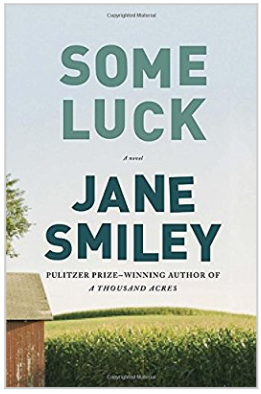


# Some Luck (The Last Hundred Years Trilogy: A Family Saga)

*By Jane Smiley*



**Some Luck (The Last Hundred Years Trilogy: A Family Saga)** By Jane Smiley

**Longlisted for the 2014 National Book Award**

From the winner of the Pulitzer Prize*:* a powerful, engrossing new novel—the life and times of a remarkable family over three transformative decades in America.

On their farm in Denby, Iowa, Rosanna and Walter Langdon abide by time-honored values that they pass on to their five wildly different children: from Frank, the handsome, willful first born, and Joe, whose love of animals and the land sustains him, to Claire, who earns a special place in her father's heart.

Each chapter in *Some Luck* covers a single year, beginning in 1920, as American soldiers like Walter return home from World War I, and going up through the early 1950s, with the country on the cusp of enormous social and economic change. As the Langdons branch out from Iowa to both coasts of America, the personal and the historical merge seamlessly: one moment electricity is just beginning to power the farm, and the next a son is volunteering to fight the Nazis; later still, a girl you'd seen growing up now has a little girl of her own, and you discover that your laughter and your admiration for all these lives are mixing with tears.

*Some Luck* delivers on everything we look for in a work of fiction. Taking us through cycles of births and deaths, passions and betrayals, among characters we come to know inside and out, it is a tour de force that stands wholly on its own. But it is also the first part of a dazzling epic trilogy—a literary adventure that will span a century in America: an astonishing feat of storytelling by a beloved writer at the height of her powers.

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**Some Luck (The Last Hundred Years Trilogy: A Family Saga) By Jane Smiley Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #226026 in Books
- Published on: 2014-10-07
- Released on: 2014-10-07
- Format: Deckle Edge
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.56" h x 1.37" w x 6.61" l, 1.25 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 416 pages

## Editorial Review

Review
“This sweeping, carefully plotted novel traces the history, from 1920 to the Cold War era, of a single Iowa farming family. Each chapter focuses on one year, setting the minor catastrophes and victories of the family’s life against a backdrop of historical change, particularly the Great Depression. As the children branch out from their tiny town, so, too, does the story, eventually encompassing several generations, cities, and cultural movements. Smiley, like one of her characters contemplating the guests at the Thanksgiving table, begins with an empty house and fills it ‘with twenty-three different worlds, each one of them rich and mysterious.’” —*The New Yorker*

“What’s unusual about *Some Luck* is how closely it’s meant to mimic real life, and yet how important Smiley’s gifts as a novelist are to achieving that effect. The way the story unfolds makes it feel not so much like reading a novel as catching up with relatives every couple of months, finding out who’s been up to what and comparing stories. Characters reminisce about scenes from earlier in the book that start to feel like our memories, too. Smiley’s ability to sketch a scene, to bring to life the quiet incidents as well as the big ones—the moment when something finally makes sense, or a decision is reached, or someone lets slip something they shouldn’t—are what transform the family stories into literature . . . *Some Luck* draws the reader in with easy charm.” —Christine Pivovar, *Kansas City Star*

“A magnificent achievement . . . Pulitzer Prize-winning Smiley has embarked on an audacious project: the first volume of an epic family chronicle that spans the past century. She pulls it off handily; her touch is light and assured. With each passing year, the Langdons respond to the events that shaped America itself . . . While written with humor and affection, *Some Luck* is a constant reminder of how fleeting life really is. Babies arrive with little warning. Children die in freak accidents. Families care for their aging and failing elders. Walter and Rosanna both worry constantly—about their farm and their family. In the end, it all comes down to luck.” —Amy Goodfellow Wagner, *Examiner.com*

