

# *Dusty Places*

*A Short Story*

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*Dusty Places*

The day Mr. Bode died was the saddest day in my six-year-old life, but it was also the happiest. It was the day I knew for the first time that the world was real and not just a back forty I could play in. It was also the day I learned how to be a real live person in this world of ours.

Kansas was hot that summer, hot and dusty. But not as hot as the day Mr. Bode died. Nothing but burnt yellow fields and a few random trees crackling with dry leaves.

I didn't know Mr. Bode, except that he was the old man who sat across the aisle from us in church. I remember he never fell asleep. He was old and the sermon was the usually long and boring one, but he stalwartly faced the preacher with a straight back and equally straight neck.

Some kids used to say he couldn't fall asleep in church—because his daughter wouldn't let him. Simmon Bode. Tall, slender, auburn-haired Simmon Bode.

My older brother, Mitch, thought her front name sounded like some kind of fruit cut in half. Mama would hush us up when we giggled in church over prissy Simmon Bode.

My daddy was a cattle rancher. He got out of the army on account of his daddy needed his help on the ranch during the war. So in 1949 after Grandpa had long retired, there was my daddy, a skinny, sun-browned rancher in a white hat who had a Kansas ranch, a slender, sun-browned wife, and a half dozen, skinny, sun-browned kids. My daddy was the long tall Texan on all the radio shows we listened to, only the best Kansas version. I guess we were poor, I hadn't ever noticed. I just lived my life and everyone else lived theirs.

At least, that's the way I lived it until Mr. Bode died, and Mitch's heart nearly broke again and Mama cried. But not for Mr. Bode.

The Bode's were the richest family in Andale, I guess. Rich in family history, too. Right up there with the Andersons and the Dales and the Missouri Pacific Railroad. The richest compared to the rest of us, that is, us being ranchers and farmers who agreed on everything except our professions.

Simmon Bode was the town spinster. Pretty as all get out maybe, but she was as old as my mama—pushing forty, unmarried, and taking care of her old father. So she was just automatically the town spinster.

Being six and much too busy wishing I was an Indian, I was blissfully ignorant of labels. I didn't know that sometimes people got labeled so much they started wearing the labels without really wanting to, without really knowing it.

Simmon Bode, richer than all the rest of the women in Andale, wore fancier dresses, had her choice of hats with bird's nests on them, and the most expensive heels in Butterby's. And she was not a very nice person.

“Stuck up, and thinks she is something, that's what Mrs. Carnegie said,” Marilyn proclaimed in my hearing once after church. We were all riding home in the truck, tires spewing dust.

“Marilyn,” Mama said with a sigh, fanning the heat off her face. “Learn to use your own eyes and ears instead of everyone else's.”

But despite Marilyn's fascination with town gossip where strange folk were concerned, Simmon Bode was everything those ladies said she was. Never missed a chance to slight one of the other ladies or dote upon Mrs. Butterby in front of them to get an extra few minutes all to herself.

Mr. Bode was just as grumpy as his daughter, but as far as I could see he didn't have nothing to be grumpy about. Except maybe his bossy daughter.

“I can't imagine,” Mrs. Carnegie said once in front of Marilyn and me. It was a soup and pie night at the community building. “Having to hang onto a daughter like that. Why didn't he try harder to marry her off to one of those young men who came calling?”

“They probably didn’t want her either.”

Mrs. Carnegie glanced at Gail Carnegie, her daughter, and they burst into giggles.

You could say the dust never really settled around Simmon Bode.

I ran straight into Mr. Bode’s behind that night, on accident of course. He stood up the split second I turned to run down the aisle between the tables, and there wasn’t anything else to do but run into him.

I gasped, sure my eyes would pop out, and Mr. Bode just stood there, hunched over his cane. Then he turned to look at me, his eyebrows scrunched together.

“Sorry, Mr. Bode,” I said. “Sorry, Mr. Bode.” I bit into my fingernails, his stare rooting me to the floor. I guess I was waiting for him to lose interest and move on, but all he did was look at me, his frown deepening.

“Nina Joan! What do you think you’re doing pestering Mr. Bode?” Mitch rushed around Mr. Bode and his cane and grabbed my arm. “Don’t you know better?” He turned to Mr. Bode. “Sorry, sir. She’s just six, she don’t know any better.”

With one good jerk he pulled me out of sight of Mr. Bode’s harrowing glare and outside into the evening where the kids were playing in the grass.

“Gee-willikers!” I whispered.

“Yeah,” Mitch said. “And he’s the one stood up in front of you.”

“Did you save me, Mitch?”

“Sure did! Who knows what he would have done with that cane.”

“Thanks, Mitch.”

He had his hands in his pockets, walking underneath the stars, careless and free like Daddy. “Yeah. Sure, kid. Go on and pick on someone your own size.”

I smiled and waded out into the grass to play hide-and-seek, the children laughing and the grass swirling around bodies.

Mama had lost two babies in the seven year span between Mitchell and me. You could say Mitchell became my self-proclaimed protector when I was born. It was only later I learned how burying two babies had gouged a deep hole through his heart. That my teasing, talkative, unafraid big brother was really hiding a broken heart with a nasty scar behind all the guff and gusto.

