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SHORTGRASS

Part of the travel cost on the fall trip up to Minnesota qualified as a write-off for medical expense. Under doctor's orders, I'd been eating so many apples and bananas for breakfast that fruit flies hovered around the house until I yearned for a mud bog or a smokescreen to drive them off.

The epidemic grew so bad that I was ashamed to sit in a barber's chair or go downtown in the daylight. Without a sliver of bacon or a spoonful of scrambled eggs frying, the ranch kitchen smelled like a big fruit stand in a Central American country and sounded like bees swarming on still days.

After takeoff at San Angelo, flies began to drop to the floor of the plane. Fruit flies are great formation fliers, but from 3000 feet above sea level and upwards, they lack the lung power to fly and buzz at the same time.

Fruit flies, however, were only part of the problem. All summer long the ranch telephone stayed on a binge. Hombres looking for deer leases and schoolteachers looking for rent houses centered on my number hotter than a holiday shift in a cab dispatcher's office.

I'd be standing on one hind leg resting my off-side from the weight of the receiver and nearly knock myself down swatting so hard at the fruit flies. At the same time, I'd be telling the red caps or schoolmasters that I didn't have a footstool to rent out, much less a house or a pasture.

But somewhere in between calls, I noticed in the bathroom mirror the skin was shriveling up on my neck and down on my chest. Calling a dermatologist was out of the question. After your whiskers gray, you can ask any kind of doctor to dig a splinter out from under a thumbnail and he'll tell you the reason you are picking up splinters is because your nails are aging.

We were mighty dry, but I had never seen a drouth so bad it made your hide wrinkle deeper than the rough side of an elephant's trunk. Then I started putting things together. The main body of telephone calls fell during bathing and shaving times, so the dried-out cakes of shaving cream and big globs of hardened shampoo caused my skin and my scalp to scale and break like one of those big iguana lizards peels off on the volcanic rocks down on the Galapagos Islands.

Just as soon as telephone calls ceased, my skin cleared up as rosy as a pomegranate's peelings, and the gloss on my hair stopped perfect strangers to compliment the glow of the locks.

Also, I felt so much better without the flies weaving in and out under my eyebrows that I ate a rasher of bacon and four eggs the first morning away to celebrate good health ...