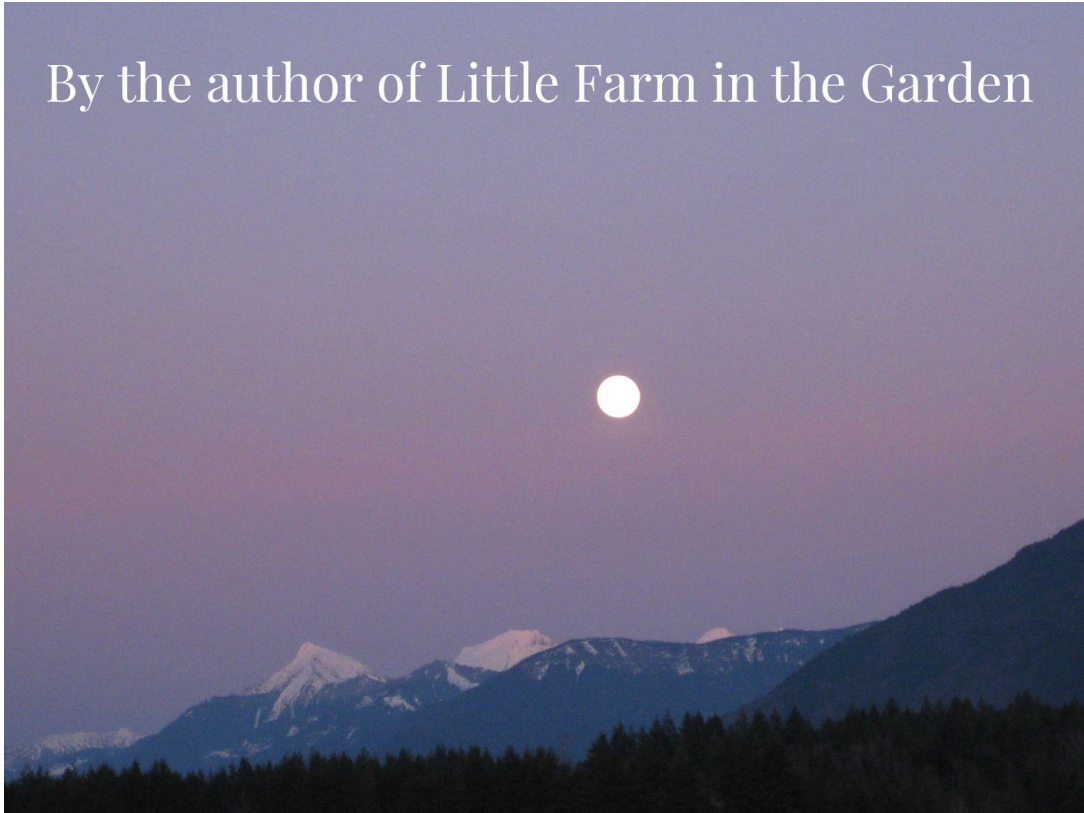
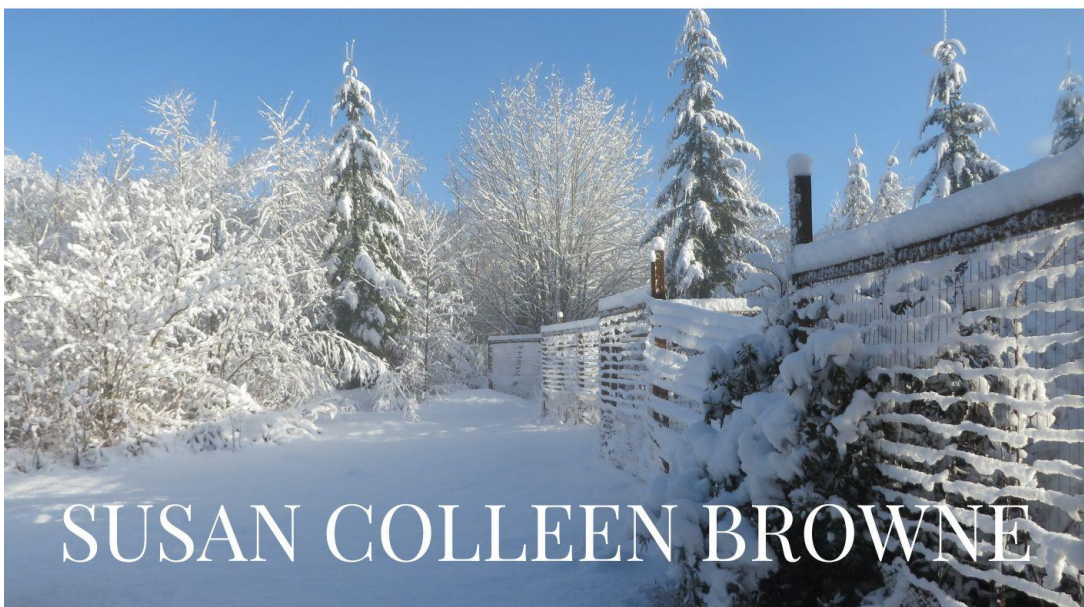


By the author of *Little Farm in the Garden*



Little Farm for the Holidays

CELEBRATING THE CHRISTMAS
SEASON HOMESTEAD-STYLE



SUSAN COLLEEN BROWNE

Little Farm for the Holidays

Celebrating the Christmas Season ~Homestead-Style~

Little Farm in the Foothills Series

Susan Colleen Browne

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Cozy Season

“I’m thankful to live in a place where winter gets good and cold and you need to build a fire in a stove and wrap a blanket around you. Cold brings people closer together.”

—Garrison Keillor

As Christmas draws nearer, and the winter’s chill sets in, life takes on a whole new tenor. At our little homestead, choosing comfy and calming pastimes seems like a lovely way to prepare for the holiday season.

Reading a book comes to mind—it’s both cozy and relaxing, and the reason I created this mini-ebook! It’s my hope that these tales will add a bit of old-fashioned spirit and cheer to your Christmas season.

As for other cozy activities...when I discovered the Danish notion of *hygge*, I realized, “Goodness—I’ve been doing this for years!”

You’ve probably heard of *hygge*—it looks like it could be pronounced “higgee,” “huggee” or with a little stretch of imagination, “hug me”...but I understand it’s pronounced “hoo-ga.” However you say it, *hygge* really speaks to me. From what I gather, this Danish practice is all about treating yourself to extra light, comforting food, and cheerful activities—embracing anything that gives you a sense of contentment.

If you live in the Northern hemisphere, in the dark days leading to the winter solstice, it seems natural to live more attuned to the slower rhythms of the season. In fact, this time of year, adopting “*hygge-forward*” activities is a great workaround for our Foothills’ cold weather and frequent power outages.

