

Chapter 1. June 2-3, 1930

Thunderstorm and Midnight Birth

Vroo-o-o-o-m! . . . Cra-a-a-c-k!

Accompanied by a long, thick, jagged streak of lightning, the loud clap of thunder shook the barn frame, causing its doors to rattle. The petite, dark-blond, 26-year-old woman, on a low stool next to a feline, nearly upset her milk pail.

The young woman, Susie Kroontje, with her husband, Wilbur, was doing the daily, late-afternoon milking of the dozen cows which their farm boasted. She hadn't anticipated the swift rise of the afternoon storm with its loud and multiple thunders. After all, this was June 2, nearly summer.

Neither had the unborn baby within her expected the storm. The baby gave a sharp kick, making the woman grab her stomach, again nearly upsetting the milk pail. Her husband looked up in alarm.

"Are things okay there, Susie?" he questioned in his mild Dutch voice. Wilbur had been born and raised in the Netherlands and still spoke Dutch with Susie and close family. Susie, on the other hand, had been born in America and was fairly gifted in the American language.

"Ach, Wilbur, I think so. That clap of thunder caused this baby some alarm. It kicked . . . and for a minute there, it hurt, too. But it's over, I think . . ."

Just then another pain gripped her lower back, increasing in intensity as it built towards the front. The wife's face, normally rosy-cheeked, blanched as she gave a muted gasp. The husband again looked quickly at her, then questioned, "Do you think it is time, Susie? Has this storm started things?"

"I . . . I think . . . Maybe it will calm down if there is no more lightning, yes? Let me just sit for a minute."

"Okay, we'll wait. But no more milking, right? Try to relax."

The woman tried one more time to continue milking but found her fingers wouldn't work right. She moved the milk pail to a safe spot and sat on a hay bale, leaning against another bale to relax.

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Although it made no sense — the rain and wind would soon undo it, anyway — the woman automatically straightened her long hair, which had escaped the bun into which it was pulled. She relaxed against the hay bales until another spasm of pain began to build, causing her to grit her teeth.

"Wilbur, I will run to the house and lie down, okay?"

"No, wait, Susie. I don't want you out in that storm alone. I have only two cows left to milk, then I will go in with you. If pains continue, I will drive to get the doctor."

"But, Wilbur, what shall we do with Willie? We can't leave him alone."

Wilbur's smile was tender as he glanced towards the calf pen where his two-year-old son was asleep. He had chosen the name of his first son, "Wiebe Jan," after his own father, who still lived in the Netherlands. "Wiebe" was "William" in English, although he was usually called "Willie."

But, uh, why was Willie in a calf pen?

The parents never dared to leave little Willie alone in the house while they milked cows. They were happy they had this clean calf pen where he could safely play near them. Usually he was content there. Today he had fallen asleep.

"Susie, since Wiebe is sleeping, he won't be upset. Even if he awakens, he can't get out — and you know he wakes up slowly. I will be in the house only a few minutes, then I will take him with me. The neighbors have already agreed to take care of him.

“But I do *not* want you running through that storm alone, Susie. Wait five minutes and I can run with you so you can get to the house safely.”

* * *

As she waited, Susie watched Wilbur work. She loved him so much! Her mind wandered back to their first meeting.

Susie had been to the fairgrounds in Rock Rapids with her parents, checking prizes they had won on produce. She had met Wilbur as he also looked over produce entries. Both of them had entered cabbages and tomatoes, so were in competition for prizes.

For Wilbur, it was instant attraction. He latched onto Susie and her family the rest of the evening. That led to courtship.

Another contraction, however, reminded Susie that courtship had long ago become marriage and she was soon to have her second child. She watched Wilbur hurry . . .

Yet five minutes became fifteen minutes before the last cow was safely milked and the milk put away. Wilbur blew out the barn kerosene lanterns and hung them on hooks. Chores were finished.

Another crack of thunder caused the last kerosene lantern to flicker dangerously despite its round glass protection.

Another contraction also gripped the woman. The message was clear: this was not a false alarm. The wild thunder storm may have started things . . . but started they certainly were.

She would need the doctor, today.

* * *

Wilbur Kroontje and Susie Tilstra had been married just three years and four months earlier on February 16, 1927. They had rented farmland eight miles northeast of Rock Rapids, Iowa — the first of their three rental farms — where they would live for roughly ten years. The farm was a typical quarter section, one-fourth of a square mile, adequate for a beginning farm.

