The Weary Traveler

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Abstract

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by Della Weems

English & Speech, Senior

SARAH watched her rough hands as they slowly rubbed the egg off the plate. The water was already cold and greasy even though it seemed like she had just poured it from the kettle on the stove.

Why do we have to live here? Why? I don't think I can stand it another day. I work like a horse and live like an animal. How can he be so cruel to me, or the children? Can't he see we need somethin' better than this?

Sarah looked out the hole in the sod wall to see the girls digging in the garden. It wouldn't be such a bad place to live if they could just fix it up. And the children loved it. Somehow they never associated the freezing temperatures of the winter or the sandstorms of the summer with the place. All it meant to them was being able to run and play anywhere, to grow a couple extra pumpkins so they could make jack-o-lanterns, to watch the tiny animals of the prairie build homes and raise their young. They were happy with flour-sack dresses and hand-me-down overalls and shoes. Why couldn't she be satisfied instead of always wishing they were back in Nebraska? Was it really that much better there?

Convinced that all her unhappiness stemmed from her selfish attitudes Sarah had that familiar feeling of guilt that made depression inescapable. Her only goal in life was to make a good home for Jafe and the kids. She couldn't stand to fail. Already she could see that the children were growing up and she'd never have a second chance to make them happy.

"Whoops." Sarah felt the coolness of the dishwater as it soaked through her apron and dress. Without looking she fished out the platter that had slid from her hands and placed it in the rack with the other plates. She was almost done, and glad. She needed to sit down and rest a few minutes.
“I’m always needin’ a rest these days. Maybe that’s why I feel so bad. Can’t ever get a thing done. Too busy feelin’ sorry for myself to notice all the beautiful things goin’ on.”

Sarah headed for the open door and settled herself on the doorsill. She was big already even though the baby wasn’t due for two more months. Her long brown hair was pinned in a severe knot on the back of her head, but her eyes were gentle like a doe’s. She pulled her dress and apron tight over her knees and began to study the faded pattern of the cloth. The material in that apron had been the curtains in one of the bedrooms in their house in Nebraska. Sarah had been happy there—she’d had friends, a little money, time to go shopping, and a nice house with running water in the kitchen. She could remember as plain as day when Jafe had come home from work and announced, “Start packin’ the stuff, Sarie. You and me and the kids is movin’ West. I got us eight hundred acres in northern Texas and we’re gonna raise cattle. It’ll be good to get away from this here place. You’ll like it, Sarie. I know you will.” So she’d packed and . . .

“Mommy, Mommy. Look a’ this.” Bobby opened his hands to reveal a fuzzy orange and black caterpillar.

“Run in the kitchen and get a cannin’ jar and you can keep this critter.” Sarah slid to one side of the door so Bobby could slip by her into the kitchen. When he returned with the jar she took it and, pushing on the hardened dirt of the kitchen floor, she got to her feet. Bobby held his little brown hand up for her and when she squeezed it within her own, Sarah felt sad that he wouldn’t get to be the baby much longer. Bobby wasn’t quite two. They’d have to be careful he didn’t feel left out after the new baby came.

Sarah led Bobby to a patch of grass and helped him pull a handful and stuff it in the jar. “Let’s go to the well now. He’ll need some water too, won’t he?” Sarah guided Bobby’s short finger into the bucket of water beside the well and then held his hand above the jar to let the water drip in. “That should do it, Punkin.” Bobby ran to show off his treasure to the rest of the kids.

Sarah walked toward the garden where Mary and Sally were working. They jerked at the weeds, sometimes without
even looking, and Sarah wondered how they managed never to pull any of the wrong plants. This year the garden was completely their responsibility and they spent each morning watering it and pulling weeds. Jafe had helped the girls plant early in April because the neighbors had told him it was too dry for anything to grow after the end of June. With the few spring rains everything had grown and already the walls of the cave were lined with jars of canned vegetables. Almost every row was brown now, but Mary and Sally still worked to save the last vegetables and collect seeds for next year. The only thing that Sarah really missed in the garden was the flowers.

