

A Match for Any Man

By Frank Green

It was the summer of 1951 that my father decided it was time to buy land and build a house.

“After all,” he said to my mother, “I’m the best carpenter in this part of the country and I’m getting tired of paying rent to old Lizzy Keon.”

“Well, it would be kind of nice to have our own place for a change after all these years of renting and raising six kids,” she replied in her calm, matter of fact voice. “Just don’t get carried away and buy more land than we need. We don’t want to end up ‘land poor’ the way your father did in his old age.”

“Don’t worry Katie,” he said, “I’m just thinking about a few acres.”

We had moved from Maynooth to the Deep River area in the summer of 1945 when my father got a job with a construction company that was building the town of Deep River to house the rapidly growing work force for the new atomic plant near Chalk River. When we first arrived we rented a log house in the Wylie Road a mile and a half South of Highway 17 and about two and a half miles from the Deep River town site. A few years later we moved to Lizzy Keon’s house on Highway 17 a mile West of the turn into Deep River.

Most of the farmland around this area was rocky and far from ideal, so the coming of the Atomic Plant was a bonanza for the longtime farmers, whose land took on a much higher value due to the demand for residential real estate in addition to the purchase of thousands of acres by the government for the plant site.

At ten the youngest in the family, I was still happy to tag along with my dad whenever I could so I was with him later that week when he set out in the old red Hydro jeep, a perk from his new job building the dam at Swisha (Rapides des Joachims). We headed seven miles East to Chalk River to see Bob Rabishaw who was married to my mother's sister Nora.

“Do you still have any good lots for sale, Bob?” asked my father.

“Sorry, no,” said Bob, “I just sold the last one a week ago and came back from my liar's in Pembroke yesterday.” (I have never been sure if my uncle's routine use of “liar” for lawyer was simply a mistake due to the fact that French was his first language or a sly comment on the nature of the profession.)

“But I think my mother still has forty acres along the south of Highway 17 about a mile East of the main turn into Deep River, right next to Scottie Elliot's place,” he continued.

(Several years later we learned that Scottie was a distant relative of Pierre Trudeau's mother.

This intelligence led my father, whose family had always voted Conservative, to say, “I bought the land without even knowing how grand our neighbours were.”)

“My liar gave me some legal papers to give her, so, if you want, I’ll mention to the old battleaxe tomorrow that you’re looking for a lot.” Apparently my uncle’s dealings with his mother were still not smooth several years after their wrangle over his late father’s will. “Wait for a few days before you go to see her,” he said. “When you do, whatever you do, don’t bring up the land deal right away, just talk to the old girl for awhile and let her bring up the business. Old Annie will be sizing you up and if she likes you, she’ll give you a good price. If she doesn’t, she won’t sell to you at any price.”

“Much obliged Bob,” said my father.

On the way back home, we stopped to have a look at the forty acre plot that was still up for sale. At the West end it bordered Scottie Elliot’s land and rose from the highway to a good sized hill. From there, the land got lower as it stretched Eastward along the highway.

The entire 40 acres were covered with mature bush. I picked out maples, white birch, one or two yellow birch, lots of jack pine and poplar, a couple of red pine, lots of spruce and balsam and a good number of big white pine with their distinctive cluster of five needles.

“The best part of this 40 acres is the strip farthest West bordering on Scottie Elliot’s land,” said my father. “Do you know why, Pat?”

“Is it because of the hill?” I asked in Irish answer.

“Good boy, that’s right,” said my father. “When I build a house on that hill, we’ll never have to worry about water coming into the basement. The land at the East end is too low and swampy. There’s another reason too. On that chunk next to Scottie Elliot’s property there’s more than enough select white pine to build a house. It’s a dandy piece of land.”

Three days later we hopped into the old red jeep and headed East on No. 17 a few miles past the lot towards Chalk River. There, at an old farm with a lot of log buildings, we turned North towards the Ottawa River. We drove along a gravel road through the bush for about a mile and a half and came to a clearing close to the river with a sign that said “Rabishaw’s Landing.” There was a big wooden wharf with a long dark red rowboat, pointed at both ends, moored to it.

“That’s a Pointer Boat made in Pembroke,” said my dad, “see how little water it draws because of the flat bottom. Even fully loaded, it can float in very shallow water.”

“Joe Freeman is my name,” said my father when a tall lady came to the door of the large old wooden frame house in front of a beautiful big vegetable garden, “and this is my youngest lad, Pat.”

“Come in, come in,” she said in the loudest and strongest voice I had ever heard from a woman.