Mama and Daddy thought it would wear off with time, but they kept telling him to watch out for me wherever we went. He never quit being responsible for the brat, never tired of hauling me out of the room when I had tantrums, and never stopped caring. Mitch was my favorite brother, forever keeping me from the lady-like influences of Marilyn. But she was just another sun-browned Laraby ranch kid who could herd cows with the best of them.

Glenn and Mitchell helped Daddy with the ranching. Grandpa went sometimes, too, but he liked helping Mama around the house more. He kept Martin and Warren out of her hair—the two devils with buzzed heads instead of horns. They were four the summer Mr. Bode died. When Mama heard the barber got an electric razor she figured paying someone to cut their hair was worth it. Besides, the electric razor mesmerized them into stillness and they didn't move an inch when Mr. Kenny turned it on their heads. Mama figured that an added bonus considering they never sat still for anything. She walloped the living daylights out of those two to make them sit for hair cuts, but it just didn't sink in. They were too busy worrying about being boys to care about sitting still or what people would think.

Not that Mama was one for caring about what people thought.

The day Mr. Bode died our phone rang the emergency ring. That was all the cue the ranchers' and farmers' wives needed to drop everything and run for the telephone. Mama never said much. And after a few minutes she hung up and turned to Warren, Martin, and me at the lunch table.

A big bite of sandwich sat in my mouth as I stared at Mama, the lines in her forehead all bunched up.

“What's the matter, Mama?” I asked between chews.

“Was it a ‘mergency, Mama?” asked Warren.

She sat down, slow and easy. “Mr. Bode died.”

I bit hard on my tongue. “Oh.”

Mama finished eating her lunch in silence.

Warren, Martin, and I didn’t know much except that we weren’t going to see a grumpy old man at church any more. The boys and I laughed and giggled, but I’d look over at Mama and she wouldn’t be any happier.

When Daddy and the others got home for supper, Mama was just as silent. Even after telling Grandpa and Daddy the news.

I didn’t know what caused the great silence. He was just Mr. Bode, and nobody liked his daughter.

Later, when dishes were done and put away, we sat around the living room waiting for it to get dark. Grandpa read in his armchair, Glenn and Mitchell studied something, and Daddy rough housed with the twins and me on the floor. But after awhile he pried himself away, tucked his shirt in, and disappeared down the shadowed hallway of our rooms.

I stood at the end of the hall, watching Daddy’s white shirt, like a ghost in the dark. He stepped into his and Mama’s room and flipped on the electric light. I padded to a stop just outside the door.

Mama sat on the edge of the bed, staring out the window facing east. Daddy walked up to her so quietly and sat down. He whispered something and Mama shook her head. Then Daddy put his arms around her and Mama laid her head on his shoulder. And when they did that, sitting there on the edge of the bed, it was always because of two little graves on the hill.

Mama remained sad the three whole days it took to plan the funeral. And the morning of the funeral Daddy woke Glenn, Mitchell, Marilyn and I long before the sun was up and took us out to do chores. When we got back, my black dress was lying out across my bed next to my black stockings and polished black shoes.

“Mama, do I have to wear shoes—” But I stopped because Mama was dressed in black from head to foot, and Daddy was standing beside her at the table in his white suit, his arm across her shoulders, whispering.

We clamored into the truck when Daddy and Mama drove up to fetch us. Grandpa rode his horse and so did Glenn. I sat down beside Mitchell in the back and he pulled me onto his lap.

“You’ll get your bum dirty sitting down there.”

“Mitch,” I said, a ways down the road, the tires bumping and engine stuttering. “Why’s Mama so sad? Did she like Mr. Bode?”

But when I looked from Mama’s stiff, straight shoulders up to Mitchell’s face, I saw for the first time the same deep hurt searing across his face. His black hair flopped over into his eyes, shading them, but I saw it all the same.

He didn’t answer me, just looked into the dust the truck kicked up behind us.

And all I could think about were the two little graves on our hill in the east pasture. I knew then that she hadn’t been sad because Mr. Bode had died.

Folks crowded into the white-washed church with the tall steeple, dressed in white and black, filling up the rows. Women fanned themselves with paper fans, men tugged at their collars, looking uncomfortable without their hats. Marilyn looked like she might croak in her black dress.

Mr. Bode lay in his casket beneath the pulpit and no one sat in the very first pew except for Simmon Bode. Her auburn hair coiled into a bun, covered with the birdcage net of her black hat.

All through the speaking I watched Simmon Bode. Stiff and straight, never a look back, staring ahead as she always did. As if Simmon Bode had always sat alone. As if losing someone never changed anything, and why on earth did we need death if it didn’t change anything?

It was like there was a dust hanging over this place. A sheer, shifting dust you could almost see through, but it hid things you really didn’t want anybody to see.

When the service let out and we followed the pall bearers to the graveyard, up the two dusty tracks of road to the middle of the prairie, I held Daddy's hand. Mama held the other. I kept watching Mama watch Simmon Bode, leading the line of people, her purse on her arm, not a breeze to disturb her.

