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A Thousand Acres

Written by Jane Smiley

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A Thousand Acres

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Book One



The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other. We were marked by the seasonal body of earth, by the terrible migrations of people, by the swift turn of a century, verging on change never before experienced on this greening planet.

—Meridel Le Sueur,
"The Ancient People and the Newly Come"

1

AT SIXTY MILES PER HOUR, you could pass our farm in a minute, on County Road 686, which ran due north into the T intersection at Cabot Street Road. Cabot Street Road was really just another country blacktop, except that five miles west it ran into and out of the town of Cabot. On the western edge of Cabot, it became Zebulon County Scenic Highway, and ran for three miles along the curve of the Zebulon River, before the river turned south and the Scenic continued west into Pike. The T intersection of CR 686 perched on a little rise, a rise nearly as imperceptible as the bump in the center of an inexpensive plate.

From that bump, the earth was unquestionably flat, the sky unquestionably domed, and it seemed to me when I was a child in school, learning about Columbus, that in spite of what my teacher said, ancient cultures might have been onto something. No globe or map fully convinced me that Zebulon County was not the center of the universe. Certainly, Zebulon County, where the earth *was* flat, was one spot where a sphere (a seed, a rubber ball, a ballbearing) must come to perfect rest and once at rest must send a taproot downward into the ten-foot-thick topsoil.

Because the intersection was on this tiny rise, you could see our buildings, a mile distant, at the southern edge of the farm. A mile to the east, you could see three silos that marked the northeastern corner, and if you raked your gaze from the silos to the house and barn, then back again, you would take in the immensity of the piece

of land my father owned, six hundred forty acres, a whole section, paid for, no encumbrances, as flat and fertile, black, friable, and exposed as any piece of land on the face of the earth.

If you looked west from the intersection, you saw no sign of anything remotely scenic in the distance. That was because the Zebulon River had cut down through topsoil and limestone, and made its pretty course a valley below the level of the surrounding farmlands. Nor, except at night, did you see any sign of Cabot. You saw only this, two sets of farm buildings surrounded by fields. In the nearer set lived the Ericsons, who had daughters the ages of my sister Rose and myself, and in the farther set lived the Clarks, whose sons, Loren and Jess, were in grammar school when we were in junior high. Harold Clark was my father's best friend. He had five hundred acres and no mortgage. The Ericsons had three hundred seventy acres and a mortgage.

Acreage and financing were facts as basic as name and gender in Zebulon County. Harold Clark and my father used to argue at our kitchen table about who should get the Ericson land when they finally lost their mortgage. I was aware of this whenever I played with Ruthie Ericson, whenever my mother, my sister Rose, and I went over to help can garden produce, whenever Mrs. Ericson brought over some pies or doughnuts, whenever my father loaned Mr. Ericson a tool, whenever we ate Sunday dinner in the Ericsons' kitchen. I recognized the justice of Harold Clark's opinion that the Ericson land was on his side of the road, but even so, I thought it should be us. For one thing, Dinah Ericson's bedroom had a window seat in the closet that I coveted. For another, I thought it appropriate and desirable that the great circle of the flat earth spreading out from the T intersection of County Road 686 and Cabot Street Road be ours. A thousand acres. It was that simple.

It was 1951 and I was eight when I saw the farm and the future in this way. That was the year my father bought his first car, a Buick sedan with prickly gray velvet seats, so rounded and slick that it was easy to slide off the backseat into the footwell when we went over a stiff bump or around a sharp corner. That was also the year my sister Caroline was born, which was undoubtedly the reason my father bought the car. The Ericson children and the Clark children

continued to ride in the back of the farm pickup, but the Cook children kicked their toes against a front seat and stared out the back windows, nicely protected from the dust. The car was the exact measure of six hundred forty acres compared to three hundred or five hundred.

In spite of the price of gasoline, we took a lot of rides that year, something farmers rarely do, and my father never again did after Caroline was born. For me, it was a pleasure like a secret hoard of coins—Rose, whom I adored, sitting against me in the hot musty velvet luxury of the car's interior, the click of the gravel on its undercarriage, the sensation of the car swimming in the rutted road, the farms passing every minute, reduced from vastness to insignificance by our speed; the unaccustomed sense of leisure; most important, though, the reassuring note of my father's and mother's voices commenting on what they saw—he on the progress of the yearly work and the condition of the animals in the pastures, she on the look and size of the house and garden, the colors of the buildings. Their tones of voice were unhurried and self-confident, complacent with the knowledge that the work at our place was farther along, the buildings at our place more imposing and better cared for. When I think of them now, I think how they had probably seen nearly as little of the world as I had by that time. But when I listened to their duet then, I nestled into the certainty of the way, through the repeated comparisons, our farm and our lives seemed secure and good.

