



2020 Third Place

THE HOMESTEAD

Patricia Dreyfus

I hear the barn door slam. “Shhh, children.” He’s coming. The supper is on the table. The children sit quietly. I have nowhere to turn, no one to talk to, no one to step between us. How will I tell him?

Why did I let my father talk me into this marriage? I was happy at St. Olaf’s. It’s south east of our farm in Northfield, Minnesota. Father’s farm is in Ransom County, North Dakota. We took his Phaeton carriage for the trip to the train station. Then we changed trains in Wahpeton and rode the Soo Line past Minneapolis to Northfield.

It was after harvest, so the fields were flat and fallow. Game birds fluttered as we passed. Fall is my favorite season. The work is done and the skies are filled with migrating birds calling their farewells. The lovely harvest moon makes the world light as day. It’s peaceful.

The campus is only a dream now. The old gray stone church, with its peaked roof, centers the school. It is very Norwegian in architecture, plain and simple. Far said the place reminded him of home. The school rooms are in a stone building too. We girls stayed in a wood house next to the church.

The spring of my first year, I went to see Pastor Muus, the head of St. Olaf’s. His office was beside the church. I knocked. “Komme,” he said. I opened the dark blue door decorated with paintings of birds and flowers. “God morgan, sir,” I said as I walked across the bleached floor to a small chair with a yellow quilted seat. I’m five foot one and the room seemed huge. The ceilings were high, and the space was cool because of the stone walls. I pulled my pink wool shawl close around me.

The pastor sat at his desk painted the same blue as the door. Our art class that semester focused on the old Norwegian folk art of rosemaling, stylized flower patterns painted on wood. The desk had Ryfylke rosemaling painted on the sides and legs. I couldn’t take my eyes off the red roses and cream flowers. I told him I had a wooden platter in the darker-colored Romsdal style that my mother painted before she died.

After I sat, Pastor Muus folded his hands on the desk top. He was tall like the room and slim with kind blue eyes. His hair was thick and gray, cut short around his ears and bushy on top. He wore the plain black suit of a Lutheran cleric. Our conversation would be in Norwegian. “So, Rosine,” he said. “I hear you are thinking about leaving us. You are doing well in the music department. Is there a problem?”

“No sir. When I went home for Christmas, my father introduced me to Magnus Johnson. He has offered to marry me. We will go homestead in the Dakotas. My father says it is a great



opportunity, and Magnus is very nice. I will finish the year. I’m to be married next October after the harvest.”

Pastor Muus shook his head slowly. “I cannot advise you to go against your father. You have time to consider this. Please do. I will remember you in my prayers.”

He gave me a smile that I felt was tinged with sadness.

Why did I agree to this? Magnus put on such an act for my parents. He was very attentive to me. That summer he brought me flowers and asked me to play and sing for him. Now he forbids singing. He accompanied me to church and asked me to read the Bible to him. He talked about a new life in a new territory. Made homesteading sound like a great adventure. One hundred and sixty acres of prime grass land. We would build our own house out of the very earth. We would live off the land. We would be the new pioneers. My head was turned with bucolic visions and romance.

I was twenty years old.

It’s our seventh year on this farm. One hundred and sixty acres of snow six months a year. One hundred and sixty acres of summer wind, drought, and hostile Indians. One hundred and sixty acres of crops destroyed by grasshoppers, prairie fires, hail. No other women close by to visit, to share chores, to laugh with. No church to find solace.

We spent five years here to make the farm ours. They call it proving. We built the house and filed the claim two years ago with the government. We paid eighteen dollars to register it. This was what proved we were here to stay. Magnus tells me it’s his, not ours, not mine, his.

Our nearest neighbors helped at first, but Magnus didn’t like the way Sven looked at me. His wife, Alma, was my only friend. Then it was just the two of us.

I cut the sod slabs one by two feet to make the eight by ten-foot house, walls two feet thick. He stacked them like bricks. I wanted the house bigger in anticipation of children since I was already pregnant. It was hard work and Magnus could only manage that much, which was the minimum size needed to get the homestead. Even so, the walls aren't even. We packed the floor down, stomping hard to keep it smooth.

It is cool in the summer and warm in the winter, except around the window and door where the sod has shrunk and the wind sneaks in. I stuff paper or rags in the cracks to keep out the cold. The buffalo and wire grass still grow out from the walls. The roof sags in places. Dirt falls from the ceiling. I ask him to buy muslin or get some paper so I can put it up to stop the dirt, but he says it's my fault the dirt falls. I tell him it's not healthy for the children. He shrugs.

