

## *Sisters and Spiders*

**East Windsor, Connecticut, 1711**

Jonathan Edwards ran through the thick forest behind his house. Pine trees whizzed by his head as he jumped over logs that lined the trail. He was taller than other eight-year-olds, and ran faster too. It was difficult growing up with seven sisters, four older and three younger. They were always talking about girly things and never enjoyed outdoor games. He lived in a world of women and knew that if he couldn't outnumber them, he could certainly outrun them.

Jonathan turned his head to see if his sisters were still chasing him. Suddenly, his foot caught the edge of a root and he fell face first to the ground. With a loud THUD Jonathan slammed into the dirt. "That was close," he thought, looking at a large rock near his head. This wasn't the first time he had taken a fall like this. His sisters often made fun of him for being so clumsy and it didn't help being the skinniest boy in East Windsor.

Out of the corner of his eye Jonathan saw something move. His knee was bleeding but he bent down to examine a large black spider climbing up its web. He

loved spiders. He loved everything about them. He loved the way they could suspend themselves in the air, the way they almost danced across the earth. He even liked the way they ate their prey—very organized and orderly. But this was the biggest spider he'd ever seen. Jonathan kept a piece of paper in his pocket for moments like these and he quickly sketched the spider's outline. He carefully recorded every detail of the experience so he could review his drawing at the end of the day. The web was wonderful—a spindle of silver shining in the sun—until, that is, Jonathan destroyed it with a pebble.

“Jonathan!” his sisters yelled in the distance. “Father’s home!” Jonathan couldn’t believe his ears. He ran back through the forest. His father, Reverend Timothy Edwards, had served as a chaplain for a colonial military expedition against Canada. For ten years, New England had been at war with France and ever since Jonathan could remember he had heard stories about how Native Americans sided with the French to conquer Connecticut. His family lived in a constant state of fear. His mother often prayed for Jonathan’s uncle, John Williams, who was taken prisoner by twenty native American warriors. While in captivity, the natives murdered his wife and two children. “Their souls were quickly taken into the presence of God,” Jonathan’s mother reminded him.

Jonathan’s father loved his family very much and wanted the best for them. Like most fathers of the day,

he was the head of the household. He made the rules and enforced them too. He was strict and demanded perfection, teaching his children the Bible, Latin, and Puritan history. “Knowing the past will prepare you for the future,” he often told them. But he was also very forgiving and gentle. Once, Jonathan accidentally launched a rock through a window, shattering it into a thousand pieces. Instead of yelling at him, his father calmly explained why it was necessary to control one’s actions and consider the significances of decisions before they are made.

Late at night, Jonathan and his father stayed up and talked about God by the fireplace. Jonathan was so proud of his father. In his younger years, Timothy attended Harvard University and became a great preacher of the gospel. No other preacher in the area had overseen more spiritual awakenings. Jonathan always asked his father endless questions about faith and his father always had an answer. Except for one.

“How long will you be at war?” Jonathan once asked his father.

“Son, there are some things that only God must know. This is one of them.”

Jonathan’s mother, Esther Stoddard Edwards, was amazing too. She was just as smart as her husband, and witty. She was the village schoolteacher and did not tolerate disrespect. Since the Edwards family lived in a large three-story house that had seven rooms, Jonathan’s mother insisted on having school inside her

own house. Jonathan got his height from his mother and also his passion for learning. Throughout her life, she was as healthy as a horse and eventually lived into her late nineties—an extremely long life in those days.

But the sound of neighing horses and carriage wheels brought Jonathan's mind back to the present.

"Father!" the children shouted, running to the buggy. Jonathan ran past his sisters to greet him. He looked different in his military uniform, but still had the same towering presence.

"I come bearing gifts," his father said with a grin. Jonathan loved the gifts his father gave him. They were always toys and gadgets. Once, Jonathan received a clock and he took it apart piece by piece to see how it worked. "Take my luggage, boy, and be careful not to drop it."

Jonathan's mother ran outside and embraced her husband. It had been two long months since he left for the war and she had no guarantee that he would come home alive. "I missed you so much!" she said. "The children and I prayed for you every night. Are you hungry? I'll have the servants prepare a meal."

Jonathan wanted to know everything about the war as the family sat down together at the large wooden dinner table. It was big enough to seat all the Edwards comfortably, even Jonathan's seven sisters—Elizabeth, Esther, Anne, Mary, Eunice, Abigail, and Jerusha.

Before too long the food was passed down the table, the corn, the potatoes, and the chicken, but Jonathan

could not take his eyes off his father's hand and the deep cut running from his thumb to his wrist. "How did you get that cut?" Jonathan asked.

"I'll tell you after the prayer," his father replied. As the Edwards family joined hands, everyone bowed their heads. Everyone, that is, except Jonathan, who stared at his father's wound. "Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, we know that before time began you already existed. You are the One who holds the whole world in your hand and nothing happens outside your control. We pray tonight for the safety of our home and the peace of our village. Thank you for protecting us from the Evil One and we ask that this food may nourish our lives as our lives nourish your kingdom. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen."

