

# SUN ABOVE THE CLOUDS

By William Blomstedt

“Look like rain, don’t it.”

“Yessir ... mmmm ... yessir.”

The dreary gray clouds stretched as far as the eye could see, which was quite a ways in Bunson, North Dakota. Most people thought of Montana as the Big Sky state, but North Dakota could put up a pretty good fight for that title, especially with most of western Montana tucked in the narrow drainages of the Rocky Mountains. On a clear day in Bunson, looking to the horizon was an elementary reminder of space and time. From the top of a knoll, a view unobstructed by buildings or mountains, one could watch the giant cloud sculptures extend upwards into the atmosphere as they silently floated over Radclaw, Sawfield or any of the surrounding towns. The clouds far away were just as big as the cumulonimbus formations passing over Bunson, but on the horizon they looked as delicate as puffs of smoke waiting for a breeze.

This day a flat and drab cloud covered the sky, like wastewater floating a few hundred feet above the ground. One could not pick out the sun’s location, and without a timepiece it was impossible to tell if it was time to get coffee at Wellgood’s or a beer at the Sinkhole. No rain had yet glazed Bunson’s streets, but it felt like the drops had already parted with the clouds and were on their kamikaze paths towards the sidewalks and rooftops.

Roland and Cliffis were the only people on Main Street. They stood next to each other underneath Wellgood’s overhang and both kept glancing up at the clouds. Usually Roland stood alone at the diner’s door when Oliver unlocked it at 5:35 AM. He would sit at the Dead Peckers’ usual table for fifteen to twenty minutes by himself, reading the newspaper or just stirring his thoughts with a cup of coffee. It was often his favorite time of the day - a few moments of solitude to gather himself and wait for the day to unfold. The other old men had their normal arrival and departure times, but none so regular as Walt. Every morning Walt would watch the WGBY news at his home, turn off the TV and walk to the diner at the same pace, opening the door at exactly at 6:36, or a few minutes later in the wintertime when he had to don his hat and mittens. His had such precise timing that Patty sometimes reset the

diner’s clock to his arrival, if the clock was a little off.

This morning Cliffis was standing in front of Wellgood’s when Roland parked his truck on the street. Unlike the other boys, Cliffis didn’t have a routine. He’d show up whenever he chose, sometimes spending every possible minute at the diner for days on end, and then disappearing for an entire month without a word of explanation. This day Roland found Cliffis with his hands in his pockets and a woolen hat jammed tightly down on his head. He would not have been surprised if Cliffis had been waiting there for three hours. They exchanged the early morning weather evaluation and soon after Oliver’s green Toyota Camry appeared on Main Street and turned into the alley that led behind the building.

The rain had yet to reach the ground. Roland took a final look at the clouds before turning his attention to the diner’s glass door. After a few moments, Oliver switched on the lights and started the coffee machine. Before taking off his rain jacket, he crossed the room and unlocked the front door.

“Mornin’ gents. Think it’s gonna rain, huh?”

“Yup. I reckon.”

“Mmmm ... mmmm.”

Oliver held the door open and Cliffis doffed his hat as he passed through. They ambled to their normal table in the corner and minutes later two cups of coffee were steaming in front of them. Oliver returned the pot to its filling station and moved into the back area where he began his morning prep. Roland and Cliffis were left alone in the diner and Cliffis rocked back and forth in his seat, continuously humming.

“It’s been a dry one this year.” Roland said  
“Crops sure could use the rain.”

“Yessir, it has ... mmmm ... mmmm.”

Roland looked at the black liquid in his mug. He didn’t put any cream or sugar in his coffee, he only stirred it with a spoon as he sipped. The coffee at Wellgood’s wasn’t the best, but it was hot and it kept flowing. A buck could fill your mug for the entire morning and caffeinate you all afternoon.

“Specially the alfalfa. Lookin’ as dry as can be.”

Cliffis didn’t say anything. He was in one of his

quiet moods, just humming away to his cup of coffee. On a talkative day he’d jaw your ear off, if you gave him half a chance. He had his favorite subjects: fishing, North Dakota past and present, the New York Yankees from 1949 to 1953, antique farm tools and, oddly enough, ABBA. But then he’d go off on other tangents a ways round the bend. One sometimes had to bumble along with him while he told you, in minute detail, the new method he had devised for raking leaves, or the pros and cons of Tupperware. From what Roland could tell, it was about a one-in-ten shot if a talkative Cliffis showed up and today had not hit the mark. Roland stirred his coffee and the silence rested between them.