We have a door made from the only wood slats we could find. There is one small window, so it's dark inside. Magnus went to town and got the window. I think it's the smallest made.

We have a table with one chair and a bench on one side. Our bed is made from stacked sod topped with a mattress filled with straw. The children all sleep together on a straw mattress on the floor, except the baby. I have my mother's bentwood cradle. It's my only possession. I left my rosemaling plate with Father.

The stove is on the side wall. It has a cistern in the back that keeps water warm and the coffee pot going. The cupboard stands beside the stove. It is tall and narrow, just open shelves to hold our tin plates, cups, flour and other goods.

We have a dugout cellar for food storage, canned goods and smoked meat. I put the milk in the well in the summer so it will keep. There is a barrel of sawdust in the dugout where we store the eggs beginning in the fall when the chickens stop laying. By spring the eggs taste old, but we need the protein. We send away for baby chicks after the last frost and keep them inside, near the stove, until we're sure they can survive.

The cows are in their own soddy. If left outside, they would freeze to death in the winter. We use buffalo and cow chips for fuel because there is no wood on the prairie. I collect the manure and dry it in the barn or beside the house in the summer. We have a well for water. In the winter, ice forms on the top and it takes time to break it to get to the water. The outhouse is beside the barn. I accompany the older children summer and winter.

I work the fields, plant, harvest, can the food, knit and sew the clothes, take care of the cows and chickens. Magnus doesn't know how to milk and doesn't want to learn.

I birthed, nursed and cared for six children in these last seven years. I can't say we live in this house. Living is for another time or place.

The winter nights are long here. It is dark early and light late. When we are imprisoned by snow in the winter, Magnus' rages are constant. Summer is better because he stays outside longer. I try to write to my father once a month, but Magnus doesn't like that. I think he's afraid I'll tell about him about my life.

One frozen night I held my first born. The wind was howling as it does on these flat plains. I knew she was sick, my little Ruby, my only jewel. Magnus told me to leave her, come to bed. I told him I couldn't, the baby was sick. He was cruel even before this, calling me lazy and stupid. He even said Ruby was Sven's child. I haven't seen Sven or Alma because Magnus doesn't like to have other people around.

This night he grabbed my arm. "Come here," he snarled. I almost dropped Ruby. "Wait," I said. I laid Ruby down. Magnus tore at me. "I'm your husband," he said as he pushed me on the bed. I was pregnant again and afraid what he would do if I told him. I was very quiet and let him do what he wished. "Stay here," he said. I lay still next to him until he went to sleep. I got up to hold Ruby. She was dead. I cannot forgive him for that.

I am pregnant every year like the cows. Every pregnancy he shouts, "Whose child is it? Slut, whore, bitch, whose?" I am so alone. If we go to town, he is always at my side. Smiling and greeting people. I never go with him if my face is bruised. Never am allowed to be alone with anyone else, woman or man. Even when I birthed the children, he was within hearing distance. Two of them, I delivered by myself. He wouldn't go for help.

What kind of a Christian am I? I pray every night that he will die. That I will be rescued from him.

I am pregnant again at least three months. I know it means another beating. More abuse. The children are getting big, aware. Pearl is five now, Edwin four, Edna three, Mary two, Minnie almost one. He will be furious. We have a hard time feeding those we have. I want to leave but can't take

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the children. Can't leave them here with him either.

I hear him at the door. He pushes it open and stares at the kids then at me. The children are very still like the pheasants when the fox is near.

How can I let him do this to my children, to me?

I ask him to please sit and I'll get his dinner. He is sweating and complains it's too hot in here. He is very thirsty and I pour him another cup of water. He is berating Edwin, who seems to get the worst of it. The rat poison is on the top shelf of the cupboard.

I reach up and take a pinch, just a pinch and put it on his left. He likes lots of butter and sugar. I roll it up for him. He watches how much I give each child and becomes angry if he thinks it's too much.

I smile and serve him first, as always. I spoon the rabbit stew onto his plate with another pinch of the powder. The garlic taste goes well with the stew. The children keep their faces down and eat quietly. Even at so young an age, they live in fear and know how to avoid punishment.

After dinner Magnus feels sick. He goes to the outhouse and stays a long time. He comes back, demands more water. Tells me my stew was terrible. His pupils are dilated. He lies on the bed, shouts at the children to be quiet. He sweats and shakes. He seems confused about where he is. He eyelids close. His breathing gets slower. He is very still.

I put the kids to bed.

He will not call me tonight.

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