

17

Vivette, Nebraska

Although the sheep seem high strung, they rarely hurry. One minute they're by the tree, staring at Vivette skeptically. The next they're on the far side of the field. They seem hesitant, but as a group they're decisive and organized.

One in particular looks like Vivette's Aunt Martha, who never leaves the house without practical high heels and a tasteful shade of pink lipstick. This morning their baaing also sounds like advice Aunt Martha would give: "Back," they say. "Go back."

The farm is getting to her. Vivette feels a hollowness forming deep inside, like a dry well that would echo if a stone was tossed in. What she needs is a drive down the lane. "Itching to explore," she writes on the back of a postcard with two prairie dogs raised up on their hind legs, kissing. "Back by five unless I meet a cowboy, then I'll be off with the dogies on the range." Vivette puts on lipstick, kisses the edge of the card, and props it up by the kitchen sink.

Jean jacket. Backpack. Vivette hops into the Buick, slamming the big driver's side door. She settles herself on the springy bucket seat and rolls the windows down, enjoying the moment of poten-

tial just before the key turns in the ignition. A sense of purpose drifts in through the windows. The silence that drapes the surrounding countryside mixes with the smell of stale coffee and freshly cut grass.

The postcard Vivette pulls out of the glove box has an old photograph on the front of the Donut Queen — a smiling 1950s lipsticked, bosomy, skinny-waisted woman with a glitzy doughnut crown atop her head and a dozen glazed resting in her lap.

Dear Grandad, I'm leaving the sheep and the farm in search of a different kind of adventure on the Plains. The guy here, Peter, you'd like him. He can hold his liquor. I think I'll use him as my guide to the next boyfriend. Did you know back in New Hampshire I had an affair with a married guy? He's friends with the people I'm staying with. It's all very complicated, but it seemed easy at the time. The Plains are sucking me in. Your favorite grandchild, Vivette

P.S. Don't you think Aunt Martha looks a little like a sheep?

After securing a stamp on its corner and scribbling in Joe-Joe's address, Vivette puts the postcard in her bag with the others. The Buick's engine heaves itself into a smooth rumble. A racy breeze wraps itself around the car and skips through the windows. Vivette digs her sunglasses out of her backpack, eases along the gravel road. The sheep run alongside.

The baaing starts in earnest as soon as she passes the edge of their fence line. In the rearview mirror, the herd clumps together, worried ladies looking earnestly after her, warning her to drive carefully, remember her seatbelt, don't talk to strangers.

Vivette zigzags her way to Lincoln. Her plan is to drive through town, get some coffee and gas, mail her postcards, look at her map, chart a course. Meadowlarks whistle longingly from fence posts. A noble hawk looks down from high up in a cottonwood, stiff and indifferent, its wings folded up like umbrellas. The fields, rich and

brown, look expectant and ready. The country has opened up, big and flat like a picture book. Vivette drives right on through.

As she nears Lincoln, the capitol is a pointer finger beckoning in the distance. Peter said the locals call it “the penis of the prairie.” A tiny sower on its top.

On O Street, she passes bars and restaurants, thrift stores and antique shops. Margaret suggested the old market for decent coffee. Vivette follows the signs along the wide, sunny streets, past the Holiday Inn, card shops, and a clothing store.

Although she’s only been on the farm for a few days, Vivette feels like a wild animal set down in the middle of all this. People everywhere. Traffic lights. Workers on their lunch breaks. Dogs straining on leashes. She needs to park, walk, acclimate.

The Beanbag Coffeeshop brims with clean-cut university types. Big rooms and hardwood floors, the smell of freshly roasted coffee. Shiny beanbag chairs in blue, green, and red are scattered in the corners, with students sunk down in, ankles crossed, studying textbooks and working crossword puzzles. Vivette walks out to the loading dock with her steaming paper cup. Everyone is busy reading, talking softly in groups. She feels entirely out of place. They stare at her, smile, and turn back to their coffee and conversations. Vivette thinks of the Buick, how it can take her anywhere.

Back inside the car, door sealed, she’s safe and secure, alone. The map takes over the rest of the big front seat, and Vivette charts a course up Highway 77. Late-morning light warms her face as she sips her coffee.

The route has a line of red dots skirting its back, a “scenic drive” according to Rand McNally, which steered her wrong in Illinois, those little polka dots leading her onto traffic-jammed, stoplight-filled, tourist-infested roads that passed miles of strip malls.

She chooses the polka-dotted road anyway, and now the sleek, black highway curves through farmland as it winds its way north.

Winter wheat and drying fields of soybean plants not yet turned under rise up to the horizon. Peter told her that come summer there will be sorghum and milo, wheat, oats, corn, and wildflowers. The plowed fields suggest endless potential, confirmed by the occasional farmhouse, barn, silo. Brown fields everywhere expecting something big to happen.