You might think of this cozy lifestyle as socially-acceptable couch potato-ing: maybe curling up with a warm quilt, bathed in candlelight, with a mug of hot cocoa at the ready.

For my husband John and me, on a cold night we like nothing better than lolling in front of a crackling fire in the woodstove, immersed in a good book. But really, you might consider *hygge* any simple, even homespun pursuit that dials up your happiness and wellbeing.

Over time, I’ve made a conscious effort to simplify the holidays for John and me. Instead of trying to do too much shopping, cooking, baking, entertaining, and attending events, we like

to focus on light and warmth, which coincidentally, is what *hygge* is all about. Too, avoiding the stress of *too much*, we've leaned into a greater appreciation for plain but high-quality holiday dishes, small, if meaningful gifts, and undemanding (and even a little humble) rituals.

This simpler mindset has served us well, given our ever-shifting home and extended family landscape: the many ups and downs of our elderly parents, grown children and grandkids, plus the vagaries of winter weather and power outages. All in all, those unexpected twists and turns have taught us that the best-laid plans often go awry.

So if I've learned anything about our holiday celebrations, it's that the only way to go is to stay flexible, don't get too invested in any single tradition, and above all, simplicity is your friend.

And keeping things simple may—just *maybe*—help give us a glimpse of the mystical elements of Christmas.

The Magic of Christmas

Feeling a sense of awe, to me, is a gift of being human. It's that glimpse of something larger than ourselves, of having that sense of the miraculous—that somehow, through forces we will never understand, we are alive on an isolated chunk of rock spinning through the vastness of the Universe.

It's those moments when I see a shooting star, view our rare Aurora borealis, or find myself in the presence of something sublimely beautiful, like the slanting pink light on the Foothills at sunset. Or the sweetness in a baby's face.

Still, call it serendipity, or synchronicity, but there are some things you might experience or “miracles” you hear about that make your spine tingle a little—because they can't be explained by rational thought or science...or even common sense.

Some Irish stories come to mind.

The mother of a creative writing student of mine had an Irish grandmother, whose surname was Quinn. This mother, an American, had recurring dreams all her life of an old castle ruin with crumbling steps. Later in life, she went to Ireland on a tour, and the bus stopped at a castle.

Exploring the grounds, my student's mother saw those same steps she'd seen in her dreams. The name of the castle? Castle Quinn.

An old friend of mine, an Irish-American author, took her first trip to Ireland some years ago. Before the aircraft landed, she gazed down at the green hills of the Emerald Isle below and was completely overcome by the conviction that she *belonged* there. The sensation was so powerful, she said, “I felt like I could have jumped right out of the plane.”

Was the mother's recurring dream, or my friend's sense of belonging simply the mind playing tricks? Or it is possible they were some kind of message from their ancestors?

I found another story I loved in the memoir *Midlife Irish*, by Irish-American journalist Joe Gannon. During his first trip to Ireland, Gannon says he felt this overwhelming sense that heaven, or the life beyond this one, was as close as the next room.

Science can't prove these kinds of other-worldly sensations and experiences are real...but can belief?

Even if these three anecdotes aren't Christmas stories, they remind me that if you keep an

open heart, Christmastime—and the entire holiday season (whatever holiday you may be celebrating)—is brimming with magic and mystery.

Because surely the story of St. Nicholas—who represents the simpler, old-fashioned holidays you may secretly year for—can't be *all* fiction...

He was a real-life bishop in 4th century Turkey. After doing many extraordinarily kind and generous deeds, he became the patron saint of children. Later, this historical figure emerged from the mists of time to become mythical—a benevolent spirit who left treasure and gifts in children's shoes or stockings.

Over the centuries, this mythical presence evolved to include Father Christmas, Santa Claus and other magical beings throughout other countries and other cultures—all of whom represent the spirit of love and generosity.

And little children around the world believe in this magical spirit as strongly and as fervently as they believe in *anything*, long after they're old enough to know the difference between reality and make believe. When I was seven years old, I was sitting with my beloved grandma in our basement rec room, watching a Christmas episode of *The Laurence Welk* show. I heard some thumping upstairs, and within moments, my dad called to us and said, "Santa was just here!" As I tore up the stairs, I believed...no, I *knew* it was Santa who'd made that noise and left those presents. There was simply no other explanation.

"Seeing isn't believing; believing is seeing." (Judy the Elf, from the movie *The Santa Clause*).

So as long as you *believe*, a little bit, in feeling open to the awe and wonder of the season, everywhere you look you'll find a little bit of St. Nick's magic.

St. Nicholas Day

For me, starting the Christmas windup right after Thanksgiving seems too early. Besides, if you put up a tree around the end of November, it'll be pale and dried out by Christmas Eve. But when I was a child, with two busy working parents, Christmas in our house always seemed very last-minute.

I would actually get a little anxious, waiting for my dad to get going on the outdoor lights and to buy a tree, and for anything else Christmasy to happen for our family.

If Thanksgiving is too early, and a few days before Christmas is too late, December 6 seems *just right*—it's the feast day of St. Nicholas. And while John and I may not “believe” in Santa any more, the legend of this important saint inspires our holidays.

However, I admit that I don't *totally* wait until the sixth to start my celebrations.

December 1st is the day I begin to ease into the holidays—when I pull out my three “vintage” paper Advent calendars. They're marked “Made in West Germany,” the giveaway that I bought them in the 1980s. The calendars have faded through the years, and are starting to get a little fragile.

But despite the passage of time, I still open one wee window each day until December 25th, to find a tiny picture and a brief Scripture verse. Over the next couple of days, I clear the books and family photos off the shelves and tabletops and actually *dust* every surface. (That's worth celebrating in itself!)

But the 6th is our *official* kickoff for the holiday season. That's when John and I begin making merry...that is, in our low-key homesteady-style.

First, I pull my favorite holiday book off the top shelf in my closet, Mary Engelbreit's *Believe: Christmas Treasury*—an illustrated collection of some of the loveliest songs, scripture, stories and traditions from around the world. The book is filled with all kinds of ways to create fun and meaningful celebrations. I'll keep it on the coffee table so I can re-read a few selections every night until January 6th.

Next, I bring our modest collection of Christmas knickknacks out of the deep recesses of our storage closet. Before I can start arranging them, I need to put on the only Christmas music I play: gentle, old-Englishy choral music like “In the Bleak Midwinter” or “Wexford Carol,”

performed by the St. Martin-in-the-Fields or Clare College choir.

To me, the old-fashioned carols bring a certain softness and spiritual mood to the season. But if you want a change of pace, a rousing tune like “Wassail Song” will surely inspire a joyful exuberance in any holiday activity! The lyrics are all about toasting your farm animals and the New Year, and sharing what’s really important: a good crop of corn, a piece of meat, your Christmas pie, and of course, your bowl of wassail.

