

# One

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The land where I was raised is like a good marriage, where Father Sky and Mother Earth come together in harmony, where summer mornings greet you with the kiss of friendship and the nights with the twinkling of starlight. Winters of snow and Jack Frost are not only anticipated, but also welcomed. Natural disasters are unheard of in this part of the world; there are no hurricanes, no tsunamis, no earthquakes, no volcanoes, no floods. It's as if the Great Lakes serve as armor against nature's foes.

My grandfather's family came here from St. Pierre, Canada in the late 1800s and settled on the Garden Peninsula, the southernmost tip of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. A true paradise of beauty, the place lives up to its name. It's where blackberries and raspberries hang from their vines and blueberries are in full supply. The smell of apple blossoms and wild roses freshen the air. Seagulls caw with laughter

and whippoorwills sing children to sleep at night. Yet, many times the only sound is silence sweeping over the meadows, climbing the maples, birch and pines. Generation after generation has reaped a rich harvest from this land of good and plenty. Included among them are great catches of salmon, whitefish and perch.

But I've heard it said, "Nothing lasts," and "Every good thing must end," as it did in Garden. I was there, my family and me, in a home of tranquility, love and happiness. But within a few hours we found ourselves living in a barren land, an unfamiliar territory. In 1960 our family was dealt a major disaster. A flood came, but it was a flood of tears. Weeds flourished, the weeds of doubt and fear. And drought came, a long drought of poverty.

In 1938 my parents Rose Marie LaMarche and John Anthony Jacques married. Following their wedding there was no question in Dad's heart and mind where the two would settle down. It had to be Garden! Outside of town he built a three-room house on property that his grandfather once owned. This was the land of milk and honey to Dad and where they'd raise a family. And a large family they had. Year after year another child came, first four boys, then six girls. I, Donna Jean, was lucky number seven. Soon my mother's stomach was again expanding. Number eleven was on the way! This time, not only would there be a new addition to the family, but to the house as well. The added space included a bathroom (although it didn't have any of the furnishings), a utility room, a large kitchen and two bedrooms.

Dad worked long and hard as a lumberjack, returning each day in time for supper, then picking up his saw once again to go to his second job to cut stove wood until after dark. On the weekends he sold the wood to the townspeople. Despite all his efforts as provider, many of our basic needs were not met, like keeping us in shoes and decent clothing. "I'm not going to let these hard times suck the blood out of me," Dad said one morning at the breakfast table. "We'll make a bigger garden this year and I can buy a couple extra pigs. And ol'

Betsy, she's still giving plenty of milk." Mom patted his hand, smiled and nodded. Dad believed a family could live off the fat of the land, as he so often reminded us whenever we were (reluctantly) sent to a new berry patch or to pick another harvest from the garden.

Although my mother's workdays were never ending, she never complained. All that seemed to matter to her was that we had a roof over our heads, food in our mouths, clothes on our backs, and that we prayed together daily. She canned more than five hundred quarts of fruits and vegetables each year, and along with the slaughter of pigs, cows, chickens and deer, it seemed the Jacques's family story would end like a fairytale with, "Happily ever after." Unfortunately, 1960 would not be just another chapter in our book, but a completely different story.

My mother had been bedridden for months. This pregnancy was harder than the previous ones, due to an in-grown goiter that kept her from getting the oxygen she needed. Each day claimed more and more of her energy until she was no longer able to take on her usual responsibilities. The days were long for my siblings and me without her up and about. Her duties were divided between us, but since we six girls were under the age of nine, there were very few jobs we could accomplish. As the last days of the year came and went, we tried to be patient while looking forward to her getting back on her feet after the baby was born.