“That whiner of a son of mine told me that you might be dropping by. Come in and have a cup of tea. I just finished making bread.” Indeed the enticing smell of fresh bread wafted from the counter where eight round loaves of white bread sat cooling. As directed, we sat at the long wooden table.

In all my ten years I had never seen a woman anything like Mrs. Ouellette. (Bob Rabishaw had explained her name change due to two more marriages after his father died.) She was taller than my father at six feet and wearing a thin faded light summer dress which came just below her knees. The short sleeved dress did not conceal the fact that she was powerfully built with long, darkly tanned, muscular arms and legs and an imposing bosom. She had a big head covered with straight grey hair, cut short and parted on the left side, a long, tanned face, more handsome than beautiful in a traditionally feminine way, hooked nose, high cheekbones that gave a possible hint of native ancestry, wide, smiling mouth and lively, piercing black eyes. She looked as fit and hard as a young lumberjack.

She brought a cup of tea for herself and my dad. For me she brought a big glass of lemonade poured from a pitcher she took out of the old-fashioned oak covered ice box, the first one I ever saw. “Tea’s too strong for a young virgin like you,” she said, “you likely still think it’s only for peeing with,” and then she let out a loud but not unkind laugh.

“Thank you, ma’m,” I said with my face burning before having a gulp of the cool, refreshing drink.

After adding a little milk to the tea, she and my dad poured it into their saucers and blew on it to cool it before sipping it gingerly. “How do you like your tea, Joe?” she asked.

“It’s the very best, the very best,” said my dad, “I heard you made the best cup of tea in Renfrew County and that you were a match for any man when it came to working, drinking or telling a story.”

“Damn right!” she retorted. “Damn good in bed too! Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I’ve buried three husbands, haven’t I? Had a few spares along the way, too, if you know what I mean,” she cried, slapping her knee loudly in delight.

“The only one I ever loved was my first husband, John Rabishaw,” she paused for a second, “and we had two sons, Johnny Junior and Bob, the whiner. But a few years after John died, I hooked up with Willard Keane, even if he was a Protestant, black as the ace of spades. I married him because he was such a good dancer. But he couldn’t keep up with my pace in the fandango, if you know what I mean, and he died only a year after I married him. Then I married Willie Ouellette, another Catholic, because I thought he had a lot of money because he always carried a big roll of bills. After we got married, I discovered that the bills were all ones on the inside of the roll with only one twenty on the outside for show.” At this she roared laughing so loud I jumped in my chair.

I noted that my dad kept a discrete silence about a crack he had heard that with her Catholic, Protestant and Catholic husbands in rapid succession, she had turned her coat so many times she didn't know which side the buttons were on.

“That son-of-a-bitch Willie was lazier than an old hound dog with sleeping sickness. He wouldn't work so I kicked him out. He was good for other things, though,” she winked, “so I let him come and visit me three times a week like a boyfriend.”

At this, my father was slapping his knee and laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes.

“I mind the time, in the middle of Lent, that Willie and I were visiting Parnell McGuire and the wife in Chalk River. There were a bunch of others there too, all dogans. After we finished playing euchre, the talk swung around to fasting during Lent and how strict old Father Murphy was about it when he was the parish priest here. ‘Wellsir’, I said, ‘he couldn't fault me if he was still here, for I haven't had a piece of meat in me since Ash Wednesday!’”

“At that, Willie pointed between his legs and hollered, ‘What in the name of Christ do you call this woman? A goddam sardine?’”

“Why, Mrs. Parnell laughed so hard she peed her pants and had to go and change.”

After laughing for several minutes, my dad, wiping tears from his eyes, said, “That’s the best Lent story I’ve heard since the one that old Indian, Fred Abbott, told last Easter Sunday. You know the way kids give up candy for Lent. For some reason, likely their sweet tooth, they always think that Lent is over at noon on Saturday before Easter Sunday and right at the stroke of noon they start filling their faces with candy until they make themselves sick.

“Well last year old Fred and the wife decided to make the big sacrifice and refrain from bedroom activities for Lent. So last Easter Sunday after the early Mass, a bunch of us were standing around gabbing on the church steps. ‘Yep,’ says Fred, ‘I sunk one five minutes after noon yesterday.’”

At this, Mrs. Oullette doubled over with laughter on the way back to the stove for another round of tea., “goddam it, you’re alright Freeman,” she said.

“The other day I gave old Joanie Rafferty a ride on the Wylie Road,” continued my dad, “and she told me in that high pitched voice of hers how the pastor, Fr. Kearny, picked her up last week when she was walking out to Deep River.”

“The Reverend says to her, ‘So, Joanie, where might you be headed today?’”

