

Sidedoor: S11E07 – The Whole Truth

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: Akron, Ohio. 1851. A tall Black woman strides into the center of a meeting hall, as women gather round. She takes a beat, composes herself and begins to speak.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Cicely Tyson: Well, children. Where there's so much racket, there must be something out of kilter.]

Lizzie: This is how Sojourner Truth's most famous speech begins. And this is legendary actress Cicely Tyson reenacting it at the US Capitol.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Cicely Tyson: I think, between the women of the North and the Negroes of the South all thinking about rights, you white men gonna be in a fix pretty soon.]

Lizzie: Sojourner Truth was an abolitionist, women's rights activist, and traveling speaker—one of the most prominent voices for justice and equality of her time. And this speech is one of the most famous women's rights speeches in American history.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Cicely Tyson: Now if the first woman God ever made was able to take this world and turn it upside down, all these women here together ought to be able to get it back and turn it right side up again. And now they's asking to do it, you men better let them.]

Lizzie: Truth is known today as a symbol of women's rights and a key figure in American history.

Her likeness is found all over the place. She's crisscrossed the globe as a postage stamp, joined your web search as a Google Doodle and even ventured to our neighboring planet as the namesake for the first Mars Rover.

[NEWS CLIP: A shot of Sojourner.]

Lizzie: And Truth's legacy is inseparably linked with a single phrase from her famous speech.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Cicely Tyson: Well, nobody ever helped me in no carriage, over no mud puddles or gives me any best place. And ain't I a woman?]

Lizzie: "Ain't I a woman?"

Ashleigh Coren: *You could probably go somewhere, or go on Etsy and find a pillow or a sticker with "Ain't I a Woman?" on it.*

Lizzie: Ashleigh Coren is a former content strategist for the Smithsonian initiative, [Our Shared Future: Reckoning with Our Racial Past](#). She says it's great that people remember Sojourner Truth as a symbol for women's rights, proudly and defiantly saying, "Ain't I a woman?"

Ashleigh Coren: *But it is important to recognize that those are not her words at the same time. The 1863 speech is a work of fiction.*

Lizzie: If this isn't what Truth said, why is this what she's remembered for? And how did her most famous speech get turned into a "work of fiction?"

Ashleigh Coren: *That's the big question, like, why was there a need for this reinterpretation? And also, why was the reinterpretation more effective than the original speech?*

Lizzie: Sojourner Truth gave hundreds of speeches in her life, published a book and sold countless images of herself. So why has a fictionalized version of Truth endured? And how can we preserve her true legacy? This time on Sidedoor, we sort fact from fiction to find the real Truth—a woman so much more complicated and fascinating than any slogan can capture. That's coming up, after the break.

Lizzie: A lot of what many of us have learned about Sojourner Truth is—well, not true. But it is true that she gave one of history's most famous women's rights speeches. And to understand how a reinterpretation came to overshadow the original speech, it helps to know the real Truth.

Lizzie: Judging by the "Ain't I a woman?" speech, you'd probably guess Sojourner Truth was from the American South. But she was actually a New Yorker. And when she was born in the late 1700s, Dutch, not English, was the primary language in rural New York.

Nell Irvin Painter: *If she had an accent, which she probably did, it would've been Dutch inflected, not Southern.*

Lizzie: This is Nell Irvin Painter, author of the book *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*. And she says Truth was born into slavery with an entirely different name.

Nell Irvin Painter: *Sometimes you will see her spoken of during the early part of her life as Isabella Bumfrey.*

Lizzie: Isabella spent the first part of her life enslaved in upstate New York. At age nine, she was sold with a flock of sheep as a package deal.

Ashleigh Coren: *I mean, that happened quite often.*

Lizzie: The Smithsonian's Ashleigh Coren again. She says Isabella was sold again—and again. And finally ended up living with the Dumont Family.

Ashleigh Coren: *So she was with the Dumonts for about 17 years. So imagine a life of a lot of domestic labor, very long days. I mean, that pretty much was her existence at the time.*

Lizzie: When she was 14, the Dumonts forced her to marry an older enslaved man named Thomas. And if you were to believe the "Ain't I a woman?" speech, they had 13 children together.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Cicely Tyson: *I have borne 13 children, seen most sold off into slavery. And when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me, and ain't I a woman?]*

Lizzie: The number of children she actually had was five. One was sold off into slavery and the others forced into a form of indentured servitude. But New York had begun a gradual emancipation law in the early 1800s. In 1827, the year before slavery was to be outlawed for good in New York state, her enslaver promised to free her. When he reneged on that promise, she freed herself.