2

JESS CLARK WAS GONE for thirteen years. He left for a commonplace reason—he was drafted—but within a few months of Harold's accompanying his son to the bus depot in Zebulon Center, Jess and everything about him slipped into the category of the unmentionable, and no one spoke of him again until the spring of 1979, when I ran into Loren Clark at the bank in Pike and he said that Harold was giving a pig roast for Jess's homecoming, would all of us come, no need to bring anything. I put my hand on Loren's arm, which stopped him from turning away and made him look me in the eye. I said, "Well, then, where's he been?"

"I guess we'll find out."

"I thought he hadn't been in touch."

"He wasn't, till Saturday night."

"That's all?"

"That's all." He gave me a long look and a slow smile, then said, "I notice he waited till we busted our butts finishing up planting before staging this resurrection."

It was true that butts had been busted, since the spring had been cold and wet, and no one had been able to get into the fields until mid-May. Then almost all the corn in the county had been planted in less than two weeks. Loren smiled. Whatever he said, I knew he was feeling a little heroic, just as the men around our place were feeling. I thought of something. "Does he know about your mom?"

"Dad told him."

"Is he bringing any family?"

"No wife, no kids. No plans to go back to wherever he is, either. We'll see." Loren Clark was a big, sweet guy. When he spoke about Jess, it was in easy, almost amused tones, the same way he spoke about everything. Seeing him somewhere was always a pleasure, like taking a drink of water. Harold put on a terrific pig roast—while the pig was roasting, he would syringe lime juice and paprika under the skin. Even so, I was surprised Harold intended to take a day off from bean planting. Loren shrugged. "There's time," he said. "The weather's holding now. You know Harold. He always likes to go against the grain."

The real treat would be watching Jess Clark break through the surface of everything that hadn't been said about him over the years. I felt a quickening of interest, a small eagerness that seemed like a happy omen. When I drove the Scenic toward Cabot a little while later, I thought how pretty the river did look—the willows and silver maples were in full leaf, the cattails green and fleshy-looking, the wild iris out in purple clumps—and I stopped and took a pleased little stroll along the bank.

On Valentine's Day, my sister Rose had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She was thirty-four. Her mastectomy and ensuing chemotherapy had left her weak and anxious. All through the gloomiest March and April in years, I was cooking for three households —for my father, who insisted on living alone in our old farmhouse, for Rose and her husband, Pete, in their house across the road from Daddy, and also for my husband, Tyler, and myself. We lived where the Ericsons once had, actually. I'd been able to consolidate dinner, and sometimes supper, depending on how Rose was feeling, but breakfast had to be served in each kitchen. My morning at the stove started before five and didn't end until eight-thirty.

It didn't help that all the men were sitting around complaining about the weather and worrying that there wouldn't be tractor fuel for planting. Jimmy Carter ought to do this, Jimmy Carter will certainly do that, all spring long.

And it didn't help that Rose had suddenly made up her mind the previous fall to send Pammy and Linda, her daughters, away to boarding school. Pammy was in seventh grade, Linda in sixth. They

hated to go, fought against going, enlisting me and their father against Rose, but she labeled their clothes, packed their trunks, and drove them down to the Quaker school in West Branch. She exhibited a sustained resolve in the face of even our father's opposition that was like a natural force.

The girls' departure was unbearable for me, since they were nearly my own daughters, and when Rose got the news from her doctor, the first thing I said was, "Let's let Pammy and Linda come home for a while. This is a good time. They can finish the school year here, then maybe go back."

She said, "Never."

Linda was just born when I had my first miscarriage, and for a while, six months maybe, the sight of those two babies, whom I had loved and cared for with real interest and satisfaction, affected me like a poison. All my tissues hurt when I saw them, when I saw Rose with them, as if my capillaries were carrying acid into the furthest reaches of my system. I was so jealous, and so freshly jealous every time I saw them, that I could hardly speak, and I wasn't very nice to Rose, since some visceral part of me simply blamed her for having what I wanted, and for having it so easily (it had taken me three years just to get pregnant—she had gotten pregnant six months after getting married). Of course, fault had nothing to do with it, and I got over my jealousy then by reminding myself over and over, with a kind of litany of the central fact of my life—no day of my remembered life was without Rose. Compared to our sisterhood, every other relationship was marked by some sort of absence—before Caroline, after our mother, before our husbands, pregnancies, her children, before and after and apart from friends and neighbors. We've always known families in Zebulon County that live together for years without speaking, for whom a historic dispute over land or money burns so hot that it engulfs every other subject, every other point of relationship or affection. I didn't want that, I wanted that least of all, so I got over my jealousy and made my relationship with Rose better than ever. Still, her refusal to bring them back from boarding school reminded me in no uncertain terms that they would always be her children, never mine.

