblings to bed. Convinced that no one would try to come for the Ludingtons in such weather as this, Sybil slipped on her nightgown and curled up into bed next to Rebecca. With Father at home and a storm raging outside, she felt safe going to bed without staying up to watch for suspicious activity outside.

She slipped into the imaginary world which she had made for herself as the wind and rain outside tried to lull her to sleep. In her world, she was a little girl again – carefree and running through the woods by the house with her sister. She loved being outside and collecting smooth rocks to skip on the pond a few steps away. Sybil remembered sneaking out late on a cold night when she was unable to sleep. She came back an hour later, tiptoed up to the house, and slowly unlocked the door to find her parents awake and worried sick. Father was putting his boots on, about to head out the door to look for her. She was sternly reprimanded and forbidden from going outside for three days, spending her time washing dishes and cleaning the house under her mother’s watchful eye. She found out a few days later that the Colonel had received word of the

Boston Massacre while she had been on her walk. It was the moment Sybil realized that she couldn't pretend all was right in her little corner of the world anymore. She had felt the unrest and anger bubbling under the surface for a long time; she had heard everything there was to know about the budding revolution living under the roof of a colonel. She had never truly believed it would come to a war. But after lives were being taken for the sake of American independence, who could say it wouldn't?

The Boston Massacre was when it all became real. Civilians had been murdered, and British soldiers had spilled American blood. The unrest and the anger had become deadly. Sybil remembered the bleak thought that occurred to her after; it was a thought that had chilled her from her head to her toes. She could no more shut out the worries of the world. Was it only a matter of time before the revolution killed her family too?

Tossing and turning, Sybil could not sleep. The thought haunted her as it had those years ago. She heard hoofbeats coming up the front drive and knew she was being paranoid. They came closer, louder. Her mind was playing tricks on her. There was a bang on the door and Sybil opened her eyes, breathing heavily. The banging did not stop. Terrified, Sybil gently slid out of bed, careful not to wake up Rebecca. Tiptoeing downstairs, her path lit by consecutive flashes of lightning, Sybil heard Father come out of the study and hurry to the door. She followed him into the entrance hall and waited. Her mother was fast behind her with a lantern in hand, and her skirt brushed Sybil as she hurried to Father's side. Father flung the door open.

The wind howled and lightening flashed. The light of the lantern illuminated a young man, whom Sybil guessed to be about 19 years old, wearing a blue and brown coat. He was soaked from head to toe and heaving, clearly short of breath. It was difficult for Sybil to determine whether his face was wet more from rain or sweat. His hat had fallen from his head,

and his hair was disheveled. The young man was a messenger sent from the battlefield. His horse's mouth foamed, and the lightning made her whinny. Sybil moved closer to her parents to see the soldier.

"Tories and Regulars... burning D-," he gasped, clutching his side.

Father's brow creased, and Sybil could see the concern in his face. Quickly, he asked,

"Where, my boy?"

"At Danbury." The messenger paused to take a breath before continuing, "Governor Tyron will capture the ammunition!" His voice raised in desperation, and he nearly fell off his horse in exhaustion.

Father's strong arm caught the young man and helped him off his horse. Mother ran to the living room and brought a wooden chair for him, and Father hastily helped him sit. Grabbing the bridle of the man's horse, Father tied it to the post outside. He closed the door and fetched one of his muskets from its place at the doorpost. Mother went to light another lantern.

Sybil knew a little bit about this Governor Tyron that the Patriot mentioned. Father had served under him in the French and Indian War. In her sleepy delirium, she was at a loss for words. *For no other reason than an emergency would Father be summoned so late at night, in weather such as this. Surely...no...Father wouldn't leave!*

"Father? What's going on?" Sybil asked, rooted to her spot in the entry hall.

Father paused for a moment, his solemn, lantern-lit expression a dead giveaway to the hundred thoughts that were running through his head. He told her that there were weapons stockpiled at the town of Danbury, Connecticut. Sybil struggled to process this information. "It will not go well for the Patriots if they fall into the hands of the Tories, Sybil. The troops must be rallied," Father said, turning to the young man sitting in the Ludingtons' entry hallway.