In Nebraska sweet peas had vined up the white picket fence around their yard. Sarah didn't think anything smelled nicer than sweet peas, unless it was the lilacs in the spring. And she'd always had at least two rows of gladiolas for bouquets in August to put on the altar of the little church on the corner. They didn't even have a church here.

Oh, why do I always compare everything to Nebraska? I hardly give this place a chance.

Six-year-old Sally ran to meet her mother and hugged her arm. "Come on, Mommy. I wanna show ya somethin'." Sarah noticed Sally had a sparkle in her eyes that showed she was excited, but she still walked slowly, not pulling or hurrying her mother. Sally had been four when Bobby was born, old enough to notice her mother's huge stomach, but too young to understand. Ever since Sarah had started to get big again, Sally asked thousands of questions and gazed at her mother in awe. So different from Mary who wouldn't think of asking a question. Mary was the oldest girl and Sarah knew the extra responsibility she'd placed on the eight-year-old made her more shy and reserved.

"See, Mommy. Look." Sally held back the leaves of a bean plant to display a wild violet that had managed to survive. She and Sarah stooped to examine the tiny purple flower while Mary stood smiling a few feet away. Sarah felt like she'd never felt since they left Nebraska. "Maybe somethin' beautiful can live in this place."

Sarah crawled beneath the heavy quilt and shifted her body until she was comfortable on the feather mattress. This
was the first night she'd spent without Jafe since they were married ten years ago and she missed the security of his body next to hers. She thought about the nights she waited up for him when he'd gone to a meeting, but that was Nebraska and this was Texas and he wasn't coming home.

Jafe and Tommy had gone to build fences only that morning, but it seemed more like a week ago. They'd taken the horses and the old buckboard that Jafe had bought second-hand from a neighbor so they could carry enough posts for the fence along the north side of the ranch. Jafe promised they'd only be gone one night and if a storm came up they'd head for the house.

There's really nothing to be scared of. Sarah almost had herself convinced until a coyote howled. She reached under her pillow and touched the worn wooden handle of her butcher knife. She was shocked at the idea of having to fight someone or something with a butcher knife, but it was all she had and nothing was going to hurt her babies. Sarah got up for the fourth time to make sure the latch on the door was hooked.

On her way back to bed she stopped at the door of the children's room. Micah and Martin were asleep in their bed and Bobby breathed gently in the crib in the corner, but the blankets were moving on the girls' bed.

"Wasn't it pretty, Mary? It's so little, but I like it anyway." Sally was trying to whisper.

"It is pretty. But I wish we could have a thousand and make a big purple bouquet for Mommy! Some day we will, Sally. I know we will."

Sarah went on to her bed, more relaxed, and confident that she could like Texas. She saw the ranch Jafe promised with a barn, corral, and a white wooden house surrounded by shade trees. And prayed for the patience to wait for it.

The sun was creeping toward the bluffs to the West when Sarah pulled the last hot loaves from the small kerosene oven. She'd loved baking day in Nebraska. She could open the windows in the frame house and have enough breeze to keep the kitchen comfortable. And she always made a special loaf for old Mrs. Carter, the crippled lady across the street. But here, Sarah had to force herself to bake. The sod
walls held all the heat inside the house until it was steaming. No breeze came in the open door and windows. Sweat dripped from her hands and arms as Sarah brushed lard over the brown tops of the loaves.

She dipped her greasy hands in the dishwater and dried them on her apron as she headed for the door. "Micah, Martin. Would you go fetch Bessie for Mommy?" The red-headed twins raced across the sandy lane as fast as their four-year-old legs would carry them. Bessie, the old milk cow, stood in the far corner of the corral chewing her cud and waiting for Tommy who usually milked her. She took a few steps backward when she saw the twins running toward her.

Sarah laughed as the boys trotted behind Bessie clapping their hands. "Get goin', Bessie." "Hike on, you old cow." The twins took turns yelling at the cow as she plodded toward Sarah. They were so much like Jafe, always laughing, always talking, always finding something good in everything that happened. Even on the long, hard trip from Nebraska to Texas the twins had sided with Jafe to go on when everyone else was ready to turn back. Sarah wondered how her four-year-old sons could be stronger and braver than their thirty-year-old mother.

