Ogden vs. Lake Bonavista

BY JODI EGAN

MY PARENTS MOVED US TO A BIGGER HOUSE WITH A NICER LAWN, AND MORE REFINED NEIGHBOURS. YET, IT'S ROUGH, ILLOGICAL ODGEN THAT I STILL MISS.

I couldn't tell if the sapphire-blue sky over my run-down childhood neighbourhood was actually better here than over in Lake Bonavista, my new community. Maybe the weather looked better in Ogden because my emotions brightened here. Ogden is a southeastern Calgary community that runs adjacent to railway tracks and alongside Calgary's industrial area. Eighteen-wheelers and the loud rumble of trains are lifestyle elements— a little rough and a little dirty.

Ogden has a seedy reputation. My new teachers in Lake Bonavista told me the paint chips and slouchy fences were offensive and screamed neglect and shady-dealings. The back alleys weren't even paved! They were rocky, rough and narrow. There was no logic to the community. Streets just ended and intersections had illogical traffic signs that confused newcomers. There were grand houses with big white bay windows and manicured front lawns next to shoebox-sized houses that were nearly eclipsed by giant weeping willows that engulfed the whole front lawn. It was illogical, they said.

I didn't understand at the time what all that really meant. I always felt perfectly safe in Ogden and it didn't need to make sense. I knew everyone on our block, if not by name then by face. My little mind couldn't perceive the evils people saw in that rough little neighbourhood.

As kids we identified Ogden's roads and streets not by numbers and names, but by the strange or memorable design of houses that looked like stucco art pieces. The colours ranged from burnt orange to robin's-egg blue, forest green to mustard yellow. Some houses were three stories and as thin as a single-car garage, while others were small and matchbox looking with tall pointed roofs and short stout walls. The majority of the driveways were homemade. People would break the sidewalk in front of their homes and pour their own concrete to make it more ramp-like. Driveways were made from years of driving on the lawn. No pavement, just the absence of grass and deep-rooted tire tracks.

I saw Ogden as a large playground. The trees were old, tall and extremely climbable. Their bark was rough and strong. The abandoned hot rods and "shaggin' wagons" made for great hiding places. The random patches of green space made tag an anywhere any-time sport.

Ogden had raised my sisters and me just as much as my parents had. The rough and gravelly cement sidewalks taught me to be cautious well before the message from parents ever registered in my reckless childhood brain.

Moving Out

In the late 90s, Ogden had becoming a bit dangerous for my mother's liking. The grow-ops, the dealers, the Hell's Angels clubhouse, and the welfare squanderers were taking a toll on her. She worried too much. Knife fights at the local school didn't bode well with her either, especially since my eldest sister was nearing 13 and soon she would be enrolling and my middle sister wouldn't be far behind her.

When we were younger, my father worked three jobs: he was a crane operator in Ogden's industrial area, a tradesman, and contractor. My mother, like most Calgarians, worked in the oil and gas industry – as a land administrator, whatever that means. Then, my mother got promoted, and my father finally made enough to quit his back-breaking manual jobs. My parents decided it was time to move on up in the world.

My two older sisters and I were dragged away when I was 10. We relocated from the nicest house on a small street in one of Calgary's grittiest communities, to the ugliest house on the main drag in the nicest community southeast Calgary had to offer us: Lake Bonavista.