The young Patriot looked at the Colonel grimly, and in the dull light of the lantern, Sybil watched his face grow pale. “I am sent to call your men to arms. You must... stay here to rally them while I go.”

Father firmly replied, “No, you cannot. Not in your condition – forty miles on horseback!” Turning to his wife, the Colonel said, “My dear, please get my hat and coat –”

Suddenly, Sybil blurted out, “I’ll do it! Father, let me do it!”

There was a brief silence. Every eye in the room was fixed on her. Henry Ludington stared down at his daughter and Sybil shivered at his piercing eyes. “No!” he shouted. “That is entirely out of the question, Sybil.” He turned away and took his hat and coat from Abigail.

Sybil grabbed his arm, and with as much placidity as she could muster, she reasoned with him. “Father, let me! You must stay and rally your men once I call them here. If you make the ride and then must travel to Danbury once the men arrive, you will be exhausted. What use will you then be to your men, who are looking to you to be strong? *I know* I can do it.”

Without waiting for a response, Sybil donned her leather boots and cloak. “There is no use in trying to stop me, because I have certainly made up my own mind. I know where to go and Star knows where to go.”

“Sybil.” Father said, his voice softer, but with an edge to it, causing her to hang on to every word. He knelt to look her in the eye. “I will not and I cannot let you go. You leave this house now and you will be thrust into danger. If you leave, we cannot be certain that you will come back. There are too many risks. You may know where to go, dear one, but you have never been.”

Sybil knew this was what she had to do. How could she make her father understand? If ever there was a moment in her life that she had waited for, she was sure this was it. This is how she would help end the war before it took her family too.

“Father, you have taught me everything I need to know. I cannot rally the troops in your stead, and neither can he,” Sybil gestured over to the young man who was bent over and coughing, “so let me do what I can to help. Please.”

“We don’t have time to keep talking about this-”

“Then consider it done.”

Sybil raced out into the stormy night, and she heard her father run after her.

“Sybil!” he called. She stopped and turned around. Father placed his hand on her shoulder as he caught up with her. He handed her his musket and cartridge pouch. He had to shout to be heard above the storm, “Remember, do not get the powder wet. You must tell the men that it is a call to arms. Tell them that the Tories and Regulars are burning Danbury. I have full confidence in you, my daughter. Godspeed.”

Before she could see his tears, the Colonel strode back to the house, his head bent. He felt like he had failed. He had no idea what he had just allowed his oldest daughter to do. In the moment, all felt hopeless, and nothing else could be done. Every minute wasted was a minute that Danbury burned.

Sybil untied Star and threw the saddle blanket followed by the saddle onto Star’s back. Often, Sybil would ride without her riding tack, but tonight, the storm raged so fiercely that she feared she would need something to hold onto. Taking Father’s musket, she secured it between Star and the girth strap.

Sybil knew she would be undertaking a treacherous journey. She had never ridden a 40-mile circuit alone before, and certainly not in a terrible storm. Though she knew where the locations were that she would have to visit, she had never been to most of them, as her father had pointed out. On the ride to the first house alone there were multiple times that she replayed the last scene at the house over in her head. Father's words about never coming back had made her stomach drop. So many things could happen; she could be thrown off her horse, intercepted and captured by the enemy, go to the wrong house, lose her way, get struck by lightning, even... the more she thought about the things that could possibly go wrong, the less she remembered her Mother's words of trusting in the Lord and making the best of it, or any of the verses she had carefully memorized after Father read them out of the family Bible. Her favorite story had always been about Rahab and the spies, which she used to act out with her little brothers and sisters in the hayloft above the stables. She reminded herself of Rahab's courage as she rode up to the first house, and thought to herself, *if only I could possess some of that courage now.*

Sybil had only ridden half a mile to get to the first house. She knocked rapidly on the door. She waited and knocked again. There was no response. Racking her brain for a solution, she dismounted Star, grabbed a stick from the ground, and tapped on the window on the side of the house. She could see that a light was lit in response, and a tired, middle-aged man opened the door, squinting his eyes to see through the darkness and rain.

Sybil waved her arms and shouted, "Call to arms! Tories and Regulars burning Danbury! Militia is needed! Call to arms!"

