

## DUST

### SHOTGUN

When Frank Hooper and Marvell Farrell were married in July 1935, he rented a small cabin house along with some river bottom ground for a commercial tomato operation, just above the South Canadian River, North of Thomas, Oklahoma.

Dad was in his preferred environment. A humid river bottom where he could raise the best tomatoes for the summer crop market and a bountiful garden for home canned vegetables an adequate supply for the winter months. Of course there was added value because of all those number one coon hides just outside the door, a cash winter crop that could be harvested as soon as the North wind turned the air to a cold winter blue so the pelt would hold tight to the long haired furs.

There was all the firewood anyone would ever use, all he had to do was chop it up, load the wagon, haul it home, and throw it through the door for Mother to use while she did the easy work of cooking and heating water to wash dishes, clothes, baby, floors, windows, blankets, curtains, and of course in her spare time she could build a fire in the heating stove while Dad labored over rolling a Prince Albert cigarette waiting for the raccoons to come down out of their din trees to forage for food so Dad and the hounds could chase them and harvest his winter crop.

Mother was not particularly thrilled with Dad's holdover lifestyle from his bachelor days on the river, owing to the fact that she had been raised near town and had lived there most of her life with people nearby, telephone, electricity, cars, brick streets, gas heating, cooking stoves, running water, and the comfortable feeling of safety in numbers.

She was often frightened when Dad was away from the cabin to do day work for one of the farmers or in town selling their produce of cream, eggs, fence posts, chickens, coon hides, tomatoes, vegetables, firewood, hand sewn quilts, or whatever they could produce from their labors. The shadows and the sounds of the night were especially frightening, the walls of the small cabin seemed to become so close they were smothering for a young woman all alone in the dark on the long nights when Dad was out with the hounds hunting those elusive chicken house bandits with their expensive one dollar hides.

Mother voiced her fears almost daily, but Dad had no solution for the problem, after all he did have to make a living for them.

On Christmas day 1935, Grandfather Richard Farrell's '29 Model Ford car came slowly bouncing and sloshing down the wagon trail through a snow covered cow pasture to the little cabin nestled among the Oak and Elm trees high above the frozen river stream.

The girl of nineteen inside the cabin looked out through a yellowed window pane seeing the familiar automobile she burst out through the squeaky door shouting back over her shoulder, "Daddy's here!" Standing outside in the ankle deep snow she waited impatiently while the muddy Ford made it's slow laborious progress toward the little cabin.

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"Merry Christmas Marvell. I brought you something." the little man said. As he pushed a package out the car door before stepping out into the mud and snow.

She burst into tears at the sound of his words. She was his youngest daughter and all her life he had called her "Midge" (short for midget), but now that she was a married woman, he had called her by her given name and she understood that she would never be his "Little Midge" again. Emotions of both joy and sorrow strove in her heart and mind. Was she a woman who longed to return to a child? Or was she a child elated at being the flower of a woman?

Now Marvell, it isn't all that much.

Thinking quickly to disguise the true reason for her tears, she replied, "But Daddy, we didn't know you were coming all the way up here in this awful weather. We couldn't get you anything."

Not important, you're going to have Christmas dinner aren't you?

Yes of course. What do you want?

Looking around at the bleak kitchen, he said, "Eggs, biscuits and gravy, will do me just fine. I haven't had breakfast yet."

OK, Daddy will you stay the night?

I may not have any choice. That road is so boggy coming up here, that I might not be able to drive out of here for a while, especially if that dark blue cloud in the Northwest comes down here and dumps all the snow that's in it.

Daddy go on out to your car and bring your little case on in.

You don't mind?

No, Daddy I don't mind. Besides I hate to see a person sneaking around with secrets.

With a slight grin he waded out through the snow and mud returning with his little case of homemade beer.

"Frank, you may have married the only reasonable daughter that I raised." he said, setting the case outside through the window where a wire cage had been attached to the side of the house for a winter ice box, then he closed the window.

Richard, now that you don't have to sneak outside for anything, why don't you take those wet shoes off before you catch your death of cold?

Thank you Frank. Marvell open your package.

I will Daddy, but first let me fix your eggs.

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No! No! I packed that thing all the way up here from Weatherford through a storm just to see you open it, now open it.

Setting down next to him by the fire she slowly opened the long package with trembling hands. Pulling out the best .20 gauge shotgun the little old man could find to protect his "Little Midge" who lived in a cabin by the river wild.

