Chapter Eight
1960 to 1964
Return to Her Roots
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Graduation (1960)

As adults, salmon follow their instincts and swim up the river where they were born to lay their eggs. Similarly, birds return to their place of birth to build a nest for their young. It is nature’s cycle and human beings can’t escape it. With old age comes the desire to see our childhood places, the house where we grew up and the people who shared our childhood games, our adventures and our dreams for the future.

In 1960, an event triggers Marie-Louise’s return to her roots. Her godchild in Hanmer, Georgette Bergeron, has just completed her nursing degree, and invites her to the graduation ceremony.

When I graduated from nursing in 1960, my mother [Claire-Hilda] had had a heart attack and was in the hospital. She couldn’t come to the graduation so I asked my aunt to come. It is she who represented my mother at the convocation.

Georgette Bergeron’s graduation, 1960.
Marie-Louise is to the right of the graduate.
A lot of water has passed under the bridge since Marie-Louise’s reunion with her family after Joseph’s departure. Her adoptive father, Napoléon, died in 1950, her children are married, she has lived in Toronto and she has become a grandmother. Marie-Louise is now 69 years old. The sister she loves so much is in the hospital and she realizes that she might have lost her. Is it for this reason that she feels more deeply than before the need to spend time in her childhood haunts, to see once more the members of her extended family and to chat at length with them?

Marie-Louise and her godchild Georgette Bergeron, 1960

THE TWO GOSSIPs

In the years following this visit to Hanmer, the bond between Marie-Louise and her sister becomes even tighter. Claire and her girls come to visit her in Ottawa every year and Marie-Louise returns frequently to spend a month with them. Georgette relates:
We would say, “Aunty would you like to come to Sudbury?” Ah! The night before, her bags were packed. “Are you coming?” “Oh, yes, I’ve decided to come.” Well, then it was a race to find her medication so that she would have enough for almost a month. And then the whole time she was here, my mother and her laughed! They laughed for thirty days!³

The three sisters (left to right):
Dorilla and the “two gossips,” Claire and Marie-Louise

This month per year with her sister, far from the city, allowed Marie-Louise to revitalize herself. The two women would relax and act frivolously.

They would go to the cabin in the woods. No electricity, no running water. And, before my aunt arrived, one of us, Georgette or me, would purchase at the liquor store a case of Porter for the two of them. … And my father [Florian] sat outside to smoke in his rocking chair. They each had a rocking chair and before dinner they would have a little drink of Porter.
And my father would say, “I’m sitting here, and they giggle all day.”

Florian can’t get over seeing Claire-Hilda and Marie-Louise chat and laugh for hours. He has nicknamed them “the two gossips.”

INNER PEACE

During her trips to Hanmer, Marie-Louise stays close to her family. She seldom goes out and does not attempt to re-establish contact with neighbours and friends from her youth. However one day, she takes an unexpected initiative.

Once she came up and seemed to want to talk. So she said “I’m going to go visit Miss Albina Beaulieu.” Albina Beaulieu lived on the farm next door. She was Louis’ daughter. Louis and Napoléon had arrived here at the same time, and brought up their families [at the same time]. So Marie-Louise went off to see Albina. … She was there for many hours. And when she returned, my mother said, “She was radiant!” She seemed happy as if a load had been lifted from her shoulders.

It had taken courage for Marie-Louise to visit Albina. Given her irregular marital situation and the distance she kept for years from the people of Hanmer, she had no idea how she would be received. What did the two women talk about? What childhood memories or difficulties in their respective lives did they reminisced together? Only God knows. But it seems as if Albina received her with open arms because Marie-Louise came back home beaming with new confidence. Having renewed her friendship with Albina gives her the feeling of having symbolically won Hanmer back. She feels free! She feels that she just knocked down within herself the last
obstacle that was stopping her from confronting public opinion. Georgette describes to me the “new” Marie-Louise:

*I know that in the 1960’s, … the first years, she did not like to go places. After she spoke with Albina, it was as if she carried her head higher, and she would go out with us, and we would go to places and it seems like, “Huh! I’m here, I know who I am. The rest of you, do you know who you are?” … And after that she did not seem to mind going out.*

Marie-Louise (Nanny) and her grandchildren David and Cathy Ray, July 1964

In fact, she now enjoys going out. The appetite from her youth for meeting new people and exploring unknown territories reawakens in her soul and she knows that, from now on, others’ opinions will not prevent her from living life as she sees fit.

**THE TRIP TO THE YUKON**

In September 1964, Marie-Louise again visits her sister Claire-Hilda in Hanmer. As usual, the two gossips start scheming and this time they don’t content themselves with talk, they take action. They intend to go to the Yukon.

