

## DUST

### THE FARM

Mother had been born with a serious heart problem, however with stubborn persistence, and strict adherence to Dr. Ryan's recommendation of, "Always take a rest after each meal for at least thirty minutes to a hour" she was able to do just about anything she wanted to and everything she needed to. However, after I was born in January of 1939, when she was twenty three, it seemed as if her strength would never return. Dad had even hired Miss Mary Tolman to help with the house work and the extra work necessary to care for me, but the lighter work and increased rest seemed to be of little avail.

Dr. Ryan searched desperately through all the medical books available at the time hoping to find the cause and a cure, but could find nothing in all the medical books about heart conditions that would cause such increasing amounts of swelling and pain to her hands and feet, so he began to look for another cause that might not be related to her serious heart condition, because in spite of the symptoms, Mother's heart didn't seem to be worsening. Adding to Dr. Ryan's frustration of searching for a cause and cure was the fact that Mother had a high tolerance for pain and would seldom complain to the doctor. But Dad's increasing alarm and request for help spurred Dr. Ryan to remain persistent in his search.

One day Dr. Ryan left his car at the service station to be serviced where Dad worked with these instructions, "When Frank brings my car over to the office, tell him to come up and see me, because I need to talk with him right away."

Dad climbed the long narrow stairway that went up to Dr. Ryan's office, which was over Mr. Norris' Thomas Drug Store in the center of town. At the top of the stairway he stepped into the sparse and dimly lit office with extreme apprehension as to what he was about to hear.

"Hello Frank" Dr. Ryan said. "Come over and sit down. I need to talk with you about Marvell."

What's wrong?

I've been over to the University Medical Hospital and I think they may have helped me to diagnose Marvell's condition.

Is it her heart?

Now Frank, she's going to have that heart condition for as long as she lives, but she has already learned how to cope with that as well as anyone can.

Then what's causing all this pain and swelling?

It's a condition commonly referred to as, "crippling authorities" probably triggered by carrying that baby.

## DUST

Doc, I have my house here in town paid for, I'll sell it and take her anywhere you say to get a cure.

Slow down Frank, medical science doesn't have a cure for this condition anywhere in the world.

You mean it will only worsen until she's hopelessly crippled?

I didn't say that, in fact I think Marvell may be that "one in a thousand" who will persevere until this disease has ran its course, if you're willing to sell your house to try.

I have already told you I would sell my house and try anything you suggest.

All right. Sell the house and see if you can rent a farm. Then take all of the money you receive from the house sale and buy as many milk cows as your money and credit will buy and have Marvell walk after those milk cows on foot and do all of the milking by hand.

There is no other way?

Oh ... I could tell her to walk five mile a day and squeeze a rubber ball for two hours each day, but she wouldn't do that because one of those boys would want something and she would stop her therapy to take care of them while the disease continues to run its course.

How will milking cows help?

Marvell won't walk around town for two hours a day squeezing a rubber ball, but I know her, if she has a herd of cows out in the cow lot bawling to be milked she'll find the time to do that. If she can stand the pain for three to five years the disease will have ran its course and her joints won't freeze up because of the exercise, then she should be all right.

OK. Doc, I'll do it.

Frank, understand this. No matter if it takes all day for her to walk after those cows and milk them by hand, you can't help her, or it won't do a bit of good. That will be the hard part for you, but if you give in to help her when she cries, or if she quits, the disease will take control and once the joints freeze up it can never be reversed. You will have to carry the buckets full of milk and do all of the cranking of the cream separator for her, because her heart can't stand the strain of that much weight while walking or the constant turning of a separator handle for an hour or more.

Dad made a deal with Uncles Sam and Brian Hooper to rent the old Engle farm West of town, then he sold our house in town to buy twenty eight head of milk cows.

"Wake up!" R.E. said, as he pulled the covers off of me and threw them in the floor. I reached out and pulled the blanket back. (Only the big people can do that to me this early in the morning.)

## DUST

"Gary!" Mother said, "Get up! This is moving day."

Crawling out of bed I walked to the living room door to see that Dad and his cousin Ab [Green Hooper's son, Absalom] were throwing a lot of boxes on the floor. (That's going to upset Mother. She even made them take the skunk hides off of the back porch.) But this moving day may be fun after all, there's always a lot of confusion when Dad and Ab get together. They even look a lot alike, thin and sun tanned, except Ab had his elbow broken when a horse threw him as a child, so now he has a stiff arm that is held in a L-shape, it's real neat though. It's as hard and stiff as a two-by-four, because of that he has used his wrist so much that he can touch his arm with the end of his fingers. Sometimes he will hold his stiff arm out for me to swing on, "just to see if I can straighten it out for him", then he will smile his big toothy smile and say, "Aha, Gary you are too little in the britches. You're going to have to eat more beans" in a very deep and mellow voice that commands attention when he speaks. (He always teases me just to hear me yell. So I do as loud as I can. The louder I yell the longer he will play with me, at least until Mother makes us stop. She doesn't like for us to do anything that's fun.)

