

*Cadillac  
Road*



# Cadillac Road

Kristin Andrychuk



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*For my husband Don and my children:  
Paul, Patricia, Sylvia, and Charles*



A

N OLD GREY house and in the distance dark bush-covered hills in Cadillac, Quebec, where I was born. I remember the board sidewalks high above the muddy streets and Mom's warning to keep away from the edge. There's no snow. Must be a summer memory.

Cadillac, Quebec—unpainted or tarpaper-covered houses, dirt yards, mud everywhere. Me and Suzette Belanger in rubber boots and overalls, dig in the dirt back of my house. We find a battered lunch bucket, a rusty spoon and a piece of a blue-flowered cup.

Our houses have faces. Mine has a sad face — the pointed porch roof makes the nose and its sagging floor, the mouth. The lighted windows above are the eyes. Shades half down like it's squinting or ducking a blow.

Belangers' next door its twin, but so different. Is it the porch with the baby carriage, the half-built go-cart, and at least three bikes? The upstairs in both is one big room, more a large attic with slanting walls. Me and my little sister Gloria share the iron-pipe bedstead. We also share the hiding place below.

Mommy takes out her hairpins and lets down her wavy red hair. I brush it for her. Though I'm only four or five—must be under six, because we leave when I'm six, I know my mother is beautiful, blue-green eyes, and long red hair. I love how her hair lifts itself to the brush. And how, when I climb on her lap, it makes a shawl around us. Sometimes we have tea, milky tea for me. Gloria, a year younger, is already asleep in the big bed upstairs. My hair is red and curly like Mommy's. Gloria's is dark.

Not all good—we hear the end-of-shift whistle at the mine. I run upstairs and burrow under the covers next to my sister. Then comes the heart-thumping wait. Sometimes, laughter rises from below, his loud, hers tinkling. Nights that he curses, glass shatters, Mommy screams, and I pull Gloria from the bed to our hiding place. She whimpers, too

Cadillac children. Papa spoke French, but English to Mommy unless he was mad at her. She didn't speak French. She met Papa when he was working on the railway in Buffalo, before he went back to Quebec to work in the gold mines.

I can't speak French now—I've forgotten it all. A strange feeling because the lost words are in my head, sometimes they almost come to me. When I start high school in September and take French, will I remember then?

I do have good memories of when we lived in Cadillac. I occasionally dream of my cousins' log house, but more often of hiding under the iron-pipe bed and listening to my parents fight.

Papa is mean. Mommy yells: "Leave my baby alone!" He's holding Gloria by one skinny arm and smacking her bum. She's just wearing an undershirt. I'm under the table and tuck my nightie tightly around me. Gloria's shrieking and trying to twist out of his reach. There's a loud thud. A piece of firewood lands by the table leg. Mommy must've hit him because he curses and lets Gloria go. She crawls under the table and I hold her tight.

Mommy yells: "Sharon, take her to Belangers'."

I grab Gloria's hand and run, but not before I see blood pouring from my mother's mouth.

At Belangers' we have brown sugar spread on white bread. The big girl fixes it for us. What is her name? I don't remember. Upstairs a curtain divides the girls' side from the boys'. We sleep in a wide bed along with the big girl's little sisters.

Gloria won't tell what bad thing she did. Most likely pooped behind the door. Mommy told her when she turned five she had to stop using the potty and use the big toilet. She's scared she'll go down the drain. She's a silly.

I don't remember how long we stay at Belangers', only that, when our mother comes for us, she looks ugly—her mouth puffy and bruised, and her front teeth are gone.

I remember my mother telling somebody, maybe Aunt Jean in Buffalo: "I hit the bastard with a piece of cordwood—too bad it was his arm and not his head. I should've killed him."

That memory's from later. My last Cadillac memory is the train.

The seats are dark red plush. Gloria keeps petting them. She does things like that. She'll sit real quiet and stroke and stroke the ratty old fur collar on Mommy's coat.

