

DUST BABY

by:

Litza Bixler

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EXT. COUNTRY ROAD (AMERICAN SOUTHWEST) - MORNING

The wind blows dust into the air and rattles a tumbleweed caught in a pile of junk. Train tracks run opposite, framing a distant cattle ranch. An old 30s pickup is parked on a long, straight road that stretches deep into the prairie.

A dirty car window. The windshield wiper sweeps the dirt away to reveal a woman, DUSTY (36), asleep behind the wheel. She is somehow both young and old, innocent and world-weary. She wears a faded leather World War One flying cap. A faint smile twitches at the corner of her lips.

DUSTY (V.O.)

People can tell a lot from the sound of your voice. So I stopped usin' mine a long time ago. Life's been a whole lot simpler, and a whole lot quieter every since.

The wind nearly dislodges the tumbleweed, but it remains caught. We see the truck silhouetted against the early morning sky. The engine starts.

EXT. OPEN PRAIRIE (AMERICAN SOUTHWEST) - MORNING

Two young boys walk across the prairie. COOPER (8), a blond slip of a boy with a droopy right eyelid, struggles to keep up with SAM (11), his older, stockier, and appreciably more confident brother. In the distance, a wooden windmill slowly turns. Sam points towards it.

SAM

See that old windmill?

Cooper shrugs, feigning nonchalance.

COOPER

Yeah. So.

SAM

There used to be a house over there, but it disappeared during that big dust storm dad tol' us about.

Cooper's eyes widen.

COOPER

Where'd it go?

SAM

Dunno.

(MORE)

SAM (cont'd)
(dramatic pause)
But a family lived in there, and all
of 'em was killed, sucked up by a
dust devil and smashed on the ground!

Sam demonstrates this by slamming one hand on top of the
other, Cooper flinches.

SAM (cont'd)
Anyways, I heard the house got put
down somewheres in Texas, but the
family still wander 'round here
lookin' for it.

Sam narrows his eyes and fixes his gaze on Cooper.

SAM (cont'd)
Y'know...if you walk into the middle
of that spot.
(he points)
You'll disappear too.

Sam quickly grabs Cooper, who squeals and runs away. Sam
charges after him, whooping wildly.

INT. DUSTY'S TRUCK - AFTERNOON

Dusty's face, in profile, driving. A male voice bubbles in
the background, the radio perhaps. Dusty grips the steering
wheel, her knuckles white.

MALE VOICE
Look, all I'm sayin' is, we never
shoulda brought 'em over in the first
place.

Pull back to reveal JEB (20s), in the passenger seat, mid-
tirade. He's a scruffy man with long stringy hair, and a
short stringy temper. He smacks his hand on his thigh.

JEB
I mean, they ain't hard workin' like
them wet backs, or good at math and
shit like the chinks and the nips.
Far as I can tell, ain't good for
nothing. Popping out kids left and
right.

(MORE)

JEB (cont'd)

I mean, I'm a god fearin' man and all, and I ain't never believed in killing no babies but if I saw a nigger baby by the side of the road, I'd think twice 'fore calling the police.

Dusty opens her mouth to speak, but dust puffs out. Her lips snap closed. She hits the breaks. The truck's tires SQUEAL. She pulls over, gets out and marches to the passenger side.

JEB (cont'd)

Hey! What the hell-

Dusty wrenches the door open, grabs Jeb by his shoulders, and with surprising strength, deposits him by the side of the road. He shouts a string of expletives and kicks the dust furiously.

Back in the truck, Dusty speeds off until Jeb is a spec in her rear view mirror.

INT. DUSTY'S TRUCK - DUSK

Dusty taps the steering wheel with her fingers. OHIA (16), a Native American teen with a shock of dark choppy hair, is now in the passenger seat. She plays a mouth-harp and bangs her heel against the door. She wears a pink tee with the phrase "Native Girls Do It Best" written across the front in loopy cursive.

OHIA (SINGS)

*Red bird, red bird;
what makes your head so red?
I've been picking your corn
for so darn long,
it's a wonder I ain't dead, dead,
it's a wonder I ain't dead.
Rattlesnake, rattlesnake;
what makes your teeth so white?
I've been lying in the sun
for so darn long,
you're lucky I don't bite, bite,
you're lucky I don't bite.*

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Dusty is sprawled out on the motel bed. A ceiling fan slowly turns, emitting a low buzzing sound. She watches the fan, her hands tucked underneath her head.

DUSTY (V.O.)
My mama called me Dusty, on account
of the fact I was born during the
biggest dust storm my town had seen
since the thirties.

