SIGN OF A PROMISE

The longer he prayed, the deeper his knees sank in the moat of muddy topsoil that circled the sod house. Undeflected by the usual prairie winds, the rain dropped from the gray sky like shot from a small-bore rifle, punching little craters in the mud of the path, craters that vanished when others exploded in the soggy earth. He had removed his wide-brimmed hat and was holding it tightly to his chest with his right hand as he bowed his head. Rain pounded into streaky hair that lay like flax on his head, then streamed down through weathered crev-

ices in his temples and forehead, dripping, finally, from the tip of his nose and chin to his heavy overcoat, already saturated from three full days of rain.

He looked upward and turned to the west again to reassure himself of what he had seen. A layer of clear blue sky belted the horizon, tinted by the fire of the late afternoon sun, now dropping slowly from the cloud banks that still dominated the sky. Rain pelted his face, but he stared defiantly upward, the water running down from the ends of his mustache, through the recesses of his cheeks, and into his gray sideburns.

To the east was the rainbow. It grew from two remote spots in the grassland, rising symmetrically toward a peak that was yet to appear. Its thick backdrop of rain clouds, suddenly curtained in purple by the sun, focused the colors, and made them bum almost mystically in the turbulent sky.

It wasn't the first time he had recalled Noah. Over a year ago he had left Wisconsin, taking his family in a "schooner," as the Americans had called it, bound for Minnesota. Several months later he and a few others had left Fillmore County for Northwest Iowa. Some of his friends seemed reluctant to give him their blessing. They watched silently as he loaded his wagon again, and they also saw his tired wife climb slowly up to take her place. There was some fear in the way they sang the Psalms then, but Antonie Vander Meer remembered the story of Noah and his neighbors — they had even mocked him, but Noah's faith was strong, the ark, the rain, even more of a test. Noah never questioned what the Lord had commanded him.

And then, the rainbow and the covenant. This was but three days, he told himself, three short days of rain. Noah had seen the heavens opened, the bowels of the earth erupt its inner waters, the entire world destroyed. Yet he had not questioned, he had not doubted. Antonie spat out the salty water that curled from his mustache into the corners of his mouth, rebuking himself for his little faith. "And one like me," he told himself, his head bowed.

A sudden downpour ladled more water over the land, as the storm poured out the last of its

offering. He raised his left hand to his forehead, brushed back the wet shock of hair that fell into his face, then replaced the hat on his head. He held his hands up to his face, his callouses softened, it seemed, from too much rain, too little work. But they were clean except for the threads of black at the tip of each fingernail. And he was clean. Weeks of sweat and dirt had been washed away by the rain, transforming his spirit and body into readiness, into actual anticipation of what still remained to be done on the homestead. As the end of the day approached and the almost-forgotten sun spread its warming rays out across the sea of prairie grass, lighting the eastern sky with God's own promise, now Antonie Vander Meer was ready for tomorrow.

He rose and walked carefully toward the sod pile that marked the comer of his land. As he left the immediate area of the sod house, however, the heavy grasses made the path more firm under foot. To the left of the path lay a broad stretch of virgin soil, stripped of its mantle of flowers and grasses, already ravaged by the plow, and now left vulnerable to every whim of the Iowa weather — naked, rich and fertile. He saw there what he had feared to see — the scars of the late spring storm, jagged cracks running like bolts of lightning down slope, but emptied now of the rain water they had carried during the storm, His wife had walked every foot of that land, smoothing over the soil where the corn had been planted. Now the seeds were gone, he knew, washed from the earth as the chalky gray sweat lines had been washed from his temples, and by transient streams to some low spot land.

He didn't stop walking. He knew what he would find, but he needed to see it anyway. Telling Tryntje would be difficult enough, knew he must be sure. When he arrived at the southern end of his field, when he saw yellow seeds lying in clumps, he started searching for the words to explain it to her. He prayed for wisdom and strength. He leaned over then, gathering the seeds into a pile in his clean hands. When he was through, he wiped the now-blackened palms against his trousers. He would return for the seed tomorrow. He stood and looked for a moment over the open prairie to the west and before turning back to the sod house. When he reached the path to the house, the rainbow had grown to a completed arch.

