

Flyover Country

A Grown-Up Fairy Tale in Three Chapters

(Teaser excerpt)

By G. Norman Lippert

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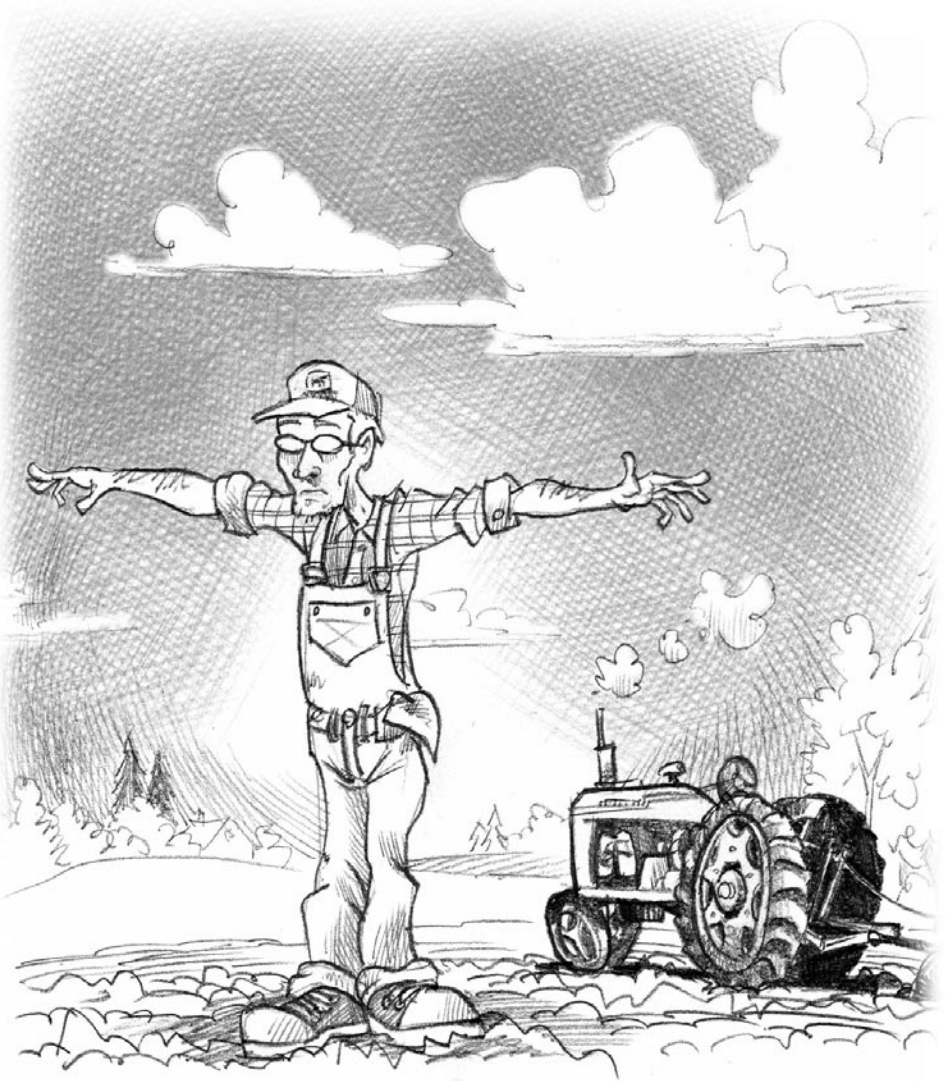
One

Clete was out in east field when the idea first came to him.

It was an unseasonably hot day for early May. A restless breeze shushed in the birches and oaks along the edge of the field. When Clete set out that morning, the sun had only been a rosy promise on the lip of a pristine, sapphire sky, still dotted with crisp, morning stars. Now she was a hot diamond directly over his head, her jaunty rays warming his back and careening off the narrow hood of his old Farm-all tractor. The heat buzzed in his old joints, limbering them like oil after the long winter.

