

*THREE*

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IN THE SOUP  
I'm swimming as fast as I can

**E**d and Ruby Elford weren't exactly overjoyed with their youngest daughter's plans to marry the local ladies' man, but they were too smart to dismiss her intentions, or to lay down any stern parental law and forbid her to see him. Instead, they managed to talk the strong-willed teenager into finishing school before launching herself into eternal wedded bliss.

"Clarence came to work for Dad. He learned to butcher meat and cut it up properly, and he was really very good in the store," she recalls, and then adds thoughtfully, "He was always good with people."

The truth was that Clarence had many good points, and to his credit, he tried hard to improve himself, even asking Jean to correct his grammar whenever he made a mistake.

Still, her parents held out, and although she graduated from high school at seventeen, Jean had to wait until December, and her eighteenth birthday, before they'd agree to their daughter making wedding plans.

Then one day, very soon after her birthday, it was official.

"Clarence sold his car. That's how serious he was! We bought an engagement ring and wedding rings, and I caught a ride to Edmonton with a traveller, to buy my wedding clothes."

Jean's mother had given her \$25 to buy her wedding dress, a practical pale blue crepe two-piece, and a smart navy blue suit for travelling.

Late on a February afternoon in 1946, the United Church minister, the Reverend H. W. Inglis, arrived at the Elford home to perform a quiet wedding ceremony.

"We didn't have a big wedding. It was just the times. The war was recently

over. My folks didn't have much money. Neither did Clarence and I."

Jean's memories of her wedding to Clarence are oddly fuzzy, and considering how important weddings and wedding parties would later become to her professional life, she kept things simple.

"There weren't many people there, just family," she recalls. "My family, and some of Clarence's people, probably no more than two dozen altogether. We must have had a supper afterward, like a very small reception, though I can't remember what we ate."

Jean was also too excited to notice the wedding cake, but it was almost certainly a dark fruitcake, the traditional western Canadian wedding cake of the day. Such cakes were always rich and heavy, often laced with rum, and full of raisins, glacé fruit, walnuts and almonds. They were baked in tiers, with the top tier well wrapped and saved for the christening party after the birth of a first child. The other layers were for cutting, and legend promised that unmarried girls who slept with a piece of wedding cake tucked under their pillows would dream of their future husbands.

For whatever reason, neither Ruby, nor the about-to-be-married Jean, nor her older sister Evelyn took a stab at baking the wedding cake, so Ed picked one up in Edmonton and brought it home just before the event.

"After the supper party, my sister Evelyn and her husband drove us to Wainwright to catch the Midnight Flyer for Saskatoon. We couldn't afford a berth, so we sat up all night on the train, and then changed trains for Regina."

The wedding breakfast would have been simple.

"You could get coffee and sandwiches on the train in those days."

They visited some of Clarence's relations near Regina, but a few days later the honeymoon was over and they were back in Irma, moving into a two-room house rented from Jean's grandfather.

*Clarence, standing tall, scoops a young Jean into his arms. She smiles, but her posture is uncomfortable, as though she's afraid he might drop her.*

Their first son, Lyall, arrived in August of 1947. Jean was able to see a doctor only twice before he was born.

"We had to borrow Dad's car in order to get there, and the doctor was 22 miles away."

Lyall, who slept in a wicker clothes basket until Jean's parents presented him

with a crib, was a happy, healthy baby and Jean loved being a mother.

*Baby Lyall, dressed in his birthday finery, is speeding on hands and knees toward his birthday cake. It's a chiffon cake, the one that will always be associated with family celebrations.*

That same year, her parents sold the Irma Trading Company and bought the Rock Oil Company warehouse in Edmonton. Their entire close-knit family moved to the city in order to invest in the new business venture. Ed and Ruby bought a house in the Highlands district with a small suite upstairs for Jean and Clarence.

"We had plumbing and natural gas," Jean recalls, pleased even now with such amazing luck.

It was a good time, even though there were shortages. Edmonton was enjoying a rush of post-war prosperity, and the baby boom had started. But the population of young families outstripped the available goods and services, so there were long waiting lists for the simple convenience of a telephone, although pregnant women could have one installed, at least temporarily, before the birth of the baby. Household appliances like washing machines and refrigerators were also hard to come by.

"I'd go for groceries, and the lineups would be so long that by the time I got through the checkout, my ice cream would be dripping."

After the baby was born, Jean decided to start drinking skim milk. In a true sign of the times, the milkman explained that she'd have to get a doctor's prescription before he could sell it to her. Everybody else had to drink whole milk, as part of post-war support for the dairy industry.

About that time Jean had a bit of luck. She'd made a rare find — a good, second-hand refrigerator, so she could keep milk and cream. Finally, things were shaping up in her favourite room — her kitchen.

Meanwhile, Clarence was moving up in the world. He'd gone to work as a salesman for Jean's dad at Rock Oil, and bought himself a car. He hit the road, travelling all week, coming home on weekends.

In August of 1950 their second baby, Brian, was born. Borrowing the down payment from Jean's grandfather, they bought their own two-bedroom house in Edmonton's Virginia Park area, a part of town with tree-lined boulevards and, true to its name, a nearby park. It was the kind of neighbourhood that would be good for children.

"There was a zoo in Borden Park in those days, and the children loved going

there. They'd take lettuce and feed the deer, and we'd watch the monkeys. There was a swimming pool too, and Brian was crazy about the water. He'd swim three times a day, if I'd let him."

At the time, Jean's domestic wish list was short and simple.

"We had a wringer washer, a fridge, a garden, a car," she says. "I had a coffee table and a chesterfield suite. Grandad built a suite in our basement, and the rent we got from it made our payments every month."

