Chapter Five
1928 to 1935
“Widow” with Three Children

Since that’s the way it is, we’ll get through it, and we will do what we need to do. That is my life; that is life!

☞ Marie-Louise
HEARTBREAK

He is gone. Marie-Louise can hardly believe it. In the days leading up to his departure she no doubt must have riddled him with questions. How will she manage the household on a daily basis without him? She, who barely knows how to read and write, how will she earn a living? He gave her a few instructions on managing the household budget. He revealed to her that he was keeping hidden in the basement, in the space between the ceiling joists and the wall, a metal box containing Canada Savings Bonds for the children’s education. He promised to make all the necessary arrangements for her to become owner of the house and the lots.

In the following days, the children ask where their father is.

We didn’t know where he was or why he was gone.
Mother, she knew, but she never talked about it. And the minute that we asked questions she started to cry, so naturally we stopped asking.¹

She cannot explain where their father is gone. He made her promise to never talk about him to anyone, not even to their children. So she promised, not anticipating all the consequences that this promise would have on her life in the future. She has buried deep in her heart forever the secret of their love story. The children do not know that their father was a priest before they were born. They cannot grasp the reason for this sudden absence. Worried, they gradually realize that something very serious has occurred and that there is no use insisting on explanations. None will be obtained from their mother.

Now an adult, Gertrude understands all of the emotions underlying her mother’s silence:

… how lonely she must have been after my father left us! She never, never spoke of it, of Dad at all,
and I am sure she must have thought about him a lot.²

Marie-Louise has lost the love of her life. She has lost face in front of the very society that she had defied. Her self-esteem has taken a major hit. She finds herself alone to raise three young children. Many women would have sunk into a deep depression if such a misfortune had happened to them. Not Marie-Louise. Thanks to the strength of her character, she is soon back at the helm. Her niece tells me, "She was very determined. She would say, ‘Since that’s the way it is, we’ll get through it, and we will do what we need to do. That is my life; that is life!’"³

UNEXPECTED VISITS

While sipping tea with Gertrude, I continue to ask her about the period immediately following her father’s departure. Did she ever see him again?

G: Well, he came to see us a couple of times during the first year after he left.
C: Oh, so he came back to the house?
G: Yes.

She adds in the written document that she hands to me, “We were so glad to see him!” But their father only stays for a few hours, and then leaves.

C: He came wearing his Roman collar?
G: Yes. And so I said “Why are you wearing that?” you know. And he laughed and turned it around backwards as a joke, you understand. So, in fact …⁴
If Joseph has promised the Church that he will cease all contact with his family, it is surprising that he returns for short visits. But I surmise that he received special permission from the Church so as to make the financial arrangements necessary to protect his family. During these short visits, Marie-Louise experiences the bittersweet hope that any woman in love and jilted by her lover feels when she sees him again after the separation. To her great joy, he is there in front of her. She would like to throw her arms around his neck and hold him tightly to her. But he smiles at her while keeping his distance, like a visiting priest. He asks about her and the children. He tells her that he has started the process to put the house and lots in her name and that there will be papers for her to sign. He leaves her an address where she can return the signed documents. And he departs again leaving her sadly disappointed. The sound of the door closing reverberates in the emptiness around her. Her heart is bleeding. Just as she was beginning to feel a little bit stronger, she now feels vulnerable once more.

For the children, too, these visits are a source of interrogation and emotional turmoil.

C: When he came to visit one day, you must have asked him, “Where are you coming from?” How did you explain this to yourselves?
G: We imagined all kinds of things but we didn’t know. And we couldn’t talk about it with mother. So there was emptiness there, all the time! It wasn’t funny you know, when you think about it! [Some] children in the neighbourhood where saying, “Your father is a priest!”
C: How did they know?
G: Oh well, I imagine that a lot of people knew about it. Because for one thing, when he came to visit us, he would walk from the Billings Station to the house

Chapter Five: “Widow” with Three Children  75
wearing his Roman collar. In those days, everyone knew one another, so I am sure that everybody knew about it. I don’t know what they thought. They didn’t talk about it. Oh no, no one talked about it.

C: But the children, they talked about it.

G: Oh, that was when we were in primary school, you know, and he hadn’t been gone long.

C: So your neighbours were discreet.

G: For sure, yes. They were good neighbours. Good Protestants.

LIVING DAY TO DAY

Daily life continues without interval of rest for Marie-Louise, like a wind that one would like to see drop but that keeps on blowing. Joseph’s absence makes the task harder. On top of her usual household chores, Marie-Louise is now responsible for the work that Joseph used to do.

