

Veronique's Dress

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I lived with wild animals. I was an explorer of my neighbourhood forest located on the footpath from the school to the main road. The inhabitants were moles, shrews, mice, chipmunks, squirrels, skunks, porcupines, jack rabbits, bears, and very shy deer. In the trees of every variety, birds nested, flew, and quarrelled. During winter, owls hunted and hooted. Chickadees hid under the pine branches that we made them move over during really bitter, blustery winter winds. I was a certified ragamuffin who had to be caught before going to school in "goodness sake" attire. Both parents entered the fray. I retained nothing. I continued exploring bird's nests, the higher up a tree the better. I was an expert on the colour of sloughs, ditch-water and the consistency of Cumberland gumbo, definitely clay and boot-sucking. I hung over the Big Stone rocks to check out schools of fingerlings. So it was tadpoles in the early spring and adult frogs in the late spring. In the summer, I went berry picking except I mixed in cute little frogs. They were really ugly toads and I was fired from that chore till I was really needed. As children we had an entire island to explore, it was a pig haven for a naturalist. There is nothing like plunging both hands into purple slough water to come up with a slimy wriggling specimen of an unidentified life form. I also had my own garden which I had to look after myself. Then I did duty hoeing the big potato patch. If I wasn't dirty, I was getting questionably unclean no matter what I had on.

I took to walking home from school with my cousin Veronique. She was a fourteen-year-old on her way to being tall, beautiful, and graceful. I was short, stocky with unruly hair, and I had snuck past my busy mother in whatever clothes I had assembled. On this day, I had to ask Veronique why she had not been at school yesterday.

My twelve-year-old mind did not understand her answer: "My mother could not get my dress dry enough" Enough to what? Iron? How could I understand? I was walking around in public and in board day light in dark long pants, plaid skirt and a top with horizontal stripes. I had escaped the house at the very last minute. Uncle Bill had come in for morning tea and had told me a story not to be missed. I was fully dressed like a turkey. I had run a comb through my hair—sort of. I galloped through the forest and landed with a thud on my desk. In my defence I was born to learn.

That lunch hour we walked briskly. The dress in question was creamy-coloured and cut in an A-line. Her auburn hair and natural grace made Veronique very attractive. Her mother was one of the best seamstresses in the village. I had a solution, make another dress. This dress piece had been sent by her older sister who worked in a big southern city. I had one more really helpful suggestion, she could make one from calico, the Bay had lots of it. Veronique said she did not wear calico prints that had been there a hundred years. I gave up, I knew nothing. Calico was only good for lining mukluks she told me.

Her brother Jimmy had won every prize for penmanship. He had a most elegant hand; I tried imitating him. When I really did my best I came in a distant second. Then, one spring, they closed their home, sold their livestock. They all moved to a mining town further north to find work and schools. The entire clan had existed in the 1700s as far east as Sault Ste. Marie, moved south, back north to Pembina, the upper Red River. The great-grandfather had been a drayman. We figured out they moved every century across the continent.

We were different from them; our lifestyle was foreign to them. The real difference did not occur to me till I went away to finish high school. In very early spring, I came to school to find it quite empty of male students. At noon some of the girls disappeared. Around 2 PM a few came back for the last class and to catch the school bus. They came back with dirty hands and faces and were smelling fishy. I had to ask, where had they been? Sucker Creek with spawning suckers and pitchforks. I was not allowed to go. The kids were acting delirious for a week, nobody got detention.

We have travelled far and wide because we started going away to school. Our village life had given avenues of interest that sustained us. I now live two blocks from the Milles Isle River, which has grey herons, countless birds and fishing possibilities. The buzz is in French, the kids try fishing. Today, I remember those cousins who had come to spend a hundred years with us.

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