

Chapter One

Children Of The East Wind

“Good bye, Adam and Eve,” my mother used to say, “here comes the Big Bad Wolf.” I remember distinctly the first time I heard her use this expression. She had dolled me up in my best outfit-- short pants of bright canary yellow and a white blouse with a doily collar--and hoisted me to the top of a weathered fencepost that jutted up out of the earth in the wilderness of our garden. Here I sat, perched in a beam of sunlight.

“Wolf,” I echoed, and she squeezed me to her so tightly that tears sprang to my eyes, and then to hers. When I was older, I would learn that occasions accompanied by pain are often fixed fast in the memory like snapshots, but at the time of which I speak, I was barely two years old and my father had just run away from home.

I suppose my mother saw it coming, but if she did, she confided in no one. She had just turned forty, the season when self-counsel in despair is in full bloom. She would wait and see.

We stayed there for a long time in the stillness of our garden: me on the fence post and she with her arms wrapped tightly round my body, gazing off into a distance that was far beyond my childish horizon.

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He was a quiet man, my father, known as a wizard at restoring to glowing life any kind of gadget, electronic or electrical, that had gone on the blink--particularly radios.

He was something of a home-grown Thomas Edison, and like Edison, sometimes referred to, even by his closest pals, as “The Far-Away Man.”

Still, in spite of his dreamy preoccupation--his “elsewhereness”--everyone said he was a kind and attentive husband; a proud and doting parent to his three children.

But when Hitler’s polished jackboots goose-stepped across the face of Poland in 1939, my father began to grow restless, becoming increasingly agitated as the months of battle passed him by. The following year, as British troops were trapped at Dunkirk like so many brown rats, he reached the end of his tether, overcome at last by his heart’s gnawing need to be somewhere else.

This was no symptom of the war, nor was it any new craving. It was

an emptiness that had troubled him and grieved his parents throughout his haunted youth: an itch that they thought had been overcome and put to rest by marriage. But it had not. Like a fire in the coal bunker of an ocean liner, it had smouldered away far below the water line, unsuspected by the happy passengers sunning themselves on the decks above.

And so it happened that one day, my father opened the screen door, walked into the kitchen, pulled out a chair, sat down at the table, burst into tears, and confessed to my mother that he had joined up and was leaving in two days.

The Royal Canadian Air Force, he said, was in desperate need of radio men. There was a war on, he said, and before anyone else could realize what he was about to do, before anyone could stop him, he was gone. His departure was its own reply to any possible objection. My sisters, both older than I--one by ten years and the other by eight--knew far better than I the reasons for his going. From time to time I caught them looking at me as if in some way I had been the cause of his leaving them; as if I had somehow conspired with him to devastate their lives.

For a while our house was filled with awkward silences, and one of my earliest memories is of sitting on the floor listening to the ticking of the kitchen clock.

With his basic training complete, my father was posted three thousand miles away to a short-wave transmitting station on the West Coast: a station from which, with his high-powered, high-frequency communications equipment, he guided flying boats on their relentless round-the-clock hunt for enemy submarines in the Pacific Ocean. But his communications with the family he had left back East soon faded to little more than an occasional whisper, then to static, and then, finally, to utter silence.

My mother continued to write him faithful letters, always tucking in little private notes from my sisters, but he did not reply.

Now my mother began to despair. Other than the small compulsory portion of my father's pay that was mailed to her by the Air Force, she had no income. She had not worked for a salary since giving up her position with the telephone company to marry my father. But with the war on, there were no jobs left in our town---no jobs suitable for a woman: particularly a woman of forty with three children. In the years she had been bearing and raising her family, so much of the larger world had passed her by. Now, her options seemed pitifully few.

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We lived, in those days, in a rented four-square clapboard house (two

up two down) on a quiet, tree-lined residential street in a small Southern Ontario town. Our garden, backed by a jungle of chokecherry bushes, was curtained off from the front lawn by a row of towering Lombardy poplars, whose restless leaves not only foretold the weather but indicated the season as perfectly as any brass weather gauge. In autumn, their summer foliage of salamander green turned overnight to blazing gold, as if, in the hours of darkness, a master gilder had lovingly burnished each leaf by hand.