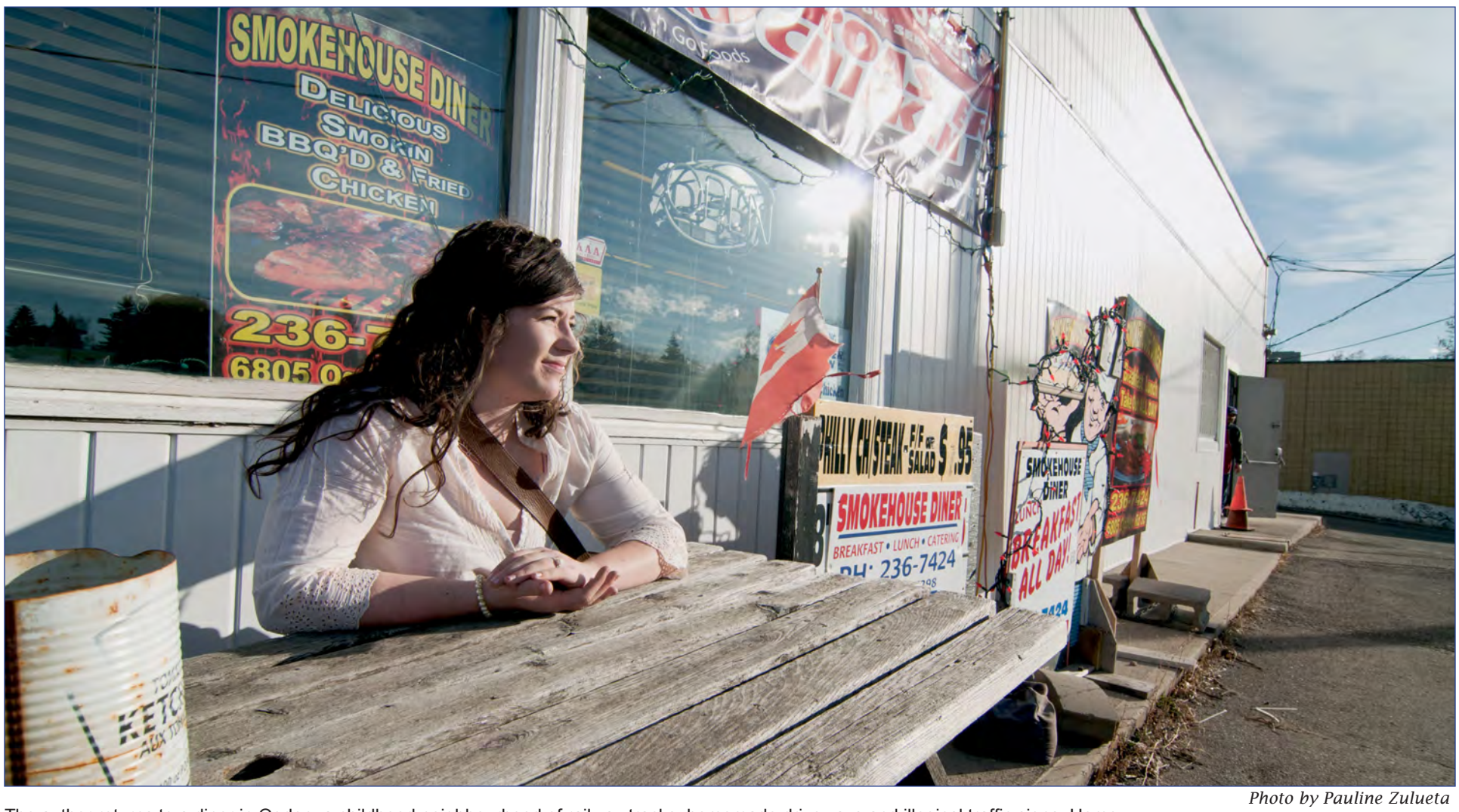

Photo by Pauline Zulueta

The author returns to a diner in Ogden, a childhood neighbourhood of railway tracks, homemade driveways and illogical traffic signs. Home.

The numbers help tell the story. We went from Ogden with an average family income of $50,000 to one with $105,000 and the difference was obvious. Although we moved only 10 kilometres down the Deerfoot, we might as well have moved to a foreign country. It was Ogden versus Lake Bonavista, and we kids lost that fight.

After the move to Lake Bonavista, I had a rough transition. If Ogden was illogical, this place was nothing but conventional. All the streets were parallel to one another. All the intersections were perfectly straight and the signs were fresh and followed fervently. This community was born on paper, whereas Ogden seemed to be made up as it went. The thousands of houses that made up the perfectly cubic "lakeside" (The Lake is a man-made, flooded, injected with fish and then dubbed "lake.")

Size Matters in Lake Bonavista

It was like there were five house designs and six colour choices (grey-blue, grey-yellow, grey, eggshell, and all shades of beige) that made up every house in this expansive southeast community. They looked as though they were made with a mathematical formula. Though mundane, they were about 2,000 square-feet, much larger than Ogden's average 1,200 square-foot homes. In Lake Bonavista, size mattered.

The house we moved into was one of the five designs/six colour options: basic bi-level, colour: grey-yellow. The backyard was half the size of the one in Ogden, where we could fit a seesaw, flower garden, tetherball pole, tree house and sand pit, along with a decent sized deck and a basketball hoop with a free-throw line. No, this backyard had a cement parking pad and one crab-apple tree that was all withered and unhappy. There was no creativity. The people weren't much more exciting.

