

The Snow

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, September 2013

In the early years of our marriage we lived for a few years in Edmonton, Alberta, and I was jostling for space on a crowded city bus when the front doors of the bus opened, to again let in not just only another passenger, but also another blast of cold Arctic air. "Wow, you'd think we were in Siberia," the guy loudly announced, stomping the snow off his boots in the aisle beside me. Looking up at him I retorted, "No, this is NOT Siberia, and you should be very, very thankful that it's not," slouching lower in my seat and pulling my scarf tightly around my head.

Growing up on the north shores of Lake Erie in southern Ontario, the winters seemed colder and the snow seemed deeper as we trudged back and forth to school each day, coming home for lunch in between. Outside of the school perimeters the boys would gather in anticipation and regularly wash our faces with the snow and throw it down our coats and dresses. It became a ritual of sorts with seemingly little intervention from teachers or parents.

But before the winter snows started to blow, there was yet another yearly ritual my parents had established in Canada. "We are going to go and get the chickens tomorrow and get them ready and into the freezer," they would announce, as inwardly I would cringe. Off to a friend's farm they would go the next day, to first kill, then pile the dead fowl into their car and return to our modest home on a suburban street. Into the garage we would all assemble as huge pots of water were coming to a full boil on the kitchen stove. Into the water the chickens went, the plucked feathers then saved for pillows and "Federdecken". The gizzards were removed, individually bagged, and then out came the blow torch as my father would expertly singe the skins. That is a smell one never ever forgets. The freezer was filled with meat for the winter, and roast chicken was always a favorite.

With his chiseled cheekbones and shock of blonde hair, my father always looked much younger than his stated age. He loved the snow, and early in the mornings, he eagerly shoveled mounds out of the driveway before he started his 20 minute jaunt to the factory where he worked. I don't recall him ever having a sick day. "Oh, the snow in Siberia was so deep, up to the rooftop of the limestone hut," he would relay to me. "The entire village was paralyzed, not that there was anywhere to go anyways." My mother and her sister were delegated to milk cows for the collective farm, for no pay of course, getting up at 4 am every morning to start the weary trek to the aging dilapidated barns. The fierce winds whipped about through their thin clothes and the walls of the stalls, as their hands often became numb with frostbite. At night the howling of hungry wolves in the nearby hillside evoked yet another category of fear. After long days of milking my mother and her sister would return home, not knowing if there was going to be anything else to eat for the rest of the day. The children were crying as stomachs were empty more often not. "I always drank my fill of milk when I worked," my mom would tell me. "They weren't going to put one over on me! They couldn't make me give it back once it was I my stomach!" she would laugh. "Oh," my aunt shuddered, "not me. All those cats running around, drinking from the udders. Cat hairs in the milk in the pails. And all those mice too! UGH! I just couldn't do it! Ever!" The day came when my bold mother, exasperated by again having to return home to crying, hungry children, filled a bottle with milk and

hid it under her coat on the way out. "What do you have there?" the boss angrily demanded. "Can't you see!" she replied defiantly. "It's milk!" "Well, well, look how smart she now thinks she is," he teasingly berated her in front of the others. "You could go to prison for that, don't you know!" "Oh really", my brave mother retorted. "Well, that's fine then. Because you see, I will go for stealing the milk, and you will go also, for stealing the cream, which we watch you skim off of the milk every morning!" Instantly he was silenced, and from that day on every worker in the stalls was allowed to bring a liter of milk home for their waiting families.

This morning, as I wrapped my aunt's broken arm in a sling and examined the intact splint, I again think of the milk story. "I never, ever could drink it," she once again tells me, "as I recall other broken bones she has had in the past. I remain reverently silent. I love milk, and so does my mother, to this day.

"Hey, dad, remember how you always loved the snow!" I laugh as I reminded him of this a while ago. He sighs deeply and says, "Well Louise....not really....you know," with a faraway gaze in his eyes...