Tryntje, too, had seen the belt of clear sky on the horizon, but unlike her husband, she didn't focus on its promise. She concentrated again on the broad apron of wasteland that led to the sky, wide and barren, nearly unbroken by any sign of life. Occasionally a cottonwood, white and lifeless, rose awkwardly from the prairie bed, interrupting the endless monotony of the landscape. One such monument stood at the southwest corner of their own land; it projected against a background of rain clouds now, its uppermost branches barely distinguishable in the growing darkness. Tryntje saw the old cottonwood as a pioneer, too, its rash impulse to pull itself up from the grassland, it had weathered jagged scar gashes that ran like stripes up and down its stubborn trunk. Finally, long ago, when no white man was yet foolish enough to settle here, one slashing blow had cured its temerity forever. Now only a shell remained, a corpse that somehow refused burial, a frame seemed to mock the vanity of its own aborted dreams.

And the sky, spewing incessant rain, seemed to combine with the desert of grass to destroy whoever, whatever tried to exist here, endless miles of prairie seemed to her a less expanse, and all the prayers she learned as a child, no matter how loudly she could cry them to the heavens, could not bring her any closer to the God she had known in the old country. This land was so wide, so vast, so everlasting, that she felt her best prayers rise in futility, like the fingers of the cottonwood, to a God who had never minded this region of creation.

But she never spoke these things to her husband. Through all those days of dirt mud she saw her children blackened by the Iowa soil, roughened bv wind and sun, pushed prematurely into the experience of Adams curse. Through the long hours she spent picking vermin from young bodies, she had said nothing to him – for he was her husband and she knew his visions and dreams.

She turned from the window and looked back to the family portrait that hung on the mud wall. It had been taken in Wisconsin. She had wanted it immediately after their arrival in America to send to her parents in Holland, for she knew theit concern and felt that they would be reassured by the clean faces and the Sunday clothes of the children. They knew very little of America. Some of the stories they had heard were like those of the land of Canaan, most bountiful, full of opportunity. But others were fearful, accounts of drought, storms, savages, violence, strange and horrid stories of people who didn't know

the Lord. The family picture had helped, she knew, for it showed them tidy and happy, wearing the reflected hopes and jubilation of a life filled with new opportunities. She would like it, for she liked it. This was the way she imagined things. There were four little ones on the tintype; now there were only three. Toon had buried one in Minnesota, but soon there would be another, unless her signs were false. She ripped the very thought from her mind —this was no place, no time for a child.

The bolt rattled and the uneven door swung open slowly.

"Tryntje?" It was her husband. He was wet and cold but his face widened into a comforting smile.

"Tryntje, did you see it? The sky — it is clearing, the rain will stop."

He sat his hat on a nail that stuck from the door frame, dropped his coat over another and drew a wooden box away from the crate they used as a table. He sat down and folded his hands before him, rocking comfortably back and forth, adjusting himself to the chair, still wearing the smile.

"That is good, Toon. The rain will stop now. Tomorrow a bright morning."

"Ja, Tryntje, tomorrow we will begin again." She smiled at him momentarily, then poured him a cup of coffee.

"We've not much coffee left, Toon. You must appreciate this."

"We out already?"

"Ja, no long."

"Ach, we drink so much?"

"We have much rain this week, and last — in the field. When you work so little, more time here, ja?" Her attempted an understanding smile from her.

"We start again tomorrow, though." He looked at her and continued. 'Tomorrow will be the first of many days of sun. Soon it will be summer."

He sat across the table; her cup next to his.

"Tryntje," he reached for her hand, "we must start over again tomorrow."

She didn't seem to understand. "Ja, tomorrow we start again — in the sun."

"Tomorrow we start over, *lieveling*."

"His smile faded as his eyes focused sharply, they seemed to reach for her, to try to brace her from a fall.

"Wat zeg fe nou?"

"The rain Tryntle, it washed out the seed. The water ran through the ground, carrying the seed along to the bottom of the land." His arm snaked through the air, mimicking the tell the children."

He saw the sign of weariness in her eyes. She refused to receive his glance, not out of anger, but because she knew her eyes would speak too much. Instead, she made herself busy about the stove, preparing corn bread for tomorrow's meals.

"I know this is not good news, Tryntje, I am not happy myself, for I would do the work of oxen to keep you and the children from the land."

