

II

1934 - 1936
Places Of Our Own

SEARCHING FOR WORK DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION was a tough job. But York persevered and within a couple of days landed a small job with Rolph Clark Stone, the big Toronto lithographers.

Clutching the cheque for \$45 he telephoned me at the Star to give me the good news and said he would spend the rest of the day looking for a place to live. We reasoned we could be together as long as the money lasted. He found an apartment on King Street in the Parkdale district, a bed-sitting room with a pull-out bed, a kitchen, and a bathroom down the hall. It was to cost \$7 a week. We moved in late that afternoon and proceeded to have our first misunderstanding. I picked up my unopened bag and started for the door. York sought to prevent me leaving and it soon blew over.

I went along to the Star each day as York searched for more work and we would meet at noon for lunch. I formed the habit of slipping my wedding ring on during our meal, then slipping it off when I returned to the Star. The day came when I forgot momentarily to remove it. Sure enough, that afternoon the manager, Mr. Tate called me into his office, "It has been reported that you had a wedding ring on your finger. Are you married?" he asked. I said, "Yes," whereupon he replied, "Well you know our policy," and gave me two weeks notice.

York and I became so hungry at times that we would press our noses against shop windows displaying delicious looking food. Another memory: of counting prunes or whatever, to make them last the week. I never did return to the labour force. The \$45 York had earned seemed to invite more money. He didn't like the idea of his wife working. He had some other peculiar ideas too: He seemed to think I should stay in the apartment all day long, not even visiting friends including my Aunt Ethel. There was little doubt that he thought the husband made all the decisions.

I began to rebel a little and one evening, after a dinner of fish, I didn't move to do the dishes as quickly as he thought I should. He

demanded I do them immediately. I didn't move so he rubbed my face in the fishy plates. It took some time to overcome this attitude but I asserted myself more and more. The one time he hit me I hit him right back. He was so surprised he never did it again.

It soon became so abundantly clear that both of us were dedicated to art, that the stage was set for us to work together as a team for the rest of our lives.

After a few weeks in our King Street quarters York had found enough work to make life a little more comfortable. He decided to see how I responded to a little alcohol as I had never indulged. He bought a 'micky' of gin and mixed it with other things thinking I might not like the taste of alcohol. We started before dinner with silver fizzes made with the white of an egg. After the first one he asked, "How was it? Do you feel anything?" - "No," I replied. "Well, let's have a second... and a third." Still we felt nothing. So we had our dinner. After dinner York used the yokes of the eggs and made what he called golden fizzes. The same response each time until the micky was finished. York was astounded. He was so intent on my reaction that he had no reaction either. He thought that someone must have watered the gin! Finally we pulled out the bed and crawled in feeling the experiment had been a waste of time and money. However the next morning told a different story. Neither of us had a stitch of clothing on except that I had one stocking and we never slept in the nude. And that was the end of alcohol for a while.

It was not long before York was again connected with Brigdens. For a retainer of \$25 a week they had first call on his work which was piecework and they would take 50 per cent. Fortunately with piecework York soon exceeded the \$25 retainer. He was kept busy by Ronalds Advertising Agency through their client Glen Bannerman of Hudson Terraplane Motors who started giving him advertisements for their cars. Things were looking better and we thought we could now afford a larger apartment. An unfurnished one became available in a nearby building at the corner of Queen Street and Dowling Avenue. Furnishing it was a great experience; it had to be done on pennies and York wanted bright colours in drapes for the windows. I made them bright yellows and reds (sounds awful) as I thought to coordinate his ideas with mine. I too had been good at art in school.

With work coming in steadily York decided he should leave Brigdens and open his own studio. He found an attractive one at

\$20 a month, at 145 Wellington Street West, owned jointly by the artist Dorothy Stevens and her brother Paul. It faced north with large windows and had two rooms. The first would be his office and the second his studio near the windows. Haunting used furniture stores and auctions we came across a rosewood desk converted from an antique piano with elephant-sized legs. It was not the most logical choice having only two small drawers but it was interesting and a wonderful conversation piece.

It was about this time when we bought our first car, a used Plymouth with a rumble seat. We enjoyed our first holidays that summer with York's parents on a guest farm near Trenton on Lake Ontario. York's parents left earlier but two weeks was all we could afford. We were halfway there, just beyond Port Hope, when a great bang brought our little car to a halt. It had to be towed back to Port Hope. It had a broken axle and would take a few days to fix for the horrible sum of thirty dollars. We called York's parents at the farm and they came to pick us up.

