

The Uncle

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The boy staring out at the landscape hadn't moved for half an hour. The ground near the tracks was a rushing blur, but closer to the horizon the fields moved sideways in a slower drift. A distant road slanted toward them. It came nearer and nearer, then the crossing blinked and was gone.

The train began to slow. The hypnotic rising and falling of the wires eased. The foreground blur resolved itself into bushes and grass. They passed over a street, and the boy looked at the waiting cars, and then at the dark backs of houses sliding by.

"Dad, is this Brockville?" The six-year-old barely took his eyes away from the window.

"*Ja*, Dirk." His father, sitting beside him, was staring out just as intently now. "Look," he said, "there's the station." He leaned over Dirk, scanning the platform.

"I see your brother-in-law," he said. The woman sitting opposite, busy tying up the baby's sunhat, felt her husband's excitement and relief.

"Where, Dad? Which one's Uncle Roelof?"

"There. The man with the sunglasses." As the train stopped, the boy looked at a figure he did not recognize.

Waiting in the crowded aisle, Dirk and his parents were surrounded by a babel of warm sound. He was becoming used to not understanding strangers, ever since his family had left the ship and boarded the train in Halifax. As the crowd moved forward, a large woman stepped in, separating Dirk from his parents. He worried, but soon it was his turn

to climb down the iron steps, and there was his father's hand reaching to help him. He ignored it, and managed the small suitcase alone.

“Dirk, do you remember your Uncle Roel?” His mother turned him round, and he looked up into the smiling face of the tall man, but Dirk couldn't see his eyes through the sunglasses.

“Give me,” said the uncle. He took the suitcase from Dirk, and turned away. “This way, everyone.”

Uncle Roel had a dark blue pickup truck. Dirk's mother and his baby sister rode in front, but Dirk got to ride in the back with his father, in the open air. He had never been in a truck before. They sat side by side with their backs against one of the suitcases. When the truck turned a corner, Dirk was pushed sideways close against his father. Once out of town, the truck sped up, and his father put his arm around him. Dirk loved how the fields and the trees on both sides rushed backwards, growing smaller and eventually disappearing over a hill or around a bend. The truck turned onto a dirt road and kicked up a yellow plume of dust, leaving it to hang in the air behind them, at every new place they passed. His father grinned at Dirk, and began to sing.

Uncle Roel and Aunt Jannie's farm did not look at all like Grandfather's brick house and attached barn, with its huge thatch roof. This farmhouse was white. It looked big. The barn was of grey weathered wood, and there was a yard between them. Only the cows drinking at the water trough looked like Grandfather's. They went into the house. Dirk had never seen a screen door. He liked the slap it made behind them. Then his aunt and his mother were laughing and hugging and kissing and admiring the baby, and when

Aunt Jannie kissed him, he remembered her, in a way he had not remembered Uncle Roel.

Dirk lay awake that night, feeling the strangeness. It was hot. His bed consisted of several blankets on the linoleum floor. But his pillow was soft and comfortable and the sheet smelled good. He listened to the soothing voices of the adults downstairs, and to the insistent sound coming from the black outside. Crickets, his father had told him, using the English word. Later in the night he awoke again, but it was no longer so hot, and he drifted back to sleep, comforted by the breathing of his parents and his sister.

It must have rained that summer but he had no memory of it afterwards. Maybe it only rained at night, that first summer in Canada. In no time Dirk and his cousin Liesbet, who was five, were best friends. Some days, they would hide behind trees, secretly spying on their fathers as they worked together outside. On other days, they explored the barn or the basement of the house. But mostly, they ran wild and free, pirates or musketeers or cowboys, adventuring barefoot together all over the farm. Dirk became tanned as no Dutch boy had ever been.