After my father left, I think about all the work that my mother had to do on her own. In those days, you had to put the storm windows on for the winter, take them off again in the spring. And she had a garden. There was a lot of work there. And for the washing, you had to heat your water in a double boiler. And in the wintertime, we would close the summer kitchen and we would live in the living room, dining room area, which wasn’t very large but of course there were four of us and we had a four-bedroom house at that time. Mother had a Singer sewing machine. I believe that was the only mark there was in those days. And it had a foot pedal. How she managed to make all the things she did
with this machine is a wonder to me. She made all our clothes. She was a wonderful seamstress and a good provider, a good cook.\textsuperscript{6}

Joe is now old enough to help out with certain chores, like installing the storm windows. But it is not enough. Marie-Louise comes to realize that she can't do it all and that it is necessary to lighten the load.

C: Did she also take care of the animals you had?
G: Well, when my father left, we got rid of them all.
C: But you kept the dog.
G: Certainly, yes! We kept the dog, and we kept some chickens for a little while, you know, not a long time.\textsuperscript{7}

The mood in the house has changed. Folk songs have been replaced with long silences full of ghostly dialogue.

And … you know, since she never talked about what was going on, there weren't many conversations in our house. When everything is kept hidden like that, you end up not talking very much. In fact, I think it was boring, really.\textsuperscript{8}

Marie-Louise realizes how difficult it is to raise children on her own. Her days are so full that she can't keep track of their activities during the day, especially those of the boys who are not lacking for imagination in their games. A Rideau Park inhabitant, Allan Robertson, remembers a game Joe invented one winter:

Joe Ray made a bobsled and after an ice storm, when the roads were slick, Joe and his brother, Lorne, and myself would whiz down Pleasant Park Road. We
crossed the tracks and flew down the steep hill and prayed that there was no vehicles [sic] proceeding in either direction on the River Road.\(^9\)

If Marie-Louise had known about these blind bobsled rides, she would have worried herself sick! In the spring, the boys also try to hide from her their swims in a local quarry, but in vain! When they return, she knows it right away, to their great surprise. But she doesn’t scold them. Lorne shares his memories with me:

She was very liberal with us. In everything. In early spring, we used to go swimming in the shale pit on Smith Road. It was a hole dug to make the shale to make bricks. Jack mentioned that the other day. We used to worry about our hair being dry. We wondered if she would see our hair being wet, you know. And he said, Oh! That was you who were worried [about her noticing your wet hair] because the only thing she had to do is look at your neck and it was clean!\(^{10}\)

He chuckles just thinking about Marie-Louise’s sagacity.

**FREE TO EXPLORE LIFE**

In the year immediately following Joseph’s departure, Marie-Louise does not seem worried about finances. Yet she no longer has the income from the sales of eggs and milk. I ask Gertrude how she managed daily expenses.

*I don’t know. I think she had money in the bank. In those days — don’t ask me how I remember this — she had $5,000. And in that era, $5,000 was a lot of money. So we lived quite well.*\(^{11}\)
The federal Department of Labour had stated that a family needed between $1,200 and $1,500 per year to maintain a minimal standard of living. With $5,000 Marie-Louise can live more comfortably than most of the population. She is sheltered from financial worries for a few years if she manages her money properly. Gertrude would be hard put to explain where this money came from, but she clearly remembers the amount. Perhaps Joseph left Marie-Louise some savings stemming in part from the sale of the lots he bought in Hanmer and Capreol townships and from his egg business. Joseph lived close to the bone when he was a missionary out West and he understood the importance of savings. He probably kept close ties on the family purse strings.

_I think he believed that his money wouldn’t last long and so we should be careful. And, in those days, there were no pensions. So you had to take care of yourself. But she had been raised on a farm. She knew nothing. So she … she splurged on spending. She dressed well. She had very good taste. And we [the children] didn’t suffer either, naturally._

In certain respects, Marie-Louise maybe feels that she is free from Joseph’s tight budgeting. She has never known life as a bachelor nor the freedom of deciding for herself the purchasing priorities. She discovers the pleasure of offering herself and offering to the children a bit more than just the bare essentials. She regularly receives the Eaton’s catalogue. At that time, department stores such as Eaton’s in English Canada and Dupuis & Frères in French Canada made the greater parts of their sales by catalogue. These catalogues displayed everything in the store with photos, sizes, measurements and prices. Men’s and women’s fashions, sporting goods, toys, tools, furniture and appliances would make everybody dream, the men as much as the women and children. Every year, people impatiently
waited the arrival of the new catalogue. And when it arrived, everyone was trying to be the first to leaf through it.

In Marie-Louise’s case, she discovers in the catalogue a whole range of activities that she has never tried before. Attracted by all novelties, she does not content herself with dreaming. She takes action.

