

# ***PLANTING IN THE DUST***

## ***A One Act Monologue***

*By*

*Nancy Paddock*

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*Revised Version 2007*

*Thanks to Dana Jackson, Brian DeVore, Audrey Arner, "Voices of Minnesota Farm Women," produced by Cynthia Vagnetti, and LSP's Ear to the Ground podcast episode 25, featuring Martin and Loretta Jaus.*

*Planting in the Dust* is a one-act monologue in which ANNIE, a thirty-five-year-old farm woman, speaks intimately to her old friend, ALLIE, who is visiting from the city, about her life on the land and finds words to reveal what that life means to her in the face of the soil erosion and destructive agricultural and business practices she sees on neighboring farms. Allie's visit gives Annie a chance to bring the whole situation into clear focus. She is angry and under stress, and at the same time vulnerable. She wants to hold onto her harmonious lifestyle and is afraid both of the many societal factors that threaten it and of what may be required of her if she translates her ethical beliefs into action.

During the course of the monologue, Annie recounts conversations with several people. The qualities they embody should be heightened in her representation of them, but she does not actually become them as she speaks.

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**OTHER CHARACTERS MENTIONED:**

**GRANDMA ANNIE:** Annie's grandmother, a salty old character full of folklore and humor. Annie assumes Grandma Annie's voice and movements in occasional "quotable" lines. Has deep feelings for land. Was deeply affected by Dust Bowl. She and her husband sacrificed to put in conservation practices after the Dust Bowl. She is a survivor and a model for Annie.

**MOM:** Annie's mother, a "lady" who never really wanted to farm, embodies the forces that pull people away from care of land. The farm was only a business to her. As the youngest child, born in the Depression, she was afraid of poverty, and too interested in prosperity and an easy life. She supported her husband's removal of the terraces, tree belts and other conservation practices put in by her parents. She counsels her children to leave farming and left herself as soon as her husband died.

**JORDAN:** Self-confident "agri-business" type neighboring farmer who is not concerned with land stewardship. Has bought up all land surrounding Annie's farm. Refuses to take Annie seriously when she gently tries to confront him. Is engaged in growing corn for the big confinement hog operation he is passing on to his sons, and is pressuring the local community to approve a huge expansion of that enterprise.

**JENNY:** Annie's younger sister. Urban and more activist than Annie, she challenges Annie to take more responsibility for the larger whole. Annie is threatened by Jenny's suggestions and so exaggerates Jenny's lecturing tone.

**GREAT-GREAT GRANDMOTHER ALMA:** Annie reads material from Alma's pioneer diary to her friend Allie. The point of the diary entry (written in 1862 when Alma was only 20-years-old, pregnant and the mother of two) is to show the long history of the family farm, the continuing struggle of its people to make a good life for themselves, the competition of the farm with nature, and the all-consuming and often destructive nature of farm work, especially for women. Annie identifies with Alma's struggle because of her own fears for herself.

**PROPS:**

kitchen table and chair (preferably old)  
old rocking chair  
print tablecloth (optional)  
cutting board  
knife  
basket of large red apples  
large ceramic mixing bowl  
wooden spoon  
coffee pot  
ceramic coffee cup  
pin cushion  
needle and thread  
old quilt  
old book (with text of Alma's diary entry inserted on several pages)  
telephone

[Would Annie now have a laptop computer in her kitchen? And, if so, does it add anything to her story?]

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[ANNIE IS IN HER FARM KITCHEN, LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW TO HER RIGHT. AN OLD ROCKING CHAIR WITH A QUILT DRAPED OVER IT TO HER LEFT. ON THE TABLE: CUTTING BOARD, KNIFE, BASKET OF APPLES, BOWL, CELL PHONE, COFFEE POT, CUP, PINCUSHION WITH NEEDLE AND THREAD STUCK IN IT. (DIARY, TOO, IF NO OTHER PLACE FOR IT ON SET.)

