

THE WIND BLOWS

In 1931 Oates Sutton had brought in a bumper wheat crop. He'd been so buoyed by his good fortune that he'd sent off for a mail order bride. Thus, the arrival of Dallas born, Betsy Livingston was just at a time when every farm had produced an abundance of wheat now stacked everywhere, even in the streets and at the train station and bringing twenty-five cents a bushel as compared to the sixty-eight cents a bushel of the previous season. The land now in drought, the wind blowing away the soil one grain at a time, newspapers warned that the severe climate change could last years.

The forecast bleak, Oates' neighbors began packing up and moving west. Creditors followed on the heels of the migrating hordes. Within four months of their marriage Oates's new bride, Betsy no longer seeing any future in him, packed up her belongings and caught the first train back to Dallas. Betsy spewed out more words than she'd spoken to him in the entire four months. "You'll be hearing from my attorney, Oates."

Oates Sutton watched his mail order bride being driven away from the farm. "Good Riddance," he spat. "She didn't have the grit to be a farmer's wife anyway." Oates stretched his wide shoulders and frowned out at the darkening sky. He was a string bean of a man lined by worry and hard work, his muddy brown eyes matched his shaggy hair and a generous mouth peeked out through an untrimmed beard.

Oates drew pictures, sketched them on a tablet with number two lead pencils. He had a drawing for every year he'd lived in his Granddaddy's house. Most sketches were

of the same view, except different angles of the fields where he toiled. Some showed the windmill. Most showed a glimmer of prosperity and all hung on the walls inside the house. The drawing of the home place for this year sat unfinished on a table next to his arm chair in front of the big plate glass window. Oates could not bring himself to show the ugliness of ruination. He knew he should, for history's sake, but reality had stilled his hand.

Barricaded inside his farm house, he stuffed old towels and sheets—anything he could find along the window sills and door thresholds. But still—the dirt filtered in and littered his floor with miniature sand dunes, outside—his topsoil blew east. He reread the letter and annulment papers from Hershel Walker Jennings III, an attorney from Dallas. Oates threw the papers on top of the dust-coated dining table, swiped a hand beneath his generous nose, tasting the dust in the air. As he clenched his jaws, his teeth ground the grit in his mouth. Sudden laughter erupted. “Betsy, you best start collecting the soil blowing in from the West, that’s all you’re gonna to get out of me.”

The one hundred and sixty-five acres of once prime farmland, passed down to him by his Granddaddy was all he had in the world. He looked around the living area of his house and saw truth. It wasn't much. All that remained was the barn, the small house and beaten down wheat stubble.

The rattling at the front door increased as familiar black clouds turned day into night. This storm could last days. He would have taken his Model T Ford truck into town, but he'd have to dig it out first. Tumbleweeds had lodged against field fences, collecting hedgerows of dirt. Property line whereabouts were unknown except to property owners.

His milk cow and team of work horses would have to be sold. Nellie, his riding horse, was in the barn. There had been no room left to pull the car into shelter.

There was two hundred and fifty dollars in his account in the Mineral Wells Bank, traveling money. He would leave here and find work, save his earnings and come home and start over—if the wind ever stopped blowing. His dreams pushed away, he set about to secure the house. He was still young enough, he hoped, to wait out this unnatural weather change, but he had to survive.

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Outside Phoenix, his sketch pad and pencils tucked away among his belongings, Oates rode by one green, white fenced farm after another. Wide driveways lined with date palms, palm fronds, scratching softly in a gentle breeze, lead back to stately two story farm houses. Neat pastures were decorated with the sleekest, most well-muscled horses Oates'd ever seen. He had visited gentleman's farms before in Dallas and Austin. He was acquainted with the lavishness that oil moneyed people surrounded themselves with. Nonetheless, he was surprised, by the richness of a valley encircled by a vast, dry desert.

The bay mare's hooves click clacked on the road as dirt changed to brick. Phoenix had been kind enough to leave a few hitching rails in tact along Central Avenue Oates noted, a reminder of a bygone era. This was no longer a horse friendly city. Oates had to hang to the far right of the road to make room for automobile traffic. He passed a telephone pole with a paper nailed to it. Leaning sideways in his saddle, he pulled the advertisement from its posting. The picture of running horses had caught his eye and he read the poster to Nellie as he rode on into town. The ad was about a horse race track and

a notification for a claims race. Oates' goal now was to get them both fed and watered. Folding the paper into neat squares, he stuffed it into his saddlebag.

Oates' scarecrow legs shot down through rag-tag overalls into tattered brogan's that poked through scuffed leather stirrups. His pants were too short to cover the hard use of his boots, his dress the mark of a farmer. Nellie was as worn as Oates' shoe leather. The hard ride west had provided just enough nourishment for her to keep his horse steady, but not enough to stave off a bony appearance. Oates wanted nothing more for himself, than he did for his horse.