Beneath these whispering poplars dwelt Jeremiah, my pet turtle whom I had found sculling heavily through the long dew-soaked grass of our lawn one summer morning. Named for the prophet, (because of the “seething pot” his galvanized wash-tub became on hot August afternoons) he had in the middle of his square tin home a large stone for an island, and a floating board upon which he could clamber to bask in the sun. Occasionally he would contrive to wedge the board tightly between the rock and the sheer side of the tub, then, with a steady platform, claw himself up and teeter on the lip. Sometimes he splashed backwards into the water, and other times he would fall out onto the grass, where he would immediately set off like a wind-up toy tank--but always towards the North--to wherever he had been going the day I found him.

Often I would overtake him in the chokecherry bushes at the back of the garden, plodding doggedly on towards whatever it was that was calling him, and he would let out through his sharp beak a peevish, world-weary hiss as I lifted him warily by his scalloped carapace and restored him to his washtub kingdom.

After my father had gone, my mother gave up to my sisters the big, sunny south bedroom, and moved her few personal possessions into a small shadowed chamber on the north side of the house whose single windowpane peered out from under the sagging eyebrow of a rickety flight of outside wooden stairs. This window overlooked the garden, so that the hinged three-paned mirror of her dressing table formed a perfect triptych of reflected choke-cherries. Here, on the floor of her bedroom, I would play on rainy days, grating my toy cars and trucks endlessly back and forth across the patterned linoleum: beneath her dresser, the fire hall; under her bed the police station and the hoosegow, and in her clothes-closet, the service station and garage. Free air.

And it was here I had discovered not long before, at the back of this closet, beneath the imaginary burnt-orange gas pumps and the red india-rubber air hose, a loose plank: a plank which I could slide back and lift out, allowing me to peer down into a dim, dusty other-world beneath the

floorboards. I knew without a doubt that there were other beings down below--other living things--for I had glimpsed them sometimes, from the corner of my eye, scurrying down a hole or vanishing into a crack when they thought I wasn't looking: fat furry creatures with pink paws, whose busy black eyes peered up at me boldly through the green glass goggles of their Buck Rogers helmets. And it was there, in that underfloor world of wood-shavings and ancient sawdust, tucked as far back between the joists as it could possibly go, that I found the Shoebox-Bible.

I was lying flat on my stomach with my chin pressed hard against the exposed joists, my right arm stretched to the shuddering point, when my fingertips brushed against something that wasn't part of the house. My arm jerked back in shock. Could it be pirate treasure? A money-box perhaps? hidden, lost and forgotten by a long-dead miser? My curious fingers went questing once again.

Hooking the edges of the object with my fingernails, I finally managed to fish it up from the depths: up into the grey, watery light of my mother's bedroom.

It was an ordinary large, square shoe-box--one that might originally have contained galoshes. On one end was a label printed in blue script: *Clarke's Shoe Shop - For Finer Footwear, King Street, Phone 536W.*

Fearing that some live creature--one of those goggled things, perhaps--might fly out at my face, I lifted the lid slowly--gingerly--my heart clattering like the hooves of *The Highwayman's* horse on the cobbles. But I was sadly disappointed. There was nothing in the box but a nest of jumbled paper: scraps of coloured Christmas wrap, lids and bottoms of pulpy white cardboard pie boxes from the bakery, used envelopes turned inside out, handbills, paper napkins, labels from Campbell's Soup cans--anything with one blank side or space enough upon which to write, and every one of them covered with what I immediately recognized as my mother's spidery, old-fashioned handwriting.

Some of these sheets were torn from a cheap household note-pad: soft blank luxuries of pink, yellow, green and blue pastel to be densely covered on both sides with her looping hand; the ink from her old Parker pen bleeding out here and there into the absorbent paper like black, broken blood vessels.

On the back of a postcard-sized 1942 calendar from the nearby Supertest service station--its front a colourful painting of a woodland stream, in whose cool depths a pipe-smoking sportsman in hip waders, under the watchful eye of an amiable Irish setter, nets an iridescent beauty

of a trout--my mother had written this:

Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant:

also our bed is green.

The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of
fir.

I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.

As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the
daughters.

Song of Solomon 1:6-17; 2:1-2

and this:

By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth:

I sought him, but I found him not.

I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets,
and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul
loveth:

I sought him, but I found him not.

Song of Solomon 3:1-2

Circled in blue ink on the front of the calendar is the day my father
went away. February the thirteenth. It was a Friday.