The song reminds me that in days gone by, people centered their holiday celebrations around special food and drink. Not presents.

The evening of December 6, I start adorning the house for the season, and to finish, John and I hang up the two beautiful Christmas tapestries he gave us as gifts. It doesn’t take all that long, since we don’t have a lot of decorations. Nothing like the homes of the Christmas collector-type folks you see in magazines, who cover every inch of their house with figurines, lights, candles, greenery, bows...and on and on.

Sure, these lavish, picture perfect decorations look pretty festive. Yet it seems to me that with your house stuffed to the rafters, any items of sentimental value, like the family tchotchkes passed down from your parents, or the tree ornaments your child made for you, gets lost in the shuffle.

Anyway, back to St. Nick’s Day...After decorating, to make the day even more special, I’ll mix up our first batch of holiday cookies and John and I will bake them together.

For me, part of the “magic” in those treasured decorations and cookie-making is the gift of nostalgia—all the feelings inspired by the special items you haven’t seen since last January, or the special treats you haven’t had all year.

And I think that “believing,” according to Judy the Elf, is sensing that angels *do* exist. St. Nicholas surely must be one. And perhaps so are people whose spirits are imbued with goodness—the especially kind and generous people we know or have known. If believing is seeing, maybe those special people have come into our lives for a *reason*.

If I had a real-life angel in my life, it was my Laurence Welk-watching grandma. But sometimes, especially at Christmastime, you’re lucky enough to witness the blessings of other angels.

Angels Among Us

I was in the post office one day in December, to mail our Christmas package to John's daughter and her family. It's a small-town P.O., where you rarely have to wait. But on this day, there was only one counter open, with at least a dozen folks in line with parcels to ship.

A little family stepped up to the counter, a thirty-something mom, a pretty young teen, and a little girl, all with the same shade of blond hair. The mother spoke English with a heavy accent—I guessed they were Ukrainian, since there's a sizeable immigrant community of Ukrainian folks in our area.

The mom and the teen set a couple of large, bedraggled boxes on the counter to send out. The post office clerk added up the postage, then affixed the stickers to the boxes. "Ready to go," he said. "That'll be \$27.53."

The mother seemed to hesitate, then swiped her debit card.

The card reader emitted a sharp tone: a "no" in machine-speak. The postal worker, very politely, said, "Here, swipe it again." There was the same result: the machine wouldn't accept the card. Then *he* swiped it—to no avail.

The little girl, sensing her mother's distress, I thought, huddled against her. Finally, the clerk attempted the transaction by manually entering her card number into his system. Still, the card was a no-go.

"I'm sorry," he said, sounding honestly sympathetic. "I'm going to have to tear the stickers off, unless you can come back in a few minutes with cash or check." Despite all the people lined up, the lobby was silent. You couldn't help but hear the mother's soft, embarrassed murmurs—and feel the discomfort in the room.

Then all of a sudden, a forty-something woman stepped up to the counter. "I've got it."

The mother said, "Oh, no—I can't—"

"Random act of kindness," the woman said briskly. "I've got it."

She literally would not let the mother to say no. The tension in the little family eased.

The post office guy took the card and you could see him visibly relax too; in fact, everyone in the lobby relaxed. I did too, as tears brimmed in my eyes.

The guy next to me in line said, "There's been a lot of that lately—random acts of

kindness. It's been on the news." In that moment, I felt the holiday spirit pervade the entire room. I'm sure this generous woman had *made* Christmas for that little family. And this woman, whom I'd never seen before and would likely never see again, totally made *my* Christmas too.

A half hour later, still feeling a little teary from the kindness I'd witnessed, I was driving into the city, listening to the radio. Garrison Keillor and his "Writer's Almanac" came on the air. After reciting his usual notable birthdays, and a lovely poem, Keillor shared a final thought—a quote from author Arthur C. Clarke:

"Just think of how peaceful the world would be if we all treated each other as if we were members of the same family."

That day in the post office, the dozen or so people in the small lobby had indeed become a family. And in those few moments, you could feel a sense of peace on earth, and "good will toward men."

More Christmas Magic

“The dreams of childhood...its airy fables, its graceful, beautiful humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond; so good, to be believed in once, so good to be remembered when outgrown.” —Charles Dickens

Sometimes, a little holiday magic comes out of nowhere.

If you're familiar with some of my books or my Little Farm blog, you may know I'm a big fairy fan. As in, I *love* fairies.

Fairy lore, fairy books, and fairy knickknacks all ring my chimes! The first Halloween I remember I went as Flora, the fairy from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* movie. I adored my store-bought, sateen costume, and wore it afterward until it fell apart.

My most prized fairy possession is a photo of my first granddaughter at age one. A shy smile on her face, she's wearing a little tulle skirt, a sparkly wand in her small hand, with a set of tiny wings on her shoulders.

One November, a few years back, that photo in my office kept drawing my eyes. Although my granddaughter was growing up fast, and long ago had consigned her fairy dress to a storage box, there was something in her baby smile, in the little fairy wings, that spoke to me.

One day, I gazed around the room with a new appreciation for the fairy snow globe on my shelf, and my books about fairy legends. And sitting next to the books, for our ceramic fairy king with leaves for his beard and a bemused smile—a gift from my generous and loving sister-in-law.

A story began to take shape in my mind.

At the time, I was busy working on another book, a Christmas novel, *The Hopeful Romantic*. And I've always been the kind of writer who can only work on one book at a time.

But several weeks later, with Christmas swiftly approaching, I was hit by an overwhelming urge to write and finish my fairy book in time for Christmas, come what may. In an unprecedented writing binge, I banged out my story in six days.

When I came up for air Christmas Eve, I realized I'd written the book so fast it was like there was some powerful force beyond me, helping me bring it to life. John proofread the book

for me, and within hours, it was ready: *Morgan Carey and The Mystery of the Christmas Fairies*, the story of Morgan, a scrappy 5th grader, a magical forest and family bonding.

I'm a slow writer, and always have been. Still, I have never, before or since, been so possessed by a story before.

If you like fairies, and you're looking for a special Christmas story to give as a gift, I heartily recommend *The Wee Christmas Cabin of Carn-na-ween* by Ruth Sawyer. It's a picture book, but it speaks to readers of all ages. Despite its rather mournful theme, the *Christmas Cabin* is a tender, mystical tale that will stay with you long after you close the cover.

As you'll discover in *The Wee Christmas Cabin*, some things can't be explained. Like fairy energy.

The Season of Giving

The original Christmas story tells us the gifts of the Magi to the Christ child is the reason we celebrate the holidays by exchanging presents. Then came St. Nicholas, evolving over the centuries into Santa, the spirit of giving, and the focus of many of our modern Christmas gift traditions.