EXT. WINDMILL ON PRAIRIE - AFTERNOON (FLASHBACK)

A YOUNG DUSTY (5) spins in circles beneath a wooden
windmill. She looks up into the yawning mechanism, the
windmill blades turn.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Dusty! Stop spinning 'fore you make
yourself sick! Come here, I've got
something to show you.

Dizzy, Dusty stops spinning, then stumbles around again.

DUSTY
I can't Mama. I'm a windmill and it's
windy.

Dusty's mother, MARY (42), appears. She carries a stick. A
brown object hangs off one end. Dust stops spinning.

MARY
Look here.

Dusty leans forward and peers at the stick.

DUSTY
Whoa! what is it?

MARY
You remember that caterpillar I
showed you the other day?

Dusty nods.

MARY (cont'd)
Welp, that's him, inside there.

Mary points at a cocoon dangling from the end of the stick.
Dusty eyes the it, suspicious.

DUSTY
What's he doin' in there?

MARY
Changing.

DUSTY
Whatcha mean? Like his underwear?

Mary laughs.

MARY
No silly, he's turning into something
else, a butterfly.

Dusty's eyes widen.

DUSTY
Really? But what about the
caterpillar? Where did he go?

MARY
Well, you know the spark that makes
you, you and me, me? In here?

Mary presses her palm to Dusty's chest. Dusty shrugs.

DUSTY
I guess.

MARY
Well, mister caterpillar's spark is
still there, inside the butterfly.

DUSTY
Okay!

And with that, she skips off and resumes her spinning.

EXT. FARM COUNTRY ROAD - MORNING (PRESENT DAY)

Dusty drives past a large water tower and an abandoned house that has long since lost its grandeur. The windows are boarded up. The paint on the white Neoclassic pillars is worn and peeling.

The landscape gradually becomes more sparse.

INT. DUSTY'S TRUCK - MORNING

The truck's engine sputters. Dusty frowns and looks down at the gas gauge. The needle points to empty.

EXT. FARM COUNTRY ROADSIDE - MORNING

Dusty pulls over and gets out of the car, noticeably frustrated. She paces back and forth, then stops and gazes into the middle distance, thinking. She spots something on the ground and crouches down to get a better look. A spider scrambles across the dirt.

DUSTY (V.O.)

One day God sneezed, and sent a great gust of wind down from heaven that nearly blew my whole town away. I reckon he must've had a terrible cold. Mama says I came into the world sneezing. Flying out of her womb like a military rocket.

Dusty puts her finger out and the spider crawls onto it. She brings her finger close to her eyes and stares at it intently. She grabs the spider's invisible umbilical cord and dangles it in the air. It attempts to crawl up the thread to safety. She carefully places the spider back on the ground. Then sneezes, and sends it flying.

EXT. ROADSIDE NEAR OLD CLAPBOARD HOUSE - MID-MORNING

Dusty trudges along the road swinging a gas can. She stops, slips off her right boot, hops, and shakes a rock out. In the distance, a man sings an old gospel tune.

Dusty turns her head towards the voice. She sees THREE OLD TIMERS (70s) sitting on the porch of a old clapboard house come junk shop. "Fresh Tomatoes Sold Here" is printed on the door in faded script. Their voices rise in harmony. The middle of the three picks on a banjo.

Curious, Dusty wanders over. Banjo playing man gives her a gummy smile, the other two nod. She tilts her head to one side, listening.

OLD TIMERS (SING)

*Children go where I send thee,
oh lordy how will I send thee home,
I'm gonna send thee one by one,
cause the one was a little bitty
baby, born.
Children born in Bethlehem.
Children go where I send thee,
oh lordy, how will I send thee
home...*

As the men continue singing, Dusty starts to dance. A little line dance, a little two-step, a little flat footin'. It's a simple understated dance. Banjo man plays, the other two men join Dusty's dance. The scene is low key and subtly joyful.

OLD TIMERS

*Children go where I send thee,
oh lordy how will I send thee home.
One was a little bitty baby, born.
Children born in Bethlehem.*

They extend the final word of the song. The dance ends. Dusty's dance partners bow. Banjo man hands her a tomato. She smiles and bites into it. Red juice runs down her chin.

EXT. GAS STATION - AFTERNOON

Dusty approaches a gas station that has clearly seen better days. She coughs. Dust puffs from her mouth like smoke. The station's metal sign swings in the wind, its hinges SQUEAK. Dusty fills her can from an old pump.

INT. GAS STATION - AFTERNOON

Dusty enters the station, a bell tied to the top of the door JINGLES. She looks around. A CRUSTY OLD MAN (60s) in a faded chambray shirt and a old trucker hat, sits behind the counter. He reads the local paper. The headline reads "Dust Storm Heads this Way! Mayor Advises Citizens to be Prepared".

