Chapter Six
1935 to 1944
Living from Hand to Mouth

So then we really started to experience hard times. Poor mother! Did she ever suffer a lot!

― Gertrude
James Street (1935–1936)

The Depression does not seem to loosen its grip on society, and like the majority of people, Marie-Louise cannot find work. The Stanley Avenue house is the sole source of revenue left. In 1935, short of money, she resigns herself to renting it out once more. An entrepreneur by the name of John W. Rostetter is interested. Marie-Louise does not rent the house fully furnished to him. She has rented a three-bedroom home at 187 James Street and takes her furnishings with her.

She moves in with her three children and Lorne’s big dog. Following his Dad’s departure, and the demise of Fairy, the four-legged garden guard, Lorne bought himself a dog, a part St. Bernard mutt. He paid for it with money saved from delivering newspapers. He loves his dog! He simply calls it Bernard.
He wasn’t a pure Saint Bernard, but he was big. He was a good dog. And [Lorne] had built a sled for the dog to pull him around. Actually, we have photos of Lorne with his dog. Then in the summer he put wheels on the sled. He brought his “chums” along.¹

Amply fed with oatmeal, bones and meat scraps given by the Billings Bridge butcher, Bernard has practically become a walking piece of furniture. So he is moved to the James Street house along with the rest of the furnishings.

On moving day, as Marie-Louise has no money to pay the movers, she gives them the piano. She counts on the payments that Mr. Rostetter will give her to pay for her rent on James Street. But he is also experiencing the impact of the Depression and can’t get paid by his clients. He therefore cannot pay Marie-Louise who, through a ripple effect, cannot in turn pay her rent.

Circumstances lead me to believe that Marie-Louise once again calls on Joseph to get her out of trouble. First, on 19 August 1936,
Joseph sells one of the lots he had purchased in Capreol Township. It is Lot 8 of Concession II that he sells to Adélard Labre for the sum of $500 even though he had bought it for $670 in 1910. For what reason would he chose to sell this lot at a loss, in the middle of the Depression, apart from the fact that he has an urgent need for cash? We can think that it is to help out Marie-Louise since soon afterwards she seems to break her financial deadlock. Not only does she pay her rent, she decides once again to start a business.

LISGAR STREET (1936–1937)
Marie-Louise rents an imposing three-story, eight-bedroom home on Lisgar Street and transforms it into a boarding house. The scope of this project supports the suggestion put forward earlier that she had received money from Joseph, otherwise where would she have found the funds necessary to furnish an eight-bedroom house? She certainly counts on her education “in the art of tending a home and of being charming and loyal” to make her business a success. Furthermore, she had gained experience with the Second Avenue convalescent home.

Every move brings its sorrow and this one is no exception. Marie-Louise organizes the room distribution to maximize rental income. She puts her children on the third floor, Gertrude in one room and the boys in another. She rents the other two rooms on the third floor and the four rooms on the second floor. She sleeps on a couch in the dining room. Since they are so crowded, Lorne receives the order to get rid of his dog. Gertrude recalls:

G: I recall the day he went to put down his dog at the Humane Society. Oh, [he was] so heartbroken!
C: He must have remembered it to his death.
G: To his death.3

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Life resumes its course. Marie-Louise has pulled Gertrude out of the Rideau Street Convent and has enrolled her in Lisgar Collegiate. Lorne now works delivering telegrams and, through two of the boarders, Joe has found temporary construction work. In 1935, the government in order to create jobs has started the construction of the Bank of Canada building and the Post Office building on Besserer Street. Perhaps Joe is working there. But soon the work is completed and he finds himself unemployed again. The Depression keeps persisting and Marie-Louise cannot rent enough rooms to completely pay her rent. Once more, she lives from hand to mouth.

One day, Joe learns that they are hiring in the northern Ontario mines. He decides to go. Marie-Louise undoubtedly feels a pang at the idea of her 19-year-old son in the mines. She knows how hard this type of work is and she has not forgotten that her birth father died in a mining accident. The only consolation she has is that of knowing that he will stay at one of her cousin’s. Joe hopes that the money he will send his mother will help solve her financial problems. But his departure doesn’t solve anything. Before long, Marie-Louise cannot make ends meet. There is only one solution left.