She passes a prehistoric behemoth of a grain elevator, then a Purina dog food plant, its own industrial revolution right there on the plains. Then it's back to the earth and field, field, field. Long, insect-like, center-pivot irrigation systems sit poised and gleaming on small rubber wheels. John Deere tractors roll around looking exactly like the toys she played with as a kid.

All the fields are transformed into a giant sandbox, the farmer a plastic figurine with a hard yellow cowboy hat. Vivette imagines the Buick is the Matchbox car she drove through the sand as a girl—the tourist watching the farmer sow the fields. There are little-kid car noises, and then the screeching of tires as she brakes for, what are they? Pheasant? Quail? Their fancy-looking plumes party hats on their bobbing heads.

Vivette eases off the road at a rectangular green sign pointing toward Bancroft, Nebraska, on the edge of the Omaha Indian Reservation. She's ready for lunch, maybe a secondhand store.

Another sign tells her that Bancroft is the home of the John G. Neihardt Center. She follows the road markers there. Hers is the only car in the lot.

Vivette read *Black Elk Speaks* in high school, but she doesn't make the connection until she sees the oversized black-and-white photos looming in the center's hushed lobby. Neihardt with Black Elk on the top of a peak in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Neihardt with his wife and family in Bancroft. Soon she's sucked into reading the text panel on the wall that tells how Neihardt and his wife Mona courted by letter. A sculptor who studied with

Rodin, Mona left Paris to marry Neihardt and live in Bancroft with only a cross-continental correspondence as proof of their love.

With the story of this unlikely romance unfolding before her, Vivette thinks of Robert. She had banished him from her thoughts, but now in the dimly lit museum she misses him. As Vivette stares at a photo of Neihardt, who's a serious little man, it comes to her — she needs to write Robert a letter.

Neihardt is short and rugged, standing one step up from an award presenter to match his height. Mona looks happy in the photographs. A classic beauty with wavy hair and a bright smile. An ideal-looking family, a lovely little prairie home with a work studio, which they shared. Vivette reads how Neihardt wrote in the morning and Mona sculpted in the afternoon, taking turns with the kids.

“Can I help you, miss?” the docent Elnora asks — a wide face, rosy cheeks, practical black skirt and shoes, and a tidy metal name tag clipped to her yellow blazer.

“No,” Vivette says, “not really. It's an amazing story.”

Elnora smiles broadly. “Neihardt was once known as the American Homer. Did you know that?”

Vivette shakes her head no.

“It's true,” Elnora says. “But sadly his focus on epic poetry, an archaic form even in his time, caused him to remain relatively unknown to many, even his fellow Nebraskans.”

“I read *Black Elk Speaks* in high school,” Vivette says.

“That's excellent,” Elnora says. She lightly touches Vivette's forearm for emphasis. “Good for you. Neihardt believed the American West's story was the stuff of life itself.” She smiles widely again.

Vivette smiles back, comforted by Elnora's sincerity.

“In the 1960s,” Elnora continues, her hands folded peacefully in front of her belly, “Neihardt's 1932 *Black Elk Speaks* — as you

well know, the strange and haunting narrative of Black Elk's highly symbolic visions during the last days of the Lakota tribe's independence—came into its own and gave rise to an interest in creating this center.” Elnora looks around the room, as if to make sure everything is there, just as she says. “Even though it's a little out of the way, people find us. You'd be surprised.”

With that, she quietly walks back to her desk near the entrance.

Vivette can't stop thinking about the romance. Mona traveled all over the world before deciding to be with Neihardt in the middle of nowhere. How did Mona know—by letter!—that Neihardt was the one?

Vivette wonders what Mona thought the first time she rounded the bend into Bancroft. Did she say, “Oh, it's beautiful”? Did she love the river? Did she eventually long for the big open landscape, the peace and quiet so different from a bustling city? Or, did she turn the corner into town and say, “Oh shit”? Did Neihardt lure her out in the middle of nowhere, or did she know what she was getting herself into?

Vivette thinks about how Peter said sometimes it didn't seem fair to Margaret, because they were living his dream by moving out to the farmhouse. Not hers.

Elnora highly recommends the pie at Mau's Place, and soon Vivette is seated at the thin Formica counter on one of ten empty maroon stools. Mau herself serves the ham sandwich, potato chips, and slice of coconut cream. Elnora's right. The pie's custard is homemade, thick and rich with eggs and milk, toasted coconut tucked inside and a perfectly peaked meringue rising from its top, the crust nutty and crisp. Lush and familiar flavors. Vivette feels a pang of homesickness. “That'll be \$3.25,” Mau says.

“For the whole thing? Did you remember the dessert?” Vivette asks.