To make matters duller, my neighbours were all pensioners, the most common age group after middle-agers. They all had smelly houses and sour dispositions. Bob, our neighbour to the left, was batshit crazy. He bought a new car every year for god-knows-why. He had six cars when we moved here and now, 11 years later, he has about 10: three occupying every inch of his three-car garage, three in his driveway, and two in the street (it's impossible to know how many he kept). The neighbour to the right died two years after we moved in; I never saw him once.

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There was one 10-year-old girl on my street who walked passed me on the street — I guess she was taught never to talk to strangers — the rest were retirees who kept to themselves and had obviously used their life supply of patience for children years ago.

My mother was right about one thing: this place was safer, but infinitely more boring.

Good 'ole Ogden

We remembered friends back in Ogden. The people in Ogden were much like the houses — you didn't know what you were going to get when you turned around the corner. Down the street there was that deranged old lady with the squinty eyes and wispy white hair that snapped back onto her balding scalp when she chased us off her garbage dump of a lawn.

There was Sye, a good friend of my father who always smelt a little off. His thick orange-grey moustache was friendly enough over his smile of yellowing, tobacco-stained teeth. About five years after the move, my father had admitted with a snicker that Sye had a small grow-op in his dingy basement. That's when I learned what pot smelt like, old man.

There was my Grade 2 teacher who lived on the outskirts of Beaverdam Flats— the most beautiful 10-kilometre stretch of Fish Creek Park. He looked like Harry Potter before Harry Potter was a thing. His black hair was slick, but stylish enough to make him look young enough. His wiry glasses sat on the bridge of his nose in a nerdy way that made you want to hand him a hard drive to reconfigure, or I guess in 1997, a floppy disk?

I got to know Ogden residents fairly well due to my childhood mischief. I was essentially fearless. My sisters and I used to knock on random front doors in Ogden and Lynnwood. We would walk up to a bizarre house we'd never seen, press our thumbs into the doorbell and wait. When they answered, we'd usually just ask them in our sweet little voices if they'd like to play with us. We were young so they forgave our lack of tact, the worst we ever got was a "no," and the best was a play session with the family pet or some cookies and milk.

I wasn't thinking of these people when I left. I didn't realize I would miss them. I didn't realize that the neighbourly feeling was so important to making a community feel like home.

It took me months to make a friend

No one spoke to one another, especially me, the newcomer "from the ghetto." No one smiled as you passed them on the sidewalk. They either averted their eyes by contemplating the cement or the perfectly manicured lawns. Sometimes they'd stare you down, contemplating you (this was only if you were lucky enough to see a soul while walking around). It seemed like everyone was scared of you, above you, or couldn't look you in the eye for fear of turning to stone.

Everyone drove their shiny black SUVs and luxury sedans to the corner store for milk. The bus stops were always empty and the dog-walkers made the 10-minute car ride down to Beaverdam Flats to walk their pooches. The kids all played inside on their video game consoles and watched the latest Disney-produced TV shows on their flat screen televisions. It took me months to make a friend.

Odgen vs. Bonavista. There were the trees. I began to hate the Bonavista poplars. Every tree in the entire community was a poplar. They were common in communities like Bonavista because they grew like weeds. Because they grew unnaturally fast, they often got sickly, and rotted from the inside out. Limbs would fall off because of after the most moderate rainstorm. The leaves always budded late and fell early. By September, the branches were barren and dripped sap on the expensive SUVs that were so coveted by my neighbours. I hated these trees. They couldn't hold the weight of a little girl trying to climb them. They were useless to me.

I made the drive to Ogden to remember not to forget. All my childhood memories of this place are being replaced with the mundane and the ordinary, with people who stick up their noses, avert their eyes and accumulate wealth. I drive here to remember that there are still places like this that exist: places with crazy houses, crazy people, and crazy landscapes where nothing is mundane, nothing is typical and nothing is predictable.

Photo by Jodi Edgan

At 10, the author's family moved from the nicest home on this Ogden street to the home below.

Photo by Jodi Egan

Moving to Lake Bonavista meant trying to understand a reserved, beige, affluent neighbourhood.