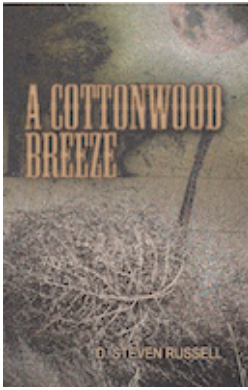




A COTTONWOOD
BREEZE

D. STEVEN RUSSELL



1927 finds Lucas Schmidt tilling rows behind a beige plow horse in western Kansas. A violent, drunken father is Lucas' daily bread. Finding the love of his life neath a Cottonwood tree is his salvation. Marriage, posterity, pain, death, the dirty 30s, World War II and a life of modernizing technology lead Lucas on a path to painful, beautiful destiny. Dust of the earth is one's only measure of time and time is the only measure of a farmer's earth.

A Cottonwood Breeze

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8785.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Enjoy your free excerpt below!

A Cottonwood Breeze

D. Steven Russell

Copyright © 2016 D. Steven Russell

ISBN: 978-1-63491-660-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2016

First Edition

Chapter 1

The spring sun rose slowly, covering the prairie like a soft golden fleece, as Lukas Schmidt held the plow in its furrow. He could see his shadow, and that of the horse and plow, moving forward and wafting slowly across newly turned dirt.

The cream-colored plow horse blew through its nostrils as it shit biscuits and flicked a horsefly the size of a nickel with its tail.

Lukas had been in the field since first morning light and was starving. He could see his sister Gertrud meandering slowly down the beaten path that led from the house to the field.

“Lukas, come for breakfast. It’s ready.”

“Let me finish this row and I’ll be there.” He wiped sweat from his forehead with his blue shirtsleeve as he noticed that his mouth was watering.

The year was 1927. Life was as simple as a horse and a dugout house and Otto Schmidt’s family was as simple as the stubborn soil that nurtured and housed them.

Lukas was a lanky twelve-year-old who seemed to grow taller by the day.

His Papa was a big German man with wide shoulders, large feet, long arms and legs, a narrow waist, and a square chin. His face was hard and expressionless.

Momma was not tall but was strong and square.

Gertrud was a typical eight-year-old who had not yet found her makings.

Lukas' brother Karl was ten, but acted like a woman and was allowed laziness that was akin to a possum. Karl was Papa's favorite and was spoiled beyond reason. This made Lukas resent his brother given that he did all of the work while his brother slept and played. Simply put, the boy was a sluggard.

Lukas could smell cornmeal mush as he neared the house.

They were currently living in a cramped dugout house that Papa dug into the side of a hill until they were able to build a sod house with three rooms for the family.

Lucas slept outside most nights, given that there was barely room for a table and three mats. Some nights, Papa and momma threw all kids out of the dugout and told them to "have a picnic and sleep under the stars on the tablecloth." They loved these times, but didn't understand why they occurred.

The family had only arrived about a month before, having come from Indiana in a wagon with two horses and all of their belongings, including seeds for vegetables, a gunnysack of corn seeds, massive bags of cornmeal, and a gunnysack of potatoes.

Papa was a stubborn man who refused to let go of the 1800s, so the family traveled from Indiana in a freight wagon and left most of their belongings in it for storage to this day. Likely, Papa couldn't afford an automobile—not that any farmer would want one—and would buy things when they got to western Kansas.

Momma had canned significant vegetables to prepare meals until Lucas could hunt pheasants, rabbits, and the like for eating. The kids were tiring of soggy vegetables, but never complained—except Karl.

The family had dragged a milk cow across the country, milking her every morning and night along the way. They were sick of warm milk with every meal, but were blessed that Papa had figured a way—beyond plentiful buffalo grass—to feed the horses with leftover milk.

Papa and momma had immigrated from Germany to Indiana in 1913. Papa had learned the English language in Germany before moving to Kansas, and refined it in Indiana. His English still converted to German when he got angry, so he always held his tongue around other people. Papa's obsession to sound like an American erased nearly all traces of being a first generation immigrant.

The breakfast table was a silent place unless Papa had something to say. Children were “to be seen and not heard” according to Papa. Momma never said anything. Karl was

allowed to babble as he pleased, however, and frequently broke the silence.

“I want to ride on the plow with Lukas.”

“You’re young, Karl, and might get hurt,” said Papa with a compassionate voice that the other children never heard.

“But...it’s not fair that Lukas gets to plow and I don’t.”

Lucas was incensed. “I *have* to plow and it’s *work*, Karl. Maybe I can teach *you* to work someday.”

“Be still, Boy. Karl is just trying to be a man. He’s not like you. He’s a sweet child.”

“But, Papa...”

“I said “Be still, Boy.”

Lucas burned with resentment. His brother would become a man alright—operating as a woman. The child was too sweet compared to any other ten-year-old that Lucas had ever met. Lucas wondered why they didn’t simply put him in a dress like Gertrud and momma.

“How’s the field coming, Lucas?”

“I’ll have an acre done by noon, Papa.”

“We need three acres to plant the vegetables, with about half of it planted to corn and the other half to potatoes. The other half will be planted to various vegetables.”

“That’s three halves, Papa.”

“Don’t smart mouth me, Boy. I meant that you’ll need to plow three acres so that we can plant all of our crops.”

"I'll have it all done by tomorrow evening, Papa. I'll do it all by tomorrow evening."

"You're not real fast, are you boy?"

"I'm as fast as the horse can go."

"Don't smart mouth me, Boy. You've got a smart mouth."

"Yes, Papa."

"This is good food, Anna. You and Gertrud done good."

"Thank you, Papa." Momma referred to Papa as Papa too."

"Make sure you've milked the cow by dark, Lucas."

"I will, Papa. Can I ask you something, though?"

"What, Boy?"

"I was milking the cow when I was Gertrud's age. Why can't Karl milk the cow?"

"There you go with that smart mouth again, Boy. Let's go outside!"

"Please, Papa. I was just asking a question and you said I could."

"Outside with me now, Boy. Drop your britches."

Papa beat Lucas with the reins of a horse bridle that hung on the front of their dugout. The beating always involved a half-dozen lashes and usually came as a result of Karl. Lucas had learned to cry early and shut up fast.

"You got any questions now, Boy?"