“The fertile first installment of Smiley’s century-spanning trilogy of fatalism, farm life and family—a big story of a big family in a big country. [But] the focus is up-close and intimate: Smiley cultivates her characters in scenes that are sometimes lightly comical, touchingly sad, sweet, or slightly strange, and they are always perfectly, beautifully true to life. She gives every Langdon careful consideration—endowing each of them with discrete likes, dislikes, private thoughts, and secret hopes and fears—but it is Frank, the baby born on New Year’s Day, 1920, who breaks the mold . . . The reader longs for the Golden Age of the early chapters and the way of life we know will not survive, even as we eagerly await the sequel. And all we can do is wait, patiently.” —Sandra Levis, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“Engaging. . . . Smiley is a self-assured writer, a skillful stylist who launches her story from a baby’s-eye view. She plumbs the drama in ordinary life, hitting all our nostalgia buttons on the way, from the one-room schoolhouse and horse-drawn plow to the TV set. As the landscape changes, from a vista of corn fields and self-sufficiency to green lawns and consumerism, Smiley is a master of the telling detail . . . Populated by sympathetic characters who take what life brings, [this] is a look back at what feels like simpler times. Family is Smiley’s turf, and she plays it well.” —Ellen Emry Heltzel, *The Seattle Times*

“The wonderful first installment of Smiley’s The Last Hundred Years Trilogy, which tells the story of an Iowa farm family from 1920 to 2019. As far as I’m concerned, the next two cannot follow soon enough . . . Over the years, the Langdons will have six children, each with their own interesting life, messy desires and flaws that will compel them out into the world, some far from the farm that the family both loathes and

loves. There are deaths, blizzards, droughts, and accidents, as well as births, celebrations and beautifully narrated family meals, like a particular Thanksgiving near the end of the novel . . . Extremely satisfying." —Natalie Serber, *The Oregonian*

"Brilliant . . . Smiley is one of America's most accomplished and wide-ranging novelists, [and] *Some Luck* finds her in her most tender mode. I happened to be reading *Farmer Boy* by Laura Ingalls Wilder to my daughter at the same time I was enjoying *Some Luck;* and *Some Luck* holds up well against Wilder's classic in its lovely, precise portrayal of the day-to-day rhythms of agriculture and what it's like to be a child growing up inside the close, hardworking, economic unit of the family farm. But it also extends beyond Wilder's scope, as you'd expect in a novel for adults. There are cow milking and field plowing in *Some Luck*, but there are also duplicity, romance and despair . . . Smiley moves through several characters' perspectives, writing in an old-fashioned, Tolstoyan omniscience that even explores the mind of [a] baby . . . As the Langdons' five children grow up and scatter from coast to coast, *Some Luck* demonstrates how events on an isolated, unsophisticated farm in the middle of the country represent and influence the larger story of America." —Jenny Shank, *Dallas Morning News*

"Satisfying . . . captivating . . . the reading experience is rewarding." —Rebecca Kelley, *Bustle*

"Unforgettable, graceful . . . The characters in Smiley's latest novel take what life throws at them—drought, freezes, economic catastrophe, death, war, progress—and carry on. Despite its epic scope, which embraces political and social changes, *Some Luck* is also intimate, and deeply observant. Smiley uses small moments and events to build a bigger, multifaceted picture of a country during decades of great change. What seems simple at first grows profound in her hands—and her skillful prose. With plain materials she builds rich portraits of her Langdons: Walter, Rosanna, [and] their five children are rendered in vivid, indelible strokes . . . A simple, remarkable scene—nothing fancy, just a loud, large family gathered for a Thanksgiving meal—leaves you with that warm feeling you get when you flip through old family photo albums, marveling at the past. In *Some Luck*, Smiley brings that past to life. You don't have to have been raised on an Iowa farm to think: That sounds like my grandmother, my aunt, my father, my brother. That sounds like *us*." —Connie Ogle, *Miami Herald*

"A ravishing and defiantly old-fashioned novel set on the same Iowa soil Smiley tilled in her Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Thousand Acres* . . . . Reminiscent of the work of Willa Cather and Alice Munro, *Some Luck* chronicles one family's triumphs and travails as they work to wrest a living from their farm. Opening in 1920, [it] tracks the fates of Walter and Rosanna Langdon and their children over three decades. Their union endures, roiled by doubt at times, yet rooted in a bone-deep connection. *Some Luck* ingeniously spirals outward from the farm and back again, capturing the arc of personal and historical change in forthright prose that unexpectedly takes flight." —Hamilton Cain, *O, The Oprah Magazine*

