

Places of the Heart column **Legacy** magazine

Along with the family mementoes arranged on my maple dresser stands a framed photo of a shack. Weathering has darkened its cedar boards, the white-silled windows sit askew in their frame, and the red-shingled roof slumps worryingly in the middle, but for nearly twenty years this modest shelter on a quarter-section near Two Hills was my pride and joy. I named it “Tulova,” for the village in Galicia my paternal grandparents had left behind to emigrate to Royal Park, Alberta, in the Ukrainian bloc settlements. Two Hills lay at their eastern reach.

I took the photo in the late Fall, when admittedly the “estate” was not at its best, the aspen poplars having lost all their leaves and the thick grasses and willow bushes around the shack having dried up completely, although there was probably still a clump or two of purple aster near the rickety stoop seducing a dawdling bumblebee.

I took the picture, got in my car, drove away on the gravel road straight south for six miles until I hit Highway 36, turned west, and never came back.

I had sold the place to the neighbour, who needed it more than I. He would crop hay for his cows, while I would be travelling and teaching and researching and conferencing, a life that made it harder and harder to arrange even a week or two in the shack, even in the summer when the land was in its parkland glory. For years I had rejoiced in the simplicity of a retreat to a shack without electricity or running water (I used coal oil lamps, I caught rainwater in a barrel, I chopped wood for the stove) but eventually I had to admit that I really did need to use a computer. For years and years I had taken daily walks through and around the bush bordering the cultivated fields and along cow trails in community pastures, breathing in the healing scents of wild prairie rose in June, of clover in July, of highbush cranberry in August while the trembling aspen shuddered in the breezes, until, catastrophically, the proverbial seven years of plague – tent caterpillars – visited the aspen parkland and writhing, black, shiny, masses of worms devastated the woods. I would watch them from my desk, devouring the willow bush right there shading the east-facing window, and in a mad rage against Nature herself I flew outdoors with the bright red canister of kerosene and doused the willow branches, gleefully witnessing the death agony of creatures whose hideous appetite was killing “my” woods.

Finally, not a couple of years later arrived the hanta virus on its long migration from south-western U.S. to B.C. to Alberta, and suddenly there were reports of farmers dying of sudden pulmonary failure in the farming communities of Alberta: they were breathing in the dried feces of infected deer mice as they swept out granaries and barns. My shack, with its spaces between cedar siding on the

outside and poplar logs on the inside, was Mouse City – I could hear their friendly scrabbling at night, and then the distressing “plop” of their little bodies taking nose dives into the slop pail – and I asked the Public Health nurse in Vegreville how I should protect myself. When she advised me never to sweep but only to daub with a damp cloth while wearing rubber gloves and a face mask each time I came to stay in the shack, I knew it was all over, this idyll in the Ukrainian-Canadian townships hard by the North Saskatchewan River.

It had begun in 1975, the summer I lived in the Frontenac Motel in Two Hills, researching the book that would be published in 1978, *All of Baba's Children*. Cooped up in a little room, dust blowing around in the motel forecourt from the highway, the August sun heating up the place like a grill, I was delighted by an invitation to visit friends of friends who had just bought a quarter-section “up the road” and were fixing it up. I sat in a lawn chair under a straw hat, fanned by a breeze coming off the field, while they transformed a shambolic log-and-plaster pile that had been the home of a Dmytro Sidor – a bachelor, it seemed, who had never needed to build anything larger nor had even dug a well - into a summer cottage. It looked very inviting, trim within its brightly-stained siding, wide-eyed with new window panes, blushing with nasturtiums and pansies transferred into a flowerbed by the broad-planked “front” door. Inside, in the wonderful coolness, the sun beaten off by the overhanging eaves, stood the gleaming porcelain and cast iron cook stove, a stack of spindly poplar logs neatly piled alongside, and in a corner hung a wooden box nailed onto the northern wall, an instant bookcase already nestling a Farmer's Almanac. I was enchanted, utterly.

Two summers later, the friends of friends had decided to move on to Toronto, and the property was for sale. I had just received my first royalty cheque from sales of *All of Baba's Children* and I knew this was no mere coincidence: I was meant to buy the place. Within weeks, I was not only its owner, I was its *chatelaine*, its lady of the manor, its resident troubadour. Although I had lived all my life in the parkland of Canada's great north-west territory, here in Tulova I was finally at home in it.

I learned what a saskatoon bush looks like and where to find marsh marigolds and how the mating wood grouse sings, I planted a windbreak of Scotch pines and rolled up old barbed wire fencing and learned to fire a semi-automatic .22, I outwitted the squirrels in the rafters and the ants in their hill under the window, I fired up the woodstove and baked pumpkin pies from the garden where pocket gophers had the first fruits of my labours, I harvested rosehips and dried them in a cheesecloth hanging in the breeze, I volunteered to sell hotdogs at the rodeo and I danced the polka with farmers at a Ukrainian wedding. I woke to morning birdsong and sat at night under the Milky Way, and the high morning when I first heard the plaintive honk of the geese forming up for the trip south, I knew that I too would soon be packing it in.

Two summers ago, I drove past the homestead for the first time since I sold it, half-expecting the new owner to have torn down the shack and ploughed the bush under for grazing land, but, no, the shack still stood, a little more sway-backed but upright and still merrily capped by red asphalt shingles. The bush was growing back – I could see the poplar saplings formed up like a virginal wood and hear how the sweet south-west wind rustled the leaves– and for a minute or two I wondered if the place was for sale.

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