

WAYNE CURTIS

## WAR BRIDE

LONG AGO IN MY SCHOOLDAYS, as far back as mid-April and the Easter holidays, my sisters, mother, and I looked forward to the month of May and, among other things, our annual picnic. In our family, it was a time when, at my mother's request, all the relations on my father's side—spinster aunts, bachelor uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins-by-marriage—got together at our place to celebrate the arrival of spring, Queen Victoria's birthday. This, along with our "move out" to the summer kitchen and fly fishing for black salmon, was a spring ritual that had been in my mother's extended family for generations and that she had brought with her from the United Kingdom to our northeastern New Brunswick farmhouse after marrying my father during WWII.

In the days leading up to the picnic Mamma kept herself busy preparing cakes, hams, potato scallops, and a variety of sandwiches. She also washed and pressed the big red and black tablecloth—used once a year on this day—that would be spread on the ground in the sunshine, in a place where everyone could see up and down two bends in the big river and near where a hardwood fire would be lighted to bake a salmon.

On the afternoon of May 24, 1957, when the fire was finally lit, blue smoke drifted out over the river that sparkled like a bed of jewels. Mamma wore her knee-length sun dress and high heels, Papa wore his new cotton spring trousers, my sisters wore their new Easter dresses, and I wore my white shirt and denim vest. Pockets of boisterous laughter could be heard for a long way on the water. Some of these people, which included woodsmen, farmers, and river guides—uncle Will was a butcher and uncle Jack, by his own admission, a horse veterinarian, though without documentation—were overweight and shabbily dressed, as they drank beer with Papa, who appeared to be relaxed and happy to dress up and take an afternoon off from work. As he set on a canoe seat with a beer in hand and joked with his old friends, I could tell there was nowhere in the world he would rather

be. There were whoops and even some inappropriate gestures made toward the women. Though not invited, Old George, our bachelor uncle from up the road—he had bad teeth, was flushed with whisky, and couldn't keep his hat from falling off his head—brought his fiddle and staggered around, scratching his bow in an attempt to play some old-time ditty. When he upset the teapot, Mamma asked him to leave.

“I wish there could be a government buy-back of every Jesus fiddle in this country,” she said in a quarrelsome tone. “No one is going to turn this day into a hoedown.”

Some children, dressed up for the occasion, were flying kites in the field in back of the riverbank. Others fished, their chrome rod-connecting ferules glinting from the bright sunlight, their lines hitting the water to leave long straight splashes with a “plunk” on the hook end. Sap flies swarmed like dust mites in a sunbeam or perhaps a swarm of locusts in a wheat field. Still, I figured that for Mamma the sun, laughter, and sweet-scented breeze would have brought in its cadence, the magical symbols of carousel music from the carnivals of her old home. “Oh, how I miss the aroma of English tea gardens in bloom,” she had said the previous day. “The sight of Maying brides, the ballets we used to dance to commemorate Sir Walter Scott’s ‘The Lady of the Lake.’” It was one of those rare moments when she opened up and said what she was truly feeling. It seemed like the more distance that grew between Mamma and the old country, the more extravagant the latter appeared. Her memory seemed to enhance her past—especially on days of foul, New Brunswick weather, which were many—and she clung to a collection of old mementos in an archivist compilation. Such was her mental state, but I always felt that if she would only speak more freely more often—put her thoughts out there for all to hear—we could all come to a common understanding of where she was coming from and where she wanted to go.

Some young people played horseshoes, while a few seniors—especially the men, having carried to the river their heavy wicker baskets of food—played cards. When the last of the provisions had been brought from the trunks of cars, fresh tea was steeped on the open fire, the fish was roasted—the fresh air having enhanced our appetites for a serving of spring salmon—and we were ready to eat. People jostled for the chairs that had been placed facing the river but away from the smoke.

“Another seven minutes,” Mamma said. “There is no need for ceremony here today. Relax, have a glass of wine.”

