

Foreword by katherena vermette

BEATRICE MOSIONIER



In Search of April Raintree

40th Anniversary Edition

*I am endlessly indebted to Beatrice Mosionier and April Raintree
for lighting the way to my own stories.*

—CHERIE DIMALINE, best-selling author of *The Marrow Thieves*

Praise for *In Search of April Raintree*

Every author has a list of books that pushed them to write, books that let them know they could tell their stories and that set the bar for them to tell them well. For so many of us, In Search of April Raintree tops that list. Harsh in places, but always honest and full of love, this groundbreaking novel does what community does—brings us home even through the dark, even when the way becomes obscured. I am endlessly indebted to Beatrice Mosionier and April Raintree for lighting the way to my own stories. Forty years after its publication, it is still inviting us to write and write well, to remain a community of stories and storytellers. The space that this book cleared and prepared for so many other writers is now populated with many voices, all celebrating that we get to share space with one of the guiding lights that brought us home.

—Cherie Dimaline, Governor General’s Award-winning author of *The Marrow Thieves*

As an Indigenous kid who wanted to be a writer, In Search of April Raintree not only showed me what was possible, but opened doors for me, and for other Indigenous writers, to do what we do today. It was the first book I read that spoke to the Indigenous experience, and it changed me for the better. This book remains a vitally important work within the landscape of Canadian literature, and an example of how we tell our stories, and why we should never stop.

—David A. Robertson, Governor General’s Award-winning author of *When We Were Alone*

Few books have impacted my life and my visions of myself as Beatrice Mosionier's In Search of April Raintree has. The book's bravery, detail, and beautiful story of strength and growth—truth in the face of lies of the worst kind—were and are one of the most important gifts I and other Indigenous people have needed for this generation. That book has moved us forward as a people and has been a light during a very dark time for all of us.

—Dr. Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair,
columnist for the *Winnipeg Free Press*

Reading Beatrice Mosionier's seminal novel was life changing. It was the first time I, as a young Indigenous woman, felt seen. Represented. Reflected. As we celebrate the fortieth anniversary of In Search of April Raintree, we must continue to raise, uplift, and amplify the voices of Indigenous women and girls, whose experiences, histories, and narratives have been systemically silenced and erased. Miigwech.

—Nahanni Fontaine, Manitoba NDP MLA
and MMIWG2S Families Advocate

In Search of April Raintree is one of the all-time great works of Indigenous literature, and it is still as vital and relevant today as it was forty years ago. For me personally, I will always remember In Search of April Raintree as the first novel I read that presented Métis experience in an authentic, gripping, and deeply moving way.

—Dr. Warren Cariou, professor in the
Department of English, Theatre, Film & Media
at the University of Manitoba

I first read In Search of April Raintree as a teenager. I was immediately pulled into this world that was so familiar, I could feel it in my blood memory. Because it was tender and brutal, authentic and unapologetic, heartbreaking and hopeful. Because an Indigenous woman wrote it. Because it was a story about Indigenous experience. Because it was a beautiful honouring of our survival and refusal to abandon our families, our cultures, our ceremonies. Beatrice Mosionier created magic for this brown girl and for brown girls everywhere.

—Rosanna Deerchild, host of CBC Radio
One's *Unreserved*

The first word in the novel In Search of April Raintree is “Memories.” I have a memory from decades ago of a visit with author Beatrice Mosionier, who handed me this manuscript with a request to help with some of the legal details of the story. In the end, this book—a true masterpiece in the history of all Indigenous literature—helped me. Like so many Indigenous people, this novel inspired me and called on me; it drove me to be a better lawyer, judge, and Anishinaabe person. I returned to it time and time again while working in the child welfare system, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Senate. Through the eyes of April, we are exposed to not only the deep and complicated struggles our people face but also the innate beauty and strength of Indigenous women, families, and communities who find paths of brilliance and solutions to colonialism every single day. I've often said that Indigenous people need heroes in our books and April Raintree is a hero for all of our people, for all time.

—The Honourable Murray Sinclair, CC, MSC
Retired Judge, Former Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation
Commission of Canada, Retired Senator

In Search *of* April Raintree

BEATRICE MOSIONIER

In Search
of April
Raintree

40TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

FOREWORD BY
KATHERENA VERMETTE

AFTERWORD BY
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I dedicate this work to *Democracy*.

She gave me the freedom to write—don't let anyone try to take *her* away. Exercise your right to vote, and vote with all your might.

—Beatrice Mosionier

CONTENT WARNING

This book includes scenes related to sexual assault, suicide, and child apprehension, which may be triggering for some readers.

If you need crisis support, or even just someone to talk to, call:
Hope for Wellness Helpline 1-855-242-3310 (Indigenous readers)
Wellness Together Canada 1-866-585-0445 or text WELLNESS
to 741741 (all readers)

FOREWORD

When I was a kid, I lived down the street from an old brick library, a perfect library. The kind with long wooden tables and walls of shelves and musty books and old card catalogues; I tried my best to read all those books. Like I'm talking I read Shakespeare in Grade 6. I didn't have to, but I read those stories because I thought they were "important" (and I'm not saying I understood them because I really don't think I did). I read all the thick (obviously super important) books. I read *Gone with the Wind* because it was the thickest on that shelf; I read *Wuthering Heights* because I heard about it in a movie. I read all the books the librarians (Bless them!) told me I should check out and all the ones I heard about in other books. So I'm telling you, I totally knew what I was talking about when it came to books, and yet I'd never found a book that was anything like what I knew or where I came from; there wasn't a book like that in the whole library. I didn't find anything like that until I discovered *In Search of April Raintree*.

Now, my life is not the same as April's, not at all, but she was such an important person to me because she was in a book and her story took place in my city! And she was one of my people! Like me, she didn't have money, and she didn't have much stuff, and she walked along the same streets that I did. Everywhere she went was familiar. Even the things she said were familiar. All in a real live book.

The thing is, and this is sad, but in all that reading I did, I never even expected a book to be about someone like me. I never thought

Winnipeg and Métis or other Indigenous people at all would ever be in a book, never mind an important one.

In Search of April Raintree (ISOAR) was very important. It was a revelation, not only for me but for so many of us. I remember hearing a story when it first came out in which someone was on a small plane going north, and every person on board had a copy of ISOAR. I don't know if that's true, but if it wasn't, it might as well have been. Everyone I knew read ISOAR, and everyone who didn't still knew what it was. (See? Very important.) It wasn't an easy read. It didn't make life look perfect or even make our lives seem all that great, but it was real. So real. That was the other revelation of it—it was like me, and it was real. Other books were real, or at least I thought they must be for some people, for the Scarlett O'Haras and Cathys and Heathcliffs of the world maybe. But April was real for me, too.

