

Believe It or Not

By Pamela Banting

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.
—Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*

*Born on a mountain top in Tennessee,
Greenest state in the Land of the Free,
Raised in the woods so's he knew ev'ry tree,
Kilt him a b'ar when he was only three.*
—First verse, "Ballad of Davy Crockett"

When I was in elementary school, my parents gave me a *Ripley's Believe It or Not* colouring book. Books of any kind were very scarce in our town, and I thought that this one must be the best colouring book of all time. It had both entertainment and educational value, I thought, and I felt privileged to have it in my possession. I decided to take it to school to show my teacher and classmates. Even our school didn't have many books—about three shelves of books per classroom; you could read the entire grade's worth in a couple of months or less—so I thought everyone at school would be as thrilled as I was to look at this book with its weird facts and records of strange happenings. After lunch one day, I placed my prized colouring book carefully in my bike carrier so that its cover wouldn't get dented and headed back to school.

As I approached the C.N.R. stationmaster's long, sandy driveway, the winds very suddenly picked up. Over in front of the post office a good-sized whirlwind was spinning sand and gravel skyward. As I watched the vortex

moved, abruptly encircling my bike and me in its almost Biblical embrace. The deep, fine-grained sand of Wellmans' driveway, which always bogged me down on my bike, was sucked up into the air and swirled around so violently that my arms and legs stung and I had to dismount, straddle my bike, squint my eyes as tightly shut as possible, and cover them with my hands. Just like what's-his-name in the Bible who feared to look upon the face of God. Suddenly I heard a loud flutter as if an enormous bird were landing, wings pumping, right in front of my face. Terrified I moved my hands away from my eyes expecting to see a hawk or an eagle, wings outspread, gripping my handlebars in its talons and about to peck out my eyes or carry me off into the wild blue yonder.

Instead my colouring book had taken flight. The sound had been the whirlwind pulling the book right out of my carrier. Now fifty feet aloft, it was tearing the pages out one by one. Some of them ascended toward heaven and the rest scattered all over town.

I stood there amazed.

To have found myself at the centre of a whirlwind. To have had the same experience as so-and-so in the Bible who was caught up in one. Elijah, that's who, taken up into heaven by a whirlwind. Or like Job, to whom God spake out of the whirlwind. Was God angry with me for having the hubris to take the book to school, to draw attention to myself as the possessor of such a wonderful object as *Ripley's Believe It or Not*? "Behold, the whirlwind of the LORD goeth forth with fury, a continuing whirlwind: it shall fall with pain upon the head of the wicked," as it says in Jeremiah. Was that me? Was it wrong to want to possess books in a bookless community?



But the Biblical associations did not strike me very forcefully. Rather, it was the supreme irony of that particular colouring book having been snatched away in a fantastic incident worthy of Ripley himself, which seized my imagination. I was so awed by the irony of the situation that I didn't even try to gather the pages of my ruined treasure. The irony of a *Believe It or Not* book being taken up in a whirlwind was almost better than having the book. I felt fortunate in having had the whirlwind descend upon me.

It was a sign that my life was charmed. I had been blessed by irony. By a cosmic joke. Since irony is, after all, a form of meaning or significance I immediately grasped that I had a destiny after all. If nothing else, hereafter I would be the girl upon whom a whirlwind had descended, the one whose *Believe It or Not* book had been taken. I could be *in* Ripley. I could be *in* a book.

Of course, one's fortune is different from one's luck. I have never been lucky. When I was eight years old, one Thursday night at my request my dad took my cousin Merle and me with him to the old Legion hall while he worked bingo. In the final game of the evening, Merle got a diagonal line of numbers, and she bingoed. She won five dollars, a large sum for a kid in those days.

To my surprise, at her "bingo!" I felt an incredible stab of jealousy in my belly. It was like a power surge in reverse. Power drained rapidly from me. I knew it was completely irrational, I understood that bingo was based on random numbers, but I felt I should have won the five dollars. It was, after all, *my* dad, not hers, who worked the Legion bingos, *my* dad who had taken the two of us to play bingo that night. *Her* dad wasn't even a veteran, let alone a legionnaire. As we drove Merle home I curled up in the front car seat, a silent little coil of jealousy. Maybe my life wasn't charmed after all, I thought.

The only other time I ever won anything was when I won five single-play records from CKRC radio in Winnipeg. I successfully guessed which records would be in the top five that week. Unfortunately, the five prize records weren't as scintillating as the top five. Nevertheless, I was proud of myself. Proud that a young girl from the country had been able to compete successfully with all those city kids who got good reception on their radios, not just on particularly clear winter nights. Who had stores where you could actually buy popular records, not just whichever old-fashioned country-and-western odds and ends the warehouse at Marshall-Wells, Winnipeg, sent to our store when my dad filled out an order for "20 records." Who received the newspaper the same day it was published and who therefore had an extra day to contemplate the hit parade, and whose letters didn't have to travel 350 miles to get to the radio station in time for the contest. A fortuitous aligning of the planets had obviously allowed me to win and to see my name printed as the winner at the top of the following week's

contest. That was the first time I had ever seen my name in print, and that turned out to be a better prize than the five free records.

There's something about coming from a small, remote or semi-remote community that lends an aura of both fortuitousness and unlikelihood to the events of one's life. Even for one to compete on equal terms (let alone win) or to make one's mark on the culture at large, such as to see your name in the paper, other than for drunk driving or some other offence, is regarded as so improbable that if it ever happens one leaps immediately right over notions of individual cleverness, intelligence, talent, insight, skill, effort, time, labour, practice or sacrifice to notions of cosmic coincidence. The charm in the charmed life extends outward to the place as a whole just as my colouring book ended up dispersed all over town.

