

Rough Terrain



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Hadley Hoover

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To my bearded guy: thanks for the years gone by, the promise of those still to come, and all the dreams and memories that form a solid foundation beneath our love.

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October 1907—February 1908



With windows closed tightly against night chills, Hans and Rebecca de Boer hovered over beds on opposite sides of their sons' room. The light from the single lamp was low, but shadows against the walls loomed as large as the couple's fears. Hans stood at the foot of one bed, his work-worn hands alternately clutching the bedpost and checking his pocket watch. Helpless and silent, he watched their youngest child, Cornelis, toss beneath the patchwork quilts.

Eyes swollen to mere slits, the eight-year-old boy's face appeared flushed in the dim light. His body seemed even smaller beneath his puffy face. His eyelashes, long and curling russet wisps against his cheeks, matched the mop of auburn hair that clung to his damp brow. Cornelis needed to sleep—as did his parents, now ragged with exhaustion after many unsettled nights and restless days—but sleep was elusive.

Across the room, Rebecca exhibited none of her husband's control and sobbed quietly. Kneeling beside the other bed, she caressed Bram's hand. Their eldest son had grown increasingly uneasy beneath his tousled bedclothes as the night progressed. While both boys shared symptoms of aches, sore throats, and malaise, Bram also complained of chest pains and fatigue unrelieved even by rest. He often flung off the covers, drenched with his perspiration—all the more worrisome for the persistent cough that left him short of breath.

Tonight was the worst. Hours ago, Hans had sent word to the doctor through a neighbor, but still no help came. When Bram opened his eyes and looked into hers with wordless anguish, it pierced Rebecca's mother-heart. "Can you hear anything, Hans?" she asked as she brushed strands of black hair back from Bram's feverish face.

"No, 'Becca. Not yet. But he'll come. Doc Draayer's word is good." In his heart he, too, wondered at the delay. *Two boys. Our hopes and dreams.* "He's on his way. We're not the only household around Dutchville with illness and *strubbeling* tonight."

The whinny of the doctor's horse offered the night's first spark of hope. Rebecca rushed to meet him on the porch and escort him to where three who formed the circle of her life awaited his skills.

Moving a lantern closer to each bed, Doc Draayer examined first Cornelis, then Bram. His face masked the thoughts behind his calming murmurs. Each boy rested easier after his ministrations. Finally, the doctor smoothed the quilts beneath Bram's chin and, with a final pat, nodded at the waiting parents. The three adults filed out to the kitchen where Rebecca hastened to pour cups of strong Dutch coffee from the pot that simmered on the wood-burning stove.

Saturated with the pleasant reminders of Rebecca's cooking, the kitchen provided a safe harbor in which to hear the doctor's verdict. "Your boys have had a siege of it, Hans, Rebecca. They are far from well yet, as you know, but the worst will be over soon. Continue with the medicine I left with you before and feed them broth and tea even if they ask for food. You have done a fine job of caring for them."

Though the doctor's manner was comforting, Hans and Rebecca sensed he had more to say. Instinctively, they reached for each other beneath the table; Rebecca shot a quick glance at her husband when his strong hand shook within her grasp. She had often teased him that he resembled *Sinterklaas* with his portly build, long beard, and twinkling eyes, but there was nothing jovial about her husband tonight. Dread lurched in their hearts as they waited.

“Young Cornelis will be fine. Eight years is a good age to have mumps. Soon you will have both boys out in the fields with you, Hans.”

“But Bram...what about Bram, *Dokter?*” In his distress, Hans lapsed into the familiar Dutch. “You said Cornelis would be fine. But how long before Bram recovers from this *ziekte?* He’ll be in the barn and fields with me, too, right?” The pitch of Hans’ usually steady voice rose until the final question in his native tongue was almost shrill.

Gerrit Draayer tugged at his beard and shifted his eyeglasses to rub red-rimmed eyes. With the surge of mumps cases in the past month and rumors of tuberculosis in nearby communities, his days and nights had melted into one seemingly endless muddle. But this visit tonight required more than his medical skills—for this news, he longed for Solomon’s wisdom. “You noticed how Bram cried out when I examined him?”