And somehow, I don't think it's a coincidence that scientific research shows that giving warms the heart of the giver, even more than the recipient!

When it comes to holiday gift-giving, I've traveled a long and winding road...and have ended up not far from where I began.

Compared to modern, conventional holiday traditions, the Christmases of my childhood were very basic. By today's standards, even Spartan. Yet to me, the holidays felt rich and glorious—the lights and special treats, the Christmas program at school, and since my siblings and I didn't have a lot of toys, the dizzying prospect of presents!

Through my life, I've often yearned for the simpler gifting traditions of my childhood. You would get one toy (yes, that's *one*), and for me, it was always a doll. My earliest memory was getting a baby doll, the next year a bride doll, then Santa graduated to giving me a Barbie.

My siblings and I would also receive a few tchotchkes, maybe a pair of mittens, and from the wealthy grandma we seldom saw, we girls would be a pretty new pinafore. With these rare new outfits, my sisters and I were, as the Irish say, thrilled to *bits*.

Yeah, yeah, you may be thinking. This gal is also going to claim she used to walk 10 miles to school and back every day, with both ways uphill, etc.

But when I was seven years old, this grandmother I didn't really know very well gave me something even better than a pinafore: a cream-colored fuzzy hat with ringlets knitted into it. As a little girl who had a pixie haircut and *ached* for long curls, I was overcome with joy.

My other grandmother, the Laurence Welk grandma, was the grandma I adored—a steady presence during my childhood. Although Social Security was her only income, she always gave me and my four siblings several holiday gifts.

She would buy bits and bobs in the small-town dime store, and would wrap each one in plain green or red tissue paper, tied up with curly red ribbon for the green packages, and curly

green ribbon for the red ones.

To this day, every time I see that classic tissue gift wrap, I think of her...and how her simple gifts will always remain the most precious to me.

The Season for Shopping

Now that my girls have homes and kids of their own, John and I, over time, created traditions where gifts are an afterthought, not the main event. But it wasn't always this way.

Far from it.

Back in the day, when I was married to my first husband and my two daughters were young, I spent the weeks preceding Christmas in a flurry of mall-visits, searching Toys-R-Us for the perfect Cabbage Patch doll or My Little Pony, schlepping around overflowing bags until my arms ached.

Then came the real challenge: trying to find hiding places for all that booty!

When the girls got older, I trolled the aisles of Bon Marche, seeking that perfect sweater or the most fashionable jeans, then it was off to the big-box stores to select only the most gorgeous wrapping paper, ribbons and bows. All these shopping trips would culminate in a post-midnight wrap-a-thon late Christmas Eve night—often till two a.m. or later.

Christmas morning, I'd be so wiped out I could hardly enjoy the kids' present-opening. But there was no downtime after—I had to jump into preparing our big turkey dinner! Knowing how utterly exhausting the whole drill was going to be, no wonder I approached the holidays with some level of dread.

Some years later, I met a kindred spirit in John. He approached Christmas with the sense of wonder I hadn't had since childhood. And in the spirit of full disclosure, I admit he and I celebrated Christmas all year long. That is, we bought so many holiday gifts it took us the next twelve months to pay everything off.

Starting our lives together, John and I lived “in town,” the mid-sized city where we got married and worked and bought a house. But when he and I conceived a dream to start a homestead in the country and needed to save every dime, we had to stop running up our credit cards.

You may wonder: after lavishly buying Christmas gifts for many years of my life, how did I make a change toward simpler giving, and jump off the spending merry-go-round, without wrecking the holidays?

It didn't happen in one fell swoop. Changing my holiday habits took me years of soul-

searching, and being inspired by other people who had somehow managed to downsize Christmas. At the time, I was teaching a lot of creativity workshops—and discovered that creativity actually dovetailed quite a bit with this holiday downsizing idea.

In fact, I did so much reading and researching, pondering and writing about it I ended up creating a new workshop: “Simple Abundance for the Holidays,” which I taught at the local community college.

Even after immersing myself in this entirely new mindset, I had to give myself lots of pep talks too. I was dealing with the inevitable apprehension, *will so and so think I don't love them as much, by giving a smaller gift than last year?* And also stressing over the eternal Christmas question: *is this present good enough?*

Yet it was more than *telling* myself that Christmas isn't about gifts, it's about peace and optimism. I had to get to a place where I felt it in my heart.

Jingle All the Way...

“Oh, for the good old days, when people would stop Christmas shopping when they ran out of money.” —Author Unknown

To be honest, the new, low-impact gifting mindset I'd developed did come with new worries. You might have them too: *How will the people in my life handle the new minimal-gifting me? Will they think I'm cheap?*

But there's something about being intentional about what you buy that brings a different kind of peace to the holidays.

No matter what your financial situation is, very few of us can resist the immense, modern holiday industry, the advertising and marketing, the siren song of *buy, buy, buy*. The “shoulds” of giving. It seems that Christmas is all about “jingles”—as long as the jingling is the coins in your pocket.

Which makes me wonder, how did creating a happy holiday become associated with money? As in, the more you spend, the happier the holiday will be?

It's not surprising that John's and my new life in the country changed our gifting forever. Once we started living a good distance from the mid-sized city we had left, a vibrant spot full of entertainment and cultural opportunities, John and I spent less and less time in “town.”

We still made the trip for grocery runs, doctor appointments, and seeing friends. But trips to the mall dwindled, then stopped entirely. Not that we missed the city's movie theatres or restaurants (though I did miss the museums a tiny bit). Because the city, over the years, had turned into a traffic-clogged, sprawling commercial center.

As the years passed, John and I developed an increasingly practical, homesteady outlook, particularly when it came to holiday gifts. Spending on frou-frou items went out the window. As our shopping-avoidance evolved, I was amazed how much money we could save by simply not going into retail establishments!

But then came online shopping, along with its ease and convenience—and it stepped in to fill the void. And I hope you'll forgive me for stepping on my soapbox...

Earlier, I mentioned that Thanksgiving feels rather premature for starting the Christmas

season. (Never mind that the whole holiday industry, really, boots up in October: Christmas decorations, Christmas candy, Christmas ads, Christmas books and Christmas movies!)

But there's another reason—besides being “too early”—that I just can't get into starting the holiday season in late November. It's what's happened to Thanksgiving weekend.

I'm not quite sure how uber-commercialism crept into a holiday that was meant to be about gratitude. I'm guessing it's kind of like the frog in the pot of heating water: little by little, that poor critter got more and more uncomfortable until, before you know it, the situation hit the boiling point and that frog was a goner.

It's true, I used to anticipate Thanksgiving because I would see my family. And because Advent was just around the corner. And definitely for the food.