"Come on, Bessie. Ho." The skinny Holstein stopped, turned her head to look at the boys behind her, and then stretched her neck forward till her nose touched Sarah's arm. Jafe had bought Bessie just outside of Amarillo when they had gotten to Texas last fall. It was lucky they bought her, too. The only waterhole on the land was in the southeast corner, far from the only road around, and it took a month to find a water vein close to the house. Jafe had tied Bessie to the back of the buckboard and led her to the water hole every afternoon when he went to fill the two water buckets for dishes and washing. But the water wasn't clear enough for drinking and they'd relied on Bessie's milk.

"So, Bessie." Sarah was too big to sit on the milk stool, so she just bent over near the cow, placing her shoulder in the spotted flank. Micah and Martin danced around the cow and finally convinced their mother to show them how to milk. She guided their hands, whispered instructions, and when they finished milking a half hour later, more milk was
on the ground than in the bucket.

Sarah started to stand and realized how long she had been stooped over. She felt like her backbone would never straighten out again and she blamed the ache in her muscles on the hard ranch life. In Nebraska she'd gotten fresh milk every morning from Mr. Briggs, the widower farmer who lived on the edge of town. He had a regular delivery route and Sarah was his last customer. Mr. Briggs had arranged that so he could talk with Tommy and Micah and Martin. He'd even taught Tommy how to milk and paid him a dime a week to help him after school. But there was no Mr. Briggs in Texas and when Jafe and Tommy were busy, Sarah had to do the milking.

Sarah and the twins had hardly reached the house when Jafe and Tommy came. The buckboard rattled loud enough to wake Bobby, and Mary hoisted the sleepy-eyed little boy to her hip and ran out the door with the rest of the kids. Sarah smiled as she poured the warm milk into a heavy crock and placed her cutting board over it. She hadn't been the only one who missed Jafe.

After a supper of fresh bread and milk everyone was ready to go to bed. Tommy and Jafe had finished the fence and were exhausted, and even Micah and Martin didn't do their usual complaining.

Sarah slid under the quilt and snuggled close to Jafe, resting her head on his arm. She thought he had fallen asleep while she tucked Bobby in and jumped a little when he spoke.

"Sarie, it was beautiful out there last night. Ya shoulda seen Tommy. He was a little scared when it got dark, but I kept talkin' to him and he pretended to be brave. An' this mornin' when he woke up he was so proud I thought he'd bust his buttons."

"Hard to believe he's almost ten. Purty soon we'll be callin' him Tom instead of Tommy. Did he help ya much?"

"Yah. He's strong 'nough to carry the posts. By the way, I talked to one of the neighbors today—Guy Smith. He says there's gonna be a herd of cattle from up North comin' to Amarillo next month. I wanna buy 'nough cows to start our herd. It'll take most all our savins to get twenty-thirty cows."
“But, Jafe, we need food. We can’t live on bread and milk. ‘Sides I’m ‘bout out of flour an’ corn meal. An’ we need some heavier clothes fer winter.”

“Sarie, I need those cows to get started.”

Sarah remembered the weekly paycheck Jafe had brought home from his job in the grocery store. It hadn’t been big, but it was regular and enough that they’d managed to save over four hundred dollars in the ten years. “Oh, Jafe. Why can’t we go back to Nebraska? We never had no trouble there.”

Jafe was silent a few seconds. “I’ll take one of the horses to town tomorrow and sell it. You be a-thinkin’ ‘bout what you’re needin’. Sarie, don’t worry. You’re gonna like it here. After the baby comes and you can go visitin’ and to town. You’ll see.”

Sarah felt tears swelling in her eyes and rolled away from Jafe. Resting her head on the pillow she felt a lump—the handle of the butcher knife she’d forgotten to return to the kitchen. Sarah decided to leave it there for the night. Jafe might not like it if he found out. Besides, she felt better when she had it, something to protect her from this place.

