

## DUST

### WEEKENDS

Saturday was the special day of the week when R.E. and I waited impatiently for late afternoon when we could go to town and spend our wages for the week on a drugstore soda and a picture show. Twenty five cents for helping with the chores, skinning the possum and skunk hides, or whatever Dad could think of to keep R.E. out of trouble.

We were setting inside our secret cave in the canyon North of the house, R.E. was eating a small green apple, slicing it up with his pocket knife.

R.E. is that a good apple?

"Yes, do you want some?" Offering me a slice.

No. Is that the same knife you skinned those skunks with last night?

R.E. blew pieces of green apple all over the inside of our cave, then started gagging trying to expel the rest of it.

Gary, you knew that before you allowed me to eat most of that darned green apple!

So, I'm not your Mama. It isn't my fault if you gag yourself to death.

You could have said something!

I did.

Dad stepped out the door of the house whistling his loud ("Come here!" whistle) we could hear for at least a quarter of a mile. R.E. and I ran to the house to see what he wanted.

You boys take your bath and put clean clothes on so we can go.

Are we going to town this early?

Yes, you boys need a haircut so you can go to church tomorrow so I will take you early.

What about the chores?

I'll come back to do your chores while your Mother does the Milking.

Do we have to stay in town by ourselves?

No, Pa will be up at the croquet grounds so you can stay with him after you have your hair cut, no more questions, clean yourselves up so we can get this show on the road.

## DUST

R.E. and I went into the house to clean up for Saturday night in town.

I have your bath ready, now don't splash water all over my kitchen floor.

R.E. and I went over to where there was a blanket hanging over a wire tied across one corner of our big Dutch kitchen, pulled back the blanket, and went inside the makeshift bathroom where Mother had set for us two kitchen chairs on top of which was clean clothes, soap, washcloths, and towels.

Gary!

What?

The washcloth is to wash your neck and ears.

Yes, Mother.

Yes, Mother.

With soap!

"Yes, Mother." (R.E. always has that disgusted look on his face when she fusses at me about my ears. I really enjoy seeing him become upset.)

And wash your hair, you're going to have your hair cut!

R.E. has to wash his hair too.

Gary, you don't worry about R.E.'s hair.

(Sure I don't have to worry about his hair, it's so black no one knows how dirty it is. I'm the one that's cursed being born with blond-white hair.)

Mother had the tub about half full of warm water. After the bath with just a little water on the floor, I stepped out from behind the blanket all cleaned up and ready to go to town.

You wasn't in there long enough to be clean.

Three minutes of torture with a extra hard rubbing from a washcloth, I crawled up onto the back seat of the car.

(Everybody knows that a little bit of good clean dirt doesn't look as bad as great big red ears, and if R.E. looks back over the seat at me one more time, I'm going to punch him in the nose. He thinks he is so big because he's riding in the front seat with Dad. I would have beat him to the front seat if Mother hadn't been holding me back.)

## DUST

Dad pulled the car up to a stop at the curb in front of Mr. Vaughn's Barber Shop and Pool Hall where we went inside to have our hair cut.

Well Frank, it looks like you have a couple of shaggy ones for me today.

"I sure do Olen. Do you think you can do anything with all of that hair?" Uncle Olen was an older cousin we called Uncle. He cut hair at Mr. Vaughn's on Saturday, drove a school bus, and farmed during the week.

"Yes, I think I can do something with them. In fact, I will cut their hair just the way they want it." he said, setting the arm board across the barber chair arms.

Dad lifted me up setting me on the board.

Well Gary. How would you like your hair cut today?

Cut it black!

"Cut it black?" He ask with a smile.

Yes! You said you could cut it anyway I wanted it, so cut it black just like R.E.'s.

After a long time of cutting my hair, and everyone laughing, I was sure they all thought I must look funny with black hair but I didn't care. I would never have to wash it again.

Well Gary, there you are, that is as black as I can cut your hair.

He turned the chair around so I could see myself in the wall sized mirror. My hair was the most horrible sight I had ever seen, it was whiter than when he started. I was ruined for life.