Why is Dad and Ab loading our furniture into the pickup truck?

"Gary, I told you, we're moving to the farm." R.E said, running back into our bedroom for another box of things.

"Why are we moving to the farm?" I ask, running after him.

For cows, horses, pigs, and chickens. That's what for! And if you want anything loaded you better get it.

I ran over to retrieve my rubber doll and ball out from under the bed. With them in hand I ran out to the pickup shouting at Ab.

Can I ride with you?

OK, but you better hurry up and get your short britches in here because we are about ready to put this show on the road.

R.E. jumped up onto the pickup seat pushing me to the center.

Ab! R.E. is going to ride next to the window and I was here first!

Now if you boys are going to fight one of you will have to ride out on the front fender.

"OK!" R.E. said, opening the door.

"No!" Ab shouted, grabbing him by the suspenders pulling him back. "Now close the door and no more complaining."

## DUST

Off we went down the road to the farm. After a long six mile fight with R.E., Ab suddenly stopped the truck tumbling me off from the seat onto the floor boards. "Ab! Why did you do that?"

"We're here." he said, with a chuckle.

R.E. and Ab opened the doors stepping out only to disappear from view while I crawled over the floorboards rolling out across the running board onto the hardest ground I had ever seen.

Where's the grass?

"Gary, there isn't any grass." Ab said, from somewhere beyond the tall weeds surrounding me, which was all I could see. Jumping to my feet I shouted back at him, "I can't see anything, isn't there a house either?"

Gary, if you'll come out of those weeds you'll see that there IS a house.

Come out which way?

Silence.

Ab's face soon appeared over the top of a wall of weeds, reaching down he picked me up, slung me over his stiff arm, then began pushing my head through a forest of those things he called weeds. (Just plain skin scratching, bad tasting, foul smelling, eye burning, no account things to me.) After having swam through thirty yards of weeds I was ready to go home, but Ab wouldn't listen to my complaint. He just stood me on the ground in front of what he called a house.

Now Gary, what's your complaint?

I need to go to the bathroom.

"Wait until your mother gets here." he said. Walking off muttering something about knowing why Frank and Marvell had chose to ride in the other truck by themselves.

She's probably lost out there in those weeds!

No, she isn't lost, now don't you move. I'm going to back the pickup truck up to the door so we can unload.

You're not my boss Ab!

I am until your mother gets here then I'll be glad to give her the job. In fact. I will insist!

Turning around, I walked up the cellar door. From atop the cellar I could see the whole world, looking around I decided, this may not be such a bad place after all. There are no fences anywhere to be seen and even those weeds might come in handy. If I can't see them that means

## DUST

they can't see me either. When Mother takes her rest after lunch, I'm going to look this place over. Horses, cows, pigs, and chickens? I don't see any of them. I'll bet R.E. just told me that so I would get out of bed. He thinks he's smart because he's three years older and going to school next year.

"Gary." I turned around. It was Mother standing waist deep in weeds with a tassel of black hair at her side.

(R.E., he's probably already told her that I caused trouble all the way out here, but I'll bet he never told her that it was all his fault.)

"Well? How do you like the farm?" she ask.

I have to use the bathroom.

Quickly she showed a big smile.

(Now why does everyone think it's funny when I say that?)

There isn't a bathroom.

What? But I have got to go! Take me home!

Well, you will just have to go out in those weeds for now.

Climbing down from the cellar top I walked a little way into the weeds asking myself, "What is this place? A weed farm?!"

Just then I realized that there was something else in the weed farm bathroom with me, looking closer, I could see that it was a half grown kitten with gray stripes, crouching in the weeds frightened and looking back at me, it had one small strange looking yellow eye. (I've never had a kitten before.) Forgetting all about why I was in the weed patch I soon had the frightened kitten in my hands or did that wildcat have me?

Mother! I shouted as the kitten dug her claws into my stubby arm.

Running to Mother with the kitten and me holding tight onto each other. Mother soon appeared to see what had caused me to shout at her.

"Oh ... where did you find the kitten?" she ask, as she reached down to pry the kitten loose from my arm. With her gentle touch and soft voice the kitten turned loose and crawled over into Mother's arms.

Looking back at me, she said, "Gary, you're all scratched up. We'll have to wash your arms."

Mother can I keep it? Can that be my kitten?

## DUST

She looked up at Dad who it seems have appeared from nowhere when I shouted for Mother.

I think a farm should have a good mouse catcher, don't you Daddy?

Dad looked at the pitiful weed patch orphan.

