

Like Snow in the Wind

Jack stepped into the feed shed. He was tall and had to lower his head to step through the doorway. He wore a Carhartt coverall, a fur-lined bomber hat, and fuzzy yellow workman's gloves. His face was tanned and creased, his glasses foggy. A few strands of curly white hair stuck out below his hat.

The winter wind blew through the doorway of the shed, carrying snow onto the pile of oats. It was a small shed with plywood floor and walls. The rafters above were laced with spider webs that grew thicker at the corners. Each strand hung slack, coated in heavy dust.

The oat pile was at the back of the shed. Standing four feet tall, it ran from one wall to the other. Stacked along the pile were empty five-gallon buckets. Several still bore labels from Sherwin-Williams' paint mixtures. Others were bare, dried paint stuck along their insides.

Jack picked up an ivory bucket, shoved it into the oats, and pulled the bucket up the pile, letting the grains slide in. He placed a knee on the bucket to hold it firm. With one hand, he reached up to the top of the pile and scooped the oats towards the bucket. Tiny dust clouds rose as the grains slid down. The bucket was filled to just below the brim. He lifted it and felt its weight.

Satisfied, Jack carried the bucket through the doorway and set it on a snowbank. He repeated this process with each bucket, and soon, he saw the oat dust drift upwards with each gust of wind that blew through the door. And in every moment of respite, it fluttered down onto the pile.

Jack began to cough. It was the dust in his nose and the back of his throat. He coughed several times with every trip into the shed; by the end, he thought he had sand in his lungs, scratching at his esophagus.

He finished the last bucket, carried it out and set it next to the others. The wind blew from the west and cut through his coveralls. It whipped over the buckets, picked up the loose oats at the top, and carried them out across the snow.

In front of the shed, the cows waited along the wooden feed bunk, a trough that ran from the barn to the other end of the pen. They stood in a line, pressed shoulder to shoulder, sniffing the bunk for any remnants of yesterday's feed. Clumps of ice were frozen to their backs. They glistened yellow in the early morning sun.

A cow shifted, pushing against its neighbor and causing the whole line to stagger. They mooed, first one and then another. They were hoarse from the cold; their breath was fog.

Jack stood with two buckets on either side. He laid the handles from each bucket across the other and picked them up, lifting with his knees. His arms trembled when he did, not much, but he could feel the buckets shake from the movement. He took a step towards the bunk and thought the buckets felt too heavy; he had lifted each one on its own, and they had felt lighter. But it seemed as if four buckets weighed eight times as much as they should have.

By the second step, Jack's arms were shaking beneath the coveralls. He set the buckets down and looked at his hands. They felt cramped; each joint was stiff as he opened his fingers.

The cold, he thought, it must be the cold.

Last spring, near the beginning of calving season, Ryan drove into the yard. The snow had begun to melt, leaving slushy puddles. The sun was warm, and ice clumps dropped off evergreen branches.

Jack had been feeding cows and had finished filling the buckets when he saw a blue F-150 pull up behind the feed shed. Despite the slushy conditions, the truck was clean, and he could see the shed reflected in the driver's-side door.

He looked at the man who climbed out of the truck. He was short and wore a green shirt with black embroidery on each shoulder. Stubble splotted his face, and his hair was a pasty blonde. His jeans were held up by a belt with prancing deer worked into the leather. In front, he wore a silver belt buckle the size of a baseball. It bore a brand, the S-quarter-circle, and on either side were longhorn cattle. Jack thought it was too large to be practical.

"Howdy," he said.

"Howdy," Ryan replied. "How've you been?"

“I’m getting along. What brings you to this side of town?”

Jack knew that Ryan and his father, Milt, farmed together on the east side of town, down where the river met the bluffs.

Ryan stuck his hands in his pockets. “I was heading over to Crosby for the bull sale. Thought I’d stop by.”

Jack nodded.

Ryan motioned towards the cows. “They look like they could drop any minute. Got any calves yet?”

“No, you?”

“We had three this morning. One yesterday.”

Jack looked at Ryan. He was sweating.

“You want to head inside?” Jack asked. “I can finish this later.”

“Oh. No,” Ryan replied. “I don’t mean to intrude. I...I was just going to ask you something.”

Jack frowned. He didn’t know what Ryan would need to ask him.

“Here.” Ryan took a sticky note out of his pocket and handed it to Jack.

He took it. A single number was on the paper: \$540.

“What’s this?” He asked, but he already thought he knew the answer.

“An offer.”

He looked back at the paper.

“Per acre, of course,” Ryan said. “Look, not many people could keep going at your age. My father doesn’t even farm anymore besides running us all around in the truck. I know you don’t have anyone to take over. It’s just...I thought you would rest easier knowing the land is being put to good use.”

