

A special Canadian Centennial experience (1967)

I want you to imagine this day like an *Impressionist* painting, as if Van Gogh or Cézanne had brushed thick strokes of vibrant colours onto a canvas lit by a brilliant sun. December 16, 1967, dawned as a very special day in my life. It was the day I married Alice Koops, the same year during which Canada celebrated her one-hundredth birthday. I was tempted to call it our “Centennial Project” but that would have been politically incorrect even in 1967. It was our *Centennial Experience*. Maybe it would last a hundred years as well.

The day of our wedding was a palette of rich colours whose texture was the emotions and feelings that ran freely through our veins that day. Our wedding was about as homegrown as one could get. Together, we had planned this day for many months hoping somehow to manage on the smallest budget possible. Alice's father first objected to our wedding because I was still in college, about halfway through my fourth and final year of study. He was convinced marriage would adversely affect my studies. I assured Lukas and Aleida Koops that my fourth year was guaranteed to be an honours year because of my work on the art college's yearbook. My parents, Chris and Cornelia Verstraete, had already given their blessing months earlier. Alice began to buy bridal magazines leaving copies strategically placed on the family coffeetable. It took a while, but soon the tide turned towards genuine enthusiasm about our marriage. Alice was the last of six children in her family to get married; I was the first of seven. Alice's parents would have no one left to talk to besides themselves. My father and mother still had four at home and two away at college. Alice's maid-of-honour was her highschool friend Jill Vokes and my best man was my college chum, Peter de Haan.

To ensure we met our budget, we designed and baked our own wedding cake. Alice's sisters created the dresses for the bridal party, except for Alice's wedding dress which she bought at Eaton's department store. Peter's ensemble and my groom's suit were rented tuxedos. The service was held at the First Christian Reformed Church on Taunton Road in Toronto. Our pastor was Dr. Remkes Kooistra, a learned man and true friend of college and university students. He even made the trip downtown to visit Peter and I in our barren, third-floor, L-shaped room on John Street, during our first year at OCA. The entire wedding party was a joyful bunch of bridesmaids, flower girls, ushers and ring bearers, who nearly all were Alice's nieces and nephews, including Alice-Linda, Irene, Annette, Debbie, Luke, Richard, and Kim. My youngest sister Ingrid was the only Verstraete in the bridal party. My entire family lived in Wallaceburg, some three hours driving distance away, which would have made involvement in the wedding ceremony impractical. Everyone assembled for the momentous event.

I was so thrilled at the prospect of marrying Alice, I invited as many college friends and classmates I knew to the wedding. Those who were part of my photography class became *unofficial* photographers for the day. I bought a bag full of film and told all of my photography friends to bring their cameras and shoot as many black and white pictures as time allowed. They gave the exposed film to me after the wedding. Alice's brother-in-law, Jake Ronda was the official photographer. Most of his pictures ended up having red eyes.

Little Debbie, the ring-bearer, promptly lost control of the rings that had been fastened to a small satin pillow. As she entered the church, one ring fell off the pillow and rolled a long, noisy and zigzag path along the floor until it was ceremoniously scooped up by one of the attendants. In the end, we assembled a large number of wonderful candid shots of the wedding taken by my fellow students. The most impressive of all pictures was a black and white shot of

Alice and I walking down the aisle as husband and wife led by Dr. Remkes Kooistra towards the exit of the church. It looked like one of those unique press photographs from the journalistic archives of Life magazine. At least I thought so, because Dr. Kooistra was dressed in a full black-gown and his hair was long, bushy and white. He looked like Moses leading the bridal couple to the *Promised Land*. Despite the fact that the "official" colour photographs all suffered from "red-eye," nevertheless, in the black and white pictures the bride was beautiful. As an *Impressionist* painting, she wore her white dress adorned with soft-white daisies, the official flower of the wedding. The bridal party was dressed in royal-blue velvet and the maid-of-honour in royal-blue velvet, aqua-blue "empire-waist" dress. Empire-waist dresses were the height of British pop fashion in those days. All the young female stars of the music industry wore them. Alice bore an uncanny resemblance to British pop singer, Marianne Faithful, with her long blond hair and wide bangs cut straight just above the eyebrows. I must admit, I looked rather dashing too in a black tuxedo and long hair. My long hair touched just above the collar and was still of conservative length by the day's standards. It would grow much longer in the years to come. Peter managed to smile despite his brown shoes which were no match for his black tux. He had simply forgotten that black tuxedos usually require black shoes. Fortunately everyone looked *up* at the handsome couple coming down the aisle. Perhaps most visible in the crowd that Saturday afternoon was a young man in a grey and black Beatle jacket. He flashed a large camera as he shot frame after frame. He was David Findlay, another roommate during the OCA years. One of my other special friends, Katherine "Kit" Harding, sat one pew over. She had given Alice and I a beautiful ceramic "little boy with a teddy bear." The church was quite full and smiles were everywhere. Dr. Kooistra used the event to preach a rather unconventional sermon for the occasion perhaps hoping to touch the lives of so many art college students in his church.

The wedding ceremony was followed by a reception in the church basement. Everyone was welcome and tables were laden with coffee, tea, soft drinks, and endless trays of rich and creamy, mouth-watering *gebakjes* or Dutch pastries. Immediate family was invited to a special dinner at a local restaurant, a steak house I think, somewhere on Bloor Street East. To keep the alcohol budget at a minimum, I had mixed a huge vat of alcohol and fruit juice to make a potent punch which I poured into a large vinegar jug made of green glass, and which stood in its own wicker basket. It was so large and heavy, it took two people to lift. It turned out to be quite an art to lift and tilt the jug to keep the punch bowl full. I had bought the jug at Toronto's Kensington Market, giving our wedding that artistic, bit-of-a-hippie, look. Years later the vinegar jug became a penny bank until the day we emptied it and somehow got rid of the vinegar jug as well.