Rebecca nodded and flushed. The blankets had formed a shield for the doctor’s scrutiny, but from having cared for her son’s most personal needs over the past days, she knew exactly where his hands had probed. Giving Bram a bed-bath earlier today, she, too, had elicited sharp outcries from him.

Doc Draayer turned to Hans. “Bram is twelve now?”

“Soon to be thirteen. He’s grown strong and tall for his age.”

“I remember when I delivered Abraham. A fine young man from the start, your Bram. When I swatted him, he cried so loudly even I was startled!”

Rebecca took a deep breath. “What is wrong with Bram?”

Knowing she was now ready to hear, the doctor responded with a soothing voice, “No one wants to be sick, but some illnesses should come when we are young like Cornelis. When those same diseases strike us at an older age, we can have problems. Hans, recall when I asked if you’d had mumps as a child?”

“Yes. It was almost your first question when we called you.”

The doctor nodded. "I was worried about you being near him if you had not had mumps. With Bram's rapid growth, he is more a young man than a child. I believe my earlier suspicions have played out. Because of the effects of this disease on his young body, I fear Bram may not be able to father children."

Rebecca's coffee sloshed in her cup. Hans' rapid intake of air hung around them like a sob.

"Mind you, I am not fully certain, but I would be remiss if I did not speak honestly. It may be the swelling and pain and tenderness so evident tonight will pass without damage. But there is also the chance his genitals have been affected, rendering him sterile. I am sorry to speak so plainly, Rebecca, but I do not want to cloud your understanding."

Rebecca stared numbly at the doctor's face until her vision blurred.

"How soon...?" Hans could not form a question to give shape to his despair.

"It may be years. Medicine in 1907 has come a long way from the last century, but there is still much to discover. We learn more every day. Typhoid Mary's arrest in New York last March was possible only because of what we now know about infections."

"*Ja*, 1907 is a good time to be *levend*," murmured Hans, half-listening, half-floundering in fearful contemplation.

"You need not say anything at all to Bram now. His recovery in all other areas appears to be sure. When he begins to court one of the pretty Dutch girls who swarm to him like bees around honey, speak to him then about his possible condition. Or have him come talk to me. Now is not the time to burden a young fellow with something outside the realm of his experience."

"Is there a chance you are mistaken?" Hans' trusting gaze robbed his words of any accusation.

"Yes. His symptoms are not limited to mumps, so it is possible that he contracted something else in his weakened condition. I will watch

him closely, especially since he has developed such a cough since I last saw him.”

“And it could be that he will be fine?” Rebecca leaned forward hopefully.

“Yes, it could be he will recover fully. Only our Heavenly Father knows, and good Dutchmen like ourselves know to trust Him.”

Hans sank back in his chair, his ramrod posture abandoned momentarily. “This is not something others need to know, is it? Especially if it all turns out to be nothing.”

“My records on his case will relate only the known facts, no suspicions. Now I must go.” The two men shook hands as the doctor gathered his cap and bag.

“Are you heading home, at last?” Hans asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry to have been so late coming to you, but there is sadness at *Dominie* Ter Hoorn’s home. Gustave and Hanna’s infant was stillborn tonight.”

Rebecca’s fingers pressed against her lips as tears clouded her vision. “The *Dominie* and Hanna have waited so long, and now this. What can we do? I know Lena is there, but I want to do something.”

“With illness at your house, it is best you do nothing now. Hanna will appreciate a visit later, and perhaps one of your special cakes would lighten Lena’s load.” Rebecca nodded and twisted a corner of her apron absentmindedly.

Beneath clouds that flirted with the moon, Hans and Rebecca watched their friend and physician climb wearily into his waiting buggy. With heavy feet and hearts, they headed back to the house.