“Nothing like last summer. Last summer was wet as could be. Farmers out in the fields hoping for sunshine. Washed half the crop away with that one storm in June.”

“Yup ... mmmmmmm ... Was a bad ‘un.”

“Sure was.”

Roland tucked the spoon into his thumb and took a sip of coffee. Cliffis also picked up his mug, and, still rocking back and forth, somehow drank without spilling a drop. When Cliffis sipped his coffee he constantly added cream shots and sugar. Patty would try to refill his mug, but she could never add more than a dash on the top. By the end of the morning Roland was fairly sure that Cliffis was drinking coffee-colored sweet cream.

Roland watched this human pendulum and tried to think of how long they had known each other. Roland had come to Bunson when he was young. His family bought a piece of land and he spent his adolescent years on these high plains. When his early-twenties hit he fled to Wisconsin with the goals of earning money, finding a girlfriend and drinking in a bar where you didn’t know the detailed history of everyone in the room. After he had accomplished these, Roland returned to Bunson, dragging the future wife with him and together they took over the family farm. Cliffis had arrived in town sometime during those missing years. He was Artie’s cousin and had only meant to work one season, but he stayed through the winter, then the next summer and soon became a Bunson fixture; another odd duck that liked the looks of this pond. Now Cliffis lived in a shack behind Artie’s house. Roland had moved back in ... it had been something like thirty-five years now. Almost forty. Forty years they had

known each other. Roland took another sip of coffee.

“Cliffis, you gone fishing lately?”

“Mmmm ... nope ... mmmmmmm.”

“Yeah.” Roland said, “Me neither. I’m sure Artie told you about that bass though.”

“Mmmm ... yup ... mmmmmmm.”

“Said it was twenty inches but he forgot to measure it. My ass.”

“Mmmmmmmmmmm.”

Wellgood’s door jingled and Patty stepped in. She smiled at the men as she shed her rain jacket.

“Howdy boys. Cliffis, you fall out of bed this morning?”

“Mmmm ... nope ... mmmmmmm”

Patty laughed as if Cliffis had told her a good joke and then moved across the room. She found the pot of coffee and brought it to them, filling Roland’s mug by half and adding only a splash to Cliffis’s.

“Lookin’ dark out there,” she said.

“Sure is. How are the kids, Patty?”

“Why, they’re doin’ fine. Hope they don’t get rained on out there waiting for the bus.”

“I’m sure they won’t. Last night Christopher said it wasn’t gonna start til mid-morning.”

“Yeah, I heard that too. But you never know round these parts.”

“Supposed to be a deluge after that.”

“Yep. It’ll be good for the crops, though. Less it’s too much. Remember last summer?”

“Yeah, I sure do. Me and Cliffis were just talking about it.”

“Mmmm ... was a bad ‘un.”

“Sure was ...” Patty smiled at them and returned behind the counter to get ready. Roland looked into his mug. He picked up his spoon and stirred the coffee into a small whirlpool, then watched the black liquid spin until it settled to a pond-stillness. Then he took a sip and looked at Cliffis.

“Cliffis, doya remember the blizzard of ‘85?”

Cliffis stopped still in mid-rock and his eyes moved in unison towards the upper right.

“Aaahyup.”

“THAT was a bad one. I remember not being able to leave the farm for three days there was

so much snow. Couldn't call anyone, no power. Couldn't do nothin' except burn the candles and fill up the wood stove. My whole family had to camp out in the kitchen together and we had to ration the wood. Then the pipes froze up so we only had a splash of water each day. That was a bad one."

"Ya ... mmmm ... was a bad 'un."

"Yup. Then there was the spring of '90 when we got that softball-sized hail. That was bad. Drove Harris right batty. Killed all his crops that year, sold his property right off for pennies on the dollar. Moved into Bismarck, straight into a home. Poor fella."

"Mmmm ... Ya, sure was a bad 'un."

