



An Admirable Woman

by Judith Bourque

Photograph: May Chung

IE was harder then; and more precious. Evelyn tells me about it as if she's telling a story about someone else, Incredulous at having lived it Evelyn. Mother of my husband. A woman I admire. An admirable woman. Through camouflages necessary to her survival, I see the sterling woman shining through.

Evelyn likes to tell of her days *in* school. In grade seven, she had trouble with Algebra and couldn't pass the course. She was allowed to attend a special grade 8 for students who needed extra help. She says, "I had always been taught by nuns. When I would hand in my Algebra and it was wrong, the nun would fust make a big 'x' on the paper and give it back to me. She wouldn't tell me what was wrong and I just couldn't figure it out. This new teacher, she was English *and*

really nice. The first time I handed in an Algebra paper, she took me aside and showed me my mistake. I had been doing everything perfectly except for one calculation I did backwards, and that made everything wrong. She showed me where it was wrong, and I started making 'hundreds' in Algebra. She was a real nice teacher. There was a boy in my class who sat behind me and would peek over my shoulder to copy my work. The teacher saw him do *it* and said, 'Frank, why don't you sit beside Evelyn so you can see her work better!' and you know what? He did! And he said, 'Thank you teacher!'" She breaks into hearty laughter as she remembers.

Evelyn remembers her brother Leo as very handsome and a wonderful singer. She and her

sister Dot were saddened to have to say goodbye to him when he left their Moncton, New Brunswick home. The depression had hit the Maritimes hard, and there were few jobs for young men. Leo travelled to Montreal to look for work. He walked the streets for weeks, until he was starving and filthy. Finally he approached a doctor at a hospital about a job. He couldn't believe his luck, when the doctor told him to get cleaned up and put on an orderly's uniform. It felt so good to shave and wash! They put Leo to work on the psychiatric ward. He was a big, strong man, and could help subdue patients when necessary. Except for their mother's funeral in the 1950's, Evelyn and her family did not see Leo again until Christmas of 1986, when he paid them a long overdue visit. He wasn't the young man they remembered. Leo was now 73 years old. He was still a handsome man, and when he sang the old songs, echos of his beautiful voice could still be heard. But he was ill, and the sisters' eyes told each other that this would be Leo's last visit.

Evelyn remembers the part she played in the 1930's opening of Moncton High School. She was one of a 12 girl chorus line that performed for the two-night opening celebrations. She was 17. The girls sewed their own costumes and were very proud of their knee length bloomers and crisp white middy blouses; very modest by today's standards. But when Evelyn's mother saw the costume she had worn, she threw it in the stove where it burned to ashes. I can see that, even now, the loss of her hard work disturbs her.

Evelyn was born a Gallant, and she is very proud that all Gallants in existence can trace their ancestry back to one Michel Hache from the Maizepeque area of P.E.I. He was such a brave man and performed such valuable service for the governor of that time that he received an award and became known as Michel Hache-Gallant in honor of his bravery. Some of his descendents took as their family name, 'Gallant', and there begins the Gallant family tree. As a little girl, Evelyn was taught by her father to recite her lineage. "Evelyn, a Augustin, a Joe, a Dominic, a Maxim, a Michel." It instilled a fierce pride in the little girl, who grew to be a proud woman. No matter how difficult life was, that pride gave her the strength to make the best of it. The character shows in her face, and in her sons.

Little money meant poor nutrition for many, and disease gained a stronger foothold during the Depression. Evelyn's face saddens as she tells of the next door neighbors who were stricken with scarlet fever. Their house was quarantined. The only way they could get food was to leave a grocery list and money in a field, between Evelyn's house and theirs. Evelyn would pick it up and go to the store for groceries, which she left in the field for the father of the sick family to retrieve. Eventually, the local store owner found out what Evelyn was doing and refused to handle the money for fear of infection. Evelyn found another store, farther away, and continued her missions of mercy. The mother and three of the children died. One of them was Evelyn's best friend. A hard lesson in the hard realities of life for the young girl. Those were hard days.

Her mother was a big woman. Almost six feet tall and heavy. She loved to laugh and was proud of her strength. Evelyn always felt safe when her mother was near. In those days, 'hobos' would often come to the door looking for a meal. "They weren't really tramps," she says. "They were just men who couldn't find work. They wanted to work." Her mother always fed them. The word passed along the ranks of the 'hobos', and if Evelyn happened to open the door to one of them, he would ask, "Is this the house where the big woman lives?" So she was known to those she fed.