Again, it's sad, but I never thought a book would be real for me like that. This is what I think about first and most often when I think about diversity in representation and how much it matters. I think of that little kid whose mind was completely blown just because a small part of the world finally actually reflected them a little bit.

But that's not the only reason books like this matter. Just like I wasn't the only one profoundly affected and changed by ISOAR, we are all so hungry for stories about people not like us, too. Non-Indigenous folks, non-Métis, non-poor, non-like-me people need to know April's story too. I think non-Indigenous people are very hungry for Indigenous stories; I see it every day. People want to know and learn. When you read a story about someone like you after reading about a whole bunch of people who aren't like you, you

learn a profound truth—yes, we are all the same underneath, sure. I mean, we all know that, right? But then you read about someone else’s life, a life unlike yours, and suddenly you really understand. I think I always knew that because I’d always read about people not like me. So when I finally read about someone who actually was like me, I thought maybe that meant others might discover that I am like them, too. Maybe I am also important; maybe my story is also worth telling. Yeah, sure, it’s sad, but it’s also super important—I can’t tell you how much—for a little kid to learn they matter too, that they too could be “important.” That someone would want to know a story like mine.

Everyone wanted to know April’s story. At the time, it was one of the very few books out there about Indigenous people, never mind Métis people, never mind Winnipeg. Truly a trailblazer, *ISOAR* was one of the very first Indigenous books published (not that Indigenous writers weren’t writing; they just weren’t getting published that much), and Beatrice was the Auntie who had led the way. She saw the need for and interest in stories like hers and never doubted their importance. She told the story she wanted to see in the world, and when it was published, the world leaned in to listen. She made it for everyone—to show those who didn’t know what it was like, and to show those of us who did that our stories can and should be written, too.

I can’t thank her enough for that. Without her and April, I honestly don’t know what I would be doing now. No hyperbole. I was literally (Ha!) changed, and I am only one of many.

Maarsii, Tante
katherena vermette

1

MEMORIES. SOME MEMORIES are elusive, fleeting, like a butterfly that touches down and is free until it is caught. Others are haunting: you'd rather forget them, but they won't be forgotten. And some are always there. No matter where you are, they are there too. I always felt most of my memories were better avoided, but now I think it's best to go back in my life before I go forward. Last month, April 18th, I celebrated my twenty-fourth birthday. That's still young, but I feel so old.

My father, Henry Raintree, was of mixed blood; a little of this, a little of that, and a whole lot of Indian. My sister, Cheryl, who was eighteen months younger than me, had inherited his looks: black hair, dark brown eyes that turned black when angry, and brown skin. There was no doubt they were both of Indian ancestry. My mother, Alice, on the other hand, was part Irish and part Ojibway. Like her, I had pale skin, not that it made any difference when we were living together as a family.

We lived in Norway House, a small northern Manitoba town, before my father contracted tuberculosis. Then we moved to

Winnipeg. I used to hear him talk about TB and how it had caused him to lose everything he had worked for. Both my Mom and Dad took medicine, and I always thought it was because of TB. Although we moved from one rundown house to another, I remember only one, on Jarvis Avenue. And of course, we were always on welfare. I knew that from the way my Dad used to talk. Sometimes he would put himself down, and sometimes he counted the days till he could walk down to the place where they gave out cheques and food stamps.

It seemed to me that after the welfare-cheque days would come the medicine days. That was when my parents would take a lot of medicine, and it always changed them. Mom, who was usually quiet and calm, would talk and laugh in a loud, obnoxious way, and Dad, who already talked and laughed a lot, just got clumsier. The times they took the medicine the most were the times when many other grown-ups would come over and drink it with them. To avoid these people, I would take Cheryl into our tiny bedroom, close the door, and put my box of old, rusted toys in front of it. Besides the aunties and uncles out there, there were strange men, and they would start yelling, and sometimes they would fight, right in our small house. I would lie on my cot, listening to them knocking things over and bumping into walls. Sometimes they would crash into our door and I would grow even more petrified, even though I knew Mom and Dad were out there with them. It always took a long time before I could get to sleep.

There were days when the aunties and uncles would bring their own children. I didn't much like their children either, for they were sullen and cranky and wouldn't talk or play with us, or else they were aggressive bullies who only wanted to fight us. Usually, their faces were dirty, their noses were runny, and I was sure they had

done *it* in their pants because they smelled terrible. If they had to stay the night, I remember I would put our blankets on the floor for them, stubbornly refusing to share our cot with them. One time Mom had let a little girl sleep with us, and during the night she had wet the bed. It had been a long time before the smell went away.

My mother didn't always drink that medicine, not as much as my father did, and those were the times that she would clean the house, bake, and do the laundry and sewing. If she was really happy, she would sing us songs, and at night, she would rock Cheryl to sleep. But that was one kind of happiness that didn't come often enough for me. To prolong that mood in her, I would help her with everything, chattering away in desperation, lest my own silences would push her back into her normal remoteness. My first cause for vanity was that, out of all the houses of the people we knew, my mother kept the cleanest house (except for those mornings after the medicine days). She would tell her friends that it was because she was raised in a residential school and then worked as a housekeeper for the priest in her hometown.

Cheryl and I always woke up before our parents, so I would tend to Cheryl's needs. I would feed her whatever was available, then wash her, and dress her in clean clothes. Weather permitting, we would then go off to the park, which was a long walk, especially on hot summer days. Our daily routine was dictated by our hunger pangs and by daylight. Darkness brought out the boogeymen, and Dad told us what they did to little children. I liked all of Dad's stories, even the scary ones, because I knew that Cheryl and I were always safe in the house.

It was very rare when Mom would go downtown to the department stores where they had ride-on stairs. Mom didn't like going

shopping. I guess it was because sometimes people were rude to her. When that happened, Mom would get a hurt look in her eyes and act apologetic. On one particular day, I didn't notice any of that, because that day I saw a Black person for the first time. I thought he was a boogeyman at first and wondered how come he wandered around so easily, as if nothing was wrong. I stared at him, and he stopped at the watch counter. Since Mom and Cheryl were nearby and there were a lot of other people close enough, I went over to him. My voice was very shaky, but I asked, "Mr. Boogeyman, what do you do with the children you catch?"

"What's that?" His voice seemed to rumble from deep within him, and when he turned to look at me, I thought he had the kindest eyes I'd ever seen. Maybe, though, they changed at night.

No, he couldn't be bad. "Nothing," I said, and walked back to my mother's side.

When winter came, we didn't go to the park anymore. There was plenty to do with the snow around our house. Sometimes Mom would come out and help us build our snowmen and our snow houses.