Now Thanksgiving, and for several days after, is all about sales! Pre-Black Friday/Black Friday/Black Friday Weekend deals. Yet there's more—Cyber Monday sales! I don't know if you still try to go online on from Thanksgiving Friday through Monday, but retail websites are hardly able to keep up without crashing.

Then there's “Giving Tuesday.” Designating a day for helping those in need and worthy causes is absolutely lovely. Or it would be, if so many retailers didn't find a way to simply extend the Black Friday sales all the way through Tuesday!

As for this crazy mess of online buying, and living in front of a screen at the end of November—well, the way things are going, with everybody loading pages/scrolling/shopping all at the same time, pretty soon the entire Internet for those six days will go the way of that poor frog: dead in the water.

It may not make sense, but John and I (people of modest means) would rather pay more for an item, then spend our precious life's energy Thanksgiving weekend clicking and waiting in front of ad-laden screens in hopes of scoring that sale. It's certainly the reason he and I will never be wealthy!

But living in the middle of a peaceful, beautiful woods, and knowing I wouldn't want to live anywhere else, I, and John too, feel rich in every way.

Better than Presents

I admit, even living where some people call “out in the middle of nowhere” there’s no escaping the commercial frenzy of modern Christmases. Catalogs jamming your mailbox... overpriced gift suggestions filling your favorite magazines...the social pressure to come up with something for everyone you know...

Pretty soon, you can just *feel* your Visa card screaming for mercy.

But if you need a break from Christmas commercialism, it’s fun to investigate the holiday rituals of other countries. Your time and attention is all that’s needed, not present-buying. Oh, wait: and eating yummy food.

In Sweden, the Christmas season begins December 13, when Swedes celebrate the feast day of Saint Lucia. Originally, it was the winter solstice celebration, since the date coincided with the Julian calendar’s solstice. Apparently, evil spirits were out and about on the solstice night, so you needed to keep alert. And what better way to stay awake than to turn up the lights (candles) and eat!

These beliefs evolved into a new tradition: young girls would wear an evergreen wreath with seven lighted candles upon their heads, and serve their families coffee and buns.

The magic seems to be that not many girls’ hair has caught on fire or else someone would have come up with a new way to celebrate! I understand that in Sweden, St. Lucia’s day has become a big deal: parades are held, and the stars of the show are girls in white dresses, holding candles and evergreens.

Light and warmth figures strongly in other Scandinavian traditions, including in Finland, like the burning of a gigantic Yule Log. Light is also a feature of German holiday traditions—Advent candles (and calendars) originated in Germany.

You might also like the Christmas rituals of Switzerland—apparently there’s lots of bell ringing, and people feast on huge homemade doughnuts called *ringli*. Maybe it’s the Danish who seem to truly embody the holiday spirit of love—giving each other baskets made from paper hearts filled with candy.

And the French custom of *le réveillon*, a big family meal that takes place after midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, must be really splendid (or magical), since everyone seems to have the

energy to stay awake for the big celebration.

When it comes to holiday magic and whimsy, however, the traditions of Iceland are the standouts! However, I've heard living in such an isolated, chilly environment, with volcanoes in your back yard and winters that seem mostly night-time, Icelandic people have a reputation for dwelling on the dark side.

Well, maybe that's true. Because they celebrate Christmas with a bit of dark humor: the legend of the Yule Lads.

The Lads are the 13 sons of mountain trolls who visit the towns and villages across Iceland to make mischief, do pranks, and pretty much wreak havoc on people's houses beginning on the 13 days before Christmas.

Each of the 13 trolls has a name that relates to his own brand of prank—think “Bowl Licker” or “Sausage Swiper.” *And* each troll gets his very own night to make trouble. If you've been good, the Yule Lad will leave a sweet or gift in your shoe. If you haven't, you don't get a lump of coal...you get a rotten potato.

Being a food gardener, I have encountered many a decomposed, nasty potato in my vegetable beds—so trust me, I'm convinced a rotten spud is far worse than coal.

Interestingly, the Scandinavian feature of seeking light coincides with the last Yule Lad's visit, “Candle Beggar.” On Christmas Eve, this lover of candles will try to sneak off with any unattended one he finds. What's really interesting is that naughty children get spoiled taters, but the Yule Lads' naughtiness goes unpunished!

While Yule Lads are all about myth, as a book lover, I love the more down-to-earth Icelandic celebration of “Jolabokaflođ”—a rough translation is “Christmas book flood.” People give books as gifts, and on Christmas Eve, the lucky recipients spend the evening reading and drinking hot chocolate, preferably in front of the fire. Sounds heavenly to me, especially if I've found a really great novel.

Christmas traditions in Italy are maybe the most poignant I've come across. Legend has it that when the Three Wise Men were traveling to see Baby Jesus, they passed La Befana, the Good Witch, busy sweeping and cleaning. The Wise Men pressed her to join them, but she would not leave her chores. They had to depart without her.

She suddenly changed her mind. But it was too late. Now, La Befana spends Christmas Eve wandering, in search of the Christ Child, whom she never finds. So in every home, she leaves gifts for each child, who is “holy” in her eyes.

Celebrations of Light

The Irish in antiquity were so attuned to wonder that they built a tomb, Newgrange, with an extraordinary design: sunlight penetrates into a special passage and illuminates an inner chamber *only* at the time of the winter solstice.

In the Northern Hemisphere, the Solstice and seeking light at Christmastime seem intertwined. Throughout the ages, the gift of the return of light, of life-giving sunshine has been reason to celebrate!

I know folks who set aside a day to observe the Solstice with a special gathering. While John and I don't do anything all that special for the solstice, we still rejoice to think of the light on its way, each day bringing the blessing of few more minutes of daylight.

Hanukkah brings yet more light to the winter holidays. Which I find very lovely, not only because some very special people we know celebrate it, but for the way the candle-lighting and blessings extend over eight days.

Living in the Pacific Northwest, at the 49th Parallel, John and I especially value light-centered celebrations—because we've had times, during the winter holidays, when we didn't have any.

One December, during the holiday season, the forecast was for epic rainfall—and we got a snowstorm instead. An unexpected snowfall at our place often brings concern, and this one, so close to Christmas, was no exception.

My anxiety mounted as first the Internet went out, then the power. As the inches accumulated, a cottonwood tree bent sideways over our narrow private lane, blocking the roadway. I not only had to cancel a needed trip to town, but fret about the soon-to-arrive Northeaster. And as it so often does, the weather system brought a power outage.

A day later, after the power was restored, I watched a TV show that follows a family—a madly-in-love couple and their three children—through the decades, and even into the future. This episode was an especially tender and heartrending one, centered around one of the sons and his long-estranged biological father. There was a moment when the younger man gently held his dying father's face between his hands. The older man was frightened of what was to come, but his son just held him, telling him to *breathe*.