The cows mooed behind him. Birds chirped from their perches on the power line.

“You know I can work it,” Ryan said. “I’m doing well enough. I plan to bring on two more hands for the extra land.”

Jack looked at the cows and then back to the paper.

“Think about it, ok,” Ryan said. “Have a nice day.”

He walked back to his truck and climbed in. Jack looked over to the barn. His father had built it and had worked on this land until the day he died. The barn still stood. It was peeling paint and missing shingles; its roof sagged, and the walls bulged, but it still stood.

He crumpled the paper, threw it into the melting snow, and watched the truck disappear.

The cows mooed at him. The winter wind blew cold air across Jack's face. He carried the last two buckets down to the far end of the bunk, spacing them six feet apart. He had carried them all like that, two at a time. It had been slower, but he thought it would warm him up.

Sweat gathered in streams under his hat, running along his loose hair, matting it to his skin. It ran down his forehead and split at the nose, stinging his eyes. He took off his glasses and wiped his eyes with his glove.

He thought back. Ryan had made several more offers since that spring. Jack didn't bother to look at them after the first one. He burned two of them, throwing them in the burning-barrel in the middle of the yard. Of the other three, one he had tossed in the trash at Albertson's, another he had torn up and dropped in the parking lot at the church, and the last he had dumped into the bunks with the feed.

He looked down the line. The cows were staring at him. Picking up the last bucket, he dumped the oats out into the bunk. Dust rose, caught the wind, and blew into his face where it mixed with his sweat and stuck to his forehead.

The cows began to feed. They pushed up against the wood, straining their necks as far as they could, licking at the feed. Those at the end stretched their necks and turned their heads sideways, reaching for just a lick.

Jack continued up the line, dumping one bucket after another, each followed by an eruption of dust. By the time he had reached the barn, the cows at the far end were finishing. They strode across the frozen manure and down into the snow-covered field.

Jack collected the empty buckets. They clanged against each other as he collected four in each hand. He took his hat off as he brought them back to the feed shed. The wind froze the oat-sweat to his forehead, causing it to itch. He carried the buckets into the shed and stacked them against the wall.

When he had finished, he used his shoulder to shove the door as far into the crooked doorframe as it would go. Then, he reached for the tarp strap that hung from a rusty nail next to the doorway, stretched it over, and hooked the metal end onto the doorknob.

Stepping away, he could see the wind pull at the door. It opened an inch, elongating the already tight strap, and then settled. Jack stayed for a few seconds to ensure that it wouldn't tear the door open.

It was a quarter to nine. If he wanted to make it into town for Marketing Club, he would not have time to shower. He hadn't made it to Marketing Club the last two weeks; he hadn't checked the stock markets in over a month.

He walked across the yard to the two-story farm house with a wide front porch that was surrounded by lilac bushes. His boot tracks from his trip to the feed shed earlier that morning were beginning to fill with snow.

He was walking by the burning-barrel when his stomach grumbled. All that waited in the house was a cold bowl of oatmeal. He walked over to the shop. It was a small building with a long workbench on one side and an open, oil-stained floor on the other. In between them was an old black woodstove.

Jack took off his coveralls and hung them over the workbench. He took an old coat off the wall next to the woodstove, put it on, and walked back towards the door, taking his truck keys off a hook on the wall.

Dakota Prairie was one of the few restaurants open for breakfast in the small town of Trottier. It had wooden siding and was protected from the cold by triple-pane windows. A lone sign stood beside the street, the top covered in snow.

Two wire newspaper stands sat beside the door. The first one was empty, although above it was a green and blue sign that read *Prairie Horizons*. The second still had a pile of month old *Ag Week* papers. Jack picked one up. He had already read that issue cover-to-cover.

"Hi Jack!" The waitress, Charlette, called over from near the kitchen. "They're in the back. Coffee?"

"Yes," he said. "Thanks."

He walked through the main dining room, past black and white pictures of the town dated '56, '58, and '60, and four stuffed raccoons. Three tables were occupied, one by a family of five, another by two rig hands in their blue and yellow reflective coveralls, and the last by a lone man wearing a L&P Trucking hat.

In the back room, two tables were pushed together, and four men sat around them. Louis and Timothy sat on one side, Milt and Ryan on the other. Jack looked at Ryan. He was wearing an embroidered shirt and a clean cap. Jack was sure he was still wearing the large belt buckle.

“Jack, how’ve you been?” Louis called. He was right around fifty and wore a mustache that curled at the ends. He farmed around a thousand acres along with a herd of nearly one hundred head.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” Timothy said. He was in his late thirties and ran a smaller operation but rented land farther to the south. He was clean-shaven and wore a faded T-shirt that stood out among the others’ pearl-snaps. “Don’t have another cow with an abscess? That’s been giving me some trouble this year.”