One December, we all went downtown to watch the Santa Claus Parade. That was such a thrilling, magical day for me. After that, we went to visit an aunt and uncle where Cheryl and I had a glorious old time feasting on cake, fruit, and hot chocolate. Then we walked home. Dad threw snowballs at Mom for a bit before he carried sleepy-eyed Cheryl in his arms. I was enchanted by all the coloured Christmas lights and the decorations in the store windows. I think that was the best day ever, because Mom and Dad laughed for real.

Not long after that, many people came to our house to drink the medicine, and in the beginning, they all sounded cheerful and happy. But later, they started their yelling, and even the women were

angrily shouting. One woman was loudly wailing, and it sounded like she'd gotten smacked a few times.

In the middle of the night when everything had been quiet for a while, I got up to go to the toilet. People were sprawled all over the place, sleeping and snoring. One man, though, who was half-sitting up against a wall, grumbled and shifted, and I saw that his pants were open. I knew that I should hurry, but I just stood there watching as he played around with his thing. Then he peed right in my direction. That made me move back out of the room. I went through the kitchen, and there was my Dad sleeping on the bare floor, still in his clothes. I wondered why, so I went to their bedroom. When I put the light switch on, I saw my mother. She was bare-naked and kissing a strange man. I guess she realized that someone was in the room, and she sat up while trying to hide her nakedness. She looked scared, but when she saw that it was only me, she hissed at me, "Get out of here!"

I forgot about having to go to the toilet and went back to my bed. I tried to figure everything out, but I couldn't.

A few days later, I was sitting on my Dad's lap and Mom was doing the laundry. A woman came to visit, but then it became an argument. She was shouting terrible names, and she began to push my mother around. Meanwhile, Dad just watched them and laughed, and even egged them on. To me this was all so confusing. I just knew that Mom shouldn't have kissed someone else; my Dad shouldn't have slept on the floor; that old man shouldn't have played with himself and then peed on the floor; and right now, Dad ought to be trying to protect Mom, not finding the whole thing amusing. I squirmed off Dad's lap, walked over to that woman, and kicked her as hard as I could, yelling for her to leave Mom alone. I heard Dad laughing even louder. But it worked, because the strange woman left.

That winter, I noticed that my Mom was getting fatter and fatter. When winter was finished, my Mom got so sick from being fat that she had to go away to the hospital. One of our aunties came to stay with us. She and Dad would sit around joking and drinking their medicine. I used to wonder how come they all drank this medicine, yet no one ever got better. Another thing: they couldn't all be sick like Mom and Dad, could they? So one evening while Dad and Auntie Eva were busy playing cards, I picked up his glass and took a quick swallow before he could stop me. Ugh! It burned my mouth and my throat and made me cough and choke. I spit it out as fast as I could. It was purely awful, and I was even more puzzled as to why they all seemed to enjoy taking it. I felt so sorry for them and I was real glad I wasn't sick.

When my mother came back, she wasn't as fat as when she left. The snow was all gone too. We celebrated my sixth birthday and one of my presents was a book. I took my book with me everywhere. There was talk of my going to school in the fall. I didn't know what reading and printing were like, but I was very curious about them. I looked forward to school. I promised Cheryl I would teach her reading and printing as soon as I knew how. In the meantime, I pretended to read to her, and as I turned the pages of my book like Mom did, I would make up stories to match the pictures in the book.

A few weeks later, we came home from a day's ramblings to find a real, live baby in Mom's arms. Mom was rocking it and singing a soft melody to it. I asked her, "Where did it come from?"

"The hospital. She was very sick. She's your new little sister, Anna."

"Will she have to take that medicine? It tastes awful," I said, pitying the baby for being sick.

“No, she drinks milk. The nurse came this morning and helped me prepare some,” Mom answered. I knew from the way she talked that she hadn’t taken any medicine so far. I hoped that, from now on, she wouldn’t have to take it anymore. I studied the baby for a while. It was so tiny and wrinkled. I decided I’d much rather play with Cheryl.

That summer, Cheryl and I spent whole days at the park. I would make us sandwiches of bread and lard so we wouldn’t have to walk back home in the middle of the day. That’s when it seemed the hottest. We played on the swings and slides and in the sandbox, as long as they weren’t being used by the other children. We would build sandcastles and install caterpillars and ladybugs in them. If the other children were there, we would stay apart from them and watch the man mow the park grass, enjoying the smell of the fresh-cut lawns, and the sound from the motor of the lawn mower. Sometimes the droning noise lulled Cheryl to sleep, and I would sit by her to wait for her to wake up.

Two different groups of children went to the park. One group was the brown-skinned children who looked like Cheryl in most ways. Some of them even came over to our house with their parents, but they were dirty-looking and they dressed in real raggedy clothes. I didn’t care to play with them at all. The other group was white-skinned, and I used to envy them, especially the girls with blonde hair and blue eyes. They seemed so clean and fresh, and reminded me of flowers I had seen. Some of them were freckled, but they didn’t seem to mind. I imagined they were very rich and lived in big, beautiful houses, and there was so much I wondered about them. But they didn’t care to play with Cheryl and me. They called us names and bullied us.

We were ignored completely only when both groups were at the park. Then they were busy yelling names at each other. I always thought that the white-skinned group had the upper hand in name-calling. Of course, I didn't know what "Jew" or the other names meant. Cheryl was too young to realize anything, and she was usually happy-go-lucky.

Our free, idle days with our family came to an end one summer afternoon. We came home, and there were some cars in front of our house. One had flashing red lights on it, and I knew it was a police car. When we entered the house, Mom was sitting at the table, openly weeping, right in front of all these strange people. Empty medicine bottles were on the small counter and the table, but I couldn't figure out why the four people were there. A nice-smelling woman knelt down to talk to me.

"My name is Mrs. Grey. I bet you're April, aren't you? And this little girl must be Cheryl." She put her hand on Cheryl's head in a friendly gesture, but I didn't trust her.

I nodded that we were April and Cheryl, but I kept my eyes on my mother. Finally I asked, "Why is Mom crying? Did you hurt her?"

"No, dear. Your mother is ill and she won't be able to take care of you anymore. Would you like to go for a car ride?" the woman asked.

My eyes lit up with interest. We'd been in a taxi a few times and it had been a lot of fun. But then I thought of Baby Anna. I looked around for her. "Where's Anna?"

"Anna's sick," the woman answered. "She's gone to the hospital. Don't worry, we'll take you for a ride to a nice, clean place. You and Cheryl, okay?"

That was not okay. I wanted to stay. "We can stay with Daddy. He will take care of us. You can go away now," I said. It was all settled.

But Mrs. Grey said in a gentle voice, "I'm afraid not, honey. We have to take you and Cheryl with us. Maybe if your Mommy and Daddy get well enough, you can come to live with them again."