Jonathan couldn't hold it in any more. "Tell us," he said, "did you . . . kill anyone?"

His father shook his head. "No, but I saw many men die. Good men—Christian men. Some died by the arrow, others by the spear. I even saw women and children murdered before my very eyes."

"Savages!" Jonathan's mother screamed.

"No, Esther," Timothy said. "We are all savages. Where would any of us be without the grace of God? The Mohicans are a very advanced people who have families and children just like we do. I believe God has a very special plan for them."

"What about your cut?" Jonathan interrupted.

"Ah, you don't want to know about this," his father

said, holding up his hand. Jonathan's sisters shrieked when they saw the gash. They all begged for him to tell.

"It was a cold morning," his father reluctantly began, "so cold that I can still feel the chill against my flesh. At about five o'clock, I heard a man scream. Running out of my tent, I saw a group of Mohicans shooting arrows at our camp. Several officers fired muskets in their direction, but the Indians kept charging. I rushed back into my tent and got on my hands and knees to pray."

"What did the Indians look like?" Abigail asked.

"Some had shaved heads and were covered in red paint. Others looked very similar to us, with modern clothes and leather shoes."

"Then what?" Jonathan exclaimed, scowling at Abigail for interrupting.

Jonathan's father closed his eyes. "All of a sudden, something sharp flew through the air. It had colorful feathers and glistened in the light. Before I could even move out of the way, I felt a sharp pain in my right hand." Timothy reached from below the table and pulled out a leather bag. "Would you like to know what cut my hand?" he asked.

Jonathan and his sisters nodded. Their mother was intrigued too.

Timothy removed a large stick from the bag and placed it on the table. "It's called a Tomahawk. I brought it back for you, Jonathan. But you have to promise not to swing it at your friends."

Jonathan couldn't believe his ears. "I promise!" he replied, grabbing the weapon. It was heavier than he expected and shiny too. He ran his hand up the wooden stick to the sharp stone that was attached to the top with rope and feathers. He had never seen such an interesting thing.

"Have I ever told you that the Bible is like a Tomahawk?" his father asked. The children, who were admiring Jonathan's present, shook their heads. "Ah yes, the Word of God is a powerful weapon," he said, opening his Bible to Hebrews 4: 12. "Listen to this Scripture reading: 'For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.'"

"The Bible doesn't look very sharp to me," Mary said, taking one last bite of potato.

"It's not the shape of the Bible that's sharp, Mary. It's the message of the Bible. God communicates his will to us through this sacred book. He instructs us how we are to act and think. The only problem is that by nature we do not want to hear it. We rebel against God and seek after our own pleasures. But the Bible cuts through all that. It cuts through our pride and reminds us that God has sent Jesus Christ to save his people from their sins. By believing in him, we can be forgiven and taken to heaven."

It always amazed Jonathan how his father saw everything through spiritual lenses. Since their home

stood along a road parallel to the Connecticut River, Jonathan and his father often walked by the water, thinking about the God who once calmed the Sea of Galilee and told the waters to behave. His father once said, "Never forget that your ancestors journeyed as pilgrims to this New World so they could worship God freely. And in the same way, you are on a pilgrimage to heaven. There is another life to come, a heaven that is your true home."

"How did you escape the attack?" Mary asked.

"By the skin of my teeth!" her father said. "A great storm arose and the wind and rain were so fierce that our army was able to retreat. We lost a lot of men that day, Mary, but so did the Mohicans. Since my hand was injured, they allowed me to come home from the war earlier than I expected."

"Thank the Lord for that," Esther said.

"And if there's one thing I've learned," he continued, "It's that war and violence are terrible things. Children, I pray that God will spare you from experiencing it as I have."

Jonathan knew a lot about violence. His grandmother lived an immoral life, his great-aunt killed her newborn baby, and his great-uncle was an ax -murderer. It was a dangerous time, yet in the midst of it, Jonathan felt the peace of God. He felt the invisible comfort that comes from depending on Jesus Christ. Jonathan thought back to the beginning of the day when he tripped in the woods and almost hit his head on a large rock. "God,

you are protecting me for a special reason,” he wrote in his diary that evening. “A reason that is far greater than my mind can understand.”

After everyone had gone to sleep, Jonathan stayed awake to read his Bible by candlelight. He often did this, not because his parents told him to, but because he wanted to know more about the God his ancestors loved so much. Pulling out the picture of the spider he drew earlier that day, he admired the creature.

Jonathan cleared his throat and looked seriously at the spider, pretending to be a preacher like his father. “Such is the destiny of all who forget God; so perishes the hope of the godless. What he trusts in is fragile; what he relies on is a spider’s web. Job 8: 13–14.” Jonathan remembered how the small pebble destroyed the web. His parents often told him that worldly attachments are undependable and disappointing. He needed something thicker than a spider’s spindle to lean against. He needed God to be the Lord of his life. That night, he invited Christ to be the web that he leaned against and vowed to live like a pilgrim in this world.

“I will travel lightly through life,” he wrote in his diary, “following the footprints of God wherever they lead. For I know that he will walk beside me on the way.”