It was an idyllic setting. We had a small cabin right on Lake Ontario. The thunderstorms across the great expanse of water were frightening but we were so happy and relaxed. The experience of joining everyone at the farmer's big table loaded with fresh produce, was delightful. I will never forget the huge beefsteak tomatoes ripened on the vine. Today we no longer know that flavour unfortunately. We spent hours wandering over the sand dunes and along the lakeshore with York stopping frequently to sketch. It was the only two weeks we were ever able to spend in this lovely, simple paradise.

The need for more space for a home studio was solved when a larger apartment with two bedrooms, became available in the same building. Unfortunately it faced Queen Street, a busy, noisy thoroughfare with traffic and streetcars rumbling along all day and night not to mention neon lights flickering on and off. At first we wore eye shades and ear plugs but quickly adjusted. The second bedroom became a much needed studio. York worked many evenings at home and now had the space to pose a model. He had been using models posing for groups but preferred not to have professionals since they often affected set poses. He was aware of a long-limbed, well-proportioned girl we occasionally saw on our street but he hesitated to approach her. He asked if I would try to arrange for her to pose. This I was able to do explaining it was necessary to pose in the nude, I was the artist's wife and would be

there. It would be for two or three hours once or twice a week for 50 cents an hour. The student was interested, thinking she would learn something about art but wanted to ask her mother. Her mother readily agreed and said she would like to come with her daughter which was reasonable. After a couple of visits the mother was satisfied that all was well. In retrospect, it was a much nicer world back in the thirties. Phyllis turned out to be an excellent model and this marked the beginning of a lifetime habit. York drew from a model all his life at least half a day a week no matter in what country we found ourselves.

As we prospered York thought it civilized to have a pre-dinner drink and begged me to have a cigarette with him, another new experience for me. We didn't know then how addictive and unhealthy these two habits could be. Somehow I was lucky and remained a light smoker but unfortunately York developed into a very heavy one. He was soon going through three packs a day, chain smoking while painting, with a background of classical music. This was a natural environment for York, his mother coming from a musical family. While still at school, York had a paper route, worked in a bakery on Saturdays and with his first money, bought records such as *Marche Slave*, *Finlandia* and *Afternoon of a Fawn*.

Much of York's work came from Ronalds Advertising Agency, Ray Avery was manager of the Toronto branch. Its head office in Montreal was headed by the owner, Russell Ronalds, a prominent advertising executive. Ronalds felt they had enough work to keep York Wilson busy and suggested he rent a studio within their offices. When they moved later to the Maclean Tower in Toronto, York moved with them.

York was getting a fair amount of illustration to do for stories in magazines, Macleans was one of them and Frank Sperry was the art director. One day York arrived sharp at 9 a.m. with his finished illustration which Sperry had ordered. Mr. Sperry was late, York was still sitting in the waiting room a half hour later when the Director, Napier Moore, passed by and asked him what he was waiting for. York said, to show Mr. Sperry his illustration. Finally Sperry arrived, obviously in a bad mood as he had been spoken to for being late. He started to criticize the illustration, wanting changes here and there. York having waited three quarters of an hour was annoyed too and folded the card. Sperry said, "What are you doing? We're going to press immediately." York said, "Well, you didn't like it," and Sperry said, "That's the last work you will ever get

from us.” Of course York was sorry later that he had been so hot-headed, he needed the work.

He then devised a scheme. He would do samples and sign Lela May Wilson, and Lela would present them as her work, maybe not to Macleans immediately but to other publications like Chatelaine. When they were ready he instructed me as to some of the terms used in the business, such as “a double spread,” “proportioned to size,” “bleeding a page,” and so on. I was extremely shy even having difficulty making normal phone calls. It sometimes took hours before I could bring myself to call to make an appointment to show my samples. Finally I managed to call Byrne Hope Sanders, editor of Chatelaine. My story was that I was from California, stopping possibly in Toronto or Montreal and would like to do some illustrations for Canadian magazines.