On 2 January 1937, she mortgages the Stanley Avenue lots with Alfred Shaw as beneficiary. He lends her $500 and she commits to sending him regular payments. This money helps pay the arrears in her rent, but she still doesn’t have enough boarders to fully pay her rent at the end of every month. In addition, Rostetter pays his Stanley Avenue rent very irregularly and never in full. The debt she just took on with Alfred Shaw only adds to the payments of her rent. Gradually, she sinks into a morass.

Meanwhile, the sisters at Rideau Street Convent worry about Gertrude’s future.

*I went to Lisgar High School until around Christmas.
And then, the nuns at Rideau Street Convent thought
that I would become a Protestant because I was going*
to Lisgar and that I was doomed. So they got in touch with mother and I went back to the Convent for the rest of the year, for free. So, I think that the nuns must have known the story.

Maybe the nuns do know Marie-Louise’s story. Gertrude is not the only adolescent at the Convent whose parents are having a hard time during the Depression. She knew a girl who lived in a tent with her family.

G: I remember, when I went to the Convent, there was a girl whose parents had lost their home. So there they were in Manor Park, camping with all their furniture. ... So, you can imagine what kind of life they had, right! But that was the Depression.

C: Did they have a large family?
G: Well, I think there were quite a few of them. I don’t recall. I do remember their name because I knew the girl. But I don’t remember how it happened that I went to see where she lived ...

C: You went there?
G: Yes, yes. And I couldn’t believe it, you know. And in fact, all the furniture was there under a kind of tent. ... It wasn’t very big.

Unfortunately, going back to Rideau Street Convent does not help Gertrude. In the two preceding years, she has experienced trying moves and she continues to feel the stress of watching her mother under pressure and of being powerless to help. Anxious about the family situation, she fails grade twelve.

And things just get worse. Soon, Marie-Louise receives eviction threats. As she knows full well that she won’t be able to pay, she starts looking for another place to rent, in case the threats
materialize. And at the beginning of the summer, the inevitable happens. Gertrude tells me:

G: *Things were going really badly. She wasn’t making enough money and a bailiff came. We were thrown out. And the bailiff sat on the porch to make sure we didn’t take anything. He let us take only a table, some chairs and a bed each, you know.*

C: *So what did she have to leave that he wouldn’t let her take?*

G: *Well, she had furnished the rooms to help out the boarders. There were beds, chests of drawers, and …*

C: *And he wouldn’t let you take any of that?*

G: *No.*

C: *Just the bare necessities for yourselves?*

G: *Yes. She lost everything. It was total bankruptcy!* 

How destitute and totally abandoned Marie-Louise must feel there, on the sidewalk, with her daughter and her youngest son! And yet she does not lose her composure; she executes the Plan B that she had set up.

C: *So what happened after that? You didn’t know where to go that night?*

G: *Well yes, we had rented a house on Nepean Street. Don’t ask me where the money came from, I don’t know. And so we moved there on Nepean Street with the pieces of furniture that he let us take.*

**NEPEAN STREET (1937–1939)**

The house is located at 227 Nepean, just one street behind the house on Lisgar. It is a three-storey house. Marie-Louise sublets two of the rooms to secure a small income.
I remember that a couple, a woman and her father, had moved with us from the [Lisgar Street] house. . . . They had two rooms there and when we moved to Nepean Street they came with us. They were paying [their rent] so I guess that helped. 

In spite of rent from these two rooms, Marie-Louise’s financial situation is not improving. Mr. Rostetter is still not paying regularly. Times are tough. Only the shrewdest people in business manage to survive. If Mr. Rostetter has more than one creditor, he must surely establish his priorities and take maximum advantage of the flexibility he suspects he can get from one or another. Marie-Louise is not an aggressive person. Maybe it is easier to make her wait to be paid than to make another more threatening person wait. We can wonder why she doesn’t terminate his lease and return to her own home. Maybe she can’t because the house is mortgaged.
Furthermore, she who is so inexperienced in business might be slightly intimidated by this educated businessman.