An owl hooted eerily as they leaned numbly against a porch post; Rebecca shivered and Hans pulled her into an embrace. “Our problems, though hard to bear, seem small compared to our *Dominie*’s tonight. He carries a heavy burden,” Hans murmured, rubbing his chin against her hair.

As the doctor's horse took him along the bumpy road back to town, Hans waited for Rebecca to reach the boys' bedroom before he extinguished the kitchen lamp and joined her beside Bram's bed. They joined hands; each knew the other was raising the same prayer of desperate petition for their first-born son and the other lives devastated this night at the Ter Hoorn house.

Gerrit Draayer slowed his horse as he neared the corner the Dutchville Reformed Church dominated. One light still burned in an upstairs room of the house in the shadow of the church: the home of *Dominie* Gustave Ter Hoorn and his family. A sad, fragile family it was tonight.

Inside that room, the lamp cast a shadow across Gustave's open Bible as he sat beside Hanna's bed. Their only daughter, Brigetta, slept alone in a bedroom large enough for several more children to share.

One afternoon early in Hanna's pregnancy, Brigetta had overheard a conversation not intended for young ears. Since then, she had prayed regularly for a little sister. But tonight's events slammed shut that window of hope. Doc Draayer had said firmly, but compassionately, there could be no more children born to Gustave and Hanna.

After the doctor left, Gustave returned to the bedroom and leaned against the doorframe for a long time. The woman in the bed was his completeness—his first and only love. *And now the act of our shared passions must be monitored?* His sorrow overwhelmed him like waves of a stormy sea battering the frail vessel of his soul.

He helped his sister-in-law change the soiled linens. Offering his thanks, he then sent her off to bed. Though saddened by her sister's stillborn child, Lena needed to rest before the next day's responsibilities rose with the sun. Lena was a good woman, willingly taking on many duties that should have been borne by the minister's wife. In return, she received both Brigetta's unrestrained love and Gustave's heartfelt gratitude to counterbalance Hanna's silence.

Setting aside her own goals to be a teacher, Lena had stayed with them for nearly seven years—it was that long since Brigetta’s birth and Hanna’s retreat into an unreachable world. Seven years since his frantic telegram to his sister-in-law: *Come immediately? Hanna ill, baby healthy. Gustave.* Not only had she journeyed cross-country on the next west-bound train, Lena had stayed with them. Without Lena in their lives...Gustave allowed an almost forbidden thought: without Lena, he wondered how his faith in God would have weathered the years. She was daily evidence of God’s love and care for his family.

Gustave stared, unseeing, at the pages of the Dutch Bible in his hands. He found no comfort there tonight. Since Brigetta’s birth, he had seen his beloved Hanna sink into a depression so profound she no longer reached out to him. He often wondered if she prayed.

Before Brigetta’s birth, he had often halted his studies when he heard Hanna’s lilting voice lifted in praise as she sang, with the Psalter perched above the dishpan and opened to Number 150, her favorite of all Dutch *Psalmen: Hallelujah! Looft God in Zijn heiligdom; looft Hem in het uitspansel Zijner sterkte...* Those bright days had faded long ago. Hanna’s Bible often lay untouched for weeks, her Psalter tucked beneath it.

But Doc Draayer had rejoiced with him when they finally dared to hope that Hanna could carry this child to full term. For several months, Gustave believed the sun would shine again in their marriage.

There was nothing in the quiet vigil beside his wife’s bed tonight to mute the echo of the doctor’s words that day three months ago: *“Gustave, even though Hanna’s sadness has deepened with each miscarriage, once she holds this child, she will see beyond the valley of despair where she has lived so long.”*

Gustave remembered the gist of his reply: “Perhaps. I still see how she was when Brigetta was born. At a time when most mothers rejoice, she began the weeping that continues almost daily. She became so distant...sometimes, I would come into a room and see her watching Brigetta with such detachment it chilled me. Through the years, she has

steadily withdrawn. Part of me hopes it will be different with this child, but part of me fears...”