As a child living on Moncton's Dominion Street, Evelyn dreamed of being a Nurse. But in those days, dreams were a luxury. Her parents could not afford to buy her clothes and books for another two years, so when Evelyn graduated from grade eight, still a child by today's standards, she went to work at Marven's Cookie Factory. "I had a heavy job!" she says. After the cookies were packed in individual boxes and then in cartons weighing forty pounds, it was her job to lift them onto scales, weigh them, and transfer them to a pile on her other side. The last box in each pile would have to be lifted almost over her head. Quite a feat for a girl weighing less than 120 pounds. Although the work was hard, Evelyn and those she worked with felt very fortunate to have jobs at Marven's. Every day as they walked in to work, there were dozens of people lined up outside the factory door, waiting to apply for jobs. "You never talked back to the boss or did a poor job!" she says. "There was

always someone just outside the door, waiting to take your place. One day, two girls in the packing room started to fight over a boyfriend. It got so bad, two of the supervisors had to pull them apart. They were taken to the Boss's office and fired on the spot. He just went outside and brought in two of the people waiting there and put them right to work. Those girls who were fired came from out in the country and were boarding in Moncton. They had to go back home. There was no unemployment insurance. So, if you had a job, you held onto it!"

Evelyn stayed at the cookie factory for five years, until she 'took sick'. It was a mysterious ailment the doctor called 'acute indigestion'. She felt like she was going to die. By then, she had a steady boyfriend, Dismas Bourque. He took her to Doctor Landry, who was said to be good for stomach problems. The medicine he prescribed cured her. But Dismas's mother, a woman of strong opinions, told her friends that Dismas was marrying "une matadeuse", an invalid. When she tells me this, her eyes twinkle and she grins, echoing the pixie of a girl she must have been. She says, "and here I am, 70 years old!" Dismas has been gone six years.

When Evelyn tells about her young married life, she shakes her head in wonder. A city girl, she found some aspects of "country life", in Lewisville, on the outskirts of Moncton, difficult and even frightening. She says, "My people weren't rich, but we had indoor plumbing! When Dismas and I moved to our own house, there was nothing. Just lots of dirt and cobwebs. Even with Dot and my cousins helping, it took us weeks to clean it up. There was no toilet. Just a little house out back. I made myself sick trying to avoid using it, but of course I had to give in. So I painted that little house and papered it inside and kept it clean! I always had lime in there to use. It was a real nice little house when I was done!"

The well would often go dry and water for washing had to be carried from a neighbor's house. The wood stove, the only source of heat, had a voracious appetite for wood and coal. She fed it constantly. She baked daily and performed the many other tasks that went into caring for her family the best way she knew how. At first, there was only money for necessities; nothing left over for extras, like furniture or paint. Dismas worked for the railroad and was gone

much of the time, so Evelyn confronted the hardships of her life, often by herself. But there were good times. Family gatherings. The accomplishments of her children. Her gardens. She even taught herself to crochet, and her creations are prized by recipients today. With each disaster survived, Evelyn became stronger.

The years brought five living sons and one little daughter who lived a week. When she speaks of Sylvia, there is still a mournful note in her voice. Surrounded by her husband and sons, it would have been wonderful to have had a daughter. Someone who could understand her woman-self. Someone to pass herself on to. Perhaps that's why Evelyn has made her daughters-in-law so welcome, sharing herself freely with both of us.

Evelyn's talent for nursing helped her family through many childhood accidents and illnesses. Her days were long and filled with hard work, but she laughs and says, "I'm not like you young women today, raising a family and working too. I never worked a day in my married life!" And hidden in her laughter is frustration at the lack of recognition today's world gives her kind of career. She would have felt pampered, to be like the women of today. If those women would take the time to listen to stories like Evelyn's, they would learn much. A life of service is at least as honorable as a degree or title. I am proud to tell her story. I wish that I knew more of my own mother's story, so that I could record it also.

On our journey, we need to carry with us the wisdom of these mothers of our generation. These women who gave themselves that their families might make their successful ways in the world. Patiently watching while their children went on to fulfill dreams that they couldn't have imagined. Evelyn Bourque is a heroine. One of a generation of ever-constant Mother-earths, nurturing the future. Thank them for the proud heritage that we, their children, may use as inspiration on our own journeys.

Evelyn, don't ever feel that your work is not recognized. Every honor your sons hold, every business success, every contribution to the community, comes first from you. Never forget that Remind us when we need reminding. Your children carry the seeds of your courage within them, and are stronger for being yours. Thank you, Evelyn Gallant Bourque. You're quite a woman! •»