The man who was with Mrs. Grey had gone to our bedroom to get all our things. He came back with a box. I became more worried, and I looked from the woman to the man, then over to one policeman who was looking around, then to the other who was writing in a notepad. I finally looked back at my Mom for reassurance. She didn't look at me, but I said in a very definite manner, "No, we'd better stay here."

I was hoping Dad would walk in. He would make them all go away. He would make everything right.

The man with the box leaned over and whispered something to my mother. She forced herself to stop sobbing, then slowly got up and came over to us. I could see that she was struggling to maintain control.

"April, I want you and Cheryl to go with these people. It will only be for a little while. Right now, Daddy and me, well, we can't take care of you. You'll be all right. You be good girls, for me. I'm sorry . . ."

She couldn't say anything more because she started crying again. I didn't like to see her this way, especially in front of these people. She hugged us, and that's when I started crying, too. I kind of knew that she was really saying goodbye to us, but I was determined that we were not going to be taken away. I clung to my Mom as tight as I could. They wouldn't be able to pull me away from her, and then they would leave. I expected Mom to do the same. But she didn't. She pushed me away. Into their grasping hands. I couldn't believe it. Frantically, I screamed, "Mommy, please don't make us go. Please, Mommy. We want to stay with you. Please don't make us go. Oh, Mom, don't!"

I tried hard to put everything into my voice, sure that they would all come to their senses and leave us be. There were a lot of grown-up things I didn't understand that day. My mother should have fought with her life to keep us with her. Instead, she had handed us over. It didn't make any sense to me.

The car door slammed shut on us.

"Please, don't make us go," I said in a subdued, quiet voice, knowing at the same time that I was wasting my breath. I gripped Cheryl's hand, and we set off into the unknown. We were both crying, and ignored the soothing voices from the strangers in front.

How could Mom do this to us? What was going to happen to us? Well, at least I still had Cheryl. I thought this to myself over and over again. Cheryl kept crying, although I'm not sure she really knew why. She loved car rides, but if I was crying, I'm sure she felt she ought to be crying too.

We were taken to an orphanage. When we got there, Cheryl and I were hungry and exhausted. Inside the large building, all the walls were painted a dismal green. The sounds we made echoed down the long, high-ceilinged corridors. Then this strange person came out of a room to greet us.

She was dressed in black from head to foot, except for some stiff white cardboard around her neck and face. She had chains dangling around her waist. She said her name was Mother Superior and she had been expecting us. My eyes widened in fear. It was even worse than I had imagined. We were being handed over to the boogeyman for sure! When Mrs. Grey and the man said goodbye and turned to leave, I wanted to go with them, but I was too scared to ask.

Mother Superior took us into another room at the far end of the corridor. Here, another woman, dressed the same way, undressed us and bathed us. She looked through our hair: for bugs, she told us. I thought that was pretty silly, because I knew that bugs lived in trees and grass, not in people's hair. Of course, I didn't say anything, even when she started cutting off my long hair.

I was thinking that this was like the hen my mother had gotten once. She had plucked it clean, and later we ate it. I sat there, wondering if that was now to be our fate, wondering how I could put a stop to this. Then the woman told me she was finished, and I was relieved to find that I still had some hair left. I watched her cut Cheryl's hair, and reasoned that if she was taking the trouble to cut straight, then we had nothing to fear. Between yawns, Cheryl complained that she was hungry, so afterward, we were taken to a large kitchen and fed some of the day's leftovers. When we finished eating, we were taken to the infirmary and put to bed. It felt as if we were all alone in that pitch-black space. During the night, Cheryl groped her way to my bed and crawled in with me.

That was the last night we'd share the same bed, or be really close, for a long time. The next day, Cheryl was placed with a group of four-year-olds and under.

I found out from the other children that the women were called "nuns" and that they were very strict, at least the ones who tended to my group. I'd seen the ones who looked after the younger children smile and laugh, but whenever I saw Mother Superior, she always seemed so unruffled, always dignified and emotionless. The ones who took turns looking after us gave us constant orders, and that made my head spin. One would want us to hurry with this and

that, and another would scold us for hurrying—like at mealtimes, when I was told, “Don’t gulp your food down like a little animal.”

Eventually, I figured out what the different nuns wanted and avoided many scoldings. My parents had never strapped us, and I’d never had to think about whether I was bad or good. I feared being ridiculed in front of the other children; I feared getting the strap; I feared even a harsh word. When I was quietly playing with some toy and somebody else wanted it, I simply handed it over. I longed to go over to Cheryl and talk and play with her, but I never dared cross that invisible boundary.

Most of my misery, however, was caused by the separation from my parents. I was positive that they would come for Cheryl and me. I constantly watched the doorways and looked out front-room windows, always watching, always waiting, in expectation of their appearance. Sure enough, one day I saw my Dad out there, looking up at the building. I waved to him and wondered why he didn’t come to the door, why he just stood there, looking sad. I turned from the window and saw that the attending nun was busy scolding a boy, so I left the room and went to look for Cheryl. I found her down the hall in another room. I looked in to see where the nun was, and saw that her back was turned to Cheryl and the door. I tiptoed in and took hold of Cheryl’s hand, whispering for her to stay quiet. I led her down to the front doors, but we couldn’t open them. They were locked. I didn’t know of any other doors except for the ones that led to the play yard at the back, but it was all fenced in. I left Cheryl there and raced back to the nearest empty room facing the front. I tried to call to Dad, but he couldn’t hear me through the thick windows. He couldn’t even see me. He was looking down at the ground, and he was turning away.

“No, no, Daddy, don’t go away! Please don’t leave us here! Please, Daddy!” I pounded the window with my fists, trying desperately to get his attention, but he kept walking further and further away. When I couldn’t see him anymore, I just sank to the floor in defeat, hot tears blurring my vision. I sat there and sobbed, for we had been so close to going home again.

“What are you doing in here?!” the nun from my room bellowed, making me jump. “Don’t you know what a fright you gave me, disappearing like that? You get back into the playroom. And quit that snivelling.” Then she asked why Cheryl was at the front and what did I intend on doing. I wouldn’t tell her anything, so she gave me the strap and some warnings. That strap didn’t hurt nearly as much as watching helplessly while my Dad walked away.

A few days later, I woke up feeling ill. My head hurt, my body ached, and I felt dizzy. When I sat at the breakfast table and saw the already-unappetizing porridge, I knew that I wouldn’t be able to eat it. I tried to explain to the nun at our table, but she merely looked down at me and said in a crisp voice, “You will eat your breakfast.”

I made the attempt, but every swallow I forced down pushed its way back up. Tears had come to my eyes, and I finally begged, “Could I please be excused?”

The nun responded in exasperation. “You will stay right there until you are finished. Do you understand?”

