



I And My Father

By Aimé
Labossière

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Acknowledgements

To God, the Author of this story we call life;

To Jesus Christ, The Lamb of God who lifts up
the sin of the world;

To John, the faithful and true witness and the
disciple whom Jesus loved;

To Robert, my father, who showed me the path of
reconciliation;

To Eugène, my brother, a fellow stone in the river.

July 15, Year 2000

Foreword

Strangely enough, many years ago, I observed something that, to some, may appear very unusual or even irrelevant. But, to me, it was apparent and quite relevant. As a young man, I would observe my two younger siblings and note the obvious differences between them. One was assertive, the other meek and modest. One was physically inclined, the other intellectually inclined. One was adept at sports, the other not. With one I felt a strong bond of kinship, the other not. One was extremely independent and aloof, the other quite dependent. With one, I could converse freely, the other not. It's just the way it was. I simply took it for granted.

Many years later, as I revisit the past and reflect, there may have been more significance to this phenomenon than meets the eye. As I gazed into these two younger siblings, it was like looking into a mirror. I could see some of both in me, as though, by some magical knife, I was cut in two. Here I was, faced with my two halves. And my two halves happened to each have a pair of eyes looking back at me. It was like looking back at the story of Genesis and reading about Cain and Abel, two siblings, two brothers of the same father but of very different character, inclination, purpose. While one was trying to impress his father, the other quite simply enjoyed being with his father. And the father, I am quite certain, reflected this back to the two siblings expressing itself in "accepting the sacrifice" of one and not of the other.

Today, it is quite apparent why our father truly preferred the younger over the elder sibling. For most of their lives, the younger son was endowed with a special attitude

which is rare and difficult to find today. And it was truly sad and very revealing when we saw "Abel" die, killed by his own sibling. One cannot truly appreciate what one has until it is taken away.

As his legacy, Aimé left us a story, not just a story, but a biography, to be more exact, a testimony to which I can corroborate as seen through the eyes of "Abel", the preferable and more desirable and acceptable son of his father.

Eugène
Eldest of the three boys

Prologue

The atmosphere was electric in that basement suite as the conversation grew animated. Five men were talking about the Bible. Three of them were family: Robert, the father, and his two sons, Eugène and Aimé. The other two were friends: Gordon, a fellow visitor, and Dwayne, the owner of the house and the gathering's host. It was Spring of nineteen ninety-four, and the midnight oil was burning.

"The Church is in big trouble and everyone knows it," Robert said.

"True," Dwayne replied. "But the question then is this: how does the Church get out of trouble?"

Aimé piped in. "If Enrico Fermi had ignored Einstein's theory, would he have succeeded in harnessing the atom?"

"I suppose not," said Dwayne.

"How then is the Church to succeed in her Christianity if she continues to ignore the words of Christ? Is there no hint in the gospels as to what Christ's following should look like?"

"I think there is," Gordon said.

"There sure is," Eugène said. "And when I look around I'm afraid I just don't see it."

"What the world needs is a new Manhattan Project," Robert said, "a great experiment to prove once and for all that the words of Christ are true. Jesus is quoted extensively in the gospels. Claims are attributed to him. It's said of him that he found the true path of reconciliation with God, and that he communicated the particulars of that path to his disciples. 'If any man will serve me let him follow me, that where I am there my servant may be also', he said. The gospel writers describe what that reconciliation looked like. They even assert that followers of Christ would become like him. They would be loved by God and hated by the world just as Jesus was."

"So the Church of Christ isn't following Christ?" Gordon asked.

"You tell me," Aimé said.

"Point taken," Dwayne said. "So now what?"

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"We're going to hear the words of Jesus and do them," Robert said. A few seconds passed before anyone broke the ensuing silence.

"We'll want to know the outcome of your experiment," Dwayne finally said. "We'll be watching."

"Good," Robert said. "You can expect a full report."

On their way home, Robert and his sons were quiet in the car, until Aimé said, "of course I'd have to start at the beginning..."