G: When we lived on Pleasant Park, you know, she tried all kinds of new things and it was all through the Eaton’s catalogue. It was the only place where one could buy. So after my father was gone, well, she bought an organ with pedals.

C: Yes, yes.

G: She bought that. And that satisfied her for a while. Then she switched it for a piano. Then she bought a harp [a small table-sized one]. And, of course they sent lessons with those. So she was trying to learn music by herself. She would try all kinds of things like that. And then painting, she always painted and some of it was painting on silk. Anyway, she always had something to interest her.\textsuperscript{14}

The catalogue allows her to explore more than just her penchant for artistic activities. She draws from it ideas for clothing and for the children’s Christmas presents.

G: I remember that I received a doll, an Eaton’s Beauty. I think that she had brown hair. Naturally, I thought she was gorgeous. And mother would sew all kinds of clothes for her. Really beautiful outfits!

C: Did the doll have long or short hair?

G: Long. You could comb it out. … It was very special, I’m telling you!\textsuperscript{15}
Gertrude smiles tenderly as she reminisces how important this toy was to her little girl’s heart. It is probably also in Eaton’s catalogue that Marie-Louise gleans ideas to decorate Gertrude’s bedroom.

G: *She was always decorating the rooms. So my room was all pink. Even the floor! It was a linoleum floor. She had painted it pink and had added a border of all kinds of tiny flowers. When I think about it, it was a little too much pink!*  
[We laugh together.]
C: So now, as an adult, you wouldn’t like it, but as a child you did?
G: Oh yes, I thought it was beautiful!
C: And she made pink curtains?
G: Pink curtains with blue flowers in them!
C: And the bedspread?
G: Right. Everything! It all matched!*

Of course, the catalogue continues to make the children dream all year long:
We loved it! We selected everything we wanted even though we knew we weren’t going to get them. [We laugh together.] It’s the same today when children look at toy store flyers.

Oh yes! So you spent a lot of time looking in this catalogue?

Oh yes, yes.

And she didn’t mind? She let you play with the catalogue?

Yes, yes. Because she got a new one every year, you know. And afterwards it made its way to the outhouse where we used it as toilet paper.

I see. Nothing got wasted! [We laugh together once again.]

Marie-Louise’s relaxed attitude around money in the year following Joseph’s departure reflects well the general mentality of the population, who during the 1920s — until 1929 to be precise — profit from Canada’s economic prosperity. Unemployment rate decreases and salaries increase. People don’t worry about spending.

Napoléon’s Visit

After Joseph’s departure, Marie-Louise reconnects with her family in Hanmer. Her adoptive father, Napoléon, comes for a visit. No doubt that Marie-Louise is extremely touched by this visit since she reads into it the proud Napoléon’s discreet way of saying to her that bygones should be bygones, that he still loves her and that he is there for her if she needs help. She feels as if she has been welcomed back within the family fold.
THE CRASH, 24 OCTOBER 1929

In October 1929, newspapers are predicting an economic downturn. Marie-Louise is not sufficiently literate to read the papers on a regular basis. And had she read them, what would these troubles in the macroeconomics of the country have meant for her? Thus, when she hears on Thursday, 24 October about the New York stock market crash, Marie-Louise probably doesn’t grasp right away the importance of this news. Sure, around her people are talking about fortunes vanishing overnight and about some rich financial magnates committing suicide. But all that seems far away.

From his secret hideaway, Joseph, who surely understands the importance of the situation, writes often to Marie-Louise, probably to brief her on his financial arrangements, to explain to her the dangers of the economic situation in the country, and to urge her to avoid superfluous expenses. She answers him. Gertrude tells me that she never saw the content of the letters written by her mother but that the address on the envelope caught her attention.

When she was giving me a letter to mail, it was always to “J.A. Roy.” She wrote “R-O.” And I would tell her, “Look you put an o here; it should be an a.” And she would reply, “Oh, never mind. Just go mail it! Mail it!” you know. So that is the only glimpse of the secret that she uncovered, without realizing it. And we didn’t make anything of it.¹⁸

In returning to the priesthood, Joseph took back his real family name, Roy, thereby psychologically distancing himself even more from Marie-Louise and the children who are still called “Ray.” But Marie-Louise does her best to keep them in touch with him. She keeps sending him news of the children and, for a short period of time, he stays in contact with them. Gertrude recollects:
G: He wrote me a few letters after he left.
C: Oh, really! Do you still have them?
G: No, we moved around so often that we didn’t keep very much.
C: What did he say in those letters?
G: Oh well … [She raises her hands in the air in a gesture of powerlessness]
C: Did he give any explanations?
G: No. But if I was getting good grades in school or if I was first in my class, he would send me a pa-per 25-cent note. We called those “shin plasters.” And I thought that I was really wealthy!  