We have two big seats facing each other. I have one all to myself for a bed. Gloria sleeps on the other one, her head on Mommy's lap. We play paper dolls—the cuttings are all over the floor, and Mommy makes us clean up. We eat bread and cheese and big sugar cookies Mrs. Belanger made. We get water in little paper cups from the tap by the bathroom. A nice lady gives us an orange to share. We're on the train all day and all night and all the next day.

Miles and miles of snow, trees, rocks, and lakes.



ANUARY IS A very good month. I start school and learn to read in two weeks. Miss Cherry says I'm very smart. What she doesn't know is that I was already reading with Mommy. In Cadillac we had a whole box of books that she had when she was little.

Mommy gets new teeth and is beautiful again. She also gets a job at Grants department store. On the last Friday of the month, the day she gets paid, she takes me and Gloria on the blue and white bus to Grants. We have supper at the snack bar: hamburgers, French fries, and grape phosphates. We watch the waitress squirt the syrup in the glass and then shoot the fizzy water from the machine. And *voila*, grape pop. There are twelve different flavours. Grape was Mommy's favourite when she worked here as a teenager. Gloria and I stick our purple tongues out at each other. Mommy smokes and chats with our waitress, Holly, who tells us she and our mommy are old friends. Grandma doesn't like it when Mommy smokes. Says it isn't ladylike.

We go to the girls' department, and Mommy buys us new underwear in different colours with the days of the week stamped on them. In Cadillac at Ducharme's store, they sold only white underwear, and Mommy says it was more expensive. Everything's prettier and cheaper at Grants. We get red plaid skirts and white blouses, and flannelette nighties with kittens printed on them. In the toy department there's a counter covered with doll clothes. Dresses are 25 cents, and we each pick one out and socks for 5 cents and shoes for 10. Mommy says next week she'll buy us new dolls. Gloria wants the soft-bodied baby doll, while I would like the grownup lady doll with the ruffled taffeta skirt.

"Are we rich now?" I ask Mommy.

"Not quite," she says and laughs.

February is good, too. Gloria gets her baby doll and me a lady doll. Each Friday we eat at the snack bar. We've had cherry, orange, lime, as well as the grape phosphates. Every week we get new clothes,



and almost every night she brings us a colouring or paper-doll book, or some candy. It's like every day is Christmas.

Gloria has stopped wetting the bed and pooping in corners. Grandma bought a child-sized toilet seat and covered it in pink furry fabric. Gloria stopped being afraid of toilets.

It's cozy being in the big bed with Mommy and Gloria, but I can't always go to sleep right away.

I'm still awake when Mommy comes to bed and snuggles down beside me.

"What was your papa like?" I ask her.

"A good man. Critical, though."

"What's critical?"

"Oh, just how he thought about people. My best friend was Mary Talbot, our next-door neighbour. Her folks had a store downtown, Talbot's Gifts and Confectionary. Their store sold beautiful china dolls, and Mary got one each Christmas. I knew my folks could get me one through the store at half price. I heard our mothers talking. I never got one though."

"Did you get ordinary dolls instead?"

"Once, but after that she would say, 'You have a doll. What do you need another one for?'"

"Was Mary nice?"

"Oh, yes. She always shared everything. Lent me clothes and even her dolls. My dad didn't like that. Anyway, when we were nine, her parents had to sell their store and move away. Dad said, 'That's what happens to big-time spenders. Serves them right.' Our families were supposed to be friends. We even had Thanksgiving dinner together, every year."

"But why did they have to sell their store?"

"It was the Depression. A lot of people lost their jobs. Nobody could buy anything. Most people were poor. The Talbots came back a year later and rented the apartment over their old store. For a while her dad was a janitor. Then he was unemployed again. Dad said, 'What does he expect, gadding around the countryside?' My mother replied, 'A rolling stone gathers no moss.'"

"What's that mean?"

“If you travel, you won’t have things like a house and money. Mother loves those old sayings.” Mommy sounds cross.

“Your mother’s nice. I love Grandma.”

“Yes, she is nice, and has been very good to us. We better get to sleep—school for you and work for me in the morning.”