"What else..." Roland leaned back and looked at the ceiling. "We had that drought in '93... or '94, can't remember. Bad, but not real bad. And that strange summer back... way back. Sixty-something, when we had no rain at all in the first half of the summer and rain every day from August on. Boy, that was somethin'."

"Mmmmm ... mmmmmm."

Behind the counter, Patty turned the knob on the old bunny-eared TV and the set buzzed to life. At the flick of the switch, all the pixels burst onto the screen and spent the first few seconds finding their assigned color and brightness. Once aligned they formed a picture of Janet Kensey and Eric Wortheimer, the two WGBY anchors seated at their desk. It took three more seconds for the sound to come out of the fuzzy speakers.

"Yes ... ha ... well," Eric chuckled at something just said. "I did have a stomach ache for the rest of the day. Let's take a look at the forecast, looks like we're going to get some rain out there today, doesn't it Veronica?"

"It sure does, Eric." The golden voice came from the TV's muffled speakers and the screen switched to show Veronica Melakonopolis, the morning weather anchor. Both Roland and Cliffis leaned forward in their chairs.

The WGBY-Bismarck Morning Show covered the weather quite extensively. Of the half-hour long time slot, eight minutes of commercials left twenty-two minutes of show. Of the twenty-two minutes, eight to ten of them were focused on the weather over three different segments. The program began with a greeting by Eric and Janet, but switched di-

rectly into a bite-sized weather preview. Then, after the main news headlines, Veronica looked at the radar in more detail and gave the long-range forecast. Finally, after sports and before the sign-off, Veronica gave a third weather rundown for those who already needed reminding on how to dress for the day.

The WGBY Evening News offered a similarly segmented program and a great debate occurred among the people in Bunson, and likely the rest of the greater Bismarck area, whether the Morning Show or the Evening News on WGBY was better. The programs were essentially the same, with the Morning Show reminding the viewers of the highlights of the previous evening's news, and the Evening News reporting on what the Morning Show said was going to happen that day. This cycle never ceased but each show colored the spaces with their own set of anchors and personalities. The news and sports segments of both shows were generally considered equal and favorably looked upon by all. The crux of this argument, the flash point which divided neighbors, friends and family, almost always came down to the weather.

In the mornings the weather anchor was Veronica, who, by any means and standards, was a beautiful woman. Even her most serious detractors had to admit her ease on the eyes. She had a lightning-white smile that dominated the TV screen through the rain, sleet, snow or sun and she dressed exceptionally well, wearing nothing fancy, but combining simple, affordable clothing that left male viewers with their jaws on the table and females planning their next shopping trip.

At first glance, Veronica had the looks of a woman who would never have to lift a finger in her life; there would always be men falling over each other to help her at every turn. But by listening to her speak on TV, with her easy banter, bubbling laughter and down-home colloquialisms, one could tell she was still a modest farm girl, and this was probably her most attractive trait. She had grown up on a farm in Arkaba, a small town in the northwest corner of the state. From there she leapt into the spotlight by winning the title of Miss North Dakota at the fair age of twenty. The rumor mill said she almost captured the Miss America title, but lost due to her platform of accurate weather reportage. In North Dakota this might seem like the most noble of causes, but its importance was lost on non-agrarian communities

and the Miss American judges were certainly not North Dakota farmers. Veronica ended up following her dream and, after gaining her degree in meteorology, became the WGBY morning weather anchor. She provided the kind of weather forecast for everyone under the sun. From kids going to school to old men planning their fishing trips, she presented the weather in a friendly, next-door-neighbor kind of way that, even if she reported tornadoes and blizzards, made you feel like looking out the window at the sky and smiling.

The evening weather show operated under a much different philosophy. When meteorologist Christopher Housen appeared on the screen, the show took on the seriousness and precision of an income tax form. Every evening Christopher dressed in a navy blue suit, a red tie and his hair looked like it had been chiseled out of a block of stone. In his expressionless voice, he proceeded to quickly and thoroughly break down the weather, packing as much information as he could in the allotted time before turning the show back to anchor Ned Foley, who then had to revive the viewers from their stupor with a story of a recovered lost puppy or a successful high school bake-off.