Wrapped in an afghan, the Christmas tree lights glowing nearby, I was reminded of how small my worries were. Whether you're focusing on everyday troubles, or your heart is breaking, you can take a moment and do the same. Simply *breathe*.

In that pause, you might notice small wonders. They say the devil's in the details, but perhaps it's the *divine* that is in the details—like the slanting winter sun through the trees, the kindness in your neighbor's face, the gleam of a meteor shooting through the midnight sky.

Even if you're giving traditional winter holidays a pass, surely the end of the darkest days of the season, the beginning of longer daylight hours is worth paying attention to. Or even celebrating.

Happily, snowstorms or holiday stress, whatever it is, shall pass. So, as darkness falls on these chilly December nights, I hope you can put your mind and spirit on pause, and take in the marvels around you. And may you enjoy every moment of the season.

Bleak Holiday

The tales in this little book may give the impression that the holiday season should be pretty much all about sweetness and light. Certainly, the popularity of all the Hallmark holiday movies makes me think that a whole lot of people fantasize about having a merry, *perfect* Christmas.

But we all have hard times—definitely un-jolly and un-merry periods of our lives. And those times can inconveniently happen around Christmas.

Two Christmases ago, a crisis in our family was breaking my heart. The situation has since resolved, thank goodness, and everything has been steadily moving in a positive direction. Still, on the days leading up to that sad and difficult Christmas, and for many days after, I couldn't see any of the light I yearned for, or the gift of peace the holidays can bring.

Even after all these years, during the holiday season I still think about that young Ukrainian mother at the post office. Since she didn't have even \$28 in her bank account, I imagine she and her kids had a bleak holiday that year. I can only hope wherever they are, this year's Christmas is better.

But as I said, you don't always get to *choose* a merry holiday. Some years back, John and I had months on end of difficulties and heartbreak. For a long while, I couldn't imagine feeling peace or a sense of rightness again.

Garrison Keillor says being joyful is a large task for people from the Midwest, “where our idea of a compliment is, ‘It could have been worse.’”

But when it comes to that awful year, I sometimes think that it actually couldn't.

It had been a year of many sorrows and challenges—and surely any truthful account of it would be too disheartening to revisit, much less share. Still, here I am.

That difficult year began even before January first. The holiday season promised to be already sad—John and I were facing our first Christmas after his mother passed away. His childhood home had just been sold too—the place where he'd grown up, where he'd brought his kids for family holidays, where his parents had lived for 50 years—and he was grieving over the loss.

On New Year's Eve, I was cooking dinner when we found a voicemail on the phone—from a hospital in Phoenix, Arizona.

John's son had been in a car accident, hit by a distracted driver. My stepson's injuries were serious; after extensive surgeries, he was in no shape to care for himself, so John spent six weeks in Phoenix looking after him.

It was a lonely time for me—worried for my stepson, and trying to look after Berryridge Farm by myself in the darkest days of winter. With John away, I learned to be more self-sufficient, but I also got a taste of what widowhood might feel like.

John's return and the advent of spring was a lift, but the day after he got back, we got another phone call. It was John's brother—their sister's cancer had progressed and she had only a few weeks to live.

As it turned out, the time she had left was only days. Right away, we traveled to her care center on the other side of the state to say a final goodbye. She died two days after our visit. Losing her felt all the more poignant knowing she had struggled through illness for much of her life. And that she, who had such a generous and loving heart, and who adored kids, never had children of her own.

John's birthday begins one of the loveliest months of the year in the Foothills—the sun doesn't set until 10 o'clock. But the day I baked him a birthday cake, we faced a plague of tent caterpillars—a plague of such Biblical proportions we could never have imagined it. So it began, our month-long battle: we hand-killed caterpillars up to eight hours a day to save our orchard and berry plants.

The plague cycle finally worked its way out; the caterpillars died back. Still, I felt like I'd lost one precious month of my life.

John and I were just regrouping when we had another loss: our small flock of chickens was killed by a cougar. For the first time since we moved here, I wanted to get away from our place. Get away from the sad little corpses, from the feathers strewn around the chicken run, from the empty coop. Get away from the guilt we both felt—that we'd let our girls down by not protecting them. After so many blows this year, after this one, I couldn't seem to bounce back.

There's a verse in the Old Testament that has become part of the Christmas story: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

Looking back, I can see that it was the light that brought healing. Six weeks after we lost our chickens, I went to the Pacific Ocean coast with three of our grandchildren. At the beach one evening, I watched the setting sun and the silhouette of my granddaughter frolicking in the surf, and saw the golden-pink light bathing my grandsons' rapt faces as they played in the sand.

I felt an incandescent joy I hadn't experienced in a long time.

In November, John and I traveled to California to see his daughter and family—my first visit to her home. Warmed by the kids' bright little faces, being called Grandma by the children for the first time, walking on the beach in the sunshine, when at home it would be dark and cold, I felt my heart lift even more.

A few days later, John and I took our granddaughter to attend a big-city symphony orchestra—a concert featuring a young singing prodigy. Christmas lights were everywhere—the eighty-foot fir tree in the city center brought back the wonder of my childhood. At the performance of gorgeous music, I feasted my gaze on the stage lights playing on this young singer's face as she sang, the sequins on her gown sparkling, and the lighting behind the orchestra dancing in the changing hues of a rainbow. It was a transcendent evening.

So after the darkness, if you're patient, the light comes back to you. Right now is the time of winter solstice, the darkest days of the year, but if we can seek the light... The light and hope of the Christmas story, that speaks of a bright star that shone over a miracle, the light of generosity that the season brings.

Sometimes you can create your *own* light. Years ago, John and I experienced a Christmas Day when a storm had knocked the power out, and the snowy roads kept us housebound. It sure didn't feel festive, with the dark Christmas tree, and no holiday meal—only leftovers heated on top of the woodstove.

But as the dusk fell, John and I sat in the dark together, and exchanged holiday memories from our childhoods. And that seemingly bleak holiday didn't seem so dark and cheerless after all.

In the midst of Christmastime sadness or challenges, I try to take comfort from simple things—a cozy fire in the woodstove, my favorite holiday decorations, rereading the Christmas Story...all of which makes me believe the light will always return.

Traveling Through Time

I wrote this poem some years ago, and as poetry is not my strength, I kept it under cover and to myself. However, I finally got the nerve to publish it in my December 2022 Substack—and having gathered all that courage to share it, I decided I might as well do it again!

The Ghosts of Christmas Past

Five years young.

Speechless in wonder, gazing at the plate glass windows of Dayton's department store in Minneapolis.

Behind the glass are no motionless mannequins in the latest fashions; these windows are filled with holiday scenes, like a living fairy tale

Dolls in Victorian dress, almost my size, who blink, lifting their arms and nodding their heads like magic.