The idea just came to him, fresh and plain, straight out of the clear blue sky. Perhaps it was the sun, beating down on him giddily after so many long, drab months. Perhaps it was just the monotony of the plowing. After all, anyone who has ever mowed a good-sized lawn on a hot day knows the imaginative, half-dreaming state that the bored mind can achieve, the interesting ideas it can concoct when left to boil on the back-burner of tedium. Perhaps it had been merely a remnant of some forgotten night's dreaming. In any case, Cletus Arvil Starcher was not normally a man given to pursuing random flights of fancy. When the idea struck him, it seemed simply plausible and reasonable, perfectly worthy of a quick test. No harm in that.

He braked the Farm-all, joggled the gear-shift into neutral, and lowered



himself to the ground. The earth was broken up in clods of rich brown, crumbling amiably under his Redwing boots. Clete moved a few paces away from the tractor so to escape the chug of diesel fumes, and took a deep pull of the spring air. It was full of the scent of moist earth laid open, and the creek swollen with winter run-off, and tender green shoots along its steep banks. His stomach growled congenially, reminding him of the lunch Rachel was probably cooking right now: pork chops and sweet potatoes and canned beets. He half thought he could smell her cooking on the warm breeze, under all the other, earthy scents, but he knew that was impossible. He was half a mile from the house now, in the middle of the east field. He frowned in contentment, reminded himself that idleness was the sport of fools, and got on with what he was doing.

Clete spread out his arms on either side of him, palms flat to the earth, testing the air as if it were a solid thing, and began to pump them slowly up and down. He studied the broken dirt about eight feet in front of his boots, still frowning with a mixture of thoughtfulness and quiet concentration. The worn flannel of his shirt pulled out of the sides of his overalls, billowing slightly under his arms as they rose and fell, rose and fell. Clete spread his fingers slightly, allowing the mid-day air to channel through them. He tested the resistance, shifting the distance between each finger until the breeze seemed to press through them like fluid. He began to pump faster, frowning studiously, his eyes locked calmly under the bill of his green John Deere cap, still studying the freshly plowed earth before him. Behind him, the dull red of the Farm-all soaked up the sun, chugging obliviously. The trees lining the field shushed and busied themselves in the wash of breeze, waving their budded branches as if proud of them. And slowly, deliberately, Clete began to rise from the ground.

He could feel the air as it whipped around him, flicking like the tail of an affronted lion. It streamed through his fingers first like running water, then like heavy cream, and finally like syrup. At first he found that it was easier to stand if he allowed his heels to lift off the crumbly dirt. He balanced easily on the steel toes of his worn leather boots. An observer might have thought he looked like a novice ballerina, toe-standing for the first time, flapping her arms to keep her balance. That observer, had there been one, might have laughed out loud at the sight, since Clete, in his overalls and work shirt, with his old man's face and wire rimmed glasses under the curved brim of his mesh cap, was about as close to a ballerina as Jupiter is to a Junior Mint. The illusion, however, would have been short-lived, for after only

five seconds of tentative balancing, Clete's toes gently but unmistakably left the ground.

A scatter of dead leaves swirled beneath him, retreating along the length of a deep furrow. Clete was still frowning with calm concentration, still staring at that section of plowed dirt, now one foot lower than it had been. In his carefully ordered old farmer's mind a mild voice commented that it was working. 'It' was apparently the simple act of flying. The voice commented on it the way one would comment about a light unpredicted rain or an unseasonably hot day in May. Then another voice, still in his mind but entirely different than the first, rang out stridently. Clete thought it was the voice of his long-departed mother. *Cletus Starcher! Just what do you think you're doing up there? Come down this instant!*

And the spell- if that was what it was- broke. Clete's arms flailed instead of flapped. His fingers clawed the air and lost their tenuous grip. That strange, fibrous quality of the breeze vanished, and in an instant the plowed field leapt up to reclaim him.

He landed smartly, his boots in two parallel furrows, and his knees popped like a double barreled cork-gun.