The man understood Sybil's call and quickly shut the door so he could gather his things. All men of the militia understood that in emergency circumstances they were to report to the Colonel's house to receive orders.

Sybil and her steed, thoroughly soaked from head to toe, thundered down the dirt road. Although she was unable to see much of anything, she trusted in Star's uncanny ability to heed the path – she had never failed Sybil before. Sybil remained alert as ever, watching each shadow, waiting for the opportunity to arise in which she would have to defend herself. Although she did not really expect anyone to be out in such weather, she remained on her guard.

She approached the second house and noticed with joy that lanterns were lit inside. Light poured out of the windows, allowing her to find the door quickly. She used the stick to bang on it, not realizing that it was unlocked, and already open a crack. The door swung open, and her neighbor rose from one of the chairs, taking up a knife in his hand. Sybil immediately threw her stick to the side, and shouted with her hands up, "Call to arms! Tories burning Danbury!"

The man's eyes widened in surprise, whether it be at the content of her message or the messenger. Stammering an apology, he set down his knife to race back and gather his things. Sybil was relieved to recognize that she wasn't the only one who was paranoid and climbed back onto Star. Moments later, the neighbor left his house on horseback and thundered away in the opposite direction. Sybil took a fleeting glance, wishing she could go with him. Back home. *Not yet.*

Sybil sped from house to house, beating the doors and windows with her stick. After her first few houses, she determined that the stick was better than rubbing her knuckles raw from knocking. Those who recognized Sybil and those whom she had never seen before understood her call and reacted as quickly as they were able. Father was reassured with each man that arrived at his house, knowing that Sybil was making her way along her route. As the ride went on, Sybil would even forget about her fear, dwelling on old memories, or dreaming about her plans after the war was over. Amusing herself, at one point she had recalled that Paul Revere

also set off on a midnight ride, just two years earlier. *Maybe, she thought, when I meet him one day, I'll tell him about how I rode for forty miles, and he only rode for twenty.*

Faithful as ever, Star never seemed to tire during the ride. She must have sensed the desperation with which the Colonel watched as each man arrived at his house, or the fear that slowly sapped the energy out of Sybil as she sat in the saddle. The Colonel had ridden Star far down the 40-mile circuit before, so she was much more familiar with it than her rider.

Sybil came to a long stretch in which she had no men to call to arms. It had been a few hours at this point, and Sybil grew more and more weary and cold. The thunder and rain, falling more lightly now, persisted. She longed to fall asleep with her head resting upon Star's neck, and to feel herself being rocked to sleep like a small child. Suddenly, her mind was wrenched from the peaceful prospect. Star had stopped dead in her tracks, and her front legs pranced uncomfortably. Sybil's heart beat rapidly as she peered out at the path ahead and grasped the barrel of her Father's musket. A huge fallen tree, with its branches lifted to the sky blocked the path, making passage impossible. Sybil quickly dismounted to inspect the blockage and realized with growing dread that she would have to turn back. The woods were too thick on either side that she couldn't maneuver around it. She would have to trace her steps all the way back from where she came instead of continuing the loop which would take her to her warm home in minutes.

*Clomp, clomp, clomp!* There was no mistaking horse hooves, even with wind howling through the trees and harmonizing with the other noises of the night. Sybil jumped and grabbed her musket from Star. She whipped around, looking south towards the direction that the noise came from. A figure on horseback was approaching her. With nowhere to go, Sybil stood frozen. The rider came to an abrupt stop, dismounting when he got within a few feet of her.

“What have we here?” The rider asked, menacingly. He had the voice of a rough man, not at all like her father’s, or any one of her neighbors. He came within five feet of Sybil. She could see his face a little and didn’t recognize him. Whoever he was, he was up to no good.

Sybil made no response. She stepped back and slid her hands to the musket barrel. It was only then that she recognized her stupidity. Star was a few feet away, and Sybil couldn’t reach a cartridge. Moreover, Sybil realized she wouldn’t be able to fire her gun in the first place since she hadn’t taken care to keep the powder out of the rain. Anyways, she would not be able to load the musket without the man noticing what she was doing. He would have plenty of time to act.