Two cowboys sit at an old Formica table and shoot the breeze. They wear worn leather cowboy hats, chaps, and boots. Fragments of their conversation fade in and out, like a radio broadcast. This creates a montage of sound that includes the amplified sound of Dusty's BREATH, her FOOTSTEPS, etc. The cowboys sneeze as she walks past them.

COWBOYS

*...shot ma self two big 'ol elk deer
up near the Johnson place... judgin'
by the looks of things, I reckon
someone's got it shined up purty
good... they'll turn a blind eye to
regulations... Sammy bought the water
rights but... Soon, they'll be taxin'
the air we breath...*

Dusty takes a large bottle of water out of a beat-up depression era fridge. THUMP, she plonks it on the counter.

Crusty looks up from his paper and sneezes. He wipes his mouth with a white handkerchief.

CRUSTY
Damn, this dust gits up yer nose like
spit in a whistle.

Dusty points at the water and at the gas can, then slides some money across the counter. Crusty opens the drawer of an old black cash register. It PINGS.

CRUSTY (cont'd)
Cat got yer tongue?

Dusty is overtaken by a fit of coughing. Crusty hands her his handkerchief. She wipes her mouth with it, tucks the water under her arm, then tosses the handkerchief onto the counter as she hurries out.

CRUSTY (cont'd)
You better watch yourself girlie,
there's a mean army of dust headed
this way.

He looks down at the used hankie and examines it closer. It has a mixture of thick black mud and blood on it. He wrinkles his nose and tosses it away.

EXT. FARM COUNTRY ROADSIDE - AFTERNOON

Dusty runs along the road. She stops, tired, and looks ahead. She sees her truck in the distance. Her vision is blurry, like her eyes are coated in something. She runs to the truck, yanks open the door, and leans against it, breathing heavily.

She catches her reflection in the dirty side mirror, her CHILD'S FACE peers back at her. She wipes a circle clean in the glass with the back of her hand.

EXT. YOUNG DUSTY'S HOUSE (WINDOW) - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A dirty window, seen from the outside. A hand wipes a circle clean in the glass to reveal Mary. She wears an old World War Two army helmet and squints as she rubs the window.

INT. DUSTY'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

A clearly pregnant Mary turns away from the window and darts her eyes from left to right.

Everything in the house is covered in dust. There are piles of it in the corners and on the furniture. She hobbles over to a worn wooden table and vigorously brushes the dirt off.

INT. SODA FOUNTAIN AT SIX STAR - DAY (PRESENT DAY)

Dusty sits in a booth sucking a shake through a straw. A low burble of conversation surrounds her.

MONTAGE CONVERSATION

...You should've seen him, his stupid shirt all covered in beer, belly hanging out like a whale... Two eggs, sunny side up please, bacon and, uh, a coffee - black... No, we haven't seen her for a while, little ones been actin' up. Sickly as a runty pig, coughin' and sneezin' all night long...

The voices continue in the background. SLURP, Dusty sips her shake. She yawns and rubs her eyes.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

YOUNG Dusty looks at herself in a small hand mirror and rubs her eyes. She wears what are obviously new glasses. They are too large for her face and have thick lenses. She pushes them down and up her nose, changes the angle of her face, then squints and blinks with large, magnified eyes.

Mary's face appears next to her daughter's.

MARY

Welp? Whatcha think?

Dusty rubs her eyes again.

DUSTY

My eyes are dirty.

MARY

Here, let me see.

Mary takes the glasses off and wipes them on her apron.

DUSTY

No, my eyes mama. My eyes are dirty. Not the stupid 'ol glasses.

Mary slides the glasses back onto Dusty, but she's having none of it. Dusty whips them off and chucks them away.

DUSTY (cont'd)
No! I don't wanna!

She crosses her arms, defiant.

DUSTY (cont'd)
God tol' me this is the way I'm
s'posed to see.

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE (WAITING ROOM) - DAY

In the office waiting room, Mary wipes young Dusty's face with a handkerchief. The glasses are noticeably absent.

MARY
Lord child, if I didn't know any
better, I'd swear you sweated dirt!

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

A DOCTOR (40s) holds up a vial of blood. The blood is split into two sections - the blood at the bottom is muddy brown - the blood at the top is bright red.

He shakes the vial, perplexed. Then scribbles something in a notebook. It reads, "Human blood 50% - Unknown substance 50%... Prairie dirt????". He circles the word "Prairie dirt" in red and taps his pen on the desk, thinking.

The clock TICKS. He scrunches up the note.

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE (WAITING ROOM) - DAY

Young Dusty sits in the doctor's waiting room. Her legs don't yet touch the floor. She swings them back and forth.