He straightened slowly and stared at the distant, heat shimmery horizon. What had he just been doing? He answered himself with the simple, unabashed honesty that had been the standard of his life so far. He had been flying. He frowned again, more animatedly, and raised his eyebrows.

"Who'd a thought it?" he remarked to himself.

After a moment's slightly distracted rumination, he turned back to the Farm-all, climbed up to the metal seat (which had soaked up a considerable amount of sun since he left it), stepped on the clutch and shifted back into gear.

Twenty minutes later he headed back to the house for lunch.

Clete didn't say anything to Rachel about the flying incident at lunch. In fact, by that evening, the thought of attempting to explain the event to her had hardly so much as crossed his mind. This wasn't because he thought she'd call him crazy. It wasn't even because he thought she wouldn't believe him. Neither of those

considerations had occurred to him. Clete was a simple man. He hadn't told her because, basically, it didn't concern her. Perhaps if she had been his wife, he'd have mentioned it. Wives have a much more vested interest in the attitudes and lifestyles of a man than sisters do.

If Anne had still been alive, he would have told her. He probably wouldn't have said anything at lunch, in the middle of the day. She'd have had enough on her mind then, what with watching little Dennis and handling the laundry and thinking about dinner and all. But he'd have told her about it that evening, certainly. And most assuredly, he'd have told her before he made any attempt to try it again, as he was now. He'd have wanted her to know what he was doing before she saw him there on the south porch, flapping his arms like a scarecrow in a twister. It'd just be common courtesy.

Rachel, on the other hand, was different. Not different-bad, of course. Just different. Any man who has ever had a sister would know. Clete didn't tell Rachel.

He stood on the porch and looked contemplatively out over the fields and the scrubby trees beyond his barn. The great red structure was one of the secret prides of his life. It stood fifty-six feet tall from its cobblestone foundation to the beak of the wrought iron weather-cock, and it was just as straight and red as the day it had been built, back before Clete himself had even been born. The structure had four peaks, one on each side, and at the apex of those peaks, dead center above the building, was an old-fashioned vent-house reached only by a hand-made circular stairway at the edge of the hay loft. A few years back, the barn had even been featured in a magazine called *Country Living*. Clete remembered the photographer who had come out after the magazine people had called. He'd been a wiry young man with glasses, and his camera had been nearly as big as him. "So we can zoom right on up to that delightful bit of architecture at the top," the young man had explained. Clete offered to take the man up the winding stairway to the vent house, but the man had declined somewhat hastily. Didn't like heights, Clete figured.

From the rear of the barn, he could hear the pigs in their pen, snorting and complaining over their dinner. Waves of stored warmth baked off the face of the house behind him, even as the sun dipped over the horizon and left the sky pale and sullen.

He had finished plowing the east field that day, and had gotten a good head start on the big loop that doglegged into Strecker woods as well. The Farm-all was now put away in the barn, along with the tiller, and the barn was neatly closed up. The swine had been fed, as had been the horses and Clete's lone milk cow, Bethel. Rachel was inside preparing an early dinner, listening to the local news on her ancient Philco transistor radio. Clete was satisfied that the time was right. He stepped away from the house and looked up.

The south porch was really just a patio, added by Clete's and Rachel's father some sixty years ago as a place to barbecue hogs for their occasional family reunions and Sunday School picnics. The brick barbecue had long fallen into an obscurity of hyacinth vines thanks to one of Rachel's beautification stints, but the patio itself had been claimed as one of Clete's personal evening areas. He had purchased a small redwood chair for the patio, and kept his pipe and tobacco in a small teak box beneath. Two and a half stories above the patio the peak of the roof protruded against the evening sky, tipped with a modest corner of white gingerbread. At the apex of the house's face, just under the old gingerbread, was a lit circular window. Clete had just come down from the attic and had purposely left the light on.