Jean has always loved the Christmas season, not just for the celebrations around the table, but for the music, the decorating, the Christmas tree. She remembers her third Christmas as Clarence's wife, when they could finally afford a string of eight lights for their small tree.

"For our first Christmas, I made crepe paper decorations. The second year, I think we managed to buy a set of glass balls. By our third Christmas we had lights, and I thought they made it a beautiful tree. They were series lights, and if one light bulb burned out, they all quit working."

In retrospect, the series lights might have been a sort of foreshadowing, a metaphor for Jean's life. But for the moment, all was well.

In 1954 Jean had a third baby boy, and they named him Grant. Clarence moved the family to a second house, this one also in Edmonton's well-established Highlands neighbourhood. They rented out the first house, and bought their first television set.

"The good times were so good," she says wistfully. "We didn't have much, but it didn't seem to matter."

They'd catch a movie on Friday night for 25 cents, have friends over for cards, celebrate birthdays with family dinners and chiffon cakes, one of Jean's favourites for special occasions.

"It was a cake that took seven whole eggs, and it was moist, but firm enough that it could be sliced into sixteen wedges."

Those seven-egg chiffon cakes became her signature birthday cake within the family. It was the mid '50s, and major food companies like Pillsbury and Betty Crocker were doing their bit to free women from kitchen chores by inventing the cake mix. Jean recalls that the first ones were just add-water-and-stir.

"They weren't really very good, a bit on the dry side, like they needed something extra."

So she'd add an egg, or some oil.

Ironically, the earliest mixes weren't a commercial success for that very

reason. They needed something extra, and Jean recalls discussions among her cake-baking friends about the relative merits of the various cake mixes.

"I think women, in general, wanted to do more than just add water to a mix, and very soon the formulas changed, and directions started calling for eggs and oil. Gradually, they became almost-from-scratch cakes, but they had better texture than the first mixes and were more like what people expected in a homemade cake," she says.

"I've never had anything against a good cake mix, especially when I'm in a hurry.

"Eventually, Betty Crocker brought out a chiffon cake mix, and it was really a very good cake, but it was only available for a few years. They stopped making them, and I still wonder why."

Cake and coffee, Sunday dinners with her parents, birthday parties for the children. The mid '50s were good for Jean and her family, and in the jargon of the day, a kind of domestic bliss settled over the house in the Edmonton Highlands.

She had everything she'd ever dreamed of. A handsome, loving husband. Three little boys to cuddle. Her own home, with a real kitchen, a place to bake her pies and roast her chickens, and a dining table to serve them on. It was almost like playing house; like old times, back in the Irma days.

Life unfolded sweetly before her, and the future was nothing but a rosy glow, as far as she could see.

October 2004. Jean's sunny office, on the second floor of the Company's Coming building on Edmonton's south side, is like a well-appointed living room in a family home. Chintz loveseat, photographs on a sideboard, a couple of art-quality dolls reposing in a chair.

She picks up a pen from the well-polished desk, puts it down, adjusts a blind, brushes some imagined fluff from her skirt.

Some things are almost too painful to talk about, even now, and her tone, when she speaks, is deliberately flat and controlled.

"One day I found that my name had been taken off our joint bank account."

For a woman as independent as Jean, it was like being slapped, but it was a blow she wouldn't take lightly.

"I can't tell you how very degrading it was to me to have to ask for money," she says, reflecting on the old humiliation.

Deeply hurt by the financial incident, Jean was bewildered by her husband's Jekyll-and-Hyde behaviour. She'd noticed things lately, nothing she could put her finger on, but Clarence had been different, somehow. She'd been trying to ignore it, hoping he'd get over whatever it was that was bothering him, and they'd be able to go back to their old life. But this was serious. This she could not ignore.

However, Jean didn't waste a lot of time brooding. It wasn't her nature to feel sorry for herself. Within days, she'd found a job and hired a babysitter.

Then Clarence came home, and when he discovered that his wife had suddenly become a career woman, he was anything but happy. He flew into a rage and summarily fired the sitter.

"He told her to go home and stay there," she remembers bitterly.

Jean was devastated, but she had three small children to raise, and she decided not to fight him on this.

Her neighbour offered to drive her to the grocery store, so she swallowed her pride and asked Clarence for food money.

He flatly refused to give her anything. Not a nickel. She couldn't understand why.

"Go ahead and starve," he yelled at her. "I don't care if the kids starve, as long as you starve too."

"I knew he didn't mean it about the kids, not really, but it hurt. The next morning he was gone, but he'd left some money on the kitchen table. I sent Lyall off to school, and then I walked with the two little ones four blocks to the bus, bought as much as I could carry, and took the bus back. That's how we got our groceries."

Jean didn't know the first thing about alcohol. Like the rest of her family, she was a teetotaler.

"I didn't have my first drink until I was thirty-three," she muses. "I still remember. It was a horse's neck, made with scotch. I could taste the liquor, and I didn't like it."

But Clarence liked it. He had always enjoyed a social drink, and for some time she'd suspected that he was drinking too much, too often. All those days and nights on the road were changing him, and he was no longer the charming, happy-go-lucky man she'd married, at least not with her.

Now he was angry, suspicious, deceitful. It terrified Jean, but she felt helpless and somehow shamed, so she kept quiet.

Her silence was a mistake she regrets to this day.

When Clarence decided to buy an auction mart in Clover Bar, on the outskirts of Edmonton, Jean thought it was a hopeful sign. He was a good auctioneer, self-taught, and he had a certain charisma, along with a gift for remembering faces and names. Men respected him, women found him charming and attentive.

"Clarence could sell ice to a polar bear," his friends said. "Clarence could charm the birds out of the trees."

