

Womb Mate
by Shannon Chartrand

Each time I saunter down a dirt path, I am transported back to my childhood where I soaked up the world through osmosis. My twin and I spent our first ten years in a small village; we were feral cats, free to roam.

Mom had her first child at twenty-five and her last at forty-five. Three cheers for menopause. Sheila and I were fraternal twins born towards the end of the family. Mom weighed ninety pounds when she got pregnant with us. She was hospitalized in the third trimester because her body couldn't handle the weight. She was x-rayed to see what was going on. An excited young doctor delivered the news:

“Mrs. Hennessy, you are having twins!”

Mom expelled the contents of her stomach. The doctor was the main recipient. She already had five young children at home.

Family life was chaotic with ten people living in a three bedroom cottage but I could always find tranquility outdoors. A makeshift teepee or snow fort filled the bill. Once, I climbed to the top of a big tree clutching my doll. I snuggled into the crux of a branch and sang a lullaby to my doll. I fell asleep and awoke on the ground with my mother peering into my eyes. I had been knocked unconscious as I descended through the branches. I needed to find a safer place for solitude.

Sheila and I were not allowed out after dark. All games ceased in late afternoon. We were surprised, then, when Mom sent us out, unsupervised, for our first Halloween. We were fledglings forced to fly solo. The thought of candy was motivation enough. Plus, we were proud that our mother felt we were old enough, at six, to venture into the mysterious darkness.

The streets were unpaved and there were no sidewalks or streetlights. The sole vehicle in town was owned by the Mayor. He sped down those roads in a cloud of dust. Once, he stopped to offer us a ride on our way to the post office. We climbed into the back of his pickup. We bounced and swayed until Sheila was thrown off his truck. Two teenagers picked her up, bloodied and bruised but otherwise unharmed. I watched helplessly as the Mayor sped ahead, oblivious to the fact that he had one less passenger.

As Sheila and I headed out for trick or treating, the moon illuminated our way. The houses were widely spaced. Fields and wooded areas looked ominous. We clung to each other in our makeshift costumes, cobbled together from older siblings meagre wardrobes. We were disguised as miniature adults.

Suddenly, we tripped over an immovable object in the middle of the road. We ran screaming to the nearest house. The door opened.

“There’s a dead person in the road,” we said.

Upon examination with a flashlight, the homeowner said,

“That’s Mrs. Crowe. She gets drunk after work in Montreal and takes a later train than the rest of the town. Sometimes, she’s found in a ditch. My husband will take her home,” said the woman. Mrs. Crowe had a beautiful daughter who left home and was never heard from again. Who can blame her. We thought Mrs. Crowe was aptly named. Crows can be scary.

Sheila and I decided to skip the next house despite the decorations. Mrs. Dalton wore a hair net on her mostly bald head. Her hair had been snagged by a machine at

her workshop. We didn't want to see her gruesome head. Mr. Dalton had vanished long ago.

Mrs. Dockrill was generous with candy, so we knocked on her door. A pungent whiff of urine and feces assaulted our senses. There was no plumbing. Like us, ten people shared three bedrooms. A 'honey pot' or commode was kept in the boys' room. A bathtub served as a dirty laundry receptacle. We nicknamed their youngest 'Candlesticks' behind his back. His nose was always running.

Ironically, slim Mr. Dockrill went to his office job in Montreal dressed in a starched shirt, suit and tie. The word in town was that he earned good money but gambled it away. Mrs. Dockrill was an obese, jolly soul. She wore house dresses the size of table cloths. Proud of her husband, she kept him looking prosperous.

At the Livingston's, we found the father passed out on the dirt path leading to the door. We saw his wife peering at us through a window. She drew the curtain closed. We knew better than to step over her husband to ask for candy. Eventually, Mrs. Livingston ran away with a neighbour's husband. She was an attractive woman who went to the city to get her hair cut. Most did not go to hair salons.

Don't get me wrong, there were plenty of righteous folks in town. One day, Sheila and I saw a little girl playing in her sandbox, the only one in town. As a twin, I didn't know how it felt to play alone but imagined it must be lonely. We invited ourselves into the sandbox. No one chased us away so we had a grand old time with the Spriggs' girl. Naturally, we thought there'd be a good haul on Halloween night at her house. We were wrong. We each got an apple.

"You don't want to rot your teeth with candy," said Mrs. Spriggs.

Naturally, our teeth were not a priority on that night but we held our tongues and nodded in agreement.

Our first Halloween experience was a good one. We loved trick or treating on our own. Walking in the dark made us feel mature. Free candy was a bonus. Back home, Mom plundered our candy. She had run out and the kids were still knocking.

At ten years old, we moved to the city. The pavement was sweltering hot in the summer. We discovered public swimming pools. I learned about danger when a boy seized my neck and squeezed as hard as his little hands could manage. I didn't know him or his motivation. But, it taught me to beware. Not everyone is a friend.

In old age, I focus on my many blessings. I don't want to miss the beauty of the universe, such as, colossal clouds skidding across the sky, the warmth of the sun, a bird making a clicking sound, a rabbit nibbling on grass. My five granddaughters call with good news, such as, a successful school assignment or a job promotion. I tell them I'm proud of them. My job is to spur on the young. My reward is a granddaughter taking me out to lunch on my seventy-eighth birthday or the youngest begging for a sleepover at my house. How great is that.

My twin or womb mate, as I think of her, has crossed the line into the spirit world. She no longer answers the door to ghosts and goblins. As I write this story, I feel like half of a whole. She will be with me for the rest of my days. I will honour the magic of Halloween and the children who knock on my door. They represent the excited children Sheila and I were so many moons ago.