Chapter Nine
1965 to 1970
Old Age, Humour and Tenderness

“The house with an old grandparent harbours a jewel.”

* Chinese proverb
A TIME TO RELAX

In 1965, the Mantha family moves again, this time to a large three-story duplex on Stewart Street at the corner of Charlotte. They rent one side and move into the other. Nanny is still living with Lorne on Larose Avenue and comes to visit them often, just as she did on Sweetland Avenue. The grandchildren are now adolescents, except for Lorne’s youngest, Cathy, who is only 6 years old. They are more independent and their activities gravitate around their friends.

Since Nanny has a little more time for herself, she joins the Good Companions, an organization for senior citizens.

It’s a senior citizens club kind of thing … and it was down on Bronson, just across from where the new War Museum is. … This was a community centre that she belonged to and maybe once a week she would go down there and they would play cards and just, you know, socialize. And every year they would have a grandchild day and she would bring me down to grandchild day and just see all of these seniors just glowing, you know, just so happy to have their grandchildren.¹

Orange earthen pot, circa 1972
She explores several artistic activities at the Good Companions’ Club. Her grandchildren still have some of the objects that she made there, among them an earthen pot and an engraved metal plate.

At Lorne’s house, she spends a lot of time with her granddaughter Cathy (S):

S: She didn’t go out much at all. Except for these trips to the Good Companions, she rarely went out. So she and I spent a lot of time together.

C: What would you do?

S: We would watch TV and … well, she painted a lot too.

Marie-Louise has come back to her first love. From the silk painting that she did during the late 1920s, she has now moved on to oil painting.

C: She never took formal lessons?

S: No.
C: Would she teach you to do it or let you play …
S: I would be quite happy to just sit and watch her.

Her paintings, in a somewhat naïve style, usually depict landscapes. But she also paints flowers with an innate sense of harmony and colour. She doesn’t hesitate to display her paintings and delights in giving them as presents to her children and grandchildren.
She has other hobbies such as reading. But since she never had the occasion to learn formally to read and write, this pastime remains occasional. She does read children’s books to her granddaughter, and leafs through magazines or Reader’s Digest, but she much prefers television.

She just loved Ed Sullivan and Laugh In. She enjoyed the comedy shows for sure. … She had a TV in her room and she was a bit more of a night owl than the rest of us were, and so she had an earphone and she would look at the TV and she would laugh and laugh at TV shows she was watching. And so this is my memory of her, sitting and laughing by herself with the TV and just having a great time.

ALWAYS KEEPING THE SECRET
Marie-Louise ages gracefully. Her silver hair accentuates the softness of her comely face. Her grandson Jean-Pierre tells me that, at this period, her most striking trait was her eyes. “It was her eyes, I remember, that were so warm. It was inviting.”

But the long hours of work and the troubles she has known throughout her life take a toll on her heart. One day while visiting her son Joe, she has a heart attack. She is transported by ambulance to the Sacré-Cœur Hospital in Hull where she is admitted under the name Marie-Louise Ray.

One day when Gertrude is at her bedside, a nun enters the room and, after introducing herself, asks Marie-Louise, “You wouldn’t be Marie-Louise Bouchard by any chance?”

To Gertrude’s great astonishment, Marie-Louise denies her maiden name. When the sister leaves, Gertrude asks her mother why she refused to admit that she was Marie-Louise Bouchard. She answers, “Leave it alone.”
To this day, Gertrude wonders who this nun was and how she had known her mother. Was she a native of Hanmer? Why did Marie-Louise insist on hiding her real name from her? Since she was registered under the name Marie-Louise Ray, we can surmise that she didn’t want to engage in a conversation that would have led to speak of her “marriage” and of her “husband.”

Once again, and in spite of all the years that have passed, her promise to Joseph to never speak of him to anyone has prevented her from establishing a relationship and has locked her up in an embarrassing silence.

REMINISCENCES OF LONG AGO

As she gets older, Marie-Louise finds herself thinking more and more about her childhood. Sometimes she feels the need to confide a little. So she talks about some distant memories surfacing in her mind: her life as a little girl in Hanmer, all the work she had to do in the house, and the trip her parents made from Les Escoumins to Hanmer.

My grandmother … spoke of Les Escoumins. … She spoke about the trip they had made when she was young … when they left Les Escoumins. … She spoke to me about that trip as if it had been a huge feat in those days. I guess her parents must have told her about it afterwards, you know. … But it appeared to me that she did not remember what Les Escoumins really was.

But such disclosures are brief and infrequent, because Marie-Louise jealously guards the doors on her past.
THE ‘BLOOMERS’

Nanny appreciates more than ever the moments of relaxation she can spend with her grandchildren. She maintains a close relationship with them, which says a lot about her innate sensitivity since, generally speaking, the relationship between grandchildren and grandparents tends to fade with adolescence. Her undeniable sense of humour astounds them sometimes, especially when she laughs about the minor misadventures happening to her.

She loved to laugh; she loved to play cards, and to enjoy herself. I remember going to Mass with her one Sunday. We lived in Sandy Hill and we walked along Laurier Avenue to get to Sacré-Coeur Church. So, half-way there, her bloomers fell down around her ankles. The elastic broke and so they fell down. She just picked them up and put them in her purse. And we laughed. We went to church. And she thought it was very amusing to attend Mass with a bare bum.

At that time, women wore girdles to flatten their stomach. And fashion dictated that over the girdle one would wear fairly wide underpants called bloomers to hide the girdle and preserve the feminine modesty. As Nanny sews her underwear, one might expect that after this minor adventure she would sew in elastic strong enough to hold back a rabid dog. But the girdle material is very slippery …

Mom asked me to go to the IGA with Nanny. As we were going down an aisle—and it was the middle of winter—her red flannelette bloomers fell down at her ankles. I was so embarrassed that I continued to walk pretending that I didn’t know her. [She laughs.]
After that, she caught up with me but she had just picked them up and put them in her bag.8

THE BRAID

Nanny finds ways to weave very personal ties with her grandchildren by making from time to time a discreet gesture that touches their heart.

L: When I was about 18 or 20, she gave me her hair. 
…I think I was going to a ball. … And she brought it in and said, “If you wish to wear it.” She had kept a beautiful braid that I wore for a few years. If I had a ball or a special occasion, the hairdresser would put it on me and would fix it. And I was so proud to wear my grandmother’s hair.

C: Was the hair auburn or very red?

L: Auburn, but quite copper. A true auburn. And very thick, you know.9

THIEVES

Not surprising that everyone in the family loves her. Everyone feel somewhat protective about her as she ages, and when a misfortune befalls her, they all take to the barricades.

Nanny is in the habit of taking the bus to get to Gertrude’s. One day as she walks toward the house after her bus ride, thieves attack her and steal her purse. I ask Gertrude how her mother had reacted:

C: She must have had a shock! And you must have had one, too.
G: Yes, yes. But in those days things like that didn’t happen very often. It was rather rare.
C: Did she recover quickly?
G: Oh yes, in fact I found that she was very tough.
C: She was not letting things get her down.
G: Oh no. Because when you think about everything she went through and that she was not discouraged. Really you know. I think I would have died, for sure.\[10\]
[We laugh together.]

The news dismays the whole family.

She was all black and blue! ... Everybody was so upset!\[11\]

How could anyone dare assault their Nanny? She is almost 78 years old. Who is coward enough to attack a woman of that age? Thankfully, she is not seriously wounded.

As for the purse, it surfaces the following spring under a melting snow bank, like a bad memory surfacing in the mind. It is empty.