Despite the cold, I could've stayed there forever.

But it's time to move along.

Dad has driven our whole family sixty-five miles with something else in mind: so we four kids could sit on Santa's lap and have our picture taken.

Another Christmas, another visit to Dayton's

To ride a mini-train through an indoor Christmas wonderland of "snow" and glitter

And fairy lights,

Elves half-hidden in the mounds of white. I can still see it, and feel the enchantment.

The years of believing blend together, scenes in my mind flowing one into the next.

At home. Christmas Eve. I'm curled up next to the grandmother I adore, on the old rec room couch,

Feeling utterly safe and loved, watching Mitch Miller and Lawrence Welk, Grandma's favorite shows. The sweet contraltos of the Lennon Sisters blend together for "White Christmas," when Mom and Dad call from upstairs.

"Come up! Santa's been here!"

I race up the stairs to find a blond bride doll for me, about the size of the dolls in the store window. Oh, I believed!

I didn't hear Santa come, but of course he did! How else would the doll in the lacy white gown

Appear under the tree?

Another Christmas. Our aunt in Toronto has sent a package:

Inside is a gigantic Christmas stocking for each of us, handmade of felt, trimmed with gold ribbon and

rick-rack. Mine is red, with "S-u-s-i-e" in green felt letters sewn across the top.

Imagine, my very own, specially-made Christmas stocking!

And that's not all. My eyes widen to find an Advent calendar too, Christmas images adorned with sparkles, the first one I've ever seen.

I glow with pleasure, taking turns with my sisters and brother each day

Opening up a tiny window to reveal a magical Christmas scene.

Eight years old. The last Christmas I believed.

I awaken to find a small, slim doll with a perfect blond beehive hairdo

Next to my red "Susie" stocking.

My first Barbie!

Then my Christmas memories fade and turn to black, like turning off a TV.

Leaving only a tiny dot of light in the middle of the screen.

Christmas Eve, a lifetime later. I'm sewing by lamplight

In a shabby mobile home next to a bare, wind-swept cornfield. It's past midnight,

But I'm staying up late to finish my baby's red felt stocking before Christmas morning.

I take the last stitch, hold up the stocking to admire. It's decorated with gold rick-rack and

tiny bells

With a name, cut from green felt, sewn across the top. My baby girl's name.

The dot expands to light. I sense the magic again. It's her turn to believe.

Christmas Eve, two years later. I'm sewing by lamplight

In the chilly back bedroom of my in-laws' home, next to a bare, wind-swept cornfield. It's
past midnight,

But I'm staying up late to finish my baby's red felt stocking before Christmas morning.

I take the last stitch, hold up the stocking to admire. It's decorated with green sequins and
tiny bells

With a name, cut from green felt, sewn across the top. My newborn baby girl's name.

The dot expands to light. The magic returns. It's her turn to believe.

Extending Your Holidays

Do you feel a bit of a letdown at the end of Christmas Day?

All the sparkle and spirit and celebrating is over, folks are tired and cranky, and all that's left is cleaning up. Sure, New Year's Eve is only one week away, but it doesn't really have the special anticipation and magic of the Big Kahuna: Christmas.

But to paraphrase Mr. Rogers: *at the end of something there's always the beginning of something else*. So as Christmas Day winds down, it doesn't need to be over at 12:01 am, December 26. You can jump into another tradition, as featured in the old carol: the Twelve Days of Christmas!

These Twelve Days aren't the ones leading up to Christmas, like with the Icelandic Yule Lads. These Twelve start on Christmas Day, and go into early January.

Okay, in our modern times, this stretch of days is no longer all about partridges or pear trees or golden rings or maids a'milking (how many again?). But what's to stop you from extending your celebrations?

You can still play holiday music, create a festive meal(s), and maybe enjoy all the contemplative moments about of the meaning of the holidays you missed out on because you were too busy. The Twelve Days go all the way through Twelfth Night, January 5th, and soon it's Epiphany, January 6.

And if you'd like another idea for stretching out your celebrations... In Ireland, there's an old-time tradition on the 12th day of Christmas: "Women's Christmas," or *Nollaig na mBan*. The men stay home, while females of all ages—toddlers to girls, mothers to elders—get together for feasting and dancing. These days, you might find a Women's Christmas gathering only in Ireland's rural areas. Still, you can start your own!

In any event, you can embrace all those lovely holiday feelings of gratitude and love and abundance a little longer. If you've made New Year's resolutions, why not postpone starting them until January 7? Instead, keep the tree up, bake another batch of holiday cookies, and break out the bubbly/sparkling cider.

On Twelfth Night, you can dance to the "Wassail Song," and toast the wonderfulness of life!

A Good Christmas

“Myth is something that never was but always is.” —Thomas Mann

As I write this, it’s the day of the Winter Solstice. An ethereal mist is drifting through the Foothills, giving an otherworldly aspect to the landscape. It puts me in a reflective mood, and I’m thinking over the last few weeks of this year’s holiday season.

Every December 1st, when I bring out my Advent Calendars, I also pull out a worn manila folder I store with my Christmas stuff. In the folder, I keep a stack of holiday articles I’ve collected over the years.

In the weeks before Christmas, I always re-read three of the most thoughtful and transcendent pieces of my collection—the articles that take on the Big Christmas Questions. Like eternal truth. Spiritual and religious beliefs. Or why the holiday myths will always resonate.

There’s a couple of really lovely essays by a writer who was also a Congregationalist minister. The third article is a yellowed newspaper clipping, as faded as the other two, written by a columnist who explores the idea of a “perfect” Christmas.

So let’s step back even further through the mists of time...

This journalist relates a very special Christmas Eve 55 years ago: the night the Apollo 8 spacecraft orbited the moon for the first time. Inside the craft, three astronauts, Frank Borman, James Lovell, and William Anderson were televised passing a bible back and forth between them, reading aloud. They’d chosen the Book of Genesis, sharing the verses about the Creation.

Yet it was a Christmas message all the same. The meaning, coming across loud and clear from so many thousands and thousands of miles away, was that we don’t need perfect; all we need is *good*.

Bidding goodnight to the American people, that Christmas Eve of 1968, Mr. Borman said, “Merry Christmas, God bless all of you. All of you on the good Earth.”

It’s my wish for you and yours too. Be well, and may you experience holidays that bring you comfort and light.

Little Farm in the Foothills
A Boomer Couple's Search for the Slow Life
Little Farm in the Foothills Series, Book 1
Susan Colleen Browne

Here's Chapter 1 of my first homesteading memoir, *Little Farm in the Foothills: A Boomer Couple's Search for the Slow Life*. Like *Little Farm Homegrown*, the second book of the Little Farm series, Book 1 is a warmhearted, true-life story for gardeners, nature-lovers, and dreamers of all ages!

