



*How Two Sweetheart Dippies
Sat in the Moonlight on a
Lumber Yard Fence and
Heard About the Sooners and
the Boomers*

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Not so very far and not so very near the Village of Liver-and-Onions is a dippy little town where dippy people used to live. And it was long, long ago the sweetheart dippies stood in their windows and watched the dips of the star dippers in the dip of the sky. It was the dippies who took the running wild oleander and the cunning wild rambler rose and kept them so the running wild winters let them alone. “It is easy to be a dippy . . . among the dippies . . . isn’t it?” the sweetheart dippies whispered to each other, sitting in the leaf shadows of the oleander, the rambler rose.

The name of this dippy town came by accident. The name of the town is Thumbs Up and it used to be named Thumbs Down and expects to change its name back and forth between Thumbs Up and Thumbs Down. The running wild oleanders and the running wild rambler roses grow there over the big lumber yards where all the old lumber goes. The dippies and the dippy sweethearts go out there to those lumber yards and sit on the fence moonlight nights and look at the lumber. The rusty nails in the lumber get rustier and rustier till they drop out. And whenever they drop out there is always a rat standing under to take the nail in his teeth and chew the nail and eat it. For this is the place the nail-eating rats come to from all over the Rootabaga country. Father rats and mother rats send the young rats there to eat nails and get stronger.

If a young rat comes back from a trip to the lumber yards in Thumbs Up and he meets another young rat going to those lumber yards, they say to each other, “Where have you been?” “To Thumbs Up.” “And how do you feel?” “Hard as nails.” Now one night two of the dippies, a sweet-heart boy and girl, went out to the big lumber yards and sat on the fence and looked at the lumber and the running wild oleanders and the running wild rambler roses.

And they saw two big rusty nails, getting rustier and rustier, drop out of the lumber and drop into the teeth of two young rats. And the two young rats sat up on their tails there in the moonlight under the oleanders, under the roses, and one of the young rats told the other young rat a story he made up out of his head. Chewing on the big rusty nail and then swallowing, telling more of the story after swallowing and before beginning to chew the nail again, this is the story he told—and this is the story the two dippies, the two sweethearts sitting on the fence in the moonlight, heard: Far away where the sky drops down, and the sunsets open doors for the nights to come through—where the running winds meet, change faces and come back—there is a prairie where the green grass grows all around. And on that prairie the gophers, the black and brown-striped ground squirrels,

sit with their backs straight up, sitting on their soft paddy tails, sitting in the spring song murmur of the south wind, saying to each other, “This is the prairie and the prairie belongs to us.”

Now far back in the long time, the gophers came there, chasing each other, playing the- green-grass-grew-all-around, playing cross tag, hop tag, skip tag, billy-be-tag, billy-be-it. The razorback hogs came then, eating pig-nuts, potatoes, paw paws, pumpkins. The wild horse, the buffalo, came. The moose, with spraggly branches of antlers spreading out over his head, the moose came—and the fox, the wolf. The gophers flipped a quick flip-flop back into their gopher holes when the fox, the wolf, came. And the fox, the wolf, stood at the holes and said, “You look like rats, you run like rats, you are rats, rats with stripes. Bah! you are only rats. Bah!”

It was the first time anybody said “Bah!” to the gophers. They sat in a circle with their noses up asking, “What does this ‘Bah!’ mean?” And an old timer, with his hair falling off in patches, with the stripes on his soft paddy tail patched with patches, this old timer of a gopher said, “‘Bah!’ speaks more than it means whenever it is spoken.”

Then the sooners and the boomers came, saying “Bah!” and saying it many new ways, till the fox, the wolf, the moose, the wild horse, the buffalo, the razorback hog picked up their feet and ran away without looking back. The sooners and boomers began making houses, sod houses, log, lumber, plaster-and- lath houses, stone, brick, steel houses, but most of the houses were lumber with nails to hold the lumber together to keep the rain off and push the wind back and hold the blizzards outside. In the beginning the sooners and boomers told stories, spoke jokes, made songs, with their arms on each other’s shoulders. They dug wells, helping each other get water. They built chimneys together helping each other let the smoke out of their houses. And every year the day before Thanksgiving they went in cahoots with their post hole diggers and dug all the post holes for a year to come.