"Fans of old-fashioned family sagas featuring historical sweep are in (ahem) some luck. Like *A Thousand Acres*, *Some Luck* conveys a deep understanding of both the endless work and worries of agrarian life and the foremost question among children raised on the land—whether to stay or go. *Some Luck*'s narrative shifts focus among various members of the Langdon family, including its youngest. What's it all about, having a family? Rosanna's reflections during a Thanksgiving gathering in 1948—a perfectly written scene [and] the climax and beating heart of *Some Luck*—captures the payoff, the sudden moments of grace that can astonish and melt even the most exhausted, unsentimental readers. An intimate, telling portrait of the changing landscape of hearth and home in twentieth-century America . . . The writing positively soars." —Heller McAlpin, *The B&N Review*

"Sweeping, bold, and completely engrossing . . . arguably Smiley's finest work—she delivers with *Some Luck.* It moves swiftly, keeping the reader turning the pages. Smiley's reach is wide and assured. Few authors are able to write equally well about war strategy, Communism, cover crops, and postpartum depression. Smiley can, and does, such that when *Some Luck* closes it feels sudden, despite the novel's

length. The reader isn't ready to leave the Langdons behind. Take consolation in knowing there is more to come: *Some Luck* is the first installment of a promised trilogy. In this case, the luck is all ours." —Diane Leach, *PopMatters*

"Sweeping . . . Smiley's most commanding novel yet. She is a master storyteller—that rare 'three-fer': meticulous historian, intelligent humorist and seasoned literary novelist . . . But what makes a Smiley novel identifiably and deliciously hers alone is a unique brand of impassioned critical patriotism. She makes us see, in the kindest, gentlest way, that we're a lot more wonderful, and a lot more screwed up—as a nation, as a people, as families, as individuals—than we think we are. *Some Luck* contextualizes three decades of American history by zooming in on one multi-generational farm family. Births and deaths, triumphs and tragedies are rendered in a [way] that mirrors the Midwestern landscape, language and temperament. The low, quiet hum of the narrative voice provides a contrast for the family's crises, each of which serves to connect the reader to her characters . . . The rolling out of all those life events, big and small, have a cumulative effect, [and] by the end, the attachment to the Langdons is enough to make the reader count down the days to Book Two." —Meredith Maran, *Los Angeles Times*

"Midwestern farm country has proved fertile soil for fiction writers, and no one has cultivated it to such fine effect as Smiley. This new novel, the first in a Balzacian project—the saga of the American family sprung from immigrant stock rooted in farmland—follows a family through major events of the first half of the 20th century. Smiley's range is, as ever, remarkable: she inhabits the heroic firstborn, the diffident little brother, the angelic girl, the bookish boy, the [child who is an] afterthought, always managing to convey the specific nature of each character's experience, even as her narrative balances birth order as fate against character as destiny. The cumulative experiences of these people, all depicted with such convincing care and detail, convey a sense of the relations that create a world." —Ellen Akins, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"Delightfully engaging, a novel full of pleasures both large and small. History makes its way into the story realistically and unobtrusively—the history is personal, told in stories passed down through generations. The chronological approach allows the novel room to breathe . . . Smiley clearly enjoys her characters without being besotted by them. Her writing has an edge of gentle humor about a place that has four seasons: 'mud, heat, harvest exhaustion, and snow.'" —Margaret Quamme, *The Columbus Dispatch*

"Engrossing . . . While *Some Luck* evokes the Iowa landscape Smiley knows well, the novel is as much about the passage of time as the people inhabiting it. As the years pass and crops grow, so does the Langdon family. Parents Walter and Rosanna have their first child, Frank. Smart, charismatic and restless, he's followed by sensitive, reliable Joe; sweet-natured Lillian; bookish Henry; and baby Claire. From birth, each is an indelible character . . . 'All ordinary people are extraordinary,' she says. 'I don't actually believe in the concept of ordinary people. I think individuals are always interesting . . . They have unique lives, and things happen to them. They all have adventures.'" —Georgia Rowe, *San Jose Mercury News*