Well, I felt it and I set it aside. I threw myself into feeding her,

cleaning her house, doing her laundry, driving her to Zebulon Center for her treatments, bathing her, helping her find a prosthesis, encouraging her with her exercises. I talked about the girls, read the letters they sent home, sent them banana bread and ginger snaps. But after the girls were sent away, I had a hint, again, for the first time since Linda was born, of how it was in those families, how generations of silence could flow from a single choice.

Jess Clark's return: something that had looked impossible turning out possible. Now it was the end of May, and Rose felt pretty good. Another possibility realized. And she looked better, too, since she was getting some color back. And the weather would be warm, they said on the TV. My walk along the riverbank carried me to where the river spread out into a little marsh, or where, you could also say, where the surface of the earth dipped below the surface of the sea within it, and blue water sparkled in the still limpid sunlight of midspring. And there was a flock of pelicans, maybe twenty-five birds, cloud white against the shine of the water. Ninety years ago, when my great-grandparents settled in Zebulon County and the whole county was wet, marshy, glistening like this, hundreds of thousands of pelicans nested in the cattails, but I hadn't seen even one since the early sixties. I watched them. The view along the Scenic, I thought, taught me a lesson about what is below the level of the visible.

The Clark brothers were both good-looking, but with Loren you had to gaze for a moment to find the handsomely set eyes and the neatly carved lips. His pleasant disposition gave him a goofy quality that was probably what most people mean when they use the word "hick." And maybe he'd gotten a little thick in the middle, the way you do when there's plenty of meat and potatoes around. I'd never even noticed it, till I saw Jess for the first time at the pig roast, and he was like this alternative edition of Loren. Jess was about a year older than Loren, I think, but in those thirteen years they'd gotten to be like twins raised apart that you see on TV. They cocked their heads the same way, they laughed at the same jokes. But the years hadn't taken the toll on Jess that they had on Loren: his waist came straight up out of his waistband; his thighs seemed to bow a little, so you got the sense of the muscles inside his jeans. From behind, too, he didn't look like anyone else at the pig roast. The small of

his back narrowed into his belt, then there was just a little swell, nicely defined by the back yoke and the pockets. He didn't walk like a farmer, either, that's something else you noticed from behind. Most men walk in their hip sockets, just kicking their legs out one at a time, but Jess Clark moved from the small of his back, as if, any time, he might do a few handsprings.

Rose noticed him, too, right when I did. We put our casseroles on the trestle table, I looked at Jess turning from talking to Marlene Stanley, and Rose said, "Hunh. Look at that."

His face wasn't smooth like Loren's, though. There's where he had aged. Lines fanned out from the corners of his eyes, framed his smile, drew your attention to his nose, which was long and beaky, unsoftened by flesh or years of mild, harmless thoughts. He had Loren's blue eyes, but there was no sweetness in them, and Loren's dark brown ringlets, but they were cut close. Nicely cut. He was wearing fancy sneakers, too, and a light blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Actually, he looked good, but not like he was going to quickly ease any neighborhood suspicions. Everybody would be friendly to him, though. People in Zebulon County saw friendliness as a moral virtue.

He gave me a hug, then Rose, and said, "Hey, it's the big girls."

Rose said, "Hey, it's the pest."

"I wasn't that bad. I was just interested."

"The word 'relentless' was coined to describe you, Jess," said Rose.

"I was nice to Caroline. Caroline was crazy about me. Did she come?"

I said, "Caroline's down in Des Moines now. She's getting married in the fall, you know. To another lawyer. Frank Ras—" I stopped talking, I sounded so serious and dull.

"So soon?"

Rose cocked her head and pushed her hair back. "She's twenty-eight, Jess," said Rose. "According to Daddy, it's almost too late to breed her. Ask him. He'll tell you all about sows and heifers and things drying up and empty chambers. It's a whole theoretical system."

Jess laughed. "I remember that about your father. He always had a lot of ideas. He and Harold could sit at the kitchen table and eat a

whole pie, wedge by wedge, and drink two or three pots of coffee and one-up each other."