Ashleigh Coren: *One day, very, very early in the morning, she decides that she's going to leave. So she walks away with one of her children in her arms, and just walks away right at dawn.*

Lizzie: She later said, quote ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *I did not run off—for I thought that wicked. But I walked off, believing that to be all right.]*

Lizzie: Newly free and with nowhere to go, Isabella headed for the big city.

Ashleigh Coren: *And so she goes to New York City, and this is where the story gets a little interesting.*

Lizzie: Isabella arrived in New York City during a time in America called The Second Great Awakening.

Nell Irvin Painter: *It's a moment of tremendous religious fervor for Americans generally, especially in the Northeast.*

Lizzie: Isabella had her own religious awakening. She had no formal education, couldn't read or write.

But people read the Bible to her. She learned it so well she could preach it, and soon found a religious community that embraced her speaking skills. Although, it was a bit of a fringe community.

Ashleigh Coren: *A group we may refer to in 2024 as a cult. This religious community called The Kingdom.*

Lizzie: The Kingdom was led by a man named Robert Matthews, but like many cult leaders, he went by a single name—Matthias.

Ashleigh Coren: *He thought of himself as a prophet. He thought that women were evil and that eating pork was wrong.*

Lizzie: *Wait, are those two things on the same plane? Because I feel like, you know ...*

Ashleigh Coren: *I never said this man made sense, made any sense.*

Lizzie: I won't go into details, but basically every negative thing that comes to mind when you hear "cult" you can safely assume was happening here: Financial, relational, the whole kit and caboodle. And Ashleigh says that people are always surprised that Truth, an icon of women's independence, found herself in a cult led by Matthias the Misogynist Messiah.

Ashleigh Coren: *This particular part of her story is so fascinating to me, because no one ever talks about it. This particular part is not a part of sort of that mainstream sort of overall story that people are familiar with.*

Lizzie: But Ashleigh says she can empathize with Isabella's situation.

Ashleigh Coren: *I mean, she's a single woman with kids trying to earn a living in New York City. And so it's not hard to understand how this could have happened, right? She's someone who's looking for community, who needs community. And at this time, there are a number of individuals who are looking for people who are vulnerable to be a part of whatever it is they're trying to do. And this dude had his cult, and brought her in.*

Lizzie: According to newspapers at the time, Isabella and Mathias were thick as thieves.

Ashleigh Coren: *The two of them were actually involved in a possible crime involving someone else in the church/cult. They're both accused of poisoning a member of their community.*

Lizzie: They were both acquitted, but other charges against Matthias stuck. He was convicted for beating his own child and sent to jail.

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Ashleigh Coren: *And that's when then-Isabella said, "You know what? It's time to go."*

Lizzie: With the Kingdom in ruins, Isabella was at a crossroads, unsure where to go and what to do. Until God Himself weighed in.

Ashleigh Coren: *One of the things that's really crucial about understanding Sojourner Truth is her spirituality. And religion was incredibly essential to then-Isabella.*

Lizzie: Isabella said she spoke with God, and God spoke to her. One day in 1843, when she was praying ...

Ashleigh Coren: *The name "Truth" comes to her from the Holy Spirit.*

Lizzie: She adopts the name, "Sojourner," a biblical term to describe a person who's temporarily passing from one place to the next.

Ashleigh Coren: *As a traveler who wanted to spread the gospel, spread the truth, that name, "Sojourner Truth," sort of became her calling card.*

Lizzie: Isabella changed her name, and Sojourner Truth was born. And from then on, it was her mission to go about spreading the truth.

Ashleigh Coren: *Now what was this truth? That the end of the world was coming and that there was going to be an apocalypse. [laughs]*

Lizzie: *That was the truth?*

Ashleigh Coren: *That was the truth.*

Lizzie: Let's just say the truth evolved. Truth traveled up the Connecticut River Valley preaching, and started to gain a reputation as a great speaker. While in Massachusetts, she got involved with prominent women's rights speakers. They quickly recognized her skills.

Nell Irvin Painter: *And so she took her power, her gifts as a preacher into her feminist and anti-slavery activism.*

Lizzie: This was the early days of the women's rights movement. The first Women's Rights Convention in the US had just taken place in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848.

Nell Irvin Painter: *This is a moment when American women in the North are starting to recognize their power and campaign for women's rights.*

Lizzie: Truth started traveling around the North and Midwest giving speeches, touring the lecture circuit.

Ashleigh Coren: *Being a traveling lecturer in the 1850s was like being an influencer in 2024.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Ashleigh Coren: *There were a lot of people making their bread and butter by traveling and speaking.*

Lizzie: She met the prominent speakers of the time—people like Frederick Douglass and the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. In 1850, she dictated her memoirs to a friend, and published a book, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*.