At milking time, the barn fascinated Dirk, with its moist brown warmth, the buzzing of flies, and the occasional mooing. One evening, Dirk and Liesbet crept in and saw Uncle Roel nearby, squatting beside a massive black and white body. They stood very still. Dirk was engrossed in the clear sound as the milk squirted hard into the pail. Suddenly its rhythm was broken, and a jet of hot liquid struck his face. Startled, blinded momentarily by the milk in his eyes, Dirk heard Uncle Roel laughing aloud, and was confused and embarrassed. But then Liesbet was laughing too, and Dirk realized this must be a new and unfamiliar game, and soon he too joined in the wild laughter.

The water trough, fed by its windmill, was another magic place. One morning Dirk watched for a long time as the breeze spun the vanes on top of the skeleton tower, pulling the rods up and down, driving the pump below. Water splashed into the trough until it flowed over the sides and his uncle came and disconnected it. Dirk had been told the water trough was strictly out of bounds, but he was drawn to it. With his fingers touching its warm rough edge, he looked down into the clear water. Golden ripples of sunlight chased each other there across the red-brown bottom. Entranced, Dirk pulled himself up and stepped into the cool water—gently, carefully, barely disturbing the patterns of sunlight. The sun was warm on his neck as he looked down at his own rippling shadow. He took a step forward, his soles caressing the rough texture, and he pretended he was a castaway, stalking fish along a Caribbean shore.

Suddenly he was upside down under water, held there, forced there. In panic he opened his mouth to scream but the water rushed in, choking him. Then just as suddenly he was out in the cold air again. He found himself lying on the ground, water in his eyes, blinded by the sun. Terrified, wet, he coughed and retched and cried. And he heard his Uncle Roel shouting, “I told you to stay away from there!” And then his uncle was gone.

He avoided his uncle after that. In a few days, the pain in his arm and his leg, where his uncle had seized him, went away. He never said anything to Liesbet.

Some days Dirk’s father worked with Uncle Roel, but many days he was away, looking for a job. Sometimes he found a few days’ work. Late one hot afternoon, Dirk heard his mother and Aunt Jannie in the big kitchen, wondering why his father wasn’t home yet. Dirk put down the playing cards and wandered outside. The road was empty. Dirk sat under a tree and tugged idly at stalks of grass. Liesbet joined him for a while but

Dirk couldn't interest himself in her stories. She left again. And then, finally, a long way down the road, there he was, walking. Dirk jumped up and ran all the way, then stopped and looked. His father's clothes were completely wet.

“Dad! What happened? Did you fall in a lake?”

His father laughed. “You've never seen sweat like this, have you? It sure gets hot here, doesn't it?” He had been walking a long time. There had been no rides.

A few days later, at breakfast, his father asked Uncle Roel if it was a good day to borrow the truck. The crate containing their household goods had arrived at the train station. “Want to come, Dirk?”

He would remember forever that drive into Brockville. His father so confident, turning the big steering wheel, pushing in the complicated foot pedals, changing the position of the long handled gearshift. Dirk laughed when his father started singing along with the radio, the words incomprehensible. Grinning, his father explained the words and spoke them slowly, and then Dirk joined in too. “Standing on the corner, watching all the girls, watching all the girls, watching all the girls GO BY!”

Of all the long easy days of that summer, the haying time was the best. Dirk's father stayed home to help Uncle Roel, and a couple of older boys came over from neighbouring farms. The grass had been mown and had dried in the never-ending sun. Dirk and Liesbet were allowed to ride to the field in the wagon. They stood behind the driver and watched the horses, their rich chestnut rumps heaving with each step, the powerful muscles gathering and straining whenever the wagon had to be pulled up an incline. Dirk wished he too could hold the long leather reins in his hands.

In the field, the light glinted off the tynes of the swinging pitchforks, and the hay piled higher and higher. When the wagon was full, Dirk and Liesbet walked with long strides to keep up with the men, and followed them back to the barn. There, a tall slender conveyor slanted up almost to the roof. Uncle Roel had borrowed a tractor. Its motor noise filled the air, and a long wide belt ran endlessly from the side of the tractor to the bottom of the conveyor, and back. The pitchforks swung again, and the hay rode up and up to the open door high in the barn wall. The smell of hot oil mingled with hay scent.