The Yukon! Land of the midnight sun! The very name of this
A Woman of Valour

territory evokes for every Canadian the Klondike and the Gold Rush at the end of the nineteenth century. It stirs up in memories images of the sea of humans lured by instant riches. This name, so unique, conveys legends about gold discoveries of mythical proportions.

Florian, Claire-Hilda’s husband, and both girls, Clothilde and Georgette, adopt the idea with enthusiasm.

So we said, “We’re going to the Yukon.” In fact, we have a cousin of the two gossips that went to the Yukon during the gold rush and he never came back. We never knew him, but the adventure of going to see where he went. So they said, “Well then, let’s get ready and go.”

Marie-Louise and Claire-Hilda are in charge of the meals. Since the travellers expect to be gone for a whole month, the two women prepare preserves to eat at noon along the way. They set off at noon on a Saturday.

We [thought] we would get perhaps to Sault Ste Marie, it was about four hours. We only got to Thessalon, I think, one hour outside the Sault, maybe half an hour. We stayed in a motel. The cabins were on Georgian Bay, on the shores of Lake Huron. We spent the night there. The next morning, we went to Mass in Thessalon and then we left.

Florian is very frustrated because the women won’t let him smoke in the car. They are travelling in a fairly big automobile, a sedan. Clothilde and Georgette are the two appointed drivers. Every two hours they switch roles and this gives everyone time to get out of the car and move a little. Florian takes the opportunity to smoke his pipe.

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At noon we would stop; [the two gossips] got out the grub and we played ball. And then we left again and stopped to sleep. We always had to find a motel with a kitchenette because we had to cook dinner. If there was no kitchenette, we had to get our stove out of the car. … So we went to the Yukon with little trips here and there. I think we stopped in Regina to see Lorne’s son, David … It was an extraordinary trip. … We went to Vancouver to see our cousin. Then we crossed to Victoria to see the Butchart Gardens and what there is to be seen in Victoria. After that, we went to the Yukon. We drove up and it took three, maybe four days.

They drive to Dawson where they can find no traces whatsoever of the mythical cousin who never returned from the Gold Rush. But who cares! They have seen the Yukon and start to head for home, happy to have set foot in this historical part of the world.

The funniest story of the trip occurred on our way back, in the interior of B.C. when we stopped at Chetwynd, near Willston Lake. There are a lot of ranches around there. It was cattle drive time. We found a motel with a small room and a kitchenette. … So [one of the gossips] said, “We’ll go to the store and get fresh steaks and veggies and salad fixings.” So [Georgette and I] went to the store and as we left we went to the hotel because you could buy beer in hotels. We would buy six or seven pints to have some for tomorrow night. Then we went back to the motel and made supper. After supper, we said, “Do you want to come and see? The cowboys are all at the hotel.” And my father answered, “Well I’m not interested.” So the two gossips got dressed and off we went …

We walked into the hotel and the man seated us.
And of course, all the men there, some were Mexican and some were American, they were all cowboys and it was a Saturday night.

Clothilde and I laugh together imagining the four women concerned with proprieties, while seated at a table in a room full of happy, slightly tipsy cowboys who, leaning on the bar, look at them with lustful eyes and take the liberty of making slightly bawdy jokes.

So they started talking with us. They sent over a few beers for my sister and me. Then they sent gin to our mothers. I think our mothers were drinking gin. Then they started to auction off the two women (Marie-Louise and Claire-Hilda).

Marie-Louise is 73 years old and Claire-Hilda is 66. They are amused and slightly flattered in spite of themselves to be getting this attention. They let the game go on.

Yes, they auctioned off the two women. At the end my aunt won. It was a young bucko [who won] and he sent her a drink. That was the game. And it was funny because they were not insulting and they were having as much fun as we were.

So the return trip proceeds. They pass through Calgary again to visit a cousin, Melva, the daughter of Paul Labelle (Napoléon junior), Marie-Louise’s brother. From Regina onwards, they travel in pouring rain, which does not deter them from completing the round of cousins before returning home. They take Highway 11 going north, pass by Nipigon and go all the way to Kapuskasing where another cousin lives.
I wasn’t really watching the clock. The first thing I know, it is one o’clock in the morning when we arrive at the cousin’s house. He was a cousin on my grandfather’s side. And he had seven children.

I can only imagine the cousin’s astonishment to see five people land in unannounced at one o’clock in the morning. He wakes up his wife, “Darling, we’ve got company.”

So we slept there! The next day, we went to Cochrane to visit the father of my mother’s cousin, my uncle Louis. So we saw Louis and spent a day there. … Then we returned to Sudbury.

We were gone a month. Three weeks and five days, something like that. We travelled many miles, saw a lot of country, and had a lot of fun. Do you know that we don’t have any photos? Not one from the Yukon.

No photos, but certainly a wealth of pleasant memories in Marie-Louise’s mind.