DOCTOR (O.S.)
No, no, she's perfectly normal. A
little anemic perhaps, that's all.

EXT. OPEN PRAIRIE - LATE AFTERNOON (PRESENT DAY)

Cooper and Sam walk across the prairie. Sam has a large air rifle slung over one shoulder. He bends down and pokes at something under a rock. Cooper crouches next to him as Sam pierces a spider web with the end of the rifle.

COOPER
Hey! That's his house y'know.

Sam ignores his brother and scrapes at the web with his gun.

COOPER (cont'd)
Stop it!

Sam stands and wipes the end of the rifle on his jeans.

SAM
What? It'll just make another one.
I've seen 'em do it on TV.

COOPER
But it won't be the same, will it?

Sam kicks the rock away.

SAM
'Course it will, only newer.

Cooper looks closer at the ground.

COOPER
Look-it.

He points at a spider crawling across the ground - it stops and changes direction several times.

COOPER (cont'd)
(distressed)
See! He can't find his house now.

SAM
Oh, for Pete's sake Coop, don't be
such a baby. It's just a stupid ol'
spider.

Sam marches off. Cooper watches the spider a while longer, then heads after him.

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - LATE AFTERNOON

WHISTLING, Dusty walks along the edge of the tracks. A train CHUGS in the distance.

INT. DUSTY'S TRUCK - LATE AFTERNOON

Dusty takes a photograph out of the glove-box. It's of a wooden house with a windmill to one side. She stares at the photo. The wind HOWLS.

EXT. PRAIRIE WINDMILL - DUSK

Dusty stands beneath a creaky windmill. It looks similar to the one in the photograph, but older and more weathered. She gazes up at its spinning blades, one is missing. The wind intensifies. Each blade cranks in turn, blocking out the sun.

Dusty extends her arms out to the side. The wind whips at her dress. She slowly turns, matching the rhythm of the windmill. As the blades speed up, so does she. The wind WHINES, the windmill CREAKS. Her feet THUD softly against the ground.

A dust devil forms around her. As she spins, it grows larger and more ferocious until she is barely visible. A white smear against the inky brown.

FADE TO WHITE:

The sound of running footsteps. The picture gradually fades back in. Dusty is nowhere to be seen.

EXT. PRAIRIE WINDMILL - SUNSET

Cooper runs towards the windmill.

COOPER
Hey! Did 'ya see that!

Sam jabs his rifle at a dead cow lying on its side. He looks up, bored.

SAM
What?

COOPER
That wind...thingy.

Cooper draws little circles in the air with his hand. Sam shrugs and saunters over.

SAM
Yeah, so? It's just a dust devil.
I've seen loads of 'em.

Sam spots Dusty's photograph on the ground. He picks it up.

COOPER
Hey, lemme see!

Sam yanks the photo away from Cooper's eager grasp.

SAM
Hold your horses!

He flips it over. "Home - 1977" is scrawled on the back.

Cooper notices something bright underneath the windmill. He races over and squats down. He finds Dusty's boots. They're bright red, vintage. He picks one up and shakes it. Something rattles. He tips out a muddy rock.

COOPER
Hey! Look-it this.

Sam tosses the photo to the ground. It is picked up by the wind and blown across the prairie, catching in a tumbleweed. He runs over to Cooper and grabs the rock out of his hand.

SAM
Why you gettin' so jumped up? It's just a piece of mud and a pair of old boots.

Sam throws the muddy rock into the air, aims at it with his air rifle, and, BANG, he shoots. The rock lands with a THUD.

SAM (cont'd)
Sweet! Bulls eye!

Cooper scuttles over to the fallen rock. He scoops it up and wipes the mud away to reveal a small, smooth, heart-shaped rock. It has a hole right through the middle. He holds it up to his eye and looks through the hole at the sky. Storm clouds gather. A house floats among them.

COOPER
(excited)
Hey! I see it, the house that disappeared. Look, up there! Sam! Look!

Cooper points up at the sky. Sam looks up. He sees a cloud that looks sort of house-shaped.

SAM
No it ain't. It's just a cloud shaped like a house.
(MORE)

SAM (cont'd)
Come on, there's a storm comin' and
dad'll shoot us if we're late for
supper.

Sam walks off briskly. Cooper carefully slips the rock into his pocket, then hurries after him.

COOPER
Hey, wait up. I swear, it was a
house. I saw it! I did.

The sound of his voice fades as an old Vera Lynn tune plays.

VERA LYNN (SINGS)
*We'll meet again,
don't know where, don't know when.
We'll meet again some sunny day.*

FADE OUT