"Ach, Antonie, we can help again. It is part of our responsibility. The children are getting older. We all have strong backs — thick legs, we can do what we must..."

"You are a good woman, *Moeder/'he* broke in, softly. His eyes followed the soft lines of her body as she worked, from her light shoulders through her waist. She was thinner since they had come to Iowa. He had seen her widen at the hips, bearing four children. But her legs were thin and weak. She was not made for this, he knew. Many had wanted her in Vroomshoop; he was blessed to have her for his wife. How it hurt him to see her plodding through the dirt, her back bent to the earth like a slave before its master, following their boy, Hendrick, as he dropped the seed into the furrows. Her hands were rough and blistered from the hoe, even today.

"Tryntje," he said.

"Ja." She still didn't face him.

"Someday I will give you what you deserve. The Lord will bless us. I know He will. He is faithful to those who love Him."

She grabbed another tightly-wound bundle of prairie grass and threw it into the stove, closing her eyes to everything. She had to tell about her signs, but she could not tell him now.

The sun, hidden throughout the day, dropped below the horizon, and the moon, like a replacement, poured its silver light over the wet grasses. Three Vander Meer children came in from their work, laughing. They, too, had seen the sun and the sky. They, too, knew the morning would be full of promise.

The sun gleamed like a hero the next morning. Bright and warm it conjured little whiffs of steam from the broken ground of the Vander Meer homestead, and lofted them up into the atmosphere where they quickly disappeared. By noon the sun glared down on the prairie, drying the skin of the topsoil quickly, and turning the big chunks of upturned sod from shiny black to a coarse gray.

Antonie Vander Meer started working at noon. He harnessed his team to the plow, set

the steel into the untouched earth, and spoke calmly to the horses. They responded grudgingly, but jerked forward, pulling the share through the grasses that had been chopped short earlier in the month. The ground ripped like cloth, and a black roll of sod slid cleanly up the share, then curled back and flopped to the stubbled grass, leaving the shiny-smooth loam exposed to the heavens.

Van der Meer loved this moment, for while he felt a certain reluctance to violate the land, to change it so drastically, he knew his task was significant. This rich earth so rich and clean even smelled like life. It was to be his heritage, the beginning of a new life, a new land for his family, for his people. To him this was not work, it was his call, for as his team jerked the share deeply through the earth he , he saw here a farm and a neat white framed house in the middle, circled by a grove of trees, cottonwoods and elms. This land, with the grace of God like him, would bring him and others like him, good Hollanders, into that dream; would bring his wife comfort, his children education, opportunity, happiness. And when the rows of com would sweep like tight ropes across the broken ground, when regiments golden tassels would float in the wind, this land itself would glorify his Lord.

All day Antonie Vander Meer worked field, alone. It was too wet to replant the corn, so Peter and Hendrick pulled the roots from the cut soil and gathered them into pile Maria, his daughter, wound some in bundles to replenish the supply for the stove. Tryntje stayed in the house, working constantly to clean up the mud from the storm, wash clothing, and prepare meals.

'Tomorrow, " Antonie said after "tomorrow we must seed again." The ground would be drier then, dry enough to harrow. The children sat silent. Only a week ago they had finally thought themselves finished; now they had to start again.

"How long will it be?" Peter asked.

Three, maybe four days," his father answered. "I have broken more ground today, but what we have already done will not be to do again."

"Early then, Pa?"

"Ja, early."

Tryntje was up before the sun, getting in order for the long days ahead. Not even Maria was excused from the work; she helped her father, standing on the harrow at times to make it dig more deeply into the soil. Or, like yesterday, she could pull the roots out of the sod and gather them. She would be kept busy, like the rest.

Tryntje turned down the lantern when the sun broke through the crude window the "prairie logs" on the east wall. She cut the pork into rations, planning the day Still she had seen no sign. She had given birth to four children, so she knew about these things, and as each day passed, she was more sure. She must tell her husband. The children still slept soundly against the wall of the cabin. Her husband had been up even before her that morning.

She leaned over the makeshift table lifting the table cloth to select the eating utensils inside of the box. Then she knew it. Her stomach seemed to jump and turn, swallowed hard as she stood again, she held her sickness in. She put water on for her husband, never stopping the preparations for the day.