Someone had spread rumours that certain plans were afoot to sabotage the honeymoon, at least to the extent of attempting to play some rather bizarre pranks on us. Anticipating the worst, we kept our honeymoon destination a total secret and threatened any effort to booby-trap the car with the wrath of Lukas Koops, Alice's father. All concluded without incident. Tired but happy, we both changed into our "going-away" clothes, said farewell and headed towards the open road.

It was a bright and starry December night as we slowly made our way north on highway 427. Our first stop was a luxury hotel right on the highway in Barrie. What a special way to end the day by falling asleep in each other's arms.

The next day, after a small breakfast, we headed for Huntsville and its rustic Limberlost Lodge. The road was clear, but everywhere was evidence of a typical Ontario winter. Snow, ice, barren trees, and a pale sun that managed to cast a yellow light over the hilly landscape to lead our way to Limberlost Lodge. It was an old but beautiful lodge built with huge timber beams and posts. It was the week before ski season opened. Everyone was busy getting the lodge ready with

a full complement of staff and supplies. I think we were the only guests that week. Of course that meant royal, red-carpet treatment. They were thrilled at having a honeymoon couple at the lodge. Good hospitality practice for all the staff. We had rented one of their cozy log cabins, off in the woods, near the main building. The cabin was luxurious, with lots of room framed by old timbers, pine furniture, and the coziest open fireplace that kept us hypnotized with a never-ending and blazing fire. We spent five glorious days getting to know each other intimately. We took long walks along pristine, winter-wonderland roads, through paths in the forest, and along a frozen lake. Alice had taken her skates and as she skated along the cleared portions of that frozen lake, I stood and watched and cheered. Between pale sunrises and spectacular winter sunsets we planted seeds of peace and joy that would last for decades - forever. Dare I mention the frequent trips to the diningroom where sumptuous meals were served just to us? As I remember that warm and intimate honeymoon and as I write (and rewrite) these words, I realize it has been over fifty-six years since that special wedding day.

Many couples made the mistake of whirlwind honeymoons, believing that if they did not see the world *now*, they would never see the world again. Planning and living through a wedding was stressful regardless of how well intended all participants were. When it was over, most if not all, were glad it was over. For Alice and I, our wedding was no exception. The thought of flying to some European or Caribbean destination and all its accompanying panic and travel details was too much. Instead we chose a quiet log cabin in Ontario's wintery northland, amidst trees, evergreens, and friendly field mice, who had made our cabin "home" as well. Often, as we lay in bed, or sat snuggled in front of the fire, our little friends would scurry up the side of the stone chimney to disappear somewhere in the rafters.

When we returned from our honeymoon, we made our little love nest in a small and humble basement apartment on Lyons Avenue, just off Eglinton in Toronto's Italian west end. In our small kitchen we had breakfast together and every day we kissed each other goodbye as Alice left for her job at Valentine Travel Service and I left for college to spend yet another day in the room below the stage to work on the OCA yearbook. Sometimes Peter would come over for dinner. Sometimes Barry Grant came for dinner. He introduced us to *Black Russians*, a heady but tasty drink that made our heads spin and our nerve-ends tingle. Alice had some trouble trying to avoid our landlady on laundry day. Our landlady was a friendly Italian *mama*. She loved the idea of having this special young couple in her basement apartment, hoping it would perhaps inspire her forty-five year old son, who still lived at home, and who desperately needed to get out and get a wife. Every laundry day we shared her old-fashioned washing machine. Every laundry day she came downstairs to "talk to Alice," who didn't understand a word of the lady's feeble attempts at English choked by a heavy Italian accent. After a year on Lyons Avenue we found a small studio apartment in a newer building on Bayview Avenue, just a block away from Valentine Travel Service and walking distance from grocery stores, shops, boutiques, and a bus stop to hustle me downtown. I remember those early years of our marriage as a very special time when we did everything together. Friday evening was laundromat evening. We both carried our bundle of laundry to the laundromat next door to a big supermarket. As our clothes tumbled and dried, we did our weekly grocery shopping including Friday night's special treat, homemade pizza. At least we thought it was homemade, when in fact it came in a box and all we had to do was mix the ingredients, heat the oven, and spread an extra measure of spicy pepperoni over the otherwise pale Kraft pizza dinner. Nevertheless, it was our special meal together as husband and wife, newlyweds on a unique adventure called life. Our only contact with the world of entertainment was a small black and white television set that sat on an old chair in a corner

somewhere. Occasionally our meagre budget allowed for an evening of Swiss Chalet and the Imperial Theatre. Our transportation was Toronto's fabled "Red Rockets" and the Subway, except for those rare occasions when Alice's father lent us his car. He was particularly generous when Alice and I wanted to visit my family in Wallaceburg.

We were in love and have been ever since. It seems ironic that after fifty-six years of marriage (60 years since we first met) and six children, we never really thought about a time when it will be just the two of us again. But, that's another story. Only this time we owned a washer and dryer, and the pizzas were truly homemade, with a reputation that has earned Alice a measure of fame prompting one of the children to burst out loud, "mommy, your pizzas are still the best." The incident took place many years ago at Mother's Pizza Restaurant that we loved to visit as a young family. Mother's Pizzas were great but according to Wendy, her mother's pizzas were better. When the staff heard my daughter's claim, they just stood there and smiled. And still every Friday night, to this day in 2023, has been pizza night.