In truth, there was not that much magic in the northeastern flowerless spring. What made it special was my mother's presence—she was tall and handsome with electric blue eyes—and the fact that this was her big day. It was like everyone had become benevolent and wanted it to be a good outing for her sake and for our family's reputation, as there were rumours about Papa and Mamma not getting along. A few invitations went to Mamma's reading club as well as to her hairdresser, the Deputy Mayor of Spruce Landing, the school principal of Thornton, and the MLA for Northumberland County. And all the in-laws who were sent invitations—most of whom were not related but English—had her putting on a pensive air.

"I don't want anyone to say that I have been unfair when it came to entertaining your father's *kinfolk*," she said to me, frowning as she spoke.

We waited for the clang of the iron triangle that would signal to everyone that it was finally mealtime.

It was at this point that we noticed the down-river sky was suddenly very dark, and we heard a rumble that came from well beyond the treed horizon. Mother ignored this, as if all the cooking and planning—from the fish to the wine to the tea—had been too meticulously organized to be influenced by the weather. "By God, a few raindrops are not going to keep me from celebrating my old family tradition," she might have said. And of course she wanted to make the festivities last, as this was her sovereign moment. But as the hurrying breeze made the water choppy, and black clouds drifted up the river, flashes of snakes and ladders lit up our fields in a transparent, pale-blue aurora borealis. Still, we hoped that for Mamma's sake this little squall, with now a few raindrops sprinkling our campsite, would blow over.

We had our plates loaded up and were seated in our proper places, the Anglican Priest having said the blessing, and everyone was advised to dig in. It was then that it started to rain. First there were big silver drops, which were more obvious on the water, and then it started to spill in sweeping torrents. We had to hastily gather our plates, hurry under a pine tree where we shivered from the dampness, and then scurry back to the house where, soaked to the skin, we stood in our window-blind-darkened living room and ate our soggy meal while listening to the moan of the wind that made the awnings flap. As Grandmamma—not a religious person except during thunderstorms—prayed, we siblings buried our heads in feathered pillows as a hundred elephants stampeded across the sky to be pursued by cannon fire. This made the house shiver, blossoms drop to the earth, and the stems

of new-growth dandelions buckle in the front garden. Rain and hailstones drove from sweeping fire hoses to hammer against our windowpanes, make the eavestroughs overflow—they were filled with petals and pollen—and uproot the newly planted corn. Large ponds of mud glistened on the driveway, and the sheep huddled under a giant tree in the pasture.

It snowed later in the evening, and up-river gusts brought large damp flakes, which drifted across our open fields and stuck to our house, blotting the recently hung screen doors that led to the summer kitchen, where we had moved only yesterday, so they changed from green to white. The wind sent the sheep scampering to the barn, where they stood shivering under the eaves of the loafing shed, and snow drifted off roofs and made long beards of fleece that twisted like snakes across the front garden. It weighted down the trees and hydro lines to create a power outage. Indeed, we were back into the middle of March, as can happen here in May, and we knew we had to recycle our endurance to subsist during another long wait for spring to arrive.

Through this, my mother played piano, Wagner style, coming down hard on the keys to some old air from *The Winter's Tale* that she said had been composed by Jody Talbot. It was like she was taking out her frustration on the instrument, making it dance to some complex air that she could never master without stumbling over the most simple of phrasing. Her little escapes—the move to the summer kitchen, spring fishing, the May picnic, and now the music—had become re-enactments filled with sentimental memories of her people and country—that Hardy, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Dorset, Stratford, Lake District influence—where as a girl she had so often gathered with family to celebrate her connections to the greater English community. As she offered now a smile, now a frown, now a grimace, it was easy to read her thoughts, her love for the symbols of bygone days. Following the phrasing in the music, these old masters and places came and went from the room. And Mamma, having tossed aside all her mannerisms and struggling now to find the keys, played on in the darkness.