"Thank you Daddy." she said, softly with tears streaming down her face.

"Awh!" he said, walking over to look out the window at nothing in particular. "Now how about those eggs before they decide to hatch?"

The shotgun was always nearby and it was always loaded. Later that same winter Dad came home late one night from a long coon hunt. Opening the door he stepped inside only to catch a glimpse of Mother setting behind the kitchen table pointing the shotgun straight at him across the room dimly lit by the moonlight cast through the open door.

"Nooo! Don't, it's me!" He shouted, as he dived for the rough wood floor. It seemed an eternal silence laying there before he heard the soft sound of weeping.

What's wrong Marvell?

I didn't know it was you.

"Who did you think it was?" He ask, pulling himself up on trembling legs and slowly taking the shotgun from the small and frightened figure before him.

Do you hear that woman screaming from down the river? Someone is killing her! That's been going on for hours.

He stopped to try and listen above the pounding of his heart. Faintly he could hear a screech owl making his nightly sounds from a tree nearby.

It didn't surprise him, when a few days later after coming in late the night before, that he found a dead screech owl under a tree near the cabin. It's body had a number of shotgun pellet holes through it. (I don't ever remember of Dad opening the door to the house without announcing himself very loud, even in broad daylight.)

Every morning after breakfast Mother would place the table scraps or a small amount of horse feed outside the cabin window on a window sill where a small red squirrel would soon appear at the window to eat his morning meal of whatever Mother had left for his breakfast. Soon the red squirrel became a highlight of her day at what she always called her honeymoon cabin.

Not long before R.E. was born in June of 1936, Mother had a very restless night, so after Dad left for a day's work she went back to bed to try and rest, but every time she would doze off, her

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pet squirrel would start chattering from up in the shade tree just outside her door. Finally angered by his constant interruptions, she got up and went to the door with her loaded shotgun intending to fire it and frighten the squirrel into silence, however when she fired the gun, one of the pellets hit a limb and glanced off hitting her pet in the head killing him instantly.

When Dad came home later that day, Mother was sitting on a chair under the shade tree crying.

Why are you crying?

She only pointed to the ground, there under the shade tree was a very small grave, with a small cross made of sticks, inside the grave was one red squirrel being mourned by a distressed, pregnant, lonely, frightened, and feeling homely little girl of nineteen, who had just shot her only friend.

Some years later, when we lived in town, and I was about two years old, Dad's best Coonhound almost met Mother's shotgun fate when I ran screaming into the back yard to escape her fly swatter, and Bob, in my defense ran her back into the house.

After moving to the farm West of town, Mother's shotgun was always at the ready to protect the family, home, and farm, from any danger.

It was a fact of life that nobody touched Mother's shotgun, except to take it to her when she ask. Dad had a .22 rifle and a .410 gauge shotgun that anyone would be allowed to use at any time if they had a good reason, but Mother's shotgun was defender of the farm.

In 1946, Dad bought a registered Herford bull to upgrade the cattle. The new bull was usually very calm and caused little trouble, however once every year when it became rutting season, he became very mean and would attack anybody or anything he thought might be there to disturb his herd of cows. Because of the bull's state of intense vigor, Dad bought a long black snake whip for Mother, R.E., and I, to use when bringing the milk cows home in the evening. Usually when we snapped the whip, that was sufficient to intimidate the herd bull into turning away from us and follow the cows, retaining his harborage over the herd.

One morning in the early spring during the rutting season, while we were at school up the road where the four corners met, Dad's bull came to the fence to bellow a challenge to the Frymire bull across the road. They hadn't been bellowing and throwing dirt into the air with their hooves for very long when Mr. Engle's Jersey bull, hearing the challenge, appeared at the third corner where he too presented a challenge in defense of his territory, soon followed by Mr. Stubb's large Shorthorn bull at the forth corner of the intersection, also prepared to protect his own domain from intrusive neighbors.

After several minutes of collective defiance, their frenzied minds compelled them to burst through the fences, charging onto the school playground, each thinking he was protecting his territory from the other three interlopers. The first to meet in the school yard was the Jersey and Herford. Both beast lowered their heads colliding with all the force of four thousand pounds of fury. THUD! Survival of the fittest had collided on our playground. Both animals dropped to

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their knees with horns locked in a struggle worthy of blood sacrifice with the right to procreate the prize.