“No,” Jack said. “Just haven’t had the time. Thought I’d come in today.” He took off his jacket and sat down in an empty seat beside Louis and across from Milt. “Have you ordered yet?”

“We were waiting,” Milt said. Milt was the only one older than Jack, at seventy-two. He was retired, technically, but still wore his boots and hat like he was in his prime. “Anyone know if Jimmie is coming?”

“No,” Louis said. “His granddaughter was in some high school play out in Fargo. He and Millie are visiting for the week.”

“I’ll go let Char know we’re ready,” Timothy said.

Jack opened the menu. He usually ordered the same meal every week: the French Toast Special. That was just over twelve bucks, and he thought his wallet felt thin. Scanning the menu, he turned to the fifty-five-plus page. Timothy walked back into the room. Charlette wasn’t far behind, carrying a coffee pot and a pitcher of water.

“Here’s a fresh one,” Charlette said as she set the pot and pitcher on the table. “What can I get you?”

“I’ll just have eggs over easy, and sausage,” Jack said, still looking at the price. He handed the menu to Charlette, reached for the upside-down mug in front of him, and poured himself some coffee. He sipped it as the others ordered.

“I’ll get these right out,” Charlette said. “Holler if you need more coffee.”

“How has the winter been treating you?” Ryan asked Jack. “Get your drill fixed?”

“No. I talked to Raymond about it. He thinks I’ll have to buy a new one.”

He hadn’t talked to Raymond in over a month. Raymond told him he needed to buy used with his budget. He had made a few calls to people he knew, asking if they had an old drill sitting around he could buy.

“Shame,” Milt said. “They ain’t cheap these days.”

“That one lasted you, what, seven years?” Ryan asked.

“Yep,” Jack said, taking another drink of coffee. “They don’t make them like they used to either.”

Louis poured himself a mug of coffee and added two creamers. “I think Jason has an old forty-two foot up north. That’s just sitting in his yard.”

“No. He sold that and bought a new one,” Ryan said, looking at Jack and smiling. “Besides, you’ll probably retire soon.”

The table chuckled and then continued talking.

Jack’s air-seeder drill hadn’t been working well enough to plant any more than half of his twelve-hundred acres. He was amazed it had made it that far last spring. First, one of the fans had gone out. It had had a bad bearing and creaked louder than the tractor when it turned. He wasn’t sure if the bearing had busted or if a fuse had shorted. Then he had lost a few press wheels. They had been worn thin from the previous spring, but he thought they could last another season. He hadn’t even noticed that the rubber had been torn to shreds until about half a dozen were gone. Finally, he had jackknifed the damn thing and bent the frame beyond repair. That had been his fault; he should have been more careful when he was backing it up.

“I hear the Pruitts are running a whole new outfit,” Louis said. “They even got a new S seven-ninety. That thing even has a mini fridge in the cab!”

“How much do those things run?” Timothy asked.

“I heard he paid about six hundred.”

“That’s too damn much,” Milt said. “You’re lucky you have cabs. My father just taped an umbrella to a broomstick to keep the sun off his head.”

Jack chuckled. He remembered those days. The dust that rose from the header in a haze, harvesting from six in the morning until eleven at night while switching off with the truck driver to run loads back to the farm. He and his two brothers would run through the knee-high stubble, struggling

to keep their balance on the uneven ground. They were both in retirement homes now, down in Arizona.

Charlette set syrup on the table and distributed the food.

“Eggs and sausage for Jack,” she said as she set the plate in front of him.

“Thanks,” he said.

She smiled and continued around the table, each man thanking her for their breakfast. She ended with egg whites and a sodium-free sausage for Milt, who grunted his thanks. He wasn’t happy with his diet.

“Did anyone actually look at the markets?” Ryan asked.

“I printed them out this morning,” Timothy said, taking a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and putting on reading glasses. “Looks like Minneapolis Durum dropped a quarter. Winter Wheat is unchanged. Feeder Cattle is down a dollar. Barley lost two quarters. Canola is unchanged. Soybeans rose a quarter.”

“If China starts importing again, that should jump a dollar,” Milt noted.

They discussed the markets, when to contract out, what to plant next year, and ate as they did. Jack didn’t listen too much, focusing on his food instead. Either way, he didn’t have much to gain. If he couldn’t find a replacement drill, twelve-hundred acres of prime prairie land would sit empty.

The breakfast finished on a lower note than it had started. With prices as low as they were, it looked to be another tough year.

“I should go,” Jack said. “I need to call Raymond about that drill.” He stood and put his jacket on. Most of the others were finishing their meals.

“I’ll walk out with you,” Louis said, standing. “Evalyn wants to go to Minot and pick up a few things.”

