Saying What Can't Be Said: Modifying Love

When Sven Johnson, his wife and two children, left their native Norway, they spent the next eight weeks crossing the choleric Atlantic in a sailboat. Impossible to imagine.

A brother lived here in this new land, 100 miles from a place called Omaha, where that brother promised to meet Sven and his family, and did, although a couple days later than he'd said. If the Johnsons worried for a couple of homeless days, Sven doesn't mention it in his pioneer memoir.

But the Johnsons weren't as poor as some who ventured out west of the Missouri River back then; they left Omaha with that brother, with two yoke of oxen, a team of horses, and his brother's load of lumber.

What they found on the open plains was a muddy little dugout they shared with Sven's brother and his family until Sven could file a claim and dig a hole in the ground he and his family could call home. All of this, Sven explains in a monotone, as if it was no big deal.

"We had plenty of clothing, a good lot of linens and homespun materials; but these and ten dollars in money were all we possessed," he says with an economy of words, so as not to beg attention or sympathy, simply to let people who weren't there know what it was like. Very controlled, as if once his mother had told him it was unbecoming to go on and on about yourself.

To file his land, Sven walked one hundred miles back again to Omaha. Just to get there and back, he worked for homesteaders to eat and live; and here and there make a few cents so that he could lug groceries all the way back to that dugout that was now, officially, his.

"There were no bridges across rivers or creeks and we were compelled to swim," he says in that same flat voice. And there was the time he and his brother-in-law had to cross a swollen stream. "I told him to be calm," he wrote years later; "we would come to no harm." Sven says he took what they were carrying, along with his clothes, and swam across; but he claims he was always a good swimmer.

He went back for his brother-in-law, "a very large man," he says, and swam once again to the other side, that "very large man" on his back.

Nothing to write home about. Just happened. You know. That's the way it was.

One year later, he hauled logs home from the river, logs for his own house. "Soon we had a comfortable house erected." That's simply the way it went. No drama, just good hard work. Soon they had a frame house, "not hewn by hand, but made from real lumber."

And then this at the end. "The old 'homestead' is still our home, but the dear, faithful, loving mother who so bravely bore all the hardships of early days was called to her rich reward January 28, 1912."
For the woman he loved through all those pioneer years, Sven Johnson stacks adjectives up front of a whole descriptive clause because for once a plain old noun like *wife* didn’t carry enough meaning. The woman beside him all those years gets a whole line of adjectives because, my word, he loved her, his "dear, faithful, loving" wife, the mother of his children.

Nowhere else in his memoir can you point to one extra word. Nary a comma to separate coordinating modifiers.

Only for her. Sven Johnson didn't want to pile it on, but he couldn’t keep a lid on his love. He had to embellish, to lay it on, because people should have known the great love of his life.

Those few adjectives make one glorious valentine.