

# Sweet Potato Pie

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*August 1, 2019.*

My granddaddy predicted this day would come. He swore on the family bible that the US of A would be invaded in the not-too-distant future. I made the man a solemn oath as he lie sweating on his deathbed just last year that I'd bear witness when his notions came to pass.

Didn't know that I, Johnny T. Bunker of Moscow, California, would be witnessing more'n either one of us expected.

I woke up feeling fit as the proverbial fiddle. A meadow lark belted out a good morning tune as I stepped out on the front porch and took a deep breath of good clean country air.

Ten years in Los Angeles had made me forget what clean air looked like. I'd been living with kin down there and working on my agricultural degree. Would've gotten my diploma, except Granddaddy left this farm to me when he passed. Least I could do was keep the place up. 'Sides, now I had a chance to practice all them new techniques I'd been learning.

And it was darn nice to be breathing something I couldn't see again.

Spike slipped between my legs, gave his famous Jack Russell yip, and disappeared round the side of the house.

A bit of night's chill still hung in the air, but the blue sky overhead promised to replace that chill with August heat – just right for maturing crops and growing critters. I gulped what was worth gulping in my coffee mug and tossed the rest of the bitter stuff on the ground. It was six o'clock in the a.m. I barely had time to check the cows and make sure the water tank was pumping proper-like before heading into town.

Buck Larson 'n me was gonna spread the word about the impending invasion.

That's when I heard a low moaning sound like a cow about to give birth only it was coming from between the corn rows instead of out in the pasture. Probably old Bessy, my bovine escape artist. No matter where I put that cow she managed to end up exactly where I didn't want her to be.

Couldn't afford to lose a newborn calf just because I got too lazy. I whistled for Spike. In less time than it took to finish whistling he was jumping around in front of me.

“Get in there and find that old girl.” Spike’s stubby little tail disappeared as he dashed into the corn field. I followed at a more leisurely pace, pinching at ears here and there as I walked the dirt rows between corn stalks taller than my head.

I wasn’t thinking ‘bout the corn, though. The new genetically-enhanced seed I planted this past spring – compliments of UC Davis’s experimental agricultural department – was outdoing anything else on my farm.

No. I was thinking about Granddaddy’s prediction and just what lay in Moscow’s immediate future. I was too young for arthritis and too old to believe in Santa, but something inside me just knew Granddaddy had hit the nail on the head this time. He’d warned folks over and over and nobody believed him.

Nobody except me, of course.

Corn leaves rustled somewhere ahead. I stopped. Listened.

“Bessy? That you, girl?” I poked my head through a row of stalks, knocking off my Johnny Deer baseball cap in the process, and peered around. Nothing showed in either direction except tiny little suns glittering at me from hundreds of dewdrops still hanging on the corn.

I took a deep breath, sorted out the smells I was smelling: damp soil, touch of fertilizer (my own special fish/manure mix), ready-to-be-picked corn.

But no sweaty-bovine-about-to-give-birth smell.

Oh, well. Spike would get things figured out. That jumpy little Jack Russel dog was Granddaddy’s favorite and sometimes I could see why. When he wasn’t busy jumping in your face, he was darn good at keeping critters outta the corn field and the garden.

I pulled the nip of a corn ear open and popped a plump kernel with my thumbnail. The thing squirted milk like a cow that’s been away from her calf too long. Just about ready for the boiling pot. I bent over to pick up my hat and noticed odd tracks running here and there, weaving beneath the corn like a fish slides through reeds just when you think you got ‘im hooked.

The tracks ran in pairs like a couple of snakes, each pair running parallel to each other. Spike barked off in the distance as I got down on my hands and knees, took a closer look . . .

And just about shit a grapefruit as something about the size of my number 12 shoe hit me smack dab in the forehead.

I sat back on my heels and tried to figure out what had gone and clobbered me. The middle of my forehead stung enough to make my eyes water. I reached up and felt a bump starting to

rise. There was moisture on my fingers when I brought my hand down.

It wasn't blood, though. The stuff on my fingers was kinda milky like with a been-in-the-dirt musty smell more like vegetable slime than any bodily fluids I was familiar with.

Maybe I'd done some damage of my own.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up like a hound's hackles as I heard that funny moaning sound again.

Spike's barking was closer now.

"Get 'em, boy."

Something heavy rammed my buttocks so hard I was eating dirt before I knew I was hungry. I glanced up, saw what looked like a giant potato disappear between corn stalks just as Spike scrambled up my back, over my head, and back into the corn, his little black and white tail stuck straight up in the air.

"Guess it was too much trouble to go around, huh?" I wiped dirt from my mouth, got to my feet before anything else decided to knock me flat.

My problems were growing minute by minute. Not only did I have a lost cow and an appointment to get to, now it looked like I had an infestation of what appeared to be gigantic bugs.

Time to prioritize.

I looked at the rows of ready-to-be-picked corn. A bug infestation, especially if the bugs were all as big as the one I got a look at, would totally destroy my crop. Even though I'd only seen one bug, I had to assume there were others close by. Most bugs aren't loners, leastways not the kind I know. Just the nature of the bug, so to speak.

Spike's bark changed in tone from an I'm-chasin-you bark to a gotcha-I-think bark.

I shoved my way through the corn, brushing off spider webs that kept floating off the scratchy soft leaves, and headed down a row in the general direction of the barking. The sun peeked in between the rows, turning the damp earth into nose-tickling dust.

All of a sudden my nice straight corn rows ended and I was standing in the middle of a disaster. Corn stalks – ears stripped and leaves shredded – toppled one against the other like a pile of pickup sticks.

Spike danced around a bunch of flattened stalks, leaping into the air about every third bark as if trying to get a better view. "Come away from there. Don't need you messing up things any

worse than they already is.”

Spike just kept on barking. With a sigh of exasperation, I walked over, nabbed the little dog’s collar, and hauled him up into my arms. “Whatever’s done this is long gone . . .”

That’s when the pile in front of Spike wiggled. Just once. And stopped.

“What the . . .?”

Shoe-sized bugs squirted out from the corn stalk pile in all directions. Big motley brown bugs – the size and shape of oversized baking potatoes – rumbled outta the corn stalks.

Another batch of spuds, only these ones skinnier and not quite as brown, reared up on their hind legs and ran straight at me. I jumped near as high as Spike would’ve and maybe a few feet more – just as the whole batch of spud bugs took a ninety and disappeared back into my corn field.

I just stood there a minute, staring at the worm-like tracks cutting through the dirt by my feet. Spike squirmed in my arms and I set him down, watching while he ran in one direction, then another, trying to decide which way to go.

Corn stalks behind me rustled. I swallowed hard and turned . . .

. . . just as another giant bug busted into the war zone. I grabbed without thinking. Found my hands hanging onto something big and cold and slightly vibrating.

“Holy shit!”

These things weren’t bugs at all. The thing in my hands had wheels. Everyone knows bugs either skitter or fly, they don’t perambulate around.

That left only one other possibility: Granddaddy’s prediction was coming true.