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## ***1. Too Poor to Go Farther***

***December 15, 1942***

**M**oving day began long before the sun roused itself that cold winter morning. When Eli opened his eyes, the moon still floated high above the frozen prairie, and Dad and Mom's voices were quick and muffled in the kitchen. The morning fire in the stove spit and popped.

Eli shoved his face out of the comforters. The freezing air grabbed his chest, but he sat up shivering. Gritting his teeth, he slid out of bed and reached for his clothes.

Big brother Sanford's feet hit the floor at the same time. The rest were waking too—his little brother Harvey and his sisters, Lovina, Esther and Lucy, Lena and Fannie Mae. Everyone was hurrying. Mom had said that on moving day there would be no time to waste. They must grab a bite and hustle about.

Eli slipped into the kitchen. He took the corn bread Mom handed him. Already the house where he had been born seemed like a foreign place. Boxes and barrels crowded the corners and hid the walls. The rooms of the little house seemed



strange and swollen out of shape. In just a few hours Eli's family would drive away and never come back. Eli tried to swallow the last bite of corn bread, but it stuck in his throat.

"Ach, your head!" Mom said. She ran a wet comb over his hair, sending a cold trickle down his neck before he pulled on his knit cap. The wetness reached way down inside his shirt without warming up at all. He wrestled with the doorknob and then stepped out into the darkness. Tree branches made thin shadows on the ground. Somewhere a rooster crowed. A truck ground to a halt out on the road, and then headlights swung in the lane. Eli jumped off the porch and stood there shivering. The movers had arrived.

Lanterns bobbed. *Hurry, hurry* went all the feet. They must soon head down the road and go who-knows-where. Eli did not know. Neither did the others. Only Dad had seen their new home in Kansas.

"I found a house to rent five miles from Uncle Dannies' and Grossmommy's," Dad had said. "Not as close as I wish, but close enough, I guess." He cleared his throat. "I do wish the house was in a little better shape. But I guess a poor man has to take what he can get."

Mom had brushed aside his words with a smile. "What needs be, needs be," she answered. And so today was moving day.

Soon Eli was too busy to think. He did not feel the cold creeping into his hands and feet. He did not feel it slipping down his coat collar, sucking at his breath. The sun peeped over the rim of the world as Dad and Sanford loaded the stove, the beds, and the kitchen sink. It peered in the windows as Mom and the girls hefted the desk, the table, and the chairs onto the truck. The loads piled higher and higher. The sun climbed up, up the sky. Clothes, comforters, and food squeezed on board. Horses, pigs, and cows. Then they were on their way with a rumble of wheels.



Mom's canaries huddled in their cages. The chickens rattled and squawked in their crates. So did the guinea hens and banties. But one thing was not on board, and that was Bowser, the family's faithful farm dog. Dad said the trucks were piled high enough. He would return for the farm machinery. Bowser could come with him then. Eli had to rub his knuckles in his eyes to keep from crying when Bowser got left behind.

The trucks crawled along the roads, eating up the miles. Farmhouses and empty fields slipped by. "Watch for the line between Oklahoma and Kansas," the driver joshed. But Eli did not see it for his eyes burned, then drooped, and his shoulders began to sag. At last he slept.

The next thing Eli knew, Dad was shaking him awake. "Are you hungry?" Dad asked.

Eli nodded. He sat there in the rattling truck, munching a sandwich, while the driver pointed out the window. "Now, there is something to see. There's the Neosho River. That water'll run four hundred miles all the way to the Gulf o' Mexico." He chuckled and gripped Eli's knee. "Think you'd like to go that far?"

The river slipped under the bridge like a wide green snake, and then they were past. Eli didn't feel like talking. Every mile they went took them farther away from the home he loved.

Like a big caravan the trucks rumbled along the paved roads then eased off onto a dirt road, bumping over ruts and through mud holes, spinning sometimes. At every crossroad, the trucks crawled to a stop, then went on. For over an hour, the muddy trucks bounced and jolted slowly along while the sun marked noon and began to sink toward the west. When at last the driver cranked the steering wheel sharply to the right, Eli sat up straight. They were turning in a lane. He leaned past Dad's arm to look. What he saw made his heart sink to his knees.



There sat their new home—a small square bump on the brown frozen prairie. Dull green tarpaper covered its sides, and weeds grew by the door. Even Mom did not know what to say. At last her mouth opened. “Ach, well, we’ll settle in and make the best of it.” She smiled and patted Dad’s hand. “We’ll be happy for a place out of the cold.”

When Sanford pushed open the door, Eli put his hand over his mouth. Trash lay in the corners. Dust covered the floor. The windows were cracked, and the floors sagged toward the south. But Mom said if they all worked together, they could make it a home just the same.

So, the cleaning began. Sanford and Eli lugged in bucketfuls of water from the well across the road while Dad started a fire in the cookstove. Mom crowded the top with her biggest kettles, pouring them full, and soon steam rose in clouds above the stove.

Lovina and Esther scrubbed ceilings and walls. Lucy washed windows and floors. The boys hauled freezing water in; they hauled gray lukewarm water out. Lena stuffed rags in the cracks. Fannie Mae swept cobwebs from the low attic and scoured its cracked windowpane. Dad tacked up poster board in the attic to make a boys’ side and a girls’ side, and said that was good enough.

In the middle of the scouring and scrubbing came a knock on the door. A fur-capped man stepped in among the boxes and crates. He shook hands with Dad. “Harold Lakes here. You chose a cold day for movin’.”