ANNIE IS TALKING ON THE PHONE TO HER LOCAL FRIEND, MARIE, WHILE HER OLD FRIEND, ALLIE, WHO IS VISITING FROM THE CITY, LISTENS.]

... Couldn't hang out my sheets again this morning. Never can till Jordan's corn's up. Too much dust in the air. Yah, he's still planting.

[PAUSES]

I can see him out there — or sometimes I can see him ... That dust is so thick! Already his soil's so dry those seeds might never sprout ....

[PAUSES WHILE MARIE ANSWERS]

And *he* doesn't seem to care. See, the land we still have in corn has been under residue all winter, so it's still moist as cake. But Jordan's making a regular dust bowl out there...why does he still insist on turning it all black, when almost everything else in the country...

[PAUSES WHILE LISTENING. FACE BECOMES INCREDULOUS,

BUT VOICE REMAINS CONTROLLED.]

What do you mean, "That's just the way he is?" It doesn't *have* to be like this! And it's not just the dust: it's the stink! When the wind's blowing this way over his hog barns or he's spreading all that manure on his fields.

[LISTENS]

Yes, of course ... It's just natural. If you live in the country .... But there's nothing natural about the stench that rises from untold numbers of hogs confined in their own manure! And he wants to build an even bigger operation!

[LISTENS, LOOKS AT ALLIE IN DISGUST. GIVES UP, CONTROLS HER VOICE SO ALMOST CHEERFUL. LAUGHS.]

Yes, Marie ... Yes ... Oh, sure, I'm dying to see your new wallpaper. ... Look, I've got to go now. My friend, Allie, is visiting from the city. I'll call you soon as I get time ... Bye.

[HANGS UP PHONE. LOOKS UP, FULL OF FRUSTRATION]

Oh, Allie! She just changed the subject to her bathroom wallpaper! She used to be the best friend I had out here, but she just won't hear it .... Can't smell it. Can't even see it. You could see it. The first time you came out to cross country ski. Remember? How the next morning all that beautiful snow was black? And you looked out the kitchen window here and asked me, "Is that black stuff that blew in last night, soil?" And I said, "That's right." You said, "But that's terrible! Why do they let it do that?"

[LAUGHS BITTERLY]

Good question .... Maybe Marie's too close to it. Or has too much invested in the way things are. What if she did see it? Did feel it. What would she find herself talking about over the meatloaf? And how would John react? I don't know. Maybe it wouldn't bother me as much if some of that weren't land great-great-grandfather homesteaded. Old Jordan talked my uncles out of it.

[SARCASTICALLY]

Neighborly of him ....

[CROSSES STAGE TO DOWNSTAGE LEFT WINDOW]

Like last winter when Peterson — he had a small dairy farm down the road — stuffed some old jeans, tied boots on them,

[HER RAISED ARMS INDICATE LEGS STICKING OUT OF THE SNOW]

and stuck them out of a snowdrift with a sign that said: "Busted!" It looked like he'd taken a last flying leap. It's "get big or get out" for dairy nowadays. Some people say if he'd just switched to grass-fed ... and organic ... But I can't imagine him doing that ... Anyway, Jordan was over there before sundown with an offer. Wants to buy us out too, but fat chance .... It's just that he surrounds us! No matter which way the wind blows, we get his dirt. Of course, he's not the only one. Even my parents farmed over the terraces grandpa put in. And tried to drain the pond.

[GESTURES OUT LEFT WINDOW]

Huh! With gullies washing into it, it was never anything but a mudhole to lose a tractor in.

[INITIAL SATISFACTION TURNING TO HELPLESSNESS]

But this spring it was loud with singing frogs! I saw birds I had to look up in a book: clay-colored sparrows, orchard orioles. And all sorts of frogs. We've restored that wetland now, but...

no telling how long it'll last. Jordan out there... [SIGHS] he said we were crazy to take that land "out of production." For him, economic principles rule. So for him, it works to let gullies drain off into the river — the Gulf of Mexico ultimately, and into our wetland to fill it up...with poisoned soil.