She laughs remembering this childhood delight.

Joseph doesn’t forget to mark his daughter’s birthday. And with good reason! It is the same day as his own birthday. During one of our interviews, Gertrude shows me what she received from her father in the mail for her birthday on 30 October 1929.

G: I only have one thing with his writing on it. It is the only souvenir of him that I have.
C: What is it? A letter?
G: Let me show you.

She gets up and goes into her room to fetch something. She returns with a framed picture of Saint Theresa the Little Flower, on the back of which it is hand-written, “I pray for you.” And the date inscribed on the picture is “1929.”

G: This was after he had gone.
C: Right because he left in 1928. So there was still a little bit of contact in 1929.  

84 ☑️ A Woman of Valour
FAMILY TIES

In the summer of 1930, Marie-Louise decides to visit her sister Claire in Blezard Valley near Sudbury, and to bring her children. She makes an arrangement with her neighbour, Mr. Bennett, to drive them there. To finance the trip, she rents her house to a couple named Baker, who are looking for a place to stay with their four children while waiting to buy a new home. Gertrude remembers the trip to Blezard Valley:

G: Mr. Bennett drove us to Sudbury. He had a Model T Ford with a rumble seat. Do you know what that is?
C: It’s like a seat behind in the trunk?
G: Yes, exactly. Just imagine! There were six of us: Joe, Lorne, me, mother, Mr. Bennett and his older son, Chad. I’m telling you we were so crowded!
And it took us two days. It was quite a trip. Mother almost got sick afterwards. Mr. Bennett took us to my aunt Claire’s in Blezard Valley and then he returned. We stayed for a month at the Bergeron’s. It was the first time that we visited true relatives.²¹

Napoléon receives the family for dinner in Hanmer and serves a surprise dish, keeping the recipe secret until the end of the meal. When all are pleasantly full and jealous cooks are begging him to reveal his recipe, he triumphantly announces that they just ate a stew of bear meat.

Marie-Louise and the children are delighted to find themselves with relatives. They have missed this life style. The children are surprised by the number of cousins they have. Joe and Gertrude communicate with all these people in French, but Lorne, whom everyone calls Laurent, is uncomfortable expressing himself in French and, although he understands very well what is said, he answers in English.
After spending all of August at Aunt Claire’s, Marie-Louise and the children come back to Ottawa by train. This first visit with their relatives opened a new era in the relationship between Marie-Louise and her family. From this moment on, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews start coming in turn to Ottawa for weeks at a time and Marie-Louise often goes back to visit them.

A surprise awaits their arrival in Ottawa. The Bakers still have not found a new house and ask if they can stay a few more weeks. Marie-Louise doesn’t have the heart to evict them. Generous neighbours, the Labrèches, offer to put her up with her children. She accepts and assures them it is only for a short period of time. But the Depression has stalled the real estate market and it becomes obvious that the Bakers will not soon find a home. Marie-Louise does not want to abuse the Labrèches’ hospitality. She returns to her home and reorganizes the allocation of the rooms to accommodate both families. She installs Mr. and Mrs. Baker in the first small bedroom, Lorne and Joe in the second, and the two Baker boys in the third. Then she puts Gertrude and the two Baker girls in the large room over the summer kitchen. As for herself, she sleeps on a couch in the living room. Everybody is cramped for room but their situation seems quite enviable to others literally put out on the street by the Great Depression.

**Homeowner**

While Marie-Louise has been up north visiting her relatives, Joseph has taken the necessary steps to transfer to her the title deed for the house and the lots on Stanley Street. The notarized documents indicate that on 16 August 1930, Joseph Roy sells his lots to Marie-Louise Ray for $1,500. Marie-Louise signs “Marie-Louise Ray, widow.” The notary doesn’t seem to notice the fact that the property was first bought by a Mr. Ray and is now sold by a Mr. Roy. Perhaps he takes for granted that the name
change is merely a typo? Whatever the case, the documents are certified.

IMPACT OF JOSEPH’S DEPARTURE

Gertrude tries to help me understand the physical and emotional consequences of Joseph’s departure on her and her brothers.

**G:** We missed him, you know. … It’s a strange situation when you think about it. [short silence]

It was sad. Yes, you know when other children spoke of their father or mother. And us, we couldn’t talk about our father. Children would ask us. I told a lot of fibs … I would say, “He had a heart attack” or … A lot of things happened to him! … I don’t know what people thought about us really. Anyway! There was always a hole there, all the time!

