

Beverley Brenna

Stories in the Wind

Standing knee deep in prairie sedges, hearing the first meadowlark of the year, my mother and I feel the wind tug against our skin, a dry, constant presence that scrapes its throat against bare branches and leans across the land, bearing witness to all that sky illuminates. Today the wind is heavy with memories, pulling from 1916, the year my mother was born, to the present, and I listen as my mother's stories fall into the arms of the waiting evening.

It's 1921, and she, not yet school-age, is playing on tin-can stilts in the yard, when Old Jones, a deaf-mute, strides up the road, dust on his clothes and on the hands he uses to gesture greetings and dispense dark chocolate. He'll stay a week, and maybe two, helping Grandad with the chores, until the wind pushes at his back and the next farm beckons.

It's 1924 and my mother is attending Squirrel Hills' school. Seven-year-old Johnny and his immigrant parents had just moved into the district, and the students were not being very receptive to him. On this particular day in September, a season when cases of peaches, pears, and plums were brought home from town to be preserved in glass jars for winter use, the girls are sitting under the shade of a caragana hedge, eating noon lunch. Mary opens her pail and gives a squeal of disappointment. On top of her sandwiches there is a piece of tissue paper, but the pear her mother had promised is missing. Immediately the students think of Johnny. They promise that if he owns up, they'll let him go. Dutifully, he confesses. Someone runs and tells the teacher. Johnny receives the strap. That afternoon the room is unusually quiet, except for Johnny's sobs. The next morning, Mary confides that her mother had found the pear, forgotten on the shelf at home.

My mother attends Normal School in Regina, the hundred dollar fee an obstacle until her grandmother sends a cheque. Without money for paints, she sits, embarrassed, in art class, until the instructor roughly arranges a loan. At age nineteen, she graduates, and, in January, heads to her first school. The train passes brittle fields, gaunt livestock standing hunch-shouldered against the wind. As the train slows around a bend, she catches sight of a group of hollow-eyed horses pawing the ground for what could only be the most meagre sustenance. But when the train whistles, the animals—transformed—lift their heads and run, manes and tails flowing, sun gleaming on their shin-

ing sides. This image becomes the inspiration for my mother's poem "Wild Horses," widely published in Copp-Clark's Grade VI Reader, *All Sails Set*.

It's 1936, and my mother is teaching in Outram, a hamlet near Estevan, Saskatchewan. The wind is parched, its voice lost in the roar of the Great Depression. My mother's salary, three-hundred-dollars a year, inspires alarm in the Ontario teaching community. The Ontario Teachers' Federation collects donations, and sends their Saskatchewan counterparts an extra bonus, based on current wages. My mother receives ten-dollars. The end of that year, wooden barrels arrive from Ontario farmers: relief apples, sent to skinny children grateful for the sweet, tart fruit.

It's 1942. My mother is spending summer vacation on the farm near Indian Head. She is digging potatoes with her father when the station agent arrives with the news. Her brother is missing overseas. In a daze, she goes into the house to find her mother, sewing at the treadle machine. "I know he's dead, dear," Grandma says in a small, tight voice. "I had a dream the other night." Then comes a letter, announcing Ken is a prisoner-of-war. Three years spent in the POW camp, and then, at war's end, he and his English bride return to Saskatchewan. The Americans had found him on the Death March south, after the Russian army invaded Germany. Fellow soldiers had resorted to eating shoe leather, falling in their tracks.

My parents, who met at Normal School, reconnect at University. My mother admires the tall, intellectual man who waits for her outside class. "Why didn't you ask me out years ago?" she asks. "I didn't have the money to entertain a girl," my father says. Her farming background parallel to his, my mother understands.

At our feet are crocuses, furry sepals drawing in the sun's faint warmth. My mother reaches down and plucks a hoary stem, touching velvet purple to her cheek. Kittens in the loft, potatoes in the cellar, Grandma's saskatoons preserved in tall glass jars: in some ways, farm kids had it easy. "I never saw her sitting down," she says about her mother, remembering the slender frame, the ragged hands. "She worked from dawn to dusk."

A bird darts from a fence post: flash of blue, then gone. Snow geese circle, bright wings trimming air, then wheel against the slough. Frog song; insect hum. My mother's words settle in this prairie world: Old Jones; Relief Apples; Johnny and the Pear. Like Coleridge's ancient mariner, my mother illuminates the past, makes and remakes the present. I'm grateful that the wind will bring these stories back to me, from time's dim glass, so that for golden moments it is me with berry pails, and stolen fruit, a brother lost—then found. Biting into wizened apples, it's me who tastes their tang. I marvel at my inheritance.

Against our cheeks the wind is whisper thin. A few bats hail through darkening sky, mosquitoes stitch against my sleeve. We turn towards the house, the porch light offering a yellow, faltering path. On Monday, entering my classroom, I hear the tapping of her shoes on wooden floors; at the chalk-

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board, she is neatly printing the day's lessons for eight grades. I see a Johnny in the warm eyes of every child I teach and, together, my mother and I resolve a different ending to his story.