

He Flies Through the Air

It's a long car trip, all the way from southern Ontario to northern Quebec. Two parents and one child in the front seat, four kids in the back of the big-finned Ford. Every hour we stop, and another child gets to sit in the front. We sing and talk and eat sandwiches and tease and argue and sing some more, and drink and laugh and finally, sleep. Ages two to eight, four girls, one boy. We're the renegade branch of the family that left Quebec and moved to Ontario three years ago. It's time for a visit. It's the month of January.

Looking out the car window it seems like we're not moving. No, it's the roadworld rolling past as we stand still. The car is stopped, the road is moving. Trees come and go, large tall evergreens leaning eastward, buffeted by the western winds. As we ride this road heading north through Ontario, the snowbanks get higher and higher. We cross the border into Quebec and the roads are shinier with ice. Less houses now, more trees and hills and a glow of rose blue. An unbelievable purple paints the snow.

We are greeted by mountains of snow in this northern village; the roadbanks have climbed the telephone poles until the snow is at the wires. As we pull into my cousins' driveway, I am amazed by the tunnels of snow. Shouts! Kids come running out of them. Greetings. I head right for the tunnels. Cool world. They have dug a network of passageways, including an escape hatch out the top. These cousins of mine are something! I am totally impressed.

I marvel at how they fit everyone belly up to the supper table. There are seven of us and ten of them, including my aunt and uncle, seven boys, and one girl, the youngest.

I guess they decided to stop procreating once they got their 'girl'.

Curtain up on a lively scene. Ma tante Rachel, my mother's sister, is a gracious person who makes you feel welcome and gives you permission to be happy. Later, there is singing: funny songs, sentimental songs, drinking songs, songs where arms and hands are moving. Everyone is buzzed, pots of coffee, sugar pie. When cousin Danny sings he becomes that child in the song, asking his grandmother for a dance.

Up the road is mining country, copper and gold, all covered in dust and noise. But our cousins' village is more of a farming town. Barns everywhere. Summer is not that long up north so they build the barns BIG to store the hay and house the horses, cows, pigs, chickens, ducks, rabbits, stray cats, rats, mice, and spiders. The dog, of course, sleeps in the house.

Second day. We venture to a barn across the field. All is ice. We slide again and again across one stretch, each time farther and faster. Exhilaration! Outdoors, cold biting nostril, energy of excitement. We run to the barn. Within minutes we are swinging back and forth like Tarzan across the hayloft on a heavy jute rope, tumbling into the hay whilst screaming and cheering each other on.

How the boasting begins I don't know, but here it comes. Michel is walking along a beam, so high up that I'm getting dizzy watching him. Pierrot is doing backflips in the hay. Bobby is screaming that he can yell the loudest. Nobody argues with that. What about me? What can I do?

(Before continuing this story, I make two arguments in defence of my foolish actions:

'Walk a Mile in my Shoes' Defense'. Before judging me, dear reader, before rolling your eyes at my foolish actions, can you really say that you are sufficiently free of personal vanity to suppress the desire to out and out impress someone you consider important? Your indulgence is certainly appreciated.

'There but for Fortune Defense'. Could be you sister!

You notice that I have not used the 'Blame it on my Youth Defense'. Reason is that I still do foolish things, possibly with a more varied palette of disguises.)

Back to the barn.

I don't know how I got up here, possibly through a window in the gable. Yes, then up a ladder that's been put there to repair the lightning rods.

But here I am on the ROOF OF THE BARN! Oh my gosh, it's high. My cousins have gone outside, they're looking up.

'Careful! Look out! How'd you get up there? We're goin' to get in trouble. Come down!'

I'm in my glory, 'Hey cousins, look at me! I'm Superman! Look, I can walk like Charlie Chaplin!'

The roof is steep and slippery, but I am in a reverie, a waking dream. I begin to wave my arms and scream like I am losing my balance. I'm not, I'm in control. I have done this at the high dock at the lake. I have jumped off the back porch roof, lot's of times. The cousins are so frantic they're whispering. And each time at the lake I have jumped the forty feet to the water. I can do this. I know how deep the snow is, it must be eight or ten feet deep. I slide right to the edge. I look down. Everything is white. I do the 'I'm losing my balance' dance one last time. Who . . . ah!

Partly slipping, mostly deliberate, I let go of the edge. I am flying through the air. I'm the man at the circus leaping off the trapeze. I am Icarus. I am Lindbergh. I'm an eagle! Out into the air I go is a swam dive, arms reaching way out to the side, then the graceful curve as I plunge head first into the snow. Owwy Zowwy! There's a crust on the top that slams me through the woollen toque. Down I go, like a driven nail, into eight feet of snow, head down, feet up.

Before I have time to panic, my cousins have grabbed me by the heels and somehow pull me out. They are speechless. I have just missed the snow-buried tractor by an arm's length. I don't feel a thing, probably shock. I shake the snow off my face, brush it off my clothes, stamp my feet. I made it! I'm alive and kicking. A broad silly smile crosses my face. I let out the war whoop, Yoowoowoowoowoo!!

What? My cousins just stare at me. I don't understand why they aren't, you know, patting me on the back. Heading back across the field, they hang back, whispering. My head starts to hurt. I don't feel so good, like a bird with an injured wing. I'm a wild turkey slipping back across the ice. I can barely get my boots to come back up through the deep encrusted snow as we make our way across the yard. The sky is turning

orange and rose red. My breath is freezing on my eyebrows. My eyelids are sticking shut.

Later, at the long supper table there is talk and there is song. My cousins haven't said a word about my soaring exploit, my glorious lead. Michel is poking Pierrot in the ribs. He stands. He's going to make a speech, or more likely a joke. He stares at my mother. Finally, he speaks.

'You know, ma tante, our cousin, he's CRAA – ZEE!