"They still do that," said Rose. "You shouldn't think something's changed just because you haven't seen it in thirteen years."

Jess looked at her. I said, "I guess you remember that Rose always offers her unvarnished opinion. That hasn't changed, either." He smiled at me. Rose, who is never embarrassed, said, "I remembered something, too. I remembered that Jess used to like his mom's Swiss steak, so that's what I brought." She lifted the lid on her dish and Jess raised his eyebrows. He said, "I haven't eaten meat in seven years."

"Well, then, you're probably going to starve to death around here. There's Eileen Dahl, Ginny. She sent me those flowers in the hospital. I'm going to talk to her." She strode away. Jess didn't watch her. Instead, he lifted the lid on my dish. It was cheese garbanzo enchiladas. I said, "Where've you been living, then?"

"Seattle, lately. I lived in Vancouver before the amnesty."

"We never heard you'd gone to Canada."

"I'll bet. I went right after infantry training, on my first leave."

"Did your dad know?"

"Maybe. I never know what he knows."

"Zebulon County must seem pretty ordinary after that, after being in the mountains and all."

"It is beautiful there. I don't know—" His gaze flicked over my shoulder, then back to my face. He smiled right at me. "We'll talk about it. I hear you're the closest neighbors now."

"To the east, I guess so."

I saw my father's car drive in. Pete and Ty were with him, I knew that. But Caroline was with him, too. That was unexpected. I waved as she unfolded out of the car, and Jess turned to look. I said, "There she is. That's my husband, Ty. You must remember him, and Pete, Rose's husband. Did you ever meet him?"

Jess said, "No kids?"

"No kids." I gave this remark my customary cheery tone, then filled in quickly, "Rose has two, though, Pammy and Linda. I'm very close to them. Actually they're in boarding school. Down in West Branch."

"That's pretty high class for your average family farmer."

I shrugged. By this time, Ty and Caroline had made their way to us through the crowd, peeling off Daddy at the group of farmers standing around Harold and Pete at the tub of iced beer. Ty gave me a squeeze around the waist and a kiss on the cheek.

I got married to Ty when I was nineteen, and the fact was that even after seventeen years of marriage, I was still pleased to see him every time he appeared.

I wasn't the first in my high school class to go, nor the last. Ty was twenty-four. He'd been farming for six years, and his farm was doing well. A hundred and sixty acres, no mortgage. Its size was fine with my father, because it showed a proper history—Ty's dad, the second Smith boy, had inherited the extra farm, not the original piece of land. There'd been no fiddling with that, which went to Ty's uncle, and amounted to about four hundred acres, no mortgage. Ty's dad had shown additional good sense in marrying a plain woman and producing only one child, which was the limit, my father often said, of a hundred and sixty acres. When Ty was twenty-two and had been farming long enough to know what he was doing, his father died of a heart attack, which he suffered out in the hog pen. To my father, this was the ultimate expression of the right order of things, so when Ty started visiting us the year after that, my father was perfectly happy to see him.

He was well spoken and easy to get along with, and of his own accord he preferred me to Rose. He had good manners, one of the things about a man, I often thought, that lasts and lasts. Every time he came in, he smiled and said, "Hello, Ginny," and when he went away, he told me when he'd be home, and made a point of saying good-bye. He'd thank me for meals and habitually used the word "please." Good manners stood him in good stead with my father, too, since they farmed Daddy's place together, and rented out the hundred and sixty. Daddy didn't get along as well with Pete, and Ty spent a fair amount of time smoothing things over between them. Over the years, it became clear that Tyler and I were good together, especially by contrast to Rose and Pete, who were generally more stirred up and dissatisfied.

Ty greeted Jess with his characteristic friendliness, and it was weird

to look back and forth between them. The last time I'd seen Jess, he had seemed so young and Ty had seemed so mature. Now they seemed like contemporaries, with Jess, in fact, a shade more sophisticated and self-assured.

Caroline shook hands with Jess in her brisk, lawyer's way that Rose always called her "take-me-seriously-or-I'll-sue-you" demeanor. She may have been, as Daddy thought, old for a breeder, but she was young for a lawyer. I tried hard, for her sake, not to be amused by her, but I could see, right then, that Jess Clark was a little amused, too. She informed us that she planned to spend that night, then go to church with us, and be back in Des Moines by suppertime. Nothing the least unusual. Well, I've thought over every moment of that party time and time again, sifting for pointers, signals, ways of knowing how to do things differently from the way they got done. There were no clues.

