

She was wrong by Shannon Chartrand

My seven siblings and I were 'nee pour un petit pain' - born for a small loaf of bread. But, we never settled for it.

Mom struggled to feed us. Clothes were optional. Sometimes, the only thing in the fridge was a bottle of Lime Rickey. That was for dad's hangovers. No one was allowed to touch it. There's the poison pill, alcohol addiction. It demolishes every family it touches. Dad was an intelligent man who never missed a day's work but his nemesis was alcohol.

When Sheila and I were born, Mom worried about contagious childhood diseases in a congested urban environment. How could she care for two sick babies and run a large household? She also feared her twins might be stolen when she placed us outside to sleep in the fresh air. We moved to the countryside.

Ironically, we did disappear when Mom placed us outside for a nap in our new rural setting. Frantically, she ran over to the school. Students and teachers combed the neighbourhood. We were found asleep in a brother's lower bunk bed. We had crawled out of our playpen, and up the stairs to the nearest bed.

I have a fondness for the tiny village where we spent the first decade of our lives. Ten people, including my parents, lived relatively peacefully in a three-bedroom summer cottage. There were rows, dishes broken and food plastered on the walls. There was also love and solidarity among siblings.

To escape the chaos, I wandered and explored the outdoors. I clawed out hiding places in towering snow banks. Trees made a good refuge. I once fell asleep in a tall tree and landed unconscious but intact. There was space for solitude. To this day, all tension dissipates when I feel the earth beneath my feet. I am transported to the peace of my childhood sanctuaries.

In our small village, there were no street lights and the roads were unpaved. Citizens commuted to work by train. Children skipped and played alleys in the middle of the road since cars were rare. Snowmen appeared with carrot noses and coal eyes. At night, fireflies and millions of stars completed our universe.

Though uninsulated, we lived year round in our summer cottage. Woollen blankets hung on the two kitchen door frames in winter, keeping the heat from Mom's cooking stove in the kitchen.

Our parents slept in the master bedroom. Three girls had the room adjacent to the kitchen and five brothers slept in the third bedroom. Resourceful brother Bill broke a hole in the wall next to his upper bunk bed to store his candies.

Since water pipes froze in winter, all ablutions took place in the kitchen. A manual pump in the adjoining back gallery yielded well water with a little coaxing. Mom heated the water to refill the wash basin as needed.

I'd watch Dad and older siblings prepare for work,

I didn't know we were poor because most families were like us. I thought every father drank alcohol and arrived home glassy eyed and belligerent.

Money was scarce and the women were resourceful. Every abled bodied family member found a job as soon as they were legally of age. Luxuries, like living room furniture and even a fridge began to appear in our house. The Bailiff visited us twice to reclaim furniture. I remember Mom picking up a small rug and flinging it at the back of a man's head, saying, "Here. You forgot this." She had a good aim. The Bailiff had an honour code. No beds were reclaimed.

The Johnson's held the title when it came to poverty. They had about sixteen children. Tragically, two of them drowned in their well. Mr. Johnson removed a living room wall so he could park his car indoors for the winter. Yes, he owned a car but little else.

The two Bracken families were financially comfortable. Old lady Bracken owned one of the few phones in town. One could use it in an emergency but had to leave a nickel by the phone.

Mrs. Alarie, an adjacent neighbour, was a short, plump woman with premature white hair. Her complexion had a sallow tinge to it. Her laugh was raucous probably due to chain smoking. She lived on tea and cigarettes. Cooking was not her forte. Breakfast was toast, butter and sugar. Lunch and dinner came out of a can - spaghetti or beans.

One day, Mom had a physical altercation with Mrs. Alarie upon learning that she was having sex with one of my teenage brothers. We stood outside the Alarie

home, listening to the yelling and watching as chairs and dishes flew by the window.

The Dockrill's had seven children. The entire family slept in two beds. The parents got the honeymoon suite. The girls and boys slept in the other bedroom. There were no mattresses just ropes and springs. Sheets and blankets were not much more than rags. There was no toilet. A large pot, euphemistically called a 'honey pot', was kept in a bedroom. Ironically, they would later own one of the few phones in town.

Mrs. Dockerill was obese at about two hundred pounds. Her walking was laboured. Her seventh child was a surprise to everyone, including her. Mr. Dockerill was a tall, slim man who wore a business suit and tie. He gambled away a lot of his money which kept the family poor.

One fine Easter day, our parents were leaning over the fence, chatting amiably with the Breakers. Someone in our family noticed the Breaker's dog running down the street with our Easter ham clamped firmly in its jaws. Now, we couldn't afford to buy a ham. It might have been sent from our grandfather in Montreal. Needless to say, brother Gerald ran after Buster. It is unclear who won, the dog or Gerald. The Breakers were laughing. We weren't.

Two matronly ladies, who were summer residents only, could be seen bent over their vegetable garden, tending their crops. They wore large straw hats and cotton dresses. They kept to themselves. I heard they were nuns. I used to stand at the wire fence and watch them. They couldn't have been impressed by the rowdy families around them.

The Stacks lived on the corner of our street. I was friends with Sheila Stack. Both her parents worked in Montreal so the five or six children peeled potatoes and vegetables which sat on the stove in pots of cold water. They set the table so Mrs. Stack only had to cook the meal. I ate dinner there once. Lamb chops with mint sauce was served along with vegetables. It was delicious. I was impressed with the pre-planning and organization. Our mom did everything herself. Why she didn't put her eight children to work, I'll never know.

One day, old lady Crowe knocked on our door. Mom answered, flanked by Sheila and me. Mrs. Crowe had never been to our house before. She said Sheila and I had been riding our bikes past her house and calling her names. We had been given our first second hand bikes. We rode further up the street than we had ever been before. In our glee, I guess we were hooting and hollering. Without asking,

Mom began pounding Sheila and me, alternately, on the top of our heads. We never defended ourselves. We hadn't noticed her house or anybody else's. Mrs. Crowe was deaf and an alcoholic. Sister Joan had once tripped over her booze sodden body in the middle of the street in the black of night. Still, Mom believed her without asking us if it was true.

Another neighbour, the Johnson's, had about nineteen children. Tragically, two or three of their babies drowned in their well. The story around town was that the old man removed a wall of their house to park his car in the living room. He didn't want to leave it outside in winter. His car mattered more than his children.

One woman, Mrs. Lauder, was a single parent with three boys and a daughter. Her husband had been arrested for bigamy and shipped back to England. She was a cheerful soul living in a tiny shack. When her boys came over to play with us, dad used to call them Kevin, Bevin and Seven. It was easier than remembering their names. There must have been some kind of social assistance because I don't remember the mom working. One day, she invited Sheila and me to go with them to Belmont Park. She was a generous soul.

Despite their poverty, her eldest, Michael, became a doctor. I shake my head wondering where the money came from.

Leo Tolstoy wrote "All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." When alcohol dependency enters the equation, otherwise happy families don't have a chance.

Children are like ripe fruit. They bruise easily. In the lottery which is birth, children born into alcoholic homes are born into strife. With ingenuity and hard work, one might overcome early trauma or carry that baggage into adulthood.

Mom forecasted doom for her children. Though a non-believer, Mom liked to quote the Bible when it served her purposes. One of her favourites was "The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children." We, too, would grow up to be alcoholics. In our case, she was wrong.