Soon, Marie-Louise finds herself gripped in a financial clutch and sees no way out of this situation. She must sell her house. On 3 May 1938 she sells the house and lots to John Rostetter for the amount of $4,000. According to the deed of sale, Rostetter assumes the remainder of the mortgage that Marie-Louise owes to Alfred Shaw. And since he doesn’t have enough cash to buy the house and lots from Marie-Louise, he takes out a mortgage on them the same day for $3,480 with Marie-Louise as the beneficiary. From this moment on, he must make regular payments to Marie-Louise (probably on a monthly basis) until the sum has been paid in full with interest. With this sale, Marie-Louise is free from her debt to Alfred Shaw. But she receives no cash, except possibly a first monthly payment on the mortgage. The sale entails a great loss when one considers that Joseph paid $5,000 for the property in 1917 and that Marie-Louise has effected some renovations, such as installing indoor plumbing.

A few months later, in October, Gertrude leaves her mother to start her nursing studies in Cornwall.

*I went to Cornwall because in those days you needed Grade 12 to go to the university and then to the General Hospital and I had not completed it. And the Civic Hospital was way too Protestant! I couldn’t have gone to mass on Sundays.*

She gives me a mischievous look and I laugh.

*As for the Sacré-Coeur in Hull, well I wasn’t French-speaking enough. … So that is why I went to Cornwall. And, aside from that, in Cornwall, one of my girl friends was there taking the course.*

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Rideau Street, Corner of Chapel (1939)

Gertrude’s departure leaves Marie-Louise alone with her youngest son, Lorne, in the Nepean Street house. The country’s economic situation is starting to slowly recover. The 1935 elections brought the Liberals back to power. They set up the National Employment Commission and, in 1937, created Trans-Canada Airlines, which would later become Air Canada. Finances are looking up and businessmen are starting to breathe easier. On 20 July 1939, John Rostetter pays Marie-Louise part of the mortgage — only for lot 133. This influx is still insufficient to pull Marie-Louise out of trouble. She and Lorne leave Nepean Street and move to a small apartment on Rideau Street at the corner of Chapel. Lorne becomes a day labourer.

Joseph Ray, eldest son of Marie-Louise and J.A. Roy
September 1, 1939, marks the beginning of the Second World War. Rumours are circulating. Some say that the Canadian government could eventually impose the conscription. Marie-Louise is probably worried since she has two bachelor sons. The War’s momentum soon overtakes Canada. “On September 10, [1939,] Canada declares war on Germany.” The Government calls for men to enlist, and they respond in great numbers. Joe is 22 years old. He returns to Ottawa and submits a job application to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. They accept him and send him to Regina for a training period. When he returns to Ottawa, he does not move in with Marie-Louise and Lorne.

Slater Street (1940)

Marie-Louise and Lorne stay on Rideau Street for only a few months. Marie-Louise has at last found a job. She has been hired by the Government to clean offices. She and Lorne move to a bachelor apartment on Slater Street. The repeated moves she has been through and the bankruptcy have reduced her possessions to almost nothing.
I don’t remember having anything to move. All we had was two beds. But still when we moved to Slater Street and we got there the apartment [we were to occupy] wasn’t empty but the upstairs [apartment] was empty. We had to move in it and move down the next morning.\(^\text{11}\)

Lorne laughs at the memory of this move, like one laughs afterwards about a sad story in the past. As with all bachelor apartments, the studio apartment on Slater Street has only one main room and a kitchen. Marie-Louise and Lorne make do pretty well. But in 1940 something unexpected changes their arrangement. Gertrude returns suddenly from Cornwall. She has contracted tuberculosis.

\[\text{I was at my [nursing] course for one year when I contracted tuberculosis. That year, four of us caught it because we had had a patient from the Indian Reserve who was supposed to have pneumonia but it turned out to be tuberculosis.}\text{12}\]

In the early twentieth century, contracting tuberculosis was practically equivalent to a death sentence. No cures were known to combat it. It is only in the mid 1950s that a vaccine was developed. Gertrude is perfectly conscious of the danger she is in, not only because she is studying to be a nurse, but also because when they lived in Rideau Park she had known a girl who had tuberculosis.

\[\text{G: I went to see her often. I sat on the porch with her and talked. She was only 20 years old. And then she died … I was maybe only 15.}\]

\[\text{C: Oh, my God! That must have been a shock for you to see a woman so young die of tuberculosis!}\]

\[\text{G: Yes, yes. And then later I got it.}\]
C: And when you got it, you must have remembered her.
G: For sure.
C: It must have come to your mind. You must have been afraid you might die because you saw her die, right?
G: Yes. I had seen her die ... yes, I knew.  