Miss Sanders liked the samples and gave me work immediately. In a few days the illustration was ready and pleased her so much that she gave me two more stories to illustrate. It carried on so well that at one point I had three things in one issue which included a cover. Byrne was getting more friendly each time and one day said, “My husband Frank Sperry likes your work so much, he wondered if Miss Wilson would like to go sketching on the weekend?” Unfortunately I was so sorry but I had another commitment but thanks just the same. “Whew” that was a close call and I knew it could happen again. It reminded me of one of Socrates conclusions, “If one could know all the ramifications caused by one lie, one would never tell a lie!”

Another time Byrne sent me in to discuss a point with John Eldridge, the art director of Chatelaine. She thought a small change in an illustration would help. Mr. Eldridge agreed and suggested I make the change right there in his studio. I said, “Thank you but I have an artist friend in this building, I know his materials, I will be right back. At this time York was renting space from Ronalds in the Maclean Tower. Fortunately he was there and quickly made the change. Eventually I did an illustration comprising three parts, the third being a tail-piece for the fairly long story. Somehow the tail-piece ended up with an illustration by Kay Bell and was credited to her. York hit the roof and instructed me to object, telling me exactly what to say. Byrne listened carefully and at the end said she would call me when she had something else. That was the last call I had and learned years later from her secretary (after she became Mrs. Ray Avery) that Byrne said, “We’ll let Miss Wilson cool her heels

for a while.”

Another person in the Chatelaine office at that time was a young journalist from Western Canada, Lotta Dempsey who years later became a great friend and fan of York Wilson's. When York Wilson was a fully established painter and muralist he was invited to speak at the Heliconian Club, a club for professional women artists. The aging Frank Sperry and his wife Byrne Hope Sanders were guests at this dinner. Mr. Sperry let it be known that he was anxious to meet the well-known painter York Wilson. We were brought and presented to them, not without trepidation I assure you, wondering if we would be recognized. Such was not the case, Mr. Sperry stressed the fact how much he had always enjoyed York Wilson's paintings and was anxious to meet him. It was a beautiful, sincere appreciation and we felt a twinge of guilt. Byrne did not recognize her former illustrator, Miss Wilson, from California either. Byrne Hope Sanders was to have a distinguished career in World War II with the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. She is also the author of "Emily Murphy," one of Canada's pioneers.

I took my samples (done by York) to the editor of Canadian Magazine, Mr. Joe Rutledge, with offices on Adelaide Street West, Toronto. Mr. Rutledge liked the samples and promised to watch for a story that needed a woman's point of view. True to his word he called in a few days and I started doing story illustrations for Canadian Magazine also. This eventually petered out as Mr. Rutledge found there were so few stories that could be illustrated by a woman!

Ray and Peggy Avery became close friends and York started doing their Christmas cards as well as humorous separate Avery/Wilson cards for a few special clients. In 1939 Flit insecticide was a Ronalds Agency account, and the President a fun crony. York designed a card of angels with Avery/Wilson heads on bodies floating in billowy garb, carrying a banner which said: "We Flit With Joyous Tidings..." (following page) "For Christmas And The New Year," again with floating angels, but in shorts. In 1940 Wilson's boisterous sense of humour came through with a poster offering a reward: "For Information Leading To The Conviction Of A Person Generally Known As RonRay AveryWilson, showing a full-faced Ray Avery with number 212121 and a profile of Ron Wilson with number 212121. The poster looks authentic but the copy was pure nonsense signed by Sheriff Halfa Buck. York always signed Ron Wilson on his commercial work but R. York or later York Wilson

related to fine art.

We made many other lasting friends at Ronalds. One of the writers, Charles Lee Hutchings (subject of York's painting Hutch, 1941) and girlfriend, later wife, Christine Connor (who posed for Welfare Worker, 1940). Because York had made Christine so very unattractive in Welfare Worker, he did a charming portrait of her later. There was Glen Bannerman, Cecilia Long (later companion to Lady Henrietta Banting, widow of Sir Henry Banting, the discoverer of insulin) and Claire Wallace, a well-known radio and TV commentator with a daily program across Canada.

Claire had a great sense of humour and fun coupled with a ready laugh. Her sponsor was the Bristol Myers Drug Company and she often interviewed pharmacists when she was giving the social news of the day. If the specified pharmacist failed to turn up she would summon York who pretended to be the pharmacist and always had lots to say. It was sometimes hard for Claire to keep back the giggles with his antics. At a party one time Claire overheard York telling a confidence and moved in fast, he stopped talking so she pleaded promising not to mention it on the air. He confided he hadn't possessed black studs for his tuxedo when hosting a television program from the Art Gallery of Toronto and had painted his white studs black. Claire had the story on the air the next night.