Christopher was not from North Dakota. He came from somewhere like Michigan or Indiana and arrived in Bismarck eight years ago when Ron Felkins retired. Ron Felkins had been the weatherman for thirty-odd-years at WGBY and was a living legend in western North Dakota. Everyone loved Ron. He faithfully reported through the good times and the bad, the snow and the sun, the droughts and the deluges. Sometime in the eighties Bunson even awarded him a medal of honor during the Summer Thresher festival. To everyone's surprise, Ron actually attended the event and sheepishly accepted the award. In his brief, thirty-second speech, he announced that the town of Bunson had a bright and sunny forecast ahead of it and everyone about fell over themselves in delight. Afterward, the line to shake Ron's hand stretched from the stage all the way to the Sinkhole.

Ron was in his early seventies when he retired. At first everyone had their doubts about Christopher, but he soon gained a cult following with his extensive, scientific and accurate-as-possible weather reporting. Christopher's report was a farmer's dream. He exhaustively covered the temperatures, precipi-

tation, wind speed and radar/satellite images as any normal weather report would, but also sometimes included the historical averages and records, dew or frost points, barometric pressure, Haines Index, atmospheric pressure, relative humidity, visibility, heat index, Weekly Crop Moisture Index, Weekly Palmer Index, soil moisture, Livestock Safety Index (which was always 'Alert'), hours of sun, solar radiation and Drying Index to name a few. As the words flew from his mouth and numbers flashed on the screen, all the farmers in the room would lean forward in their chairs. After the whirlwind of technical jargon, Christopher would take it down a notch and summarize the forecast. Sometimes he would highlight one of the statistics and give a brief explanation of why it was important to know for that day. Once the report was over people would discuss the numbers ("Boy, I haven't seen solar radiation hit 4600 since last June...") and feel satisfied with their grasp on the complicated weather process happening all around them.

After Ron Felkins retired from the evening show, Roland quickly became a Christopher fan. He liked watching Veronica in the morning, but for the same reasons he didn't mind watching commercials on TV or going to see a movie with a pretty girl in it. Even though Roland did not understand half of the numbers and indexes that Christopher reported, he felt that the wealth of information could help him in any situation.

Roland had watched Christopher's report every day until last spring when an afternoon of heartburn

**“ Retirement, Roland realized, would be the next and final phase in his life. With his social security check and his wife Cindy's retirement plan, they could live comfortably for the rest of their days. ”**



*Artowrk by Yahat Benazir*

turned out to be a minor heart attack and Roland had to take a trip to the Bismarck hospital. Doctors with clipboards stood at his bedside and told him he needed to cut back on the fried foods and start taking things easy, or he wasn't going to be around much longer. They kept him under observation for a few days and all he did between visits from family and doctors was watch the Weather Channel. An unusually warm week had hit that April and Roland took in forecast after forecast from different parts of the country, listening to the weathermen and women parade their best springtime vocabulary. By the end of his stay he could tell anyone the three-day forecast from anywhere between Scranton and Seattle. But this constant meteorological barrage clawed at his worried mind. If he couldn't work as hard anymore, what would happen to the farm?

The big surprise came when Clyde, Roland's eldest son, came from Iowa and said he would return to Bunson to take over the business. Clyde had a good job in Iowa City, and had never mentioned the idea before, but when Roland looked him in the eyes he saw the truth. He could retire. The realization frightened him, but when it stood on his doorstep he could do nothing but to welcome it inside. Before the heart attack, Roland could feel his creaking bones and tight muscles, but his eyes and brain couldn't see the wake of his lifetime spread behind him. In peaceful moments, when he was warm and sitting in a nice chair, the thoughts and years compressed on top of each other into a single indefinable point, one that he had held onto since his youth. Roland could sit still and savor those moments, dragging each one out until his gut started acting up or he leaned over to scratch something and felt complaints from his toes to his neck.

