

“...the land wanted to be let alone,
to preserve its own fierce strength,
its peculiar, savage kind of beauty...”

– Willa Cather, 1913, *O Pioneers!*



June 1920



Rosa Jean knew it was foolish to believe her parents had been buried alive. But she couldn't get the idea out of her head. When she closed her eyes, she could see them sleeping in their wooden boxes. She could hear the rain of dirt pelting the casket lids. She would dwell on their terror – awakening in the darkness, lungs burning from the rank, oxygen-depleted air, and realizing their fate.

How must it feel to be buried alive? To be swallowed up by the earth?

She stretched out in the oblong hole she had dug behind her uncle's barn. The moist earth chilled her bare legs. She briefly peered at the black mud packed around her chewed fingernails and jagged cuticles. Then, she crossed her tiny hands over her chest and closed her eyes. When Uncle Lou came upon the girl lying there, he howled, grabbed her up by the arms and dragged her like a ragdoll to the house.

“There's something dreadful wrong with this child.”

May 1934



The walkway and lawn below Rosa Jean's second-floor dormitory window was teeming with graduates, proudly sporting their ebony gowns and golden tassels, embracing family and friends. Her own graduation gown was already neatly folded and packed away in her trunk along with most of her other clothes.

A breeze wafted in through the open window, bringing the sweetness of Wisconsin spring grass and adolescent glee with it. College commencement provided them all with a chance at real freedom. It was the perfect excuse to shed old baggage and start life anew. Maybe her plan was backward then, packing up all her belongings and heading back to where her life began.

"I have to be going soon, Rosa Jean." Aunt May shattered the silence inside the small room. "Lou wants to get an early supper at a restaurant before we head on back to the farm."

RJ, as she had come to be known at school, nodded and folded one more blouse.

Aunt May ran her calloused fingertips over her niece's college diploma, somewhat disbelieving the words. How often does a young woman get a master's degree, in geology of all things? The dean at the ceremony that morning had said RJ was this university's first.

"Oh, I do wish you'd come to supper with us," Aunt May said. "This rift between you two has gone on far too long."

“And why am I always the one who has to take the first step, always the one to mend the rift?”

“Because that’s what *women do*, Rosa Jean.” Aunt May set the diploma aside and stood up, smoothed down the front of her faded cotton polka-dot dress and sighed. “Fine lot of good that college diploma does you if you haven’t even learned that much in life.”

RJ groaned. She had learned that, and a whole lot more, during her six years at college. That didn’t mean she liked it, or planned to abide by it.

“It would just be nice if he made an effort for once,” RJ said.

Aunt May’s posture stiffened. “Giving you a bed to sleep in and food to put in your belly all those years wasn’t effort enough for you?”

RJ’s shoulders dropped. It was the same old debate they’d had a thousand times. She turned to face her aunt.

“I’m sorry, Aunt May. I’m so grateful for all you and Uncle Lou have done for me. I know I don’t show it the way I should. But I truly am.”

The air between them took on its familiar fog of silence. Once RJ accepted there was nothing more that could be said, she stepped forward and embraced her aunt for what she expected would be the final time. “Thank you for coming today.”

Aunt May indulged her niece for a moment, then tapped her back and pulled away awkwardly. “You have a safe trip, now. And be sure to send a telegram the moment you arrive in Vanham, so I won’t have to worry too terribly long.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And you put that diploma away somewhere where it won’t get ruined.”

RJ smiled at that, her aunt’s roundabout way of saying she was proud.

“Yes, ma’am, I will.”

With one last nod, Aunt May turned and left. RJ stood for a moment, staring at the empty doorway, fighting the urge to fly

down the hall after the woman. She ran her fingers through her hair to tamp down her nerves, then turned back to finish her packing.



“Hey, you can’t park there! Hey!” The residence hall dean stood at the top of the expansive stone steps of Barnard Hall, waving her arms, as RJ backed the Ford flatbed truck across the emerald campus lawn and up to the women’s dormitory entrance.

RJ turned off the engine and jumped out of the truck. She bounded up the steps two at a time and into the building, the dean hot on her heels.

“Did you hear me, young lady? I said, you cannot park there.”

“Yes. Yes, I heard you,” RJ said, scrunching up her shoulders, smiling. “I’m so sorry, Miss Tubbs.”

But RJ did not turn around, nor did she slow her pace.

The dean stopped chasing, her plump face flushed from the high neckline of her dress all the way to the tops of her fleshy ears. She stood a moment, wringing her hands. Then, she spun around, shouting back over her shoulder, “I’m getting campus police. Don’t you think for a moment that I won’t.” The woman hurried down the stairs muttering to herself – of all the unladylike behavior, the impertinence, the gall. Good riddance, I say.

RJ pushed her trunk along the floor and through the hallway. She bit her tongue. *Go right ahead and get the police, you old goat.* She knew Miss Tubbs wouldn’t actually make the effort.

The trunk bumped down the stairwell. RJ struggled to maintain control over its weight and bulk. When she reached the bottom, she dragged the trunk across the carpeted vestibule, down the stone steps outside and up beside the truck. She stood up straight, rubbed at her lower back, and took a long look around campus.

Coming down the women’s dormitory steps was a classmate, flanked by her parents. The young woman carried her purse and a small suitcase, and chattered excitedly, though RJ couldn’t make

out what she was saying. Her father nodded and smiled, while he fumbled along with a bulky box. Her mother laughed and looped an arm around the young woman's waist.

RJ watched the cheerful family move down the walkway until they disappeared around the corner of the building. She blew the hair out of her eyes with an exaggerated breath, then turned to plod back up the dormitory steps alone.