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March starts off good. First of all, the snow melts, and we don’t have to wear our itchy-wool snow-pants. If we went bare-legged in Cadillac in March, we’d freeze our behinds, as Mommy says. I learn to skip double Dutch.

Then things get very, very sad. Grandma dies. I didn’t know she was sick. She did sleep a lot, but she looked after Gloria all day while Mommy was at Grants.

Grandma said: “Sweet little Gloria’s no bother. I hardly know she’s in the house.”

Gloria had a nap every afternoon with Grandma. I can’t remember ever having afternoon naps. But Gloria, with her Christmas doll, her baby doll, and the brand new Raggedy Ann doll, slept all afternoon in Grandma’s bed.

Mommy and Aunt Jean have a big fight. Aunt Jean says: “Mother was too old to look after your kids, and that’s why she had a heart attack.”

Maybe she means me, because Grandma said Gloria was no bother. I know I’m not quiet. And sometimes, Ruth came after school, and we made a fort out of the kitchen chairs and a blanket. But Grandma said she didn’t mind. She liked to see children having fun, and she gave us cocoa and graham crackers spread with peanut butter to take into our fort.

Mommy buys us pink taffeta dresses for Grandma’s funeral. In the funeral home I have to tell Gloria to stop stroking hers. People will think she’s a crazy.

Gloria does act crazy. First, she wants to stand by Grandma’s coffin. Everybody says what a sweet little girl she is. Gloria tells everybody: “My grandma’s sleeping. Doesn’t she look pretty?” I try to lead her away, but she won’t budge.

When we turn around, Gloria is howling on the bare living-room floor. No more fringe for her to straighten.

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I wake up and Mommy's not in bed with us. From the living room doorway, I see her sitting on the couch. She's smoking. She's not supposed to smoke in Grandma's house. I stand right in front of her, but she doesn't see me. She's staring at the window with a gone away look.

"Mommy, what are you looking at?"

"Just thinking, honey, just thinking." And she reaches out and pulls me onto her lap.

"About what?"

"How much I loved my mother, and never told her."

"I love you, Mommy."

"I love you too, Sharon. Never forget that. Don't ever think I don't, no matter how stupid I act."

"You don't act stupid."

"I never did anything she approved of."

"You had me and Gloria, and she loved us."

"Yes, she did." She holds me so tight I can't breathe.

"Come back to bed," I tell her.

She gets up and carries me to bed, just like a baby. She tucks me in beside Gloria and kisses me. "I'll be right back. Go to sleep now."

But I can't go to sleep, and she doesn't come back. I can smell her cigarette. Grandma didn't like Mommy smoking.

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Mommy's late for work because Gloria clings to her leg and won't let her go. Mommy pulls her off and I hold on to her while Mommy gets out the door.

One time, Mommy sits down on the floor with Gloria on her lap and they both cry. That's scary, and I don't know what to do.

Gloria gets strep throat, and Mommy has to stay home. Gloria

has pills that cost a lot of money and a high fever. Her being sick isn't all bad because every day I get to go to school.

Gloria's sick for two weeks and Mommy loses her job. "Those S.O.B.'s," she says, but won't tell me what that means. She says not to worry, we'll have the money from Grandma's estate.

Aunt Jean returns and takes the pink and white dishes, the silver platter and all the pretty things in the china cabinet. Then the movers come and take the china cabinet. The apartment doesn't look like Grandma's place anymore.

Mommy says: "It's okay. When I get my money, we'll buy new things."

In May, me and Gloria move into Grandma's room. Two men come and bring white beds with gold trim and take Grandma's old bed away. Mommy buys us pink flowered quilts and pink curtains and a pink rug for between the beds. Our room is just as pretty as our cousin Barbara's.

The only problem is Gloria's scared to sleep alone and crawls with me. I tell her I'll kill her if she wets the bed. I wake up with cold pee against my leg. She's sound asleep in her soggy mess. I give her a good poke. She bawls and Mommy comes.

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June 12th is my birthday. I'm seven today. Gloria's still five because her birthday's not till October. We have pink and white balloons and streamers, but best of all, I get to invite Ruth and also Judy and Karen, but Ruth's my best friend.

