



JENNA BUTLER

“A deep and inspiring meditation
on what it means to care for
the places we love.”

CANDACE SAVAGE,

author of *A Geography of Blood*

Farming
on the Edge of
the Grizzly Trail

A Profession of Hope

A Profession *of*
Hope

Farming on the Edge of
the Grizzly Trail

JENNA BUTLER



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For Thomas:
my partner in all things,
with awe and love.

For the land:
home, heart.

Farming is a profession of hope.
– Brian Brett

There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places.
– Wendell Berry

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PREAMBLE

IN AN ERA OF LARGE-SCALE agribusiness and multinational corporations dedicated to the privatization and control of the world's seed stocks for profit, starting out as a small-scale farmer seems like an uphill slog, a thankless task. But there's beauty in it, found in the steadily growing community of supporters who are searching for more than just local food. They're looking for a way back to the land itself, its histories and pleasures, in a form far different than the gigantic feedlots, pumpjacks and canola fields that checker the North American prairies. They want a hands-on experience when it comes to food and to the land that produces it. Instead of needing a haz-mat suit to grub chemically drenched Yukon Golds out of the field, they want to be able to scabble out their produce with bare hands. Even better, with the kids in tow.

In spite of the burgeoning support base for small farms in North America, there's still the wider issue of food security in a country such as Canada, where most of the people (and thus, the small farms) are located in a relatively limited southern belt. With overseas food shortages and domestic food prices on an ever more drastic rise as an environment under threat becomes increasingly unpredictable, there's an immediate concern regarding food production in Canada's colder climates.

This is where the northern small farms come in, in all their quirky glory. They're places capable of producing a great deal of high-quality food in a manner that doesn't take more from the land than the soil can bear. Small-scale organic farming methods offer ways of reclaiming marginal land whose goodness has been used up, putting into play farming methods that allow for a strengthening, rather than a wholesale destruction, of ecosystems. These are the spaces that protect and preserve the heirloom seeds passed down for generations and adapted specifically to the strictures of our local weather. At the same time, they're more than just cold-zone seed vaults: Canadian small farms are places in which the rough beauty of the landscape can be seen thrumming just beneath the surface of daily life. For the many who live on them, they represent a tying together of ideology, economics and functionality. These farms provide fiscally viable returns to the natural world in a diversified way that is no longer possible on many large-scale operations. Small farms are celebrations of what it means to live closely and responsibly with the land through all seasons, no matter what the weather or the economy throws your way.

Right now, the weather is throwing an eight-month winter our way. We found our farm during a winter much like this one back in 2006: the land was wild, overgrown and sunk in snowdrifts to the knees. We were captivated. We spent the dark months of 2006

snowshoeing the land before we signed to it, but we knew what we'd find come the melt in April. The quarter section (one hundred sixty acres here in Canada, rather cryptically listed on the deed as "160 acres, more or less") consists of one hundred thirty-five acres of northern mixed forest and boreal muskeg spruce (dwarf black spruce growing over deep peat bogs thick with Labrador tea). At the far corner stands a twenty-five-acre hayfield that one of the neighbours keeps in alfalfa for his dairy cows. When we found the land, we had no illusions. We knew that the only reason the quarter was going for a price that two teachers, living in a tiny rented apartment in the city, could afford was that it was rough northern bush. All of the big industrial farmers in the neighbourhood had looked at that land and turned it down. "Too much effort," they later told us. "Too much work to clear, and too much peat."

But where they saw wasted effort and backhoes sinking into acidic bog water, as would-be small farmers, we saw something else. The land had scarcely been touched, and while the access was poor and the ground springy with peat, the forest offered a built-in buffer zone from the conventional farms around us. The hayfield was beyond our reach at that point; at the far end of a rough old seismic line that turned into a swampy track in the spring, it was an ideal building site with dirt-poor access. We rented it out another year to the neighbour, who was happy to have the extra twenty-five acres after a bad year for hay the summer before. Every extra bale he could bring in was one fewer he'd have to buy. We turned his first rent cheque over to equipment and began nibbling away at the corner of the property that fronts onto the township road. A dead willow thicket, it promised easiest access for clearing. For gardening, it boasted earth that was deep and rich from years upon years of untouched willow-leaf mulch and decaying swamp grass.

A bucolic farm life? Nothing was farther from the truth that first year. The land was an hour and a half from Edmonton, and without a place to stay, we were driving out and back every Saturday and Sunday, pacing clearing work against full-time teaching jobs. The same dark, moist earth that promised a spectacular garden in future years yielded us an unwelcome bumper crop that first spring: a hatch of mosquitoes so bad that they literally coated us from head to foot the moment we emerged from the car. This was followed by a batch of nettles that reached five feet in the unrestricted root run of peaty soil.