He turned back to the yard and dropped his gaze to the corner of the smoothed flagstone floor of the patio. Slowly and deliberately, as he had done in the field earlier that day, he stretched his arms out and began to move them. Up and down, up and down, first slowly and then with an increasing rhythm. Again, he felt that strange, perfect assurance come over him, just as it had in the east field when the idea first came to him. It made perfect sense. It was so simple that he was amazed he'd never thought of it before. One wasn't surprised, when he worked the pump lever, to see water stream out, was he? Or to find that the earth moves under him when he moves his feet in a walking motion? Of course not. So how could he have missed *this* before? This elementary, physical phenomenon of moving one's arms and achieving flight?

Yet he knew that it wasn't only physical. As he tested the air, feeling it like ephemeral harp strings under the musician's practiced hand, he could sense part of himself opening. It was like learning to whistle, or wiggle one's ears. He felt strange activity in his brain, as if he was using mental muscles that he had never before known how to flex.

And again, he felt the air thicken between his scissoring fingers. He felt it billow and fold under his cupped palms. He lifted tremulously to his toes and hovered there, his arms pumping swiftly, strongly. Air swirled in the bald vines of Rachel's hyacinth. He didn't know precisely how it was working, but he could sense the knowledge of it in the back of his mind, huge and phantasmic. He could grope around the edges of it. It had to do with the friction between his arms and the air. And static charges. Not the kind that poked him when he climbed out of his truck on a dry autumn day, zapping between his fingers and the metal door, but an entirely different kind of static charge. One he could create. He created it by flapping, by producing that sort of humming resistance between the air and his fingers, but he created it also by thinking. Or not by thinking, exactly, but by exercising that odd, slippery, mental muscle in his brain. The one he was exercising now, carefully and diligently, frowning an old man's frown that would look more at home over a crossword puzzle or a misbehaving child.

Clete's feet scraped slightly on the sandy-smooth surface of the flagstones as he rose from the patio.

He achieved the same height he had earlier that day next to the chugging Farm-all, and then began to rise higher. His shadow separated from him and spread away into the yard, cast by the small yellow porch light. Clete knew instinctively that he must not look down, must not give notice to the distance between himself and the patio below. He had nearly sprained both knees earlier that day, falling only a distance of two feet. If he were to lose his concentration now, rising slowly past five feet, he would most certainly break one or both of his legs. The threat of this struck him only vaguely, however. He was flying. And strangely enough, as he arose past the glow of the porch light, he found it was becoming easier. He was approaching the second story of the house. The lights were off inside, but he could see just over the sill of Rachel's sewing room window. A pair of sharp-beaked sewing scissors and a spool of black thread sat on the sill, blue in the light of the evening sky.

The wooden screen door below opened with a startled squawk. Rachel appeared in the opening holding a Ball jar of sweet pickles. Clete glanced down sharply. He could see the top of her head, her steely hair pulled back in a bun. He could see yellow seeds swimming in the green soup of the pickle jar.

"Clete would you give this jar a yank for me? I can't seem to-"

She stopped in mid-sentence, realizing he wasn't in his redwood chair. His feet hung solidly in the air at about her eye-level, but off to the side.

"Clete, what..." she said, and then looked up. She saw his feet, clad in his evening shoes, standing firmly on nothing. She followed them upwards until her eyes met his, wide and serious.

"DearLordGodInHeaven!" she spat sharply, as if the phrase were all one syllable. Her entire body seemed to retract backwards, like a cuckoo bird being yanked back into its house. She disappeared through the door and it slapped dumbly shut behind her.

Clete credited her for not dropping the pickles.

She didn't come back out, so Clete decided to continue with his experiment. He floated higher, passing the sewing room window of the second floor and approaching the attic.

Slowly, he turned in the air, allowing himself to enjoy the sensation of weightlessness. Across the yard the barn was being gathered into dim violet shadows. He could see over the point of the stable, into the back corner of the pig pen now. There were no pigs to be seen, however. He knew they were all still busy at the trough, fighting over Rachel's potato skins and coffee grounds. Over the peak of the barn, Clete could just begin to see the hazy shape of Drake's woods and the reflected evening light of the pond. Normally, he could only see this far from the attic window. If he waited just a little while, when the night set fully, he would be able to see the pinprick glows of the city of Bastion Falls, just under the brim of the horizon.