To my horror, I threw up just then. Instead of getting heck, though, I was taken to the infirmary room. I was bathed and put to bed, and by then, I was feverish. When I slept, I dreamt I was somewhere near home, but I couldn’t find our house. I was very hot, and I walked and walked, but our house was no longer where it should have been. I woke up and called for Mom and Dad.

The next time I went to sleep, I dreamt my parents were on the other side of a large, bottomless hole, and I had to edge my way slowly and carefully around the hole to get over to them. But when I got there, they were back over where I had started from. At last, I dreamt that I was finally running toward them and there was nothing around that could stop me. They even had Cheryl with them. I felt such relief, such happiness! Just as I was about to jump into their outstretched arms, I glanced up at their faces again. Their faces had changed. They weren't my parents; they were the two social workers who had taken us away in the first place.

Meanwhile, my temperature was rising, and the nurse decided I'd better be taken to the hospital. My dreams continued in the hospital. I was always on the verge of reuniting with my parents, but always ended up thwarted by something beyond my control.

When I was awake, a new kind of terror came to me. I guess it was delirious imaginings, but I would see this huge, white, doughy thing, kind of like a dumpling, and it would come at me, nearer and nearer and nearer. It would always stop just in front of me, and I felt that if it ever touched me, it would engulf me, and that would be the end of me. Sometimes, its huge bulk would whiz around my head, back and forth in front of me. I was always scared it would bang into me, but I couldn't duck it or anything. It didn't matter if my eyes were open or closed: I could see it there, and it seemed to know I was scared of it. I remained in the hospital for about a week before the fever broke and the dreams became less intense.

2

I WAS GLAD TO GET BACK to the orphanage because I was looking forward to seeing Cheryl. A new social worker had been assigned to me. Her name was Mrs. Semple. She told me she would find a home for Cheryl and me together. Or maybe she told me she would try, but I didn't understand that. When I found out that Cheryl was no longer at the orphanage, I thought she had already gone to our new home. I wondered how come I wasn't sent there too. But the day soon arrived when Mrs. Semple came for me. She said she was taking me to the Dion family. I was really excited but I pretended nonchalance. I figured if the social workers knew how much I wanted to move with Cheryl, they might take me to another place, or else leave me at the orphanage.

When we arrived, I jumped out of the car, looking for Cheryl, wondering why she wasn't outside waiting for me. The front door was opened by a pleasant-looking lady. I walked in, looked around, and asked, "Where's Cheryl?"

Mrs. Semple realized then that I had misunderstood her, and she tried her best to explain to me, but I wouldn't listen. She assured

me, “Don’t worry about Cheryl. She’ll be well taken care of in her new home.”

“But I can take care of Cheryl,” I said indignantly. “I want my sister.”

“April, you’ll be going to school now. So don’t make a fuss.” Mrs. Semple had a hint of exasperation in her voice.

Mrs. Dion, my new foster mother, said, “Why don’t you come into the kitchen, April? I’ve got some milk and cookies waiting for you.” For some reason, she reminded me of my mother. Obediently, I followed her and sat at the table. The two women went back into the living room, leaving me there alone. My eyes were stinging as I took a bite of an oatmeal cookie. The tears spilled over and rolled down my cheeks. I was so sad, so lonely, so confused. Why was all this happening?

St. Albert was a small French-Catholic town south of Winnipeg. The Dions lived on the outskirts, not far from the Red River. It was September 9, 1955, when I moved there, and the three Dion children were into their fourth day at school. Usually they came home for lunch, but on this day it had been raining quite heavily, and they had been allowed to take their lunches to school. It was midmorning when I arrived, and I spent most of that day moping around the house, fretting over Cheryl.

In the afternoon, Mrs. Dion turned on the television set for me. I’d never seen one before, and I sat in front of it transfixed. I was still sitting there when the Dion children came home. The oldest was Guy, who was twelve. Then there was Nicole, whose room I would be sharing. She was ten, and the youngest was seven-year-old Pierre. They were all friendly and polite, and only Pierre asked about my hair, which was still ridiculously short. Of course, I was

very shy, and I couldn't look them in the eye. They reminded me of the rich white kids in the park, so I was amazed at their friendliness.

I had come on a Friday. So the next day, I got up at eight with everybody else, had breakfast, then waited for Nicole to finish her Saturday chores. Meanwhile, Guy swept out the garage, washed the car, and collected all the garbage. When they were finished, we all went to the vegetable garden to do some weeding. Pierre and I carried the boxes of weeds over to a pile that was to be burned. We stopped for lunch, which Mrs. Dion brought outside for us. When we finished, some other kids came over, and we all played dodge ball. By the end of that day, I had forgotten how lonely I was.

The next day, when we got up, Mrs. Dion came into our bedroom and got out a real nice dress for me from the closet. She told me it had been Nicole's. I saw that there were some more nice clothes for me, and I was very happy. I thought now I was rich too, just like those other white kids.

We went to Mass that morning. I didn't like it. I was fidgety from having to stay still for so long. But after Mass, we had a nice, big Sunday dinner. When the dishes were done, we all piled into the car to go on one of Mr. Dion's excursions to find plants to bring back to his gardens. On these trips, Mr. Dion would tell us about the trees and the plants and the wildlife that lived in the forests. Of course, I didn't learn much on that first trip. I was excited about the adventure and explored things by myself.

Monday was my first day of school. Mrs. Dion came with me that day, and the others rode their bikes. I was scared and excited at the same time. When I was introduced to the rest of the class, I was so shy I couldn't look at any of the other children. All I knew was that there must have been at least a hundred kids in that classroom.

By the end of that first week, a few of the girls had deemed me acceptable enough to take possession of me. That is, they made it clear to the others that they were going to show me the ropes. At recess times, we played hopscotch or we skipped rope. Although I found them bossy, even haughty, I was very grateful for their acceptance.

I learned that I had been baptized into the Roman Catholic faith when I was a baby. Therefore, I had to study catechism to prepare for my First Communion in the springtime. Since the majority of the students were also Catholics, we had catechism classes every day at school. Every evening, I was obliged to learn my prayers in French, so when they were said at church I would be able to say them too. I memorized all the Acts, and there were a lot of them: the Act of Love, the Act of Charity, the Act of Faith, the Act of Penance. I was allowed to learn the prayer for the confession in English, because later I would be telling the priest my sins in English. I also learned the answers to all the questions in my manual, and there were a lot of things in it that puzzled me. Was it possible that my parents had committed a lot of mortal sins because they had never gone to Mass on Sundays? That meant they would go to hell when they died. If so, I didn't think that I'd want to go to heaven so much, after all. Another thing was that the Church was infallible, never to be questioned, but I couldn't help it—nor could I ask anyone else my questions about it, for fear they would know that I, April Raintree, had sinned.

