Chapter Seven
1944 to 1965
Nanny

We called her Nanny. I think that that says everything…

Patrick Mantha
GRANDMOTHER

Marie-Louise is simply delighted to be a grandmother. And God knows she will have this pleasure many times over. Between 1944 and 1960, twelve more grandchildren are added to the first granddaughter. For each one of them, she becomes a memorable presence, someone to whom they will remain attached all of their lives.

On 21 September 1946, Gertrude weds Paul-Emile Mantha. Marie-Louise is 55 years old. All three of her children are now married. She can relax, knowing that she is no longer responsible for their well-being, that all three have loving spouses and that they are quite able to face their own future. She now enters a phase of life where she can devote all the time she desires to her role as a grandmother.

Her grandchildren called her and still call her Nanny. When I ask them in turn what impressions come to mind about their grandmother, they all speak of her with love and admiration, and in the most touching terms. From these interviews I glean the portrait of a patient and gentle grandmother who adores them, who does
not hesitate to hug them close to her heart and who represents for them “warmth, comfort and protection.” ¹ A grandmother always in a good mood, who gives generously of herself by working non-stop for them and by taking the time to make small gifts by hand for their parties and birthdays. A woman always well groomed, a “class act,” ² who enjoys simple pleasures and whose sensitivity masks a will of iron. Lastly, a woman who’s silence, sometimes sad, gives off a glimpse of her profound depth, hard for the children to grasp. One of her granddaughters sums up her portrait with a heart-felt phrase, “For me, Nanny was boundless love.” ³

There is no doubt that Marie-Louise intends doing all she can as a grandmother to shower affection on her grandchildren and to help give them what she couldn’t give to her own children after Joseph’s departure: a childhood and an adolescence free of all material and emotional worry. She bestows her unconditional love on them and devotes all her talents to expressing it.

**SEWING AND KNITTING**

Nimble fingers. That’s what they are, these fingers that produce dresses, coats, trousers, blouses and underpants. To help out her daughter and daughters-in-law, Marie-Louise makes most of her grandchildren’s clothes, for the boys as well as for the girls.

_She made us many, many outfits: tiny coats with matching hats. And when I got married, Nanny and my Mom made their own dresses, my wedding dress, my going away dress, and dresses for Anne, Pauline and Suzanne. She worked and worked!_ ⁴

She sews all these clothes on a simple foot-pedal sewing machine, probably bought through the Eaton’s catalogue. Later, her son Lorne will add a motor to make it easier for her and prevent her
from getting leg cramps. She oversees her grandchildren’s wardrobes with all the experience she learned during the lean years. Nothing is wasted! From items that no longer fit one child, she fabricates wonders for another.

She would take a coat from Lorne’s wife who didn’t want it anymore and make a coat for me. … I remember one I loved. It was a little coat. It had fur on the cuffs and she made me a little fur muff. I LOVED it! And I felt so special in it.5

She uses her imagination and creativity to exploit in the most unexpected ways any cloth she can get her hands on, even material not usually destined for sewing clothes:

_Papa had bought some parachute cloth from the Army Surplus in Toronto. She took that material and made us blouses and underpants, … in this heavy, white nylon, you know. It could resist anything!_6

And with the same material she confects a toy for her grandson:

My Dad had a real parachute and she took a piece of the cloth and made me a parachute with it so I could throw it up in the air.7

What’s more, she doesn’t just sew for the children. She also sews for their dolls.

_Every Christmas, we got a new dress and our doll did, too. You see. Everything matched. They were always chosen with care, beautifully decorated with lace where it was needed._8
Gertrude tells me:

_She made doll clothes for all my children. And GORGEOUS things! Do you remember Mary Poppins? She dressed a doll for Suzanne and Pauline as Mary Poppins. And it was so well done! It was beautiful! [My daughters] were the only ones in the neighbourhood to have nice clothes like that to play Mary Poppins. They could dress it and undress it._

Marie-Louise sews jeans for the boys, and knits mittens, tuques, scarves and wool socks for them.

I remember also she knitted me a hat. It was a tuque that I just hated! It was one with the thing that goes down underneath and I didn’t want to offend her. So I would wear it as I went out of the house and then as soon as I got down the street, I would take it off. … It was red and blue.