[INTENSELY]

*Water* doesn't recognize fencelines, Allie. *Wind* either. It's all *connected* — like one bloodstream. Any day now his poison'll show up in our well ....

[PAUSES WITHOUT LOSING MOMENTUM. TAKES DEEP BREATH]

We'll drink it. It'll flow in our veins .... And bigness is no excuse. Why, old man Wade and his two boys farm a thousand acres north of here, and he was named Conservation Farmer of the Year three years ago. You should see that place! All his land is continually covered by perennial grasses. I wonder if he even *owns* a tractor! He says he measures his farm's success by the wildlife that call it home.

[LOOKS OUT RIGHT WINDOW]

Look at that dust! What short memories we have! I keep hearing Grandma Annie. Did I ever tell you any of her dust bowl stories? What a character! You know, no matter how hard it was, she always managed to be content doing just what she was doing. And laugh about it too. She'd say,

[IN GRANDMA ANNIE'S VOICE ONLY WHERE INDICATED BY QUOTATION MARKS]

"Used to hold the frying pan up to the keyhole to scour it during those dusters. Worked real good!" Or, she'd say: "You aren't a real farmer till you can taste the difference between North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota."

[LAUGHS. THEN SERIOUS, IN HER OWN VOICE]

Oh, they ate a lot of dirt in those days .... and the way things are going, those days could come again ...

[PAUSES. CROSSES UP TO ROCKER, LEANS OVER IT. INTENSELY]

It was all just *burned* into her mind. She'd settle into this very chair and her eyes would focus somewhere else. I'd sit at her feet and she'd lay her strong old hands-still, for once, in her lap and she'd say: "Time *does* go.

[ROCKS CHAIR STANDING OVER IT]

But when you get into something like them dirty thirties, then it goes *devilish* slow."

[SITS]

That black blizzard, that was the worst. But the day it came was a beautiful day. She even had the door open. Grandpa Al was out planting wheat and the neighbor about four miles southwest

of us called and told her,

"Annie, there's a terrible dust storm comin' ! Be sure and light your lamps first and then go close up your doors and windows."

And she said, "Why?"

And the neighbor said, "If you don't find your lamps now, you 'll never find them once it hits!"

In about an hour it was so black — just like they were down in the ground.

[GRIMLY AMUSED]

Grandpa had to let the horses lead him back to the barn. Grandma said,

"Lot of people were scared. Down on their knees. Thought the end of the *world'd* come. But the chickens just thought it was night and went to roost."

[LAUGHS]

She always did hide her feelings behind a joke.

[SERIOUSLY]

But, she said, "You had to cover your nostrils with a wet handkerchief just to breathe — and try walkin' against it!"

Well, by night it had kind of quit. And in the morning everything in the house was all *black* with it. But the wind had let down, so Grandpa went back out to the field to finish seeding. He couldn't tell where he'd sowed and where he *hadn't*.

[A DESOLATE VISION FOR HER]

The field had just drifted ... like black snow.... But... Grandma said,

[INTENSELY]

"We put in a crop anyway. If we didn't seed, we *surely* wouldn't get anything."

Well, that evening, Grandma sat with Grandpa in the dust on the porch steps. She said the sunset was like a red wound over the land and that Grandpa never looked at her once. He just slumped there, like he had a great weight on him, his neck all caked with dust and sweat... And then his shoulders stiffened and he took his finger and wrote in that dust: "NEVER AGAIN!"

But Grandma Annie told me it was years before they could do anything about it. For years they hardly got their seed back. She said,

"The pond bottom cracked and curled up like barn paint. Dead fish stinkin'. Flies buzzing over 'em. That dry wind peeling away your very skin. Why, one day a drop of water hit a man — and they had to throw two buckets of dirt in his face to bring him to!"

And one time she got a bright steel in her eyes, and she said, "Well, the wind blew the soil away, but we didn't lose everything. We still had the mortgage."

I was always proud to be named for her.