We have a treasure hunt. Have to follow the clues. Mommy hands me a pink note: *Look in the third dresser drawer in the girls' room.*

I read the notes because I'm the best reader in our class. The next one says: *Look in the silverware drawer.*

We run to the kitchen. Ruth yanks out the drawer so hard it falls on the floor and the stuff flies all over with a great bang clatter.

"Sorry, Mrs. Desjardins," says Ruth.

"It's okay." Mommy laughs and pats her on the head. "Find the clue, quick."

I spot the piece of pink paper, and we're off to the living room. *Under the middle cushion*, the note says.

By the time we find the prize in Mommy's closet, the apartment is a big mess, but everybody's laughing, Mommy most of all.

We tear the paper off the box and there are shiny bead necklaces and bracelets for all of us.

We have hot dogs, cake and ice cream, and the cake is from the bakery, and it's white with pink candy roses and has happy birthday and my name all in pink icing.

In Cadillac, Mommy made our cakes, and they just had candles and white icing.

When Mommy's tucking me into bed, I ask her: "Did you have fun birthday parties when you were little?"

"No. My mother didn't think children needed birthday parties."



THE VERY NEXT week we have to put all our stuff in boxes and Mommy carries the boxes into her room and keeps the door shut.

One night I wake up and hear Mommy talking to somebody in the living room. I get up to investigate.

She tells me her friends have come to help us move. The clock says halfpast one—I can tell time now. “Why don’t we move in the daytime?”

Nobody answers me. Mommy picks me up and says: “We’re having an adventure.”

They take all the boxes out, and the beds and the chesterfield and load them into Mommy’s friend’s truck. Gloria wakes up and cries, of course. Mommy puts down the back seat in the station wagon, and the men put a mattress in. Mommy makes us up a bed with Grandma’s quilts, and gives us the big box filled with our dolls. “Go back to sleep,” she says.

Pitch dark and Gloria’s bawling.

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Our new place is in the basement of an apartment building. The building is bigger than Grandma’s, and no playground nearby. But the parking lot is cement and good for skipping, and there are lots of kids around. It’s too far to go to my old school. I’ll start at a new school in September. I never see Ruth again.

There’s only one bedroom. It’s for me and Gloria. Mommy fixes it up with all our new furniture and stuff. This apartment smells funny.

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Mommy has a new job working for the *Buffalo Courier News*. She tells us it’s a better job and we can help. I want to help, but don’t see how Gloria can.

We get up so early it's still dark. We climb onto the mattress in the back of the station wagon. Gloria curls up with her blanket and her doll. Big help she'll be.

We go to the newspaper office and park in a lane. Mommy tells us to stay in the car. Even with my face pressed against the glass I can't see much. A big door opens and a man is talking to Mommy. Now they're coming back with bundles of papers.

Load after load of papers. I offer to help, but she waves me back. By the time they're finished, there's just room for me and Gloria to sit.

We drive for a while. Stop at the end of a very dark street. Mommy cuts open a bundle and hands us each a paper and points out the porches where the papers go. She keeps the headlights on so we can see. It's kinda fun. We don't usually get to run around outside in the dark. We've only delivered a few papers when Gloria falls and skins her knee and bawls. Now it's just me delivering. Then Mommy helps, too. She's really fast. We make it a game, but my legs and arms ache by the time we finish.

We deliver papers six days a week, even if it's raining. Mommy buys us yellow raincoats with hoods. Gloria doesn't deserve one. She doesn't deliver many papers, sits in the car, hugging one of her dolls.

Even though I get pretty tired, I like being part of the crew, as Mommy says. By the time we're done, the sun's up and we go to Hank's Diner for breakfast. We order whatever we like. One day I have pancakes and the next, bacon and eggs. Chocolate milk one day and cocoa the next. Gloria is usually asleep on Mommy's lap. Then, we go back to the apartment and sleep as long as we like. I always wake up first. Living in Buffalo is sure more exciting than dull old Cadillac.

Summer is very, very hot. Mommy says: "A good thing about our basement apartment is it's a lot cooler than Grandma's place would've been."