With her grandfather's help, Jean ran the coffee shop at the auction mart, and also managed the office, balancing the sales records after each sale.

Once again, she dared to start hoping. Maybe Clarence would stop drinking and be home at night. Maybe everything would be all right after all.

But within a few months, her life once more began to unravel.

"Clarence was drinking again," she says, sighing.

"Not just a sociable beer after work, either. That wouldn't have worried me. But he was drinking heavily. I guess he'd never stopped."

The marriage was getting rocky.

"He'd go to bed when the kids went," she says. "He'd take the two little ones into our bed, so he wouldn't have to be alone with me. We seldom spent time together as a couple. Less and less, as time passed."

In July of 1957 their fourth child, a daughter, Gail, was born. Once again, Jean became a full-time mother. Clarence was at the auction mart all the time, and as bad as his drinking had been, it was getting worse. When he'd come home, he'd fall into bed, apparently too tired even to talk to her.

The closeness they'd once shared was gone. Most of the time, so was he. He had two faces: one affable, hail-fellow-well-met public face; and one sinister, private face, reserved especially for his wife. When she looked at Clarence, Jean no longer liked what she was seeing.

In spite of the drinking, his business seemed to prosper. He sold the auction mart in Clover Bar, then started the Vermilion Auction Mart and later built a sister operation in Vegreville, about an hour's drive east of Edmonton.

In 1959, he told her they were moving to Vermilion so he could be closer to his work. Reluctantly, Jean agreed, but only if he'd sign over the original house on 74th Street, in the Virginia Park district, and put it in her name. For some reason she's never fully understood, he agreed.

"There wasn't a lot of equity," she says. "But it was a bit of security. Somehow, I knew I needed to hang onto that. We'd borrowed the money from my

grandfather to buy it so I needed to control the payments. I rented it out when we moved.”

That may have been the first time Jean had realized the critical importance of being financially prudent and looking after her own money. It wouldn't be the last.

October 2004. A decisive woman in a well-cut blue suit, Jean glances out her office window and once again her hands move nervously over the desktop, as though looking for something. Answers, maybe. She sighs, because this still hurts, this memory that bothers her most of all, and when she finally speaks, there's a bitter note in her voice.

“After every sale, he'd get so drunk!”

The Yellowhead Highway runs east from Edmonton, and doglegs around Vegreville before it reaches Vermilion. Here the rolling green prairie is scattered with grazing cattle, black Angus, Simmental, Herefords and, now and then, the big white French cattle called Charolais.

Vermilion, a community of several thousand people on the south bank of the river it's named after, is a pretty town, with a broad main street of solid buildings, many of them brick.

People here have done well for themselves. The brick structures are both a mark of the prosperity this town has enjoyed for the past century, and a reminder of one bad day in 1918, when a disastrous fire wiped out most of its existing main street.

In summer, flower baskets hang from the lampposts on Main Street, perfuming the long July evenings. In the early dark of December, Christmas lights twinkle in the windows of Craig's Department Store and Long's Value Drug Mart. All year through, up and down this street, people stop to pass the time of day when they meet.

There was a time when the auction mart on the west side of town was also a meeting place, especially on sale days.

Auction marts have their own excitement, their own rush. Folks in this part of the country say you can smell three things at a good auction: cattle, coffee and cash. The bleachers around the sales ring are full, and as the animals are herded in, the auctioneer is the star of his own show, his singsong patter crackling through the microphone, entertaining the crowd, so even those who aren't buying are having a good time.

*Lot 25 now, ladies and gents. We got some fine little bred heifers here, friends. Who'll start the bidding at one-fifty? Thank you sir, I got one-fifty, now two, now two-fifty ... Who'll give me three? Three hundred dollars? Going once for two-fifty, going twice ... all in, all done, SOLD, for two hundred and fifty dollars to my good friend in the black hat.*

Clarence was a showman. If he'd had a motto, it would have been “Always leave them laughing,” and he had a million tricks to keep the people entertained.

In September, he'd bring in cases of apples and oranges, and throw the fruit into the bleachers for them to catch. At Thanksgiving, he auctioned fresh turkeys for the appreciative crowd, and gave the odd one away, if he knew a man couldn't afford to buy one of the big birds, and had a family to feed.

Before long, Clarence had his own television show, a weekly livestock report on CKSA Lloydminster. It was a half hour during prime time, complete with a country band and celebrity guests, including visiting rodeo clowns.

On a slow day, Clarence would bring the two younger kids on the show, Grant in a fringed cowboy shirt and Stetson, Gail with a basket of kittens.

Anything to grab attention.

Gail remembers.

“If I wanted him to pay attention to me, I'd just climb on his knee and start smoking his cigarette.” (To this day, she's a non-smoker.)

“He'd laugh. He'd give me real money to play with, wads of cash. I'd stuff it into my little blue plastic purse and then forget it on the lawn overnight, and in the morning it would be gone. I don't know whether he'd picked it up, or somebody else had. It never seemed to matter.”

Along with cattle, Vermilion is also horse country, and during horse auctions, Clarence could get even more creative. The western bands would do their torch-and-twang numbers, the clowns would cavort and shout one-liners into the microphone, the trick ponies would dance around on their hind legs, but Gail remembers her horses.

“I loved animals, and he'd give me a pony for a present. Make a big fuss, tell me it was my horse, just mine. Then we'd be at the auction, and he'd tell somebody to bring in my pony. And he'd sell it! Sell my pony, just like that.

“He did the same thing to Mom with her palominos. He'd give her one for a present, make a big deal of it, then he'd turn around and sell it without even asking.