Ashleigh Coren: *Which really propels her to stardom in a lot of ways. So again, influencer.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: People loved to hear Truth speak. She was authentic, engaging, and she knew how to make her point with just a few words.

Ashleigh Coren: *I don't know if you've, like, read any of Frederick Douglass's stuff. The man could just go on and on. Love him to death but, like, just went on and on and on. And she was really known for being succinct.*

Lizzie: So in 1851, when the call went out for speakers to attend a women's rights convention in Ohio, Truth knew that was the place for her to be. Akron, Ohio. 1851. A tall Black woman strides into the center of a meeting hall, as women gather round.

Ashleigh Coren: *So we've got a full audience.*

Lizzie: Truth takes a beat, composes herself and then begins to speak.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *[voice actor] May I say a few words? I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's right.]*

Lizzie: Ashleigh says Sojourner isn't just trying to reach the women in the audience that day.

Ashleigh Coren: *She is very strongly trying to reach the men, but with logic.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *[voice actor] I have as much muscle as any man, and I can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed. And can any man do better than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and I can eat as much too—if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is today. As for intellect, all I can say is if a woman have a pint and a man a quart, why can't she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, for we can't take much more than our pint will hold.]*

Lizzie: In her speech, Truth makes an argument. She says everybody wins when women have rights.

Ashleigh Coren: *Like, this is not about women being higher. This is not about women taking over. This is about something that's for the greater good of society.*

Lizzie: *Hmm.*

Ashleigh Coren: *How progressive is that? And to have a formerly-enslaved person who was a part of a cult say that to this audience of men and women, I think is so freaking cool.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *[voice actor] The poor men seem to be all in confusion. They don't know what to do. Why children, if you have women's rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and there won't be so much trouble. And I can't read, but I can hear. And I have heard the Bible, and learned that Eve caused men to sin. But if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again.]*

Nell Irvin Painter: *It was clear that Sojourner Truth's presence was extraordinary. I think she was the only Black woman, the only woman of color there. And people noticed her, noticed the power of what she had to say.*

Lizzie: One of the people who noticed her that day was the editor of the Salem Anti-Slavery Bugle. A man named Marius Robinson. He sat with a pen and notepad in hand, and not only did he write down Truth's words, he spoke to the experience of being in her presence.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *[voice actor] It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones.]*

Lizzie: If 18th century lecturers were social media influencers, she was now trending. And not only was she a compelling speaker, she was fearless in front of rowdy audiences. Suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Gage later recalled what it was like to watch Truth speak in front of these crowds

of jeering men.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *[voice actor] Sojourner combined in herself, as an individual, the two most hated elements of humanity: she was Black, and she was a woman. And all the insults that could be cast upon color and sex were together hurled at her; but there she stood, calm and dignified, a grand, wise woman, who could neither read nor write, and yet with deep insight could penetrate the very soul of the universe about her.]*

Ashleigh Coren: *You know, I—I'm gonna start crying. I read this a few days ago, and it just—it really hit. I think—sorry. [cries]*

Lizzie: *No, don't apologize.*

Ashleigh Coren: *I think about a lot of these women, regardless of race, were always under the threat of violence. But to be steadfast, and to continue to go, and to keep going and to keep talking, it's beyond brave, it's beyond resilient. It's something that gives me a lot of pride. So yeah, she's awesome, basically is the bottom line. [laughs]*

Lizzie: Still to come, how the truth got away from Truth—and what she did to take it back. That's coming up after the break.

Lizzie: Sojourner Truth was a person so committed to the truth that she literally changed her name to Truth. But some of the people who carried forward her legacy weren't as committed to the facts as she was. And you can see this in what might be the most famous painting of Sojourner Truth.

Kim Sajet: *She has a white shawl. She's very plainly dressed, and she's holding out her right hand a little bit over this book, which is the Bible.*

Lizzie: This is Kim Sajet, host of the Portraits podcast and director of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. She and I are looking at a copy of this painting that's part of the museum's collections.

Kim Sajet: *Sojourner is seated, and she has a kind of a blank look. And it's a little bit unusual for her because she took pride in looking directly at the viewer when she sat for her portrait.*

Lizzie: This portrait is also unusual because Truth isn't alone.

Kim Sajet: *Standing behind her is Abraham Lincoln. He's sort of looming over her a little bit. He is looking down at the book. So they're not really looking at this book together, but he looks like he's turning a page.*

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Lizzie: The man, the legend, Abraham Lincoln. This was a big deal.