"No, Papa. I'm sorry, Papa."

“Finish your breakfast and get back to plowing.”

“Yes, Papa.”

Gertrude and Karl watched each beating with spectator eyes. Gertrud actually seemed to care, while Lucas saw excitement in Karl’s eyes. He was a wicked child and Lucas was quickly moving from resentment to hate for his darling brother.

Chapter 2

Lucas would finish plowing the three acres by noon the day after he had told Papa that he would finish the night before. On the night of his failure, supper was unbearable.

“I thought you said you’d finish the field by tonight. If it was a full moon, I’d have you plowing all night to finish it.”

“I’m sorry, Papa. I thought it would go faster. I’m letting the horse graze on grass while we eat, and overnight, but she seems tired and slow.”

“You’re the one who’s slow, Boy. You’ve got no sense about how to get more out of the beast.”

“I don’t see how...”

“You’re not starting with that smart mouth, are you boy?”

“No, Papa. I’m slow, that’s it.”

“Now you’re mocking me, ain’t ya boy?”

“No, Papa.”

Karl spoke up.

“If I’d been helping Lucas, we’d have finished on time, Papa.”

“Likely so, boy. Likely so.”

“Lucas is slow, but I’m fast when I work!”

Lucas erupted without pause. “When YOU work?! You haven’t done a lick of work since I’ve known you!” He knew he’d made a mistake.

“That smart mouth just can’t shut up, huh, Boy?”

“I’m sorry, Papa...it’s just that...”

“Outside now, Boy.”

The parade followed and Karl’s eyes were lit up like a candle with glee. Momma always kept quiet and stayed in the dugout.

Lucas was so used to the beatings that he had to force himself to cry. He did it to prevent further beating. Compared to catching his finger between the plow and the horse’s harness, it was nothing, but he had to cry.

“There. Now apologize to your brother.”

“I’m sorry, Karl.”

“Say it like you mean it, Boy!”

“I’m sorry I made fun of you, Karl.”

Karl’s eyes filled with evil.

“You cry like a baby, Lucas.”

Lucas burned with anger. Murder entered his mind, but he held his tongue, lest the cycle continue all night.

“I’ll finish the field tomorrow, Papa. I’m sorry I’m so slow.”

“You better, Boy.”

“It’s a dark moon. When Lucas gets done piddling around with the plowing we’ll all plant the field. Momma, you can help too. Gertrud can stay behind to fix us dinner and supper. We can plant it in a day...unless Lucas does his usual piddling around.”

The rest of the family slept late—until about 5:30. It was late for everyone except Lucas. He was routinely up at 4:00 to milk the cow and begin working in the fields. Today was no exception.

“We’ll plant this here acre to corn first. Everybody get a row and begin shoving corn seeds in the ground. Put them every six inches or so. When we’re done with the corn, we’ll plant the vegetables and then, finally, the potatoes. You all understand?”

Everyone had a shoulder bag stitched by momma for the seeds.

“So, Papa...You *want* me to help?” Karl’s face was long like a sad horse as he contemplated the idea of work.

“No, come to think of it, Karl, you can get the cottonwood branch that’s beside the little fishin hole and try to catch us some fish for supper. Is that ok?”

Karl looked absolved and freed from slavery.

“Ok, Papa, I’ll catch us some fish.”

“Lucas, you dig him up some worms so he can go fishin. Ought to be plenty where you just plowed.”

Lucas grabbed a shovel and dug into the moist, fertile soil where he had just plowed. He could smell the soil and felt one with nature. It was the only solace that kept him from striking

his brother with the shovel and burying him on the prairie.

Momma got a tin cup and Lucas dropped worms into it with a little soil to keep them alive. Karl went over the hill to go fishing.

“You gonna stand around all day, Lucas Schmidt, or are ya gonna plant some corn?” Papa used slang sometimes, though Lucas didn’t know when. It was when he was not mad, but wanted to emphasize irritation. It seemed cynical in some way and likely was.

“Notice your momma’s already planting corn while you’re diddling around, Boy?”

“Yes, Papa. I’ll get on with it immediately.”

“Don’t fart around like you did plowing the thing, Boy. You better keep up with me or there’ll be some whippins in your future.”

“I’ll try, Papa. I’ll try to keep up with you.”

“Don’t just try!” Papa was already walking his furrow and planting corn.

By the time Papa was done with his first row, Lucas was a third of a row behind. Perhaps he spent too much time wiggling his seeds into place and covering them with dirt. Perhaps he worried about the six inches of separation. In any case, by three rows, Lucas was a row behind. This led to a whipping. Momma just kept plugging along.

After the whipping, Lucas tried hard to keep up, but fell behind by about a quarter of a

row. After four rows, there was another whipping. Momma just kept plugging along.

Finally, before the next whipping, the corn was planted and it was time for vegetables. Lucas was even slower with the little seeds and, so, this led to another four whippings. Momma just kept plugging along.

Lucas was in so much pain from the beatings that he had trouble planting, but he pushed through the agony and planted faster and faster. Finally, the vegetables were done.

When it was time for the potatoes, they dropped them into the ditch of the plowing that Lucas had done, and this was easy, so Lucas was able to keep up. Each potato had been cut into three or four pieces with a bud sticking out of each piece. Papa had cut the potatoes into pieces after supper and they would finish planting them the following morning. When potatoes were in the furrow, Papa had Lucas plow the ground the opposite direction to bury the potatoes. The plowing, with loose ground, was easy.

Supper was three catfish that Karl had pulled from the spring fed pond behind the house. This same pond provided all of the family's water. Gertrud cooked the fish.

"Karl, you done good, Boy. You did more to feed the family today than Lucas has done in the last month. I'm proud of you, Karl."

Lucas burned with jealousy and anger as he pondered all of the work that he had done compared to his sluggard brother. If he had gone fishing, he would have caught six or seven fish and no whippings, but he never got to go fishing. He couldn't feed the family with plowing and he knew that Papa would take credit for planting the field. He also pondered how Papa called Karl by his name and only referred to him as "Boy." He was worse off than the plow horse and saw no hope for his future. What would be next? What would lead to his next beatings? He felt abandoned by God and the universe.