"Fascinating—an impressive accounting of family life . . . *Some Luck* would qualify as Smiley's magnum opus if this, her 14th novel, were a single work and not the first in her trilogy. [As] the story, told from the multiple viewpoints of the Langdon family, moves through history, Smiley portrays her characters with such clarity that we care about their fate . . . The book's message [is] that farm life is a harrowing enterprise, needful of great reserves of fortitude. Frank will grow up handsome, brilliant and heartless—the mesmerizing center of the book . . . No one captures the rhythms of ordinary life like Smiley does: babies, sewing, cooking . . . In 1992 Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* won the Pulitzer for fiction and looked to stand as her epic achievement, retelling *King Lear* in Iowa. Now, with *Some Luck* and a return to the heartland, the remarkable Smiley just got a little more remarkable." —Barbara Liss, *Houston Chronicle*

"A masterpiece in the making . . . intimate, miraculous—the auspicious beginning of an American saga every bit as ambitious as Updike's magnum opus, anchored in the satisfactions and challenges of life on a farm, but expand[ing] to various American cities and beyond . . . Frank is one of the most fascinating and

complex characters in recent fiction. The way Smiley gets deep inside [all] the children's heads is a staggering literary feat in which we see human character being assembled in something that feels like real time. An abundant harvest." —Kevin Nance, *USA Today*

"Engaging, bold . . . Smiley delivers a straightforward, old-fashioned tale of rural family life in changing times, depicting isolated farm life with precision . . . It is especially satisfying to hear a powerful writer narrate men's and women's lives lovingly and with equal attention. Subtle, wry and moving." —Valerie Sayers, *The Washington Post*

"Convincing . . . A young couple, Walter and Rosanna Langdon, are just setting out on their own [in] 1920. Eventually they will have five children; Smiley gives each of them a turn in the spotlight, filling in the details of their lives and drawing the reader into a story meant to last a long time . . . Smiley has been compared to some of the great writers of the 19th century, [and] in that tradition, she gives her trilogy the sweep of history. But what interests her most is the way historic events play out in the lives of one family whose roots are deeply embedded in the middle of America." —Lynn Neary, *NPR Weekend Sunday Edition*

"Smiley is prolific [and] seemingly writes the way her idol Dickens did—as easily as if it were breathing . . . She made up her mind at an early age that she was going to master not just one genre, but all of them. Her new book is the first volume of a trilogy—one of the few forms left for her to tackle . . . *Some Luck* starts in 1920 and follows the fortunes of a Midwestern farming family; each chapter covers a single year. What most surprised her, she said, was the way that, more than in her other books, the characters took on lives of their own. 'I got the feeling that I got on a train and sat down, and all these people were talking. I was eavesdropping, and the train was just heading into the future.'" —Charles McGrath, *The New York Times*

"Audaciously delicious . . . Every character here steals our heart. Smiley has turned her considerable talents to the story of an Iowa farm and the people who inhabit it. The suspense is found in the impeccably drawn scenes and in the myriad ways in which Smiley narrows and opens her camera's lens. Her language has the intimacy of a first-person telling; her stance is in-the-moment. Always at the narrative hearth stand Walter and Rosanna and that Iowa farm, a character in its own right, a landscape remembered by those who flee to Chicago, Italy, San Francisco, Washington D.C. and New York . . . We read these lives, and we find our own." —Beth Kephart, *Chicago Tribune*

"Sumptuous . . . A meditation on the things we encounter in our lives that shape our personal histories. Smiley impresses the reader by shifting perspectives that include those of the Langdon children as infants and toddlers learning how to grip, walk—and manipulate their parents and siblings. Readers will find much enjoyment in Smiley's sharp prose and finely observed details. She's in no hurry to get us anywhere, allowing readers to luxuriate in this study of character, place and time. By the time I got to the end of this big, human book I wondered where the time had gone." —Christi Clancy, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

"Quietly suspenseful, subtle, and captivating . . . We see a changing world through the eyes of a hard-working family trying to make ends meet on their farm in the Iowa heartland. *Some Luck* is set against a backdrop of sweeping social, political, and economic change—the Great Depression, the rise of Communism, World War Two, and innovations like electricity and automobiles. As the landscape evolves, the Langdons' world expands beyond the corn fields to the big city, a university campus, and the battlefield . . . Their family life is filled with conflict, rivalries, and shifting alliances—the reader forms a close bond with them . . . Smiley's deft prose is succinct and clear; she covers the span of a season in a few sentences, then focuses on an ordinary event that turns out to have enormous consequences. The mundane becomes profound, and the effect is smooth and seamless." —Eleanora Buckbee, *Everyday eBook*