Sybil realized that the stranger was watching her every move. She could discern a grimacing smile upon his face as he came closer. He lunged for her, and Sybil made a split-second decision. She flipped the musket around and whacked the man on the side of the head as hard as she could. The man collapsed with a groan – Sybil had knocked him out cold. Unsure how long he would remain unconscious, Sybil swung herself onto Star, musket in hand, and went straight for the fallen tree. There were no alternative options. She had never practiced jumping with Star before and riding side-saddle would pose yet another challenge. *Aren’t the best tales told with a trial by fire?*

Star took the jump with a flying leap. Part of the hem of Sybil’s dress got caught on a branch in mid-air. Sybil, as scared as she had ever been in her sixteen years, clutched onto her horse for dear life as Star jumped. Shocked when they made it to the other side, but eager to get home, Sybil urged Star on. A faint flash of lightning revealed the path ahead, and Sybil knew they were approaching the last house. Still in shock at the events that had just occurred, she barely noticed that that the storm was letting up. A light mist was falling.

Sybil reached the last man's house and feebly beat her stick on the window. She repeated her call to arms, and seeing the soldier jump to action, she stopped for a few moments to catch her breath. She had never been so tired in her life. The last man that she had called would be riding to meet the others at Danbury. For all she knew, the Colonel was already there. Her mission was complete, but it was only the beginning of what her Father and his men would have to face at Danbury. Lifting herself onto Star for the last time that night, she looked towards Danbury, which was only about 20 miles away, and could see a bright orange glow mingled with the fading night sky.

Sybil arrived at the wicket fence of the Ludington estate. Her trusty horse made one last sprint across the lawn to the stall. Sybil took off the riding tack, made sure Star was comfortable, and gently tied her to a post. Sybil walked slowly to the front door with the musket, too tired to run, as was her custom.

Mother threw open the door and took the dripping Sybil into her arms. The musket dropped to the floor with a clang.

"Oh, Sybil! I am so glad!" exclaimed Mrs. Ludington, and taking Sybil's hand, led her to the kitchen where some hot breakfast was waiting for her. It was so good to be back home... and yet Sybil could not stop thinking about Father.

Sybil noted the wet boot prints all over the carpet as she followed her mother. She noticed that the young messenger who had brought the news of burning was gone from the wooden chair. She remembered his cough. *He should be in bed*, she thought, *being cared for by his mother*. As she slipped into a chair at the kitchen table, her mother draped a blanket over her. She smiled for Sybil, but her fear was as transparent as the hole that the tree ripped on Sybil's dress. Mother noticed her dress and gasped,

“Are you hurt? What happened?” she asked, bending down to see the threadbare fabric.

Sybil rested her hand on her mother’s. “It’s alright Mother. Truly. I am afraid for Father too. You needn’t put on a brave face for me.”

Mother sighed, running her hands through her hair, which was tied in a loose braid with hair sticking out. Mother’s hair was always neat as a pin. She said softly, “You are right. I forget that you’re not a little girl anymore, and you should know, even after everything that you’ve been through tonight.”

Surprised that she would have news already, Sybil waited to hear what she had to say.

“From what I know,” Mother began, “the British burned Danbury down to the ground. Your Father is fighting them back towards Long Island now.”

*It was all for nothing.* Sybil’s heart sank. *I could have gone faster...I could have jumped over that tree right when I saw it...* She felt the panic rising and looked up at her mother. “I failed them!” she whispered.

“No, Sybil!” Mother was stern, but she needed to be, so that Sybil would listen. “Quite the contrary. Danbury burned, and that couldn’t be helped – even if you rode the fastest horse in the world to rally the troops. Without your help, we wouldn’t have the opportunity to confront the British like this. You are helping us win the war, Sybil. A chance to catch the British unawares and drive them all the way to Long Island doesn’t come around too often,” Mother said, smiling, “And Father couldn’t be prouder of you.”

Sybil smiled back. There were many things she could worry about, but for the time being, she would take comfort in her mother’s words. Sybil did not know it then, but one day soon, she would be personally thanked by General George Washington himself for her efforts on the night of April 26, 1777.

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