**C:** This hole was emotional, not just physical.

**G:** Yes, yes. In fact, I think it affected me. And the boys. Joe more than Lorne, I think, I’m not sure why. Maybe because he was the eldest and he remembered our father more. … There was just a big void there, all the time. And I don’t know how one can describe this. There was no one with whom I could talk about it, you know. If relatives had been nearby [with whom] to talk to. But there was no one!\textsuperscript{22}

I asked her what her reaction was when she understood that her father would never return.

_Really, when you think about it. I hated him for a long time, but afterwards … My oldest brother, Joe, he is_
dead now, but he never, ever forgave him. He always hated him. He called him, “That son of a … ”

Diane, Joe’s daughter, confirms this in telling me about her father’s relationship with his father:

D: He hated his father because, when it happened, he was the oldest and he felt completely abandoned and he saw how my grandmother’s heart was broken. And his heart was broken too! He was old enough. And he just resented him. He hated him and could never say a nice word about him.

C: What else did he tell you about your grandfather?
D: I can’t repeat it! No I mean, he used to use actually not nice words whenever I asked anything about him.

As for Lorne, he was still too young in 1928 to fully realize the impact of Joseph’s departure. However, later, when Joe and Gertrude had left home, he stayed alone with his mother and became an invaluable support for her during the rough times they went through together.

Gertrude still doesn’t know the reasons why her father returned to the priesthood. She puts forward some plausible explanations, but she knows full well that it is only speculation on her part.

Well, after having had children at his age it must have been difficult, very complicated. And I imagine that he felt stuck, with three young kids. And then, I don’t know what happened, whether the Church contacted him or he contacted them. Anyway, they might have paid him to return, I don’t know.
In the next interview, as we come back to the subject, she adds:

G: Well, he went back and he was a teaching.
C: Oh really. What was he teaching?
G: Well, very Catholic stuff I suppose. I don’t really know, I just heard that he was supposed to be teaching. I don’t know where I heard that.
C: It’s Marie-Louise that is whispering the answers to you.
[She laughs and adds in a determined tone of voice.]
G: Well, she should have spoken a long time ago!\[16\]

Later on, the extended family will try to understand the motivation behind his departure, but will only be able to suggest some hypotheses:

GB: My mother [her mother was Marie-Louise’s sister], her name was Claire, always said, “If his superiors had left him alone, he would never have left Marie-Louise … [and] the children would have had a father.”
C: So you think his superiors put pressure on him?
GB: My mother always said so, and I heard it very, very often.\[27\]

Only Marie-Louise knows the real reasons why Joseph returned to the priesthood, and she kept the secret forever.

RELIGION AFTER JOSEPH’S DEPARTURE

In talking with Gertrude about the impact of her father’s departure, of course the topic of religion came up.
C: *My Lord, she must have sat, at night, and damned this God that took her husband from her?*

G: *Never, never did she speak against religion. Never.*

If Marie-Louise feels bitterness about the Church and the Catholic religion, she doesn’t let it show. In spite of her sorrow, she seems to accept the situation, as one accepts an extraordinary event beyond belief, an event that cannot be fully understood. Brought up in the Catholic faith, she learned to submit to “God’s will.” Moreover, she certainly does not want her personal views to influence her children’s religious life. Hence her decision to return to her religious practice after Joseph left.

G: *When Dad was living with us, we did not go to mass.*
C: *Never?*
G: *Never. … Well, he did not go to mass, so mother didn’t go either. So we became Catholic again after his departure.*

We laugh together because she says this last sentence very simply, as if declaring that she has decided to put on again a previously discarded shirt. I have no doubt that Gertrude inherited from her mother her sense of humour and the graceful attitude with which she accepts life’s detours.

**THE FRENCH—ENGLISH QUESTION**

Joseph’s departure leads to another unexpected consequence: the spoken language at home slips gradually from French to English, as if the household had lost its anchor with the French language. I ask Gertrude:

90 ➞ *A Woman of Valour*
C: On Stanley Avenue, when your father was there, did you speak French or English in the house?
G: We spoke French. But after he left we spoke English.
C: When he was there, your neighbours were anglophones?
G: They were all anglophones.
C: So, in the house you spoke French and when you went out you spoke English?
G: Yes.
C: And then when he left?
G: It was all English. Mother was trying to speak French to us, but we would answer in English.
C: Because you were going to English schools?
G: Yes, exactly. ... And then herself, you know, she spoke better English than French.  

Obviously, all of Marie-Louise’s friends are anglophones. Only with Mr. Brûlé, the butcher, can she speak French. So gradually her English improves and her French starts to fade.