Oates tipped his floppy straw hat to a white-bearded man passing on the sidewalk. "Begging your pardon, where might I find this place?" Oates took out the ad and thrust the paper toward the surprised man who'd stopped walking to stare at him.

The man pushed back his bolero derby and gave Oates a sharp look through piercing blue eyes. "That's Turf Paradise race track east of town. It's about a mile out. There's a big red barn with a white roof. You can't miss it." The man pursed his mouth and rubbed a hand down his neatly trimmed, gray beard. "I recommend Cactus Lil's for a filling supper and a clean, cheap room. You'll pass that establishment and a stable for your horse down a little further."

"Much obliged." Oates nodded.

Oates looked back over his shoulder at the road amass with automobiles. Moving Nellie about, the unkempt pair waited. In time, he pointed his mare east and stopped traffic with an out stretched hand. This crossing was nothing compared to the narrow and steep dirt roadway snaking down, and then back up the Salt River Canyon. Nellie, ever fearless, moved out gamely to the tune of honking horns.

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Kate O'Mally waited tables at Cactus Lil's six days a week and every day for the past two weeks a tall reed of a man had entered at precisely eleven o'clock in the morning and had taken a back corner table where he'd pull out a white tablet and six pencils and begin sketching something. Every time she'd approached the table he'd cover his work. He always ordered steak and eggs and three biscuits and would sketch between bites. He worked for exactly one hour, then he would fold over his tablet, tuck his pencils away, put money on the table and leave.

His clothing and demeanor were unusual. Obviously shy, the man stared at her from across the room as she waited on other customers. When Kate served his food his soft brown eyes avoided her own. He wouldn't say anything extra. This day Kate was determined to get him to talk to her. Mostly because whatever he was drawing was needling her curiosity. She took this stranger as a challenge.

Putting on her best smile she slid into the booth across from Oates. "Doin' okay today?" She plunged ahead. "I see you got ya a new shirt. Looks good on you, what with your brown eyes an all. I love the color blue, myself, the shade of the sky on a bright winter day. Don't you?"

Oates blinked. He felt his throat tighten and his face flush with heat. He could not ignore the woman. That would be impolite. "Thank ya. I like all the colors of nature." The girl's grin widened. Her green eyes sparkled in reflected light from the front plate glass windows. Oates had never seen eyes that shade of green, more aqua and what he thought the color of the sea would be. He saw her quick glance at his sketching and then she'd asked—

“What’s your name?”

“Oates Sutton.”

She rushed on. “So—you want the usual?” Her dainty hand fluttered at her throat.

Oates saw color rise in her cheeks and somehow that made him feel better and less awkward. But he nodded lest his voice crack with emotion because he’d never heard a voice such as hers, musical and undeniably feminine.

When she stood and walked away, he stared after her. He sketched furiously, regretting that he had no pigmented pencils to do her eyes justice.

When she brought his meal she asked, “Do you work here in the city?”

He nodded. “I tend the horses at the race track.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re a horse doctor?”

He swallowed. “No. I’m sorry if I gave you that idea. I only clean stalls.”

“Oh,” she said.

He didn’t offer more and heard her sigh just as two boisterous fellows ambled into the café. They eyed Oates. He felt trouble and left his tablet closed, finished his meal, left his money and was on his way. He hadn’t gone a half a block before the same two fellows came by in a new Ford coupe. Their car screeched to a halt beside him, the passenger door busting him in the side when it swung open.

“Stay away from my girl!” the big burly man breathed in his face.

Oates didn’t reply. The fellow grabbed his sketch tablet. “Let me see here,” he yelled and waved the pages in the air. Oates’ pencils littered the ground and he stared down at them, fury surging through him. He led with his shoulder and swung at the

fellow, hitting him solid in the jaw. Before he could stoop to gather his belongings the other man jumped on his back. Oates didn't know when he blacked out.

He woke—the girl's green eyes swimming above him. He struggled to a sitting position. Pain flashed through his head.

She laid gentle hands on either side of his shoulders, forcing him back, she dabbed at his forehead with a cool cloth. “Stay put. You've got you a concussion the doc says.”

He closed his eyes tight against the pounding in his head. “My head hurts too bad for me to be dead.”

She laughed and he peeked up at her. “What's your name?”

She tilted her pretty head, her shining mahogany curls sliding across her shoulder. “Kate O'Mally. Lie down now. Doc said you should rest at least two days.”

“Can't. I have a job and my horse Nellie depends on me. It wouldn't look right me stayin' in a woman's house and her not my wife.”

She drew back and looked down at him in surprise. “Why, Oates you are a gentleman. But your head is hurtin' way too much for you to be any kind of a threat to me.”

He didn't argue, but he wouldn't stay either. He wasn't brought up to do as she asked. Before he could get to his feet she held out the sketch he'd made of her.