IN THE KITCHEN

Nanny shares her cooking talents with her loved ones. The grandchildren remember:

_She made very good soups. … She made a Scottish soup, what she called a Scotch broth. That was, I remember, one of her best soups. And my father always said that nobody could cook a roast like my grandmother: roast pork or roast beef._

_She loved tea, not coffee. And she adored lamb. … She had habits more … English I would say. It wasn’t lamb. It was mutton because that it was they had_
David, Lorne’s son, recalls a rather frugal grandmother who sometimes prepared a salad with dandelion leaves that made him wince a little bit.

Potatoes make up an incontrovertible part of Nanny’s cuisine. It is the first thing she puts on the stove when preparing a meal and she makes them with every meal which sometimes bothers Gertrude’s husband, who does not necessarily desire to eat potatoes every single day.

But what we love can become our downfall in the hands of an enemy. Cathy (S) Lorne’s daughter, tells me:

S: She always had meals with us and she always washed the dishes every night and she LOVED her mashed potatoes. Every night she would have to have potatoes.
C: Always mashed?
S: Always mashed. Oh! I should say mashed or boiled potatoes but nothing any fancier than that. And yeah, to her a meal was not complete if there weren’t potatoes involved. And I always knew if … like her and my mum, they got along fine. But I mean of course, you know, you’ve got two cooks in the kitchen, sometimes there would be squabbles. We were not a very vocal household, so there would not be any screaming, but I always knew when she and my mum were in a tiff because my mum wouldn’t make potatoes. … My mum wouldn’t make potatoes and Nanny wouldn’t wash the dishes and I would know: that’s it! They were not speaking to each other. But then the next day, it all seemed to be back to normal.
“BREAKING CAMP”

In 1947, Gertrude and Paul-Emile move into a nice, large home that they had built in Orleans. They rent the upstairs to Joe and Cécile. Since the latter free up the second floor on Central Avenue, Marie-Louise invites Lorne and Isabella to leave Brockville and to come live with her. They accept.

Then in 1949, new moving around! Paul-Emile accepts a job with the Ontario Government in Toronto. He sells the Orleans home and goes to Toronto on his own first to find housing for his family. Gertrude and her two babies, Louise and Anne, move to Central Avenue with Marie-Louise for a few months, and then they leave to join Paul-Emile.

As for Lorne and Isabella, they buy a house in Ottawa south, on Fentiman Avenue. They invite Marie-Louise to come live with them. This proposal offers advantages to Marie-Louise. She would not have the bother of finding boarders anymore for the second floor on Central Avenue. She would no longer have to pay rent, and, more importantly, she could share precious moments with her grandson, David. She accepts.

The move is somewhat painful for her, because she has to “break camp.” She can’t bring all her possessions to Lorne’s. In preparing to
move, Lorne and Isabella sort out what they can bring to the new home and leave on the front lawn the things that they relegate to the garbage. While they are busy in the house, Marie-Louise pulls out of the garbage things she can’t bear to part with and brings them back into the house through the back door. This game of “in one door, out the other” ends when Lorne and Isabella realize that they have taken out the same things more than once. Through negotiations, they arrive at an understanding.

**Mother-in-Law**

Marie-Louise adapts well to the house on Fentiman Avenue except for a small detail that Lorne laughingly describes to me, “I remember her being sea-sick on the veranda rocking the chair.”

If Marie-Louise is nauseous, it may be because while rocking, she is reflecting on the consequences that will follow the change of direction her life just took. For the first time since she left Hanmer, she doesn’t have her own home. She now lives with her son and daughter-in-law. She cannot make decisions anymore concerning the organization of her own environment. She must consult her daughter-in-law about all initiatives concerning the management of the household. In this new context, her status as mother-in-law is linked like a shadow to her status as grandmother. And she cannot separate from it as Peter Pan separated from his shadow. She must keep that in mind while carving alongside her daughter-in-law a support role that is as efficient and discreet as possible. What an apprenticeship for a woman who has run her own ship freely all these years without asking anyone’s approval!

She looks after her grandson, helps with the chores, and takes part in the meal preparation. But she prefers sewing in her room so as not to constantly impose her presence.

In 1950 Gertrude and her husband invite her to come and live with them in Toronto and she accepts with pleasure. She is 59 years
old and the idea of leaving her job with the Government to go live in a new city appeals to her.

As she did at Lorne’s, she lends her daughter a hand and tries to impose herself as little as possible. Gertrude’s husband, Paul-Emile, is a tolerant man and he loves his mother-in-law. But, whether one likes it or not, it is always difficult to live with one’s mother-in-law, even if she is the nicest person in the world. So, inevitably, tensions flare up from time to time.

