

## DUST

### PRAIRIE IN BLOSSOM

Early springtime, 1944. I was five years old and the prairie was just awakening from its long, bleak, winter slumber, putting on a refreshing new dress of green grass and a sweet bonnet of wild prairie blossoms with their perfume of fresh-clean.

Mother had the radio on constantly for the past few months because the dark clouds of war was hanging over all of Europe and the Pacific. With so many of our cousins, uncles, family, neighbors, and friends in the military, every moment was spent waiting for news, either good or bad, everyone, even I, was aware that the invasion (whatever that was) would be happening any day or hour. The British isles were sagging under the weight of men and machines of war. The Allies were prepared for a bloody offensive against the hated Nazis of the once beautiful and industrious Germany that is now in the oppressive grip of a resentful Austrian Corporal intent on revenge for the defeat of Germany by the Allied Armies a quarter of a century before.

Above the sound of the radio there came a faint putter of an engine from the distance that grew even louder until it was right over the house.

"What in the world is that?" Mother said, as she ran out the South door of the kitchen into the yard.

R.E. and I ran out the door behind her to see for ourselves.

Mother was standing by the cellar holding her right hand above her eyes to shade the sun, the South breeze gently blowing her dress hem and raven black hair.

"It's an airplane." R.E. shouted.

"Did it crash?" I ask as I ran up the cellar door to where I could see.

No, dummy, it landed.

Why?

Ask Mother.

Why?

Gary. I'm not sure, but I think it's Forrest Watson.

Who?

Forrest Watson, the president of the Flying Farmers.

What?

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Gary shut up. Mother is thinking.

Gary. Mr. Watson owns that airplane and I think he is here because of a friendly bet he and I made.

She turned to look back at the plane. "I didn't think he would take me up on that bet."

The airplane, a long way from the house, in ankle high wheat of the South field, the South breeze carried the sound of the engine revving up as the airplane slowly turned around and began coming back toward the house.

Is he going to fly again?

No, he would have to be going South into the wind in order to lift the plane for a takeoff.

Then why is he coming this way?

I think he's looking for an apple pie.

A what?

Never mind, don't say anything, he will tell us about it when he gets here.

The airplane stopped in the wheat field just South of the house, then the engine revved again real loud and the airplane turned around.

Is he going to take off now?

No, he's just turning around.

The engine stopped and a square faced man wearing a Panama hat, leather jacket with sheepskin collar, blue jeans, and western boots, opened the door and climbed out then walked through the field toward the house.

Marvell, do you have that apple pie baked?

"I'm not going to bake an apple pie." Mother replied, with a big smile.

Are you sure about that?

"Sure enough that I haven't baked an apple pie, but you're not sure or you wouldn't be here." They both laughed.

Dad came from up from the barn and ask, "Want a cup of coffee Forrest?"

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Mr. Watson thought for a moment, and replied, "Hold the coffee Frank, I'll drink it with apple pie."

They both laughed, then Mr. Watson looked at Mother and ask, "Ready?"

Might as well. Let's go!

Mr. Watson and Mother walked out into the field and climbed into the airplane.

Dad. Why did Mother bet Mr. Watson a homemade apple pie?

Dad was looking at the airplane with apprehension and slowly shaking his head.

Well? Why did she bet?

"Oh," he said, looking at me, "she told him he couldn't take her for a plane ride and make her say stop and take me down. Then he told her that he would take her for a ride, but if she said "Stop!" the ride would cost her a homemade apple pie."

Will she say stop?

"We're going to find out right now." Dad said. Then drew his lips into a thin line the way he always does when he is not sure about something.

The airplane engine grew ever louder until it whined without interruption, only then did the airplane move forward over the Wheat field with the tender young plants behind the airplane laying flat on the ground from the wash of the prop sucking spirals of air under the wings. The tail wheel came off the ground then the engine released from the sound of labor as the two front wheels slowly lifted and freed the plane from its bond to the earth.