Not long after breakfast the work went slower than Vander Meer had hoped for. The moisture had not left the soil, and spikes of the harrow dug into the earth thick clods formed quickly against the teeth. forcing Toon to stop and clean off the mud. Roots lodged in the soil were as much of a problem, they jammed against the spikes, forcing the entire harrow to skid on the surface, doing no good at all. Hendrick helped his father scraping and cleaning the harrow, father, back and leg muscles straining, had lifted the implement and set it on end. When Antonie saw Hendrick's boots caked with mud, he realized that every member of the family carried this additional burden through the fields. He scarcely noticed his own feet.

The harrow smoothed over the rain furrowed land. Because he was forced to work slowly the entire planting operation was bogged down. Peter followed the harrow, digging little cones in the soil with a hoe. Then came Hendrick, swathed by a thick belt of seed corn rolled into his mother's old apron, dropping only three or four kernels into each of the openings. Finally, their mother, armed also with a hoe, tramped through the dirt, covering what had just been deposited in the soil. Maria flitted about, chirping like a red-winged blackbird, helping here and there, and constantly reminding her father of the strange stream of light smoke that rose daily in the southwest. Vander Meer told her he would investigate, and her curiosity diminished.

And so they worked, breaking off only at noon, as much to rest as to eat. As the day wore

on, the sun dried the deeper earth, allowing the harrow to pulverize the flattened soil more efficiently. The brigade of Vander Meer husbandmen moved at a quicker pace.

Antonie never stopped, even for dinner. Tryntje gave him some pieces of corn bread and pork, but he continued to trudge behind the team of young horses, pulling out in front of the rest of the family. By supper his calf muscles were hard as melons, and his knees were weak, for the harrow moved easily over the dirt in the afternoon, forcing him to dig his heels into the soft earth to brake the pace of the team.

Tryntje could move no more by suppertime. She and Hendrick gave up their work for the day, while Antonie and Peter harnessed the team to the plow again and broke more prairie. By the time the sun set, a wide new swath of loam lay turned out of its centuries-old bed.

But Tryntje went to bed early. Her back was cramped by strain; it burned from her buttocks to her shoulders. Her hands were raw from the hoe handle. Even a week of callouses couldn't prevent the slivery wood from working through to the soft flesh underneath. The sun had turned her neck an angry red again. She had sipped her coffee slowly that night, wondering where she could draw strength from for the continuing assault.

She prayed, in spite of her hopelessness. She asked for a blessing, expecting nothing, feeling that no one was there to listen, much less to give. The dead cottonwood, standing alone in the bleak expanse of grassland, seemed more real, more omnipotent than the God she once thought she knew. Surely He had forgotten them here.

And yet the work continued, for dawn signaled another day, then another, and another. The harder the family worked, she thought, the more fanatically her husband plowed, opening up more and more land to be planted. Each day she worried about her failing strength, and each day she saw her own children, subdued by their own exhaustion, sitting around the shipping crate like old people, then- faces scraped and scoured by the fiery sun and the searing prairie winds. They should have been in school, she told herself. In Holland they would be clean and nicely dressed. At night they would learn their lessons: spelling, writing, music, history, poetry. They would read Huygens and Da Costa, and sleep well in soft beds built from wood, not sod and straw. She hated this land.

And each night her husband would return, tired and sore himself, wearing a hesitant smile that begged her to share his enthusiasm, while it offered his understanding and sympathy. They would lie together at night close to their children, his heavy hand resting on her side as she faced away from him, to exhausted to sleep. They would lie in that position for hours, silent but awake, separated by a wall of fatigue and emotion, listening to the crackle of the straw beneath the rustling bodies of their overtired children. In these agonizing hours Tryntja would remember the thump of the hammer and the rip of the saw as the coffin maker prepared the little box for her tiny daughter. They had lost her in Minnesota; the cause was still a mystery. And now, when she knew a new life was beginning to form within her, she wanted to cry out in anguish because this one would know only a vast, dismal ocean of grass.

Tryntje," her husband said late one night. "Are you awake?"

"Ja, Toon."

"We have but a little left now. One, maybe two days."

"That is good," she said, remaining very still.

"We have done well."

"Ja, we have."

"We have more land planted than I thought." He wanted to act as hopeful as possible.