There was some tension in the house because, and I understand it now, for my father it wasn’t pleasant to have his mother-in-law there all the time … If my parents had friends over, well she sat there in the living room, too … It’s sad to say, but she was there like an intruder. … There was tension between my parents because she was always there. … I know that Dad said things sometimes. … He loved her! But, you know, when you have someone visiting you all the time, all the time, all the time. And besides that, it’s your mother-in-law! … She wasn’t the type of obtrusive mother-in-law. She didn’t impose herself at all. She was in the background but she was there.5

In fact, she imposes herself so little that she is “like a mouse”6 in the house. She is quite aware that her constant presence causes tension. She finds ways to absent herself from time to time to give the young couple a bit of privacy. She stays in her room to sew and goes out sometimes with her friend Betty Fleming, a Toronto woman who has seven children. The memories that Betty will write down later on in a note to Gertrude reveal the empathy that Marie-Louise feels for women in difficult situations and her subtlety at finding discreet ways to help.
Madame Rae: a very sweet sociable little lady who enjoyed doing nice things for friends, i.e. making a parachute silk dress for one of my infants, babysitting while I was in hospital having another baby and on many occasions to let me and my husband “get away.” Also, on occasion, she could come up with a good one-liner. She was a doting grandmother, mother of her three, and positively glowed with pride over them all.  

Nanny in Toronto with her Mantha grandchildren, circa 1954

J A K E A N D T H E K I D
On occasion, Marie-Louise returns to Ottawa to spend time at one or the other of her sons’ home. Lorne bought a house in August 1950 on Larose Avenue and Marie-Louise comes for short stays from time to time. Her grandson, David, remembers happy moments spent with her:
She was a great grandmother! I mean, you know, she looked like a grandmother and was always there for you. When I was in grade one and two, my mother always worked, so she would give me lunch and I guess one of my strongest recollections with her is going home for lunch. And we always used to listen to *Jake and the Kid*. It was on at noon hour. 18

Marie-Louise loves to please her grandson and this program gives her the opportunity to do so, since *Jake and the Kid* tells about the adventures of a young boy in the Canadian Prairies in the early twentieth century. The series of 320 episodes written by Ormond Mitchell was broadcast on radio between 1949 and 1957.

Marie-Louise in Toronto, circa 1952

**G O D**

In March 1951, when Cécile, Joe’s wife, gives birth to her third child, Michael, Marie-Louise comes again to Lorne’s home and brings over Donald, the little 4-year-old, for a few days while his mother is in the hospital. Donald recalls: 19

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There was one time that I was staying with Nanny Ray at my uncle’s home while my mother was in the hospital giving birth. At the time, I didn’t understand what my mother was going through, but in my mind, I felt that she was in grave danger. Nanny could see my concern and talked to me about it. I was still very concerned so she suggested that I walk up to the local church and say a prayer for my mum. I did that, and remember being in the church ALL ALONE “talking to God.” After I had verbalized my request sufficiently, I returned to Nanny and told her about my experience. She assured me that now that a child had made a request to God, that everything would be fine. Therefore, when the birthing went without incident (at least that was what I was told), I was not surprised and felt that I had played a big part in the outcome.

It is interesting to note that Marie-Louise encourages her grandson to “dialogue” with God. After what she lived through, one could expect her faith to be strongly shaken, but it seems not, as revealed in my conversation with her oldest granddaughter:

D: I remember having an argument with her about God. I said to her that there is no God. And she said, “YES, THERE IS!” And it would be like, “No, there isn’t.” “Yes, there is!” You know. “No, there isn’t.” And we argued. I was an adult, a young adult. And I said, “Okay, Nanny. If you die before me and there is a God, you come back and tell me.”

C: What did she say?

D: She said, “I will!” And that was it.
All her grandchildren remember her as a woman of faith. She goes to Mass by choice and not because she is under obligation. She kneels down by her bedside to say her prayers and says her rosary regularly. But she considers her spiritual life a private affair and does not impose on others to pray or to go to church with her.

BACK TO OTTAWA (1957–1965)
In 1957, the Mantha family moves back to Ottawa, and settles at 38 Sweetland Avenue in Sandy Hill. As three more children were born in Toronto, the house is not big enough to accommodate Marie-Louise. She therefore moves to Lorne’s home on Larose Avenue. She will reside there until 1970.

She frequently visits Gertrude to help out and takes this opportunity to do activities with the children.

