

Some of the words: Mystery

Grace Hols

Remember the saying “A picture is worth a thousand words”? Well, I have a lot of pictures: black and white, some already fading. So I am trying to write the words, or at least a few of them. This process involves an intimate study of a photo, to the point where I take a magnifying glass to zoom in and capture details otherwise overlooked. The result of all this is a growing collection of vignettes that I am calling “Some of the words.”

Introduction to *Mystery*

There is no actual photo for this piece. But the picture in my mind is sharp and clear. It is an image that emerged after hearing stories from my mother and from many of the other immigrant women in her circle as I was growing up. They are stories about leaving a country that may have been crowded, war-torn and broken, but that nevertheless offered a lifestyle much different from what they were to experience in northern Canada.

My mother had been a seamstress, and she liked to dress nicely. In Holland she didn't do much housework because her job was to sew for everyone. But a week after we arrived in northern BC in 1949 she was living in a leaky cabin in a remote logging camp, cooking for a group of men, the only woman around, no electricity or indoor plumbing, no vehicle, no telephone. There was no wallpaper, so she flattened grocery boxes and nailed up the cardboard to keep out the draft and provide a place to hang a photo of her parents. A few years later she was living in a new, though far-from-finished house on a remote farm, still no power, phone or plumbing. No vehicle either, until my dad walked 40 miles to pick up his new Ford tractor, which then became our transportation.

I do not remember ever hearing any complaints or negative talk about living conditions. My parents often spoke about how much they loved Canada, how right it was for them. They were young, still in their 20s when they arrived. They woke to each new day with a sense of adventure, of pioneering even, of building up a better place in which to raise their family and develop a community. They weren't the only immigrants in town, and they were all in it together. Mom

thought she “had it good.” Other women had arrived from Holland to live in hastily remodelled calf sheds or chicken barns.

It wasn't until I was older that I realized that many of the early immigrant women had little idea of what lay ahead of them, especially those who ended up in remote areas of Canada. My grandparents saved letters my mother wrote, some of which came back after they died. One of the first things my mother sent back was a note from the ship on the way across the ocean, and what she asked for has always tugged at my heart, because it became clear to me then that she did not have a clue about what she was in for. She may have needed work gloves and gardening gloves and rubber gloves, which she wouldn't be able to afford for a long time, but what she wanted her mother to send from Holland wouldn't have served any purpose until many years later. It prompted me to write this poem.

MYSTERY

with a razor blade my father released the pressure from under her blue nails:

the hay fork had come down hard and struck her unprotected fingers, but the thunderclouds burst long after the hay was under cover

my mother did not wear rubber gloves to wash and fill thousands of milk bottles, nor to pull milk cans from the water cooler, rubber being too elusive or too expensive for those early immigrant lifestyles, probably both

with bare hands she pulled down one-inch poplars, twisting the green trunks until they splintered and broke, the only sticks she could find to chase heifers out of the valuable oat field, and our dad away at work

in fact, she took her off her woollen mitts when she chopped through ice so the cows could drink, the wool newly knit and too valuable to soil

as a child I watched her fingers fly as she patched work pants worn beyond patching, almond nails darkened by soot from wood fires and kerosene socks that wouldn't light

so it surprised me, forty years later, when old letters were returned to Canada:

on that first crossing of the Atlantic, my mother had written home from the ship

“ma, I have forgotten my brown leather gloves in Holland ... please send them to me as soon as possible”