Chapter 3

As the field began to sprout, Papa took the wagon with both horses and went to town. He was planning to find some way to dig a well for a windmill.

Fortunately, Papa had saved some money from work in Indiana and had enough to buy these tools and materials. Truth be known, Papa had saved up quite a bit of money, though no one in the family knew it. He would need it later, and he knew that. Papa was a good planner and a good man with handling money.

Lucas got his first day to go fishing. His evil brother went along and insisted on “teaching” Lucas to fish. Lucas had to be patient and act as if he was the obedient student.

“First ya tie a stick on the string and that makes the thing have a bobber. Then ya put a worm on the hook and toss it in the water. When the stick goes under, ya pull on the pole and you’ll catch a fish most likely. You got that?”

The pond was shallow or Lucas would likely have tossed his brother in and drowned him.

“Thanks, Karl. That helps me.”

“You’re welcome, Lucas.”

They caught eight fish and took them home for supper. Papa didn’t come home that night and momma was worried. Nonetheless, they slept and waited on Papa.

The next day, about 8:00, Papa came driving the wagon up the drive. The sun was bright and irritating.

He had four square posts about twenty-five feet long hanging out the back of the wagon, and sitting on each side of him on the seat. The poles extended in the air to the front of the horse's noses. The wagon was also filled with lumber that Papa would explain were "cross-braces." There was a strange looking thing that Papa called an "auger." None of the kids knew what it was for. The wagon also contained some pipe about four inches across and a number of smaller pipes—maybe the size of Papa's thumbs.

Papa's eyes were bloodshot and his breath smelled of alcohol. Momma was unusually animated with a burning silence and scorn. She whispered, but the kids could hear her.

"You've been drinking all night, haven't you Otto?"

Momma never called Papa by his first name and, so, she was pissed. Papa looked like a scolded schoolboy and avoided her, defaulting to work.

"Come on kids. We're going to dig a well."

The kids followed their Papa across the hill that provided their dugout, toward the gully that contained the spring-fed fishing hole. There, Papa stopped—only slightly up the hill from the ravine—and released the horses from the wagon. They went immediately to the pond

area and guzzled water. They had, apparently, not been drinking with Papa.

The first order of business was for Papa to break off a “Y” shaped piece of the willow tree that sat by the pond. He began walking around, maybe a hundred and fifty yards south of the pond. He walked around with the top of the “Y” in his hands and seemed like a drunk walking in circles. Suddenly the tip of the willow branch stabbed into the earth and Papa yelled something in German. He seemed thrilled.

He marked the spot by stabbing the willow into the ground and then used his reach to measure out four equidistant spots from the center. He had Lucas dig a single shovel out of each spot with posthole diggers.

Papa then had Lucas dig four deeper postholes about six feet apart, whereupon Papa said that it was time to try the auger.

He dropped the tip of the auger into the first posthole that Lucas had dug and hooked the horses up to the top of it via a large, heavy cross-pipe; then he led them in a circle...around and around the hole.

The auger began to dig into the moist soil beneath the buffalo grass and spit out dirt. It looked like an anthill as the auger went into the ground. Down it went until the auger was perhaps three feet deep and then Papa turned the horses around and had them unscrew it. He

used the same process for all four of Lucas' holes.

Finally, Papa had Lucas dig a posthole dead center of the other four holes—where the willow stick had been—and dropped the auger into it. The auger dug and dug until the top of it was nearly even with the ground. Then Papa unhitched the horses and bolted another auger to the top of the first one. Around and around the horses went and bigger and bigger the anthill became. Papa finally had Lucas scatter the dirt away from the anthill until it was flat with the ground.

The second auger disappeared and Papa attached a third one. Around and around the horses went until the hole belched and water came out. Papa actually hit his leg with his hat and laughed a belly laugh!

“We got water, Kids! We got water!”

The kids all held hands and danced in a circle singing, “We got water!”

Papa reversed the direction of the horses and backed the auger out of the hole, unbolting each piece until the last piece was out of the ground. It was dusk and the day had been long.

Papa put his face over the hole and yelled something in German that he said meant “Pure water, be blessed.”

He covered the holes with boards from the wagon and said, “Let's go in for the night, Kids. You can all have a picnic and sleep outside.”

Lucas had been hearing sounds from the dugout and was suspicious of something weird happening between Papa and momma on these nights, but he didn't know what. He figured—because Papa read the bible every night—that they were screaming and praying in tongues.

Momma had cooked a big meal when they returned to the house and seemed to drop her rage when Papa told her that they had struck water.

“We'll put up the frame and then I'll go to town and buy a windmill motor. I'll see if ole Cartmill will come and help us put it into place. I'm getting ahead of myself, though. First, Lucas and me need to put up the tower.”

In a rare instance, momma spoke. “I'm pleased, Papa.”

“You will be,” he snickered, with a meaning that seemed unique to them.

The next day Papa took a string with a rock tied to it and lowered it into the hole where water had come out. He jumped for joy. The string went down about fifty feet, even though the hole they dug was about fifteen or eighteen feet deep.

“We got about 35 feet of water table, Boy. We tapped the spring hole that feeds our pond. I knew I figured that right. Water witchin works like the hand of God Himself!

Lucas stood watching as the normally stern man jumped around like a child. He had never seen Papa so happy.

The wagon was parked about ten yards from the new holes and Papa had Lucas help him unload the 25-foot beams. It was terrible work, but one by one, they dropped them into the four outer holes. Lucas noticed that they leaned inward, making a wobbly tower that nearly had the poles touching at the top, while the bottom of each pole sat in its three-foot hole. It was a towering marvel.

“Now, Boy, we’ve gotta do cross-braces on the tower, but first we’ll just make the poles equidistant by nailing boards parallel to the ground. Give me that new saw out of the wagon.”

Papa cut boards that stitched together the poles. The first set of boards were only about four feet off the ground, whereupon Papa nailed them and told Lucas to climb up and stand on them.

The second set made the tower wide at the bottom and narrow at the top. Then Papa cut cross-braces, like an X, while Lucas climbed the windmill and nailed them into place.

Lucas was amazed at how smoothly the tower was going up and how fast it was taking its majestic place on the prairie. He hadn’t received a beating all day—not even a threat.