3

MY GRANDMOTHER'S PARENTS, Sam and Arabella Davis, were from the west of England, hilly country, and poor for farming. When they came the first time to Zebulon County, in the spring of 1890, and saw that half the land they had already bought, sight unseen, was under two feet of water part of the year and another quarter of it was spongy, they went back to Mason City and stayed there for the summer and winter. Sam was twenty-one and Arabella was twenty-two. In Mason City, they met another Englishman, John Cook, who, as he was from Norfolk, was undaunted by standing water. Cook was only a clerk in a dry-goods store, but a reading man, interested in the newest agricultural and industrial innovations, and he persuaded my great-grandparents to use the money remaining to them to drain part of their land. He was sixteen years old. He sold my great-grandfather two digging forks, a couple of straight-sided shovels, a leveling hose, a quantity of locally manufactured drainage tiles, and a pair of high boots. When the weather warmed up, John quit his job, and he and Sam went out among the mosquitoes, which were known as gallinippers, and began digging. On the drier land, my great-grandfather planted twenty acres of flax, which is what every sodbuster planted the first year, and ten acres of oats. Both flourished well enough, compared to what they would have done back in England. In Mason City, my grandmother, Edith, was born. John and Sam dug, leveled, and lay tile lines until the ground was too frozen to receive their forks, then they returned to

Mason City, where both made acquaintance with Edith, and both went to work for the Mason City brick and tile works.

A year later, just after the harvest, John, Arabella, and Sam built a two-bedroom bungalow on the southernmost corner of the farm. Three men from town and another farmer named Hawkins helped. It took three weeks, and they moved in on November 10. For the first winter, John lived with Sam and Arabella, in the second bedroom. Edith slept in a closet. Two years later, John Cook purchased, again for a good price, eighty more acres of swampy ground adjacent to the Davises. He continued to live with them until 1899, when he built a bungalow of his own.

There was no way to tell by looking that the land beneath my childish feet wasn't the primeval mold I read about at school, but it was new, created by magic lines of tile my father would talk about with pleasure and reverence. Tile "drew" the water, warmed the soil, and made it easy to work, enabled him to get into the fields with his machinery a mere twenty-four hours after the heaviest storm. Most magically, tile produced prosperity—more bushels per acre of a better crop, year after year, wet or dry. I knew what the tile looked like (when I was very young, five- or twelve-inch cylinders of real tile always lay here and there around the farm, for repairs or extension of tile lines; as I got older, "tile" became long snakes of plastic tubing), but for years, I imagined a floor beneath the topsoil, checkered aqua and yellow like the floor in the girls' bathroom at the elementary school, a hard shiny floor you could not sink beneath, better than a trust fund, more reliable than crop insurance, a farmer's best patrimony. It took John and Sam and, at the end, my father, a generation, twenty-five years, to lay the tile lines and dig the drainage wells and cisterns. I in my Sunday dress and hat, driving in the Buick to church, was a beneficiary of this grand effort, someone who would always have a floor to walk on. However much these acres looked like a gift of nature, or of God, they were not. We went to church to pay our respects, not to give thanks.

It was pretty clear that John Cook had gained, through dint of sweat equity, a share in the Davis farm, and when Edith turned sixteen, John, thirty-three by then, married her. They continued to live in the bungalow, and Sam and Arabella ordered a house from

Sears, this one larger and more ostentatious than the bungalow, "The Chelsea." They took delivery on the Chelsea (four bedrooms, living room, dining room, *and* reception hall, with indoor bathroom, and sliding doors between living room and dining room, $1129) at the freight delivery point in Cabot. The kit included every board, joist, nail, window frame, and door that they would need, as well as seventy-six pages of instructions. That was the house that we grew up in and that my father lived in. The bungalow was torn down in the thirties and the lumber was used for a chicken house.

I was always aware, I think, of the water in the soil, the way it travels from particle to particle, molecules adhering, clustering, evaporating, heating, cooling, freezing, rising upward to the surface and fogging the cool air or sinking downward, dissolving this nutrient and that, quick in everything it does, endlessly working and flowing, a river sometimes, a lake sometimes. When I was very young, I imagined it ready at any time to rise and cover the earth again, except for the tile lines. Prairie settlers always saw a sea or an ocean of grass, could never think of any other metaphor, since most of them had lately seen the Atlantic. The Davises did find a shimmering sheet punctuated by cattails and sweet flag. The grass is gone, now, and the marshes, "the big wet prairie," but the sea is still beneath our feet, and we walk on it.