Nell Irvin Painter: *It was a kind of stamp of approval, a kind of proof that she was considered important in her time.*

Lizzie: Nell Irvin Painter again. She says this painting depicts Truth as an important historical American figure—a Black abolitionist and suffragist invited to the White House during the Civil War.

Nell Irvin Painter: *And she is welcomed, and not just treated as an equal, but also as someone of greater importance than the President. So he is standing, pointing out something in a book to her. And she is seated.*

Lizzie: But this entire scene, like the "Ain't I a woman" speech, is invented.

Nell Irvin Painter: *So it's a made-up scenario, not painted from life.*

Lizzie: Truth did visit the White House. Once. But it was the same way you or I might visit today, as a sort of tourist. She did meet Lincoln there, but according to her companion who wrote about the meeting, he pretty much brushed her off. But this painting, which was made in 1893, 10 years after Truth died and nearly 30 years after Lincoln's assassination, it creates a very different impression.

Kim Sajet: *So this is very much an apotheosis, as we say, a sort of a deification of both of these remarkable people.*

Lizzie: The painting shows what people wanted to believe, that Lincoln had a rosy friendship with Sojourner Truth. That they were buds. That Truth was a frequent visitor to the White House during the Civil War.

Nell Irvin Painter: *That she advised him on how to conduct the war. That they stayed in close touch. I mean, they're practically lovey dovey.*

Lizzie: And it worked. The impression that Truth and Lincoln were friends persisted for much of the 20th century, mainly due to this one painting—a fictionalized version of how someone else would have wanted Truth to appear.

Kim Sajet: *She couldn't read and she couldn't write. And we have no words that weren't mediated through somebody else. So any quote attributed to Sojourner has gone through the filter of a ghostwriter or someone else.*

Lizzie: And nowhere is this more evident than in the reinterpretation of Truth's most famous speech. We know Truth gave a rousing speech in 1851, because Marius Robinson recorded it. But where did this "Ain't I a woman" business come from? Well, Robinson wasn't the only journalist in the audience that day. The president of the convention, Frances Dana Barker Gage, she was a journalist, too. And 12 years after the event, she published her own version of the speech.

Nell Irvin Painter: *Gage is right about the message. Where she's wrong is in the quote.*

Lizzie: It's important to understand Gage considered herself Truth's ally. For context, at the time of this convention, some white women didn't even want to include Black women in the movement. They believed there were two distinct groups.

Nell Irvin Painter: *The woman and the Black. And so the woman is white and educated, and the Black is southern male and enslaved.*

Lizzie: But Gage did not agree.

Nell Irvin Painter: *Gage was much more attuned to Sojourner Truth's insistence that all women deserve their human rights.*

Lizzie: Gage wanted to build up, center Black and working women in the narratives about abolition and women's rights. But even abolitionists had their biases.

Kim Sajet: *White abolitionists still had a sense of their superiority over their African-American friends. They still, I would contend, had a deep-seated belief that it was thanks to their allyship that their African-American colleagues could take a step up. So there is still a sense of infantilizing. There's still very much a sense of, you know, you should be grateful to me.*

Lizzie: They could get behind the narrative that Sojourner Truth was an enslaved woman who had escaped evil Southerners, and here she was, this old wise woman with extraordinary perception. Painter says that's why Gage changed the speech from standard English to Southern slave dialect.

Nell Irvin Painter: *Truth speaking in dialect seems realer, more Negro, more Black, more African American, and therefore more satisfying.*

Lizzie: Again, here's the first sentence of the original speech, titled "On Women's Rights."

[ARCHIVE CLIP: *[voice actor] May I say a few words? I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's right.]*

Lizzie: And here's the first sentence of Gage's version, which was titled "Aren't I a Woman?"

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Cicely Tyson: Well, children. Where there's so much racket, there must be something out of kilter.]

Lizzie: Smithsonian's Ashleigh Coren says Gage also had Truth talking about how old she is in the speech.

Ashleigh Coren: *Sojourner is not old. [laughs]*

Lizzie: She was in her early 50s when she gave the speech. And for all my Gen Xers out there, we see you. That is not old.

Ashleigh Coren: *So she's not some older African-American lady, but to reimagine her giving the speech as an older African-American lady is playing up on tropes of representations of African femaleness that make them more wise!*

Lizzie: *Mmm.*

Ashleigh Coren: *This older Black woman is giving you this wisdom and you should listen.*

Lizzie: And this was not the first time Truth saw her words twisted and changed. She could see the importance of taking control of her own image. Luckily, she had a new tool at her disposal.