What do you think?

Uncle Olen, I'll never trust you again as long as I live!

(Now I really am going to have to fix R.E., he has that silly grin on his face again.)

After Uncle Olen ruined my new haircut, R.E. and I walked up the street to the croquet grounds to play on the bleachers while Pa played his Saturday game of croquet. Soon it was time for the picture show to start. R.E. and I went over to the theater to watch the show. Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Abbott and Costello, or that new guy, John Wayne.

After the show Pa took us home with him for the night, then Uncle Jake or J.E. would take us to Church the next morning where Mother and Dad would pick us up again to take us home.

Pa, Gary wanted his hair cut black like mine.

## DUST

Pa laughed, rolling the window down so he could spit his tobacco juice outside.

R.E., I wouldn't have black hair like yours if you gave it to me!

(Now I really am going to have to go to Church tomorrow because I lied. I would have black hair like R.E.s, it's just like Mother's raven black hair, but I guess my hair is all right, everyone tells me I look just like Pa, and that makes me very proud, after all, he is the best man I know.)

Pa and Ma were real old, both of them were about fifty years old. Pa said, he was born before there even was a state of Oklahoma. (Boy! That's older than dirt.)

The next morning I went out to the barn where Pa was milking his cows and feeding the calves and horse.

Pa, why do you have those coon tails nailed up on the wall of your barn?

Stopping with a bucket of feed in his hand, he looked at the two coon tails for a long moment, then said, "Well son, I had so much fun chasing those two old chicken thieves, that when I caught them I took their tails and brought them home to nail up on my barn, that way, when they come after their tails, I can chase them again."

But Pa, you don't have a Coonhound anymore.

I guess when they come around here I'll have to call for you to come over and bring your Dad's old hound Bob.

(I waited for a long time, maybe two days, for Pa to call saying he needed me and Bob to come and help.)

Back in the house, I ran over to Ma's divan, turned a flip, standing on my head.

Gary! Don't stand on your head, that will turn your liver upside down.

I quickly jumped down thinking that must be very dangerous, it might even make me die.

(Forty years later, while driving down the road I had to pull over to the side and have a real good laugh. Standing on your head on your grandmother's divan will turn your liver upside down, in fact, it turns everything upside down.)

Late one Saturday night while walking back to the house down that long little trail, I noticed a fire on a hill not too far away from Pa's farm.

Ma, are they having Church tonight?

No. Why do you ask?

## DUST

There's a cross over on that hill.

Ma looked out, then closed the door turning around with a strange look on her face.

Gary. You stay in the house with Pa and me tonight, and don't go back out.

Why?

Never mind. You wouldn't understand.

Years later I ask Dad about the cross, he too looked at me very strange, then his only answer to my question was, "Son, you probably saw the last K.K.K. cross burning in Custer County."

I never ask again, even though I heard rumors about the cross burning that was to warn people who weren't K.K.K. that they were to stay away from the area because there was a K.K.K. meeting taking place.

Early one spring morning I went out to the brooder house to watch while Ma took care of her new baby chicks she had just received from the hatchery up town a few days earlier. When she opened the brooder house door, she said to me, "Quick! Bring me that garden hoe!"

I ran to the fence returning with the hoe. She took it running into the brooder house where she began to hit the floor real hard. I thought she was getting real violent to be killing a sick chick, then she reached in pulling out from under the brooder hood the body of a headless Bull snake which had several large lumps in its long slender body. Holding the snake by the tail, she gently smashed the body, one by one, the chicks came out. All but the first chick were still alive.

"For that many of them to still be alive he must have been grabbing them real quick." she said, with a very calm tone of voice.

Satisfied that she had done all she could she threw the snake outside where Pa's old squirrel dog barked at it a few times, then went over to sniff it, content that it was dead, he walked away.

Ma went back to caring for her chicks, singing to them softly in a calming tone as if nothing had happened, while I stood in awe at the hard and fearless, kind and tender, pioneer lady in front of a dusty land that is both harsh and sweet!

DUST