

# Prairie People



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A Short Story Collection

DILLON HAMILTON

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PRAIRIE PEOPLE  
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To my beloved wife, Heather, and son, Cillian.



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# Preface

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This collection of short stories was a response to my old professor's challenge to "write what I know." The advice was humbly received but sadly, not heeded until a year later.

I thought, knowing little about the world and having no expertise in any academic field or discipline, that I wouldn't be able to establish believable or creditable characters. I felt that my education, which I consider to be meager in the face of all I intend to learn, was insufficient to provide the proper amount of focus and thought to any project of fiction, great or small. I thought, having been raised on a baseball diamond, that baseball was the only thing I truly knew. Largely, this was true, but I failed to see baseball had been a conduit for observations across many of the ecoregions in Oklahoma, as well as the Great Plains. Outside of writing, the only knowledge and skills I have practiced to a certain level of adequacy can be most useful on a mound or at a plate. I failed to appreciate, but do appreciate now, how a game, at its supreme use can teach many virtues to young men, brought me before characters like those in these short stories.

Though, this is not a work about baseball. In fact, baseball is mentioned few times beyond this preface. But the opportunities it presented to me to meet and observe loveable souls on the prairie could not be understated. I have learned to admire them and believe their character and way of life deserve a kind and honest recording. I hope you enjoy my humble and brief attempt at such a recording.



## Oklahoma Needs an Ocean

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Eviction had always been on the table for *Knuckle's* and since the arrival of the more violent earthquakes Vince had no choice but to concede to all demands. He quit listening to the assessor's rambling after she proclaimed the century-old structure was "unsound." She muttered something about a foundational shift and a weakened roof, but Vince had already wandered out of earshot to his favorite corner of the diner. The corner where he would sit for the few hours before opening with a tea or coffee, depending upon the season, and watch the old and new characters of downtown go about their business. He imagined the days when he was a young customer in the diner, before he had graduated, where he would wait for Bethany in the same corner next to the same window. The cold seeped through the poorly-caulked corner next to his leg as it had then, but these days there was no Bethany to warm him with her presence.

Vince picked up the salt shaker and tapped a dash onto the backside of his hand. Some of the salt tumbled onto the table for two, but most landed between the black and gray hair on the back of his hand—pure white jewels upon leather. He blew a concentrated and strong stream of breath at the spilled salt, sending it into the air to fall to the floor and be trampled by his regulars for one last day of service.

"Did you get that, Vince?" his sister Joan asked.

Vince had not paid attention to any of the conversation since hearing the verdict for his beloved building was condemnation and the sentence was death. “What?” he asked, listlessly.

“Out by noon tomorrow and Sharon will need *all* the keys. We can’t risk someone else stepping into this death trap once we leave. Got it?”

Vince nodded, pursed his lips, and turned down the corners of his mouth like a frustrated cartoon character.

Joan dressed her voice in her ‘momma’ tone. “I’m serious, Vincent. No funny business. I know how sentimental you get with this place.”

Vince used the same response as before, adding a “Mmm hmm,” for clarification.

Joan returned to her conversation with the assessor, claiming, “Those frackers will pay for this.” Vince surveyed Main Street for a few more moments before walking back to the kitchen, where his employees and coffee would be waiting. He had seventy-five feet to decide how he should announce that they would be out of a job by the end of service. He had seventy-five feet to decide whether he would add bourbon or cream to his dark roast. He had seventy-five feet until he reached the saloon-style kitchen doors where he said a short prayer each time he exited in hopes that Bethany would be sitting in their corner.

The doors moaned for help on their hinges. No matter how much lubricant he applied Vince could never make them happy. An unopened fifth of bourbon stood resolute on a steel counter next to a stout and steaming cup of coffee. Two figures waited at the end of the long polished kitchen, which seemed to reflect all the light that it could into Vince’s face—a testament to their thorough late-night cleanings.

“Tomorrow, huh?” a young woman with neon pink and purple hair asked.

Vince removed the bourbon’s plastic covering, uncorked the bottle, and poured the caramel-colored liquor until the mixture brimmed and overflowed the rim of the clay mug. Streams stained the eggshell paint exterior and ran over the cold counter, fogging