“The difference was, she never really wanted the horses in the first place.”

Clarence Lovig's ongoing battle with alcohol wasn't that unusual in the auction mart culture of the western prairies. Some folks even called it an occupational hazard. Some folks still do.

When a rancher made a big sale, he felt good about it. In a business where there are probably too few successes, he needed to celebrate, kick up his heels a bit. So the auctioneer would buy him a drink or two, and maybe they'd even kill the bottle. For the rancher, it might be once a year. For the auctioneer who owned the business, there'd be another sale day next week, or even tomorrow. Another sale, another bottle.

Clarence was running two auction marts, and between sales, he was hitting the road to buy cattle all over central Alberta. The drinking had become routine.

Close the deal, open the bottle.

Jean saw it happening, and she grew increasingly desperate.

"He was a man who'd see a hole right in front of him, and jump in anyway. There was drinking every night, and he'd started gambling. He'd bring his drunken friends home and expect me to cook steaks for everybody.

"It got so bad that many nights Clarence never came home at all," she says, memories flooding back, voice changing just a shade.

"I don't know which was worse."

Even as her marriage continued to crumble, Jean was determined to cobble together some sort of normal life for her children. When summer holidays rolled around, the two older boys, Lyall and Brian, both had jobs. They'd spend the summer working on the farm for their grandfather. The two youngest, Grant and Gail, asked if they could go camping. Jean packed up the car and headed south, into the Drumheller Badlands.

There was something about the strange, contorted landscape that Jean found comforting, almost spiritual. There, with the constant uncertainty of Clarence's wild alcoholic moods temporarily out of the picture, she was at peace. She could relax for a moment, watch her kids scramble around the sandstone hoodoos and give her tired brain a rest. They could camp for free, and there was a swimming pool in the campground that cost them nothing.

She remembers the smallest detail from that first trip.

"Grant was interested in geology. He had a miniature pick, and a bag tied to his belt to collect rock samples, and Gail and I watched him way up high in the hoodoos, tapping away with that pick. We noticed that the sound didn't reach us until after he'd hit the rock and raised his pick again. He had a pocketful of

firecrackers, and some matches, and once, when he was trying to squeeze through a narrow hole in the rock, the firecrackers began to go off! I still can't figure out how that happened."

After sundown, they'd roast hotdogs over a campfire, watch the stars come out and listen to the night sounds of a northern desert. She'd make a bed for the kids in the back seat of the car, filling in the floor space with pillows so they'd be comfortable, while she slept on the front seat.

"It wasn't so bad. Kind of cozy, really, and the kids had fun, so I had fun too."

One night during that trip, the clouds rolled in and the rain came bucketing down in sheets, as it does in this part of the country, so they headed for an old railway hotel to wait out the storm.

They were sitting in the lobby, willing the rain to stop, when a stranger who introduced himself as Charlie Hill started talking to the children. He discovered Grant's interest in petrified relics, and invited them all up to his room, where he kept his personal collection of dinosaur bones, a giant femur, ribs, bits of jawbone found during his many years of solitary rambles through the Badlands.

"You wouldn't believe the bones he pulled out from under that bed," says Jean. "He had a museum, right there in his room."

Charlie insisted that Grant should have a petrified oyster and a number of small dinosaur bones, and the youngster was thrilled with his new acquisitions.

When the rain kept pelting down, Jean decided they'd better spend the night, so she rented the cheapest room in what was already the cheapest hotel in town.

"There was only one bed, but it was a double, and we all crawled in together. I waited until the kids fell asleep, and then I slept on the floor."

The next summer they went back to the Badlands, and Grant took a friend, Barry Jackson, with him.

Barry's mother, Kay Jackson, had been one of Jean's closest friends, and the only person with whom she was ever able to share confidences regarding her problems with Clarence.

"Kay was a nurse, and she understood about alcoholism, and what it does to people, and to their families. She had a wonderful sense of humour, and we were close, but she developed cancer.

"The last months she lived, every Wednesday, I bought two roses — one for Kay, one for myself. Then I'd go to her house and we'd talk, just the two of us. If we snipped the stems properly, the roses would last almost a week.

"Kay was a brave woman, and a great friend. When she died, I missed her terribly, and her children were far too young to be without their mother."

Jean, maybe remembering Kay's bravery, stifled her fear of rattlesnakes and let Grant and Barry sleep in a pup tent, while she and Gail slept in the car.

One hot day, Grant came running back to camp, yelling that he needed the camera. They'd found a baby rattler, and Barry was up there in the hoodoos guarding it, so hurry up or it might get away.

"We still have so many good memories of those trips," she says, her face softening as the happy times run like an old movie through her mind: the trail past the little church, the ride on the four-car ferry across the river, the suspension bridge, the ghost town.

"Once during each trip, we splurged on bumper car rides. I think the tickets were about 50 cents each, maybe less.

"Thank goodness my own car stayed in good shape during those road trips. That car was a blessing."

And so the summers passed, with Jean and Clarence struggling through a relationship that was now almost too painful to be called a marriage.

Like the Vermilion Fair, the Vermilion Rodeo was part of the western rural culture that city folk admired and envied. The annual rodeo was the real thing, part of the professional circuit, and seasoned cowboys with more grit than glitz knew every Brahma bull and bucking bronc by name and reputation.

"Here comes Rocky Rockabar aboard Spitfire," the guest announcer would sing out in his Texas drawl, as the chute opened and man and horse burst into the ring, the cowboy with one hand tightly gripping what some cowboys call a suitcase handle, the other hand raised high in the air.

Then the fiddles would start, and everybody knew they had to watch closely, because this ride would be measured in seconds only.