They said goodbye and walked back past the racoons and the pictures to the till.

“Who first?” Charlette asked, looking at them.

Louis stepped forward.

“Hope you don’t mind,” he said.

“No, not at all.”

Jack stood and waited. The glass counter next to the till was filled with pies, muffins, and scones, all arranged on leftover Thanksgiving napkins with cartoon turkeys, pumpkins, and fall foliage.

Louis was paying when Ryan walked up.

“Can I have a moment?”

Jack looked at Ryan and then down at his big belt buckle. He thought it seemed bigger than before.

“If this is about the land again—”

“Just take this. Think about it. Call me.” Ryan handed him a folded sheet from a notepad and then walked to the backroom.

The wind blew snow across the road. It came over the prairie, swirled above the ditch, and then glided like a ghost on top of the icy gravel. Jack drove through it, leaving a brief opening behind him.

He looked out at the prairie as he drove, pushing Ryan’s offer to the back of his mind, and wondered if he could find the source of the wind, where it came from and why it blew. He passed several farms, protected from the snow by stands of pine and cottonwood, and two small oil wells, the nodding donkeys pumping despite the cold.

When Jack passed the trees that marked the edge of his own farm, he slowed. The blue steel bins stood in a line that followed the trees. The barn sat on the other side, across from the road. Next to it was the little feed shed. Across from the bins were the truck garage and the shop. Behind the shop and truck garage stood the machine shed. The two-story farmhouse was closest to the road.

He drove through the snow that had drifted over the driveway, past the burning-barrel in the middle of the yard, and up to the open door of the truck garage.

After parking the truck, he tugged on the nylon rope attached to the garage door to close it. He turned and walked to the shop.

The metal siding was rusting where it met the shingled roof. The big door at the front was uneven when it slid closed. It didn’t fit the bigger tractors, but Jack made do. It could use a new coat of paint, a new door. Heck, he thought, he could use a whole new shop. He walked in. The floor was nearly black from years of oil and grease stains. Tools covered every open space. The riding mower sat in one corner, the engine out and taken apart.

Jack picked up his coveralls from the morning, walked out, and started towards the house when he stopped and looked. The paint had peeled off

the wooden siding. One end of the porch roof ended at a slant, the column below having given way. He couldn't remember when that had happened or when he had last trimmed the lilac bushes that grew up around the house. He made a note to trim the bushes and fix the roof.

Walking up to the deck, he threw the coveralls over the railing and turned towards the bins. They were tall, cylindrical, and corrugated with blue steel that reflected a dull shine onto the snow. He walked up to the first one and pounded his fist on the side. A hollow clang. He twisted the handle and opened the door. The floor was covered with layers of old grain and black mold.

He closed the door, walked along to the next bin, and pounded on the side. This one was full, and no noise answered the knock. He walked down the line, knocking on each bin. Of the sixteen, six were full, and eight of the empty ones had moldy grain at the bottom.

The last bin was full, and Jack turned towards the barn and feed shed. The barn walls were slanted out, the concrete foundations giving way over time. Manure had accumulated in piles along the base where he had shoveled it when the loader on his tractor broke.

He walked around to the shed. The door had blown open, and he could see half the tarp strap hanging from the rusty nail. The other half had fallen into a snowbank. Only a sliver of the silver hook was still visible.

Jack reached for the door and looked inside. The wind had carried snow into the shed, covering the bottom of the oat pile. He took the scoop shovel that sat just inside the door and stepped into the shed. He was about to start shoveling when the wind blew the door closed, and he was left in blackness.

Jack blinked, but his eyes could not adjust to the dark. It was warm; the air was thick and heavy. Outside he could hear the wind blowing by the thin walls, whistling, calling. It was a cold wind, and with every gust, he could hear the snow brush across the walls like dust. He opened the door and stepped out.

He propped the shovel under the knob to keep the door closed and walked out into the yard. He thought about going to get a new tarp strap from the shop but walked straight towards the house instead.

He stopped when he reached the burning-barrel. It was filled with last week's garbage and twine from the hay bales he had fed the cows. Reaching

into his jacket pocket for the small case of matches he kept there, he felt the paper Ryan had given him. He took it out but didn't unfold it. Looking around the yard, he took the matches out of his pocket and struck one. Watching the thin wood burn, he held the paper inches from the match. When the fire was about to reach his fingers, he dropped the match into the barrel.

It smoldered, and then the fire caught. It began to burn the twine, one thread at a time, and then grew as it sprang upon the trash, melting the plastic bag and finding the paper and moldy food inside.

The flames grew, and Jack turned away from the barrel. Still holding the folded paper, he walked up to the porch, picked up his coveralls, and went into the house.