



Ancestral Land

by JoLee Wingerson

(A spiritual essay from the book,
“Handprint in the Woods,”
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One evening last June, my husband, Jim, and I helped Grandpa and Grandma count their Hereford cattle as they grazed in the pasture. Again and again our count stalled at twenty-seven head: short one newborn calf. The mother had probably just bedded it down in the tall grass somewhere, but it might have been sick or attacked by coyotes. Jim and I searched through bluestem grass as high as our hips. Grandma, who is unsteady on her feet these days, watched expectantly from the pickup.

Then I noticed Grandpa just standing there, his wiry frame stock still, intent. A moment later, he walked straight to the calf, finding it healthy and safe. I asked how he knew where to look in the sea of grass. He said he just watched the mother, and she kept looking back at that one particular spot.

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Jim and I, parched by Kansas City's asphalt and traffic, often escape to my grandparents' farm in the Flint Hills, a place settled by my great-great-grandfather in 1872. He brought the first Herefords, white-faced bovines with cinnamon bodies, to Marshall County, Kansas, in the late 1800s. The cattle we counted in the pasture are descendants from that original stock.

The pasture's 160 acres of rolling, virgin prairie enchants everyone in the family, young and old alike, beckoning us to come enjoy a peaceful interlude while we absorb its subtle beauty.

The pasture is also ancestral land. Its recurring seasons of native grasses and the on-going bloodline of cattle remind me of the generations in my family who have sprung up and lain down within view of this place. The pasture has taught us about life and death, scarcity and abundance, travail and hope. All my life, I keep looking back at this one particular spot.

Grandpa, eighty-seven, harvested his last bushel of wheat four years ago. Then he rented the fields to a neighbor and sold his combine.

After Grandpa found the wayward calf, he told us, "You know, I'm gonna sell the whole lot of 'em come fall." For a decade, we had heard him say these exact words

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about the cattle every year. I looked at Grandma. Her face was solemn, resigned. Somehow, this time, I knew he was serious.

Grandpa, Grandma, and Jim decided to check the pasture's perimeter for fence that needed fixing before dark. Instead of going along with them, I climbed the highest hill to a limestone ledge, breathing deeply the pristine air. From my lookout, I noticed the shiny, emerald shoots of grass sprouting from vestiges of last year's dry, lifeless shafts. In a good year, the tallest grass could tickle my earlobes. Butterfly plants also dotted the field with deep orange, lilly-like blooms.

The pasture remains pure, untouched, just as Native Americans would have found it. The native grasses—big bluestem, little bluestem, and side-oats grama—have evolved so they can survive flooding, drought, and fires which would decimate other grasses. Grandpa regularly cuts down non-native cedar saplings and thistle interlopers that would overtake the grass, given time. Thus, the pasture remains a sanctuary to mid-sized and tall grasses indigenous to the Midwest, which have too often been sacrificed by tilling the soil for crops or by allowing too many cattle on the land.

Beneath the dome of endless sky, I scanned the horizon. A pinkish hue enveloped a string of clouds to

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the east, just above two hills, known as the Twin Mounds, bathed in golden twilight.

Sojourners along the Oregon Trail relied on the Twin Mounds as a distinguishable landmark amid a never-ending expanse of grass. Once, as a child, I climbed the south mound to a rock outcropping. On it were carved two sets of initials and the year 1803. Even earlier, Native Americans reserved the notch between the Twin Mounds for a sacred burial ground.

In the valley that stretches between the Twin Mounds and the pasture lies the final resting place for scores of my relatives—the Antioch Cemetery, a peaceful, well-kept plot of land that originally belonged to my grandmother's great-grandfather. The stone shell of his house, a solid, two-story structure, still stands next to the cemetery.

Family legend has it that one day a stranger knocked at his door asking where he could bury one of his traveling companions who had died overnight. He told the stranger that they would have to start a cemetery somewhere, so they might as well have it right there on his land.

Since then, five generations on Grandma's side and four generations on Grandpa's have been buried there. My grandparents' engraved tombstone is already positioned at the head of their empty burial plot, waiting only the dates

Spirit Whispering

of their passing. Jim and I will rest there, too, after we each take our final breath.

I stood up to locate the pickup, which had stopped at the opposite end of the field. Grandpa was kneeling by the fence, still working.

The truck soon flushed out a pair of prairie chickens who glided a short distance before disappearing back into the dense grass cover. Once near extinction because of hunting and loss of habitat, these large, shy birds continue to breed in the pasture, hiding their nests on the ground. Some people say their foot-stomping, feather-dragging mating ritual inspired Native American ceremonial dances.

Off to the northwest I caught a glimpse of my grandparents' house, a white two-story structure built by Grandpa's grandfather in 1898. Before he migrated West, he owned a lumber mill in New York. At age forty, he moved his family to Kansas in hope of improving his wife's health. After twenty years in a log cabin, they built the five-bedroom house with long-narrow windows and four porches.

Grandma comes from a strong line of honest, resourceful folks. Her grandmother buried one young husband and divorced another for mistreating her

Spirit Whispering

children. Then this stalwart woman, on her own, proceeded to build up one of the most prosperous farms in the county.

A picture of Grandma at eighteen reveals a stunning beauty with deep-set eyes wearing a long-waisted 1920s dress and beads. Her hair is cut short, stylish. A photo of her during the Depression shows a thin, tired woman in a faded cotton dress with three children. Without her garden, the family would have starved. Without her efforts alongside Grandpa in the fields, they couldn't have harvested the crops on time. For sixty-seven years, they have toiled as loyal, equal partners.

Ten years ago, Jim and I were married at the farm, just east of the house between the pear and apple trees. (The pasture, the most holy of holies on the farm, was not an option because the road to it is often inaccessible for days following a heavy rain.) The farm still represents the most sacred site I know. Jim, raised in western Kansas, has also come to treasure this parcel of land.

The pickup rounded the corner by the pond and slowly headed back toward the hill to pick me up. The sun had just dipped below the horizon.

I couldn't avoid the fact that my grandparents were preparing for the end of their lives. For them, life and

Spirit Whispering

death are interwoven, like two patterns on either side of the same piece of fabric. Every summer the crab apple trees bear fruit and then lie dormant for the winter, only to be resurrected come spring. The wheat is planted in the fall, dies back in the winter and matures to be harvested each June. And every season, cattle are fattened up so that they may be sacrificed, providing nourishment for our bodies.

Grandpa and Grandma have never skirted around the issue of death, least of all their own. Grandpa is fond of saying, “Hell, we’re so old, we don’t even buy green bananas.” Grandma talks openly about who will inherit which piece of antique furniture after they’re gone.

Though I’m saddened by the matter-of-fact references to their own deaths, I’m grateful as well. Whether they know it or not, and I think they do, they are helping prepare me for life without them. And without them, stewardship of the farm and pasture within our family remains uncertain.

No relative has come forward as the likely successor to continue the family legacy. Earning a decent living in rural Kansas with little agricultural expertise is no small feat. And rumor has it that a potential local buyer is waiting in the wings.

Spirit Whispering

But a new owner might graze too many cattle on the pasture limiting the native grasses' regeneration. The carefully tended house might become unkempt.

Maybe we should just be content with our cherished memories. Maybe we don't have to own the land. The new owner would probably let us visit once in a while.....

Yet my soul is woven into the fabric of this land. When the time comes, I trust that we, too, will remain guardians for this land we hold dear, this land we all keep looking back to.