[CROSSES TO DOWNSTAGE RIGHT WINDOW]

Grandma and Grandpa were the first around here to plant on the contour and put terraces on the hills — as soon as the prices came back a little.

[PROUDLY]

I don't know how many hundred trees they put in. Grandma used to carry water to those trees *herself*. "A blessing to the land," she called them.

[CROSSES UP TO CHAIR ABOVE TABLE. THE FOLLOWING HURTS. ANGERS.]

Good thing she didn't live to see Dad bulldoze them out to make room for his big machines. Or to see him plant those straight cornrows up and down the hills and hope it didn't wash so bad he'd lose the picker in a gully.

[ASHAMED AT ANGER FOR FATHER. CONTROLS IT BY POURING COFFEE. SITS.]

I don't know. They were good people, Mom and Dad .... Got good yields, too. Enough to put four kids through college, and enough for Mom to retire to Florida when Dad's heart ... burst.

They farmed just like most of the rest of the neighborhood — and old Jordan, too.

[BITTERLY]

On the advice of the colleges and the banks and even the Extension in those days.

[SHE DOES BLAME THEM]

Can't blame them. With the market as it is, and the way the government slides about .... One bad year and you're out ....

[HESITANTLY, THEN WARMING TO IT]

But even in those hard times some farmers took care of their land and still made it. ... And neither Pete nor I could see doing it at all if we didn't do it right. So far, we've managed to hold on .... And live more *naturally* too. Oh, we still have some of our land in row crops, but we add a year of alfalfa into the rotation and that builds soil. Most of our farm is permanent pasture where all we do is move the fences. And as we rotate our cows from one paddock to another, they do the fertilizing. [LAUGHS] And they're not only healthier and cheaper to raise, they bring a premium price. I suppose it'll be awhile before we'll be certified organic, but we think of our land as ... *habitat*. For animals and for us. We planted groves and orchards and brought back Grandma Annie's shelterbelts ... You remember! All those lines of wispy little trees .... Did you see them when you pulled in? They're spreading out full size now. "Carbon reservoirs," some people call them. Maybe that's just another way of saying they're "a blessing to the land."

[LOOKS OFF IN DISTANCE]

I like the look Pete gets now after a day in the field. Funny, you give something back to the land and it gives *you* something. And the *pattern* it all makes! Like some kind of living quilt — the soil all tucked in nice and cozy.

[LOOKS AT HANDS. PROUD, AMUSED]

My hands were so swollen that first summer we came back! My whole body ached. I really got into this *work* thing. Never read a book till the snow. And then I noticed I couldn't get my wedding ring off. I thought, that must make me *married* to this land.

[UNDERSTATEMENT. IT IS REALLY EVERYTHING]

And it was all right. Of course, I had my doubts at first .... When Dad died, Mom wanted to sell the farm right away. She said everything she looked at reminded her of him. It was just so hard ... but ...

[GRUDGINGLY AT FIRST, THEN SYMPATHETIC]

She *never wanted* the place. One of those tricks life plays on you. She was by far the youngest. And the only one to survive. Her oldest brother killed in the Battle of the Bulge. The other, shortly after, struck by *lightning* out in the field. Did I ever tell you about that? She was only ten! With all that grief and all that work around the place, what could Mom *do*? Stay and marry "the boy next door." Right out of high school. Nothing else opened for her.

[SIPS COFFEE. PROUD OF MOM IN SPITE OF HERSELF.]

But I used to see her up late reading. And not novels either — politics and history. Archaeology!

[SENSES MOM'S FRUSTRATED LIFE]

She made do, I guess. And she really loved Daddy, but I can't ever remember her saying anything good about farming.

[BITTERLY]

Just a way to get the things she'd never had as a kid. And she'd lecture us:

[STANDS. MOM'S VOICE IS LADYLIKE, DESPERATE]

"Go to college. Don't spend your life buried up to the elbow in dishwater." Or, "Don't let the sun beat your brains out. Try something else.

[DISPARAGINGLY]

You can always farm .... "

[EMPHASIZES THIS UNDERSTATEMENT]

Not so true today! With these land prices, how does anybody even break *into* farming?