Something hard and pointed bumped his back and he startled, almost losing the rhythm of his arms. He turned in the air and saw it was the peak of the roof. The apex of green shingles stretched away from him in the dim light, ending at the base of the brick chimney. Clete glanced down carefully. Between his feet, the patio looked like something painted on paper, distant and insignificant. The patio light still shone yellowly, but he was far outside its range now.

He realized he wasn't flapping quite so hard anymore, nor were his arms weary. He pumped the air almost casually, feeling its weight throttle against his palms like molasses. Slowly, he lowered himself, watching the roof reassert itself over his head, until he hovered directly in front of the round, cross-paned window of the attic. There was a book propped open on a steamer chest just inside the dust-grimed window. Clete squinted through his glasses at the tiny columns of type, flapping his arms cautiously so as to keep a steady altitude. The book was his and Rachel's family Bible. He had positioned it there ten minutes earlier, opened at random, directly beneath the attic light. He had intentionally not looked to see where he'd opened it to.

He read to himself, picking a verse from the right page. *But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty...*

He said the words of the verse to himself several times, swishing the air lazily. When he was sure he would remember the phrase, he turned again, looking out over the dimming yard and the barn. After a few moment's contemplation, he decided to attempt a small, experimental swoosh. He leaned forward, gathering momentum, and swooped. The evening air billowed beneath him, supporting him as he swept along a mild current. He spread his arms and glided out over the yard, picking up speed as he slipped from one air flux to the next. The barn loomed before him, swaying ponderously. He approached it. Bars of air beat at his shirtsleeves and batted his pant legs. Clete wondered if he could simply heave up to the barn with a series of flaps, slow himself, and then land in the open hay loft. He decided to try it. He angled up as the dark shape of the barn heaved over him. With a round of gentle arm waves, he settled smoothly onto the edge of the loft. His weight returned to him grudgingly as his feet touched down, and he could feel the relaxation of that secret, mental muscle.

Clete looked around as if realizing for the first time where he was. Bales of stacked hay lay like sleeping soldiers along the canted roof of the loft. He could smell the familiar barny smell of wood dust, loose straw, and- faintly- animal dung. Below him, he could here Bethel softly pawing the dirt floor and chewing her cud. He was in the hay loft. He had gotten here without ever touching the yard. He hadn't passed the familiar old water pump with its rusty bucket or climbed the old plank ladder. He had, in fact, flown straight in like a kite.

He had flown into the loft.

Clete's frown slowly, haltingly, fell from his haggard old farmer's face. In its place erected a careful, almost childlike smile.

They were half-way through their dinner before Rachel said anything. She carefully dabbed at the corner of her mouth with a cloth napkin and reached for her water glass.

"Decided to take up flying, then, did you?" she asked with remarkable mundanity.

Clete considered the question as he chewed methodically. After a pause he answered.

"Ayuh, I guess I have."

He had gone up to the attic as soon as he got back from the barn. He needed to turn off the light. He also needed to check the old family Bible to see what it had been turned open to. It had been first Corinthians. Verse twenty-seven of chapter one began with "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise..."

There hadn't been much of a chance that Clete had imagined the whole thing anyway. Clete wasn't a man given to very much imagining.



The next morning Clete got up at five-thirty. He had been getting up at five-thirty for most of forty years and he did so without the aid of an alarm clock or the customary rooster. He dressed in front of his closet mirror, choosing another

pair of heavy denim overalls and a different flannel work shirt. He dipped his comb into the water basin on his dresser and raked the stiff bristles of his gray crew-cut until it was as flat as the face of a new stump. He examined himself grimly over the lenses of his glasses, and then went downstairs to meet Rachel for breakfast.

