

MEADOWLARK

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Published by NeWest Press

Release Date: September 15, 2015

CHAPTER ONE

My mother pulls her knees up in the big chair by the morning window. That's what she calls it, the morning window, the place she sits to forget she lives in a place where winter comes and stays too long. Godforsaken, she says at times, when she thinks she can't possibly bear one more minute of a northern Ontario winter.

It was here, she said, pointing to the ground beneath her with an angry jab of her finger, that the glaciers stopped and burped, leaving a tract of farmland in between the rocks and lakes, along the Rainy River, before they, the glaciers, continued on with their gouging and tearing up the soil and scraping down to the bare rock, carving out the Canadian Shield. She shivers and pulls her shoulders up and closes her eyes, probably trying to imagine that winter has gone, that the sky is blue and warm and calm. As if England's any better, my father says, an accusing tone in his voice, flinging insult for insult. My mother never lets on, just shakes her head and closes her eyes.

The east rising sun shines in through the window's glass and drenches my mother in light, the many shades of yellow woven in and out of her hair pulled back in a braid. Her hair is almost always tied up, gathered in a smooth twisted braid with her magic fingers, fingers that work on their own without her eyes, without a mirror. I can't remember her hair ever hanging down. She stirs the heavy cream into her coffee, the tiny spoon tinging out a tune while she stirs, no sugar. She holds the white porcelain mug up to her face, the steam from the coffee rising up around her. She closes her eyes and breathes in as though the smell itself might warm every cell in her body. She looks like she is dreaming.

I want to stand in front of her and memorize the details of her, the colours of her cheeks, flushed slightly on either side, her eyebrows thick but perfectly shaped, her lashes long and sweeping, her eyes a deep blue, somewhere between blue and green, a single dimple, the mirror image of mine, on the left side, a deep fissure where I am tempted to place my finger, wiggle it to see where the hole goes. I want to memorize the way she runs the backs of her fingers along her jaw and drops her eyes when she is tired as if her mother might have done that when my mother was little; a genetic motion. I want to memorize how she stands up tall, her back arched with her hand on her forehead, her eyes closed and her teeth together, a look that says I've had enough, a warning to everyone but me.

Jake is eleven months old, not even real enough to be measured in years, as if he is still a test model, waiting to become a real boy. He pounds his fists into the tray of his high chair and squirming, trying to get free. He shouts, merely for the sake of shouting. I

look at him with disgust, at the bits of toast stuck to his hair. The toast has been cut precisely the size for his mouth but instead he jams several pieces in his mouth at once.

“Yuck,” I say, closing my eyes so I don’t have to see the mess. He does a lot of food flinging and dragging his sticky hands through his hair leaving his appearance a bit startling. He wears a bib that is soggy with his drool, wet and sloppy and disgusting.

“He’s teething,” my mother says. He’s always teething, has been teething since he took his first breath. His cheeks are red and enflamed as if the skin might crack. My mother hands him an ice cube to bite on through a tiny face cloth. He winces and then sucks on it with a fury like he’s suddenly gone mad for ice, his eyebrows jumping up to his forehead and his eyes looking crazed. He is usually jolly, but annoying and demanding. I try to remember my life before he came along and upset the balance, when my parents lifted me off the ground and I hung between them from their hands, my feet walking on air. It was magic, but now their arms are taken up by Jake, his fists closing around their thumbs, his heavy head falling asleep on their shoulders, his thumb stuck in his mouth like a plug. The rest of the time he is loud and laughs and everyone laughs with him. Except me. I don’t find him funny; not one bit.

My father is tip-toeing through the kitchen like a cartoon character, a big grin stretched across his face like he knows a big secret and he can’t hold it for one more second. Jake squeals at him. My father knocks his flat open hand on the kitchen table and the silverware jumps.

“It’s today,” he shouts, as if he has become an evangelist, shouting about being saved. We’d had one of those at our church, an evangelist, but our congregation preferred

not to be shouted at, my mother said, when my father fidgeted and said good grief, as if he knew he didn't want to come and wanted to remind my mother of that again.

“We've packed a lunch and we're driving up the lake today to clean out the cabin for its new owners.”

My father throws his arms over his head and turns his back to my mother. “We're selling the cabin and with the money we're going to build this farm into something Jake can take over. Isn't that right, Jake,” my father says, bending over with his face close to Jake's.

Jake only clobbers my father's nose with his spoon and laughs with his crazy noise-making voice. He can't even talk, only says mom-mom-mom, pressing his lips together, his dimples like deep holes on either side of his mouth. He has two dimples, as if he is more balanced than I am. I am like mommy, I want to say, to shout into it his face. That makes me better.

“I want to be a farmer,” I say, my throat feeling dry and sore all of a sudden, as if I swallowed something too big.

My mother opens her arms and I run in and bury my face in her apron. Her fingers instantly begin weaving my hair, like a reflex, as if she can't help herself. I would have left my face there forever, her fingers calming all the worries that a six-year-old might have.

“Robert,” her voice stern with a warning sound to it. I look up at her face. Her teeth are pushed together and her lips pulled straight across, as if something stung her, but my father doesn’t seem to notice, keeps his face turned the other way.

“Right, right,” he says. “We’re all farmers.”

We aren’t really farmers though. Not yet. We don’t have huge hogs in our front field like the Mennonites down the road, hogs that look like bulldozers digging in the soil. The hogs get down on their front knees, pushing their wide snouts into the dirt, pulling up roots and twigs, their small curled tails wiggling with what looks like pure joy.