[PAUSES. PICKS UP NEEDLE AND THREAD. TIES KNOT. LAUGHS]

All our friends thought we were crazy to come back here. Admit it, Allie, you did too! But you know how burned out I got teaching. And Pete had this dream ... I couldn't let Mom just sell out ... Besides, the whole family heaved a collective sigh when we said we'd come back. None of *them* wanted to live here or work the place — neither of my brothers and certainly not Jenny.

But it's home.

[AMUSED, BUT IRONIC.]

They all show up nostalgic at Christmas.

It hasn't been a simple life, Allie. So different from what I remembered. So much business! But we decided to really try to fit into it. Pete got active in the Conservation District. I did too. Church suppers, 4-H. We even took up square dancing.

[LAUGHS GENTLY]

But, that had gotten as complicated as the *rest* of it.

[ARMS REACHING ALTERNATELY AS IF TAKING HANDS IN SQUARE DANCE]

Had to take lessons before we had *any idea* which way to turn!

[LAUGHS, THEN SERIOUSLY]

But we made a *life* for ourselves here.

[DISCOVERING THIS]

A sort of harmony. Harmony within our little family and with the land.

[PICKS UP QUILT. SITS IN ROCKER. BEGINS MENDING]

The other harmony should be with the people here. And that one's always been a little shaky.

[INDICATES JORDAN OUT DOWNSTAGE RIGHT WINDOW]

Old Jordan out there.

[GRUDGINGLY]

He's no outlaw. He's not mean. He's good to his sons and his grandkids. He loves his wife, helps his neighbors when they need it. He took care of *so much* for us in that terrible time when Daddy died ...

[INTENSELY]

But he just doesn't include the land in that. Monitors the markets by computer, while his soil slips out from under him. Just doesn't feel it...I wonder how many around here *do* feel it. The land is something you *own* ... and use. Maybe I'm crazy, but when I look out there and see that cloud of blowing topsoil it's like it's my own *flesh*, skinned *alive*.

[HUGS QUILT AS THOUGH COLD, THEN WITH AWE]

And it is alive — this soil is made up of the bodies of all the beings that have ever lived — and died in this place — over millions of years. And it's the whole life of all the years to come, too. In this dirt! This dirt!

[PAUSES, THEN REMEMBERS. ROCKS NERVOUSLY]

When I think of the pictures I've seen of columns sticking up out of desert sand — the ruins of civilizations that destroyed their soil. ... and in this country, Allie, we've wasted *half* of ours already. These days, if it isn't a drought, it's a monster thunderstorm stripping away the soil. But most people don't even think it's a problem — or not *their* problem anyway. What would happen

if they did?

[HOPEFULLY]

Oh, what would happen?

Remember when Pete broke his leg a few years back? Well, half the neighborhood showed up to pick our corn. Yes, Jordan too. Beautiful! The whole driveway roaring with combines! Put it all away in an afternoon — complaining the whole time — because they had to work around the *contours*. But they *did* it. Just *expected* to do it. That's the way community works.

[TENTATIVELY DISCOVERS IT]

Like a square dance! Everyone with a place in the pattern and a certain set of steps to follow.

[LOOKS AT QUILT, TRACES PATTERN WITH FINGER]

Helping each other through the maze, the constant weaving of new designs on the old.

[ALMOST DOUBTFULLY]

In harmony

[MUSING]

A good part of living is learning to do that dance right. ... But sometimes you don't know what steps to follow ....

[FRUSTRATED, ANGRY]

And sometimes you're out of step with almost everybody else. Some time ago I tried to kid Jordan about all the soil he's losing. To him, I'm still his old buddy Karl's little girl. Thirty-five-years old, and I'm still tiptoeing around him. But anyway, I said,

[TRYING TO DISGUISE HER ANGER WITH A JOKE]

"We never have to fertilize our northwest forty thanks to all the dirt we get from you. I suppose next you'll be sending us a bill for it."