Jafe made the trip to town the next day and sold the older of their two horses. It didn’t bring much, but enough to buy flour, salt, corn meal, and a few other groceries, and some cheap wool. Sarah couldn’t go into town, and as she unpacked the goods she laughed at the bright Indian wool Mary had selected. But Mary thought it was beautiful and she told her mother about the town and the man who helped her measure the cloth.

“Mommy, he told me I was a purty little girl an’ darn smart if my mother let me do the buyin’.”

“You are a special little girl, Mary. You help Mommy so much in the garden an’ with Bobby. Purty soon we’ll have a new baby for you to help with. An’ I’m hopin’ you can go to school come fall. I’ll have to talk to the neighbors ’bout that.” Sarah looked into the soft brown eyes of her oldest daughter and sensed how proud the little girl felt. It was too bad Mary couldn’t have grown up in Nebraska, gone to the same little school Sarah attended, and been a lady—had long curls instead of thick brown braids.
Sarah spent most of the afternoon cleaning the three small rooms of the little sod hut. Some people in town had decide to move back East and Jafe bought the windows in their house. He said he'd put them in tomorrow and Sarah wanted everything to be ready. It would be so nice to have real glass windows instead of old boards that swung on hinges to cover up the rugged holes in the wall. And windows would keep some of the dirt and sand out. Sarah moved any furniture that would be in Jafe's way, swept the floors, and shook all the quilts and blankets.

By eight o'clock she was too tired to take another step. Jafe washed the faces and hands of his six children and sent them to bed an hour after their mother had fallen asleep.

The next month was a hard one for Sarah. Except for an occasional sprinkle or a sudden cloudburst the weather was hot, at least above ninety. The tough grass was half green and half brown, but the neighbors said it was good enough to support a small herd of cattle. And that was all Jafe could think about. He and Tommy spent several more days and nights away, working on fences and building corrals. Sarah had come to depend on the butcher knife beneath her pillow and never thought of moving it. That knife gave her the courage to face the evil that was hiding in the darkness.

About the middle of July the unborn baby shifted positions and Sarah could hardly get around. It was all she could do to fix the meals and do the dishes without having to lie down. The same thing had happened before Bobby was born, but it hadn't been so bad then. Her mother lived only a few blocks from them and had spent every day at Sarah's. She had done all the cooking, baking, and cleaning so Sarah could rest and fortunately, she'd even had time to sew a lot of extra baby clothes. Sarah really missed her mother now, more than she had when they'd first come to Texas. She needed someone to talk and help her in emergencies like this. If only she could go back to Nebraska for a couple months and get things straight in her mind again.

Toward the end of July, Sarah met the couple whose land bordered theirs on the South. It seemed strange that she'd lived on the same ranch for three-quarters of a year and was meeting her neighbors for the first time. Helen and
Clayton Jackson had been to town and stopped at Sarah's on their way home.

"We can only stop by for a minute." Helen's voice sounded much coarser than any of the neighbor's in Nebraska, but as the minute-long visit turned into an hour-long one Sarah realized what a wonderful woman she was. Helen had the same rough hands and the same complaints as Sarah. She understood how hard it must be for a young woman with six children, and expecting the seventh, to adjust to such rugged living.

By the time Helen left, Sarah felt a little calmer. Maybe Jafe is right—after I have the baby and can meet people I'll like it here. Helen's been a midwife before and she said she'd come anytime I sent for her. At least I have one friendly neighbor here.

"Oh, Jafe, the wind must be ninety miles an hour. I'm scared. I never seen anythin' like this." Sarah sat with Bobby on her lap and the other children huddled near her in the middle of the small kitchen. Jafe stood by the window watching the whirling sand outside. It beat against the glass and Sarah expected it to splinter across the floor any minute.

"Get away from that window, Jafe. An' please get a quilt to spread over the kids like a tent."

"Never knew there was so much sand in the whole state of Texas. Can't see a thing out the window 'cept sand. Let's see. What time is it? 'Bout half past four. Well, wind always goes down with the sun. Not too much longer."