But there was no reply.

"If the Lord gives us a good year ..."

"Toon — ..." she interrupted.

"Ja?"

She said nothing. Maria turned in her sleep, breaking the deep silence. Then it was quiet again.

Toon, I will have a child."

"Oh, *lieveling..."*

"Please, say nothing."

"But, Tryntje..."

"Please," she stopped him again.

Again, silence.

"Tryntje, the Lord..."

"Antonie, I know what you must say ... Please?"

He said no more.

Late Friday afternoon Antonie Vender Meer worked alone, planting the seeds and covering them himself. He had little left to do, so he sent his family back to the sod house to finish the day away from field work. For the first time since they had started on Tuesday, he saw their faces brighten when they sensed the end coming. He sent Tryntje home first with Maria, then Hendrick and Peter. By tonight he would

be done, but tomorrow he should work a garden for Tryntje, or mend the leaks in the thatched roof. The week had been good for him. The Lord had blessed him and his family with five clear, bright days of growing weather, enough warmth, certainly, to send young green shoots budding from the seeds. He removed his hat, dropped it over the handle of the hoe, then placed both hands over it, and gave thanks for God's goodness. He asked mercy for Tryntje, too, and strength for their children, all of them.

Then he looked up to the east and south, tracing the lines of his land by erecting the fences in his mind. Peter would help him, of course. Once the crop was growing well, they could start to fence in the farm — Peter would like that work. He followed the limits west, stopping at the big cottonwood, then moved back north toward the sod house. As his eyes swept over his little kingdom, he saw them — huge, billowing monsters rolling from the west, ready at any moment to swallow the sun behind a blanket of bluish-gray. The rain was coming again.

And somehow he had sensed it all day. He had seen the whiskery morning clouds evolve into harmless puffs in the early afternoon. He remembered the relief he felt when the sun was threw the hoe over his shoulder, and started walking back to the house, watching jagged branches of lightning play in the darkening sky, still far away.

By the time he arrived at the house, Tryntje had already lit the lamps. The three children were inside; Hendrick and Maria read quietly from two of the few books the family owned. Peter stared out of the window to the south, while Tryntje worked quietly over the stove. No one spoke.

"We have worked hard," he said, hanging up his hat. "The Lord will bless us."

Peter turned quickly; his youthful face was agitated by what he saw approaching. He sat down at the table, next to his father.

The work is finished. Next week we can start to fence, Peter, if we can get the supplies. The work will not be easy, but it will be good work. Soon our land will be marked to every corner." Antonie tried to distract his son, but the deep rumble of distant thunder was too easily heard and felt in the background.

Tryntje kept working. She didn't respond to her husband. The darkness swept into the house as the storm clouds approached the homestead. She turned up the lamps, and served coffee to Peter and Antonie.

"Sunday we will walk, Tryntje, all of us, to where Maria saw the smoke in the south. We must have neighbors there, eh, Peter?"

"I thought no one lived to the south, Pa?"

Ma, so did I, But we will meet them on Sunday."

"Do you think they are Hollanders?"

"It seems to far from Orange City. Boschma said no one lived here when we took the land. We will see once on Sunday."

Peter looked up suddenly and ran to the window. Tryntje and Antonie heard it too, like a thousand little animals running together over the earth.

The Lord will bless us," Antonie said again, quietly, to no one but himself.

Then the rains came.

Unlike the week before, the new storm was scattered and sporadic. The rain came in spurts, but water soaked through the bundles of prairie grass that lay like a mat on the roof. It slowly seeped through the ceiling, dripping finally onto the floor, turning Tryntje's home once more into a muddy den.

By Saturday night Hendrick and Maria had paged through every book, and all the coffee was gone. Other than the clatter of a frequent cloudburst, there was little noise within the thick mud walls. Peter and Antonie had gone out periodically to feed the animals in the lean-to behind the house, while Tryntje found plenty of work inside, mending and sewing.