There had been no need to name his fear to Gerrit Draayer. The doctor had weighed each word as carefully as he measured medicine: “You and Lena have never faltered in your love for Hanna. Brigetta’s unquestioning acceptance and devotion for her mother is like a balm. When someone has a visible physical condition, we know they are unable to do the same work as others without that problem. We must allow those who have an invisible condition—Hanna—the same respect and concessions. You and Lena have done that, and you have raised Brigetta to love and honor her mother even though Hanna is not like other mothers.”

Gustave now looked at Hanna, her face as white as the pillow beneath her head. He had told the doctor: *“Lena once lived in her sister’s shadow—Hanna shone like the sun, and Lena merely reflected all her brightness. When you look at Lena now, you see a spark of what Hanna was like.”*

The doctor’s reply had brought comfort then: *“Brigetta brings that same sunlight to all who meet her—she, too, is like the old Hanna. Perhaps the Hanna you see only in your mind will return.”* But the trauma of this night had snatched that modicum of comfort and thrown it like feathers to the far winds.

The long-awaited day of birthing had come and gone, and with it any expectations for a transformed Hanna had fled. Gustave watched his wife’s still form in the four-poster bed they had shared for nearly a decade. Doc Draayer had given her a sleeping potion, but in the morning—in the morning...Gustave buried his face in his hands. A chill brushed over his spirit as doubt did battle with faith.

Helplessly, he had watched Hanna flounder in the seas of depression through several miscarriages. Any lifelines he had thrown—whether compassion, loving acceptance, or attempted understanding—had been rejected. He now feared she would sink beneath the surface, out of his grasp, beyond the reach of human help.

As pastor of the Dutchville Reformed Church that loomed beside the parsonage, Gustave had often stood at other bedsides with equal sadness. Tonight, he cried out alone to his God for solace.

Beneath a hazy Iowa sky, Doc Draayer passed along the street and, seeing the single light still flickering in the window, offered his petitions for peace in the midst of such trials.

One doctor. Two families. And on this 1907 autumn night, the silence from heaven tested their faith.

* * *

One brisk February Saturday morning, Brigetta tiptoed between the church pews. Each week, she dusted the long wooden benches and straightened Psalters in the racks in preparation for services on the Lord's Day. For completing these tasks, she received three pennies from Papa: one for the collection basket, one for the pretty jar on her dresser, and one to spend as she wished. Usually she was alone in the sanctuary, but today Mister De Haan worked with the boys' catechism class as they recited the Nicene Creed and Heidelberg Catechism's questions and answers.

Tomorrow, these gangly disheveled boys would look quite different than the ones who now shifted from foot-to-foot, responding when called upon, but otherwise itching to get away. Sunday, they would graduate from catechism class. Today, the boys fidgeted and poked each other and generally behaved as if Mister De Haan were blind to their antics.

Brigetta, who was learning a shortened version of the catechism in the younger children's classes, whispered scattered sections along with the boys' singsong responses. Mister De Haan finally closed his book and enumerated his expectations for their demeanor the following day, stressing the importance of speaking up so the people in the last row could hear them.

The power of suggestion was strong; all eyes sought out the last pew where Brigetta sat quietly, having finished her tasks. “Hello, Brigetta! What do you think? Has my class performed well enough to be excused?”

Brigetta bobbed her head in response. Within seconds, the boys whooped their way past her in a mad dash to the coat racks in the narthex, the rhythmic brush of *klompen* along the aisle carpet-runner drowning out Mister De Haan’s futile pleas of “No running in church, *knaaps!*”

Their excited voices mingled as they grabbed coats and hats and mittens. “Last one to the river is a rotten egg!” Brigetta heard the church door open and close; she hugged herself with delight. *The boys are going skating!*

Papa had strict rules about Brigetta ever skating alone, and since her friend, Mary, was housebound with a cold, she had nearly despaired of skating any time soon. But now, she could skate to her heart’s content and still obey Papa’s rules. There was no more delightful way to spend a cold, crisp Saturday morning.