Retirement, Roland realized, would be the next and final phase in his life. With his social security check and his wife Cindy's retirement plan, they could live comfortably for the rest of their days. The week after he left the hospital, Roland officially passed the business onto Clyde and strange feelings of excitement and emptiness swirled inside him like smoke and steam. While Roland vowed to let Clyde run the business, he promised that he would sit down with his boy for the mid-morning meal and talk with him about the farm. The tradition began and Roland imparted his best knowledge over flapjacks and fruit salad every morning. Clyde followed his advice most of the time, but other times he had his own ideas

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and brushed Roland's words aside. That hurt a little, but when Roland saw the numbers coming in, he couldn't complain. In his first season of retirement, Roland's farm harvested a bumper crop of sunflowers, even with the rust that had been bothering his fields for the past few years. Clyde also managed a 1.5 ton-per-acre average for the alfalfa, numbers Roland had never seen on this side of the state. Near Fargo that was possible, but for Bunson those numbers were off the charts. Roland was proud of his boy, but right on the heels of that pride was a hollow feeling. When Roland spoke, he could see Clyde politely listening, but sometimes there was a look his son's eyes which made Roland stammer and huff. He wanted to explain that he knew what Clyde was thinking and it wasn't like that; this wasn't just an old timer explaining how they did things back in the good old days. But as Roland listened to his own words, he realized that was exactly what it sounded like, and he eventually stopped trying. They still had breakfast together, but Roland did not talk as much about how he used to run the farm and answered questions only when asked.

When the hollow feeling still remained weeks and months later, Roland realized that he missed running the farm. He missed being on that edge of life. Through all the financial uncertainty and constant fear of disaster, the process of waking up every morning and working became as much a part of him as the breath coming out of his lungs. Every morning for nearly forty years he had woken up and asked himself what needed to be done that day so they could work the next day, and the day after that, and the entire chain of days that led all the way to harvest day. And after harvest day he would take a breath and start getting ready for the next season - repairs, maintenance, paper work, insurance and all the little chores in between. In the little cluttered office on the side of his work barn he could look at

the calendar of the previous year to see what they had done on that day exactly a year ago. If he dug through the scattered piles of paper and magazine, he could find the calendar from the year before that. The longer he dug the further he could go back in history.

In his first winter as head of the farm, Clyde cleaned out all of Roland's junk in the office: the receipts, the misplaced tools, the countless Smitty's Feed and Grain calendars, long-forgotten coffee mugs, stacks upon stacks of old seed catalogs and the notes Roland had written to himself. Clyde swept out the years of dust, bleached the local civilizations of grime and installed filing cabinets and a computer. Now, as Roland had told the Dead Peckers more than once, it looked like the waiting room of his dentist's office. That joke roused a chuckle the first time he told it, but afterwards the scenario became real. Roland avoided that office much like he avoided the dentist, filling his day with the things he used to do for fun, like going to the diner, getting a haircut, or driving into town to get groceries. Each day felt shorter than the last and Roland had the sad realization that life had become less a matter of surviving as it was one of waiting.

The bell on the door jingled and Roland came back into his diner at the table with Cliffis. The TV was in the middle of a commercial when Lester and Artie stepped through the front door and into Wellgood's.

“Mornin', fellas,” Patty said from behind the counter. By the time the door jingled shut, Patty had two mugs and a pot of coffee in her hand.

“Mornin' to you too, Patty.” Artie bellowed. She walked around the counter while Artie and Lester stood in front of the door, extracting themselves from their rain jackets and brushing off their shirts. Lester was nearly a head taller than Artie, but Artie stretched out horizontally two or three times Lester's width. With his jacket off, Artie slapped his belly with both hands and jiggled it up and down.

“God damn, I'm starved. Almost didn't make it through the night.”

“Oh, you poor soul.” Patty said and put the mugs on the table across from Roland and Cliffis. “What's going to save you this morning?” She filled the mugs with coffee and both Artie and Lester moved from the door towards their seats.

“I think the steak and eggs will do me fine, with

white toast, grits and an extra egg. Tell Oliver to cook the steak rare today. I mean rare. Thirty seconds on the grill, no more, no less.”

“I'll have the Hardy Boy, please.” Lester said as he sat down and put his finger through the mug's hoop.

“Sure thing. You boys OK?” Patty looked at Cliffis and Roland. Roland held up his hand and Cliffis rocked back and forth. “OK, it'll be up in a minute,” she said, and returned to the counter. The rest of the diner was still empty and both Lester and Artie started modifying their coffees.

“Cliffis, thought you might have up and died this morning,” Artie said once his coffee was stirred properly. “I didn't see you in the hut and thought you mighta just sleep-wandered off into the fields. Legs would've found your body in a couple of weeks.”