Dad bobbed his head. “We’re the Ben Yoder family.” He patted Mom’s shoulder. “Mary, my wife.”

Mr. Lake’s face creased in a smile as he nodded at them all. “Want to step across the road till the place warms up? The missus will give you a hot drink.”



Mom said thank you—there was no need—but it would be helpful if the canaries could stay there until things got settled in.

Mr. Lakes bowed just a bit and nodded. “Glad to oblige.” Then he smiled. “You’ll find it not as dry here as in your corner of Oklahoma. Was the drought right smart where you came from?” His hands kept passing his cap back and forth as he talked.

Dad cleared his throat “Ya, quite a few years.”



“Well, you’ll find it different here, I hope.” Mr. Lakes pulled his cap back on. “Yessir, bring those birds right over. We’ll be happy to oblige.” He chuckled as he reached for the door. “You’ve found the well, I guess? It does right fair, as old as it is.” He stepped outside. “You brought horses?” He shook his head. “This farm’s got some right rocky fields for plowing, but maybe you can make a go of it.”

“Ya, we’ll make do,” Dad answered. “We hope to find a place more suitable before long.”

Mr. Lakes nodded, turning to go. Suddenly he turned back. “Course on the back side of the creek it’s right good soil. Black and rich, so I’ve heard.” He chuckled. “Creek’s called Fish Creek. Don’t know but your boys might want to look for minnows there.”

The door slammed shut, and Sanford and Eli looked at each other. *Minnows?* Eli thought. That would be fun.

“Ach, what good neighbors,” Mom said, stopping long enough to smile.

Dad held his hands over the stove. “Ya, well, I best take the canaries right over, then get busy checking the fence.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Guess we’ll find out what the fields are like, come planting time. Then we’ll see how farming with horses goes.”

Eli looked at Dad. Dad had always used horses to farm. What else would Dad use? Eli counted in his head. *Pedro and Mabel. Gray and Dick and Queen.* Dad had brought along plenty of horses to work the farm. Cowboys used horses, and a cowboy is what Eli hoped to be. Of course Dad would use horses on this farm.

While he helped set dishes and canned things on shelves, Eli thought of Bowser. While he helped the girls make beds and hammer clothes pegs into walls and hang curtains at the windows, Eli thought of Bowser. When Bowser came, perhaps even this strange house would feel like home.



At last everything was in its place. The cows and horses plodded into the faded barn to wait for spring. The chickens and guineas crouched in their strange coop and watched snow sift through the cracks and crannies. The little green house slowly began to warm in all its corners.

By morning, it was time to bring the canaries home. “Now, we’re really settled in,” Mom said, hanging the canary cages along one wall.

The canaries fluffed their feathers and twittered and chirped. They liked their new home. Mom smoothed down her apron and smiled. “If we keep the attic door shut, the canaries will stay warm enough.” Her forehead creased. “I’m sorry there’s no way to heat the upstairs. It’s too far away.” She fastened up the last braid of Lena’s hair and pinned on Lena’s cap. “You’ll just have to pile the covers high in the attic.”

A day went by, then two, and then three. A whole week went by until at last Dad hired a truck and driver, and out the lane they went—out the lane and down the road under a thin, cold moon. Eli watched the lights of the truck grow smaller and smaller, then disappear. He smiled just a bit. By evening, their farm dog would be home.

While they did the morning chores, Eli thought about Bowser. While he and Lena gathered the eggs, he thought about the dog. The hands on the clock had never seemed to move so slowly as on that day.

At last evening came. In the lane came Dad and the truck. Dad got out, then turned and spoke to the driver. “Back it up this way.” He took a step, then stopped, pulling on his gloves as the boys ran up. “My, it’s good to be home,” he said. His breath showed white in the cold.

Eli hurried out to the truck, wondering why the dog hadn’t jumped out ahead of Dad. “Here, Bowser!” he called hopefully. Behind him, Sanford cried out, “Where’s Bowser?”



Dad ran his gloved hand over his face. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, boys. The new owners said they put food in Bowser's bowl. They shook out the rug box where he slept and gave him fresh water every day. But Bowser would not eat. And then he disappeared. He ran off and never returned."

Sanford whirled away. "Just what I thought might happen!" he hurled over his shoulder, running toward the barn. Eli turned and fled. He collapsed under a bush behind the house. Never had he felt so sad. Tears ran down his cheeks—large wet tears that tore at his insides. His stomach twisted and ached. He thought of Bowser, standing at the end of the lane waiting for them to return—Bowser, missing them so much that he could not eat. Eli slid facedown on the ground, crying. His legs felt stiff and cold when at last he picked himself up and crept to the house.

Although Eli could not eat a bite at the supper table, Mom did not scold. Dad put a hand on Eli's shoulder at bedtime. "It was a terrible mistake," he said, a hollow sound in his words, "but we must make the best of it. We cannot go back and do it over."

"Ya, Dad," Eli said. Then he turned away. No more words came. From the row of cages against the wall, one canary and then another cheeped a sleepy good night, but Eli dragged himself up the cold, cold stairs and jumped shivering into bed. Sanford was already there, huddled in the darkness. A snuffle came from his side of the bed, even though Sanford was twelve—almost too big to cry.

Eli squeezed his eyes shut. It was too cold to kneel by the bed to say his prayers. He should say them, but he couldn't. His heart felt too cold to squeeze out anything at all.