“I’m going to the river with the catechism class!” she shouted through the kitchen door. Grabbing her skating boots and blades from the hook behind the kitchen door, she soon pounded along the foot-packed trail.

The section of the river designated as the skating rink was bordered with waist-high mounds of snow. Within those boundaries was a winter wonderland of invigorating air, abundant exercise, and friendly games and competitions.

Since it was still quite early in the morning, only the catechism class populated the ice. Later, with Saturday chores completed, families, groups of children, and couples who skated hand-over-hand, their bodies swaying in perfect rhythm would answer the call of the frozen river.

Throughout the day, grandparents—those who walked slowly from pillar-to-post on land—glided with grace and renewed vigor along the ice. Their eyes glistening with memories of Holland’s frozen canals on

wintry days gone by, they nodded to others with gray hair and silver skates, as all dipped and swept across the ribbon of river, with hands clasped behind their backs.

Brigetta hastened to buckle the blades onto her skating shoes and soon joined the boys who fanned out across the slick surface. The air hummed with the sounds of crackling ice and merry voices. Wrapping her long scarf around her neck and flinging both ends over her shoulders, she pulled the matching woolen hat a little lower over her ears.

She felt like singing and shouting and spinning—so she did all three. When the frosty air rushed into her lungs, she quickly switched from singing to humming and, after startling the boys with her gleeful shouts, decided to concentrate on spinning.

The boys chased each other and raced from side to side, often crossing in front of Brigetta at break-neck speeds. She ignored them, staying out of their way as they played rough-and-tumble games. She tried to remember all that Papa had taught her about executing a perfect figure-eight and attempted to imitate *Tante* Lena and Mama with their graceful swan-like movements.

Abruptly, a blur took shape as it skidded to a stop in front of her. Red-cheeked and panting, Bram de Boer towered over her. “Hey! Do you want to play crack the whip with us? You can be the tail.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, thanks to you, Mister De Haan let us out a little early. Come on!”

The tail! The most exhilarating position on a crack-the-whip chain! Mindful of her father’s concerns and aware an accounting would be expected, she asked gravely, “Are you grown-up yet, Bram?”

“Huh? I’m half-way between thirteen and fourteen—just today I’ve finished my last recitations of the Heidelberg Catechism, don’t you know!” he boasted. “That means I’m accountable for my own self now. But, what’s that got to do with you skating?” He filled an invisible circle on the ice with intricate designs in a flurry of swoops and dramatic spins as he waited for her answer.

Almost fourteen—that’s ancient! “Let’s go!”

Bram grabbed her hand and pulled her along with him back to the boys clustered on the opposite side of the river. “Brigetta gets to be the tail. Whoever is next to her, hang on tight; she’s just a little kid.” The natural leader of the group, Bram skated to the front of the line that quickly formed, mittened hand grasping mittened hand.

Like a schooner at sea, Bram cut through the wind and propelled his followers on a wild adventure. They moved in a straight line until he dipped to one side and it became an “S” and then he cut back and the line jerked from a “U” to an “L” with Brigetta’s delighted squeals marking each shift.

She clung to the hand that linked her to the others and scarcely breathed. Her scarf whipped the air behind her, sometimes obscuring her view until another gust blew it away. *Skating has never been such fun!* Only the tip of her other skate connected her to reality. *I feel like a bird!* *Ooooh! Did my hand slip?* Before she could reinforce her connection, she truly was flying, clutching a boy’s empty mitten in her hand.

Even when she finally landed, she didn’t come to a complete stop. She continued to skim along the ice, the secrets of the river screeching wildly in her left ear, until she crashed, face-first, into the boundary wall of crusty snow. At last she lay still, knocked breathless and nearly unconscious.

A thundering herd of scared boys reached her side, but she was only dimly aware of them. Through a cold and distant fog she could hear accusations, scared speculations, and Bram’s shaky voice above the din: “It’s all my fault!”

No! It’s my fault—I let go! Her protests went unheard and unspoken, trapped in her mind.