All of this seemed another curse to Tryntje, but she uttered no words of complaint. The new life within her was the source of much anxiety, but it pushed her forward as well. When the soggy blankets and thick humidity provoked a chill, she would wrap a hot brick from the stove and put it next to her feet, or even put on more clothes — not for herself, for the baby. She watched herself closely, and in the process, the, and in the process, the despairs prompted by her environment settled into the recesses of her mind-still present, but for the moment subordinate to her instinct as a mother. This new attitude caused no change in her behavior, however, for her new concern dominated her activity with equal intensity; whatever strength was not expended on her children was absorbed by the infant suddenly visible before her. Even Antonie saw nothing of the change. Her solemnity, her quietness, he felt to be the product her covert distast for the new land.

And as the beating rain continued to blanket the land, he felt his faith begin to ebb in the stream of tribulations he suffered as father, husband, and believer.

"I can take no more," he silently told the Lord.

But the rain fell persistently for the next several hours. Antonie and Tryntje lay motionless on the bedding, hearing every drop while feeling the damp spring air invade and inhabit the sod house. Antonie stared into the darkness and groped for ways to accept the curse.

Then he rose silently, slipped across the muddied floor, grabbed his coat and hat from the nail at the door, and left the house. He ran over the slick earth as fast as he dared until he reached the field — the first field he had plowed, the one that sloped so slightly toward the bog. He cursed himself for his stupidity. He knew he should not have chosen this land first. It had already shed his first planting; now more rain threatened a repetition that could destroy the verdant farm he had envisioned and threaten his own belief in an omniscient God.

The rain continued; it smacked into his hat and ran down around the brim where it dropped steadily, forming a kind of fringe. The land was already scarred by tiny rivulets beginning to connect with each other. Streams of water ate into the earth, carrying topsoil down toward the slough. In the face of the infinite black sky he felt powerless. He was driven back to his knees.

He realized but one frail hope. He threw off his coat, despite the cold, and rolled up his shirt sleeves as he stepped into the muck. He could barely distinguish the little mounds where seeds had been planted, but he tried to adjust his position to leave the seed undisturbed. He leaned over, buried his hand in the cold earth, and felt the wet mud strangle his fingers. He pulled his hand into a cup like a swimmer, dug out a scoop of mushy soil, and laid it to the left of the hole, taking a step forward. On and on he worked, back bent to the black topsoil. Soon a thin furrow crossed the slope, collecting the runoff as it moved slowly downward. For hours he reached and dug, until the field was ribboned by jagged lines. His fingers were caked with mud, and the heel of his palm and his wrists were gloved by thick dirt.

He stood, erect and strong, and surveyed his work. The rain continued to fall, but it ran harmlessly into the troughs he had cut.

Tryntje was awake when he returned, but Antonie laid his drenched body beside her, silent, his eyes open to the darkness, listening, like her, to the rain, waiting, praying, for it to end. All that mattered now was how long this would continue.

The grass roof, saturated again by more than a day of rain, continued to drip long after the storm had passed. Not until Antonie rose from the straw bed once more and stepped outside was he sure. It was over.

Even Tryntje sensed the relief and joy in the rhythmical throbbing of the Psalms that Sun day morning. The sun had appeared again and when Antonie returned from an early morning walk , his face broadened by an authentic smile, she felt a twinge of enthusiasm that her husband seemed always to possess. He told them of the fields-very little had washed away. So with another breakfast over , the sun drying the land again, and no threat of reseeding, the family found a relaxed and happy intimacy in their Sunday worship. Antonie even led more songs than usual, prayed even longer, and read more lustily from the stories of the Old Testament. Only the absence of a larger fellowship bounded his joy.

"We will start another sod house this summer," he told Peter after their worship had concluded.

"Another?"

"Ja, we must build a house of worship." He saw his family, clean and refreshed, in a good church building, singing the Psalms, listening to the dominie, worshiping with the greater family of God. And all around him would be other Dutch people who would follow the Van der Meers to this place, Christian people, who, like him, would thank their God for His blessings. Tryntje heard his words to Peter. She looked up at the family portrait, longing to share her husband's dream. And she smiled then, and poured her husband some of her home-brewed "prairie tea," made from some grasses she had collected.

After dinner, the entire family stood beside the house, staring south, looking for the faint thread of smoke that Maria had pointed out to them on other days. But today there was no sign. Before them lay the slough grass, waving in a mellow southern breeze. It rolled like ocean swells, far, far into the south; but they saw no sign of other men.

"Maybe we stay home, Tryntje. I see nothing today," he told his wife. He himself had lost his directions in the tall grass several times; he was reluctant to take such chances with his

whole family.

