THE

DUST
SETTLES
THE DUST SETTLES

A NOVEL

JOANNE BUTTERFIELD

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I wish to dedicate this story in memory of my mother, Bertha Elizabeth Bougsty Moomau, whose steadfast commitment to her family will always be remembered.
HE 1930’s OF THE MIDWEST of these United States was marked by one major climate event which turned into an ecological disaster: the lack of rain. The states of Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, South Dakota, Colorado, Missouri, New Mexico, and Arkansas were its victims. It began innocently at first, just a lack of normal rainfall one year. “Nothing to worry about,” the farmers said to one another. “We have had a time of meager rainfall before. Next year will be better.”

With that in mind, the unsuspecting farmers and ranchers and shop owners went about their business, conserving water when and where they could. But a pattern set up by these same farmers would help to bring the Midwest and its people to its knees. For years, the Midwesterners had plowed under and planted the plains when their only water source was rainfall. Before that, the plains of the Midwest were grassy fields and hills, covered with native plants that held the soil and survived the worst the winds and the snow and the rain (and lack of it) could
bring. Now, however, the native grasses were gone. They were replaced by row after row of crops—soybeans, corn, and wheat—the mainstay of the farmers.

A greater force than any these farmers could imagine was barreling down upon them. Seven years of drought. And dust; dark dust everywhere. Aptly named “The Dust Bowl,” the drought caused the affected states to lose more than just the ability to grow crops. They lost the top soil, that beautiful, warm, brown dirt that smelled like fresh chocolate and tasted like used coffee grounds.

As the years progressed, the topsoil was picked up by the winds and lifted high into the air. It moved across the countryside like a black cloud of smoke, pushed by the winds. It is estimated that 75% of the native top soil blew across the plains and ended up in the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf. Daylight was the first victim. No sun could penetrate its blackness. People who were caught in its push across the land came out covered in the dust. No body part was immune to the dirt. Teeth blackened, ears plugged, nostrils filled, and fingernails turned brown as the clouds traveled, leaving black dust everywhere. The dust crept under doors, between the cracks of the windows, and through the tiniest of holes in the sides of the homes and barns. There was no escaping it.

Some people, many in fact, escaped to other states, hoping to rebuild their lives as they left all they had behind them. This is where the term “Okie” began. Almost 15% of Oklahoma residents migrated westward in their jalopies, carrying whatever they could fit on them. It is estimated that 2.5 million migrants left their farms and homes and businesses during this time of the “Dirty Thirties.”
California, Texas, Oregon, and Washington beckoned with their coastlines of water.

Those who stayed, those stubborn residents who existed from day to day, lived lives of hardship. Many died from a disease unique to the Dust Bowl, “Dust Pneumonia.” Others died of malnutrition and during childbirth. The young and old all suffered. Schools closed; families were kept at home. They never knew when a dust storm would come across the fields, bringing fear with it, and pushing the limits of even the strongest water-starved inhabitants.

Far beyond the crop losses and the economic impact, the spirit and faith of the American farm family was tested, some beyond their endurance, and those who stayed were stretched further than they thought they could possibly go. They were those who chose to believe in a better life ahead, with hope for tomorrow, as they clung to their faith.

When the Dust Bowl ended and the rains returned, they went on to rebuild their homes, their farms, their towns, and most importantly, their lives.
I wish to acknowledge my daughter, Pam Hardesty, and my friend, Jennie Theobald, for their tireless reading and helpful comments. I also wish to acknowledge my Tuesday Women of Grace Group for their ongoing support and encouragement.
ONE THOUSAND ONE, ONE THOUSAND two,” Jane said as the lightning crashed overhead. The kerosene lamp cast its limited light upon her small frame as she stood still and waited for the thunder. “It’s only two miles away,” she said to her dog, Ruffy, who cowered at her feet. She reached down and rubbed his head as he whined at the sounds outside the farmhouse.

“Maybe this will be the rainstorm we need,” she mused.