Sally started a game with the quilt. "Look, that's a piece of the curtains in Mary and my old room." "That's from the first shirt Gramma made me." "That's my old Sunday school dress."

Sarah sat glaring at Jafe, getting angrier and angrier, as she heard the sand pounding the side of the house and listened to the children's game. They wanna go back too. I know they do. Why else'd they play that game? We have to get out of here before it kills us. A couple more hours is too long. We gotta get out of here. I'll get the butcher knife from the bedroom and take the kids even if he won't go with us. Bobby's whimper brought Sarah back to her senses. She was squeezing him too tight.
The next two hours seemed more like two days. Sarah sat statue-still in the middle of the kitchen while the wind continued to roar outside and the sand whirled through the air, making the sky a dull brown. Sarah expected the sand was piling up around the house, higher and higher, until the little sod structure would finally become a suffocating grave for her and her family.

Dusk came, then total darkness. But the wind didn’t die. Sarah remembered what Helen’s husband had said only a week before—“If the wind don’t stop by dark be ready for one helluva storm.” A shiver crept up Sarah’s spine as she thought of having to listen to the wind all night, but she couldn’t let the children know how terrified she was. They wouldn’t sleep a wink.

“Jafe, would you carry Bobby to bed?”

“Sure, Honey.” He slid his hands under the sleeping child and walked into the bedroom. Sarah helped the other children put on their pajamas and followed them to their beds. Jafe and she tucked both sides of each quilt under the feather mattresses so that the children would be covered in case the wind broke a window. They kissed good nights and Sarah left with a strange feeling in her stomach, wondering what the next few hours would be like.

Jafe and Sarah blew out the kerosene lanterns as they walked through the kitchen. Their bedroom was on the northwest corner of the house, and the most exposed to the strong blasts of wind. Sarah almost wished they could sleep in the kitchen, but a sharp pain in her side commanded her to lie flat. Even after she and Jafe stretched out in the bed the sensation continued in a rhythm that made her cringe.

“Jafe, I think the baby’s comin’.”

“Oh, God no. Not on a night like tonight. Are ya sure?”

“This place is tryin’ to kill me. I know it is. The baby’s not due for a month an’ I’ve heard women always die when a baby comes too soon. Jafe, you gotta help me. Get me outa here. Please?” Tears ran down Sarah’s cheeks and she muffled her sobs in a pillow. She couldn’t let the children hear her cry.

“Sarie, it’s gonna be all right. Shall I try and get Helen?”
“Don’t leave me alone. You’d never get to Helen’s in this weather and I know I’ll die without her. What’re we gonna do?” Sarah moaned as the muscles in her stomach tightened. The tears mixed with tiny beads of sweat on her face and the whole room swirled with grotesque images of Jafe.

“Honey, you helped deliver a baby before. You just have to tell me what to do. We gotta try.”

Sarah felt like her eyes were sinking toward the back of her head and she was too weak to return the squeeze that Jafe had given her hand. She did owe it to the unborn baby to try. “We got lots of time yet.” Sarah thought for a moment. “Go to that trunk in the corner. There should be an old oil cloth. Might as well leave it open ’cause you’ll need some other stuff out of it.”

Jafe raised Sarah a few inches off the bed and slipped the oil cloth beneath her. He flinched when Sarah stifled another shriek. “Aint there somethin’ I can do, Sarie?”

Some of the color returned to her cheeks and she forced a smile. “It’s not so bad yet. You’ll have to boil some water—might as well use some out of the drinkin’ bucket. Then get some string out of that box and put it in the oven. Then we’ll have to wait. Be quiet—don’t wake the children.”

Jafe put the kettle full of water on to heat and cut six inches of string. Sarah knew how upset he was, but somehow she felt like he deserved it. It was his crazy idea to come here and now maybe he’d know how terrible her life was. When he returned to the bedroom and stood beside the bed she gave him more instructions in case she fainted.