And I laughed, and he laughed. Around here, people always laugh when they're serious.

He said,

[MIMICS VERY CASUAL VOICE]

"You get some from me, I get some from Larson. Just trading a little real estate through the air..."

That got me. To him, the soil's nothing *but* real estate ... and something to soak up chemicals and hold roots. *His* soil doesn't even always do *that*.

[THIS HURTS PHYSICALLY]

I've walked out into his fields after a good blow and, oh Allie, his little corn plants were hanging on by hairs. And the leaves all sandblasted! And so I said,

[STILL TRYING TO JOKE, BUT ANGER COMES THROUGH]

"A lot of *your* real estate's ending up in the Gulf of Mexico. Pretty soon you'll have to go down there to farm."

[STOPS. TAKES A DEEP BREATH. LAUGHS]

Every now and then I lose it. Drop my cover. So then he narrowed his eyes and his voice came soft and slow:

[HIS VOICE SHOWS HE DOESN'T TAKE HER SERIOUSLY]

"Now look here, little lady, it's my land and I'll do what I want with it.

[JORDAN LAUGHS]

And anyway, you can't argue with *success*. I must be doin' something right or I wouldn't be goin' to Texas every winter."

Huh! Texas! Of *course* he goes to Texas, now that his sons have taken over the hogs. They had to! Jordan got so sick from all that manure gas! He can't work in his barns anymore. I hate to think about that, and what might happen to his sons...but "Little Lady?"

[GROWLS]

You can bet I called Jenny about that one. His land!

[WITH FERVOR]

The land belongs to *itself*. If anything, we belong to *it* .... as much as earthworms or corn plants. We rise up a while and sink back in. *Borrow* our lives from it.

[STOPS. CALMS HERSELF]

Anyway, from the safety of the city, Little Sister Jenny said,

[MIMICS JENNY'S UNSYMPATHETIC VOICE]

"Well, what do you expect from him? All the time we were growing up he was the same way — just like Daddy." And then she launched into one of her diatribes. You know, the one that begins with:

[MIMICS JENNY A BIT SARCASTICALLY BECAUSE IDEA THREATENS HER.]

"We've left the world to men long enough to be sure they aren't going to take care of it," and ends with: "Women hold up half of the sky."

But, I said, "That's not exactly fair. "Women around here have started a local foods initiative. They've started CSAs and a farmers' market. And they help each other with Holistic Management techniques. So much of the really innovative work *is* done by women, even trying to figure out a way to block Jordan's mega-hog factory." She said,

[SARCASTICALLY]

"I suppose that lets you off the hook then?"

[A BIT HELPLESSLY]

That's easy for her to say!

[PICKS UP QUILT. FOLDS IT NEATLY WHILE TALKING]

It's different out here. Jordan won't list to *me*. And anyway, I have enough trouble holding up my end of things around here without reaching for the sky too. Things are precarious enough. We work all the time just to stay in the same place.

[HOLDS QUILT ALMOST LIKE A BABY]

Just holding onto the farm is so hard — and making sure the kids learn what they need to know to live in the world. Just staying sane when everything seems to be ....

[PAUSES. GRIM]

Everything I used to think was forever .... is eroding. Jordan and the rest of them like hungry wolves swallowing up every farm that goes down. Soon there won't be enough folks out here to *hold* a square dance. *Then* who will take care of the land?

A juggernaut of corporate-backed factory farms? You should have seen Jordan last month try to steamroll our township board into backing his projected hog operation! As if the one he *has* isn't big enough! He'd mustered a crew of representatives from banks and Big Ag and government that filled every seat in the town hall. They told us to look at "the big picture," but that turned out to be eighteen-foot-deep manure basins the size of seven football fields! And Jordan called that his *family* farm!

You need a computer just to keep track of your losses. Our local town just keeps reaching out for more land — even while it's dying on Main Street. ... Allie ... They rezone farmland for big box stores. And subdivisions of starter castles. And corn ethanol plants. Don't get me started on that! But I've got to say that it makes me want to scream when farmers who've been getting payments for putting their marginal land in CRP want to break their contract without penalty so they can grow \$4 corn for ethanol! Think of the dust *that* would raise! Do any of the people who make plans even *see* the land?