Mrs. Waters could no longer command us children to remain in our seats. In unison we all ran to the South windows so we could watch this display of natural selection by strength.

Mrs. Waters told us children to stay inside, while she began to count heads making sure that all of us were there.

"Where's Bill?" she shouted, with fear in her voice, just as Bill Southwell walked into the schoolhouse.

Mrs. Waters! I, er, well, you, uh. Oh never mind, I know where you was. Stay inside!

Everyone was at the windows shouting encouragement to their champion of choice. About that time the two beast locked in conflict had regained their feet and was snorting large gasps of air through flared nostrils with eyes looking intently at the enemy before them. Powerful necks bulged with taut muscles under their slick coats of spring hair.

Across the school yard Frymire's Holstein came belligerently stomping the ground looking for a weak spot where he might enter the fight with a crippling blow to one of the preoccupied contestants before him, just as the Jersey stuck a powerful blow to the Herford's side knocking his hind feet out from under him.

The Holstein who had been prancing with his head held high, eyes wild with contention, lowered his head, and charged head on into the Jersey's side, driving him sideways and expelling a large gasp of air. The Hereford came up under the Holstein with such force he lifted the large black and white bull off the ground.

The conflict continued all across the school yard and into the intersection where the four roads met. Then Mr. Stubb's Shorthorn feeling his territory being threatened entered the fight with gusto making it a four way fight for dominance. Now there was eight thousand pounds of unrestrained anger charging, colliding, recovering, and charging again. Sixteen bone hard hooves dug into the ground under four tons of thrust tearing up the ground as if it were a plowed field.

About then, Mrs. Waters shouted, "Noooo! Mrs. Hooper stay out of there!"

Mother was coming up the road carrying the black snake whip, red faced with anger that these animals would be fighting around the schoolhouse where children were. Eight thousand pounds of mad beasts were about to find out just who the real champion on that hill was. She was 110 pounds of angry Mother with a black snake whip and fourteen children to protect.

Near the fray, Mother shouted for attention, and then unleashed fifteen foot of snapping leather that bit the flesh with a pop! Leaving welts of pain at every lashing. Startled by a little woman full of ire, the Jersey broke and ran for home. (I'm sure he must have been thinking, "A little

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friendly scuffle with the neighborhood boys is one thing, but facing a mad woman with a flesh biting whip is out of the question.")

With the Jersey out of the way, she turned her anger and whip on the Holstein. Four slashes of the whip and a stream of blood coming from his nose, the Holstein decided that he too should retire from the playground and go home from school. He too had learned his lesson for the day.

Turning her attention to the Shorthorn, Mother drove him back from the fight. Then swinging the whip high, she brought it around throwing a curl of leather down the length of it, biting the air with a sharp snap sufficient for the Hereford to remember it's bite caused him to turn for home without a second thought. However the Shorthorn being the last into the fight and undaunted to continue the struggle followed Mother, causing her to turn around every few yards to drive him back.

Not long after they had disappeared from sight at the house we heard the report of Mother's shotgun come to the schoolhouse.

I'll bet that got their attention, Harry Edward said aloud, causing everyone to laugh and look out the windows toward our house. Coming up the road Mr. Stubbs's Shorthorn was running, kicking with his hind feet as if he had a swarm of bees on his rump. Without looking back he ran straight home with no more thought of confrontation on his mind.

R.E. looked across the room at me saying without sound, "She got him."

Because of her weak heart, Mother laid in bed for two days, so exhausted she could hardly move. Dad was very upset that she had gone into a four way bull fight with only a black snake whip, instead of using the telephone to call for help from some of the neighborhood men.

One teacher and fourteen children were glad to have a champion bull fighter watching over our playground.

Later that fall Mr. Stubbs stopped at our house and handed Dad a nickel instructing Dad to give it to Mother. When Dad ask what it was for, he replied, "I sent that bologna bull to market last week and he brought me five cents per pound, I figure he weighed at least one pound heavier because of all the buckshot that Marvell put into his backside, so I want to pay her for her part."

When I was about eight years old the temptation became too much for me to bare any longer, but I knew I must ask. So I went into the kitchen where Mother was setting at the kitchen table peeling potatoes for supper. Setting down on a chair, I ask in my most pleading voice, "Mother may I shoot your shotgun?"