"It's OK with me. We'll see if the Coonhound lets it stay when he gets here." Looking at my arms, he said, "Marvell, you had better wash that boy's arms and put some alcohol, or iodine, on those scratches."

"Alcohol will burn him alive!" she protested.

"Not like infection." he said, walking back to the truck.

R.E. was jumping up and down, asking, "Mother what are we going to name the kitten?"

Walking back through the weeds toward the house with the frightened kitten in her arms, she stopped to look at me. "Gary, what do you think about naming her Hilda since she's a girl cat?!"

"A girl?!" Dad ask from the back of the truck. "Lord I didn't know that!"

"Yes, a girl!" Mother replied, "And you have already said it was OK for her to stay."

Did I say that?

Yes, you did! Now hush, the boys and I will take care of this problem.

As Dad went back to working he looked at Ab with a smile and said, "So will that Coonhound when he gets here." (After a few sharp hooks to the nose from Hilda's claws, and some whacks from Mother's kitchen broom, Bob allowed Hilda to stay for many years and to Dad's dismay, a more prolific house cat never lived.)

Mother and R.E. went into the big enclosed South porch that was just in front of the cellar door. She was telling him how they would leave Hilda there and bring some milk back for her on the next trip from town.

Walking on past the door, West to the corner of the house, I looked over a gentle slope and down to where there were two buildings Northwest of the house. (Maybe that one has a horse in it I thought walking down the gentle slope and looking in. But there was no horse there only more weeds. Just as I thought, R.E. lied to me about a horse.)

Dad whistled his loud whistle that always meant "Come here now!" so I started slowly back up the slope where Dad met me and picked me up.

What are you doing down here?

## DUST

Looking for the horse.

There's no horse down here.

R.E. told me there would be horses, cows, pigs, and chickens.

There will be, but not today.

Dad set me in the middle of the pickup seat between Mother and himself.

Where is Ab and R.E.?

"They drove the big truck back to town so they could bring another load of furniture." Mother replied.

But they were suppose to wait for me.

You wasn't here when they left, you had to wander off.

Well, it's R.E.'s fault. He told me there was a horse out there in those weeds.

Dad had his hand on the gearshift in the middle of the floorboard with his elbow in the center of my chest pressing me against the sharp springs in the back of the seat when we stopped at the gravel highway and Dad changed gears. I moved over close to Mother, but she pushed me back to the center of the seat. (Boy! She's as selfish about setting next to the window as R.E. is.)

After riding the long six miles back to town with an elbow in the center of my chest and a sharp spring in the middle of my back, I recognized the top of a familiar light pole which stood at the corner of 6th Street that went up to our house, but we just drove on past the corner.

Dad, that was our corner!

I know, but your Mother and I thought you might like to go out to your Grandparents for the rest of today until all of this moving is done.

That was all right with me. I liked to go out to Pa and Ma's farm. [Enos and Lizzie Pike Hooper] Pa likes me too even though he never said much just kept his lips pulled down tight across his reddish suntanned face so he wouldn't lose his chewing tobacco. He would look at me with his big blue eyes, then he would spit his Mickey Twist tobacco juice into a Folgers coffee can and ask, "Do you want to empty my spit-can and put some fresh sand in it for me?"

I always liked to do that because you could hold that can upside down for a long time then scoop up some clean sand returning it to the side of his wide armed rocking chair with the worn thin rockers. He would always say, "Thank you." Sometimes he would give me a nickel or a dime.

## DUST

R.E. wouldn't work for money like that he's just too fussy. He would rather help Ma wash dishes, now that was work! And she didn't pay much either.

On Saturday night Pa would set close to his big battery powered radio with his elbows on his knees and the radio turned down real low. He said it had a better sound quality turned down low like that, but Ma said it was because she didn't want to hear his racket while she was reading. Whichever the case, he would close his eyes and listen quietly to the Grand Ole Opry from the W.K.Y. radio station while I just stood there looking at him rubbing my new coin.

Pa always wore khaki pants and shirts with the sleeves rolled up above his elbows, black suspenders, and kangaroo hide shoes. On Sunday he would roll down his sleeves, then put on a black neck tie and belt with his suspenders, then he would say that he was "all dressed up."

Ma on the other hand was always either in the kitchen or outside with her chickens. Often I would see her through the double windows that were next to Pa's rocking chair on the North side of the dining room.

Ma never went outside without putting her sunbonnet on over her tightly braided and bunned light brown hair and tie the chin strap tight about her soft round face. Sometimes she would look out over her glasses with tender blue eyes, and say, "I'm going to tend my chores now. Do you want to go with me?"

I would just to hold the bucket while she opened the yard gate. Just Ma and me. Her in her big high heeled black work shoes, cotton stockings, and a house dress carefully sewn together by hand from cotton "chicken feed print" and wearing the widest wedding ring you have ever seen.