Everything smells like the cellar in Cadillac. The walls are getting black spots.

Sundays, when there aren't any papers, we go on adventures. We go to the zoo. The hyenas make this crazy noise, almost like they're laughing. Now I know why Mommy says her boss laughs like a hyena. He laughs really loud. He jokes around with her when they're loading the papers.

Sometimes, we go to the movies and have popcorn. A lot of movies are love stories, and Gloria falls asleep. I like *Two Years Before the Mast*. Alan Ladd's the hero. *Bambi* is really good, but Gloria cries because Bambi's mother dies. She screams so much during *The Wizard of Oz*, Mommy has to take her out and sit with her in the lobby.

My favourite Sundays are when we cross the border and go to Crystal Beach. We both have new bathing suits—mine is blue polka dot and Gloria's pink. We pack a picnic lunch and swim and play on the beach all day. I learn to swim by watching other kids. I hold my breath, go under, kick hard, reach out my arms, wriggle like a fish, surface, gulp in air. Yippee, I did it! Gloria's scared to try.

Before we go home Mommy takes us to the amusement park next to the beach. We buy sugar-puff waffles, all crispy and coated with powdered sugar. They don't taste anything like those from Grandma's waffle iron. Those were good too, but more like pancakes. We all go for a ride on the merry-go-round. My horse goes up and down. Gloria cried when Mommy put her on an up-and-down horse, so they sit in the sleigh behind my horse. Then we have ice cream and walk through the park. There's music coming from the dancehall.

"I used to go there when I was a teenager," Mommy says. "The Crystal Ballroom where all sorts of famous bands played—Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington." She looks sad.

"Was that when you worked at Grants and bought pretty dresses?"

"Sure was. Now, let's go get all-day suckers."

My favourite's cinnamon, Gloria likes butterscotch, and Mommy gets lemon or peanut.

One Sunday, we cross the border and go to Niagara Falls. Gloria doesn't like the roaring water, but I do. We see an old wooden barge stuck in the river.

Mommy says: "It got stuck a long time ago. The men on it thought at any moment they'd be swept over the falls. They were so scared their hair turned white. The next morning they were rescued. The barge never did go over."

"There's a tree growing on it, like a little island."

"Amazing, eh?"

"Did other boats go over?"



year of university. My parents made a big deal out of us getting a good education. Were always telling me to work harder. Getting good marks was all that mattered. Yet they didn't mind her getting married partway through. In fact they were delighted."

"Did she have a pretty dress?" She ignores me and goes right on talking.

"Because what was really important wasn't education but money. John was already working in the bank, and what's more, he came from a wealthy family. Jean got married at the Buffalo Country Club. Do you remember seeing it on the way to Aunt Jean's last Christmas?"

"Where we saw the horses?"

"That's right. John's parents were members, mine weren't. We went to J&M's department store, and Jean got a long white satin gown decorated with tiny pearls, and a silk suit for going away. I was to be junior bridesmaid. The bridesmaid dresses were green taffeta with sweetheart necklines and flared skirts. Pretty, and just right for a party dress. I was thrilled and already planning on going to the Christmas dance at my high school, but no, Mother had something else in mind. She thought the bridesmaid dresses too grown up for me and picked out this ruffly thing with puff sleeves. Mother never did have good taste."

"Did you go to the Christmas dance?"

"No, and I never wore that dress again. I quit school at sixteen and worked at Grants so I'd have some decent clothes."

"And you went to the Crystal Ballroom?"

"That's right, honey. And come hell or high water, I won't live as they did."

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The week before school starts we go shopping at Grants. Mommy says there's no point holding grudges—anyway, she has friends there. I like these friends—Roseanne, I don't know her last name, and Holly Holmes, whose name sounds like a movie star. Roseanne's working in the snack bar. She's old and plump, but really nice. She serves our hamburgs, fries, and lemon phosphates. Just when we're finishing she

brings us ice cream with chocolate sauce and a cherry, and whispers to Mommy: “On the house—those bastards owe ya.” Mommy giggles. I love being back here.