**Life During the Great Depression**

In the years following the Crash, the Depression deepens throughout Canada. The Government must create programs to help out the poor. In Ottawa, the Depression is felt unevenly across the population. The Public Service offers relatively stable work, although many public servants still lose their jobs. In April 1932, the Government imposes a 10% salary cut on federal public servants. Thankfully, since the cost of living is also falling, most of them can still support their families. As for workers in private industry and trade, they face massive layoffs.

In 1930, Marie-Louise does not feel the Depression’s disastrous
after-effects as much as most citizens across the country. Of course, the Bakers can’t move and everyone feels crowded in the Stanley Avenue home. But they make do. Since the house is in a rural setting, the household can mostly feed itself with produce from the garden and the orchard, protecting them from the scarcity others encounter in the city.

With a household of ten people, Marie-Louise realizes that if she wants to accomplish everything she needs to do, she will have to find a means of transportation for weekly errands and for outings with friends and family. As usual, she does not hesitate to take action.

Mother bought a car, a Pontiac ’29. One of our neighbours, Mr. Crouch, taught her to drive. In those days, you didn’t need to pass a driver’s test or anything. So she was driving. She was the only woman in the neighbourhood who was driving an automobile.32

One wonders how Marie-Louise had enough money to buy a car. Maybe she found a bargain. Indeed, when the Depression arrived many businessmen were ruined overnight. Some of them sold their cars for a ridiculously low amount just to get some cash. Perhaps someone told Marie-Louise that she could buy a practically new automobile for next to nothing and she jumped on the deal. The rent paid by the Bakers probably also helped finance the purchase.

Bank Street (1930–1932) and Sunnyside Street (1932–1933)

Although, Marie-Louise has owned the house and lots since the fall of 1930, she has no regular income for day-to-day expenses. The financial cushion Joseph left her is dwindling away.
She was spending money and no money was coming in, so you know …

The Depression continues to worsen and Marie-Louise must confront its menacing countenance more and more. First, she hears perturbing news reports, including one about the May 1931 suicide of Ottawa’s Chief of Police, Charles Hopewell, overwhelmed by financial problems. Then she starts witnessing the Depression’s impact in the streets in Ottawa. People walk everywhere, since they have no money to take public transportation or, if they own a car, to fill the gas tank. In doing her errands, Marie-Louise sees the beneficiaries of the “dole,” or Government aid, queuing up at grocery stores to exchange their coupons for a piece of meat or a bag of sugar. She notices in passing the great number of youth swelling the ranks at soup kitchen doors and thinks about Joe who will, before too long, be looking for work also. She resorts to using credit, too. She buys her groceries at J.L. Brûlé’s in Billings Bridge and can’t always pay the full amount at the cash register. The owner allows her to wait until the end of the month to settle her account.

Finally, Marie-Louise can’t make ends meet with the little cash she has left. She must find a source of income. Since the Bakers are still sharing the Stanley Avenue house, she decides to rent them the whole house and to go live elsewhere on the proceeds from their rent. She and the children move to the second floor apartment of a house located behind a diner on Bank Street, between Cameron and Riverdale in Ottawa South. On the ground floor live a Jewish man, his wife and child. This man rents and operates the diner attached to the house. Lorne and Gertrude tell me:

L: The Jewish lad and his wife had a child. They were living downstairs, we were living upstairs. And, all of a sudden, one morning, he is gone with the family! The guy walked away. He left
everything there. … And then, when the Jewish lad moved out, we took the whole house.

G: … and the store.

Marie-Louise takes over the lunch counter. She rents one room in the house to a labourer who owns a horse and Gertrude has to rise early every morning to prepare this man’s breakfast. Marie-Louise does not make her fortune with the store.

G: *It was only a corner store.*  
C: *Like a confectionary?*

G: *Not exactly a confectionary because she didn’t sell food products, really. It was mostly chocolate bars and sodas. … There were a couple of tables. Val [Lorne’s wife] remembers going there with her brother; they bought a chocolate bar, sat at the table and split the bar in two, you know. So, big treat!*  
[She laughs.]

Marie-Louise operates the small lunch counter for a year or two. But she has no business experience and the Depression worsens relentlessly. Her business slowly dries up. Soon, she does not have enough income to pay the rent for the house and the store. Since the Bakers still occupy the house on Stanley Avenue, she must find another place to live. While the children finish their school year at Saint Margaret Mary’s, Marie-Louise sets out to find other accommodation.

