

The Prairie and Me.

My name, Sylvia, means “of the forest”, but I am “of the prairie”. The flat and gently undulating land, the stretch of the horizon and the high arc of the sky structure my world and hold it together. They are as much a part of me as are my skin and bones.

Even when I was very young I knew about the prairie. My father used to put me beside him on the front seat of our dark blue Mercury sedan and we would drive out into the Alberta countryside. He had been a country storekeeper before the family moved to Calgary and he never lost his sense of connection to the land. As we drove he would look out the car window and tell me what he saw. “That rye is about ready to cut” or “There’ll be a good wheat crop this year”. My father didn’t talk down to me. He always knew what was growing, although he never taught me how to tell one crop from another. Sometimes he was silent, but that didn’t bother me. We were comfortable with each other.

I loved driving in the country with my father, just the two of us. Sometimes we pulled off the road and stopped at the edge of a field. My father would say “Let’s get out and stretch our legs, Sylvia.” I would jump out of the car and say “Daddy, watch me run all the way to where the sky comes down to the ground.” But, I never could get there. It was always far away. That’s what I called it, “the far away,” and I imagined that it was a magic place where the trees and the grass and the gophers all knew how to talk. The sky was so high up that I could not touch it even if I climbed my father’s biggest ladder. Sometimes I felt very small and then I would be glad my dad was there. I would reach for his hand and hold on tight. When we arrived home my mother would ask us where we had been and what we had seen.

“Mom,” I would say “we’ve been out on the prairie and daddy showed me wheat and barley and hay and we parked and I ran on the prairie and the sky was way high up and there were cows and yellow fields and green fields and brown fields. We had lots of fun.”

I'm only six when I go alone to see the prairie. It's not the same as driving out into the country with my dad. I go farther than my mother lets me go. I even cross 14th Street West. It is a busy street, with cars and streetcars. Fourteenth Street West is just on the corner, only three houses away from my house, but mother has warned me not to cross that street by myself under any circumstances. This is an adventure, like the ones Maggie Muggins has. I listen to her on the radio. She is a little girl just as old as me. She is always getting into trouble. I am not thinking about disobeying my mother. I am thinking about something else. I want an open field, prairie, and I am going to find it on my own.

I 'm not afraid of getting lost. I am heading for the open field behind Sunalta School. I'm not exactly sure how to get there, but I think I know. I walked there once with my big sister. I 'm excited about going on my own. It is summer and I am wearing my blue dress with the smocking across the front. My mother loves smocking. I like it, too. I've got my oxfords on because they are my walking shoes and I am going walking. I know that once I cross 14th Street I need to keep going straight and eventually I should get there. After a few blocks I can see it. First I see the school, and then the big open space behind. It is bigger than just a schoolyard, much bigger and there were no houses on the other side. I keep going. Finally, I am there. I knew I could do it.

This is the prairie. It is covered with tall grass, not grass like in our yard, not as green. Nobody has planted this grass. It just grows on its own. I like it out here. It is big and open and I can see far away. I walk slowly, looking at the ground under my feet so I can see what is growing and so I don't fall into a gopher hole. There are lots of gopher holes. There are other things growing in with the grass. I don't know what some of these things are called. I think my dad calls them "weeds".

I see silky, waving foxtails and I run my hands along them. I like the way that feels. There are even tiny flowers with no stems. They crawl along the ground. There are yellow buffalo beans and dandelions and lots of clover and there are ants. It is very busy down there on the ground.

Now, I am tired and I sit down to have a rest. I look up at the sky. I see fluffy white clouds moving along and I lie back so I can watch them. My big sister and I have a game we play. You look up at the clouds and you roll your head around a bit and sometimes you scrunch up one eye and suddenly there is a cloud like a dog or a horse or someone's face. I play this game for awhile, but it's not as much fun as when I play it with my sister Bea-Bea. That's what I call her. Her real name is Beatrice.

Something near me moves. It scares me. I sit up and have a good look. At first I don't see anything, but it happens again and then I see it. It is a grasshopper. It takes a big hop. Now it is quite near me. I am not too sure how I feel about grasshoppers so close to me. They are kind of funny looking, but they sure can jump. Grasshoppers are sort of the same colour as the grass and they have long skinny legs and knees. My friend Barbara says that grasshoppers see with their knees, but I think she just made that up. I stand up before the grasshopper has a chance to jump right on me.

Maybe I should head for home. I don't want to be away too long or my mother will notice and then she will want to know where I've been.

I have decided to keep this trip to the prairie a secret for now.



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