That night, Dirk lay awake for a long time, his mind spinning with the images of the day.

Then it was September, and almost time for school. His mother unpacked some good clothes he had not worn all summer. Dirk had never gone to school before, but he knew about it. Back in Holland, he had envied the kids on his street when they went off in the morning, leaving him with nothing to do. Now it was Liesbet who would have to stay home alone.

And so one morning, Dirk rode again in the truck with his father, up the road a mile, to a one-room clapboard building at the edge of the village. Inside, he stared at the long blackboards, the bright windows down both sides, and the rows of dark desks bolted to the floor. Overwhelmed by the piercing energy of young voices, Dirk hardly noticed his father talking to the teacher. His father led him to a desk in the middle of the first row, beside a window. "This is your seat, Dirk. This row is for the first grade kids like you. See? There's a row for each grade." Then his father disappeared, with a last smile, through the door at the back.

Dirk sat at his strange new desk. He looked timidly around, and it came to him gradually that in all the happy sound overflowing the room, in all that cacophony of anticipation and laughter and excitement, he could not understand one single word.

The teacher clapped her hands and the noise stopped. She said something, and started calling sounds to which each time a different child would answer something. Suddenly, the litany stopped. The teacher looked round, fastened her eyes on Dirk, and repeated the last sound. Dirk realized the sound was his own name, spoken strangely. He did not know what to do. His face became hot and the skin under his clothes prickled, but there was nowhere to go. Everyone was looking at him, some laughing, others just curious. Then the teacher said something else, and called another name and the ritual passed him by. His hot skin became cold and damp. The boy beside him whispered something to him. Dirk looked, at a loss. The boy spoke to the girl behind him and they snickered. Dirk turned to the front to escape.

He thought of his mother, home doing housework with Aunt Jannie, or looking after his baby sister. He thought of Liesbet and wondered where she was now. He saw again his father disappearing through the door. And slowly, quietly, Dirk started to cry, and once he began, he couldn't stop.

Soon, he had the attention of the whole room. The teacher's solicitations brought only more sobs. The teacher spoke to an older girl on the other side of the room. The girl spoke to Dirk, miraculously in Dutch, but she was impatient and unfriendly. She said, "The teacher wants to know what you want. What do you want?"

"I want my Mom, I want to go home."

And somehow, he was let go. Somehow, a moment later, he was outside. The schoolroom door was closed behind him. Before him lay the road home, and freedom. The sun shone warm on his cheeks, the tears now dry. Over his head, birds sang from the trees.

Dirk started to walk. Halfway home, the white farmhouse came into view and his steps picked up. Then, in the distance, he saw the familiar blue pickup truck coming out of the driveway, and turning towards him. Maybe his father was going into Brockville again. He hoped his father would let him come too.

But it wasn't his father. The truck slowed and rolled to a stop, and Uncle Roel's eyes scowled at him. "Why aren't you in school?"

Dirk's insides turned cold. "The teacher, she..." He choked and had to start again. "The teacher said I could go home."

"Oh no, you don't!" In an instant, Uncle Roel was out of the truck and had him. A hard hand imprisoned his arm. Pulling him almost off his feet, his uncle dragged him round to the other side of the truck. In one motion, Uncle Roel opened the passenger door and threw Dirk up and in. The door slammed.

Uncle Roel gunned the motor all the way back to the school, and braked in a cloud of dust. Gripping Dirk like a vise, his uncle burst into the schoolroom. His angry words rang in the air, and then the door banged shut behind him.

In the shocked silence of the classroom, every eye stared at Dirk for a long, long time. Finally, he took a step, and then another. As the eyes followed him, he reached his desk, and slowly sat down.