“Mmmm ... Legs is a good dog ... mmmm”

“Sure as hell is,” Artie said and folded his arms so they rested atop his belly. A moment of silence passed over the table before Lester opened his mouth.

“Looks like rain today.” Lester spoke in his deep voice and turned towards the TV set, which showed sports highlights.

“Sure does,” Roland replied. “Cliffis and I were just talking about it.”

“Yep ... mmmmmm ... Sun's always shining above the clouds.”

“I bet ... uh ... I,” Artie stopped and looked at Cliffis like his tongue had been pinched by a pair of pliers, but his words soon found a detour. “I bet Veronica told you guys that this morning, didn't she? She's just a dumb broad. Heard it all from Christopher, I'm sure. Doesn't tell you anything you haven't heard the night before.” He gave the table a slight pound with his fist which jangled the cutlery. “My crops aren't gonna rely on her.”

“Yup,” Lester chimed in. “Just a pretty face and a nice ass.”

“Hey,” Roland said, putting his coffee cup down. “She does alright. I mean ... sure, she's not as thorough as Christopher, but you gotta admit she's good at what she does. She reports the weather, huh? She makes you feel good and she's nice to look at.” Both Artie and Lester nodded their heads. “Sure she isn't as technical about the numbers, but you don't always need that, right?”

“Well, I do.” Artie said. “Without all those numbers how am I gonna know when the first frost is coming? How am I going to know ... how am I going to know when the right day to plant is? Not from Veronica, that’s for sure. If I want her weather forecast, I’ll be just as fine lookin’ out the window. But when I need to know ... I watch those numbers and I know the right day to call up Corey and have him come over with the combine...”

“Yup.” Lester chimed in again, derailing Artie’s speech. Cliffis kept humming and Roland began stirring his mug of coffee.

“I suppose...” Roland started but he stopped talking to look at the television. Lester and Artie turned in their chairs and looked at the screen.

“That’s our newscast for the day, folks,” said Jane Wharton, the Morning Show’s bespectacled news anchor. “Let’s go back to Veronica one last time ... Veronica?”

“Thanks Jane and Eric.” None of the men in the diner moved when Veronica came on screen. She was wearing a yellow button-up sweater over a plain white dress and a golden necklace with earrings to match. From Roland’s seat, Veronica’s image was about the size of his thumb, but her figure and smile burst through the screen and almost filled Wellgood’s.

“Well, as I told you all before,” Veronica said, her voice still musical in spite of the warped speakers, “it’s looking nasty out this morning, but don’t let that fool you. The wind’s going to come down from the north and wipe all these ugly gray clouds out of town. By noon you’ll wish that you’ll be having a picnic out in the countryside with the whole family. Then the rest of the afternoon and evening will be free and clear, and the three-day forecast looks the same.” The computer-generated chart momentarily replaced Veronica and showed sunshine and highs in the upper seventies for the next three days.

“So get out this afternoon ... and have a good ole day, North Dakota.” The camera paused on Veronica for an extra second and then flashed back to Eric and Jane who said their perfunctory goodbyes before the credits. Patty, who was taking a minute’s break to watch the weather, turned off the TV and returned to the kitchen where Oliver was crafting the morning feed.

“Have a good ole day, North Dakota,” Artie said in a snide tone as he turned to the table. It was

the phrase that Veronica used every morning at the end of the broadcast. “She doesn’t know nothing. Look at the sky! It’s gonna pour!”

“Yeah. I suppose,” Roland said.

“Good for old-timers like you, who need to know if they’re going to get wet out there fishing.” Artie said.

“Yeah, I’ve got my boy out there running the show. He’s doing great. You see that field over on the Radclaw side? Best looking sunflowers I’ve seen around this year.”

“Best looking sunflowers I’ve seen on that piece of property, ever!” Artie threw his hands up in the air. “You should’ve turned the farm over to Clyde years ago, if you’d known what’s good for you.”

“Yep, he’s showing me a thing or two. Say, Artie, you should think about adopting a kid. Get one from Korea, that seems to be the thing to do these days. Then you can turn over your back acre of flax to him.”