"No writer has ever captured the satisfactions and frustrations of the American farmer with more insight, humor, accuracy and grace than Smiley. In the first novel of her forthcoming trilogy, she serves up 33 years (1920-53) of American history, viewed through the particular lens of an Iowa farm. The Depression, the Dust

Bowl, WWII and the early Cold War provide a compelling backdrop to the lives of Walter and Rosanna Langdon and their six children, all drawn with Smiley's signature specificity and clear-eyed compassion. The storytelling is shared among the characters, [with] each chapter representing one year of drought or plenty—an almanac to honor these harsh and beautiful lives." —Pam Houston, *More*

"Starting from a farm in Iowa, the Langdon family knows growth, diaspora, heartbreak, and passion over three decades. It's breathtaking to realize that this novel is the first of a trilogy!" *—Philadelphia Inquirer*

"From Pulitzer winner Smiley, a multi-generational saga about an Iowa farming family's shifting fortunes." —Kim Hubbard, *People,* One of the "Best Books of the Fall"

"Marvelous, a tour de force . . . *Some Luck* opens in 1920 with Walter Langdon on the eve of his 25th birthday, thinking about the vicissitudes of farming; his strict father; his wife; and his five-month-old son—the first of five children who grow into memorable individuals over the course of the novel. With her vivid, tactile depiction of rural Iowa farm life, Smiley has imaginatively recaptured the dangers and rewards—the play of good luck and bad luck—in a lost way of life . . . *Some Luck* moves swiftly and assuredly through 33 years of the Langford clan's experiences, [becoming] an exploration of 20th-century American culture and politics. Smiley says the novel's velocity arises from the year-by-year approach she deploys throughout the trilogy. She says she began with the concept of the trilogy but ended up being swept away by the trajectories of her characters. She writes about farm life, family life and, suggestively, near the end, national political life. There are farming scenes, sex scenes, combat scenes and table-talk scenes . . . Wherever Smiley goes in *Some Luck*, most readers will willingly follow. Then wait, with bated breath, for her next steps." —Alden Mudge, *BookPage*

"Kicking off a new trilogy that follows the Langdon family for 100 years, this novel starts with their humble beginnings on an Iowa farm, and takes them from the Depression to the Red Scare. As times change, so do relationships, hearts and minds." *—Woman's Day*

"Epic, striking . . . The reader becomes intimately involved with the characters amid the minutiae of family life, sharing Rosanna's anxieties over the children and Walter's worries about his crop prices, understanding Frank's desire to leave and Joey's desire to stay. The cumulative effect is a story so fully immersive and absorbing that I finished the book with a sense of loss. Masterly." —Alice O'Keeffe, *The Bookseller* (UK)

"The expansive American epic is Smiley's métier, and she's in top form with this multigenerational story of an Iowa farming family—sturdy sons, passionate daughters, a tough but tender existence—across the first half of the 20th century." *—Time*

"Pulitzer Prize-winning Smiley moves from the 1920s to the 1950s as she unfolds the life of Iowa farmers Rosanna and Walter Langdon and their five children. As the children grow up and sometimes move away, we get a wide-angle view of mid-century America. Told in beautiful, you-are-there language, the narrative lets ordinary events accumulate to give us a significant feel of life at the time, with the importance and dangers of farming particularly well portrayed. In the end, though, this is the story of parents and children, of hope and disappointment . . . Highly recommended; a lush and grounded reading experience." —Barbara Hoffert, *Library Journal* (starred review)