The contractions got closer and closer together until Sarah lost consciousness. Sweat poured off her face and arms and Jafe laid a cool rag across her forehead. Her stomach heaved and she breathed in broken gasps. Jafe tried to open the window a crack, but a torrent of sand blasted the opposite wall. The house was stuffy and there was nothing he could do.

Jafe got the little jar of smelling salts and revived his wife. “Ya gotta push, Sarie. Can ya stand it? Try.” They spent almost two hours of fainting and reviving until finally it was over. Jafe tried the string tightly around the cord that
connected the baby to Sarah, then cut it with the butcher knife which he slipped from beneath the pillow. Jafe washed the tiny baby, wrapped it in a clean blanket from the trunk, and placed it beside his sleeping wife.

"Sarie, Honey. It’s a boy. I love you." Sarah’s eyes didn’t open, but a tired smile crossed her lips. She forgot about the storm outside and the country she hated and slept.

Sarah woke up early the next morning when she heard Jafe’s coarse whisper, "Be quiet, Bobby. Don’t wake Mommy up." She looked down at the baby beside her and realized it hadn’t been a nightmare. Jafe had delivered their baby, alone, a month early, in the middle of a sandstorm. Sandstorm? She didn’t hear the wind roaring outside and decided that had been a dream, until she rubbed her hand over the layer of sand that covered the quilt. It had all been true.

Sarah was about to call for Jafe when she heard Sally ask, "Why isn’t Mommy up? Is she sick?"

The old rocking chair squeaked as Jafe sat down and Sarah sensed Sally was on his lap. "Somethin’ wonderful happened in the night. You got a new baby brother. He’s little and weak, his fingernails ain’t even grown yet. An’ Mommy’ll be tired for a few days so you an’ Mary’ll have to help her. You will, won’t ya?"

"But when can we see him, Daddy? Can we touch him?"

By the time Sally had finished asking, all of her brothers and Mary were standing in the kitchen. "Why don’t you come see your new baby brother now?" Sarah called from the bedroom.

Jafe picked up Bobby and the whole family filed through the narrow bedroom door. The children stood in awe and patted the tiny hands and tummy. But in a few minutes Micah decided to leave. "He don’t even talk. He ain’t no fun." Micah was followed by Martin and Tommy and a little later Sally and Mary left to gather the eggs and make some breakfast.

"How ya feelin’ this mornin’?"

"Oh, purty good. I’m still tired—think I could sleep for a week. But look at this place. Everythin’s covered with sand. What’s it like outside?" Sarah sighed and pulled the quilt up to the baby’s chin.
"Couple inches of sand all over. Bessie's all right though and the chickens got in the shed. Nothin's else could've been hurt 'cept I s'pose I should ride out and check the waterhole in the pasture. Want me to ask Helen to come over?"

"No, don't think I'll need her now. You're not leavin' right away?"

"Yep. Sooner I get out there the sooner I get home. Have ya thought about a name for the baby?"

"What about Franklin John, after my father and your grandfather?"

"Sounds all right to me. But I think I'll call him Tex. Bye, now. You stay in bed, hear?"

Sarah was in tears by the time she heard the outside door slam shut. *How could he call anything so beautiful Tex? Nobody's callin' my baby that name.*

Jafe didn't get home until late afternoon. The water-hole hadn't been filled by sand and he'd talked to Clayton Jackson. The cattle would get into Amarillo in less than a week. "I gotta go to town tonight and make sure they know I want thirty head. Sorry I gotta leave ya so soon, Sarie, but we're countin' a lot on those cows. I should be home by tomorrow night. Bye, Honey. Bye, Tex."

Sarah spent most of the day in bed. Once in a while Mary or Sally came in to look at little Frankie, but the boys completely ignored him so the house was quiet. The children were fascinated by the huge drifts of sand covering everything. They had already forgotten last night's raging wind and the incessant beating of the sand against the house. They were playing a game of fox and goose like they had played in the snow in Nebraska.