A good cowboy could tape his broken ribs and his blistered palms, kill the pain with a swig of rye, and wrestle a steer to the ground with his bare hands. If you sat in the front row, choking on dust, you could hear that cowboy groan.

By sundown, Bucky Swan and his western band would be playing, the liquor would be flowing, and for Clarence and his friends, it was party time again.

One of his favourite drinking companions was a rodeo clown named Buddy Heaton, who owned a trick buffalo. There is every possibility that the buffalo had more sense than Buddy, who was, by nature, a hard-drinking brawler.

Like Clarence, Buddy had a kind of fatal charm, and when he was sober, the Lovig kids enjoyed having a real, live clown for a friend. It gave them a certain celebrity-by-association. Buddy wasn't just fun, he was hilarious, as all

good clowns are, and he made them laugh. But when he was drunk, things got pretty crazy.

"During the rodeo, when Buddy was in town, no day was complete without a fight," Grant recalls. "There'd be blood all over the place."

The Brahma bulls are also part of the rodeo culture. Huge, powerful, temperamental animals with names like Terminator and Sizzler, they earn their dinner by putting on a show, snorting, stomping, bucking. Now and then, when some hapless cowboy falls the wrong way, or the bull is friskier than usual, the clown can't distract him fast enough, at least not before bones are broken and brains are scrambled.

Gail was scared of the bulls. Her older brother, Lyall, remembers why.

"One day Dad was drunk, and he was teasing a huge Brahma bull named Tiger. He teased the bulls a lot, and they'd get mad. They were massive animals, very strong. Tiger darned near broke through the fence. He could have killed Dad, if he'd wanted to."

Gail, who hung out with her dad whenever possible, had seen many such moments.

If the rodeo gave Clarence one excuse to drink, Christmas gave him another.

In the early days of the auction mart, Clarence and Jean always had a big staff Christmas party, with Bucky Swan and the band playing up a storm in one corner, a full open bar in the other, Clarence being the genial host and Jean's good food in every room. By this time, she was developing a sideline as a part-time caterer, cooking for other people's parties as well as her own, and she was earning a reputation for her generous hospitality. By doing her baking ahead of time and freezing as many dishes as possible, she could handle one or two events for other people, and still load her own table with Christmas goodies for Clarence's big night.

For those parties, the kids were allowed to stay up as long as they wanted.

"It could have been so good," Grant muses, remembering how much fun it was to hang out with the adults even though you were just a squirt of a kid and likely should have been in bed hours ago.

"They could have been such a team, Mom and Dad. Her talent, his personality, and their combined business sense.

"We all loved our Dad," he says, thoughtfully. "But none of us loved the drunk."

"I think I could have coped with it if only he'd done one or the other — stayed drunk, or stayed sober," Jean says, reflecting on the wild swings in temperament, the crazy contrasts in his behaviour.

"It was the uncertainty that was so awful. Never knowing whether he'd come home happy, or come home and start hitting me ... or not come home at all."

Too soon the happy house parties ended, and Christmas, the season she'd always loved so much, became the loneliest time of the year.

On one memorable Christmas Eve, while her friends' husbands were home with their families, Clarence had gone out drinking.

It got late, and she waited, leaving the Christmas lights on, hoping he'd come home just a bit sober. For hours she listened for the crunch of his boots in the snow, for his voice in the hallway.

Questions tumbled around in her brain. Where was he? Had he been in a car accident? What could have happened to keep him away all night on Christmas Eve?

Eventually, when it was nearer morning than night, she heard him stagger in. Thank God, he was alive. But when the children got up to see if Santa had come, Clarence couldn't get out of bed.

"He said he had the flu," she recalls. "He'd always say he had the flu when he had a hangover."

Clarence's repeated bouts of flu were among the little white lies Jean had begun telling her family, the face-saving excuses that might explain his increasingly odd behaviour.

"I had to do Christmas for the kids, so I got up and made a big fuss over the presents, and hoped they didn't notice anything was wrong with their dad. We drove to my parents' farm near Ardrossan for Christmas dinner, and we all pretended everything was all right.

Jean was getting good at pretending.

"I didn't tell anybody about the mess I was in. Not my parents, not my sister, not my friends. I was too embarrassed," she says, echoing words that are sadly familiar to people with alcoholic spouses.

"I was too ashamed.

"Mom and Dad never knew about his drinking," she says, and then she repeats it, as though she's no longer as convinced as she once was.

"Really, they didn't. They just didn't realize."

And if they did, they never said so.

*Family portrait, with Christmas tree: Clarence is seated, with two serious-looking children beside him and one on each knee. Nobody smiles. Jean, perched nervously on the arm of the chair as if ready for flight, is looking at Clarence. Her expression is wary.*

It was in Vermilion that Clarence built a new home for Jean, her dream home, with a kitchen that was the envy of her friends. She went back to work at the auction mart, running the office and coffee shop. She was also baking all the pies and making all the hamburger patties from scratch.

By 1962, she had saved enough profit from the coffee shop to buy herself a car: a brand new Chevrolet Biscayne.

But she was working too hard, worrying too much, keeping the books, trying to collect bad debts while the money Clarence made ran through his fingers like water.

One late night, exhausted mentally and physically, she headed back to Vermilion from Vegreville, where she was working one day a week. She fell asleep at the wheel of her car. The powerful Chevy crossed the road, went into a ditch and piled into some boulders.

Jean was terrified: if she had died in the accident, what would become of her children?

Outsiders who didn't belong to the tightly knit community of Vermilion might have thought the Lovigs were a model couple, but within the walls of her handsome ranch-style home, Jean's family was in chaos, and the local gossip mill was grinding busily.