The only thing that Marie-Louise can do to try and save Gertrude is to make her take to her bed for a total rest cure. Since the studio has only one bed — a Davenport sofa bed in the main room — Gertrude and her mother share it and Lorne sleeps on the kitchen floor in a sleeping bag. Gertrude remembers this long convalescence as the most boring time of her life.

G: I had to stay LYING DOWN! All day! All the time! I only had permission to go to the toilet. That’s all I was allowed to do ... I couldn’t even knit!
C: No?
G: Because your arms, you know ... It had to be COMPLETE BED REST. Boring! It was really boring!
C: How long did this last?
G: For two years.
C: For two whole years? That’s martyrdom!
G: Yes, I think I became mentally deficient during that time.
[We burst out laughing together.]
C: Could you at least read?
G: Yes, I could read. And Joe who was in the Mounted Police would bring me books from the Library. Boy, did I read!  

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The following year, Marie-Louise, who now has a regular income thanks to her office cleaning job, decides to move to a more spacious abode with Gertrude and Lorne. She discovers a three-story house for sale at 5 Central Avenue. Since she has neither the means nor the intention to buy it, she rents with an option to purchase to lull the owner, who absolutely wants to sell. She then sub-lets the top half of the house to a couple.
But soon, the owner starts putting pressure regularly on Marie-Louise to finalize the purchase. Marie-Louise plays cat and mouse. She continues to imply that she intends to buy the property but avoids saying when she will do it. Eventually, the owner desists from pestering her, perhaps because the war does not facilitate house sales. The government has imposed restrictions on raising costs. “... [A] freeze on salaries is decreed and this control also applies to rent and essential services like gas and electricity.” It also sporadically imposes periods of blackout. “For many minutes, street lights are extinguished, cars must circulate headlights off and houses, businesses, factories and stores must be plunged into darkness. The warning signal with its strident whistle sends a shiver of anxiety throughout the population.”

Whatever the reasons for the house owner’s change of mind, Marie-Louise ends up staying in the Central Avenue house for many years.

ACQUAINTANCE CHANGES (1942–1944)

The years 1942 to 1944 bring winds of change in Marie-Louise’s acquaintances. New relations get established and old ones come undone. Like planets around a stable star, people circulate around her, sometimes closer, sometimes farther away.

First in 1942, thanks to her mother’s tender care, Gertrude recovers her health and returns to Cornwall to complete her nursing studies, to her mother’s great delight.

“She was so proud of me for returning!” Gertrude tells me.

Marie-Louise resumes her life alone with Lorne. But soon it is the latter’s turn to leave home. He is now 21 years old. He aspires to find a permanent job and the war offers him the opportunity to do so. He joins the Navy and is transferred to Halifax. As soon as he starts receiving a steady salary, he begins helping his sister financially.
In those days, Lorne was sending me “money orders” for $10. Oh! That was a big gift! … He sent some to me several times … in Cornwall. … Lorne is an angel! He really is an angel! ¹⁸

Albert Laurent “Lorne” Ray, youngest son of Marie-Louise and J.A. Roy

Marie-Louise does not stay alone for long. Gertrude has a friend, Alice Adam, who started her nursing degree with her in Cornwall. Like Gertrude, Alice caught tuberculosis and had to interrupt her studies. Always ready to help others, Marie-Louise gives her lodging for a while. Then after Alice’s departure, she welcomes one of her nieces, DesNeiges Bergeron, who comes from Hanmer to work in Ottawa. DesNeiges spends all of 1942–43 with her. The two women get along well. I ask DesNeiges about her stay with Marie-Louise:
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C: What kind of outings did you do together? Would you go to the cinema?

D: Sometimes. Other times we just went for a walk to pass the time. She was very ... how do you say? She was very ordinary ... and extraordinary. ... She was a beautiful friend. ... She was very elegant.

C: Was she pretty?