"Tremendous . . . Smiley is a seductive writer in perfect command of every element of language. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *A Thousand Acres*, a novel about a farming family in Iowa, and she returns to that fertile ground to tell the stories of the Langdons, a clan deeply in accord with the land . . . As barbed in her wit as ever, Smiley is also munificently tender. The Langdons endure the Depression, Walter agonizes over giving up his horses for a tractor, and Joe tries the new synthetic fertilizers. Then, as Frank serves in WWII and, covertly, the Cold War, the novel's velocity, intensity, and wonder redouble. This [is a] saga of the vicissitudes of luck, and our futile efforts to control it. Smiley's grand, assured, quietly heroic, and

affecting novel is a supremely nuanced portrait of a family spanning three pivotal American decades. It will be on the top of countless to-read lists." —Donna Seaman, *Booklist* (starred review)

"Exciting. . . In the first volume of a planned trilogy, Smiley returns to the Iowa of her Pulitzer Prize winning *A Thousand Acres*, but in a different vein. The Langdons [are] a loving family whose members, like most people, are exceptional only in their human particularity; the story covers the 1920s through the early '50s, years during which the family farm survives the Depression and drought, and the five children grow up and have to decide whether to stay or leave. Smiley is particularly good at depicting the world from the viewpoint of young children—all five are distinct individuals from their earliest days. The standout is the oldest son, Frank, born with an eye for opportunity. But as Smiley shifts her attention from one character to another, they all come to feel like real and relatable people. Smiley conjures a world—time, place, people—and an engaging story that makes readers eager to know what happens next. Smiley plans to extend the tale of the Langdon family well into the 21st century; she's off to a very strong start." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Smiley follows an Iowa farm family through the thick of the 20th century, [as] the Langdons raise five children to varied destinies; [there's a] sense that we've simply dropped in on a continuing saga. Smiley juggles characters and events with her customary aplomb and storytelling craft . . . Underpinning the unfolding of three decades is farm folks' knowledge that disaster is always one bad crop away, and luck is never to be relied on; it wouldn't be a Smiley novel without at least one cruel twist of fate. Smiley is the least sentimental of writers, but when Rosanna and Walter Langdon look at the 23 people gathered at Thanksgiving in 1948 and 'agreed in an instant: something had created itself from nothing,' it's a moment of honest sentiment, honestly earned. An expansive tale showing this generally flinty author in a mellow mood: surprising, but engaging." —*Kirkus* (starred review)

About the Author
Jane Smiley is the author of numerous novels, including *A Thousand Acres*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, as well as five works of nonfiction and a series of books for young adults. In 2001 she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 2006 she received the PEN USA Lifetime Achievement Award for Literature. She lives in Northern California.



1920

Walter Langdon hadn't walked out to check the fence along the creek for a couple of months—now that the cows were up by the barn for easier milking in the winter, he'd been putting off fence-mending—so he hadn't seen the pair of owls nesting in the big elm. The tree was half dead; every so often Walter thought of cutting it for firewood, but he would have to get help taking it down, because it must be eighty feet tall or more and four feet in diameter. And it wouldn't be the best firewood, hardly worth the trouble. Right then, he saw one of the owls fly out of a big cavity maybe ten to twelve feet up, either a big female or a very big male—at any rate, the biggest horned owl Walter had ever seen—and he paused and stood for a minute, still in the afternoon breeze, listening, but there was nothing. He saw why in a moment. The owl floated out for maybe twenty yards, dropped toward the snowy pasture. Then came a high screaming, and the owl rose again, this time with a full-grown rabbit in its talons, writhing, going limp, probably deadened by fear. Walter shook himself.

His gaze followed the owl upward, along the southern horizon, beyond the fence line and the tiny creek, past the road. Other than the big elm and two smaller ones, nothing broke the view—vast snow faded into vast cloud cover. He could just see the weather vane and the tip of the cupola on Harold Gruber's barn, more than half a mile to the south. The enormous owl gave the whole scene focus, and woke him up. A rabbit, even a screaming rabbit? That was one less rabbit after his oat plants this spring. The world was full of rabbits, not

so full of owls, especially owls like this one, huge and silent. After a minute or two, the owl wheeled around and headed back to the tree. Although it wasn't yet dusk, the light was not very strong, so Walter couldn't be sure he saw the feathery horns of another owl peeking out of the cavity in the trunk of the elm, but maybe he did. He would think that he did. He had forgotten why he came out here.