I remember taking the bus with her to go stay overnight at my cousin Cathy’s, where Nanny was living at the time. I recall that she curled our hair, you know, and she played with us like we were dolls.\(^{21}\)

OGILVY’S
But Nanny’s most frequent outings with her grandchildren are her shopping trips to Ogilvy’s department store on Rideau Street. It is her favourite store.

I remember going shopping at Ogilvy’s with her. We went to the bathroom because she would hide her money in her corset, … in her girdle. … So we had to go to the bathroom so she could take out her money to be able to go shopping.\(^{22}\)
She buys all her sewing materials there. Since she shops there quite frequently, she knows all the clerks in the sewing section and introduces her grandchildren to them with great pride. Once the purchases are completed, they go down to eat at the cafeteria in the basement, a very special treat for the children.

She does the same thing with her niece Georgette when she comes from Hanmer to visit her. Georgette emphasizes the fact that Nanny wore gloves to go shopping as dictated by the etiquette of the day.

CINEMA

Another pleasure that Nanny delights in sharing with her grandchildren is going to the cinema. Her passion for films has never diminished since the presentation in Ottawa of the first talking film, *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson, in 1927. As soon as the grandchildren reach the age where they can sit still for over an hour, she keeps an eye on the cinema schedule at the Nelson Theatre and carefully chooses something of appeal for each grandchild: Walt Disney’s *Bambi* for one granddaughter, *Fiddler on the Roof* for a grandson. In 1963, a film by Alfred Hitchcock comes out, which soon gets the reputation of being very frightening. Nanny takes Anne, who is 14 years old.

I remember that she took me to see *The Birds* by Alfred Hitchcock … I was so afraid that she would have a heart attack!²³

THE COUNTESS OF SÉGUR

Some stories the grandchildren tell me about Nanny remind me of the Countess of Ségur,²⁴ who like Nanny was always telling her grandchildren to be kind and good, and whose stories always contained a lesson to be learned. Two stories in particular describe a
“Nanny—educator” who doesn’t miss a chance to transmit a small message. The first one was told to me by her eldest granddaughter, Diane:

There was another time when she got mad at me. It was quite a lesson that I learned from her. I didn’t mean to be bad. Again, I don’t remember how old I was. But we were in the Aylmer house. And it was Christmas and my parents used to give us money to buy Granny a present, right? And I was trying to get everyone a present and I forgot that I hadn’t got a present for Nanny. And I had no money and I knew I couldn’t get anymore. So I rummaged through my drawer and found this bottle of perfume that I had never opened. It had been a gift. I don’t know if I remember who gave it to me. So I wrapped it up very pretty and put it under the tree for Nanny. And I didn’t think anything of it, you know after that. I don’t remember anything about that Christmas. But the following Christmas, I got that perfume back from Nanny. And I was so disappointed because she always gave us something that she would make for Christmas. And I couldn’t wait to open my present. And I sat there and thought about it. And I thought, “This is the present I got her.” And then I thought, “Oh God! She gave me that!” And then I looked at her and she was like this. [She imitates her grandmother staring at her.] Oh! I was upset at her and she was upset at me. And we never spoke about it. And I never told my parents. Actually, I don’t think I have ever told anyone. But it was something I remembered. 25
The second story divulges Nanny’s generous heart and her clever way of giving a lesson in charity to her grandchildren. The story takes place one day when the children caught head-lice in school and they had to stay home so as not to spread the affliction.

Jean-Pierre, Pauline and I had caught head-lice. We lived on Sweetland Avenue at the time. We were very young. We had a neighbour who was named _______ and he came to ask if we could go out to play. And we yelled out from the window that we had lice. Nanny was babysitting us then. Since we couldn’t go out, he went behind our house where there was a shed and, right in front of our eyes, took the wooden dollhouse that stayed outdoors. And Nanny refused to stop him from leaving with it. ... She said to me, “Let him take it. He might need it more than you.” And ... of course he was quite poor. But I remember being so shocked that she let him go. ... My dollhouse!26

Nanny who has known moments of abject poverty silently understands the uncontrollable urge to steal that a poor child might experience in front of a nice toy. Indulgent, she tries to give her grandchildren a lesson in charity by telling them to let him go.

The children learn other lessons watching their grandmother live her daily life. Marie-Louise’s grandson, Patrick, writes to me:

If anyone in the world taught me to understand the word frugal, it is definitely my grandmother. ... She knew how to survive and how to “cut a penny in four.” She never wasted a piece of string or a sewing pin. Table scraps, either. She searched and bargained to her satisfaction, sometimes coming up empty-handed, not
having found what she wanted. Sometimes it was exasperating for the young boy I was, tugging at her skirt hem. But, oh, how examplary and educational!

