Fifteen-year-old Laura lives apart from her family for the first time, teaching school in a claim shanty twelve miles from home. She is very homesick, but keeps at it so that she can help pay for her sister Marys tuition at the college for the blind. During school vacations Laura has fun with her singing lessons, going on sleigh rides, and best of all, helping Almanzo Wilder drive his new buggy. Friendship soon turns to love for Laura and Almanzo in the romantic conclusion of this Little House book.

I read this series in my early teens. I enjoyed the latter books more because as Laura ages the language advances, so I found the earlier books (especially Little House) boring (but appreciated later). However, the latter books are still my favorite. I found Happy Golden Years sad because at the time I thought that was all I would ever know about Lauras life, that the rest would be a mystery, but I later found The First Four Years and then biographies as well as her own writings depicting events in her adult life (I especially like Little House in the Ozarks). But even though I now know that Laura went on to have a long and happy life (not without hardship), the Happy Golden Years is still sad. This series focused on this wonderful tight-knit family that experienced joy as well as heartache, and now the family is breaking up. It started when Mary left for college in Little Town on the Prairie. She is missed but when she returns for a visit theres the beginning of the realization for Laura that this life shes had, this family she loves, will change and she will eventually leave. Its something she is not comfortable with- it is hard for her to imagine doing anything other than remaining single and staying with her family, teaching school, but as the book progresses so does her realization of change, which becomes acceptance and hope. I love the writing style- it is simple and honest like the lives of the characters. I couldnt help but feel the joy that Laura felt to be at home with her family, the dread with which she faced her first teaching assignment. The warmth on the weekends contrasting with the
chill away from home at that horrible teaching assignment. And who is it that is responsible for giving her the respite from that awful place - Almanzo, who first comes to take her home but who ends up taking her away for good. She goes from not giving Almanzo much thought to missing him terribly when he goes East to visit family, so much so that her family, who were her greatest joy and comfort, are little consolation. It seems that most coming-of-age stories these days are cynical and family is usually considered a burden to free oneself from, but this story is not like that at all. I found this book inspiring. Laura is able to have an independent mind and spirit and stay devoted to what matters in her life: family, faith, a strong work ethic, perseverance. The book Little House in the Ozarks is a compilation of articles Laura wrote for a newspaper column, and I see that the qualities of independence, perseverance, and devotion endured throughout her life, so I am reassured that Happy Golden Years was not the end, but in a way it was, and that's why this book is sad.

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