1930 was the beginning of the Great Depression . . . but the industrious couple was intent on making a prosperous farm, working hard to build a herd of cows — to sell cream from milk as well as supply their own family needs.

The farm house was a typical farm house, if there is such a thing . . . although a very small home, just for a beginning family.

It had no basement, just a small first floor and a still smaller attic. Outside the house, there was a crude stairway going down to a small cellar dug under the house.

Other than two porches, one enclosed and the other open, the main floor had only a moderate kitchen, a small dining room, and an even smaller bedroom. The upstairs attic room was a single room, later to be divided into two narrow halves, a girls' bedroom and a boys' bedroom.

Like most farm homes in 1930, the house had no indoor toilets, no plumbing, no electricity, and no telephones.

Because there were *no indoor toilets*, they used an old outhouse which in summer swarmed with flies. When in haste, they used a "chamber pot" — the fancy word for a pail with a lid.

Because they had *no plumbing*, water had to be carried in five-gallon pails from the windmill pump down the hill from the barn. Water for dishes or laundry was rain water; it was drained through a spout from the roof, through a charcoal filter, and into a cistern. They carried it in pails to wherever they needed it.

Because they had *no electricity*, they used gas or kerosene lamps. A Sears-Roebuck gas lamp, with an attractive white shade, hung from the ceiling in the kitchen. Kerosene lamps were to carry around the house, putting light wherever needed. These had to be closely watched when a storm caused the house to vibrate.

Because they had *no telephone*, there was only one way to contact a doctor: ride to town and get him.

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The storm had not yet lessened. Wilbur left the last lantern hanging so it would not be dark if Wiebe awoke before he got back.

Now he took over the safety concerns of his wife. He shielded her from wind and rain as they sloshed through growing puddles from barn to house. They had to skirt tree branches which had blown down.

Once in the house porch, Wilbur gave his wife a quick peck on the cheek and asked, "Can you get out of those clothes into something dry?" When Susie headed for their bedroom, he stripped off his own wet clothing, changing into dry clothes hanging on a hook.

Zippering his dry jacket, Wilbur headed for the bedroom. Willie's crib was just inside the door. Susie handed him Willie's coat, shoes, and other clothes. They didn't own any suitcases.

Pausing as another contraction hit, Susie found her husband silently taking the boy's clothes into a box on the bed. Within minutes, he had left for the doctor.

* * *

In the early 1900's, babies in the Midwest were not born in the hospital. Only the wealthy would think of such a thing. Babies were born at home. Some poor families could not even afford a doctor. A midwife — a neighboring lady who knew what she was doing — would assist in labor. But most people were choosing doctors, and Susie felt fortunate.

Susie hated to wait for the doctor by herself, fearful of what could happen if the baby came before the doctor arrived. Since labor had just begun, she didn't think anything would happen that quickly. She *would* wait. She *must* wait.

To pass the time, she found things to do between contractions.

She made sure her already clean house was 100% spotless.

She checked the stew on the back center of the corn cob stove. Her husband would have supper warm when he returned.

She set out a large pan with water on the stove burner directly above the hot corn cobs, to be hot and ready if the doctor required it.

She laid a little kimono atop a baby's crocheted blanket in the baby crib which Willie had used two years earlier. Now the new baby would have that crib.

But what a relief when she heard the sound of the Model T Ford returning! What a relief when the door opened, wind nearly blowing in the doctor . . . who struggled to shut the door while Wilbur brought the Model T out of the thunderstorm to the garage.

What a relief also to find that while neighbors were taking care of Willie, the neighbor's wife had come along to assist the doctor as a midwife. From then on, all Susie had to do was crawl into bed. Doctor and midwife took over.

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The storm continued to howl. Lightning continued to zigzag, rain to pelt the windows, and thunder to cause vibrations of the buildings.

The contractions also never let up. It approached midnight as the mother gave birth.

Midnight! The father, pacing outside the bedroom, heard the first wail of the newborn baby. Instantly, he glanced at the clock. *Exactly* midnight: not one second earlier or later.

But if the baby was born at *exactly* midnight, on which day was it born? Was it born on June 2 or on June 3? The father scratched his head in indecision. He decided to leave that up to Susie.

Susie smiled a tired smile when asked to choose the day.

“June 3,” she whispered. “Our baby was born on June 3. Now tell me: is it a boy or a girl?”