The drawing was torn and dirty—still she said, “It's beautiful. You've a real talent. I don't know why you're cleaning a barn. Why you could be making a whole lot of money drawing.”

“Ruined.”

“Would you have given it to me?”

A little frown passed between his brows. “If you had asked for it.”

“You would have kept it if I hadn’t?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a puzzle.” She smiled at him. “Can I keep it until you make me another?”

“Yes.”

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It was a week before he returned to Cactus Lil’s. He saw a relief pass over Kate’s fine features.

“It’s good to see you, Oates. I was worried, I thought you’d gone. I heard you’d been threatened again.”

“I’ve only turned my back on one problem. I don’t ever plan on turning my back on any other.”

She tilted her head and stood a perfect pose, elbows bent, one hand holding the other.

“Would you go riding with me today? he asked. “I have a day off.” Glancing around the busy café, he added, “When you’re not busy.”

“Why, Oates—I would love to. Sally will be in soon. She’ll cover for me.”

He brought Nellie around. Nellie who didn’t look anything like herself at all, now fattened up on good timothy hay. Nellie’s dark eyes set on Kate O’Mally and the mare stuck her muzzle right into Kate’s outstretched hand. “Oates, she’s beautiful.” Kate reached up and rubbed the agreeable mare’s brow, her hand smoothing down the furry, brown cheek.

Oates smiled for no one had ever called Nellie beautiful before now. “She does look good. I may ner’ get her back to eatin’ wheat stubble again.” He chuckled.

“Can we both ride her?”

Oates nodded. “We can. She’s fit and ready.” Oates mounted Nellie and removed his foot from the stirrup and held down his arm for Kate to grab a hold.

He swung her up and behind, Kate’s foot barely touching in the leather stirrup. She leaned in close and encircled Oates’ waist with her arms. Her fingers played on his belly beneath her clasped hands and she snuggled close behind the saddle pressing her upper body against his. She leaned her cheek against his back and smiled to herself.

As they walked Nellie out of the city, Oates said, “The men who whooped me, the one ol’ boy said for me to stay away from his girl.”

“That isn’t true, Oates. I don’t like him. He’s lazy. He won’t work and he was mad at me.”

Oates nodded.

Heading Nellie east, Oates said, “There’s a claim’s race in a week.”

Kate took her cheek from Oates’ back. “You’re thinkin’ of running Nellie?”

“Maybe.”

Kate stared over and watched Nellie’s sure feet moving along the highway. “Can she run?”

Oates lifted his shoulders. “She’s been fed up and cared for. I’d grieve losin’ her if she didn’t win, but the fellers runnin’ won’t be on race horses. They’d be racing their ridin’ horses. They draw up pairs to race one another. There’s a chance she could win. In addition to the other feller’s horse there’s a two hundred dollar purse.”

They worked their way down a dirt lane. Kate noticed how close to the track they were. “You gonna show me how good she can run?”

“I am.”

“Okay,” she said excited.

Oates helped Kate down and went to speak to a man at the barn. In no time the sweet tempered mare, Nellie, was racing against a gray pace horse, her good nature transformed into that of a swift race horse. Nellie did not like to lose.

Oates dismounted, Kate still looking up at him with a starry gaze. “She’s wonderful, Oates. I like a man who is willin’ to take a chance.”

Oates resettled his hat that he had folded and stuffed inside his shirt during the race. He smiled at Kate. “She is good, though I still can not bear to think of losing her.”

“Sometimes making money takes risk.”

He nodded and grasped Kate’s small hand in his. “Let’s walk apiece to let Nellie cool down.”

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And win, she did. The horse Nellie’d run against, a stud horse called Apache now belonged to Oates.

After the race when Oates was standing beside Nellie, Kate rushed to him and threw her arms around his neck. He swung her about as a beau might swing his girl. When he stopped there was nothing for it but to look down into those sea green eyes and kiss her parted lips. When the kiss ended, they were breathless. He asked, “Would you consider marrying a farmer, Kate?” Kate’s hands in his—he waited.

She yanked her hands from his. “No!”

Oates rocked back on his heels. “No?”

“I want to marry an artist, Oates. Why, as soon as everyone knows about you, you’ll be able to get a whole lot more than five dollars a drawing. It would be a wonder to be sought after, to be stopped on the street and to be Mrs. Oates Sutton, the wife of a famous artist. I would be somebody!”

He heard her words though his mind wandered back to Granddaddy’s farm and to the once fertile soil, the sound of a whippoorwill at night and bees buzzing in the old apple tree of a spring. He knew himself and what he was born to. Drawing was more uncertain than any amount of farming. People would expect flawlessness from him and he was a flawed man. Oates reached back and patted his good horse, Nellie. “Texas is in the middle of what they’re callin’ ‘The Dust Bowl’. Who knows when the wind will stop blowin’, but when it does, Kate O’Mally, I’ll be goin’ home.”

THE END