This is not the story of a ready-made farm, complete with generations of history, carefully tended tools and sturdy clapboard farmhouse. Those came later, as we learned the stories of our county and added a cabin of our own to the land. That first summer, though, there was nothing to move into, and so we moved *out*. After our teaching jobs wrapped up for the summer, we spent every available moment out on the land. At its most basic, it was literally just us, an axe, a chainsaw and a quarter section of northern bush picked out in inquisitive moose.

This is what the small farm movement is all about. Inspiration. Diversity. Maybe a touch of madness: the desire to be out under the sky in all weather, to be working with our hands as much as possible, turning to big machinery only when necessary. When it comes down to it, it's about hard work and long hours put in with the knowledge that in order to found our farm from nothing, it's been necessary to hold other jobs in the wings, full-time jobs that also require energy. My husband and I are not extraordinary people. We're everyday folk, and we've lived in a big city for most of our lives. But there's a very specific love that drives us out here, that makes us want, more than anything, to be able to enrich our lives and those of others by working with this land, taking just what we

need from a small corner while safeguarding the rest as a wild place for future generations. There's an excitement about it all, not just about small-scale northern farming, but about what it can mean *now*, at this point in time, for this country. Paul Hawken, entrepreneur and environmental activist, frames it exactly: "When asked if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: if you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand the data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse."¹

Welcome to the farm.

CHAPTER ONE

Flipping the Switch: From the City to the Farm

WHAT MAKES US STEP AWAY from a stereotypical urban life? For some, perhaps it's a small departure: a handful of chickens in the backyard, a few raised beds for beans and greens or a rooftop garden if the condo building permits. For others, it's the whole hog: departing city life altogether for a different way of being. Either way, there's a shift that happens within some of us, and the desire for change – to be closer to the earth, our food and the seasons – becomes a necessity.

There's a moment when, no matter who you are, if you've been "dreaming out," something flips that switch. You make the transition from a life of *what if* and *wouldn't it be great if* to *why not?* And more importantly, *why not now?* No matter when that happens, it's a date that stays with you: the moment you granted yourself permission to have that life; the moment that everything changed.

Our moment came during the early winter of 2006. After months of driving isolated back roads outside Edmonton, my husband, Thomas, and I drew up at a single-strand wire gate on an early November evening. It was five o'clock and dark as the inside of a barrel. The day's exploring had taken us longer than we'd anticipated, and we'd gotten to the circled point on our map long after the sun, wandering toward the solstice, had set. We shivered our way out of the car and stood in the glow of the headlights, looking up at the weathered grain bin that marked the entrance to the property. Out of nowhere, a pack of coyotes began its evening chant. A great horned owl called in the deep woods, and a second one answered. Thomas squinted up at the metal bin, reading the paint. "Look at that," he laughed. "It's got your name on it." It was one of those old Butler bins. We paused and considered each other.

Like that, the switch flipped.

Why were we even out there at all, two lone figures on a snow-fringed township road in early winter? Like many people, we'd dreamed of having a little plot of our own, a small piece of land or a double lot in the city where we could grow our own food, but it had been a semi-formed dream. Then we moved to England for a year – my husband on sabbatical from teaching, me working on my Master's in poetry – and for ten months, we settled in the northeastern part of the country where my father's family hails from. There, surrounded by the small rural villages, intergenerational farms and large country gardens of my early childhood, I rediscovered that land with my husband, and we became aware of a desire to have something like that for ourselves. But, being stubborn and steadfast Canadians, we wanted to try to build a rural life back at home in Alberta, not in the tiny village where my grandmother lived. Beyond just the homing instinct, there was something about small-scale farming in a cold climate with a short growing season that appealed to us. The challenge beckoned.

Michael Pollan speaks of a formative moment “a few years shy of [his] fortieth birthday [. . .] when the notion of a room of [his] own, and specifically, of a little wood-frame hut in the woods behind [his] house, began to occupy [his] imaginings with a mounting insistence.”¹ Fiction writer and small farmer Barbara Kingsolver lists a number of practical reasons for moving her family away from an urban lifestyle, including being closer to extended family and loving the wild life spent outdoors. Mostly, though, she came to realize that her family’s move emerged from a desire to be nourished by the ground they lived on: “[They] wanted to live in a place that could feed [them]: where rain [fell], crops [grew], and drinking water [bubbled] right up out of the ground.”²

