

## IN SEARCH OF THE LOST PRAIRIE

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*Katie Price*

We packed up our Nissan hatchback the night before, and set the alarm for six a.m. Our home life is characterized by a casual, grad student blend of high and low, old and new: a dirty second-hand economy car, an old world apartment with lustrous hardwood floors and high ceilings, spotty used furniture, and each morning the best coffee money can buy. On road trips, however, we sacrifice taste for speed, and get our first cup of coffee at the all-night gas station when we fill up the Nissan. We pulled into the Quik Trip parking lot at 6:30, and as Joe was pumping the gas, I went inside with my brother, Allen—also a grad student, visiting us on his way to Seattle. At the coffee counter, Allen and I were delighted to find an instant cappuccino machine, right next to the sticky burners with the traditional glass pots that had been sitting there for hours already, their contents thick and bitter. The cappuccino, albeit instant, was truly a good sign. This was going to be a very special day.

I first heard about Haydn's Prairie from my landlady, Mildred, who lives next door. Our building is one of those old stately homes that used to be considered big when it belonged to one family, and is considered small now that it's been turned into an apartment building. Mildred's late husband grew up in our building, a long time ago. Something about the relaxed off-handed bass-notes in Mildred's voice, their slow descents and casual stretches, has always suggested old money to me, what people used to call "breeding." One sweaty July morning I ran into her as she was gardening with little gloves and a clipper. She grows a vivid yellow mass of Black-eyed Susans in the back alley by our parking space and the dumpster.

"These flowers will just *take over* if you're not careful. You've got to *constantly* clip them," Mildred drawled.

"I like them because they're tall. You don't see tall flowers on people's

lawns as often as you see short ones,” I offered.

“Well, people think they’re *untidy*. But these flowers *are* native to this region.” I commented to her how the latest trend in landscaping is to use all native flowers, and that the new thinking in landscaping is that the ultimate art is to remove the perception of art, to make the ground look as if it’s been untouched. The more progressive the landscape artist, the less it looks like she’s been there. Mildred told me about a local women’s club that is restoring the unused strips of grass that line the city streets, planting tall native flowers, mostly Black-eyed Susans and Tiger Lilies. She also recommended I visit Haydn’s Prairie, on the Iowa-Minnesota border.

*Haydn’s Prairie*—is that what she said? Even the sound of the name promised me a world I had never seen before. The name echoed in my head at odd moments throughout the day. Was I imagining it, or was the name really Haydn’s Prairie? I couldn’t find it on any map. Well into August I kept mentioning it to Joe, each time imagining it a little more: an old place, exquisite in the way only ancient places are, an untouched land guarding the multi-colored grasses, the mauves and silvers and violets, that we’ve since plowed over. At the public library my brother finally found reference to it, in a guide book about Iowa’s nature reserves. At Haydn’s Prairie we would see the elusive black soil, last glaciated 500,000 years ago, the oldest soil in Iowa, that used to cover the entire state. We’d see the “myriad-colored grasses” and “majestic splendor” of the prairie early naturalists wrote about in the 18th and 19th centuries, a time referred to wistfully as pre-agricultural.

The sun was already bright when we hit the two-lane country highway heading north out of Iowa City. On either side of the car as far as we could see were the famous, almost mythic cornfields, their stalks just sprouting the crowns that turn the hues of the fields from rich emerald to reddish bronze. We were all in a good mood. “Even the cornfields are pretty!” I exclaimed.

We kept looking for signs of native prairie along the sides of the roads, speculating about whether or not this or that strip had ever been “touched.” One of us would spot some wild Queen Anne’s Lace, and alert the others quickly before we sped past and missed it. “Do you think there’ll be Queen Anne’s Lace there, too?” “Oh, I’m sure there will be.”

An hour passed. We pulled off to get some Egg McMuffins, and ate them in the car. Despite the watery coffee, we were getting drowsier and drowsier. The monotony of the landscape had become a narcotic.

My eyes glazed over the fields. I could make out my own reflection when the sun was just right. Joe drove the whole way, as he often likes to, silent and pensive behind the wheel. It was road-dream hour. I stared into the rolling spaces beside me, trying to hold myself back from vocalizing each tiny perception. Joe’s road-dreams took the more dignified shape of silence and driving, big soft hands on the wheel, eyes on the horizon in front of him.

Another hour passed. The time was arriving when the road brings out the amateur philosopher in each traveler.

“You know, I don’t care about philosophy all that much anymore.

Seems like the older I get, it's the small things that really matter," I said to no one in particular. Though with Allen in the back seat, who, like me, inherits the idle dreamer's vocal zeal, I knew he'd chime in.

He said, "Well, you know what Dad always said: 'When all the great questions have been answered by all the great philosophers, little will have been gained.'"