“‘Well, Father,’ she says, ‘I’m going out to Deep River to get my hair done,’”

“‘You can be sure Joanie, that Our Blessed Lady never had the luxury of going to a hairdresser to get her hair done,’ said the pastor in his most pious and preachy voice.”

“And without missing a beat Joanie screeched back at him, ‘Maybe so, Father, but Jesus Christ didn’t get to buy a brand new Buick every year either!’”

“I guess the Reverend didn’t know whether to shit or go blind,” said my father, slapping his knee again, “that’ll teach him not to be so nosy.”

“Nosy! I’ll tell you what kind of a Nosy Parker he is,” said Mrs. Ouellette, wagging her finger.

“A couple of years ago, when his brother, Billy Kearny, was about to marry Marie Jones, Billy a widower and Wanda never married before, down to my place comes the Reverend, friendly and chipper as a butter and egg salesman.”

“‘Good day to you, Father,’ I said to him, ‘and what can I do for you on this fine Spring day?’”

“‘Well, Mrs. Ouellette, as your pastor, I have to ask you a question. It’s come to my attention that you do not approve of the upcoming nuptials between my brother Billy and Marie Jones. As the parish priest and also as his brother, I have to know what the basis for your objections might be. After all, they’re both over forty years of age and legally free to marry both in the eyes of Holy Mother Church and by the laws of the province of Ontario. So what’s your problem with this marriage?’”

“‘It’s none of my business, Father,’ I said, ‘entirely none of my business whatsoever what they do.’”

“No, no, I insist, you must tell me. As your pastor, I order you to tell me what you object to in this marriage. After all, my good woman, the salvation of their eternal souls could be at stake!”

“Well, if you put it like that, Father,’ I said, ‘I’ll say my piece... Marie Jones... Marie Jones... why if Marie Jones had all the pricks sticking out of her that have been stuck into her, she’d look like a goddam porcupine!”

At that point, I thought my father was going to fall off his chair, he was laughing so hard. “No wonder they called her Sweet Marie,” he said.

“You’d better have another cup of tea and I think that bread has cooled off enough to eat,” said Mrs. Ouellette, tickled that my dad was such a good audience for her stories. She brought a plate piled high with sliced bread and a side plate of homemade butter. The bread and butter was delicious. I had three pieces and wanted more but didn’t out of good manners. “The secret is to use White Rose flour and the water from boiled potatoes to make the bread,” she explained, “I learned that from a crazy old German-Irish woman from Eganville who made the best bread in the country.”

After we each had three or four slices the tall old lady banged her fist on the table and made me jump again. “I hear you want to buy some land, Freeman, so let’s get down to business. I’ll sell you the whole goddam 40 acres for 75 dollars an acre,” she said firmly, “and that’s a hell of a good price!”

“It is, it is for sure,” said my dad, “but with the big family I have, I can’t afford to buy the whole 40 acres. How about selling me five acres right next to Scottie Elliot’s property at the West end of the 40 acres?”

“Well, OK, although I was hoping to get rid of the whole parcel. But if you’re only taking five acres, I’ll have to charge you a hundred dollars an acre for a total of 500 dollars. Still a good price, especially because that’s the best chunk of land in the whole goddamn 40 acres. ”

“It’s a deal,” said my dad.

They stood up and shook hands on it and Mrs. Ouellette added, “Because I like you, Freeman, I’ll throw in the legal costs. My lawyer will take care of all the paperwork at my expense and send you a deed. You won’t have to hire your own lawyer.”

“That sounds good to me,” said my dad, “thanks a million. I’ll give you the money right now.”

On the way home, we went down to Chalk River to tell my sister about the deal. When dad told her husband, Danny Oswald, some of Mrs. Ouellette's stories, Danny said, "Oh Geez, she's got an awful tongue in her head. Years ago she had a small general store here in Chalk River, just across the corner from the Provincial Bank. She used to pay old George Goulette, a bit of a simpleton, to do odd jobs for her. One sunny summer day he was scrubbing clothes on a washboard in a big tub outside. As she chanced to walk by, George, who was blind as a bat, was holding up a piece of clothing close to his face to see if it was clean. It happened to be a pair of Mrs. Ouellette's bloomers."

"Sniff them, you old bastard," she yelled, "it's the closest you'll ever get to them!"

On the way home, dad said, "No need to tell your mother all the details of our visit with Mrs. Ouellette. She wouldn't like her language."

When we got home, after we told my mother about our new status as landowners, she said, "Well, that's good news, but you were away for an awful long time. What took so long?"

"Well," said dad, "that old lady drives a hell of a hard bargain, she's a match for any man I've ever met."

Otherwise, diplomatic silence prevailed.

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