The rest of the family came to watch mid-morning and were amazed by the shape, size, and towering effect of the windmill. Momma was particularly amazed.

“Why, Papa, I didn’t even know that you knew how to build something so amazing.”

“I looked at old man Cartmill’s windmill on the way to town and bought the things that it took to build it. Look here.”

Papa handed momma a short block of wood with a windmill drawn on it.

“I drew his windmill, and this one’s the same.”

By evening, the tower stood nailed and erect against the prairie sunset. The next day would involve building a platform at the top of the tower—like a tree house. Lucas looked at the tower and felt his stomach sink with fear of being so high off the ground.

At sunrise, after Lucas had milked the cow, Papa and Lucas went to the windmill tower to build the platform. Lucas was terrified.

Papa built a ladder by nailing short pieces of wood on a leg of the tower. Up and up he went, nailing one piece, standing on it and nailing another half dozen to accompany his height.

When he was at the top of the tower, he came down and cut boards to make a square platform that sat on the windmill and went out about three feet.

“Lucas, you can bring me boards up the ladder while I stay up here and nail them into place. Be snappy, Boy. I don’t want to stay up here all day.”

Lucas swallowed his fear of heights and began dragging boards, one by one up the ladder to his Papa’s grip. Papa needed the four short boards to build the first set around the top of the windmill. Lucas worked fast, bringing the four boards up, one by one, to Papa. He held the board and climbed the ladder until his Papa could reach it.

Naturally, Papa became impatient and told Lucas to climb faster and get the boards to him faster. There was a brief reprieve as Papa nailed the first four boards into place, whereupon Lucas rested his tired hands.

When the first four were nailed into place, Lucas began bringing up the next four. Each board was heavier as Lucas climbed up the ladder with it. His hands were already cramping from the weight.

He changed hands to give his right hand a rest and managed to get the next four boards to his Papa. The ass chewing continued.

“You’re slow as cold molasses, Boy. Are ya gonna leave me up here all day?!” Lucas climbed faster.

When he dragged up the third row of boards, the length and weight of them made his

hands cramp more and quicker. His arms were shaking and his hands were aching with cramps.

Then, as he was nearing the top with the first board, he dropped it and it tumbled down the ladder to the ground. Papa was incensed.

“You idiot! You can’t even bring me simple boards while I’m up here building a platform?! I’m comin down, boy.”

Lucas knew that a beating was in his future, but didn’t think that Papa would be so inefficient as to go over the hill for his horse bridle.

Down came Papa, cussing in German. He grabbed a two-foot piece of board that he had cut off and told Lucas to drop his britches. Then he wailed him with the board until his butt was red and inflamed.

The good news was that while the whipping occurred, Lucas’ hands were resting. He followed Papa up the ladder with his next board in hand. Perhaps a second wind had strengthened him, perhaps his hands were simply growing stronger, or perhaps the Lord God had interceded, but Lucas was able to take the rest of the boards up the ladder to his Papa.

Papa had the answer.

“Looks to me like a whippin took the sloth out of you, Boy. Now I can go to town for the windmill motor.”

Papa hooked the wagon behind both horses and headed to town the following

morning. Momma chided him with whispers that he'd better not get drunk and come home the following morning. She was to Papa what Papa was to whippins. Lucas was amazed that a little woman had such power over a German giant.

Nonetheless, the sun set and rose before Papa came home. His eyes were red and he stunk of alcohol. He said that, for some reason, he was under the weather, and slept away the day. Momma was visibly angry.

Lucas took the rifle and went rabbit hunting while his Papa was incapacitated. Karl went fishing.

By day's end, Karl had three fish and Lucas had three rabbits. Momma could cook them up for a luxury meal, and did.

Papa was rising now and claimed that he had a "powerful headache." He said that he must have influenza.

While Papa was sleeping, the entire family looked at the contraption that sat in the wagon. It looked like a giant vertical hawk's tail tied to a massive metal box. There was a wheel made of tin on top of the other inventions. Everyone was amazed. Lucas had trouble going hunting because he wanted to study the machine and figure out how it worked. He didn't though. He knew that Papa would show them that.

The next morning ole man Cartmill showed up with his team of horses and a wagon full of

ropes. He also had giant pulleys and hooks. It was dawn.

By now, Papa was over the flu and was eating corn mush for breakfast. He hadn't felt well enough to eat fish and rabbit the night before. There was some fish left over which Papa was to eat for breakfast. He said that it tasted funny, though, and merely picked at it to appease momma. Lucas tried a small bite and agreed—it did taste funny. It tasted dead.

Papa and Mr. Cartmill shook hands and Papa offered him something to eat. Mr. Cartmill declined, saying that he'd eaten before sunrise and wasn't hungry. Momma insisted.

"Thank you, M'am, but I'm full of my wife's good cookin."

Mr. Cartmill was the family's nearest neighbor. He lived five miles north, about half way to town. Unlike Lucas' family who lived in a dugout hole in the ground, the Cartmill family lived in a wooden house. Lucas concluded that he must be filthy rich.

Another man showed up before 7:00, whom Papa introduced as "a friend from town." Momma looked at him as though he were a bottle of whisky. His eyes were red and he stunk of alcohol.

The three men and their horses—with Papa's wagon—went over the hill to the windmill tower and talked a bit about how to get the gizmo atop the tower. Lucas scratched his head

and was totally stumped about how a machine so big would rise to the heavens and stay. He was waiting with bated breath.

Mr. Cartmill was obviously the boss of the job. He had apparently participated in the construction of his windmill and, thus, knew a great deal about how to accomplish the launch.

Lucas' parting job of putting the platform on top of the windmill tower was to fill in the beams at their base with dirt and tamp it with a shovel handle. He had done this well, given that it was on the ground and his hands were shot anyhow. Having the windmill firm and in place would matter this day.

The men rigged ropes up with pulleys and attached them to the box with the hawk's tail. Then, they hooked the ropes to two horses and began lifting it out of the wagon.

The man who smelled of whisky held the horses and moved them away from the windmill when Mr. Cartmill told him too. Everybody seemed incredibly tense, and verbalized it as, "We only get one shot at doing this right without dropping or breaking the damn thing."

Lucas was glad that Papa did not ask him to help. He was enthralled with beholding the thing.

