

City as Redhead

.....
ELIZABETH HAY

I MOVED TO OTTAWA IN 1992. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY RIPPLED OUT AROUND me, but I inhabited an old map, like something in the leather satchel of a medieval man. There was talk of a windmill on Dow's Lake, a gift from the grateful Dutch that nobody wanted. I wanted it. I wanted to hear through my open window the thud of heavy wooden sails turning in the wind, just as they clacked and turned in that old Hitchcock movie with Joel McCrea, the one where he realizes something is wrong because the windmill is going against the wind.

I had been away for eight years, living in Mexico and then New York City. I came home because I was homesick and I came to Ottawa because of family history, at least in part. Besides all the practical reasons for moving here was the bald fact, the deep truth that my grandmother died here essentially abandoned. She was an Elizabeth too.

Recently, urged on by my mother, who said it was the best book she had ever read, I made my way through *Moby Dick* and came upon these words about Ahab: "he found himself hard by the very latitude and longitude where his tormenting wound had been inflicted." I am hard by the nursing home on Powell Avenue where my grandmother lived out her final years after inflicting the wounds that still torment my mother.

Through the windows of our two-storey brick house in Old Ottawa South, I see a world that still has plenty of room. Back porches face each other across a grassy lane. Fences, held up with rotting posts, lean into gardens. Old free-standing garages shelter gardening tools and sometimes a car. From the roof of our neighbour's garage, bits of tattered shingle slide all summer long into the raspberry patch.

On my regular round, I have been in the habit of walking up Aylmer Avenue to the Sunnyside branch of the public library, then continuing down Bank Street past the Mayfair Movie Theatre, the bank, the post office in the 7-eleven, Paddy's Pub and the

dry cleaner's until I arrive at Fresh Fruit, where I buy our food. On the way home, grocery bags straining my arms, I pass the house belonging to the tiny trim woman with short silver hair who grows a trellised patch of the most beautiful roses; I pass the cul-de-sac where the friend used to live who said that Ottawa in the seventies was the Paris of the North, there were so many plays and movies to see, so many magazines to read; I pass the old gentleman who remembers hunting for bees in the hollyhocks that lined the alleys when he was a boy. Then this summer, in the same week that Mike the barber won the lottery and shut his doors on Seneca Street, Fresh Fruit announced its lease was not being renewed. With the closure, I lost one half of my bearings. I also lost the pleasure of seeing the most beautiful woman in Ottawa, Mahvash, the employee who became a friend for life when I described her beauty in a novel.

When we prepared to move into this house, I imagined building a stone fireplace in the back garden and cooking outside all summer long. Life in New York, in a tiny, dark apartment, had made me ravenous for the simple outside. To step through a screen door onto a back porch, then down the steps to the garden and around the side of the house and up the front steps and back into a house that had windows on all sides—this was my idea of heaven. I felt as the prairie farm girl did when she heard footsteps on a marble floor.

My study has windows on three sides, north, west,



Early painting by the author's mother, Jean Hay, of her mother, the redhead.

south. The weather rolls in over treetops and houses. On a summer evening, dappled light plays on the walls. I hear the sound of crows and semi-distant traffic, of Jack the beagle baying a few houses over. My study used to be a sunroom full of plants tended by

a botanist who watered them after his morning bath. He took mischievous pleasure in telling female neighbours that he watered them in the nude, which is why the windows were waist height.

Thanks to him, our garden has good bones. After a frost, it lies down like an old dog. The stone pathways and walls, carefully, lovingly made, come up through the expired weeds and flowers.

When I was a girl, we would drive from southwestern Ontario to see my grandmother, but not often. These are my first memories of Ottawa: my father behind the wheel on Bronson Avenue, getting lost and bad-tempered in the terrible summer heat, my mother seated beside him, distinctly on edge. Eventually we would find the nursing home and enter its old-people smell. Granny's small room, shared with a blind roommate,

She lit up at the sight of us, then managed to undo her welcome by letting us know we had neglected her, and we had.

.....
was on the second floor overlooking the street. She lit up at the sight of us, then managed to undo her welcome by letting us know we had neglected her, and we had.

She addressed me sentimentally as her only namesake, but she preferred my brothers, just as she preferred her sons. One brother especially, and one son. We would take her for a drive along Colonel By to a park, which one I wonder, and there we would sit awkwardly for a time. I remember that the flowerbeds

along Colonel By made me think of the tightly-curved hairdos of Ontario matrons.

After she died, my mother discovered a stash of her hairnets, dozens upon dozens of them, and said, "She must have thought she was going to live forever." Characteristically, my mother kept them. Years later my small daughter would take ballet lessons at the School of Dance on Catherine Street, and we would use Granny Stevie's hairnets when we put her hair in a bun. I have one of the packages on my desk as I write. "Intimate hair nets, the un-see-able nets, one size fits all hair do's, neutral. 59 cents." I lift the torn envelope to my nose and unbelievably I can smell the nursing home's bad breath.