We stood around the grave as the preacher read the final words, men bared their heads at the last prayer. And Simmon Bode was the first to leave, never even waited to receive condolences or watch them lower her daddy to the grave. She got in her black sedan and her hired hand drove her home.

"They're getting up an open house at the Bode place," Mrs. Carnegie told Daddy and Mama. "Everyone's welcome." She looked off to the dust left behind by Simmon Bode's car. "Can you even imagine? To see of all us come to her father's funeral and not speak a single word to anybody."

"Well, he's dead, ain't he?" Daddy said, shoving on his hat. "You can't expect anyone to want to talk about that." He pushed past Mrs. Carnegie, pulling Mama and me beside him.

I'd never been to the Bode's house. It was the fancy Victorian on the end of 5th Street, flowering gardens, green lawns, a cement walk leading from the gated fence to the front steps.

Cars and wagons parked along the street, haggling for the shade from the Bode's enormous trees.

We Larabys kept huddled together as we opened the gate and walked to the front steps. Mr. Butterby opened the door for us and we walked into a house full of people with crystal glasses of punch and plates of store bought finger foods.

The Bode's house was indeed fine; a real carpet, grape colored drapes pulled away from windows, the house filled with the bright light of summer. People wandered in and out of the entry as we stepped inside, whispering hushed words and examining china and photographs. A strange, cool air filled the house, and I'm not sure why, but it didn't feel real to me.

It was as if all the finery was covering up for something.

Miss Simmon Bode sat in the parlor just around the corner, with her own plate of food and crystal glass of punch. A man in a fancy suit stood behind her, whispering consolations or something. Miss

Bode didn't seem to be listening. Mitch said he was her lawyer.

Daddy whispered something to Glenn and Mitch, and Mitch leaned down to me, "We're all going up to say we're sorry for her loss." He took my hand and I stared. Surely Daddy didn't mean for me to say anything. I didn't have anything to say to her.

But we shuffled up in front of Simmon Bode, the whole group of us Larabys, and she looked up. Her face hardened from a far off look into a forced smile, a company face as Mama would call it.

Mama held to Daddy's arm, hardly daring to look up as Daddy spoke.

"We're terribly sorry for your loss, Miss Bode."

Prim and proper Miss Bode straightened her shoulders. "Thank you, I'm sure. Do help yourself to some refreshments." She fluttered a hand at the table of food and punch, and slipped back into the far off look, the limp shoulders. Mama didn't say anything.

We all took a small plate of food, and somehow it didn't seem right, taking from her when it was her who'd lost more. I think the rest of us felt that way. Marilyn and Glenn only took a small glass of punch, and Daddy and Grandpa didn't have anything.

A few empty chairs, upholstered in red and gold paisley, sat against the wall not far from Miss Bode, and the Laraby clan laid hold of them. Daddy saved a place for Mama and she sat down, holding a crystal glass, the red punch sparkling inside. But she didn't drink it. I sat in the same seat with Marilyn, and the twins plunked themselves down on the carpet.

I watched people float in and out, offering condolences before filling their plates and wandering around to gawk at the Bode's finery. And Miss Bode just sat in her chair the whole time.

I'd eaten all my food and had a small sip of Marilyn's punch when the shadows began to fall across the carpet. A few people had already come to say their good-byes.

Mrs. Carnegie, her daughter and husband walked up to Simmon Bode just as someone else was leaving. Mrs. Carnegie began to say how sorry she was about Mr. Bode and Simmon Bode's crystal

punch glass slipped, thudding to the floor. All that punch sank into the carpet. Simmon Bode trembled all the way down to her lap where her plate of untouched food flipped over onto the carpet, too. She buried her face in her hands and the whole room froze in utter shock as Simmon Bode's walls broke open.

Her lawyer reached out a tentative hand to her shoulder, but he decided against it and stepped away, no doubt hoping the episode would end just as quickly as it began.

Mrs. Carnegie backed away as Simmon's sobs filled the silent room, wide-eyed and speechless for once.

But nobody stood, nobody lifted a hand as Simmon Bode cracked open before us. We didn't know this Simmon Bode. Except my Mama. And when my mama handed her punch glass to Daddy and hurried to Simmon Bode's side, when she knelt in front of Miss Simmon Bode and touched her shoulder, when Simmon lowered her hands from her tear-stained face, her mascara running and lipstick smudged, when my Mama wrapped her arms around Simmon and sobbed, too, unconstrained, the dust finally cleared.

Those two little graves on a hill just about equaled Mr. Bode's. And the sorrow flooding out of Simmon Bode just about equaled the pain Mama was reliving.

Everyone else in the room just stood watching them cry together, and I think everyone else, even Mrs. Carnegie, understood now. What separated a prim, rich lady from the rest of the sun-browned farmers and ranchers wasn't really that strong of a dividing line.

In the end, not even money and finery or the dusty, hidden places in our lives, are enough to cover up what we are. It just all comes down to this one thing—the raw, painful beauty of being people is what really holds us together.