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A Sand Hills Gift

by Del Cain

Headed west toward Woodward on U.S. Highway 270, which is also Oklahoma 3, I had the cruise control set and the air conditioning on, and I was sliding through the spring sunshine. The locusts and post oaks were shining green as the pasture grass and an occasional tumbleweed chased the south breeze across the highway. The brown of plowed fields was broken by green spots caused by the cedars that had managed to escape the brush hog until they became institutionalized in their place in the pasture, and by occasional fields of summer crops being grown where wheat had already been harvested. That green was broken, in turn, by cows grazing: Herefords, Angus, and all the new breeds that I don't recognize.

As I cruised and enjoyed the country, something changed. Like a slow dissolve in the movies, my pickup became a buckboard. I watched my hands, now my great-grandfather's hands, extended in front of me/him, handling the reins and urging the team up the track of a road through the sand hills. As an undetected observer within him, I heard/shared his thoughts as he noticed the things around him and drove on toward town. With him, I noticed that the big thicket of sand plums on the south bank of the hill would soon be ripe. They would be ready to pick in a couple of weeks. He decided to buy extra sugar in town so that there would be plenty for making jelly. He was enjoying the thought of the pleasure the children would take in a day off from most of the chores. They would take a picnic lunch and pick plenty of plums for jelly to last all year. Sand plums are, along with God's greatest sunsets, one of the few natur-

al rewards for living in this country. They are about the size of a grape, mostly seed, and so sour you can't eat them off the bush no matter how ripe they get. They're too sour to make pie. What they are good for is to make wonderful jelly. Sand plum jelly is the taste of home for a lot of us Northwest Okies.

This is hard country. The sand blows when the wind blows, which is most of the time. When it rains, which is rare, it washes things away, top soil, crops, and sometimes, your livestock. The weather that brings the rain also brings tornadoes to blow away your barn, your house, or you. It's a hard country, but those who stay with it become hard also. Dragging a living out of it, they sink roots in it so deep that it sometimes draws their descendants back to look or even to stay.

As I slide through this country in modern comfort, I think of all those winter breakfasts warmed by the sunrise glow of summer's sand plum jelly spread on warm biscuits. I wonder how my children would react to spending a morning picking plums and an afternoon making jelly. I think I'll pick up an extra bag of sugar while I'm in town. In a couple of weeks we'll take a day off and put up some pleasant memories.