As the giant box with the vertical hawk's tail rose in the air, old man Cartmill and Papa held it away from the windmill by pulling on another set of ropes. The whiskey man lifted it

slowly with the horses. Finally—slowly—the contraption was at the top of the tower.

“Now comes the hard part,” said Mr. Cartmill with a deliberate, frightened tone.

Papa and ole man Cartmill climbed to the top of the tower and perched themselves on the platform while Mr. Whiskey held the horses incredibly still.

Papa and Mr. Cartmill grabbed the machine and slowly pulled it over the edge until it perched atop the windmill. This took every bit of strength that they had. Then Papa called to Lucas.

“Come up here, Boy. We need you to help me steady this thing while Mr. Cartmill bolts it into place.”

Lucas felt his stomach flutter with fear as he recalled climbing to the top of the windmill, but he quickly obeyed his father and scurried up the ladder.

He felt as though he were atop a mountain on a small ledge as he steadied himself on the platform across from his Papa.

The horses were getting restless as Mr. Whiskey held them and sounded an alarm.

“I’m not sure how much longer I can hold these horses. They’re gettin really antsy.” He had fear in his voice.

“You’re GOT to hold them steady for another few minutes—maybe ten—while we bolt

this thing into place. It's not an option. You've GOT to, Vernon."

Lucas heard the horses flicking their tails and moving their legs in place nervously. He knew this symptom from plowing. When they got like this, they were ready to bolt.

As he looked at the contraption up close, it looked gigantic and he thought of crushed hands and knees if it fell before it was bolted. Fear filled his eyes. He had never seen fear in his Papa's eyes, but he saw it now. Ole man Cartmill was hurrying with a pace that was urgent. All of them knew what might come next.

"Hold em, Vernon! If they bolt before we get this bolted into place we're all fucked," said Papa. Lucas had never heard Papa cuss.

"Ok, Vernon...back the horses up a hair so I can untie these ropes from the motor. I've got it bolted into place.

Vernon began to back the horses up and the rope began to sag. Mr. Cartmill began to unhook the ropes. Then the horses moved quickly forward. The remaining rope slapped at Mr. Cartmill. He fell over the edge and was holding himself on the platform with his fingertips. He looked terrified, and rightly so.

Lucas held onto the motor and extended his arm with a thrust toward Mr. Cartmill. The old man grabbed Lucas' hand at the wrist with his right hand and swung like an acrobat towards the ladder. He hooked the ladder with

his feet and let go of Lucas. He grabbed the ladder with his left hand and perched on it, shaking.

The old man's voice was shaking. "You saved my ass, Boy, and I'll be forever indebted to you for that."

Papa unhooked the last rope and Vernon let the horses move quickly forward. They had to be tired, even for horses. All three men—and Lucas functioned as a man—went down the ladder, whereupon a one-time event happened—Papa grabbed Lucas and hugged him.

"I'm so proud of you, Son."

Old man Cartmill shook Lucas' hand and would not let it go.

"Thank you, Lucas. Thank you."

The windmill looked like a windmill now and it was only noon. The men and Lucas went to the dugout for dinner.

Momma had cooked a giant meal, and that was a good thing. Everyone ate as if it was the first and last meal.

"We'll drop the piping into the well and hook up the leathers this afternoon," offered Mr. Cartmill.

The men worked all afternoon dropping the four-inch casing and the thumb sized pipe into place. They threaded a round rod into the small pipe's hole and hooked it to a gear on the motor.

Because the top was about level with the hill that divided the house and the windmill, they put a stub pipe there and another at the bottom.

Papa's plan was to pump water directly to the house, and allow the bottom pipe to fill a stock tank. They didn't own any cows yet, but Papa planned to get some. Papa would need a lot more pipe to complete the job.

Now it was evening.

"Let's get drunk," offered Vernon aka/Mr. Whiskey.

"Hell yeah. Let's get drunk. Papa's eyes were lighting up, while Mr. Cartmill's looked more temperate.

Naturally, Vernon had a couple bottles of whiskey, which he broke out. Papa took the first swig and wiped his mouth.

"Thanks, Boys, for your help today. I couldn't have done it without you."

Mr. Cartmill took the next drink.

"Here's to Lucas, who saved my life today." He handed the bottle to Lucas.

Lucas looked at Papa, who nodded affirmatively, and then he took a drink. The whiskey burned his throat and he coughed. The men all laughed.

"It's not the caboose that gets ya, Boy...it's the engine." Mr. Whiskey laughed and the others slapped their knees laughing.

Lucas was allowed to drink with the men under the disapproving look of his momma, but he drank nonetheless.

About seven swigs into the bottle he tried to walk and fell down. As he lay there, he felt the sky spinning and puked. He was not yet a man. Papa led in the laughter as his drinkin buddies cackled.

“I think you’ve had enough, Boy.” Mr. Cartmill smiled.

Momma put Lucas to bed, while the men continued drinking until about midnight.

The next day, Lucas had a headache that throbbed into the back of his neck. Nonetheless, he arose and milked the cow. He kept gagging and tossed up a yellow fluid.

Papa didn’t arise until about 8:30, and seemed to have the same symptoms as Lucas. He was mean and irritable.

“Go weed the garden, Boy, and don’t take too many days doing it.”

By midmorning, under the hot sun, Lucas was feeling better. He was thirsty beyond a road snake, though, and guzzled water. Papa kept walking by to see how he was doing. Karl maintained a safe supervisory distance and watched Lucas work. He couldn’t keep his stupid mouth shut.

“Weed faster, Lucas, or you’ll take too many days doing it.”

Lucas wanted to grab the little bastard by his throat and shake the life out of him, but he didn't. The lad would never work a day in his life.

At noon, Gertrud came to get Lucas and they all ate a silent meal. Karl, of course, kept looking at Papa and mocking the speed that Lucas was weeding.

"You got three days, Boy, and then the whippins start. You got that?"

"Yes, Papa."

Apparently, working like a yeoman and saving a man's life was a one-day reprieve.

Lucas thought of his years of endless toil, and concluded, "No...it's the caboose that gets ya...not the engine."

Chapter 4

Lucas finished weeding the garden and only got one whippin because he finished in the evening and not at noon.