Once I ask her, "Ma do you like your chickens?"

Without as much as a turn of her bonnet she softly said, "Well, of course I like my chickens."

Then why do you eat them?

Her bonnet turned quickly with a surprised look on her face, then with a wide smile, she replied, "That's why I like them."

Me too.

Bump, the pickup turned a corner and out through the windshield I could see the tops of Mulberry trees. We were there! Pa and Ma's. I struggled to stand up but with an elbow in the middle of my chest and a left arm on my shoulder, it was no use. I'd just have to wait. When Dad pushed down on the mechanical brakes the pickup came to a slow squeaking stop.

Opening the doors, Dad and Mother stepped out. Pa, Ma, and Uncles J.E. and Jake came out of the back door of the house to see who had driven into the driveway.



## DUST

J.E. turned around and ran back into the house. (Probably to hide his toys again. It wasn't my fault he was standing in front of his B.B. gun when I pulled the trigger. Ma told him he shouldn't have loaded that thing and handed it to me if he didn't want to be shot. J.E. and Dad didn't look a lot like brothers with J.E. being big and heavy, while Dad is as thin and poor as an Indian's horse, although their blue eyes and easy smile is the same. Great Uncle Jake (Ma's younger brother) and Dad are built more alike. Uncle Jake is as long and slender as a spring snake.)

Dad and Mother walked over to talk with Pa and Ma while pointing at me. I slid off from the pickup seat onto the ground and began walking around the farm then I laid my rubber doll down on the concrete well cap.

"Frank!" Mother's voice pierced the clear morning sky. "He's climbing the windmill tower!"

Everyone came running to the windmill to see how high I could climb.

(Mother is so thrilled, she has turned pale, almost too faint with excitement. Dad is waving his arms with encouragement, and his deep blue eyes riveted on me with sheer wonder. Ma is holding her hands together looking up at me with admiration, while Pa stands astonished looking up while frozen like a statue, mouth open, and a plug of tobacco on the ground at his feet. Uncle Jake is walking in a circle, saying, "Oh! My Lord. Oh! My Lord. What next?" I don't know what he is doing. Maybe it's some kind of rain prayer. I hope not, doesn't he know lightening could hit a person up here? Uncle J.E. is running around screaming at the top of his voice. He's probably jealous, because I am getting all of the attention. I'll show them I can climb all the way.)

When I got up to the walk board, I couldn't go any farther, so I stopped to look around.

Look! I can see the houses in town.

"That's good Gary." Dad said in a very calm reassuring voice. "Now come down and tell Pa how pretty it is up there."

"OK" (Pa is really going to like hearing that you can see the houses in town from his farm, I thought, while I was climbing down from the top of the windmill tower).

Dad picked me off of the ladder about six foot from the ground and handed me to Mother. As she walked back to the pickup, I looked over her shoulder. Dad and Pa was talking. Pa was looking at the ground and slowly shaking his head. When they reached the pickup, Dad opened the door and slid under the steering wheel. Then he started the pickup and drove us away.

Everyone was standing behind the pickup in a row while I stood on the seat holding onto the back and pressing my nose to the yellowed glass.

(They must have been glad to see me.) Everyone was waving and smiling as we turn the corner between the chicken house and the orchard. Then they all disappeared in a cloud of dust.

## DUST

Riding down the road again, I looked at Mother, with her black hair shining in the sunlight, the color had returned to her face, in fact, it was real red, then I saw her dark eyes were shooting daggers at me.

The only reason you are in this world is because I didn't want R.E. to be raised alone and grow up to be a spoiled brat.

I quickly turned to look out the back window again, pressing my eye up against a bubble in the glass, certain that I didn't want to challenge that look.

(Well it didn't work, I thought. R.E. is still a spoiled brat, but I wonder who got her upset? People shouldn't do that. She has a bad heart, you know.)

I looked at Dad. He was having a good time, in fact he was laughing with his mouth closed, his face was turning purple and he was snorting through his nose the way he does a lot and the pickup was wobbling all over the road.

(Boy! Dad sure knows where to take a weed farm boy so he can have a good time.)

Back in town I climbed down out of the pickup and walked into the half empty house.

Hi Ab!

He turned to look at me with surprise, then ask, "I thought you was going to stay with your Grandparents today?"

No, we just went out there to have some fun, but I came back to help you move our furniture out to that weed farm.

I'm very sorry to hear that.

(Sometimes Ab can say the strangest things.) I thought, as I looked at the big empty room. Then I ran out and crawled up onto the seat of the big truck. Soon Ab appeared at the truck door with his big smile, dragged me off front he seat, he carried me over to the pickup where Mother and Dad were waiting for me. Then Ab and R.E. drove off in the big truck while we followed in the pickup.

That's how I helped Ab move my family to the weed farm.