For Thomas and me, both city-based teachers, both as prepared as we could be for an adventure of such magnitude, the thought of finding a piece of land to protect from development was deeply attractive. In 2005, when we came home from England, where any construction is years in the planning before spade is set to ground, we found that much of the best black-soil land immediately around Edmonton was being sold off for development. Industrial parks and suburbs were being built overtop of some of the province’s most fertile farming belts. Knowing we couldn’t afford even half an acre in those developments (and who wants to – or can – shell out a cool million for a lot next to an industrial park?), yet still wanting to purchase a wild space we could keep safe, we searched farther and farther afield. For a year and a half, our weekends were composed of very pointed road trips: the two of us in our small black Jetta, equipped with mugs of tea and a well-circled map, buzzing around the back roads amidst farm trucks and mobile drilling rigs and snowplows. We learned that the farther we got from the city, the lower the price of the land, but with those cost benefits came a host of new problems: groundwater so contaminated from nearby oil and

gas wells that farmers could light their methane-filled tap water on fire, and muskeggy dirt that could suck a one-ton truck down during the spring thaw and not release it until freeze-up. Everywhere we turned, there was gas flaring and quad damage and quarters that had been logged within an inch of their lives.

Over the years, many people have asked us whether we came from farming backgrounds, and if that was how we knew to look for the right sort of land. There might be some farming blood in me – my father’s side of the family has lived and worked in England’s farming country for generations – but Thomas is a city boy, born and bred. To be honest, my biggest experience of farming as a kid was going to the annual Harvest Fair down at Fort Edmonton Park after we moved to Alberta. So when people ask me whether we knew something beforehand about farming, as though there’s some secret skill set that allows certain folk to make the jump from the city to rural life with a greater deal of success, my answer is no. That’s exciting and terrifying, isn’t it? That means there’s no magic pill for success, no easy way to go about it. Anybody with determination and knowledge can do a pretty decent job of getting back to the land.

Our decision to buy the piece of land that would become our small farm was one born in the bones. For me, it echoed with memories of the tiny farming community I come from in north-eastern England, where some of my family still grows sugar beet and grain, and raises cattle. Although I don’t recall much of the life I left behind in England, I’ve always harboured a deep-seated desire to find a piece of land outside the city to call home. Thomas, too, born in the Netherlands and raised in Edmonton, has always loved being outdoors; he’s a devoted backcountry hiker and camper, and has hauled me up a fair number of mountains. We both love being *out*, whatever the weather. I can’t help but think you’re asking for

trouble if you make a break from city life when you don't really like being in the country.

This means being able to stand up to *everything* the country throws at you: in our case, windstorms, lightning strikes, mosquitoes, flood years, drought years, raiding moose, slumpy peat soil and stinging nettles. I have dear friends who can't stand cramped city life but whose only appreciation for the country comes from running their snowmobiles through it in the winter. If that's you, all I can say is look for a double lot in the city and get your taste of rural living from having a big, beautiful garden, because jumping ship to a country property isn't going to be the answer if you only love the land at specific times of year. You have to want to be out, and then for as much of the day as there is light, especially if you're running a farm. When friends learned that we were living in a fourteen-by-six-foot truck camper for four months of the year during the first few years of the farm, they were horrified. "How can you *survive* in there?" they'd ask, looking at their own partners. "We'd kill each other!" The answer was, we were outdoors. Thomas built a huge gravel patio outside the camper, and this was our living room for those four months. Every day, we were out of the camper at dawn and in again only to sleep, or to escape the rain and have a cup of tea. The world outside, the world of farm and forest, became our everything.

What began as a practicality – we simply didn't have the money to buy close to the city – changed along the way into something more profound. We came to the idea that what we really wanted was to find a tract of land far outside the city that we could protect against future urban development, and that we could work with to ensure our own health and survival. We wanted a flower garden, a big one, and an orchard with beehives. A cabin, eventually, as a home. A large hayfield for growing crops, and maybe one day for growing the bales for a straw bale house. A spread of forest to

manage sustainably as a woodlot. We wanted the good health that came from working hard outdoors in all weather. And we began to understand, as I suffered from progressively worsening allergies when eating conventionally farmed, store-bought vegetables in the city, that we needed to completely change the way we ate.

So, that November dusk in 2006, when we stood by the side of a small township road in northern Alberta's Barrhead County, an hour and a half's drive northwest of Edmonton, and listened to the owls and the coyotes, we were aware of a very real separation beginning to happen between ourselves and the city. The switch had been flipped. The land we stood on was relatively untouched, distant enough from oil and gas, and full of animal life. We didn't know what the ground would look like come summertime, and we realized that we stood at the base of a huge learning curve, but we were already sold. Somehow, over the next few years, we would find a way to make that land our home.

And truly, once doubting and worrying and hedging your bets are set aside, just committing to the decision to live closer to the land is most of the battle won.