Papa took the wagon to town and returned the following morning red eyed and stinking of booze. Momma was her usual pissed. Papa had a load of pipe to connect the windmill to the house.

The first order of business was for Lucas to dig a trench across the hill for the pipe to fit in. It went from nothing on both sides of the hill to about three feet deep. This work merited two whippins. Lucas realized that Papa nearly always sat around whittling wood and never worked. Lucas was the white nigger.

When the trench was done, Papa and Lucas affixed the pipe to the top of the windmill's pipe and ran it across the trench to an area beside the dugout.

"Now I've gotta get a tank to store the water and some bracing to set it on," said Papa, scratching his head and looking at the end of the pipe. First, I want to fire it up and make sure it pumps water."

The wind was blowing as it nearly always did, so Papa turned the windmill on and hurried over the hill to examine the end of the pipe. He shut a faucet at the bottom of the windmill, and

out came water—a pipe full of water. Papa was elated.

Perhaps he was excited about getting to town to get drunk, or maybe he was actually excited about water pumping out of the pipe, but he told Lucas that they had done a good job. Lucas was amazed.

The next day Papa took the wagon and headed to town. He was off to get the tank and wood for its tower.

Karl went fishin while Lucas took the Winchester and went hunting. By evening, they had a turkey and three fish. Momma waited for Papa to come home, but knew that he wouldn't be home until the next morning. She cooked the fish and prepared the turkey for the next day. Sometimes when they kept meat for the next day the family got sick. This would be one of those times.

In the morning, about 10:00, Papa came up the drive with a wagon full of wood and a large tank. It would hold about 300 gallons of water.

Lucas was sick and, naturally, Papa was stinking of booze. Momma spoke to him in whispering tones and the kids could see murder on her face.

“But, Anna, it took me all day to get and load these materials and I didn't want to drive the wagon home in the dark.”

She whispered, though the kids could hear it.

“You couldn’t drive home in the afternoon because you were getting stinking drunk, Otto. You’re a liar and a drunk.”

Papa was angry and hung over, but he didn’t respond to the attack. Rather, he defended his late arrival by saying that he had talked with Vernon and Mr. Cartmill about helping him with the tank. He disallowed Lucas to be sick that day.

“They’ll be here tomorrow to help with the tank after Lucas and me get the tower built today.”

Papa was not his sharpest, but he finally managed to get the horses ready to dig holes for the tank’s tower. The tower would only be about ten feet high, allowing water to connect to the top of the tank from the pipe that Lucas and Papa had installed.

As Lucas and Papa dug the holes, Lucas’ puked and his mind wandered.

“I’m sick and Papa doesn’t care. I don’t like the idea that I’m nearly 13 years old and I can’t read. I’ll be a farmer my whole life and I don’t know when Papa will stop whippin me. Likely, when I’m bigger he’ll beat me with his fists. I know Papa. He’s mean and he’ll never let me do anything but farm. Someday, if I get a wife, I’ll build a house on this property and do what I’ve always done—plow, plant, reap, and reap the hell

that Papa will deliver. I'll never be able to get a job in town and be around people. I hate my life. And, Karl...I hate him beyond words. At the rate he's going he'll be a goddamn lazy woman when he grows up. I hate my life."

Papa and Lucas built the tower precisely as they had built the windmill. Lucas tamped the holes and the tower sat in place. He got two whippins as blood for the job. His fears and thoughts were affirmed with each beating.

That night they ate the turkey that Lucas had killed. The meat smelled like a dead animal, but the family ate it. That night the entire family was puking and sick. They were still sick when old man Cartmill and Vernon Whiskey arrived that following morning.

"You killed a bad turkey, Boy, and made the whole family sick. You're an idiot. Couldn't you see that the turkey was sick?"

"No, Papa. It seemed normal to me."

"You're a dullard, Lucas Schmidt, and I don't know how you came from my blood."

As the men hooked up the horses to lift the tank, Papa and Lucas kept puking. By noon, they were feeling better.

"What'd you do, Otto, hit the bottle after you came home yesterday? You're puking like a weak drunk."

"Bad food, Vernon. Bad food. Lucas killed a sick turkey and we all got sick. The boy's an idiot.

Old man Cartmill was incensed.

“Lucas is one of the workinest boys I’ve seen in my life, Otto. He can outwork most grown men and you should be proud of him.”

Lucas wished that he were Mr. Cartmill’s son. Papa became silent and obviously had a resentment against ole man Cartmill, but he needed him to hoist the tank.

“I know that I’m hard on the Boy, but that’s why he’s a good worker.”

Papa had called Lucas a good worker, albeit he thought his son to be an idiot.

“I’m a good worker and I’m not an idiot,” thought Lucas. He needed someone, even himself to say it.

As they were hoisting the giant tank into place, Lucas accidentally got his arm caught under the tank. The pain was instantly excruciating. He had broken his arm.

The men quickly finished the job and then tended to Lucas.

Ole man Cartmill seemed adept at these things and felt Lucas’ arm to see if the bone had broken in a way that misaligned the bones. It had not. Lucas had a clean break.

Ole man Cartmill said that he would drive Lucas to town to have the doctor set his arm, but Papa said that he could build a splint out of boards and wire. The other men looked skeptical, but Lucas was not their son.

“I think he needs to go to the doctor, Otto. I don’t know that a wooden splint will work.”

“I had my arm broke once in Indiana and they used a wooden splint on me. It’ll be fine.” Papa was already cutting two boards to build the splint.

Papa wrapped Lucas’ arm in an old shirt. He then placed the boards on each side of Lucas’ arm and squeezed them together with wire. It actually felt better.

“He’ll likely need a shot of whiskey to kill the pain, Otto. I just think that would be the right thing to do.”

Papa winced. “When we finish hooking the pipe to the tank and putting a faucet on the bottom hole, we’ll all get drunk and Lucas can have a few swigs.”

“Makes sense to me,” said Mr. Whiskey. “Makes good sense to me.”

“That seems to be our ritual.” Mr. Cartmill smiled and winked at Lucas.

After about three shots of whiskey, Lucas felt better. His arm didn’t really hurt at all.

“You can’t have any more, Boy. Last time you reeled and puked. I think we’ve both puked enough today, given that you brought home a sick turkey.”

“Ok, Papa.”