She remembers watching Clarence lose an average year's salary in a single night, and it wasn't long before most of the town knew he'd added a serious gambling habit to his drinking.

During one drunken poker session in her kitchen, with Clarence losing heavily and his language toward her growing more insulting by the minute, her frustration boiled over. She took a dozen eggs out of the fridge and headed for the drunken rabble around her kitchen table.

"Leave my house! Get out, unless you want these eggs all over your cards," she yelled.

They left.

Not for the first time, Jean cried herself to sleep.

But there was worse to come. Gail remembers a particularly painful evening with her father arriving outside their house with his current girlfriend in the car,

and her mother, totally humiliated and close to tears, picking up a rock and threatening to throw it through the car window.

They all remember the time Jean rented out their master bedroom when the local motel was overbooked. The bedroom had an attached bath, and Jean planned to sleep in the spare room, give the guest his breakfast the next morning, and pocket some badly needed cash.

"Somehow, Dad found out, and he came roaring home," Gail recalls. "He was threatening to kill the poor guy who'd rented the room."

This grown-up daughter laughs, nervously, but there was nothing funny about it. Not one thing, and she remembers every detail like it was yesterday.

"I remember watching Dad's fist come through the glass in the door. I remember the blood running down his arm, and my brother Brian holding him up against the house, yelling at him to behave, or he'd punch him. And of course, the police coming."

August 2005. They can laugh about it now, and they do, all four children-as-adults, gathered around the dining room table with their mother in her Edmonton condo. So many miles and years have come between the past and the present, maybe it's finally possible to see some humour in what happened to them. Like people who got in the way of a drive-by shooting and somehow survived, they laugh because it was all faintly bizarre and, truth be told, if they didn't laugh they'd probably cry, even now.

Only other survivors understand such dark humour.

At school in Vermilion, Lyall hears the gossip, or most of it.

"I can't look anybody in the eye," he accuses his father. "You owe everybody in town."

Meanwhile, Clarence seemed to take some perverse pleasure in humiliating Jean in public.

"He'd take me to a party, and leave me standing alone at the door. Then he'd ask another woman to dance. It seemed that everybody in town was talking about us."

Clarence fuelled the gossip by adding his own tidbits, insisting that Jean hadn't been home all weekend.

"It wasn't me," she protests. "I never left."

It hurt when he'd stay away all night, but the uncertainty was even worse. When he finally packed his clothes and moved out, it was almost a relief.

"He was the one that kept running out on us," she points out. "I was always there for the children."

The drinking was expensive, and so was the gambling. Clarence needed money, and even when he wasn't living there, he'd come sneaking back to the house after Jean had left for work, so he could take something to sell, anything at all, from frozen steaks to the lawn mower.

"Two of our neighbours were kind enough to keep the grass cut. They knew where the lawn mower had gone."

On one memorable morning, Jean discovered that her milk cow had gone missing.

Desperate for cash, Clarence had sold the cow.

Over several years, Jean's husband became increasingly violent, and during his binges it was she who took the brunt of his temper.

Once again, Gail remembers.

"One night when Grant and I were asleep, there was a fight, and it woke us up. Dad was hitting Mom. I remember Grant waking up and saying, 'Let's throw our toys at him.' So there we were in our pyjamas, two little kids pitching toys at our dad to distract him, so he'd stop hitting our mom."

"Grant doesn't remember the incident. He was a sensitive kid, he always blocked out the worst stuff. But I remember it all. I remember how everybody looked, I even remember what they were wearing."

Clarence got sicker, and developed delirium tremens. Violent with Jean, terrified of his own demons, he was hospitalized more than once, and was put in restraints. He ended up in an Edmonton psychiatric hospital.

For Jean, the humiliation and sadness of seeing Clarence in a straitjacket, and the fear of what he'd do when he got out, was a personal nightmare that played over and over again.

"They shot him full of enough drugs to down a horse, and still he fought. He'd be shaking so bad, he couldn't hold a glass. I'd have to hold it for him, hold the straw in his mouth ..."

Then would come the pleading, the professions of love, the promises to clean up his act once and for all. Each time, Jean would rush to his side, and she'd try again, hoping to nurse him back to health, hoping this time the promises meant something.

She lost track of broken promises.

Grant still wonders how his mother survived.

"It was psychological and physical warfare," he says. "Apart from everything else, he completely destroyed her self-esteem."

One ordinary day in 1965, Clarence walked out for good. Without a goodbye, he was gone, and the sheriff arrived to padlock the auction mart and officially inform Jean that she and her two younger kids would have one month to make other living arrangements. The mortgage company had foreclosed, and they would be evicted from their house.

"Our power was going to be cut off. I asked if they could wait one more day, and they agreed."

With one day's grace, she considered her options, but they weren't good.

"The catering wasn't enough to support us. I had no money, and no place to live. I could not, would not, ask my parents for help."

The two older boys would manage, somehow, and by this time she had almost no control over them in any case. Lyall was planning to go to university in Montana. Brian wanted to quit school and become an auctioneer.

It was the two younger ones who needed her the most. Jean packed them up and headed for Edmonton, where she still had some small equity in the house she'd made Clarence sign over to her when they moved to Vermilion.

Her marriage was over, her kids were suffering, and her future was a gaping void.

Depressed and more desperate than she'd ever felt before, Jean was headed across Edmonton's High Level Bridge in her car when suddenly she had a terrifying thought: what would happen if she just walked across the bridge and decided to jump? She wouldn't have been the first to drown her sorrows in the muddy swirl of the North Saskatchewan River.

"I decided I wouldn't be walking over that bridge for awhile," she says, with careful understatement. "I had kids to raise."