By October, all the vegetables and crabapples had been canned, and Mr. Dion had made his last trips to get new plants for his gardens. I had settled in at school, and I had found that this home could be as safe and secure as the tiny one on Jarvis Avenue. Sometimes, when it was windy, cold, and grey outside, I even enjoyed the

cozy feeling of being with a family. At the same time, I still yearned to be with my own.

Back then, there were a lot of good shows on television. It made me wish for adventure, and also for pets just like the ones on TV. First, there was Tornado, Zorro's black stallion. Then there was Rin Tin Tin, a big German shepherd dog. And, of course, Lassie. I wanted them all. When I grew up, I would have German shepherds and collies, black stallions and white stallions, and palominos too! I spent many church-time hours thinking what it was going to be like.

By November, my hair had grown long enough that the children in school who had teased me about it stopped. Mrs. Dion told me I could grow it long if I wanted to. But even better than that, she told me that I would be going to visit Cheryl and my parents at the Children's Aid office. I circled the date on the calendar, then waited with impatience and excitement. When the day finally arrived and Mrs. Semple came to pick me up, I suddenly remembered those horrible dreams. I was very quiet on the trip to Winnipeg. What if something happened? What if Mom and Dad got too sick and couldn't come? What if Cheryl couldn't come?

"Why the glum face, April? Aren't you glad you'll be seeing your parents and sister again?" Mrs. Semple asked me.

"Oh yes!" I almost shouted, fearful that Mrs. Semple would turn the car around, and it would end up being me who didn't make it.

I was the first one there, and I was taken to one of the small sitting rooms down the hall. Mrs. Semple showed me some books and toys with which I could occupy myself while I waited. Then she left, shutting the door behind her. I chose to sit on the edge of the chair, and I stared real hard at the closed door, wishing with all my

might that the next time it opened, there would be Dad, Mom, and Cheryl. I could see movements going back and forth through the thick frosted windows. What if they all went to the wrong room? Maybe I should wait in the front waiting room. Better yet, maybe I should wait downstairs at the front entrance. I settled for opening the door a crack and peering out. When I saw someone approaching, I shut the door quickly and went back to the chair. The door opened, and in walked Cheryl, followed by her worker, Miss Turner.

When Cheryl saw me, her face lit up, and she screamed, "Apple! Apple!" I was just as happy to see her and, for a moment, forgot my fears that Mom and Dad might not make it.

"Hi, Cheryl. I got a present for you. Mrs. Dion gave it to me to give to you." I presented the gift to her, and she tore off all the wrapping and held up a black-and-white teddy bear.

"Has he got a name, Apple?"

I nodded and said, "Andy Pandy. Do you like that name?"

"Uh-huh. I like Andy Pandy. I don't got a present for you, Apple. But you could have this." Cheryl put her hand in her pocket and pulled it out, her chubby little fist clutching something. She opened up her hand and offered me a brass button that had obviously come off her coat.

Miss Turner and I both laughed; then I said, "It's not my birthday, Cheryl. Don't you remember having a cake for your birthday?"

"I had lots of cake," Cheryl answered, moving the arms of Andy Pandy.

"Why don't you girls take off your coats. I'll be back as soon as your mother and father come." I helped Cheryl take off her coat, then took off my own. While I asked Cheryl questions, I kept my eyes on the door.

“What’s your new home like? Mrs. Semple told me you live with the MacAdams. Are they nice?”

“Oh, yes. We have lots of good things to eat. There’s lots of other boys and girls there. And I got my own bed. At night, Mrs. MacAdams reads us stories. But no one reads good stories like you, Apple. Cindy always reads the same story. You used to read me lots of different stories.”

“I’m going to school now and I’m learning to read and print for real. Pretty soon, I’m going to have a confirmation. Right now, I have to learn a lot of prayers in French.”

“What’s French?”

“French is . . . well, it’s not English. We talk in English. And the Dions talk in English a lot but they probably think in French. Do you go to Mass on Sundays, Cheryl?”

“Yes. I don’t like going to Mass, Apple. We got to behave and not play. Mrs. MacAdams said so. Cindy was bad in church, so Mrs. MacAdams made her sit in a corner and she couldn’t have dessert. But I took her some cake to eat when she was sitting there.”

I was laughing when the door opened again, and this time Mom and Dad entered. I ran into my mother’s arms while Dad picked Cheryl up and twirled her around the room. Then I noticed the tears in Mom’s eyes.

“Oh, Mommy, did I hurt you?” I remembered that she was sick.

“No, April, I’m just so happy to see you again.”

“See what we brought you?” Dad said, after he had hugged me. He had brought some doughnuts and milk and some candies for us to take home.

“See what Apple got me?” Cheryl said, holding up her teddy bear. “His name is Andy Pandey. He’s going to be my friend now.”

“So, you’re five years old. Happy birthday, Cheryl. My baby girl is growing up fast. And we brought you a present, too,” Dad said to her. He nudged Mom to open her purse and she brought out a tiny leather purse with beadwork on it. Cheryl was delighted. Then she asked, “Could we come home now?”

We all suddenly became silent, and I looked, hopefully, at each of them. But Mom said very softly, “I’m sorry, my babies, but we can’t take you back yet. Soon, maybe.”

To change the subject, Dad said to me, “So, April, you’re in grade one now, eh? How do you like your school?” I realized he wasn’t all that interested, but I told him anyway. I didn’t tell him how much I liked the Dions and liked living there, because I felt that would hurt their feelings. Besides, going back home with them was my first choice.

We had our snack and talked some more. Cheryl talked the most, because she liked to talk. Too soon, though, Cheryl’s worker returned to say it was time to leave. As I was getting my coat on, I felt total despair. I didn’t want to leave Mom, Dad, and Cheryl again. I kissed and hugged my Mom, then my Dad. I pleaded with him, “Please take us home with you. Please, Daddy?”

“April, we just can’t do that. We want to, but we can’t.”

“Why not, Daddy?”

“Look, you’re making your mother cry, and you’re going to make Cheryl cry. If it was up to us, you would never have left home. But this isn’t up to us, and you can’t come home with us. I’m sorry.”

I felt defeated. My shoulders slumped inside my heavy coat. I walked out of the room, my head down. I didn’t want anyone to see that my eyes were wet. Then I remembered I hadn’t even said

goodbye to Cheryl. I ran back and kissed and hugged her, and shot one last pleading glance at our parents. I knew it was of no use.

I had to wait a bit for Mrs. Semple. By then, the rest of my family had left. As we were going down the road, I saw my parents up ahead. Dad had his arm around Mom's shoulders. I wondered if they still lived in the house on Jarvis. They looked so much like they loved each other. It gave me a good feeling to see them like that. At least they were together; they had each other. As we passed by, I waved to them, excited that I was seeing them again in such a short time. They both smiled and waved back to me.

