



MY CANADA

Celebrated Canadian recording artist **Jann Arden** writes that the patch of land she shares with her parents in Alberta's foothills is the place she belongs. It's her refuge, her home and her Canada

I am an apple that has not rolled very far from her tree. In fact, my tree is just a few miles from where I live now. I live in the foothills of southern Alberta, on a piece of land that is nestled between the mountains and the wheat-filled prairies. My parents live on that same piece of land with me, about 75 feet from my front door, I might add. Joan and Derrel, my beloved makers, built a “granny cottage” here on the property and managed to live in a little trailer the entire time they were building it. They looked like crazy people while all the construction was going on. They had a refrigerator parked beside the trailer that made them look like they had stumbled out of the movie *Deliverance*. You could hear banjos off in the distance, I swear.

And it was a very big refrigerator, larger than their trailer actually.

That big white KitchenAid looked really odd sitting there on a piece of plywood, plugged into a long orange extension cord that was attached to an old trailer in the middle of nowhere. And to top that off, when my parents had to go into town for anything, they'd tie their dog, Dolly, to the fridge door. If she wandered too far away from the trailer, well, she'd open the fridge door. My mom pretty much kept generic beer in there and hot dog condiments. Not much else. I can't think of anything more Canadian than generic beer. I can hear my mother say, “Well, you can't tell the difference, Jann. It's just as good as Coors Light or Wildcat beer.”

You don't say?

Yes, we do, indeed, have a beer called "Wildcat" right here in Alberta. I have drunk, drank, drunk it? Well, you know what I mean. It's lovely stuff... but I digress. My parents are good neighbours, thank the gods, or I'd be in trouble. If you have wacko neighbours living 75 feet from you in this day and age, you could very well end up as a guest on *The Jerry Springer Show*. I mean, I can see right into my parents' house. I can see them turn their TV off at night: that eerie blue light that suddenly just disappears when they finally find their remote and click "off." At 11 o'clock, like clockwork, they climb the carpeted stairs and go to bed. I can see every light being turned off as they make their way through the house. First the TV goes off, and then the living room light, and the kitchen light, and finally the hallway light. It always makes me smile. It's comforting knowing that they are there and that they are fine and happy, and still moving ever forward. I am lucky to be able to do this. I am lucky to be able to have them here with me.

We, my parents and I, had always talked about buying land further out of the city and building two homes on it so that we could look out for each other. I have travelled 250 days a year for nearly 16 years now, and of course, with my parents getting older, we thought it would be great to live as close together as possible without things somehow turning into some kind of a weird cult. I am quite sure we've done all of this years sooner than we thought we would have to, but the city was nipping at our souls and it was just time to leave our old place. My parents had lived there for nearly 40 years and it was very hard on them to have to move. I, after much searching, found the perfect place for our "compound" about five years ago and it has taken us that long to finally build our homes and move into them. I think I'll have mine paid off in just under 77 years – 76 if I double up a few payments, but who's counting? The day I moved in was overwhelming in so many ways. I felt like all the work I had done over the past 25 years had actually come to something. I cried a lot. My cat was wet from me blubbing on her. I had dinner at my folks that first night, and as I was leaving to walk the 75 feet to my house across the muck – we need to landscape – my mother stood in her doorway and said, "I'll just watch to make sure you get home okay."

I said, "Mom, I can see my door. I'm sure I'll make it home."

And she said, "You never know, Jann, the cougars could get you. We need to get you a stick with a bell on it."

My dad did eventually make me a stick with a bell on it. I use it all the time to walk down to the river. I have a feeling, though, that I am the only cougar out here.

I love where I live. I love this piece of land. I know I belong here. I feel part of something so big. No matter where I travel to, how far I go out into this crazy world, this place grounds me. This place calms my heart and constantly reminds me of how far indeed I can go out without fear.

I went to school out here. From the time I was eight years old, I was on an old yellow bus that picked up the Colborne family and the Young family and the Johnson family and the Wagners and the Parkers and the Baldwins. We were all on "Route 24." A guy named John

Romney drove the bus on Route 24 for as long as I can remember. By the 12th grade I was good and sick of that bus ride. All I wanted to do was drive my own car to school and be one of the cool kids, except for the sad fact that I didn't have a car. I knew that I would probably never be cool. The 42 kids I went to school with on that bus weren't cool either, so it all worked out. Forty-two kids... most of us stunk of cow crap or chicken crap or some kind of crap by the time we even got to school. Hard to be cool when you smell of something awful. Most of us had chores to do in the morning before that bus ride, because most of us lived on farms or acreages. The yellow bus was always a myriad of scents and unidentifiable odours. Between the odours and the bagged lunches filled with overripe bananas and bologna sandwiches and Rice Krispie squares, it was a relief to get

off and get into some fresh air. I always had my lunch eaten by 9 a.m. in Miss Brooke's English class. It was the first class in the morning. She used to say to us that we could eat our lunch or read a book. I didn't learn a heck of a lot in Miss Brooke's English class. I wonder what ever happened to her?

People ask me, "Where are you from?" all the time. I tell them that I am from Springbank, Alta. They ask me, "Where is that?" and I tell them that it's near Calgary. And they ask me where that is, and I tell them that it's in Canada. I finally see that look of "Ah," on their faces. I have never met a single soul who wasn't interested in asking me about Canada. They usually ask me if I know "so-and-so" who lives in Brampton or

Winnipeg. They think we all know each other up here, which I think is so charming. They ask me about bears and deer and coyotes and "Eskimos." They honest to God do. They always tell me that I am lucky to live in such a beautiful place and I always say, "Yes, I am. I am the luckiest girl in the world."

And it doesn't matter where I go in this world, the respect that is paid toward me simply because I live in this country astounds me. People are kind to me because of where I come from and that is hard to understand at times. The reputation we have on this planet is a gift. I always wear a little Canadian flag pin wherever I travel. I always, always, end up giving it to someone at some point on my trip. People want to have it. They want to know who we are and why we are the way we are. I wonder the same thing. Who are we?

All I know is that I am Canadian. I say "sorry" 12 times a day. That's a sure sign. I can pick us out in a grocery store in Madrid by just that word alone.

This place, this little piece of land carved out of the prairies, is indeed who I am. It is the songs I write. It is all of the work I have done. It is my art. It is my life and the whole of who I am. Every breath of my childhood still hangs in the clouds above me. I will die here.

My Canada is my mother's face and my father's hands and the 75-foot walk to their front door that overlooks the Rockies. It's in the trees that nod at me every morning and watch me as I eat my breakfast; the grass that whispers about winter coming; the wind that swirls around my house chattering madly about nothing at all. ■



The Ardens after a late night chasing a bat trapped in Jann's home.

My Canada is a new series of personal essays on our country written by noted Canadians.