In 1932, she and the children move to the second floor of a house at 402 Sunnyside. As the homeowner, Mr. Patterson, pays his taxes for the public school system, come September Marie-Louise must enroll the children in the Hopewell Public School. One day, upon returning from school, Gertrude finds her mother in tears. Are financial worries the cause of Marie-Louise’s sorrow? Gertrude will
never know because, as usual, her mother remains silent about the reasons for her actions and feelings. Thankfully, the sojourn on Sunnyside is a short one. In the spring of 1933, Marie-Louise and the children move back to their home on Stanley Avenue. The Bakers still live there, and they continue to do so until the fall, when Mr. Baker buys a fairly large property on River Road, at Uplands, to start raising chickens.

\[402 \text{ Sunnyside Street}\]

**Stanley Avenue (1933–1935)**

The country’s economic situation just keeps on getting worse. One Canadian in five depends on Government aid programs. Unemployed men illicitly travel the railroad from one end of the country to the other, in the hopes of finding work. They stop in one city or another, knock at doors to offer their services in exchange for a meal, and leave by train for other towns. Near Marie-Louise’s house...
in Billings Bridge, many jobless men who come in by train from the West form a rustic campground. An Ottawa citizen tells me:

There were hundreds of them out there at Billings Bridge, you know, living in tents and everything else. Well, make shift. I don’t think they all had tents.\(^\text{37}\)

Soon, they come to knock at Marie-Louise’s door. Gertrude recollects:

**G:** I remember that during the Depression, people often came by … They were looking for work. If there was no work, then [they would ask], “Can you give me something to eat?”

**C:** They knocked at your door?

**G:** Yes, yes. She always gave them something to eat. … We didn’t live far from the tracks. So they just got off there, I suppose. And they walked around, looking for work …

**C:** And your mother fed them with what?

**G:** Well, with sandwiches.\(^\text{38}\)

In the hopes of reducing the vagrancy of jobless people in Ottawa, the government establishes a work camp in Rockliffe to build a road. This work provides a few very low-paying jobs but does nothing to lessen the devastating impact of the Depression. In 1934, 22,000 people depend on Government aid in the nation’s capital.\(^\text{39}\) Women abandoned by their husbands and left to raise children on their own easily slide under the threshold of poverty.

Marie-Louise receives no Government assistance at all because she can’t prove that she is a widow. Since she promised to never reveal her past life, she fears the questions that may await her, were she to ask for aid.
And of course, in those days, what she has done was such a mortal sin that she couldn’t speak about it to anyone, you know. So she couldn’t go ask for assistance.  

She makes do as best she can. With the Canada Savings Bonds that Joseph left, she enrolls Gertrude at Rideau Street Convent and Joe at the Ottawa Technical School. However, since she no longer receives an income from renting the house, her dire financial straits are becoming increasingly worse. It is therefore possible that she may have decided to ask Joseph for financial help, because in the next two years she makes numerous trips to Montreal.

We went to Montreal several times. She went to meet [someone] — we didn’t know whom — we thought that she met with father but she didn’t say, we didn’t know what she was doing. Anyway, we parked on Sherbrooke Street, and she left us in the car. It was a big building, and I wonder if it wasn’t the Seminary. She would enter, and we waited in the car for her. We had no idea what was going on. I don’t know if she was going to see him, or if it was to decide how to solve our financial problems. I don’t know. ... And she never stayed very long. When she returned, she was very sad. And, anyway, we would do all that in one day.

These trips to Montreal were the source of many discussions during my interviews with Gertrude and her brother Lorne. Lorne recalls that when Marie-Louise was leaving the building she had in her hands an envelope full of money. Was this money coming from Joseph or from the Church? Gertrude and Lorne suspect that, as part of the agreement negotiated by Joseph with the Church for his return to the priesthood, he obtained that the Church would financially compensate Marie-Louise in return.
for her silence on her life with him. Gertrude tells me, “It was ‘hush money’.”

Given how important it was to the Church to keep Joseph’s “straying” a secret, in order to hush up the scandal, this interpretation of events makes sense. But we have no way of verifying its accuracy.

Gertrude notices how sad her mother is when she leaves the Seminary. With good reason! During her first trip to Montreal, she is probably going there secretly hoping to have the pleasure of seeing Joseph again and of conversing a little with him. But since the Church made Joseph promise to never see her again, I suspect that Joseph was obliged to leave the envelope with some receptionist who handed it over to Marie-Louise in a very impersonal manner, maybe even with a half suspicious, half disdainful look. How humiliating for such a proud woman to be perceived as a beggar. So for Marie-Louise, these trips to Montreal are synonyms for disappointment and humiliation. For the children, these trips are rather fun. It is an adventure out of their daily life. They stop for lunch at a restaurant, a real treat for them. Furthermore, for Joe, who is now 16 and has started to drive, it is a golden opportunity to practice a bit.