We drove further and further away from them, and when I could no longer see them from the rear window, I became sad again. I just wanted to cry, but I couldn't, not in front of Mrs. Semple. I figured that if I did cry, she wouldn't let me see them again. I answered "yes" or "no" whenever she asked me something, because I knew my voice would give me away. When we got to the Dions', Mrs. Semple explained to Mrs. Dion that I would be moody for a while because of the family visit, but not to coddle me or I would carry on like this after every family visit. I didn't much like Mrs. Semple for saying that. How would she feel? I went off to my bedroom and was glad that Nicole wasn't there. I felt the same as when I first came to the Dions.

A little later, Mrs. Dion came into my room and asked me in a gentle, coddling voice, "April, do you want to come out for supper? It'll be ready in a few minutes."

"I'm not hungry," I said listlessly.

"I know how you must feel. But if you eat something, you'll feel much better. How about if I brought a plate in for you? Nicole can

do her homework in the kitchen tonight.” Mrs. Dion patted me on the arm and left.

I ate all the food on my plate that night, knowing it would make Mrs. Dion happy. When I finished, I took my plate and glass into the kitchen. The Dions were all sitting at the table having their meal. I felt shy and timid again. I felt like an outsider. I felt that I didn’t belong to this family—they were being nice to me, that’s all—and I did have my own real family. I wondered again how long it would be before I could go home.

“Are you feeling any better, April?” Mrs. Dion later came in to ask me.

“Yes,” I replied. I had been half lying and sitting, so I sat up properly on the edge of the bed. Mrs. Dion sat next to me. I asked, “Mrs. Dion, why can’t I be with my Mom and Dad?”

“You poor angel. It must be so hard on you.” Mrs. Dion put her arm around my shoulders.

“I want to be with my Mom and Dad. I want to be with Cheryl.” I tried hard not to cry, but I felt so sorry for myself that the sobs and tears broke loose. Mrs. Dion hugged me to her and rocked me back and forth. She tried to explain. “Honey, sometimes we can’t have everything we want. Believe me, living here with us is what’s best for you right now. I know it’s hard to understand that. You just have to trust God’s wisdom.”

“Mom and Dad say they’re sick. They say when they’re better, then we can go home to them. But they used to take a lot of medicine before, and it never made them any better. So, will they ever get better? Will they?” I looked up at her face. “They never will take us home with them, will they?”

“Honey, that medicine your Mom and Dad take does make them feel better, but not for long and not in the right way. Someday you’ll understand. For now, just keep loving them and praying for them. And try to be happy with us. We all care for you very much, April.”

“I know. It’s just that . . . I belong to my Mom and Dad.”

“That’s true, April.” Mrs. Dion gave me a big hug and then stood up. “Come and join us for the rosary now. Tonight we’ll say it for your family.”

I did feel a whole lot better, but I wondered about the mysterious medicine.

My first Christmas with the Dions was the most memorable, because the holiday had been celebrated so differently when I was with my family. We went to bed right after supper, but of course we couldn’t get to sleep for a long time. Then Mrs. Dion came to wake us up so we could go to the midnight Mass.

As we walked to church it was snowing, but it wasn’t cold. The snow shone like a million sparkling diamonds. The Mass seemed endless that night, but relief was provided by the choir singing Christmas hymns. After it was over, we went back home and gathered in the living room to open all the presents. That’s what stood out for me: all those presents. I got a set of books, a doll, puzzles, and games, and I couldn’t decide which present to play with first. In the kitchen, Mrs. Dion had set out the best dishes, and all the baking she had been doing was displayed. By the time we had eaten, it was almost four in the morning!

It wasn’t that long after Christmas that I received my very first letter from Cheryl. I was amazed that she could print, and she

wasn't even in school or anything. There were spelling mistakes and some of the letters were reversed, but I could make out exactly what she meant.

January 5, 1956

Dear Apple,

How ar you? Mrs. Madams tole me to ast that. I got lots a presnts. A dol and sum books of my very own an sum puzles an gams to play with Cindy an Jeff an Fern an some craons an a colring book. Wen they is at scool I colr an lok at my boks. I am lerning to reed an print an count an Mrs. Madams says I is fast lerner. I wish I was going to scool. Jeff is bad boy. I is good. I is good girl like Dady tole me. I mis you, Apple. I mis Momy an Dady.

luv,

Cheryl Raintree

p.s. I had to ast how to spel sum werds.

I had never written a letter, but I sure learned how to write one that day! Nicole helped me write it, and I made sure that my letter was a little bit longer than Cheryl's.

Our next family visit came in February. Up until then, I had begun to get the feel of being part of the Dion family. Like all our future visits with our parents, the pattern would be the same. From the day I was told about an upcoming visit, I would become excited, and the excitement would mount until the day of the visit. Then, when I actually saw my parents and Cheryl, it was a constant high for those few hours. As soon as a social worker came to tell either Cheryl or me that it was time to go, I turned instantly despondent,

and I would stay that way for maybe a week or more. But just for those few hours, I was with my real Mom and Dad, and I was with my real sister. I loved them and they loved me. And there were no questions of ties or loyalties. Just family.

I loved the Dions because they took care of me and they were nice to me. They were deserving of my love because I had nothing else to give them. But Mom and Dad were different. It didn't matter that they were sick and couldn't give us anything. I thought then that I would always love them, no matter what. Cheryl and I did ask them when we would go back with them—we would always ask them that—and they would promise us that as soon as they got better, we would all be together again. So, I had hope, and I knew it wouldn't be long before we once again had our own home.

The next big event for me was my birthday. Mrs. Dion gave me a small birthday party, and some of the girls in my class came to it. I got a present and a card from Cheryl. After that was my First Communion. I felt more grown up, because from then on, I was able to receive Communion. I bragged about this to my parents at our summer visit, but they didn't seem at all interested. Then I remembered they had never gone to Mass, and realized that they probably knew they would go to hell. I wanted to tell them that if they went to confession and then went to Mass every Sunday, they too would go to heaven, but I felt awkward about the whole thing, so I didn't say any more about religion. Cheryl had been going to kindergarten, and she told us that she could read and print while most of her classmates were still learning their ABCs. She was still very funny, and she always made Mom, Dad, and me laugh. Most of the time, she had no intention of being comical.

It was after that family visit that I received another letter from Cheryl.