Sarah got up for only a few hours in the afternoon, to do the day's dishes and fry some fresh potatoes for supper. She was disappointed when she reached in the bread drawer and found only two loaves of bread. She'd have to bake in a couple of days. And there was sand to clean out of everything, dishes to do, diapers to wash, and butter to churn. How could she stand to do it all? After only these two hours Sarah could hardly get back to the bed before she dropped.

When she woke again it was dark and she reached under the pillow for the security of the butcher knife. It was gone.
Sarah bolted upright in bed, so suddenly that Frankie started to cry. But she didn’t have time to comfort him. The knife was more important and she had to find it. What would happen to them without it? She swung her feet to the floor and patted along the top of the small nightstand till she located the matches and kerosene lamp. Sarah studied the dresser tops and window sill, looking for the knife. Only when she glanced at the floor to find her slippers did she notice the dim reflection of the fire in the knife blade.

How did that get down there? Did I knock it out of bed? Sarah imagined a dozen unlikely ways the knife could have slipped to the floor without her being cut. But she was stunned by her next thought. Jafe must’ve used the knife to cut the cord when Frankie was born. I wonder how long he knew it was there. Probably thinks it’s purty stupid to keep the knife handy, but I guess I don’t care. I need it.

The days following Frankie’s birth were long and hard. With six children and a baby, Sarah didn’t have time to rest, yet she didn’t have enough strength to do everything she had to do. By the middle of the morning she was always exhausted and aching, but the only time she allowed herself to sit down was when she nursed Frankie. The children often found their mother crying while she finished the dinner dishes or hung handwashed diapers on the line to dry and they asked their daddy what was wrong.

“Mommy’s just tired. Soon as the cattle get here I’ll have lotsa time to help her.”

The cattle did come a few days later and Jafe and some of the neighbors went to Amarillo to drive them home. It took nearly two full days because they had some trouble keeping the herd together and when they were about a half-mile from the little sod house Jafe rode ahead.

“Sarie, Sarie,” he called from his horse when he got near the house. “Think ya can stand out there between the house an’ the gate to stop strays?”

Sarah looked up at Jafe. She was so weak she didn’t have enough energy to open her eyes all the way. “Jafe, I don’t think I could take it. I can hardly move now.” She’d lost weight since Frankie was born and the skin on her cheeks hung loose over sharp bones.
“Honey, it’ll only take a few minutes and all ya have to do is stand there. I’ll take care of the kids and cook up some supper an’ you can go to bed right after we’re done.” Sarah stumbled from the doorway and stood where Jafe pointed. “Thanks, Hon.”

The sun was blazing and Sarah wished she’d brought a bonnet, but when she called to Mary to bring her one she heard the hooves pounding on the ground. “Don’t come out now, Mary. Keep all the kids in the house till I come in.” Sarah’s eyes stung from the brightness. In less than five minutes her temples were pounding furiously.

A thundering mass of brown was approaching her and she saw occasional flashes when the sun reflected off the horns. What if they stampede? What if they run over me? They’d kill me sure. But then I could sleep and I’d be away from here. Sarah wanted to crawl under the feet and be in the shade.

The shade? Of course the shade of the trees in the back yard. I have a swing in the backyard and no matter how hot it is, it’s cool in the backyard. Sarah began walking toward the shadow cast by the bodies of the cows. “No, I think I’ll play in the lilac bushes. My dolls are all in the lilac bushes and so is my stove Daddy made me.”

Sarah turned toward the house. “London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down, falling down. London Bridge . . . It is cool in the lilac bushes.” The children all ran outside to see their daddy and the new cattle as Sarah entered the house. She wondered when her dolls had learned to walk and where they were going, but she didn’t follow them. “They’re in too big a hurry.”

Sarah walked into her bedroom and saw little Frankie on the bed. “This one can’t walk. Wonder why he didn’t learn? Think I’ll take him down to Amy’s to play, but I better put him in this suitcase. The sun’s awful bright.” Sarah laid the baby in a red and brown flowered carpet bag and started to close it. “No, wait. He’ll need this too.” She reached under her pillow, pulled out the butcher knife, and placed it in the bag.

Sarah carefully latched the gold locks and, swinging the bag by its handle, walked down the road.