A sudden flash of lightning followed by a loud crack made Ruffy run for his bed. Jane started to count again, but this time there was no need. The lightning had found the large maple tree in the front yard; the one Jane’s parents had planted the day they bought the farm.

Dan, her husband, called out as he ran toward the front door, his hair a dark contrast to another sudden flash of lightning. “Stay put Jane. I’ll check it out.”
The scene in the front yard was devastating. The tree was sliced in half and was still smoldering when Dan got to the porch. Jane followed after him; wanting to be sure everything was all right.

“Darn storm. We don’t get rain for seven years and now that it’s coming, we get this,” Dan said.

“At least it hasn’t caught on fire,” Jane responded as she stood at the open screen door. “I’m just glad momma and poppa aren’t here to see it,” she said. She cast a glance at the hand-carved bench her poppa had made, and saw that it was crushed beneath the fallen branches.

“Yes, Jane. I’m glad for that too. Glad, too, that the lightning didn’t hit the house or the barn. But I sure don’t look forward to having another hard job to do, especially since I’ll be starting the planting tomorrow.” He made his way back up the porch steps, put his arm around Jane, and closed the front door. “It’ll just have to wait.”

The next day, Dan was up and around long before the sun rose. “Perhaps last night’s dry lightning and thunderstorm is an indication that rain is on its way,” he said to Ruffy as they made their way out to the barn. It was planting day. He had finished the prep work and was ready to get the wheat seed into the ground.

*It’s feels like rain*, Jane said to herself as she carefully made her way downstairs. “Rain at last. I can smell it coming, I’d almost forgotten what rain on thirsty soil smells like. Thank you, Lord.” She dried her hands on her apron. Actually, it was her momma’s apron, but she was keeping it so that maybe one day momma’s grandchild might wear it.

Jane looked out her kitchen window and could still see the remains of last week’s dust storm. Fine topsoil
covered the back porch railing and steps. The tops of the corn in the dried up cornfield—soon to be plowed under—dropped silt at the slightest hint of a breeze. Her heart began to beat faster and her throat began to close up as she thought of the damage another dust storm could bring.

Standing at the kitchen window of their farmhouse, the farmhouse where Jane was born, she looked out across the fields to the barren wheat field and sighed. She turned to cross the kitchen into the front parlor where she saw the remains of the storm’s damage. The fallen limbs of the maple tree would indeed have to wait to be cut up, Jane thought. The barn doors were open and Dan was on his way to the field now, his strong body barely visible as he began the process of planting the winter wheat.

She turned to go back to her kitchen when she saw her brother-in-law, Ernie and his son Chad and their neighbor on the other side of the section, Lou, drive into the yard. They were ready to help Dan with the planting. Waving to the three of them as they made their way to the field, Jane hurried to the kitchen to fix another pot of coffee and finish the cinnamon rolls she was preparing. They’ll be hungry when they stop for a break, she thought as she set about her work; her small hands kneading the dough with an expert’s touch.

Her thoughts became a spoken prayer to God as she said, “Lord, You know our needs. You know that Dan needs to have something to hope for. He desperately needs something to go right for him. Please let this winter wheat survive so that in the spring he will be able to see the fruits of his hard labor. And would You please bring him to You. I know how much he needs You. I want him
to believe in You as I do. With all that’s happened to us, I don’t know how much longer I can go on without him standing by my side; knowing You like I do.”
That afternoon, with no rain in sight, in spite of Jane’s prediction, the darkening in the sky beyond the farm looked like another dust storm was coming. Jane stood on the porch of her aging farmhouse, apprehension rising in her veins like the bile rising in her throat. “Oh, no. Not another one. Not today,” she cried. She ran as quickly as she could to alert Dan, who was in the winter wheat field finishing up the planting.

When she caught his attention, she yelled, “Dan! Dan!” “It’s another dust storm. I’ll go close up the house. You might have enough time to get the animals inside the barn before it hits.”

Dan sprang into action, turning the tractor back toward the barn and yelling to Jane, “You get inside. Be careful. I’ll take care of this.”