"This year's been tough," Dad said. "'59 is going out like a lion, so '60 is bound to come in like a lamb." But by no means did the new year come in gently. Just nine days into it, my mother died while giving birth to our baby brother Jude. On that day a beast of a burden was brutally dropped upon my dad's shoulders. Tears from us, his children, fell daily, like chilling fall rains. I suspected my dad, too, had plenty of sorrow, but he never showed it with tears. He had little time for himself. There was too much to be done around the house, not to mention his chores that had been neglected lately. One day I accompanied him

into the cellar to check out the supply of canned foods. We separated the empty jars from the full ones. My mother had been unable to do her usual canning, so only sixty-two quarts of food stood full on the shelves.

“The noose seems to tighten more and more every day,” he said as we climbed out of the cellar. I didn’t know what that saying meant, but for some reason I thought he was hoping to find the shelves miraculously supplied. Actually, I did too. I figured it was the least God could do to help us out, considering He’d taken our mother from us.

Daytime was met with new beginnings, but nighttime brought the sorrow again. Someone was always crying, including me, but when dad would ask why, I’d say I had a stomachache. I decided he had enough problems trying to cheer up Monica, Anna, Catherine, Sarah and Luke without adding my name to the list. I felt if one more tear fell it would be enough to drown us all, especially after overhearing my dad talking with my Uncle Ernie one day.

“Night after night I lie awake for hours wondering how I’m going to manage to go to work and care for my kids, too.”

“No doubt, it’s going to be rough sailing,” my uncle responded as my dad continued on.

“To make matters worse, I’ve been denied Aid for Dependent Children. Social Services said that ADC is designed for *women* raising their children alone.”

“That’s not right!” my uncle declared. “I’d give them a piece of my mind!”

“Oh, I already gave them a piece of it when they suggested finding homes for Jude and the girls. I’ll be damned if that’s ever going to happen.”

Hearing their conversation made me realize I had to try very hard to be a good girl. I needed to do whatever I could to help Dad out so that my sisters and I would never end up in someone else’s home.

Three giant steps backward followed every step forward. Like

termites in wood, poverty infested our lives more than ever. At first Dad kept us oblivious to his struggles, but within months they became apparent in his actions. He began eating Tums and Roloids as if they were his primary diet.

“I wish they wouldn’t send these letters out right before Christmas,” he said one day after reading the mail. He refolded the letter and placed it up in the cupboard. Later, Sarah got it down and read it.

“It’s a tax bill,” she said to the rest of us. We didn’t know what a tax bill meant, but that night at the supper table my dad said that we needed to tighten our belts or we’d find ourselves on the back of a slow-moving train, like a bunch of hobos. From that night onward, Dad spent more time kneeling in prayer beside his bed. From the living room we could hear his foot hitting the floor, which meant our giddiness and laughter was distracting him.

Although I was only seven and a half, I sensed my dad had big troubles, especially when he admitted that it would be impossible for him to raise our newborn brother. Aunt Geraldine and Uncle Roy had taken Jude home from the hospital soon after my mother’s death and had been caring for him ever since. One day I overheard my dad talking with my grandmother and aunt. Aunt Geretha said she’d take Jude and give him back to us when he was potty trained, as Dad requested. But Grandma spoke up, “Geri, you lost a two-year-old and that was devastating for you. Giving up a child once you’ve had him a couple years won’t be any easier. Plus, Rosie told me more than once that if she could have a baby for anyone, she’d have one for Geraldine. [My aunt and uncle had one child but it died after three days.] So Johnny, I think the best place for your little boy is with Rosie’s brother, Roy, and his wife.”

“As long as they know I’m not giving him away. But if they’re willing to care for him until he’s potty trained, maybe Jude will fare best there.”

“Like I said, that’s your best bet,” Grandma reassured him again.

“Well, I’ll talk it over with my boys and see what they think.”

About a week later as I lay in bed unable to sleep, I heard Dad telling my brothers what he was thinking of doing in regards to Jude. The boys agreed. I couldn’t believe my dad was really going to give our baby brother away. I wanted to run to the kitchen and scream at him. I wanted to tell him we girls could take care of Jude, but I knew he’d say we were too young, too little. Since my mother’s death we were always being told we were too little for this or too little for that, except when it came time to do dishes, wash and iron clothes, or scrub the floor. So instead of telling Dad anything, I pulled the blankets over my head, turned onto my stomach and silently cried to my mother about not being able to keep our brother. I made a promise to myself that night that I’d never have a baby, so I wouldn’t die and the baby wouldn’t have to be given away.