“Move back. I’ll carry her home and tell the *Dominie* what happened,” Bram said, taking charge. His skates hit the ice with a thud, their buckles tinkling upon impact. Brigetta felt herself being lifted off the ice.

Voices mingled: “She’s bleeding a lot!” and “Take off her skate—her foot is twisted!” and “Here’s her hat!”

These ministrations complete, Bram shuffled to the edge of the river, his body trembling both from the weight of his burden and fear. He clutched Brigetta against his chest and struggled up the slope. With each jerky step Bram took, Brigetta’s seeping wounds rubbed against his rough-weave coat. She stirred; his grip tightened and pinned her nose against a button. Everything inside her seemed jarred, and the cold air hurt with each breath.

She moaned as they bumped along and a responding sob rose from Bram’s chest. “Don’t-die-don’t-die-don’t-die! Please-God-please-please-don’t-let-her-die!” His pace increased until breathing echoed like a tug-boat’s note: tuneless and haunting.

By the time he reached the corner of the churchyard, Bram’s breathing was ragged. Brigetta was lighter than the hay bales he hefted from haymow to feeding troughs, but he didn’t usually carry hay up from the river, along three streets, and across the churchyard to the parsonage. His muscles burned, but he dared not stop.

For the first time, he looked intently at the load he was carrying and felt something inside him tilt like the arms of the Dutch windmill in the town square. Brigetta was just a kid, but her eyelashes fluttered like the wings of a soaring bird and her skin—where it wasn’t bruised and broken—was the creamy pink of his mother’s favorite summer flowers. White-blond curls created an exquisite frame for the heart-shaped face that was swelling to lopsided proportions.

It was this thirteen-year-old boy’s first occasion to closely observe a girl. What he saw took hold of his senses and shook them up like soil from a newly plowed field in a windstorm. He swallowed hard and lengthened his stride along the foot-stomped path to the back door of the parsonage.

Tante Lena was cleaning the parlor when she noticed a most unusual sight through the lacy curtain. A staggering boy carried some sort of a

cumbersome package across the lawn. Her curiosity hooked, she pulled back the curtain to watch his slow progress. When he got closer, she recognized a red tasseled scarf and cap and flung her feather duster aside with a scream, “Brigetta’s hurt!” Hanna and Gustave pounded down the stairs and all met at the back door.

Bram stumbled across the kitchen and relinquished his precious load to the tabletop. Lena quickly wet a dishtowel and gently pressed it against Brigetta’s nose and face to stem the bleeding. Hanna carefully loosened Brigetta’s clothing. Gustave searched for broken bones.

All three voices became a cacophony of sound soon joined by Bram’s quavering words behind them. He offered up the full story in a frightened jumble of facts and emotions. “*Dominie-this-is-all-my-fault-I-asked-Brigetta-to-be-the-tail-for-crack-the-whip-and-I-was-the-lead-and-didn’t-stop-to-think-that-she-was-too-little-and-couldn’t-keep-up-I-am-terribly-sorry-and-if-you-don’t-want-me-to-take-communion-tomorrow-I-understand.*”

Gustave had paid scant attention to Bram in his overriding concern for his daughter, but the confession nested in Bram’s rush of words snagged him. “Bram, thank you for bringing Brigetta home. Perhaps inviting her to skate with older, stronger boys didn’t show the greatest wisdom, but your honesty and courage outweigh that lack of judgment. I will gladly serve you communion tomorrow.” Gustave pulled his eyes away from his daughter to look at the young fellow. Heart-wrenching agony was evident in every inch of the lad’s posture.

“I am so sorry,” Bram’s voice trembled

Gustave said soothingly, “Son, perhaps you could find Doc Draayer on your way home and ask him to come by?” Bram nodded and, after one sorrowful look at the kitchen table, fled from the parsonage.

Bram raced to the doctor’s house. *What if she dies all because of some stupid game? She’s such a funny little kid—always using big words and singing the Psalmens so loud that the old men smile.*