A BUSY ROOM (1962–1965)

In 1962, the Mantha family moves to 29 Sweetland Avenue. Since the house is bigger, a room is set up for Nanny to sleep over when she wants to. Although she still lives with Lorne, Nanny stays intermittently at Gertrude’s.

The room she occupies at 29 Sweetland has the distinctive feature that one must pass through it to get to the attic where the boys have their bedroom. So sometimes it happens that the boys pass through her room just as she is getting dressed. They discover with a tinge of curiosity and discomfort that Nanny wears a whalebone corset fastened with ties. Nanny is now over 70 years old and surely doesn’t appreciate having impromptu visitors in her most private moments. If she desires a place all of her own, where she could retire with the certainty of not being disturbed, she doesn’t say so to Gertrude and her husband because she knows very well that they can do nothing about it.

THE SECRET

Although Nanny maintains a very close relationship with her grandchildren, who see her regularly, they have a feeling that a part of her remains inaccessible to them. David recounts:

I recollect of her too standing at the back window and talking to herself. … She was talking in French so I couldn’t understand her but I remember walking in the room and she was looking at the window very calm and she suddenly knew that I
was there and she was not embarrassed at all. So … but what she was talking about or who she was talking to …

What is Marie-Louise thinking about as she looks out the window? Who is she talking to like that in French? Is she telling someone about the events of the day, about the emotions that she is feeling and that she cannot share with anyone?

David is not the only one of the grandchildren to sense an enigma in his grandmother. During the same period of time, in Toronto, her granddaughter Louise notes:

*There was a deep sadness that I felt emanating from her. There was a very sad underpinning.*

Similarly, Suzanne, Louise’s sister, felt that her grandmother kept a secret about her grandfather and that her efforts to try and find out the nature of that secret only opened a painful wound:

*I felt uncomfortable with her because every time I tried to find out about my grandfather she often changed the story and then she started to cry. And so I just avoided raising the topic.*

When I ask Cathy (S), David’s sister, for three words to describe her grandmother, she answers:

S: I would say she was fun loving, but at the same time, mysterious. And cuddly. She was very cuddly.

C: Now why mysterious?

S: I guess just because the tears I would see sometimes, … cause she spent a lot of time alone and seemed to like it that way. … So just
introspective all the time, you know. She had a lot on her mind and maybe sort of mumbling away to herself sometimes and I wondered what she was thinking about. And later on when I found out about her history and how tough things had been, it all made such perfect sense. At the time, the little quirks that I thought that she had, like the crying and just the quiet behaviour at times, when other times she could be so outgoing. It all made sense.

C: Your brother told me that, one day, he caught her near the window, talking to herself quietly. Did it happen to you too?

S: Often! Yes. She would be like that. She would just kind of be staring off and sort of mumbling. I would look at her and wonder what it is that she would be talking about.

C: Was she talking in French or in English?

S: In French. It was usually in French.

Cathy does not speak French. She therefore doesn’t understand a word of her grandmother’s veiled soliloquy.

That’s what occurred to me, that she was praying or just trying to sort through things on why her life had turned out the way it had or taken the course of events. But I don’t think she felt sadness. I certainly never sensed bitterness in her, EVER. But there was maybe a sadness there that things had turned out … would have wished that things have turned out differently. But NEVER angry. Or never feeling like a victim.
It is certain that Marie-Louise keeps inside her heart a Pandora’s box in which she conceals her memories, her feelings and the thoughts that she could never express. This is what makes her pensive sometimes. She hides from her grandchildren her love story with Joseph and his return to the priesthood. She keeps the promise made to him of never revealing it to anyone. She does not want to open the box on any pretext, for fear of seeing her memories escape, change with the re-telling or be sullied by gossipmongers. And even if her daughter is now a mother and women often share intimate secrets amongst themselves, she keeps the silence into which she locked herself up all these years. I ask Gertrude:

C: When she spent afternoons with you, did she talk about her life a little?
G: Never, never! It was a big, big secret.

In spite of the years that have passed, Marie-Louise maybe still feels the need to pour her heart out, to tell her children about the wonderful love she and Joseph lived before their arrival, and to clarify once and for all the mystery surrounding his departure. But what good would it do? What is the use of telling them how and why their father returned to the priesthood? What is the use of telling them that their real name is Roy and not Ray? Why upset their lives?

Really, when you think about it, that she kept it secret for so long, it must have been terrible!