If I want to unsettle my mother, all I have to do is mention Granny. I ask her what year Granny died, and immediately the air is awkward. My mother can't remember. She doesn't want to be reminded of that aggrieved figure in the nursing home, who found fault with everything she did. I am on my mother's side in this old argument. I believe her when she says her mother was a narrow, quarrelsome woman who cared about appearances, especially her own, and was never satisfied with anything or anybody, with the crucial exception of her eldest son. On him she doted. This family drama got played out in Renfrew, about sixty miles up the Ottawa Valley. There my mother was born, and there she lost her father when she was seven, a deep wound that could have been healed by maternal love, had Granny been a different sort of mother.

I am on my mother's side, but no less intrigued by my grandmother. My father has described her in three words: brisk, handsome, temper. She was a redhead. According to my mother, she always wore green, dark green with light green trim or light green with dark green trim, to the point where my mother could not

abide the colour. The first time my mother needed a full-length dress for a dance, Granny wrote from Renfrew to Freiman's department store on Rideau Street, requesting a suitable dress for a teenage girl, and putting ten dollars in the envelope. Within the week, the box arrived. My mother opened it with great excitement to find a dark green velvet dress.

After my mother married and moved away, Granny lived for a number of years in Ottawa with one of her sons until his wife, driven to the edge of a nervous breakdown, found herself standing on a bridge over the Ottawa River with no recollection of how she got there. After that, Granny moved into an apartment on Sunnyside Avenue that she shared with two other women. Sunnyside is a block from my house. My grandmother was a resident of this very neighbourhood until she moved into the nursing home in the Glebe, the neighbourhood of big old houses on the other side of the canal.

Living here, immersed in my mother's and grandmother's past, is more like living in old bathwater than on Melville's ocean, except for the waves of feeling. The first time we had a porch sale, in this city of porch sales, a genetic whirlwind whipped around inside me. I thought everything we sold should be dirt cheap, yet I was worried lest anyone walk off without paying, and at the same time I wanted to run away from anyone who approached and hated being asked the price of anything. The first time we gathered blueberries on a wild hill in the Ottawa Valley, I picked in an exquisitely happy frame of mind until, again no doubt for some genetic reason, I began to pick feverishly, work, work, work, more, more, more. It brought to mind my mother's kindred feeling for the peasant in a short story by Tolstoy—offered as much land as he could circumnavigate in a day, he died of exhaustion before the day was out.

I have musical accompaniment to these Scottish-

Canadian thoughts. All summer long the pipers of the Ceremonial Guard practice just to the west on the fields of Carleton University. Their tunes waft across Bronson Avenue and through the windows of my room. I could be in an old musical. "Macbeth on the Rideau." Personal history and national history bubble in the same theatrical pot.

In letters to friends when we first moved here, I described Ottawa as soft. New York City had been hard. In Ottawa people walked barefoot down the sidewalk, and not just children. It was a place from the fifties, protected, prosperous, a backwater. A place that suited the temperament of someone who loved the past. I started to read about the Rideau Canal, an author who considered it too beautiful to be called a canal and used 'waterway' instead. I read Norman Levine writing about Murray Street where he grew up, a part of the city that had an air of failure, he said, which he liked. I understood what he meant, and felt a great empathy. Despite the snow and the canal, which I loved, there was an awful uniformity about Ottawa, an absence of anything raunchy, which was profoundly depressing.

I reminded myself of what I liked. The Ottawa River, the view of it from the National Library, Glenn Gould's piano in the stairwell, the blood on the canal from skaters who had fallen, the boots tucked trustingly under benches while people went off to skate, the sound of a neighbour constantly shovelling snow. White-haired Madame was always the first one to shovel and did so more extensively than anyone else. One morning she swept her driveway clean of a light overnight dusting; it could have been her kitchen floor. Her cheeks turned pink and she was happy.

"What was the weather like when you were a child?" I ask my mother. And her voice relaxes and

her mind clarifies as she remembers the summers and winters of her childhood in the Ottawa Valley. She loved this part of the world for its pure air, cold lakes, rustic charms. She is surprised and pleased that I have ended up where she began.

It took me years, however, before I bicycled past my grandmother's nursing home on Powell Avenue. I was on my way to the National Library to do some research and instead of noting the name of the street and continuing on, as I always did, I turned right and bicycled its length, looking for the house number I had found in an old letter. I recognized the three-storey house with the wheel-chair ramp, the place my

grandmother called jail. More run-down, perhaps, but it looked run-down when she lived there. It had the force of an anti-magnet, pulling me even as it pushed me away. I felt my grandmother's deep loneliness and shallow understanding. I felt it as an ache and a pressure, the scabbed-over relationship she had with my mother. By pressure I mean something moral and artistic that's hard to put into words, but begging to be put into words.

I came home to write about all this and I've barely scratched the surface. I must think I'm going to live forever.