D: Oh yes, and she knew it, too!

C: She fixed herself up well?

D: Aaah! You had to see her. 19

Even though Marie-Louise gets along well with her niece, she can be harsh with her when the latter tries to find out about her private life. This comes out by coincidence when I ask her:

C: If I asked you three words to describe Marie-Louise, what would you say?

D: She was good, and she was gentle. She was nasty and “Get out of there, you.”

C: When was she nasty?

D: When I had just pestered her.

C: OK. So if someone tried to get involved in her private life?

D: Her private life, it belonged to her. 20

December 3, 1942, marks the end of a business relationship. John Rostetter finally completes paying Marie-Louise the mortgage he signed on 22 April 1938. From that date onward, he has sole ownership of the Stanley Avenue house and lots.

Then the year 1943 blows a whirlwind of happy events through Marie-Louise’s life. First, Joe, still in the RCMP, falls in love with a young woman named Marie Cécile Valois. Now, at that time there was a regulation in the Mounted Police according to which a man

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could not marry unless he had completed six years of service or he had special permission. But love proves to be stronger than regulations. On 1 July 1943, Joe and Cécile secretly marry at Christ Roy Church on Argyle Street, at 6 o’clock in the morning. Since Joe must continue to live in the Mounted Police barracks as if nothing had happened, Cécile returns to her parents’ home where Joe visits her during his leave.

Marie-Louise at a picnic, circa 1943
Lorne has also met a woman that he likes. Her name is Isabella Hall and she is a native of Brockville. It doesn’t take him long to follow Joe’s example. On 8 October 1943, Marie-Louise has the great pleasure of attending their wedding. The newlyweds honeymoon in Halifax, where Lorne must complete his service in the Navy. After a few weeks, Isabella returns to her parents’ home in Brockville. Lorne will join her at the end of the war and stay there until 1947.

Finally, a third event, this one slightly more comical, livens up Marie-Louise’s life at the end of 1943. In December, Joe’s wife Cécile becomes pregnant. The RCMP discovers the story of the secret marriage, thanks Joe for his services, and fines him $500 for having wed without permission. Marie-Louise does not miss seeing the funny side of the adventure and the good that comes with the bad. Joe and Cécile can finally live together openly. Marie-Louise puts them up on the second floor of the house on Central Avenue.

During 1944, Canada continues to manage the changes brought about by the war. In Ottawa, taxi and telephone services are still rationed. The Government does promulgate a law ensuring family allowances to parents who have children less than 16 years of age at home, but these measures arrive too late to be of assistance to Marie-Louise. Her three children have reached adulthood. Anyway, she would not have dared to resort to it for fear of being asked questions.

As was 1943, the year 1944 brings a succession of significant events in Marie-Louise’s life. First, at the beginning of the summer Gertrude completes her nursing studies. Marie-Louise feels immensely proud to see her daughter receive her diploma and get a job at the Ottawa General Hospital. She hastens to convince the new graduate to come live with her on Central Avenue.

A few months later, on 28 July, Joseph Ray (alias Jérémie Alphonse Roy) dies at L’Assomption. Does someone inform Marie-Louise of her “husband’s” death? If so, she does not tell the children because Gertrude and Lorne tell me:
G: When father died in 1944, we didn’t even know he was alive!
L: No. I wonder if mother knew.
G: No, I am sure she didn’t. I don’t think she heard from him at all. And I imagine that this was the agreement that they did when he left, that there would be no communication.²²

Gertrude Ray, daughter of Marie-Louise and J.A. Roy, 1944

One thing is certain: the “widow” does not attend the funeral that took place on 31 July 1944, in Berthierville where he was born. On the death certificate, his name differs slightly from the one his birth certificate showed: D. Jérémie A. Roy. The “A” for Alphonse that he used during his mission out West has remained. As for the
name “Joseph,” it was buried along with the secret of his life with Marie-Louise.

It’s seems like Nature hastens to fill voids. In families where a death occurs, often a birth arrives not long afterwards, and Marie-Louise’s family offers another example of this. On 4 August 1944, Cécile, Joe’s wife, gives birth to a little girl, Diane Ray. This happy event marks a new era in Marie-Louise’s life. She is now a grandmother.