Kim Sajet: *The carte de visite really comes to the fore during the Civil War. 1861. And it becomes a craze, like around the world. They literally called it Cartomania.*

Lizzie: The carte de visite was a new form of photography that made it affordable for anyone to get their picture taken and make a bunch of copies. Kim says African Americans, as people who were often caricatured and stereotyped by painters and sculptors, especially embraced cartes de visite. Prominent speakers like Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass basically said ...

Kim Sajet: *We trust the science behind the photograph. While yes, a person has to push a button to take the picture, you basically can't mess with it.*

Lizzie: Truth saw the power of the carte de visite. She could control her image without journalists or artists bending the truth.

Nell Irvin Painter: *She's her own publicist. That's the way I would put it. She's her own publicist.*

Lizzie: To craft her image, Truth sat for numerous cartes de visite, trying to project an image of the Truth she wanted people to see.

Nell Irvin Painter: *In my favorite, she holds knitting. And I think that was her favorite as well, because it appears many, many, many times in many different repositories.*

Lizzie: This carte de visite is at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

Kim Sajet: *She has her hair in a cap, a white cap. And she's looking directly out at the camera, and she's wearing glasses, which is interesting for someone who can't read.*

Lizzie: There's also a book next to her. And we don't know what the book is, but it appears she's projecting the image of an educated woman. And at the bottom of the image is a caption.

Nell Irvin Painter: *The caption is not, "Aren't I a woman?" The caption is, "I sell the shadow to support the substance."*

Lizzie: This phrase, as poetic as it is, is actually a quite literal statement. She is saying that she sells the shadow—which is another word for photograph back then—to support the substance—herself. Literally.

Nell Irvin Painter: *"I am selling this rendition of myself in order to feed myself and clothe myself."*

Lizzie: Truth sold these cartes de visite and her biography wherever she gave speeches as a way to pay the bills. It was highly practical, but it was also a tool she used to control her image when others had taken liberties with it. These cartes de visite and her book are how most people would have known of Truth during her lifetime. Gage's version of Truth didn't actually catch on until much later.

Nell Irvin Painter: *At the very end of the 19th century, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton put together a collection of documents called "The History of Women's Suffrage."*

Lizzie: And this collection sat buried in libraries, mostly read mostly by scholars, for decades, until the 1960s, when second-wave feminism made it more acceptable to teach women's history in high schools and colleges. Out came "A History of Women's Suffrage." It got dusted off, cracked open and used as the basis for many a lesson plan. But inside ...

Nell Irvin Painter: *We do not find Robinson. We do not find other Black women, for that matter. We find Sojourner Truth a la Frances Dana Gage.*

Lizzie: This version of Truth became the "official" version in the story of women's suffrage. The words "Aren't I a woman?" tweaked into "Ain't I a woman?" turned into a rallying cry. A slogan for empowerment that turned truth into a powerful feminist symbol. Which is great, but Nell Irvin Painter

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says if we don't learn anything else about Truth beyond this phrase ...

Nell Irvin Painter: *You cheat yourself. You cheat American history by only having to resort to a slogan that she did not utter.*

Lizzie: Painter says it's normal for us to want to lionize our historical figures. In fact, it's usually our greatest historical figures who inspire the tallest tales. But when we make someone larger than life, we miss out their missteps, their ups and downs, their forays into cults, the complexity of the full person they were. It's up to us to decide if we want a satisfying story—or the truth. It's like Sojourner Truth said—and yes, I double checked that she actually said this— "Truth is powerful, and it prevails."

Nell Irvin Painter: *I would be so happy if people said, "This is what Sojourner Truth means to me. She was a self-educated woman. She was extremely intelligent. She had a message that she delivered clearly and effectively." If people would say that, I would be so grateful.*

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. To learn more about Sojourner Truth and to see some of her cartes de visite, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at SI.EDU/Sidedoor. We'll include a link to Nell Irvin Painter's book *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*.

Lizzie: For help with this episode, we want to thank Nell Irvin Painter, Ashleigh Coren and Kim Sajet.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Big props to our summer intern Lena DoDoo, who led research for this episode and gave voice to some of the suffragists you heard praising Truth in this episode. And a shout out for the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum for all their help as well.

Lizzie: Our executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Mimi Plato writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Transcripts are done by Russell Gragg. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at [Sidedoor\(@\)si.edu](mailto:Sidedoor(@)si.edu)! And if you want to sponsor our show, please email [sponsorship\(@\)prx.org](mailto:sponsorship(@)prx.org).

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Ashleigh Coren: *The newest, hottest rapper at the Smithsonian, Lizzie PEE-body.*

Lizzie: *Said no one ever. What a plot twist! I've been waiting 11 seasons to drop this on you.*

Ashleigh Coren: *Drop a hot beat, James.*

Lizzie: *Oh my gosh.*

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