He flew over to the barn to slop the pigs and feed the horses. Getting airborne, he discovered, was something that quickly became easier with practice. When he was done milking Bethel, he made a spontaneous attempt to fly back to the house with the milk pail in his hand. He stood behind the barn, just outside the pig fence, and flapped steadily with his right hand, using the left to hold the pail. The air sang between his sieved fingers, thickening as it had before, but he was hardly able to get one boot off the ground while holding the bucket. He put the pail down on the straw-covered ground and stared at it dourly. What good was flying going to be if he couldn't carry anything?

A fuzzy thought appeared in his mind, offering a solution. Perhaps he could make himself a belt-hook to hang things on, so he wouldn't have to use his arms to carry anything. The picture in his mind limped with the effort. It was like something from a child's crayon drawing. He saw himself flying gamely over the barn, trying to keep steady while a bucket of milk slopped from his belt. The picture disintegrated. Too messy. Too impractical. Why go to the effort to fly the milk over to the back veranda with a hook, spilling most along the way, when he could just as quickly walk it?

No, he concluded, flying wasn't going to be the sort of thing that would revolutionize his farm life. Maybe he'd do it now and then just for the enjoyment of it, like walking down to Strecker woods and back on a summer evening. He'd tell Rachel he was just going to step out for a little fly. No harm in that. Otherwise...

Otherwise Clete would simply go about business as usual. Being able to fly didn't get the fields plowed and seeded. It didn't get the pigs slopped or the cow milked. He was still Cletus Arvil Starcher, flying-man or not, and he still had farming to do.

That decided, Clete picked up the milk pail, turned on his heel, and whistling a strangely melodic near-monotone, headed smartly through the open barn toward the house.

Later that day, while plowing the rest of the Strecker loop, he decided to fly home for lunch.



It wasn't until the next evening that Clete discovered another mental muscle he had spent most of his life not knowing about.

He had used a portion of the evening to fly out to the southeast corner of Bethel's and the horses' pasture. A few braids of barbed wire had come loose of the fence-post out there, probably stripped by a wandering black bear or coyote. Clete discovered that he could carry small objects easily enough while flying, simply by utilizing the multiple pockets of his overalls. He had his hammer hooked into the loop on his hip and a handfull of three inch nails in the front pouch. In the past, it would have taken him at least ten minutes to walk to that corner of the pasture, not counting time avoiding the mud bogs and puddles that were so prevalent this time of year. He flew there in less than forty seconds, catching tiny flashes of his reflection against the blue-mirrored sky of the pasture's puddles.

Later, while leaning against the pig fence watching the sows wrestle for space at the trough, the second idea came to him. It wasn't like the idea to fly that had occurred to him in the field two days earlier. Not entirely. This was an idea about something he could make. It was a refinement of the belt-hook idea for carrying things while flying, but it was much clearer, and it would work much better. He marvelled that it had not been obvious to him from the first. That initial child's crayon-drawing of himself flying with the milk pail spilling and jostling from his belt was gone. It was replaced with a perfect mental blueprint of a device; a device he knew he could make. It could carry things of all different sizes and shapes, and it had a counterbalancing mechanism, so that it would stay level no matter what

position he flew in. His mind chewed systematically at the invention, tackling problems and proposing revisions. And some, detached part of him just sat and watched, amazed that he was actually having such inventive, imaginative thoughts.

He was snapped out of this diversion by the commotion of the pigs. They lolled over each other with their sausage-like, coarse-haired bodies, grunting and squealing indignantly at the trough. The feed was getting low.

Clete stepped toward the barn to retrieve a bag of sow-feed and then stopped, his face a mask of mild surprise. There weren't any more bags stacked in the inside corner of the barn, under the loft ladder. He'd need to walk over to the feed shed with the wheelbarrow and bring back another load.

As he turned and walked out of the shadow of the barn to pick up the wheelbarrow, yet another idea struck Clete. This one was *exactly* like the idea he'd had while riding the Farm-all in the east field. He recognized the quality of it. It was like a post-hypnotic suggestion, or like meeting somebody you had only ever dreamed about. It came in the form of a question to himself.

Why am I walking all the way over to the feed shed to carry back sow feed?