We get to choose our dresses. I pick a quite grown-up looking, pale-blue cotton with a white eyelet collar, and Gloria, a babyish kitten print, with a big bow at the waist. We get hair ribbons, barrettes, and socks to match.

I skipped kindergarten, but Mommy thinks Gloria better go. She’s going to be in afternoon kindergarten. The first day everything’s fine until Mommy leaves her in the kindergarten line-up. Gloria shrieks so much, Mommy has to go with her into the school. In the grade-two line-up, I look away and pretend not to know them. The second day Mommy stays home, and after lunch, I have to take Gloria, whose sniffles turn into wails when we reach the schoolyard. “You’ll make friends and have lots of fun.”

“I want Mommy.”

I wipe her nose with my hanky and make her stand by the monkey bars until it’s time to line up. I swing upside down with my new friend Jill.

The kindergarten teacher takes Gloria’s hand and tells me not to worry—lots of little ones cry the whole first week. Nobody else is bawling. The teacher’s wrong because Gloria cries every day for as long as we go to that school. At least she only goes afternoons.

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Winter comes. Delivering the *Buffalo Courier News* is no fun at all. Mommy buys me a new snowsuit with heavy wool snow-pants and boots with fur lining. I wear two pair of mitts. My fingers and toes are numb before we finish. And bundled up in those heavy clothes, I can barely walk, let alone run to each porch, so the job takes longer. My legs get red and sore from those snow-pants, though I wear my long brown stockings underneath. Mommy rubs Vaseline on me. It helps a little bit.

Even though Gloria stays curled up in the back with her quilt and her dolls, she gets an ear infection, and then tonsillitis, and has a high

fever, and needs expensive medicine. I have to stay with her at the apartment while Mommy delivers all the papers by herself, and that takes a lot longer.

Still, as Mommy says, everything has a plus side—I don't have to take Gloria to school. Mommy doesn't say this is the plus. She said that when we got new stuff after Aunt Jean took Grandma's things, and when she got the newspaper job because she earns more money than at Grants.

By Christmas Gloria's all better. I told her teacher how sick she was, and the teacher gave me work sheets and green and red construction paper. I helped her with the work sheets. We play school a lot. Gloria says she likes playing school better than real school.

This Christmas is different, but fun. We don't go to Aunt Jean's. We go to Lobby's Old Spain, this really fancy restaurant. It has a fountain and white arches with little bumps, called stucco, all over them. There are white tablecloths, and a red flower in the centre of each table. We wear our red velvet dresses even though they're getting too small. We have new white stockings and black patent leather shoes.

Mommy says she didn't cook dinner because she didn't want to be alone. A funny thing to say because she's not alone, she has us. Maybe she's missing Grandma, or Papa. I do miss Grandma even though we only knew her for a little while. Papa? He knocked out Mommy's teeth. She has false ones now. I won't ever forgive him for that. He never hit me, but I'll never forget what he did to Mommy. On the trips to Uncle Yves he sang *Sur la pont*. I liked that, but I'm still mad at him. I miss the Belanger kids and my cousins.

After dinner, even though the stores are closed, we look at all the fancy Christmas displays in the department store windows. Me and Gloria catch the big soft snowflakes on our tongues. There are hardly any cars or people. As the snow covers Main Street, and more still falls, I close my eyes and see Rue Maisonneuve, our old grey house, and dark, bush-covered hills.

Then we go home and play with all our new toys.

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## About the Author



Kristin Andrychuk was raised in an area of stark contrasts between the conservative village of Ridgeway, Ontario, the vibrant summer resort town of Crystal Beach, and just a few miles away from the bustling American city of Buffalo, New York. All three places majorly influenced the stories she tells in her poetry, short stories, and novels. She has been widely published in literary magazines and anthologies. *Cadillac Road* is her third novel. Her two previous novels are *The Swing Tree* (Oberon 1996) and *Riding the Comet* (Oberon 2003). She has three times been the recipient of scholarships to attend the Banff Centre's writers' studios. She resides in Kingston, Ontario with her husband Don.