The following night Dad told my sisters and me that he was going to let Uncle Roy and Aunt Geraldine raise Jude until he was potty trained. It brought tears to Dad’s eyes when Anna, who was only four, asked if Jude was still going to be our brother. “Of course,” Dad answered. “He’ll always be your brother. He’ll always be a Jacques. And we’ll visit him and they’ll bring him to see us, too.” Two more months passed, however, before Dad shared his decision with our aunt and uncle. It was on a Sunday when he took us to visit Jude. On the way to their house, we girls were driving John and Dad crazy. We were arguing about who was going to hold our brother first. The car was barely stopped and we were stepping from it, each trying to get to the door first. “All right!” Dad hollered. “*I’m* in command here! So listen to me.” He rang the doorbell as he looked down at us. “Don’t go throwing your coats all around when you get in there. And don’t be asking to hold the baby.”

“Well, well,” Uncle Roy said as he opened the door. “What a surprise!” Despite my dad’s warning, my sisters and I tried getting through the door at the same time, while Uncle Roy tried his best to

stop each of us so he could get his usual hugs and kisses. We went flying past him and into the dining room where the crib was.

“Well Jude, lookie here,” Aunt Geraldine said as she pulled the strings of Jude’s gown together and tied them. “Your big sisters have come to see you.”

“Can I hold him?” Sarah asked excitedly that morning.

“No,” Catherine shouted. “You got to hold him first last time.”

“I get to,” I said, with my arms outstretched to snatch him from my aunt.

“No way, I’m the next oldest,” Bernadette crabbed as Anna and Monica busily climbed onto a side of the crib.

“Get to the couch, all of you, or we’ll leave right now,” Dad ordered as he walked over to the crib. He picked Jude up, cradled him in his arms and smiled as he looked at our brother.

“Listen, John,” Aunt Geraldine said. “It’s almost noon. I’ll get some lunch ready so we can all have a bite to eat. The baby’s all yours.” Dad nodded, then held Jude up so we could all see him. “Well, the little chap has really grown,” he said, chuckling. We girls stood from the couch and followed Dad’s eyes hoping to be the one called to hold Jude. But his eyes went to the door where John was standing. “Would you like to hold your little brother?” John still hadn’t taken off his coat or boots. He shrugged his shoulders and tipped his head.

“Do you think Ma would want me to? She was really mad at me for not hauling water for her.”

“Get over here,” Dad said. “And let bygones be bygones.” John slipped off his coat and boots and left them on the floor by the door. Dad didn’t say a thing.

“We’d get in trouble for dropping our coats to the floor,” we whispered among ourselves, each drooling for our chance to hold the precious bundle.

That day we stayed longer than usual. Both before and again after lunch everyone had a chance to spoil Jude. When Dad took him again,

Aunt Geraldine and Uncle Roy called us kids into the kitchen and let us eat our fill of sugar cookies and milk. It wasn't until Monica insisted on going home that we returned to the living room. "It's time to get going anyway," Dad said as he pulled Anna's little finger away from Jude's eye.

Everyone hurried to the car but me. I wanted to see if my dad was *really* going to give our baby brother away. I stayed in the entrance and peeked through the cracked-open door. I heard him tell my aunt and uncle what he expected. Then with trembling hands, he placed Jude into Uncle Roy's arms. I ran to the car crying which prompted John to ask what was wrong.

"I have a tummy ache," I said.

"Well it's your own fault! You shouldn't have pigged out on all those cookies," he said, as Dad came walking to the car.

On the way home my dad didn't talk, or sing, or hum like he usually did. He didn't tell stories or nursery rhymes, or tease us girls about boys or John about a girl. Most surprising of all, he didn't even smoke his pipe!