Twenty-five, he was. Twenty-five tomorrow. Some years the snow had melted for his birthday, but not this year, and so it had been a long winter full of cows. For the last two years, he'd had five milkers, but this year he was up to ten. He hadn't understood how much extra work that would be, even with Ragnar to help, and Ragnar didn't have any affinity for cows. Ragnar was the reason he had more cows—he needed some source of income to pay Ragnar—but the cows avoided Ragnar, and he had to do all the extra milking himself. And, of course, the price of milk would be down. His father said it would be: it was two years since the war, and the Europeans were back on their feet—or at least back on their feet enough so that the price of milk was down.

Walter walked away from this depressing thought. The funny thing was that when he told his father that he broke even this year, expecting his father to shake his head again and tell him he was crazy to buy the farm when land prices were so high, his father had patted him on the back and congratulated him. Did breaking even include paying interest on the debt? Walter nodded. "Good year, then," said his father. His father had 320 acres, all paid for, a four-bedroom house, a big barn with hay stacked to the roof, and Walter could have gone on living there, even with Rosanna, even with the baby, especially now, with Howard taken by the influenza and the house so empty, but his father would have walked into his room day and night without knocking, bursting with another thing that Walter had to know or do or remember or finish. His father was strict, and liked things just so—he even oversaw Walter's mother's cooking, and always had. Rosanna complained about living with his parents—it was all Walter wanting his own place, all Walter looking at the little farmhouse (you could practically see through the walls, they were so thin), all Walter walking the fields and thinking that bottomland made up for the house, and the fields were rectangular—no difficult plowing or strange, wasted angles. It was all Walter, and so he had no one to blame but himself for this sense of panic that he was trying to walk away from on the day before his birthday. Did he know a single fellow his age with a farm of his own? Not one, at least not around here.

When you looked at Rosanna, you didn't think she'd been raised on a farm, had farms all through her background, even in Germany. She was blonde, but slender and perfectly graceful, and when she praised the baby's beauty, she did so without seeming to realize that it reproduced her own. Walter had seen that in some lines of cows—the calves looked stamped out by a cookie cutter, and even the way they turned their heads or kicked their hind feet into the air was the same as last year's calf and the one before that. Walter's family was a bastard mix, as his grandfather would say—Langdons, but with some of those long-headed ones from the Borders, with red hair, and then some of those dark-haired Irish from Wexford that were supposed to trace back to the sailors from the Spanish Armada, and some tall balding ones who always needed glasses from around Glasgow. His mother's side leavened all of these with her Wessex ancestry ("The Chicks and the Cheeks," she'd always said), but you couldn't tell that Walter's relatives were related the way you could with Rosanna's. Even so, of all Rosanna's aunts and uncles and cousins, the Augsbergers and the Vogels, Rosanna was the most beautiful, and that was why he had set his heart upon winning her when he came home from the war and finally really noticed her, though she went to the Catholic church. The Langdon farm and the Vogel farms weren't far apart—no more than a mile—but even in a small town like Denby, no one had much to say to folks who went to other churches and, it must be said, spoke different languages at home.

Oh, Rosanna, just twenty, but with the self-possessed grace of a mature woman! He could see her profile as he approached the house in the dusk, outlined by the lamplight behind her. She was looking for him. Just in the tilt of her head, he could see that she had some project in mind. And of course he would say yes to her. After all, no fledgling had it easy, farmer or crow. Hadn't he known since he was a boy the way the fledglings had to fall out of the nest and walk about, cheeping and crying, until they grew out their feathers and learned to fly on their own? Their helpless parents flew above them, and maybe dropped them a bit of

food, but flying or succumbing belonged to them alone. Walter put his foot on the first step of the porch, and felt his customary sense of invigoration at this thought. On the porch, he stamped two or three times, and then slipped out of his boots. When the door opened, Rosanna drew him in, and then slipped her arms inside his unbuttoned jacket.