“Never!” Artie cried “I hate kids. I’ll be farming my land ‘til the day I die. And I still have a section of flax back there, thank you very much.”

“You haven’t had a half-section of flax since the eighties. Even if Veronica’s forecast ruins your crops, you’ll only be out a few hundred bucks.”

Artie pursed his lips together and Roland smiled as he saw a little red flare in Artie’s cheeks.

“I ... used ... to be one of the biggest farmers in

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Scratch County.”

“Yeah, just like that twenty-inch bass of yours, huh?”

By now Artie was puffing hard and his cheeks were flushed. He folded his arms across his chest which usually meant he was through with the conversation. Patty showed up to top off all the coffee cups to the soundtrack of Cliffis’s humming. Artie uncrossed his arms and brought his hands down on the table

“Roland, I’ve got a map in the truck. I’ll...”

The door tinkled, cutting off Artie, and Walt stepped in the diner, right on time. Walt received a Wellgood’s greeting as he took off his coat and as soon as he pulled up a chair, Woodrow and Bernard trickled in. A few minutes later, Vernon burst through the door, licking his lips at the tantalizing aromas greeting him. Even Frank, who wasn’t a regular member but still enjoyed a good session with the Dead Peckers stopped in for a chat. Other tables and stools began to fill up with hungry farmers and it turned into a busy morning for Patty and Oliver. Patty flew around with the coffee pot, filling every mug to the brim and coaxing smiles at every opportunity.

The Limp Dick Club’s conversation shifted around in topic, reverting briefly back to the weather every time a new person pulled a seat up to the table, but then branching out to the other well-traveled subjects like car repair, fishing and town gossip. They even held an informal joke session where everyone shared the jokes they had heard from their latest conversation with out-of-town cousins or relatives. Everyone at the table guffawed at the punch lines and made mental notes to tell the joke to their cousin or uncle during the next phone call. It was another standard morning at Wellgood’s diner.

Roland drained his cup of coffee and pushed the plate of toast crumbs to the side. He waved away Patty from his mug and left a few dollar bills on the table. Everyone said their goodbyes and at the door Roland put on his jacket.

When he was outside, Roland looked up. Grey still covered the sky but a few lumpy outlines showed a presence of clouds above the town, rather than just a flat, painted color. Roland looked at his watch. It was 9:25 AM. To his left stood Cliffis, who had left a full half hour before him, but was still standing in front of Wellgood’s window with his hands shoved

in his pockets. Roland pulled his rain jacket around him and spat into the gutter.

“Well...” Roland said and ran his fingers through his hair. Cliffis continued humming and rocking back and forth. Instead of doing what he normally did, which was get in his truck and drive away to a second breakfast with Clyde, Roland leaned against the wall next to Cliffis. He found a toothpick in his coat’s pocket and picked at his teeth as they both watched the street and the sky above. A few cars drove by and both Roland and Cliffis waved at the ones they knew. Neither of them said anything for fifteen minutes until the door of Wellgood’s tinkled open and Artie waddled out. He huffed and spat and turned to face Roland and Cliffis.

“Good thing I brought this today, right?” He said and yanked his rain jacket closed. Artie began fumbling with his zipper but he couldn’t see over his belly and it took a few moments and a couple curses before he zipped it up tight to his neck. Then Artie brushed off his chest, belly and thighs and stood up straight.

“Well, have a good ole ... day, uh ... I, um ...” Artie bit his lower lip and a strange look came over his face. Then he abruptly walked away.

“Hey Artie,” Roland yelled “isn’t that your truck over there?” and nodded his head in the opposite direction. Artie stopped short, turned and walked back. With his head down and his face a ruddy, dark red, he grumbled something as he passed them by. Roland tried to stifle his smile.

“Bye Artie. Don’t forget to water your crops.”

“Hmmm ... bye now, Artie ... mmmm.” Cliffis mumbled, rocking back and forth. Artie didn’t acknowledge them. He yanked the door of his truck open, fired the engine and sped off with a great roar. Roland finally let his smile loose. It felt good to smile. Then he glanced at the sky and far to the west he thought he could see the faintest speck of blue.

*William Blomstedt was born in Washington state, raised in Massachusetts and has lived from Texas to Montana. He travels the world working with, writing about and studying honey bees. He has not published any fiction.*