But the kids weren't happy. Jean had found a job, but Gail was skipping school and having nightmares. Some nights she'd wake up screaming.

"One night I thought I heard her screaming and I ran in, but it wasn't Gail. It was the man downstairs in the basement suite beating his wife, and *she* was screaming. It terrified all of us."

Jean took immediate action. She evicted the wife-beater and helped the woman move, hoping the husband wouldn't find out where she'd gone.

When the incident was settled, Jean knew it was time to swallow whatever pride she had left, and look after her children. She quit her job, applied for welfare, and got it.

Meanwhile, Grant was quietly miserable.

When Jean asked what his problem was, he told her bluntly that he wanted to go home, to Vermilion.

So Jean put the house up for sale and once again loaded her car, with what were by now her greatly reduced worldly possessions, and headed back.

Life was never simple for Jean in those days, and it was almost prophetic that the family cat, a big black-and-white stray whose name was Mother Cat, would do her part. She chose to give birth to a litter of handsome kittens during the trip home.

"She was well named," says Grant. "Mother Cat was the matriarch of all cats, tough, fiercely protective, the terror of the local dog population."

No doubt feeling a common bond with the new mother, and having nowhere else to go, Jean settled her little family, Grant, Gail, cat, kittens and all, into a tent beside the Vermilion River.

It was the beginning of July, school was out, and the summer lay ahead. If we're going to be homeless, she thought, this is the best possible season. The long, warm days were in their favour, and she was oddly thankful for small mercies. Jean made beds on the tent floor, and they lived out of the trunk of her car. She cooked the simplest possible meals on the wood stove in the picnic shelter, and tried to make it seem like fun, as though they were just having a holiday at the lake, albeit somewhat longer than usual.

The worst time was when it rained and their beds got soaked.

"The kids had lots of sleepovers with friends, and one very kind family took us in for short periods," she says. "But you can't impose."

As the weeks passed, Jean operated in a kind of fog, and spent sleepless nights worrying. How could this have happened to her once-perfect world? More importantly, how could she rescue her family from this mess?

Summer waned and as the days grew shorter, nights in the tent began to take on a decided chill. A friend in town intervened.

"Jean, you can't live in that tent," he insisted. "Winter's coming."

He had a cabin by the water, and she could use it, rent-free. Gratefully, Jean moved kids and cats into the cottage. But, not unlike the tent, the cottage was also heat-free, and according to Gail, it was infested with moths.

"I don't remember the moths," says Jean. "I was grateful for a roof over our heads."

September 2004. In Jean's comfortable kitchen, the visiting goes on, and the smell of coffee tells the assembled friends that a fresh pot is brewing.

Behind the table where the women are seated, the big bay window overlooks

the valley. From the deck of this house, if she looks west, Jean can almost see the park where she once pitched her tent like some latter-day nomad, made beds on the ground for her children, and cooked their meals in the picnic shelter.

Jean: "It wasn't too bad, except when it rained."

Gail: "We always knew we had a home with Mom, no matter what. We just knew."

Jean is, and always has been, one hundred per cent mother, and her devotion to her children has never wavered. No matter what happened to her marriage, and no matter how wounded she felt by Clarence's behaviour, the kids came first.

As the boys were growing up, she tried to be both mother and father, whether that meant driving Lyall to a farmer's field before dawn so he could go duck hunting when he was still too young to drive himself, or buying firecrackers in Edmonton for Grant so he could resell them in Vermilion at a profit.

"She bought me my first model rocket," Grant remembers. "She'd get up early with me to watch the launches from Cape Kennedy."

When Brian was in a car accident that mangled his front teeth and pushed them into his jaw, the child didn't shed a tear until Jean came flying into the room and he knew it was safe to cry.

Gail remembers the birthday parties, each of them in great detail.

In years when Jean could hardly scare up grocery money, there'd be the party, the presents, the big chiffon cake with pink icing, and the coins hidden inside.

"She knew what kids wanted, and how kids felt. It was important to her that we were happy, and carefree, as children should be," Gail recalls.

"One birthday she made us all banana splits. Real ones, with maraschino cherries, chocolate sauce and whipped cream. Nobody else's mother did that. Just mine."

The Vermilion Hotel sits on a side street, half a block off Main. It's a seedy looking place, even today, with a bar aptly named The Zoo. Attached to it is a low-slung structure once known as the Rio Cafe, and a third section, then called the Vermilion Block, that was an apartment house. In later years, the Vermilion Block would burn down, but in the mid '60s it became a temporary roof over the heads of Jean and her two youngest children.

With her marriage in tatters, Jean decided to put her business skills on the market. She talked a local banker into a \$1,000 small business loan as a down payment, and bought the Rio Cafe. Then she moved the kids into rooms in the adjoining apartment block and hired more staff, planning to be home each afternoon as soon as school was out, or maybe before. But it didn't work that way.

"She was at work from six a.m. to after ten o'clock," Gail remembers. "We hardly saw our Mom."

And once again, the kids were miserable.

"I hated that place so much," Grant recalls. "I stayed away as much as possible."

Across the street was the Boston Confectionary Store, owned by the Wong family, and it became Grant's refuge. Mei Wong was in Grant's class at school, and although they weren't close friends, they certainly knew each other. His father didn't seem to mind Grant being around his store.

"I'd hang out in the Boston Confectionary until closing time, just to keep from going home. One day I actually found a drunk stuffed into a baby carriage at the bottom of the stairs."

Jean wasn't happy either.

"I had to leave for work before they got up. I had no free time. If the cook was sick, or the dishwasher quit, I had to be there. I knew the kids were suffering. Gail was going to school without her hair combed."