That night, after Mr. Cartmill and Vernon Whiskey left, Lucas lay under the night sky with his arm throbbing. He got little sleep.

When morning came, he had to milk the cow with one hand and Papa was up by the time he finally brought the milk in.

“You’re slow, boy. What’s the matter with you?”

“I had to milk the cow with one hand, Papa. I can’t use my broken arm.”

“You’ll be of little use to me, Lucas. I do know that you can weed the garden with one hand, though, and now I know that, dullard or not, you can milk the cow. You’ll hold us up from building a sod house, though. I’ll give you a week to weed the garden and then we’ll go about the work of building a house. This dugout has about seen its last days. Eventually we’ll use it for storage. Your stupidity is holding me up, Boy.”

It took Lucas six days to weed the garden and his arm felt better each day. He received no whippins and Papa, obviously, gave him no praise for finishing a day early. Now it was time to build a sod house and he actually felt excited to see how that was done.

The first order of business—and Papa chewed Lucas out for not being able to plow—was for Papa to plow fresh ground from the buffalo grass. Then he showed Lucas how to use his good arm and his right foot to cut 18-inch pieces out of the plowed sod.

Papa, cussing Lucas because he could not do it, took the shovel and dug a shallow trench

(about three inches deep) that outlined a house. This took most of a day and got Lucas numerous cussings and two whippins because he couldn't do it.

The next day, Papa took the wagon and loaded sod bricks into it. He had Lucas use his good arm and help him. The sod bricks were heavy, but Lucas kept the pace. He was becoming proficient at using one arm now. Papa seemed pleased, though only his face showed it.

With a wagonload of sod, they returned to the trench that Papa had dug and placed the sod bricks in it—all around. Then they went back to the pasture, dug another trench and put on a second layer....then a third one, and so on. The outline of a house was forming. Papa left space for a door. They were able to do about two rows a day.

As the rows became higher, Lucas found the limits of his broken arm. He had to haul sod blocks from the wagon to Papa, who laid them as walls.

There were setbacks, so the walls took about a month to build. By then, Lucas' arm was pretty well healed up and he was able to contribute like a man. It took several days for his arm to regain strength and about a week for it to be back to full strength.

As Papa went from twenty rows of sod wall bricks to the tapered ends of the house (for a roofline), Lucas found his limits.

They built a wooden ladder and Lucas handed Papa sod blocks to form the upside down “V” that took the sod to a peak.

Lucas found that his gangly frame was too weak to haul sod bricks up the ladder and reach them to his Papa. On a few occasions, he dropped the sod block and it shattered on the ground. This resulted in a whippin. Lucas wondered if any kid in the world was a better worker than he was at the age of 12. He doubted it. Whippins were nothing now, though he still cried to convince Papa of his beastly dominance over Lucas.

When the peaks were built, Papa took the wagon to town. He decided that instead of using sod as the roof, he would use wood framing and tin sheets. This would keep the water out, even though rodents, bugs, and snakes would likely crawl through the sod walls. Papa also needed wood to frame a door and windows, and he needed glass for the windows. Though Papa said he would be back by evening, momma now knew better. He would return in the morning, stinking of booze.

Sure enough, about 10:00 in the morning Papa returned with all of the materials. He reeked of whiskey. His mood was particularly fowl and he picked a fight with momma and then with Lucas. He whipped Lucas for looking at him funny. Karl’s eyes beamed with glee.

While Papa was building the roof, with Lucas handing him materials, he had Lucas use the shovel to smooth the face of all walls, top to bottom. This was not fast work and resulted in a few beatings. In fact, by the time Papa was done building the roof, Lucas had only done two walls. This resulted in...

Lucas finished the other two walls while Papa was framing in the door and windows. Papa seemed to be in a better mood now, no doubt the result of seeing the house taking final form and of being over a hangover. The house was an amazing thing.

When Lucas finished smoothing out the interior walls, Papa and Lucas plastered it. The house, though made of sod, was a sight to behold.

Papa made one last trip to town, not telling the family why. When he returned the next morning, he had a beautiful cooking stove for momma. She was too thrilled to be mad about Papa's alcohol breath. He also brought her a new cotton dress as well as a dress for Gertrud. He actually brought Lucas (and naturally Karl) two new shirts and two pair of britches.

In a final effort, Lucas and Papa ran a water line into the house and it was done.

The floors were still sod and insects would make it their haven, but with water, dirt cut from the prairie, a tin roof to play melodies in the rain,

a new cooking stove, and a happy family they were seemingly ready for winter.

The smell of fall was in the air and Lucas felt the first bit of peace that he'd felt since arriving. He had actually avoided a whippin for days and his heart was filled with joy.

Momma and Gertrud were canning vegetables from the garden and Karl was fishing. Lucas was doing nothing. After the pain, what could be better?

Chapter 5

Lucas' feelings were changing with the autumn prairie grass. He was restless and, believe it or not, bored. All he did was milk the cow and pick vegetables these days, though Papa was talking about getting some cattle and having Lucas build a fence. He also talked about planting their first wheat field in the spring. Lucas actually looked forward to the work, though he didn't know what it might entail.

On a Saturday, Papa announced that there was a dance in town and that the entire county would be there. He wanted to take momma dancing.

Lucas and his siblings had not been to town since their arrival in the early spring, so they had no concept of the town that Papa visited so regularly. Papa was actually going to take the entire family to town, so the kids were elated. It took about two hours to get to town, so the family loaded up in the wagon and left home about 5:00. The dance started at 8:00.

When they got to town, Papa wanted to impress momma, so he took the entire family to a restaurant in the middle of town. Lucas and Karl were actually having a conversation while Gertrud sat looking around, as though she were at a county fair. Momma and Papa were chatting, touching hands, and laughing.

In the restaurant, one could actually get a steak, which was a luxury for a family that had eaten cornmeal, vegetables, fish, rabbit, and poison turkey. Papa was happy to play the big shot and allow his family this luxury. The kids ate as though they had never eaten.

Unlike the outside shitter, which Papa had built—the only wooden building on their farm—the restaurant had an inside toilet with running water. Lucas and his siblings took advantage of this luxury. Lucas marveled at a toilet where he didn't have to worry about black widow spiders crawling beneath his ass.