Jane reached the front door and took one last look at the darkening sky behind her. Her lungs began to feel the pressure of the winds that came with the dust storms. She yelled for Ruffy, who came running. Together they
went inside the house just as Shamus, the stray cat who had made the farm her home these last several months, scampered through the open screen door and made for her perch on the back of the parlor sofa. Ruffy found his stuffed toy and carried it to the screened-in back porch, where he cowered in his bed.

Jane hurried to close the doors and the windows and the curtains and to start the wood stove in the kitchen. “Dan will have to close the upstairs windows when he comes in,” she said to Ruffy. “I don’t think I can make it up those stairs right now.”

She pulled the curtains back and watched Dan as he hurried to close the barn. From her viewpoint, she could see the corn stalks beginning to bend and break as the wind grew stronger. *I know we have to plow them under, but I also know some of Dan’s hopes for the farm will be crushed beneath the soil with them,* she thought to herself. “We had so planned on the corn crop to make it this year,” she said. Her face matched the sound of the worry in her voice: pleading eyes, furrowed brow, and tense lips.

Looking across the road toward Iowa City she could see the small town cemetery. In the morning light she could just make out the headstones that marked her momma’s and poppa’s graves. And next to them rested two of her own offspring: the two stillborn children she and Dan had lost before they could even breathe. Tears fell from her eyes, and she let them slide down her freckled face onto her swollen belly.

Dan pushed open the door and stomped into the hallway, leaving a trail of dust behind him. “Why did it have to come today? Why couldn’t it just not happen
today?” he shouted as he threw his boots into the corner and headed toward the wash room.

“Dan, could you go upstairs and close the windows?” Jane asked him. “I just didn’t feel like I could make it up the stairs again today.”

Dan turned and rushed upstairs to do as Jane asked.

Watching Dan bound up the stairs, Jane said. “I wish I could do something, anything – to make him feel better, but He doesn’t want to hear me talk about having faith in God and trusting Him for our lives. He did at first, but not anymore. These last few years have taken all the hope out of him. Now he’s just angry at God and sometimes I think he’s angry at me for believing.”

Jane walked into the kitchen, reached up for the apron hanging by the door, and wrapped it around her spreading body. “Owe,” Jane cried, as a sudden movement in her womb caused her to reach for the kitchen table for support. Rubbing her protruding abdomen with the palm of her hand, she whispered in a voice as soothing as she could make it, “Quiet, quiet, little one. Quiet now. Everything’s all right.”

A moment later Dan called out from the covered back porch: “Jane, come here. Quickly. Look at the sky.” Jane opened the porch door to stand beside her husband. Overhead the sky had opened up—as bright a blue as she’d ever seen—and the dust cloud was gone.

“Where is it?” she asked. “Where did it go—the dust cloud I mean?”

Dan took her hand and helped her down the steps as Ruffy poked his head out from under his blanket. A dark shadow crossed the yard. Both Jane and Dan felt the apprehension that came when the sky darkened. They
clasped their hands tightly and felt the strong connection between them. Across the horizon, the blackish gray clouds of the dust storm had been replaced by what looked to be rain clouds. Jane sat down on the steps, her deep purple eyes looking up to the heavens, her gaze bulleted to the clouds, and her hands on her lap. She prayed quietly to herself, \textit{God, please let those clouds bring us the rain we so need.}

Dan stood on the parched ground, turning first to the north, then to the west, willing the clouds to bring the rain.

\textit{Oh God,} Jane said as she continued to pray, \textit{If only this could be the beginning of the end of the drought and the horrible dust storms. If only this could be the beginning of my Dan releasing whatever it is that keeps him from believing in You. Please cause Your seed of faith to begin growing in Dan’s heart and mind so that he will love You as I do.}

As she rose to take her husband’s hand, Jane said to herself, \textit{Lord, I’m not sure how much more I can endure without having Dan by my side, the two of us on our knees together, trusting You.}