"No, Pa, I will show you."

He smiled at his pretty daughter. She was clean and neat. Of course, his wife had seen to that. No matter how muddy things became, no matter how wet, Tryntje always kept Maria clean and dry. She had already lost one daughter.

"Let's go, Pa. Let's go out past the sod-pile by the old cottonwood. We never been out there!" Peter was not to be denied.

"We will stay together. We promise, Pa!" Hendrick said his part. He looked into his mother's eyes and scampered toward the south, beckoning them all to follow. Antonie looked into his wife's eyes to get her permission. Her stiff, dry hair blew softly in the breeze.

"Can you, *Vrouw?"*

"Ja." She smiled.

"Very well. We go."

Once they were past the limits of their own claim, they felt like real adventurers, even though there was clearly nothing in the area besides the prairie grass. But at times the ground bottomed into soft sloughs and soggy marshes, and in order to find alternative routes, Antonie would make them all hold hands as they passed through grass that grew even higher than his head. Then they would scale a slight rise, and the grass would shorten. Suspicious blackbirds would scream out raspy warnings, and little bands of prairie pigeons would fly close to their heads, then their wings thumping against their bellies like little drums. Hendrick said he saw a badger, but by the time the others looked, it was gone.

Still they pressed on to the south. Miles passed as they moved up the knolls and through the hollows. Then they saw it, suddenly, as they reached the crest of another hill-a real frame cabin, standing alone on a small incline. There was no fire just then, but even from a distance, beaten paths were visible, signs of life were there. The grass was chopped shorter around the house, and a wide strip of plowed land ran along the top of the knoll.

"I knew we would find it," Maria shouted, jumping happily and infecting the others with her enthusiasm.

"Maybe they will help us build the church, Pa." Peter had not forgotten his father's words.

They approached the cabin slowly but with great hope. The children seemed to want to hide behind their parents; even Peter walked behind his father, peeking around his wide shoulders.

Then the door of the cabin opened, and a woman backed out, closing the latch behind her. The Vander Meers stopped walking immediately, watching her. She turned, grasped the bottom of the wooden pail she was carrying, and dumped the contents on the stubble grass. *As* she finished, she glanced up and froze, confronted by this new and unexpected tribe.

"Hul-lo," Antonie stumbled over the little English he knew.

There was no reply. The middle-aged woman stood motionless, still holding the pail upside-down. She seemed entranced by Tryntje; at least she appeared to pay little attention to the rest of the family. Antonie looked at his wife; she, in turn, seemed transfixed by the woman who stared at her.

"Dina," Tryntje whispered.

"Dina?" she repeated, more loudly.

Tryntje?" The woman's round face lengthened as she gasped in disbelief.

Both women drew their long skirts up from the ground and ran toward each other, then stopped at arm's length, incredulous, holding hands and studying each other closely, with obvious delight.

Antonie heard very little of their conversation, but when the women embraced warmly and kissed, he knew he had been blessed.

Tryntje turned back to her family, her lips in constant motion, her left arm still embracing the stranger. She waved her family forward with a girlish swoop of her right hand.

This is Dina ... my friend ..." she said, her face as warm as the morning sun, "from Holland ... the singing school."

The two women turned back into each other's arms, while five children, one after another, exploded from the cabin and ran to their mother, keeping a steady eye on the Vander Meers. Then a tall, gaunt Hollander filled the door frame and looked suspiciously at the emotional reunion taking place before his home. When he saw the look on his wife's face, he glanced over to Antonie Vander Meer, who nodded and smiled.

As the sun inched closer to the horizon that night, Antonie and his family finally reached their southwest sod-pile. Peter had gone ahead of the rest, and when they caught him, he was sitting on the marker, one hand holding the big

sack of coffee, the other shading the bright sun from his eyes as he looked into the west. Tryntje held Maria's hand; Antonie walked arm and arm with her on the other side.

"Pa, look!" Peter pointed upward, and there, like fancy lace against the orange sky, a huge regiment of geese — three, four, five echelons — moved north in formation. The Vander Meers stopped for a moment, listening to the faint, discordant honking. "Is it true what they say about the geese?" Peter asked.

"What is that?"

by James Schaap