[TAKES A DEEP BREATH. THE FOLLOWING IS WHAT GIVES HER STRENGTH.]

But what I value most of all about this life, in spite of everything, is what we've built ourselves.

[ALMOST PLEADING]

You can see it, can't you?

[PICKS UP APPLE, GRADUALLY RELAXES INTO FEELING GOOD ABOUT HER LIFE]

I take care of things all day — bandage Amy's cut finger, move pasture fences, prune fruit trees, take Pete's lunch out to the field, pick worms off the broccoli. I can take the time to sit down and listen to little Mark's dreams .... All day I keep track of how things are *growing* and it feels so good. Because everything in this universe *is* growing and I'm part of that here ....

[PAUSES TO THINK]

Maybe I shouldn't let the dust old Jordan's raising get in my eyes .... I may be wrong, but it seems to me that any time you start trying to change something, you lose what you have.

[NOT SATISFIED WITH THIS EXCUSE]

But can I just go on cultivating my own garden when there's so much wrong right next door?

I've certainly tried to do just that for years. You know what I've done to build up this place.

[THREATENED]

Sometimes I wonder if I haven't been completely gobbled up by it. Remember how I told you when we came back here that I'd hold onto myself, my inner life? Now my hands are almost *always doing* something ....

[LAYS DOWN KNIFE AND APPLE, A LITTLE HORRIFIED]

The other day, when I was cleaning the attic, I found this in an old trunk.

[PICKS UP DIARY]

It's my Great-Great-Grandmother's diary. The thing that comes through here, over-and-over again, is how this place gobbled her up! I wonder if Mom ever found it? She never mentioned it if she did.

[LIKES HAVING THIS STUFF]

It was buried under all this old stuff — stiff pictures of relatives I've never even heard of, her old yellowed wedding dress, crumbling in the creases, faded letters in Swedish .... But Great-Great-Grandmother — Alma was her name — and *Bjorn*, Great-Great-Grandfather — came out here from Illinois — homesteaded in 1862. Built a sod hut on this very spot. *He* sounds like a bit of an empire-builder, though it never amounted to much. But *she* was so lonely. And overworked. Coming out here before anything was here. I think she was angry at what her life had become — but she took that anger out on herself. Sound familiar?

[OPENS BOOK. BEGINS PAGING THROUGH IT]

Where is that page? Oh, here it is. Written in 1865, just after the Dakotah Conflict, when they were homesteading this place. She was twenty-years-old and already had two kids! She says:

[ANNIE TRIES TO PROTECT HERSELF FROM THIS WITH A TOUCH OF CYNICISM BECAUSE IT HITS TOO CLOSE TO HOME. ALSO BECAUSE SHE DOES NOT WANT TO BE A VICTIM LIKE ALMA. BUT AT TIMES HER EMPATHY BREAKS THROUGH.]

"I can't believe it is four months since I have taken up this book. I have been much occupied with my work, which seems daily to increase. And have suffered so much from loneliness in this empty place. The letter I received last week from Mother was full of worry *I* have caused her coming here. And she, herself, crippled so with rheumatism again. There is no one to help her now that Lizzie has gone to her sweet rest.

[LOOKS AT ALLIE AS IF TO SAY, THIS IS TOO MUCH.]

But I will not think of rest. My duty lies here with my dear ones — my only happiness — and I dare complain to no one, save only you, my little book. Least of all to Bjorn. I fear Mother may have been right about him. Oh, that I could lay my head on her sweet breast!"

Allie, I can't imagine this. She says: "I realized today that it has been an entire year since I have been to town."

[LOOKS UP]

A year!

[READS AGAIN]

"And no neighbor close enough to visit. It seems I am always either too ill or busy with the children to go any distance. Bjorn didn't want to hear the church bell ring on Sunday morning so he passed up many a piece of land closer to town."