On the front porch, sitting up (he had just learned to sit up) on a folded blanket, Frank Langdon, aged five months, was playing with a spoon. He was holding it in his right hand by the tarnished silver bowl, and when he brought it toward his face, his eyes would cross, which made Rosanna, his mother, laugh as she shelled peas. Now that he was sitting, he could also drop the spoon, and then, very carefully, pick it up again. Before learning to sit, he had enjoyed lying on his back and waving the spoon in the air, but if he dropped the spoon, it was gone. This was no longer the case. One of the qualities Rosanna attributed to little Frank was persistence. If he was playing with the spoon, then it was the spoon he wanted to play with. If he dropped the spoon, and she happened to give him a sock doll (the sock doll that her sister, Eloise, had sewn just for Frank), Frank would fuss until she gave him the spoon. Now, sitting up, he put the spoon down and picked it up and put it down and picked it up. Although he much preferred the spoon to the doll, Rosanna always told Eloise and her mother how much Frank liked the doll. Eloise was now knitting him a wool hat. It was her first knitting project; she expected to have it done before October. Rosanna reached into the basket of pea pods and took the last handful. She didn't mind shelling peas.

Frank was a good baby, hardly ever fussy, which, according to Rosanna's mother, was a characteristic of all her side of the family. Speaking of peas, Rosanna and her sister and four brothers were just like peas in a pod for being good babies, and here was Frank, another of the same breed, blond, beautiful, and easy, plenty of flesh but not a bit of fat, active but not fussy, went right down every night and only got up once, regular as sunrise, then down again for another two hours while Rosanna made breakfast for Walter and the hired man. Could she ask for a better baby?

Rosanna finished shelling peas and set the bowl on the blanket, then knelt in front of Frank and said, "What a boy! What a darling boy! Are you a darling boy?" And she kissed him on the forehead, because her mother had impressed on her that you never, never kissed a baby on the lips. She laid her hand gently on the top of his head.

Frank still had his grip on the spoon, but his mother's face transfixed him. As it loomed closer and then retreated, his gaze followed it, and as she smiled, he smiled, and then laughed, and then he waved his arms, which resulted in the spoon's being thrown across the blanket—a first! He saw it fly and he saw it land, and his head turned slightly so he could watch it.

Rosanna laughed, because on his face was a bona-fide look of surprise, very advanced, as far as Rosanna was concerned (though she would have to admit that she had never paid one iota of attention to her brothers and sister, except when they were in her way or in her charge—no one ever said that she enjoyed watching them or had a flair for it). Now Frank's body tilted forward, and all of a sudden he fell over on his side, cushioned by the blanket. Being Frank, he didn't cry. Rosanna sat him up again and handed him the spoon; then she stood up, thinking that she could hurry into the house and set the bread loaves, which should have completed their second rising by now, into the hot oven and be back out in a minute or two. Nothing could happen in a minute or two.

Spoon in hand, Frank saw and heard his mother's dress swish around her legs as she went inside, and then the screen door slapped shut. After a moment, Frank returned his attention to the spoon, which he was now gripping by the handle, bowl upward. He smacked it on the blanket, and though it was bright against the darkness of the blanket, it made no noise, so he brought it again to his face. It got bigger and brighter and bigger and brighter—this was the confusing part—and then he felt something, not in his hand, but on his face, a pressure and then a pain. The spoon jumped away from him, and there was noise—his own noise. His arm waved, and the spoon flew again. Now the spoon was small and didn't look like a spoon. Frank looked

at it for a very long time, and then he looked around the blanket for something that was within reach. The only thing was a nice clean potato, into which Mama had cut two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. Frank was not terribly interested in the potato, but it was nearby, so his hand fell upon it, gripped it, and brought it to his mouth. He tasted the potato. It tasted different from the spoon.

More interesting was the sudden appearance of the cat, orange, long, and just his, Frank's, size. Frank let the potato drop as he looked at the cat, and then the cat was sniffing his mouth and smoothing its whiskers across Frank's cheek, squatting to inspect the potato, pressing himself into Frank until Frank fell over again. Moments later, when the door opened and flapped closed, the cat was crouched on the porch railing, purring, and Frank was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling of the porch and kicking his legs—left, right, left, right. Mama picked him up, then arced him through the air, and he found himself pressed into her shoulder, his ear and the side of his head warm against her neck. He saw the cat one last time as the porch spun around him, and beyond that the green-gold grass, and the pale horizontal line of the dirt road, and the two fields, one for oats, a thick undulating surface, and one for corn, a quiet grid of still squares ("There's a little breeze," thought Rosanna; "I'll open the upstairs windows"), and around that, a different thing, empty, flat, and large, the thing that lay over all things.

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