We laughed; these words had always been Dad's elliptical mantra to us during our undergraduate days, when we were prone to painfully profound sophomoric debates.

"Yeah, it's like, I'd rather take a walk through a prairie, a real-live prairie, than sit around philosophizing, you know?" I responded.

"...like there's some great meaning in life," Allen responded sarcastically, "...I know what you mean." There was a long pause. "Yeah, I used to care a lot about philosophy. Not so much anymore."

I said, "But you know, it's like, think about it. What really makes you happy? I'd rather see some wildflowers, something simple like that—it's always some simple activity. Not sitting around trying to find some great meaning in life."

"Well, anyway, it's just an accident that we were born human at this particular time. Like, I think about the dinosaurs, they really flourished—" Allen said.

"—Yeah they were here a lot longer than we'll be—" Joe added.

"—yeah, so what's the sense of us taking ourselves so seriously? We'll be gone too some day."

"I know," Joe said. "I read somewhere about how if you think of the Earth as lasting for one day, well then we've only been here for something like two seconds—"

"Oh yeah, and the dinosaurs were here for like fifteen minutes or something?"

"Hm-hmmm, and there are some species that have been here for like an hour, like the sea turtles. They're becoming extinct now, but they were here when the dinosaurs were."

We all fell silent for the last hour or so. It was 10:30 when we came on the last road before the turn-off. By this time we were famished again, and thought we'd grab a quick bite before we hit the prairie. Our only choice was a tiny town that consisted of a few roads and intersections without traffic lights. We drove all the way through it, taking inventory: a few dozen small houses, a small white church, a school, and two stores. One of the stores was a feed store, already closed for the day. The other was a trailer with a rent-a-sign on wheels that read "Jones Supper Club."

Inside the supper club on the wood-paneled walls were lots of posters of big-haired women wearing string bikinis and high heels, holding beer bottles or stretching themselves across the hoods of big-wheeled cars. The menu offered mostly fried meat sandwiches and fried potatoes. A friendly girl, probably in

high school, asked if she could help us. We were the only customers there. An older couple (her parents?) kept walking around the kitchen, attending to things. As they passed us, they fixed their eyes on us openly, scrutinizing us.

I became self-conscious about our appearance. With our faded khaki cut-offs and untucked tee-shirts, our glasses, our longish hair tangled with wind-grease, I was struck with how slovenly we were, and how much we all looked alike. Once we were gone, they could easily categorize us as a group. We ate our sandwiches quietly. Out the window we commented on a large round thermometer that was posted across the driveway, next to a creek. The thermometer faced the windows of the trailer, clearly visible from our table. It read 89 degrees. “Why do you suppose it’s important to know the temperature way over there, instead of right here? Are they much different?”

Back in the car, Allen said, “I guess it’s mostly farmers who live in this town.” “Yeah, that’s mostly what Iowa is—small farming towns,” Joe responded. “It’s hard to imagine my students mostly coming from small towns like this,” I said. “Iowa City must be a real culture shock to them.”

I wondered what the couple back in the supper club thought about the nature reserve. They were practically next-door-neighbors to it. Did they think it was a good idea to section off what could be valuable farming land, just to see what grows there without human help?

A small blue sign was posted by a gravel road: *Haydn’s Prairie, 3.2 miles*. A knot formed in my stomach at the thought of it—soon the prairie would be a reality. It was the narrowest road yet; the corn was high on either side of us. We drove until the road met another road, also gravel and closed in by tall corn on either side.

“It should be right here,” Joe said. “Where is it?” “Look for an entrance—maybe down there,” I said, gesturing farther north. “But that doesn’t make sense, it’s been 3.2 miles exactly.”

“Wait a minute, could this be it?” On the corner was a small patch of land without corn growing on it. We drove up to a wooden gate. One sign read “Historic Nature Reserve,” another sign read “Hunting permitted.” From our vantage in the car we could see clearly to the other end of the flat patch.

“We just drove nearly four hours to take a ten-minute walk,” Joe smiled.

The guide book said the prairie covered 240 acres; was this really 240 acres? That had sounded like so many to us.

The wind beat against the car windows. There were no other signs promising anything else. Our options were simple: do we get out of the car, or do we keep going? We laughed. That was another option: laughing. We certainly didn’t have to debate that—laughter was an easy instinct we all shared.

We got out and followed the one path that led to the other side and back. If we kept our eyes close to the ground we could block out the corn that was so tall on all sides of us. The wildflowers weren’t in bloom anymore, and the grasses looked exactly like the grass along the highway. Each of us took turns saying “It is pretty, though. I bet in the Spring it’s really pretty.” The Spring really would be the best time to come, we agreed.

We decided to keep driving. Just across the Minnesota border were some state parks that we hoped would be more what we were looking for. It wouldn't be so bad, spending another hour in the car.