That was in the morning. In the afternoon they took each other’s cistern cleaners and cleaned all the cisterns for a year to come. And the next day on Thanksgiving they split turkey wishbones and thanked each other they had all the post holes dug and all the cisterns cleaned for a year to come. If the boomers had to have broom corn to make brooms the sooners came saying, “Here is your broom corn.” If the sooners had to have a gallon of molasses, the boomers came saying, “Here is your gallon of molasses.”

They handed each other big duck eggs to fry, big goose eggs to boil, purple pigeon eggs for Easter breakfast.

Wagon loads of buff banty eggs went back and forth between the sooners and boomers. And they took big hayracks full of buff banty hens and traded them for hayracks full of buff banty roosters. And one time at a picnic, one summer afternoon, the sooners gave the boomers a thousand golden ice tongs with hearts and hands carved on the handles. And the boomers gave the sooners a thousand silver wheelbarrows with hearts and hands carved on the handles. Then came pigs, pigs, pigs, and more pigs. And the sooners and boomers said the pigs had to be painted. There was a war to decide whether the pigs should be painted pink or green. Pink won.

The next war was to decide whether the pigs should be painted checks or stripes. Checks won. The next war after that was to decide whether the checks should be painted pink or green. Green won. Then came the longest war of all, up till that time. And this war decided the pigs should be painted both pink and green, both checks and stripes. They rested then. But it was only a short rest. For then came the war to decide whether peach pickers must pick peaches on Tuesday mornings or on Saturday afternoons. Tuesday mornings won. This was a short war.

Then came a long war—to decide whether telegraph pole climbers must eat onions at noon with spoons, or whether dishwashers must keep their money in pig's ears with padlocks pinched on with pincers. So the wars went on. Between wars they called each other goofs and snoofs, grave robbers, pickpockets, porch climbers, pie thieves, pie face mutts, bums, big bums, big greasy bums, dummies, mummies, rummies, sneezicks, bohunks, wops, snorkies, ditch diggers, peanuts, fatheads, sapheads, pinheads, pickle faces, horse thieves, rubbernecks, big pieces of cheese, big bags of wind, snabs, scabs, and dirty sniveling snitches. Sometimes when they got tired of calling each other names they scratched in the air with their fingers and made faces with their tongues out twisted like pretzels.

After a while, it seemed, there was no corn, no broom corn, no brooms, not even teeny sweepings of corn or broom corn or brooms. And there were no duck eggs to fry, goose eggs to boil, no buff banty eggs, no buff banty hens, no buff banty roosters, no wagons for wagon loads of buff banty eggs, no hayracks for hay-rack loads of buff banty hens and buff banty roosters. And the thousand golden ice tongs the sooners gave the boomers, and the thousand silver wheelbarrows the boomers gave the sooners, both with hearts and hands carved on the handles, they were long ago broken up in one of the early wars deciding pigs must be painted both pink and green with both checks and stripes. And now, at last, there were no more pigs to paint either

pink or green or with checks or stripes. The pigs, pigs, pigs, were gone.

So the sooners and boomers all got lost in the wars or they screwed wooden legs on their stump legs and walked away to bigger, bigger prairies or they started away for the rivers and mountains, stopping always to count how many fleas there were in any bunch of fleas they met. If you see anybody who stops to count the fleas in a bunch of fleas, that is a sign he is either a sooner or a boomer. So again the gophers, the black and brown striped ground squirrels, sit with their backs straight up, sitting on their soft paddy tails, sitting in the spring song murmur of the south wind, saying, "This is the prairie and the prairie belongs to us."

Far away to-day where the sky drops down and the sunsets open doors for the nights to come through—where the running winds meet, change faces and come back—there the gophers are playing the-green-grass-grew-all-around, playing cross tag, skip tag, hop tag, billy-be-tag, billy-be-it. And sometimes they sit in a circle and ask, "What does this 'Bah!' mean?" And an old timer answers, "'Bah!' speaks more than it means whenever it is spoken."

That was the story the young rat under the oleanders, under the roses, told the other young rat, while the two sweetheart dippies sat on the fence in the moonlight looking at the lumber and listening. The young rat who told the story hardly got started eating the nail he was chewing, while the young rat that did the listening chewed up and swallowed down a whole nail. As the two dippies on the fence looked at the running wild oleander and the running wild rambler roses over the lumber in the moonlight, they said to each other, "It's easy to be a dippy . . . among the dippies . . . isn't it?" And they climbed down from the fence and went home in the moonlight.

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