

PLUM WILD

I was probably five when I began to awaken to the awful truth that our wild plum orchard at Venosta, Quebec, was in constant danger from "them" and "they", during the fruit picking season.

While these neighbors and our family were the best of friends at other times, the relationship cooled decidedly during this period. The orchard was situated near the line fence between our farm and that of a third neighbor, with a few straggling trees across his fence. This neighbor seemed oblivious to the bonanza.

One could feel the tension, and for me, the excitement, growing, as the harvesting period approached.

At this important period of my life, it was my assignment to scan the fields through which this mortal enemy was expected to move to the attack. The expectancy, and the thrill of catching "them" was overwhelming. Even at that age, I wondered why an attack of this magnitude was so easy to spot.

I spied the enemy in multi-colored garb, shiny pots and pails gleaming in the bright August sun, making their way through the field. I decided, without hesitation, that they were not on their way to milk the cows. I sprung into action. I bounced and stumbled down the cellar stairs, where I found my eldest sister, Loretta, furiously pumping on the butter churn.

I rubbed my bruises, and was able to get out, something like, "They're coming, they're going, they're headed for the plums". My sister also sprung into action. In her "Ma Kettle" thunder, she had the troops scrambling from every corner. We were handed out pots, pails and flour sacks. With big sister in the lead we fell in line, according



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to the pecking order, behind her, and we were off.

As this vast new era of learning was dawning, I recognized my sister's leadership qualities. Our motley crew of siblings would have followed her into hell, I think, if she had asked us. Sometimes our excursions into the forests, during fruit picking season, was just that, hell. Bee's nests and bears all added to the maelstrom.

Often, the bears would adhere to the unwritten agreement between themselves and my sister. That they would leave the area when she entered it. They were helped along by the loud banging of our utensils. They took most of the fruit with them. In their bellies.

Loretta seemed to know where every patch of fruit was located, and at what time it would be ready for picking. It was a constant battle for her to outwit the bears and the neighbors, to get to the fruit first. Our sister was plum crazy, plum intended, about pickling and preserving. I came early to know that, losing the fruit to these interlopers, was a humiliation and frustration that was all but unbearable.

Under cover of the dense brush, and a deep gully, that ran from our house almost to the plums we made our way, at a much faster pace than was

comfortable for me. Our sister could walk faster than most of us could run. At a time like this the slowest was expected to keep up with the fastest. The saving of the plums was all important.

We arrived at the site and were instructed to head for the other side of the fence. The strategy was to get as much of the fruit on the neighbor's side as we could, before "they" got there, and that they would go away then they saw or heard us.

We were half right. They skirted us and went through the fence to ravenously reap the fruit on our side of the line. This was too much for our grim and determined leader. She gave the silent signal, and we followed her through the fence painfully aware that the plums were in greater abundance there.

We moved down the orchard, aloofly, side by side, with "them" picking frenziedly. When our utensils became full we returned to the spot where we had left our respective flour sacks, to empty them, then resume picking. The atmosphere seemed to get a little better as we began to realize that there was more than enough fruit for all. Animosity is difficult to maintain, among best friends, when the reason for the affliction evaporates, and we are left with fog in our hands.

We were some ways down the orchard still trying hard to show our annoyance at these trespassers, when we became aware of the ripping and grunting and munching, behind us. The bears had discovered our stash.

We voted quickly, to leave the area. We dropped our pots and pails, the older ones grabbing the younger ones. I found myself in the arms of an enemy, as we bounced over boulder, log, hole and fence, to the nearest porch. Ours. Where enjoyed scones and strawberry jam and fresh milk, as we laughed uproariously, and nervously, at our recent hair-raising experience.