Then the house in Edmonton sold, and Jean was able to put a down payment on a house in Vermilion. It wasn't grand, but it was comfortable, and infinitely better than their brief stint in the apartment.

Jean's marriage to Clarence Lovig had ended in divorce in 1966, but no matter how conflicted their lives together had been, he was the man she had always loved, the father of her children.

"We had a lot of history together," she says, remembering the good times.

After the divorce was final, they stayed in contact, even after he'd remarried and they became, in Jean's words, "almost friendly."

Without the constant worry and humiliation, Jean's life and that of her children improved dramatically. She even began dating, although the men Gail remembers had a pretty tough time romancing a woman like Jean.

"I always told them I didn't entertain men in my home, and I meant it."

While there wasn't exactly an army of eligible men knocking at the door, Jean was an attractive woman, and Gail remembers a modest parade of suitors,

some of them definitely more suitable than others.

"They tried hard," Gail says, remembering how she and Grant dealt with them.

"They'd bring her chocolates, and we'd eat them. They'd bring her flowers, and we'd giggle. She'd say 'I'll go out with you, but my kids will have to come too.'

"So we'd all go to the drive-in, and watch *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, or *The Mummy's Revenge*, and Mom's date would buy us popcorn. One guy had a flat tire on the way home, and we locked all the doors while he was out there in the dark, fixing it. Some of the guys were pretty funny, and I don't think she took any of them seriously."

Although Clarence never came out of his alcoholic tailspin, during the last few years of his life he managed to have periods when he was sober. During those times, he made an attempt to repair the relationship with his children, and all four of them were able to spend some positive time with their father. In retrospect, Jean is grateful for that.

"He'd even phone me," she recalls. "We'd talk."

Sadly, Clarence's attempts at reform were a classic example of too little, too late.

At fifty-nine, Jean's first love, the best dancer in the world, suffered a heart attack and died. He was broke, and alone.

Gail Lovig: "In all those years, she never spoke badly of Dad, not to us. She never stopped loving him, either. She wanted that other Clarence, the one she knew was there somewhere inside him, but it just didn't happen."

There had been one bright note in the whole Rio Cafe fiasco. His name was Larry Paré, and he was an electrician, a big, good-looking guy with dark hair and an easy laugh. When Jean took over, he became a regular at the Rio.

"At first he just came for pie and coffee, but he did seem to be there a lot," Jean remembers. "He often came for lunch with his son. He said he loved my apple pie."

Larry was a single father and Jean was now a single mother. It gave them a common bond, something to talk about. When Jean announced that after six months as owner she'd had enough of cafe life — she was selling the Rio — he offered her a deal: if he and his son could eat their noon meal at Jean's house,

he'd pay all her grocery bills.

She took him up on it.

Larry was different than the other men she'd met after Clarence left, and Jean enjoyed his company. With him she felt safe. Here was a man she could count on, one who actually wanted to look after her.

In 1968, Larry Paré and Jean Lovig were married by a United Church minister in Wainwright. When Gail asked if she could come to the wedding, Jean said no.

"You weren't at my first wedding, and I see no reason why you should be at this one."

The Lovigs and the Parés became a blended family. Larry didn't try to be a father to the Lovig kids, and Jean didn't try to mother his children. It was a wise policy, and they all got along.

"Mom has been close to his three kids," says Grant. "She still is. She has organized family trips to places like Nashville, Disneyland, Hawaii, with herself and Larry, all the kids and all their spouses. She has worked hard to make us all feel included, like we're one big family."

September 2004. Jean, in her office at Company's Coming, leafs through a pamphlet from Alcoholics Anonymous.

"When I was going through all that trouble with Clarence, I'd heard of AA, but I didn't really know what they were, or how to contact them. There was no Al-Anon in those days, at least not in Vermilion. No help for families of alcoholics, no safe places ... " and for reasons that might be understood only by other women in her position, she'd been too ashamed to tell anybody what she was going through.

"I don't know why that was. I guess if you have an alcoholic husband, or wife, you might understand how I felt, but still not know why you or I would try to hide it."

She sits bolt upright in her chair, her back not touching the cushions.

"I don't like what happened to us," she says.

"I still hate to think of what it did to me, how it changed me. I got so angry. I still get angry, when I remember.

"Not with my kids — never with my kids — but with Clarence, for all the pain, for how he hurt me, for what his drinking did to all of us ..."

Strangely, to this day, Jean can't help but wonder if she was somehow the cause of his problems.

Intellectually, she knows that Clarence's alcoholism was a disease, and it had nothing to do with her. But still, there's that inkling of doubt: what could she have done differently?

"His drinking brought out the worst in me. I did lots of things I probably shouldn't have done. I fought back when I could, and I talked back."

Even now, the unreasonable guilt is there in the back of her mind, the nagging feeling that maybe, somehow, in some way, she was responsible.

"Maybe he wouldn't have hit me if I'd been quiet? I don't know. I've wondered about that.

"I was lonely, and I went to a few parties that I wish I hadn't. I soon found out they didn't help the loneliness ..."

She pauses, searching for some redemptive moment here, something of value she might rescue from those troubled years.

"The only good that might come of all those bad times would be if I could help just one other person, keep one person from going through what we went through."

So what would she tell them, if she could, these phantom women she knows are out there, scared and silent, hiding from the truth?

"I'd say this: If he hasn't been home all week, if he's lying to you, if he's blaming you for his problems, if he's suspicious of you, if he's blacking out, if you can't do anything right no matter how hard you try, if he's hiding liquor around the house, if he hits you even once ... get help.

"Don't wait. Ask for help right now. Today," she says.

"Phone Alcoholics Anonymous. Phone Al-Anon. Tell somebody you trust."