Because the sows are hungry, he thought dimly. A hungry sow is an unhappy sow. An unhappy sow isn't a very tasty sow. But that wasn't the real thrust of the question. He knew that, because he'd asked it of himself. It wasn't why are you *getting* feed for the sows? It was why are you *walking* to get feed for the sows?

Maybe there was a different way of doing it; a way he could get the sows their feed without all the heavy work and strain on his already sore back. And it would probably be faster, too. Faster is more practical, if quality isn't spent, or so his mother always used to tell him.

The idea nagged at Clete. He adjusted his John Deere cap and rubbed thoughtfully at his upper lip. No harm in trying, he thought for the second time in three days.

He looked at the narrow face of the feed shed some thirty yards distant. It stared back at him blindly, full of dumb curiosity. *You lookin' over dis way?* a voice

in Clete's head queried. It was the voice of the hired hand his parents had had when he was a small boy. A black man with graying hair. His name had been Chesapeake Chester, or at least that was what everyone called him. *Is it that ol' feed shed you starin' at, boy? If you want some feed to give those sows over yonder, you gonna hafta walk over an grab you up a sack. 'Less you know some other way t'do it...*

Clete could envision the inside of the shed. It was stuffy and full of the rich smells of animal feed and fertilizer. Rachel's rake and shovel and garden trowel hung on the right-hand wall, splashed with a dusty sun-beam from a missing plank along the back. To the left was a rack of two-by-four shelves, three high and three long. The shelves were stacked high with this season's store of feed and Garden-Grow. He could see the big, fifty pound burlap sacks with the picture of the smiling pig on the front. Hubbard Hog Feed, the legend over the smiling pig read.

Clete stared at the double doors of the feed shed and frowned that thoughtful, old man's frown under his glasses. He absently rubbed his upper lip, running the calluses of his thumb and fore-finger over the sand-papery gray stubble.

The doors opened.

There was no fanfare. No explosive motion or puff of magician's smoke. The doors simply swung apart and gently backed against the outside of the shed as if someone had casually pulled them open to get some feed. Clete wasn't surprised. He could feel the mental muscle flexing rhythmically in his head. It wasn't even as hard as flying.

Steadily, like the parade of Mickey Mouse's brooms in Fantasia (which Clete had seen some twenty years earlier with Anne and little Dennis), fifty pound burlap sacks of Hubbard Hog Feed began to emerge from the darkness inside the feed shed. They marched across the yard to the barn, each bag bouncing slightly as it moved, as if being hefted along a chain of invisible hired hands.

Clete was glad Rachel couldn't see the feed shed from the kitchen window of the house. She had grouched enough about his flying. He couldn't bear to think what she'd say about this.

He walked to the corner of the barn, where the feed bags rounded the entrance and floated inside. He reached out and touched one as it went by. The

dry burlap rasped under his palm and swept on. Twenty bags went by, making disembodied pill-shaped shadows on the grass. When the last one turned the corner into the barn Clete followed it. He came into the shadow of the barn entrance just in time to see it settle gently onto the other nineteen, which had formed a neat, bricklayer's stack under the loft ladder. It was just the way he stacked them when he did it by hand.

Clete considered the stack, his lips pressed together in contemplation. Now here was a skill he could put to work.

He came out of the barn a few moments later with one of the sacks hefted easily over his right shoulder. He plopped it down onto the pig-fence and pulled the string seal with a practiced hand. Yellow feed poured from the mouth of the sack into the feed trough with a dusty hiss, sending the sows into an ecstasy of grunts and smacks.

Clete glanced over at the feed shed thirty yards away and deftly closed the doors.

Greetings, reader. This has been a teaser excerpt of "Flyover Country", which will be available in hardcover from www.lulu.com. If you enjoyed "James Potter and the Hall of Elders' Crossing", I suspect you'll also enjoy this quirky little tale. It's short and sweet, but I think it's fun and (dare I admit) a little endearing. Plus, it's a great way to support your friendly neighborhood independent author since he (quite understandably) does not make any income from writing James Potter stories.

Thank you for checking out the story, and happy reading.

G. Norman Lippert