When I was eight, and my mom's dad was dying of leukemia and of the excessive radiation he had been given to treat the disease, our parents took us with them to Winfield, British Columbia, for a last visit with him. Somewhere along the B.C. highway we stopped at the Enchanted Forest. A roadside attraction aimed at kids and their families, the facility consisted of a landscaped path through the verdant forest along which at intervals you encountered very large, brightly painted fairytale figures—Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the Three Little Pigs, The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, Little Bo Peep, The Fox and the Grapes, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Little Red Riding Hood.

This was my first trip out of the province of Manitoba, the first time I had seen a truly different landscape. Long before we arrived at the Enchanted Forest, my brother and I saw for the first time the bluey-green water of the Bow River. Not content with the first few sightings of this jewel-like, turquoise water, we noted and exclaimed over each and every single glimpse of water that appeared between the trees as we drove along the mountain highway. The only rivers we had seen before were brown or red-brown like the Birch River, which ran by our land at home. We were charmed by this water. This was miraculous water. Jesus could have walked on this water, though the current may have been a little swift for him.

When our dad agreed to pull over at the Enchanted Forest, I could hardly contain my glee. I thought I might burst with it. My brother and I played in the bush around home all the time. We had a very strong affinity for trees, and this forest was enchanted! We leapt out of the car, and dad took Murray and me down the path while mom stayed in the car with our baby sister.

Immediately, we realized that this forest was different. But it was not the promised fairytale characters which distinguished it from the bush at home. It was the smell of the conifers, and the moss growing not just at the base of trees but everywhere. The springy, cushiony moss, the lush ground cover and the enormous trees were the main

attraction for me. I'd never before seen any of these plants. At home I not only knew each kind of tree, shrub, fern, wildflower and weed, but it would not be an exaggeration to say I also knew individually the maples and red willows, and each bluebell and columbine on our few acres of land.

I was delighted with the Enchanted Forest but perhaps not for the reasons our parents might have thought. I was happy to see facilities designed for children. We had no such thing in our village, and I approved of that aspect of the Enchanted Forest. But what pleased me most was seeing the natural vegetation of the interior of B.C. I loved the vegetation; I thought the fairytale characters were out of place. They weren't local, indigenous or in any way meaningful. The fairytale statues belonged in books, on TV or in your imagination, not in the forest, which was enchanted enough in its own right. Anyone could see that the trees, the mosses and the plants were the real enchantment, the path through the forest the magical thing. Paths of any kind are marvelous. Paths are signs of the former or present inhabitants of a place—humans or animals—or more likely a collaboration between the species. Paths are signs that others have passed that way and left little more than the cumulative evidence of their foot, paw or hoof prints. In a bookless community, paths are your textbooks and your pleasure reading. Paths link you with the animals and assure you that you are not alone.

Who needed Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs? Who needed Mickey Mouse? It was nothing but a letdown to round a curve in the path and be confronted with a giant red and yellow plastic fairytale character.

As kids, my brother and I were much more interested in wild than tame animals. One time when he was sixteen and out fishing somewhere north of town, Murray came across a wounded great blue heron. He caught it and was going to bring it home to try to heal it, but he couldn't figure out how to hold onto the bird while driving back to town. Even with its injury, the bird was just too strong to hold with one arm, and so he had to leave it to its fate. But the image of a good-looking, blonde-haired, blue-eyed teenage boy driving through town in his blue Ford Fairlane with his arm around a great blue heron is such a compelling one that I have added it to the collection of images associated with our charmed lives, whether or not it ever happened.

How is it that I came away from the Swan Valley—which lacked most of the comforts, conveniences and culture that most of my urban contemporaries take for granted—not with a feeling of deprivation but rather with a sense of having lived a charmed life? This is something of a mystery even to me. We were not raised in

ignorance of the outside world. Though the paper arrived a day late, we always received the daily newspaper, as well as a weekly newspaper, the *Reader's Digest*, *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Chatelaine* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. As kids we knew that cities and larger towns had town water, sewers, libraries, museums, concert halls and a million stores. We only had a few stores: three grocery stores, one grocery and dry goods store, one hardware (ours), a succession of pubs, each of which burnt to the ground, three gas stations, a post office, a poolroom/bowling alley with three lanes where girls weren't supposed to go if they didn't want to get pregnant, and an electrical store which was actually a liquor store long on Baby Duck and Gimli Goose. We knew that where we lived simply did not count. That the only way the outside world might hear of us living up there in the bush was if a forest fire

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or flood raged through or a spectacular homicide was committed there. However, to our way of thinking we were off the beaten track, and that, despite the disadvantages, was an incredibly fortunate place to be.

In her book *Bone Deep in Landscape: Writing, Reading, and Place*, Montana-born writer Mary Clearman Blew posits that perhaps the frontier can be redefined as “the meeting point between conflicting narratives, and perhaps those narratives conflict within ourselves as often as with others.” Certainly it would seem that knowing one lived in an economically and culturally disadvantaged place while thinking one is living a charmed life would qualify as two such conflicting narratives. Of course, the contradiction is not unresolvable: while it is not impossible, it is difficult to place the proper value upon something you have never had, and of course neither money nor season tickets to the theatre is any guarantee of a well-lived life. Moreover, these two apparently conflicting narratives can co-exist quite easily if you view your place in the world through the lens of irony. If you believe that meaning is rooted in irony, then such a place can yield meaning galore.

Having a charmed life comes down to two things: living in relative proximity to wilder things, and living within a contradictory narrative in which one is cast as humble and insignificant on the one hand and larger than life on the other. Believe it or not.

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