

## **A Canadian Family Tree in a Kitchen Garden**

*Rebecca Bromwich*\*

They looked away when she did it, my parents I mean. When my father's mother folded the plastic produce bags and placed them gently in the kitchen drawer, they looked out the window. And, when she rinsed out the empty margarine jar and stacked it with others already there in the kitchen cupboard by the gas stove, next to the wooden clothes pegs, my father cleared his throat and brought up a new political subject. Looking back, I see that they were ashamed. It was 1983.

I remember the coarse fibre of her clothesline, and the strange looking dryer that squeezed the water out of fabric as you fed it through by hand. I remember that her hair was swept up in a bun. To me, her kitchen garden was a wonderland of cherries, peas, carrots, tomatoes and beans.

After, I must have asked about why she kept the plastic bags, or maybe it was my brother who asked. They scoffed in the car on the way home about the war, her old country, and the depression. About how you used to have to keep things.

My mother, who my grandmother had not recommended as a match for my father as 'too fine,' whispered that my grandmother's first home upon arriving in Canada, a homestead, had a dirt floor. In 1967, when they first met, my grandmother had asked her, my mother, if she had a garden. My mother had said no, to which my grandmother had smiled gently and replied: 'you will.'

In turn, my mother had only smiled a polite, careful, Canadian smile. Many years later, when I was grown too, my mother had told me she decided then and there she would be damned if she would ever have a garden. She would *not*. She had two university degrees and she was not about to be relegated to poverty and what she would a few years later start to call patriarchy. She intended to work on other things.

'Too fine' meant separated from a farm by only one generation, which was something my grandmother had not known then about her son's new girlfriend, who would become my mother.

I remember my grandfather, my mother's father, slathering butter on bread, his eyes twinkling as he talked about having ridden the rails in the depression after his parents' Saskatchewan crop failed in the dust bowl of the 1930s. He did not talk about his Cree grandmother. He also did not talk about the war. Driving in his longer, lower, wider Lincoln with his roll of hundred dollar bills and silver belt buckle bought with his savvy with math, salesmanship and good fortune in Calgary's oil boom. He would tell jokes about a bounty being placed on gophers when he was a child. He had a scar on his forehead which he had, as a small boy, been kicked there by a horse. His was a charming bravado. He wanted nothing to do with

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gardens just as my parents wanted nothing to do with farms, or the languages of the old countries of their parents, or foreign wars.

My parents were first in their families to be raised in suburbs, the first go to university. They had carefully, but maybe subconsciously, acquired urban, Anglo- Saxon whiteness. I was told my city was much like anywhere else in North America. My childhood was coloured orange shag, with tiffany lamps and faux-wood paneling. It involved polyester, macaroni and cheese, television, clipped, square lawns, and no gardens. But there was nothing to be done about my round face, brown hair, and dark hued skin.

I, who look like my grandmother, and my great-grandmother, and am a generation farther from the farm, far enough, my father says dismissively, for me to romanticize it, now have a kitchen garden, where we grow herbs and vegetables and over which we hung a clothesline. We recycle. I am learning how to grow things, from books mostly. My children, I hope, will feel beneath their blundeness, a sense of connectedness, a sense of their own history, rooted in the soil.