August 20, 1956

Dear Apple,

How ar you? Mrs. Madams got our scool thins. I am so cited to go to scool for reel. I wil be in Grad 1. Apple on Sunday I wuz bad. I did not meen to be. I wanted to see the litle peepel who lives in the radio. I culd see the lites on. The radio fel on the flor. The lites wont even werk an thos peepel is ded. I am skared. Mr. Madams is mad. He ast who brok it. I wuz to skared. I didnt say nothin. Dont tell Momy and Dady. Pleese Apple. I am so skared.

luv, Cheryl

I felt so sorry for Cheryl. I used to feel scared like that at the orphanage, so I knew what she felt like. I also knew that there weren't any people who lived in radios. I'd seen Mr. Dion fix their radio. Poor Cheryl. She was scared she'd killed some people, and she was scared she'd get heck. Mrs. Dion had told us that telling the truth was always easier and better than telling lies. I wrote to Cheryl and told her to go to Mr. MacAdams and explain how she broke the radio. I told her to write me and tell me what happened afterward. Her response came on August 30th.

Dear Apple,

How ar you? Mr. Madams sed you wuz good to tel me what to do. He even laft after I tole him. He sed to me the peeples werds cum frum waves in the air or sumthin. I dont no. Now I am cited agin bout going to scool. 1 week to wate. I try to be good. I promis.

luv, Cheryl

I felt warm and happy that I had been able to help Cheryl. I was glad that Mr. MacAdams was the kind who could laugh at something like that. Not that I knew of any other kind, because Mr. Dion was just as understanding, and my Dad . . . well, I really couldn't remember when we had broken anything in the house. Of course, we never had much to break. One of the good things about having nothing, I guess.

I don't remember the exact day when I began to call my foster parents "Maman" and "Papa." I just copied their children, and nobody made any comments about it. I was still very shy, and if anyone had taken note, I would have stopped. It did make me feel more comfortable in their home.

At the beginning of the winter, when I was in grade two, my classroom was overcrowded. I was among six students who were placed in the grade three class. With Nicole's help and patience, I was able to adapt very quickly to the higher grade. When I passed with a good average, all the Dions were very proud of me, and they threw a little celebration. For an eight-year-old, I had a very large head for a while.

That summer and the following summer, we all went to a Catholic camp at Albert Beach on Lake Winnipeg. Those two weeks were filled with wonderment for me.

At home, all the neighbourhood kids would gather to play baseball, mostly in the evenings. When there weren't many kids around, we'd play badminton. If it was raining, we'd find something to do indoors. There was always lots to do.

In winter, we'd go tobogganing down the slopes of the Red River. Sometimes, a man from a farm on the outskirts would come with a team of horses and a hayrack and give the kids of the town

a hayride. Afterward, Mrs. Dion, or some other mother, would serve us all cookies and hot chocolate. At Christmastime we would go around carolling, even those of us who couldn't sing. And for me, there were my regular family visits. They always made me happy and sad, at the same time.

Mrs. Dion had always been a happy, cheerful person, and as long as I had been there, she had never been sick in bed. I must have been the last to sense the change in her. Mostly, I was told that Maman was very tired, and Nicole urged me to help with the chores a little more. When Maman took to her bed, I offered to do as much as I could. At the end of November, Papa coaxed her to see a doctor. She was supposed to be going to the hospital for a week to have some tests done, but her stay was prolonged by another week, then another, and another...

I remember that Christmas was my saddest. Maman came home and stayed for New Year's. Everyone was very sad but made a pretense of being happy. When I saw Maman, I wanted to cry. She looked so different. She used to joke about being too fat. She wasn't really—just pleasantly plump—but now she was skinny, and to me she looked grey. Any movement, even breathing, seemed to be such a strain for her. Yet, she led us all in forced cheerfulness.

I'd lie in bed at night, worrying about her. I'd say my prayers over and over, pleading with God to make her better. I must have overheard Papa and Grandmère Dion saying in French that Maman was dying, because my prayers to God changed to "Please don't let Maman die." I would think of Nicole, Guy, and Pierre. It would be so awful for them not to have their real mother. Finally, I would cry myself to sleep.

One night, I sat up in bed and was wondering what had woken me. After a while, I put on my robe and went to the kitchen for a glass of milk. I was on my way back to my bedroom when I heard a noise in the living room. Because of the bright moonlight, I could see everything clearly. There in his rocker was Papa, with his arms on the armrests and his back very straight. I knew he wasn't sleeping, that he was very, very sad. I went in without turning on any lights and sat on the stool beside him. I wanted to comfort him, but I didn't know what to say. I put my hand on his and said softly, "Maman says it's okay to cry sometimes. Maman says it makes you feel better."

I saw tears, glistening in the moonlight, run down his face. "Maman says we have to trust in God's wisdom."

I heard him restrain a sob and felt him patting my hand. I knew then I should leave him alone. I returned to my room and said another prayer for Papa.

In January, Mrs. Semple told me that I would be moving. At first, I thought I was finally going home. I was happy and excited to be going home at last, but very sad that I was going there only because Maman Dion was so sick, and maybe dying. But my happiness was short-lived because Mrs. Semple began telling me about the farm that would be my new foster home.

I was permitted a last visit with Maman in the hospital. She smiled when I walked into her hospital room, and after asking me about school and other things, she said, "April, I wanted to say goodbye to you. We're all very sorry to see you go, but the final decision was theirs. You understand that, don't you?"

I nodded slowly, trying hard to smile courageously. I couldn't talk because of the lump in my throat.

She continued, “I wanted to say some things to you before you . . . Papa told me how you gave him comfort. We all love you very much, April. When life seems unbearable, remember there’s always a reason. April, you’re a very special person. Always remember that. Mrs. Semple says that the home you’re going to is a fine home. I’m sure you’ll be happy there.”

“I love you, Maman.” It was the first time I had ever said those words. To me, they were precious words: to be used for very special people. When I saw how much she appreciated hearing those words, I was glad I had said them.

There were tears all around when I said goodbye to the rest of the Dion family. I had promised to write and always keep in touch with them. I left them, with the hope of either coming back to live with them or returning to my own home.

3

I WAS TAKEN TO A SMALL farming community further south of Winnipeg, on the outskirts of Aubigny, to the DeRosier farm. It was a Friday afternoon when we arrived. While Mrs. Semple talked with Mrs. DeRosier, I studied my new foster mother with great disappointment. She was a tall woman with lots of makeup, and badly dyed hair. If she had been a beauty once, the only thing left to her now was her vanity. Her voice was harsh and grating. The more I watched her, the more positive I became that she was putting on an act for Mrs. Semple's benefit. I wondered why Mrs. Semple couldn't figure that out.

But then I thought it was okay—as long as Mrs. DeRosier gave me a good home.

After my social worker's departure, Mrs. DeRosier turned to me. I looked up at her with curiosity. She went to the kitchen drawer, took out a strap, and laid it on the table near me. She told me the routine I would be following, but in such a way that it made me think she had made this speech many times before. "The school bus comes at eight. You will get up at six, go to the henhouse, and bring

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