[LOOKS UP MEANINGFULLY. LAUGHS]

He sounds like a regular Daniel Boone.

"And he never tires of praising this place. Just today he said: 'Look at this soil! Not a stone, and black as velvet. What a life our children will enjoy in this place!'"

[TURNS PAGE]

"But something is wrong with me. I look at the very thing he looks at and see only emptiness."

[LOOKS UP WITH EMPATHY. READS]

Emptiness! Of course it was empty for her. How could she love a place that broke her body and separated her from everything she knew? And here she says: "We spend our days toiling for a future we know not of, and, being with child again, sometimes it is all I can do to hold my tongue."

[LOOKS UP. KNOWS HOW DIFFICULT THIS WOULD BE. CLOSES BOOK]

Another child! I wonder .... What if she *hadn't* held her tongue?

[PAUSES, THINKING. THEN A SLIGHT SMILE]

There's something else I want you to hear.

[SEARCHES BOOK. THEN READS]

Listen to this: "Now that spring comes on, clouds of geese and ducks invade our pond. Their

constant chatter makes it clear just how silent winter was!

[THINKS THIS NEXT IS STRANGELY FUNNY]

Bjorn said they are so tame he can walk right up to their nests with a buggy whip and knock their heads off. So we have plenty of meat. But, of course, in the fall, they are nearly as bad as locusts eating our grain."

[LOOKS UP, PLEASED]

You know, those geese and ducks come back now every spring. I never saw a *one* all the time I was growing up ... But in all those birds, Alma could see only meat ... or threat. A lot of people — and not just farmers — still see the natural world that way — something to use — or a threat.

[TURNS PAGE. SAYS, TONGUE IN CHEEK]

And here she is, feeling guilty again — for not *enjoying pioneer* life!

"I should be thankful for each day that is given me, and for the blessing of my babies' health, but I do so wish we could have made our home in Illinois, close to Mother, where the land is tamed and we would not have to make the whole world over again ourselves."

[CLOSES BOOK, AS IF TO PROTECT HERSELF FROM IT. LOOKS UP]

"Make the whole world over again ourselves!" That's the way *I* felt when we came back here. I still do sometimes. Maybe every generation feels like that, no matter where they live.

[PAUSES. A LITTLE DISCOURAGED]

But what has gone before wears such a great rut! You have a hard time breaking out of it. It's hard to even see the chance you always have ...

[EXCITED BY THIS IDEA]

to stand up and call the dance yourself .... These women in my family — each of us with such a different burden on this land. Alma was exhausted by trying to "remake the world" on it and found her "sweet rest" at only 45. Grandma Annie watching all her sweat blow away .... Finally realized it wasn't just the wind or the drought that was wrong, but *the way they farmed*.

[ANNOYED, ASHAMED]

And Mom. She just refused to take it on. Always living somewhere else in her mind while Daddy's dream of Easy Street destroyed everything her parents had built. ...

Pete and I — inherited this history *with* the place, and the job of making it whole again.

[GETTING ENERGY]

Allie, there are fields in Europe that have fed people for a thousand years. Still fertile. That's what I want here. An agriculture that works with natural processes to replenish the earth. An agriculture that can sustain itself, and us, indefinitely. Or at least until *our* kids tear it down. But part of all this is bringing them up so Mark — or Amy — *won't* tear it down.

[INSPIRED BY THIS VISION]

So they'll see the limits of the land and live within them. So they'll know in their bones that it's the source of their very lives and health .... And pass it on to *their* children as whole as it was left to them. Or even better.

Maybe that's *part* of what Jenny means by holding up our half of the sky ....

[WITH CONTINUING MOMENTUM]

But it's not *enough*. Literally all around us, Jordan makes a killing mining the land. Polluting the water and the air. "You can't argue with success," *he* says. But Allie, what if I *did* argue with it? What would I be planting .... and what would sprout? Would the wind blow *all* my seeds away?

**THE END**