It was dark by 8:00. The crowd was meandering toward the fairgrounds, and Lucas was seeing the first automobiles that he had seen since Indiana.

Papa brought his fiddle in case he was able to join in with the band. Momma had her new dress on. The entire adventure was already euphoric.

The band consisted of people like Papa who came together as spontaneous music. Papa would indeed be able to play his fiddle. He knew a lot of tunes.

The mayor welcomed everyone to the dance and the band began to play. Papa smiled and fiddled in a way that Lucas had never seen. Papa was actually happy.

The band rotated members, so Papa soon stopped playing and danced with momma. The

kids meandered around looking for kids their age. Lucas found his eyes drifting towards a beautiful girl his age. He introduced himself.

“Hi, I’m Lucas Schmidt. We live about ten miles southwest of town. What’s your name?”

“I’m Sarah Stanley. I live about three miles north of town.”

Sarah had a shy, ocean-like serenity about her. Lucas was enthralled. He would have asked her to dance, but he had never danced and, so, he was afraid.

Other boys were approaching her, but she seemed attracted to Lucas. He was honored.

“Do you want to dance, Lucas Schmidt?”

“I’m embarrassed; I’ve never danced.”

“I’ll teach you.”

As Lucas battled with his clumsy feet, Sarah instructed him and, soon, they were dancing.

Karl laughed at Lucas while Gertrud sat listening to the music and watching people spin around the floor. Momma and Papa danced like they had done it a hundred times before and, so, they had. They looked so happy that Lucas wondered how this man could ever beat him. The evening was magic.

Sarah held Lucas’ hand as they danced and seemed amazingly attracted to him. He was euphoric—better than when he drank alcohol. She asked if he wanted to go outside, and they did.

After awhile, Papa and momma came outside. Men were passing a fifth of whiskey, so, naturally, Papa joined in. Momma didn't seem to care as she stood off to the side talking with other women.

Papa and momma were distracted as Sarah took Lucas' hand and led him into a grove of cottonwood trees. A full moon shined brightly through the trees, and a gentle breeze was blowing, wafting a thousand dancing silhouettes. The leaves were yellow and silver as they danced in moonlight.

Lucas was shy, and turned red, as Sarah hugged him. She didn't see or care about his shyness; then, she kissed him.

His head spun as it felt the warm kiss and perceived the full moon. He kissed her back. Then Karl came hunting and making fun of Lucas.

"Lucas and Sarah, sittin in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

"Get out of here, Karl!"

"I'm gonna tell Papa, Lucas. I'm gonna tell."

Lucas pondered thrashing the boy for the first time ever. His face showed it.

"Come on, Lucas. There's no reason to get into trouble."

"The boy is as spoiled as a rotten apple, Sarah. Someone has to teach him some manners at some point and Papa won't do it."

“Don’t. You’ll get into trouble.” She was leading Lucas by the hand towards the other people.

When they arrived at where the men had been drinking, there was a commotion brewing.

Papa and a giant Swed were getting into an argument. The Swed called Papa a “German Immigrant Asshole,” and Papa punched him in the jaw.

The women were scurrying to break up the fight, but the Swed pushed momma out of the way and she fell backwards, soiling her new dress.

Lucas saw Papa’s eyes grow cold and mean, like nothing he had ever seen.

Papa uppercut the Swed on his chin and began whaling as though he were windmill blades.

The Swed got in a couple of punches, but found himself too drunk and too slow to counterbalance Papa’s beating. He soon lay bleeding and knocked out on the ground. Papa then ran to see if momma was ok.

“I’m fine, Otto, just fine. I can’t believe that you got into a fight with that man. Why did you do it?”

“Because I may be German and I may be an immigrant, but I am an American, and NO man pushes my wife.”

Lucas was proud of his Papa. He was pleased to see his fury unleashed on a grown

man. He suddenly realized that Sarah was gripping his hand so tightly that it hurt.

“Are you alright, Sarah?”

“I’ve just never seen anything like that.”

“Me either. I didn’t know Papa could do that.”

“Well, he did.”

“I feel bad for feeling this, but I’m proud of him.”

“No one’s ever whipped the big Swed...I’ve heard my daddy talk about all of the fights the Swed’s been in and nobody has ever won.”

Men were patting Papa on the back and handing him bottles of whiskey. It was as though they had seen the fight of the century. Perhaps they had.

Papa drank a good swig from several bottles and then took mamma in to dance. The Swedish giant was moaning now and trying to get up. When he did, the men handed him a bottle too.

Lucas and Sarah danced until her daddy came in and said that it was time to go home. Lucas stood like the gangly 12-year old that he was and sweated giant beads as Sarah introduced them.

“Daddy, this is Lucas Schmidt. Lucas, this is my daddy.”

The man surveyed Lucas as though he were a gunnysack full of rats.”

“Come on, Sarah. We’ve gotta go home.”

Sarah smiled over her right shoulder as her daddy loaded her into their Ford and drove away. Lucas felt his mind fill with memories as he watched her ride off under the full moon. Blowing cottonwoods danced in his heart.

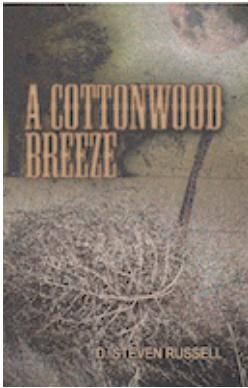
A man walked up to Lucas.

“You better be careful messin with ole Porky Stanley’s daughter, Boy. He’s a gentle man, but REAL protective of his daughter.”

“Porky?” Lucas wondered where that name originated.

Papa tapped Lucas on the shoulder and said that it was time to go. It was about midnight.

The kids slept under the stars that night, even though the house had two rooms. No doubt Papa wanted them to enjoy a full moon.



1927 finds Lucas Schmidt tilling rows behind a beige plow horse in western Kansas. A violent, drunken father is Lucas' daily bread. Finding the love of his life neath a Cottonwood tree is his salvation. Marriage, posterity, pain, death, the dirty 30s, World War II and a life of modernizing technology lead Lucas on a path to painful, beautiful destiny. Dust of the earth is one's only measure of time and time is the only measure of a farmer's earth.

A Cottonwood Breeze

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8785.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**