Leaning over to check, a broad smile crossed Wilbur’s face. The baby was a girl, a tiny, precious, six pound girl. The farmer’s big hands stroked the baby’s almost invisible blond wisps of hair. Looking to his wife, he asked, “Susie, what shall we name her?”

The answer came quickly.

“Katherine. Katherine Kroontje. After my mother, Kate Tilstra. Is this not a pretty name?”

The name sounded perfect to Wilbur. Willie had been named by him after his father. This child was named by Susie after her mother. The father was elated that the baby was healthy and well.

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Looking at the baby’s tiny size, he wondered if she would fit inside his new shoebox. Going to the porch, he found the box, picked up a soft flannel blanket to line it, and gently placed the baby inside.

The shoebox was a perfect fit. It became Katherine’s first tiny crib.

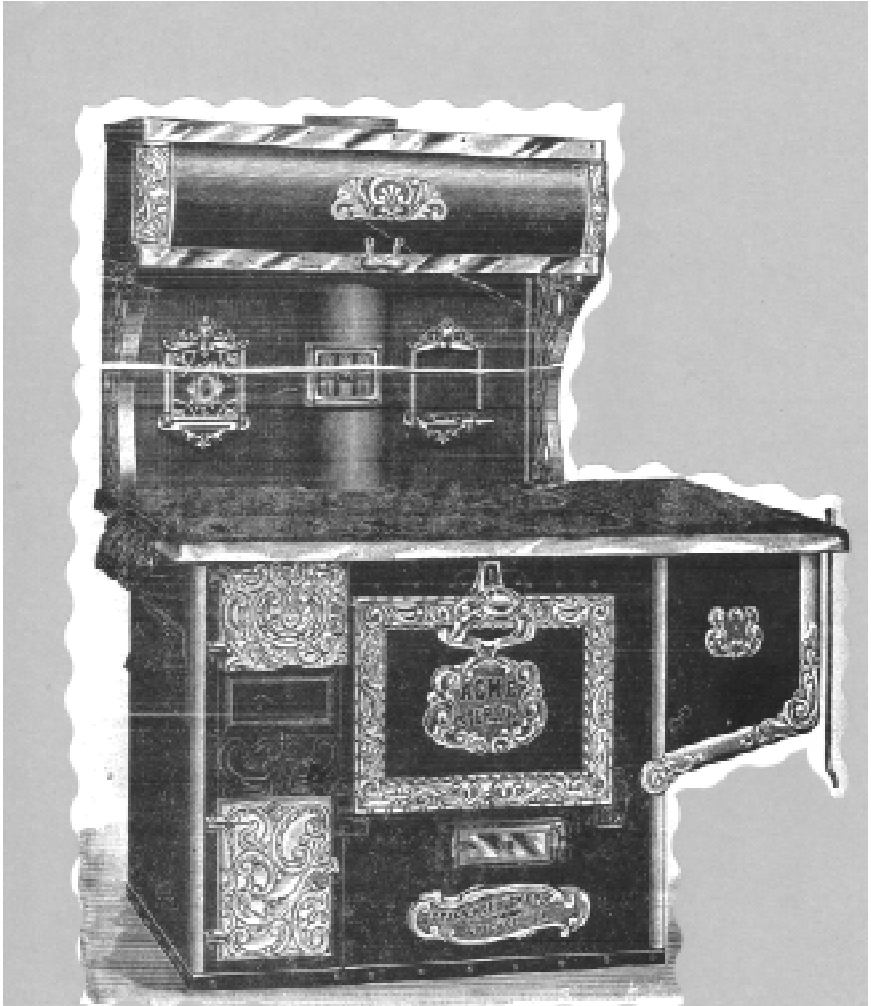
Now the doctor had to be taken care of. The doctor’s usual fee was \$25 but he was satisfied to receive that value in farm produce, too.

Leaving to bring the doctor home, Wilbur paused in the doorway to watch the baby begin her first feeding. It always seemed like a miracle how a baby instinctively rooted to find its mother’s milk.

All was well with Wilbur’s world and he was thankful. He might be only a farmer, struggling to make a success of his first farm. It might be thundering outside . . . but he was a rich man.

He had a wonderful wife, a fine son . . . and an adorable daughter. What more could a man want?

“Give us this day our daily bread . . .”



This stove from the SEARS' catalogue was similar to the stove of the Kroontjes. Two main differences: the Kroontjes' stove had an open shelf on the top, no door in front of it as this one has. And the Kroontjes color was not black but ivory.