“Happy as a pig in shit,” Mr. Katz from next-door likes to say. He is a bachelor and doesn’t know not to talk like that around children, but I say that in my head and it makes me laugh. Happy as a pig in shit. Happy as a pig in shit. I sing while I jump with my skipping rope on the hard-packed mud in the driveway. Happy as a pig in shit.

We don’t have lovely black and white cows that know when to come down from the pasture field to be milked, coming all on their own with just the help of two border collies Nip and Nancy. They are very smart cows, cows that stand quietly under a tree when they are full of grass and chew their cud and make milk, cows that don’t run and jump around while they refill their large udders. They look dazed, burdened with the huge sacks of milk they carry around and I wonder if they’d like to unhook those udders and leave them at the edge of the field while they run and play and chase each other.

The calves are in a separate field, not allowed to run with their mothers. They drink instead from large glass bottles or pails when they learn how, but they want to suck, want to suck so bad that they suck on each other’s ears, not caring that no milk comes,

desperate to be sucking, wanting their mothers, bawling at the fence that separates them, protesting this separation that they can't quite figure out the rules of. Their mothers have forgotten them, more interested now in making milk, eating grass and making milk.

“Why can't they be with their mothers,” I ask Mr. Kruger and he looks at me with impatient intolerance.

“That milk is not for them,” he says. “Too much milk. They'd get sick.”

“All babies need to suck,” my mother says. “It's only natural.”

The calves would suck the fingers right off my hand if I let them. We stopped in a couple of times to buy milk for one of our orphaned calves and I wanted to play with the dogs, but Mr. Kruger snarled at me.

“They're working dogs,” he said, waving me off like a mosquito.

“Why do they have friendly names then,” I asked my mother.

“Good question,” she said, her fingers in my hair.

We aren't really farmers like a lot of farmers on our road, like Corkums who have a field full of small black cows whose calves look like cuddly teddy bears. The Black Angus frolic and play, wrestle and disagree with heads pushed together, cows that run with their tails up over their backs like they are alarmed and running from imaginary danger just for fun.

“Can’t keep those Angus buggers in,” Mr. Corkum says. I like that word bugger, and practice saying it in my head, knowing I won’t be allowed to use it in a regular sentence. I tried it once.

“That Jake is a noisy bugger,” I said, and my mother pulled her apron up over her mouth and shook her head rather seriously, her eyebrows trying to be angry.

Mr. Corkum is always fixing his fences and chasing calves down the road. They have eight children to do the chasing, eight children that run around like ants, laughing and pulling at one another, and they never notice me standing and watching, wondering if I might join in. I lean forward and back from my heels to my toes as if I am trying to jump into a skipping rope that is turning too fast for me. I suppose Mr. Corkum never notices how much time it takes to keep his cows inside their farm.

We aren’t even farmers like Harold Prescott who milks cows, some Jerseys and Brown Swiss and Holsteins, in his tumbling down barn, selling cream to the neighbours. Prescotts have pigs and chickens and sheep and goats and Mr. Prescott works hard, but not smart hard, my father says. We buy their cream. Mr. Prescott always seems angry. My mother doesn’t like him, says she doesn’t think she has ever seen him being kind to his children, especially Charles, she says. Farming can do that to a man, my father says, but my mother shakes her head. It’s not right, she says.

My mother is the real farmer, or more a farmer than the rest of us. She has a huge garden that she tends to as if the seedlings, the little bits of green life pushing through the soil, are her own flesh and blood. She gets on her knees and pulls the weeds, the invaders that try to crowd out her vegetables. She plants a thick band of marigolds along the edges

of her garden and she places crushed eggshells around her tomato plants, the plants tied up to wooden stakes with her old nylon stockings. The carrots she thins with tweezers so they don't crowd one another out and all the while she explains what she is doing, and hums, a white bandana tied around her hair. She looks earthy and exotic, both at the same time.

She keeps a stack of old bed linens on the back porch and every night that threatens frost, she covers her garden plants, tucks them under the sheets, placing bricks along the sheets' edges so the wind can't tear the sheets away. In this part of Ontario the frost seems to threaten twelve months of the year. Farmers have to be smarter, my father says. The window of opportunity is smaller, fewer days to get things to grow, less heat to let things ripen. Farming in the north isn't for sissies, he says. It's the world's biggest gamble.

I have no idea what gambling has to do with farming, but I picture my father at a card table with other farmers, all of them chewing on cigars.

I'll raise you a second cut of hay, one farmer says. I'll see your second cut and raise you some corn silage, says another, but before they can throw their cards down Mother Nature tips the table over and their cards all go flying.

My mother's garden is a living-breathing thing that shifts and changes and what starts out as tiny seeds in the palm of her hand, becomes something magical. In the fall, when the last potato has been dug and the last carrot pulled and all the tops stacked in a pile to rot and decay, to be put back on the garden, my mother cries, weeps quietly at the

edge of her garden. It's over, she says, as if she might never have the chance to garden again.

The summer after Jake was born, my mother's precious garden was forgotten, over-run by weeds, the rabbits and deer eating off the blossoms until my father took the lawnmower to the whole garden, leveling it flat.

We aren't really farmers at all. My father works in town three or four days a week, picks up shifts at the sawmill pushing and lifting logs. We have four Hereford cows and my mother's eight hens with rich copper feathers. Gwen, the biggest hen, lets me carry her around like a doll and when I stand and stomp my feet on the wooden platform at the back door Gwen comes running right to me. My father says chickens are stupid, but I think Gwen is brilliant, a word I borrow from my mother. She only uses that word when something is very good. Gwen is just such a very good something.