The wings appeared to grow wider as the airplane climbed ever higher into the Oklahoma sky.

My body was tense, I was suddenly aware that I was breathing long deep breaths, my fists were clinched so tight that my knuckles were white, and a chill was spreading through my bones. Dad was motionless with deep blue eyes staring into an equally blue sky and I knew exactly what he was thinking. I too was ready for Mother to come back and bake that apple pie.

Back in the sky the nose of the airplane dropped and the challenge was on with a long slide down through the deep blue sky, then suddenly it came up into a loop and straightened out going into a roll.

"That should be enough for an apple pie." Dad said.

Climbing back into the sky the plane suddenly stalled then nosed over starting down again as it went into a pancake spin.

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Dad stomped the ground then walked in a small circle saying, "Right there. If I had one, I would have given him the whole damned apple farm!" Looking back at the dot in the sky as the airplane made another climb, he said, "Marvell you are going to break your fool neck just to keep from baking an apple pie!"

The airplane went into a steep straight dive. Dad's eyes widened, then just above the Cottonwood treetops it pulled up into a slow wide turn, rolled over onto its back for awhile, then straightened out and came in for a landing on the wheat field. Dad drew a long deep breath, blowing it out real hard through tight lips.

Peel the apples boys.

But I want to ride!

Gary, you are as crazy as your Mother.

"Can we?" R.E. ask.

Not like that son.

Mother and Mr. Watson walked back up to the house.

"Well?" Dad ask.

"No apple pie today!" Mr. Watson said.

No pie?

No, and that's the first apple pie I never got.

I want to ride.

Gary! Mr. Watson can't afford to give free joy rides to everyone who wants one.

I looked at the ground embarrassed that I had been so impertinent.

Frank if you and Marvell don't mind, I think I owe someone a decent ride today.

We don't mind but you don't know what you're asking for.

(Of course R.E. always has to ride next to the window.)

When are we going to fly?

We are flying.

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Untie me, I can't see!

"Gary!" R.E. said, poking me in the ribs with his elbow.

I poked him back just as hard. I said I can't see!

Be quiet! Mr. Watson is trying to drive.

I looked at Mr. Watson then at the funny steering wheel that was only half there.

"Just a minute Gary." Mr. Watson said.

He did something to the funny looking steering wheel, then reached over and loosed the strange looking suspenders that were holding me down in the seat, then holding onto me while I stood up in the seat where I could see.

"Now I'm going to have to hold onto you." R.E. said, with his older brother tone of voice.

No! I'm not going anywhere.

"It's all right." Mr. Watson said, "This is a nice calm day. We'll take a real smooth ride."

Now that I remember back on that wonderful day and think of all the things Mr. Watson showed me, I am still amazed at how beautiful the dusty plains can be when it's in early spring bloom.

Up there when the sky is a deep powder blue and dotted with clouds so white they are pure of the earthly bonds, from there a small boy can look to the horizon as far as the eye can see and fall in love with the dusty plain, a wonderful land. From up there you can look at the rolling hills that not long ago wore the color of winters dreary brown and gray, but is now dressed in nature's vest of tender green grass for the beast of the field to replenish the fat they lost to winter's harsh thin rations. A field where not long ago they stood facing a bone chilling cold of North wind, but now lay down. Filled with the grass of spring watching their increase of calves, colts, chicks, and a thousand other young that frolic in the spring time sun, not yet knowing the harshness of the dusty plain with its summer sun and lack of rain, but for now the land is spring green.

How could any man with a heart of flesh look on such beauty and not want to stay from year to year, just to see it all again?

There are those I am sure who pass by in winters brown and gray or in the summers dry, and wonder why stay on a land so hard and bleak. They just don't understand. But I know why our hearts and souls struggle so to return and stand on this harsh and dusty land. We've lives and loves, and memories in the dust.

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