"At what?" She ask with surprise.

At nothing. I just want to shoot it.

No, You're too small, that shotgun kick would knock you down.

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No it won't. George Harris allowed Sammy to shoot his shotgun.

George's shotgun is a .410 gauge, and mine is a .20 gauge, that's some bigger than a .410.

But I'm bigger than Sammy.

So you think, but you're not that much bigger.

But Mother, I pleaded for her reconsideration.

Let me tell you a story about when I thought I was big enough to shoot my Daddy's shotgun. Your Grandfather Farrell had a long double barrel .10 gauge shotgun that he used to hunt geese, but he would never allow me to shoot it. He would always say, "Midge, you're too little to shoot that goose gun, so leave it alone."

But I was just like you. I didn't think I was too small to shoot that gun. So one day when I was about twelve, your Grandmother and Grandfather went to town leaving me at home alone, that's when I decided it was a good time for me to try my luck at shooting Daddy's shotgun. Taking his .10 gauge outside I loaded both barrels, but after I thought about it for a little while remembering how Daddy had said, "That gun will knock you down" I walked over to a big tree and put my back up against the tree so the gun wouldn't knock me down. When I raised the gun I pulled both triggers at the same time. The kick was so hard that with my back against that tree the impact bruised my shoulder half way down my arm and half way down my side. I also hit one of Mother's chickens killing it on the spot.

After cleaning Daddy's gun and putting it back where it belonged I was hurting so bad I could hardly breath, or move my arm, but I had to go back for the chicken and clean it for supper because Mother would miss her chicken. After I cleaned the chicken there was so many holes in it that I had to strip the bones and stew it, which required that I make noodles using Mother's large rolling pin, and that hurt even more, but the worst part was yet to come.

When my Mother and Daddy came home from town I told them that I had made chicken and noodles for our supper. Mother ask me where I got the chicken so I had to tell her.

Out in the back yard.

She went out into the yard, seeing the chicken's head, she came back to scold me for cooking one of her best hens instead of one that was old and molting or a young rooster.

Daddy was very proud of me for being able to cook such a good chicken and noodles, but I couldn't eat a bite for the fear that he would bite into a shotgun pellet.

I went around for two weeks hurting so bad I couldn't stand it and Mother kept asking me why I was wearing those long sleeved dresses in such hot weather, but I couldn't allow her to see the bruises on my arm and side because I would have to tell her how I received them.

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Now Gary, that's the kind of thing that can happen when your parents tell you that you are too little, but you choose to ignore what they tell you.

But Mother, you could shoot Granddad Farrell's shotgun now because you are a lot bigger.

The expression on her face told me that I had said the wrong thing. She was expecting my younger brother Tommy at the time, so I quickly went away without asking again for several years.

Many times, day or night, the chickens would start squawking and Mother would run out to the chicken house. As soon as we heard the report of her shotgun, we knew she had dispatched some chicken stealing coon, possum, or skunk. Usually during the day it would be an egg thieving bull snake or a stray house cat.

One cool late winter night, I heard something disturbing the chickens. Mother went out with a lantern and shotgun, soon after hearing the gun blast, Mother returned to say, "It was another big old possum."

The next morning she came back from the chicken house with tears in her eyes and said, "Gary go out to the chicken house and take care of that possum."

I couldn't figure out why she was so upset, it couldn't be because of the possum, after all she had shot a hundred of them for stealing chickens.

When I stepped into the chicken house, I saw the big old possum in the corner, on her back was eight baby possums no larger than mice. When I walked out Dad was just outside with a shovel I looked up at him he too had a very sad look on his face that I understood very well. He liked wildlife as much as anyone and even though he hunted for the winter cash crop of hides, he was firmly opposed to killing anything without a good reason and it cut against his grain to have to dispose of those babies even though they had no chance of survival without their mother. Looking at me he ask, "Can't do it?"

No.

OK. Son go back to the house. I'll take care of them.

As I slowly walked back to the house I understood something about my Mother and why she liked wild roses so much. She too was very much like the wild rose, tough as a green rose stem when she needed to be, and as sharp as a thorn at times, to protect a heart that was as soft as the wild rose petal.

After that day I don't remember Mother ever shooting her shotgun again, but it was always there and if needed, it was always loaded for me to use. Mother's shotgun. VIOLENT LOVE.