According to Gertrude, Marie-Louise would have gone to Montreal up to three times between 1933 and 1935. The money she receives makes their life much easier. She breathes freely again. She pays her debts to Mr. Brûlé’s grocery store and makes the house more comfortable. She has indoor plumbing installed and acquires a telephone.

**Social Life**

Since her return to Stanley Avenue, Marie-Louise’s social life becomes a bit more active again. Her best friend is Mrs. Annie Sutherland.
Mother had one very good friend, Mrs. Sutherland, whose husband had left her. And she had three sons and she and mother would go out quite often. And for them, an outing was to go to the tea gardens on Sparks Street and to have their teacups read. They had a real mania for this. And she and Mother joined the bowling club at one time and she and Mrs. Sutherland would go, I think it was once a week. So that was about the biggest excitement that Mother had for quite a while.\(^43\)

The power of the universe takes care of us and protects us. There are no coincidences. Mrs. Sutherland really is the best friend that Marie-Louise could have met. Both women were abandoned by their husbands. Both raise their children alone. They have a lot to share while sipping their tea. What do they say about men? Has Marie-Louise told her soul friend about her life with Joseph and the circumstances surrounding his departure, or has she kept the secret as promised? Annie Sutherland alone would have been able to tell us, but she has passed away.

Marie-Louise, who suffered so much from having been abandoned, sympathizes with people who live alone and never misses an opportunity to help them. This is revealed by the two following stories told to me by Gertrude.

G: We had an elderly neighbour, Mrs. Derby. She had pneumonia and lived all by herself. We went to get her on a sled and brought her home and Mother took care of her.

C: She stayed at your house for a few days?

G: Yes, for just a few days because I think she was then hospitalized.\(^44\)
And then:

_She helped many neighbours, really. There was a woman who lived across the street. A Mrs. Slinn, I think. S-L-I-N-N. Dad had bought the property from these Slinns. She ended up going to the Pearly Home. It’s on Aylmer Street in Ottawa. … And I know that we went to visit her. She was an old woman and she didn’t seem to have any family. … [Mother] was a good woman. She tried to help, you know. And so naturally we all went._

Marie-Louise’s interactions with her neighbours help fill the emotional void left when her husband abandoned her. For her, as for the children, the neighbours replace the relatives far away in Hanmer and in Blezard Valley.

_And apart from that, she had some long-time neighbours, the Dawsons, who had been neighbours many years before Dad left. They had moved out and lived in the West End of the city. It was called Laurentian View in those days. It was near Britannia. And during the Holidays, one year we would go to their place for Christmas and they would come to our place for New Year’s. Then the next year we switched [the invitations]. Anyway, they had four children about the same age as us. So we really liked to see them._

**CONVALESCENT HOME**

After the humiliating trips to Montreal, Marie-Louise is more determined than ever to earn her living. With a nurse friend, Miss O’Neil, she maps out a project for a convalescent home where
patients able to leave the hospital would come to complete their recovery before returning home. The idea is pretty innovative and the two women decide to go ahead with it. But they have no business knowledge at all and Marie-Louise can hardly read or write. Neophyte managers, they jump into this enterprise without knowing that they should have first conducted the equivalent of what is known today as a feasibility study. They hope that the Depression that closed so many businesses will spare theirs.

The project requires quite a considerable investment. They rent a home on Second Avenue in the Glebe, near the Canal. They buy furniture, beds and linens. To buy the basic necessities, Marie-Louise undoubtedly uses part of the money she received during her trips to Montreal and I imagine that her friend invests some of her savings too.

Marie-Louise leaves the children with a neighbour, Mrs. Jackson, who has no children and owns a cottage on Constance Bay. The children spend the summer there while Marie-Louise tries to start the convalescent home. But the project fails. I ask Gertrude:

C: Why did the project fail, do you know?
G: I think that it is only because people didn’t have money and I imagine that they kept their sick persons at home. In those days, for most people, that’s the way it worked.

After about six months, Marie-Louise and her friend must face reality: they have lost all their investment!

KIOSK

Marie-Louise has to go back to square one. But she keeps her chin up. She sells her car. She still has the house and the lots in her own name. While waiting to find another way to earn her living, she
asks her neighbour, Albert Bennett, to build a small kiosk on the side of the house where she can sell candy and sodas. New investment. New failure. Gertrude explains:

*Hardly anyone lived nearby. There were only neighbours, so not enough people to sustain a market. … And I think that there were more children eating the profits than anything.*

We laugh together. But sometimes when Gertrude thinks about her mother, it is with a feeling of admiration tinged with sadness, as revealed by her comment in the recording she handed to me: “Poor mother! She certainly tried a lot of things!”