I well remember the night Ray Avery brought a live goose to a party we were giving in the third floor Dowling Avenue apartment. He set it down inside the door, the poor frightened goose dashed around between people's legs squirting as it went. Everyone laughed and Ray was enjoying it immensely in spite of our chasing around to clean up after the bird. Finally someone grabbed it and put it outside the door. There it was forgotten until someone went downstairs to the drugstore on the main floor for cigarettes. The goose was there with a puzzled crowd watching it. No one ever knew the fate of that poor bird.

Peggy Avery apologized saying she had no idea that Ray had a goose in the back seat of the car though she admitted she had wondered who he was talking to as they drove along. She said she had given up taking any responsibility for her husband's misdemeanours. He was an inveterate prankster. On another visit he had slipped out and removed all the light bulbs in the halls hiding them in flower pots. The tenants were soon complaining, no light on the stairs or in the hallways. The management was completely baffled and so were we.

Ray and Peggy had a cottage on Morrison Lake; we joined them there many times and often did little jobs for the George Gays, Peggy's parents, neither Ray nor York could resist putting a brush of red paint on the other's backside when temptingly close. The two of them would often clown in women's clothing and hats at parties on Morrison Lake. I would marvel how two such talented men could have so many loose screws!

It was now 1936 and we had a little daughter, Virginia. We decided we must have more space, not only a good studio for York but a room for Virginia. We spent an evening looking at apartments, none suited and on the way home at midnight, the agent said he would like to show us a house nearby, it was so beautiful and an outstanding buy. It was at 28 Hambly Avenue, the Beaches area of Toronto and had been vacant for three years, the owner would let it go for very little. It was like new having been built 15 years earlier at a cost of \$15,000, an enormous amount in those days. The owner's brother was in the lumber business and all the wood had been carefully selected. The vestibule had a handsome oak chest, the entrance hall (itself a large room), the dining room and the den on the second floor were all panelled in oak. The living room, entrance hall and den had fireplaces. The kitchen was complete and the breakfast room had an eight piece set of furniture. The second floor had three bedrooms, one with a large sunroom, and the den. The third floor had two enormous rooms, one became York's studio, and the other Virginia's bedroom. There was a brick garage with private drive and a small garden.

It was magnificent and the price had been dropped to \$7,500. We had seen it all by flashlight as the electricity had long since been turned off. The agent suggested an offer of \$5,500 with \$500 down and we made the offer that night. We talked with York's parents who offered to loan us the \$500 for the down payment. We would sell our car and take in boarders. Maybe we could swing it. Our offer was put in the next day and we were told thrown in the waste basket. We then offered \$6,500 which was accepted.

We sold the car and took in boarders. A young business girl named Alva took the bedroom with the sunroom. She was pleasant but with a persecution complex, imagining that people were always doing things to her such as putting pins in the lining of her coat. Then a Mr. Pudifun rented the den. We all shared the one bathroom which never seemed to present a problem with our different hours. Eventually Mr. Pudifun developed pneumonia and had to be moved

to the hospital. He returned when he was well again, only to leave with a promise to pay many weeks overdue rent. That was the last we saw of him. Next the son of a well-known Toronto family took the smaller bedroom next to Alva's and stayed for some time, always paying his rent on time. But when he left York's beautiful riding boots, departed with him. We concluded that we could get along without any more boarders.

On an occasion Ray Avery brought a container of baby frogs to our party. Unbeknownst, he set them loose in the large goldfish tank on the landing. Soon the frogs were jumping all over the place even on the mantlepieces. Another time Ray couldn't think of anything better to do so he gathered the magazines on the coffee table and threw them into the blazing fireplace. I walked up to him and slapped his face. I had never done such a thing before, I was exasperated beyond reason. Ray took it lightly and laughed nervously. We also had many very good times with the Averys, he wasn't all bad, just a devilish streak. The last lingering misdemeanour happened at a Ronalds Agency celebration, Ray said: "With a twist of my little finger, I can decide what work goes to York or not." When I told York he confronted Ray: "What is this I hear about a twist of your little finger?" Ray said that he was only fooling!