After she'd hauled all her belongings out to the lawn, RJ carefully loaded them onto the flatbed, arranging them like pieces of a puzzle and tying them down. She climbed into the cab and started the engine. Then, she leaned out the window and waved good-bye to Miss Tubbs, who stood at the top of the steps in the entryway, flabby arms folded across an abundant chest.

The woman shook her head slowly from side to side, then turned and disappeared into the building.

RJ wrinkled her nose, and drove off across the lawn.

"Good-bye, Wisconsin. Good-bye, UW," she said, pulling out onto the main road. "Good-bye, you old goat."



RJ scanned the landscape for a good place to pull off and set up camp for the night. After nearly a week on the road, she was no longer enjoying the adventure. The last forty miles had been nothing but the same monotonous montage – flat, brown, barren as far as the eye could see. For the first time, she began to question the wisdom of her decision to drive the nine-hundred-fifty miles from Wisconsin to Kansas, alone. Why hadn't she taken the train, as so many well-meaning people had suggested? Maybe she had wanted the trip to take longer than was necessary. Maybe she wasn't so sure, anymore, if going back to Kansas was, in fact, a very smart move.

Aunt May's voice bounced around inside her head now. "Cheese and crackers, Rosa Jean. What in God's name are you thinking you're going to do down there in Kansas anyhow, with

your test tubes and fancy college degrees? Mix a magic potion and make it rain?"

RJ took a quick look in the rearview mirror at her crates and trunks in the back. She had taken days before graduation to carefully wrap and pack her equipment, her beakers and test tubes, her droppers and "magic potions."

Inside the truck cab she had packed her Corona typewriter, in its spruce green case, her one luxury in college and the envy of all her classmates. Beneath it, her satchel held important papers – her birth certificate, her college diplomas and the letter from Washington, D.C. that said her application to the Soil Erosion Service had been accepted. Upon receiving her diploma, RJ was to "dispatch immediately for Vanham, Kansas to establish and manage a Department of the Interior soil erosion experiment station." It would be a dream come true, if she ever made it there.

A gray-brown haze hovered across the horizon. The hardscrabble road became less and less distinct, blending with the landscape. Dirt road. Dirt fields. Dirt as far as the eye could see. The sky began to darken. RJ's grip tightened on the steering wheel as the wind kicked up.

She slowed and pulled off to the side, letting the truck idle. RJ extracted a silver pocket watch from her satchel. It had been delivered by the postman to her aunt and uncle's farm when RJ was just eight years old, along with a letter from the Clark County, Kansas doctor saying her parents had finally succumbed to the flu that had claimed so many lives that year. RJ ran her thumb slowly across her daddy's initials before snapping open the lid.

The watch ticked half past three. The horizon had nearly disappeared now, sky blending with land as the sun faded away in a blaze of scarlet through the dusty haze. RJ turned off the engine and stepped out.

"A storm rolling in?" she asked out loud, though there wasn't a soul within a hundred miles who could answer. Drought and hard

times had driven so many farmers and homesteaders off their land. RJ knew that. It's why she was there. Then it dawned on her.

"It's a duster!"

She felt a rush of jitters tumble through her gut, something between thrill and panic, as she began to assess her situation. RJ ran to the back of the truck and pried open a crate containing a bag she had packed for just such an emergency. Inside were a canteen of water, a bandanna, a wide-brimmed cotton hat, goggles, canned sardines and a small box of saltine crackers. Next to the bag was a wool blanket neatly rolled and tied with twine.

A steady, deafening rumble in the distance put to shame the worst thunder RJ had ever heard. She squinted at the horizon, at the approaching mountain of dust. Millions of fine dirt particles hurtled across the landscape in a frenetic rush, picking up still more granules that bounced off one other in a chaotic whirl. This created an electrical charge in the air that made RJ's scalp tingle and the fine hairs on her arms stand at attention.

It was coming. Her first duster. She had no time to lose.

She surveyed the land. There was nowhere to take shelter. Not a building, not a tree, not even a big rock lay in sight. Just rolling sand dunes across miles and miles of abandoned farmland.

RJ slung the bag over her shoulder and leaned back into the crate to retrieve the blanket roll. She worked her way to the front of the Model AA, walking straight into the wind and biting dust. She grabbed hold of the door handle and felt a jolt of static electricity shoot through her arm and into her body. She dropped to her knees, momentarily paralyzed by the heat vibrating through her insides.

"Brilliant, RJ. Just brilliant."

She knew all about the dusters, about the danger of electrical charges they could generate. She'd read news articles about unwitting folks seeking shelter in their automobiles who'd been burned alive by the powerful currents. She felt glued to the ground

now, her limbs paralyzed by fear – not fear of the storm, but of her own stupidity, her carelessness.

The wind and earth continued its onslaught across the landscape, pulling a burial shroud over the sun itself.

The unnatural darkness jolted RJ back into action. She yanked the bandanna from the bag, soaked it with water from the canteen. She wiped the dirt from her eyes, secured her goggles in place, then tied the bandanna over her nose and mouth. The risk of electrocution made taking shelter inside the truck impossible. She'd have to seek refuge beneath it.

RJ crawled to the back of the flatbed and struggled to her feet. She retrieved an Army surplus spade, careful not to bump the metal frame of the truck. Then, she grabbed the crate lid and used it as a shield, pushing and fighting against the dust and wind like some ancient warrior headed into battle. She worked her way back toward the front of the Ford and braced the wood-planked lid on the ground, leaning it against the front bumper and grill.

The grit hurling through the air nipped at her exposed arms, causing tiny pinpricks of blood to emerge from her soft skin. She rubbed the sting from her arms, then dropped to her belly on the ground and shimmied beneath the low truck, pulling her emergency supplies in beside her.

She had shelter. Abysmal as it was, it would protect her from the storm. But how long would the duster last? How long would she last?

The truck above her rattled and quaked. Darkness descended.