1 * Seeking Walden

It's said that if you want to figure out your life's passion, look at what you loved as a child. When I was growing up, I loved Barbies. You might think, there's a girl who'll go far, what with Astronaut Barbie and Internist Barbie and Professional Figure Skater Barbie. Actually, I predate all those ambitious, take-the-world-by-the-horns Barbies. In *my* time, back in the sixties, all Barbie did was sit around and look hot and wait for Ken to ask her out.

But I also loved to read, especially fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty*, and stories about gutsy, courageous girls like Jo March and Laura Ingalls. And when I wasn't reading or hanging out with Barbie, Midge, and Skipper, I was playing in the woods behind our house. Maybe I was living out fantasies inspired by *Sleeping Beauty's* forest hideaway, or Laura's "Little House" series, but I found my bliss climbing trees, building forts and riding my bike around Woodland Hills, a new development perched on the rural edge of St. Cloud, Minnesota.

My husband, John, was an outdoorsy kid too, with a childhood a lot like mine. (Minus the Barbies.) Your mother sent you outside to play after breakfast, and except for lunch, you were supposed to stay there until it got dark or dinnertime, whichever came first. But then, you didn't really want to be indoors anyway. Certainly not John—from what I can tell, he *lived* "The Dangerous Book for Boys." He'd roam nearby woods and fields with his little gang of friends, playing Robin Hood or cowboys and Indians, coming home so dirty his mom would have to hose him down.

Later, as a young husband and father, John got his fresh air nurturing a small vegetable plot for his family. But it could be the outdoor activities so many of us love as adults, like camping, hiking, and gardening—and I hear vacations on working farms are getting popular!—are a way to free our inner tree-climbing, mud-lovin’ child. To return to a simpler time, when most people lived on farms—or at least *knew* a farmer. A time when you spent far more of your life outside than in.

Whatever it is, I never stopped loving the outdoors, and John never lost his longing for wide open spaces...a love and longing we indulged with our mutual passion for gardening. But there came a time when we both yearned for a deeper connection with the land...for a more peaceful life, one more attuned to nature’s pace. Okay, that sounds pretty highfalutin’—all we *thought* we wanted was more room for a kitchen garden, and a little quiet in which to enjoy it. Regardless of our goal, our journey to that life began the day we reached our tipping point with urban noise and traffic and crowds...when John and I bucked our play-it-safe, risk-averse natures and decided to leave the city. *Little Farm in the Foothills* is the tale of our fifty-something leap of faith, to seek out a slower, simpler, and more serene lifestyle on a rural acreage. And embrace a whole new way of living.

Who’d have guessed how complicated “simplicity” could get. Or that serenity and reinventing your life was no match made in heaven.

Before I hit my Boomer years, I’d never seriously considered living in the country.

Despite my woods-playing, I hadn’t spent much time in the true boondocks. In elementary school, I’d been a Campfire Girl, but my group never went camping or sat around a campfire—much less lit one. I’d gone tent camping exactly once in my life, a post-high school girlfriend getaway memorable only for the fact that for the entire three days, we’d frozen our eighteen-year-old tushies off. In June!

Anyhow, I’m all for city comforts. Call me picky (I’m the first to admit I’m annoyingly germ-conscious), but I’d always been sort of revolted by the idea of an on-site septic system. There’s all that “stuff” in a tank right next to your house, for Pete’s sake. And I liked city water. The only well water I’d tasted was loaded with sulfurous compounds, and the rotten-egg smell wafting up from your glass would set off a gag reflex. I didn’t want water from just *anywhere*—it could be unhygienic, okay? I have a B.S. in environmental studies. I *know* about contaminated

groundwater. I wanted my drinking water from nice clean municipal water treatment plants.

But water was only a side issue. In my youth, I'd had the kind of country experience that would turn most people off permanently...

Praise for Little Farm in the Foothills

“The Browne’s foray into slower living...is an enjoyable read. Their delightful, yet very real, experiences in making the big leap toward their dreams make for a humorous and charming book.” —Washington State Librarian Jan Walsh

“A delightful account.” —*The Bellingham Herald*

Little Farm in the Foothills is available for free at your local library; you can request the print or ebook version. You can also order a print copy at your neighborhood bookstore, or find the ebook at your favorite online retailer!

About the Author

Susan Colleen Browne is a graduate of the College of the Environment , Western Washington University. She’s the author of an award-winning memoir, *Little Farm in the Foothills*, the sequel, *Little Farm Homegrown*, and a food gardening guide, *Little Farm in the Garden*.

Susan weaves her love of Ireland and her passion for country living into her Village of Ballydara series, novels and stories of love, friendship and family set in the Irish countryside. Her latest Irish novels are *Becoming Emma* and *The Fairy Cottage of Ballydara*, with more books on the way!

She has also created a fantasy-adventure series for tweens set in the Pacific Northwest. A community college instructor, Susan runs a little homestead with her husband John in the Pacific Northwest, USA.

When Susan isn’t wrangling chickens or tending vegetable beds, she’s working on her next Village of Ballydara book!

Books by Susan Colleen Browne

The Village of Ballydara Series

It Only Takes Once, Book 1 (print and ebook)

Mother Love, Book 2 (print and ebook)

The Hopeful Romantic, Book 3 (print and ebook)

The Galway Girls, Book 4 (print and ebook)

The Secret Well, short story ebook

A Christmas Visitor, short story ebook and the sequel to *The Secret Well*

The Little Irish Gift Shop, Book 5

Becoming Emma, Book 6

Becoming Emma, Special Edition

The Fairy Cottage of Ballydara, Book 7

Little Farm in the Foothills Series

Little Farm in the Foothills: A Boomer Couple's Search for the Slow Life, Book 1 (print and ebook)

Little Farm Homegrown: A Memoir of Food-Growing, Midlife, and Self-Reliance on a Small Homestead, Book 2 (print and ebook)

Little Farm in the Garden: A Practical Mini-Guide to Raising Selected Fruits and Vegetables Homestead-Style, Book 3 (print and ebook)

The Morgan Carey Series for Tweens, set in the Pacific Northwest

Morgan Carey and The Curse of the Corpse Bride, Book 1, a lighthearted Halloween story (print and ebook)

Morgan Carey and The Mystery of the Christmas Fairies, Book 2, a gentle fantasy (print and ebook), set in the Foothills!

The Secret Astoria Scavenger Hunt, Book 3, a haunted house adventure (print and ebook)

Susan's books are available for **free** in ebook and print format at your local library—all

you have to do is put in a request, or use an ebook library app.

You can also order them from your neighborhood bookstore or find them at your favorite online retailer!