(Revelations 12:11)

Part 1 "In the Beginning..."

Chapter 1

I've heard it said that beginnings are more important than endings. You can have a beginning with no ending, but can you have an ending with no beginning? I guess maybe what I've heard is true. Where then is my beginning? Was it in that little mining town in northern Ontario where I was born? How odd that I have no real memory of the place. I visited it many years later and only recognized a few things. My parents shot some home movies there when I was little. The things I recognized were the things I saw in those home movies, so my only memories of my birthplace are thanks to Bell and Howell.

How odd also that my parents moved there with two sons, and moved away again with three. The place put its name on my birth certificate, a few frames on some reels of celluloid, and that's all. No great formative experiences, no sad partings, no tearful reunions in later life; just a few typed letters on a piece of official documentation.

I do remember Saint Boniface. I remember our house on Balsam Place, in Norwood. It had a park in front instead of a street. How large that park was to my four-year-old eyes! There was a junior high school, way off in the distance. And there was a tremendous weeping birch tree in our front yard, into which my brothers could climb, but I couldn't.

Like stones in a river, brothers shape each other. My two brothers, Eugène and Vincent, could perhaps relate what effect I had on them as we grew up. I do have an idea what effect they had on me. My eldest brother Eugène was to me an object of reverence. The age spread between us was wide enough to make him appear "grown up" in my eyes. I always saw him as some sort

of role model. Every new interest he took up, I took up, sometimes with embarrassing results. When he took up model building, so did I, but I lacked his dexterity and patience, and usually botched my project. I once botched one of his as well. It was a masterpiece of detail. I couldn't keep my clumsy little fingers off, and I broke it for him. That sent him looking for a new hobby.

Eugène, as I said, was my role model; Vincent, on the other hand, was my foil. He was but one year older than I, and we were fierce sibling rivals. He was athletically inclined; I was bookish. He was gregarious; I was reserved. I would introduce him to my own classmates, and he would befriend them instantly. They would then lose interest in me, or so I felt at the time, and it smarted. Every slight and insult, however lacking in malice, I added to my grudge against Vincent, and I looked for chances to put him down. Someone told me that I was witty, so I cultivated that wit, and used it on Vincent at every opportunity. His response was to engage me in wrestling matches which, of course, he always won. Thus we fed a vicious cycle, and the relationship between us has always been coloured by that fact.

I remember when we took delivery of our piano. The men came and brought it in through the front door. It was apartment size, I suppose, upright, but not tall like the one in the school auditorium. It was a pretty piece of furniture and had a pleasant sound. It was a source of great delight for my mother. Maman (as we called her) played on that piano for fun, teaching herself to play by ear. She never became a virtuoso, but did make real music with that piano. It was, as I said, a delight to her, but to me was a cause of chagrin. The piano came into our lives and brought with it Piano Lessons. I hated piano lessons. This is strange, because I've always liked music, indeed was immersed in music from infancy. We had a handsome cabinet stereo, and a large and ever growing collection of records. We played those records often, and as she worked in the kitchen, Maman sang.

In any standard by which moms are measured, I must say that Maman rated high. Confident in her parental authority and a strict disciplinarian, she could also "rough-house" with her boys on the living room floor in a most playful manner. She was an efficient

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home-maker, a nurturing care-giver, and an excellent cook. The smell of her home-baked bread wafts through my memory and makes my mouth water to this very day. She made a point from an early date to broaden her family's culinary experience, bringing home uncommon fare and having us sample new dishes. Sometimes we little ones balked at some novelty, but she persisted, sometimes sternly, in having us try this or that. Tastes I found objectionable at first, I gradually acquired. Now my list of dislikes is very short, and I experience little difficulty trying something I've never tasted before.

Our house was backwards. As I said, the front of it faced a park. The back of it faced a street: Highfield, to be exact. Between our yard and the sidewalk there was a hedge, pierced by a wooden archway with a gate. There was a driveway separated from the rest of the yard by a partition made of coloured fibreglass panels. There was grass, and a little patio made of cement slabs. There my father sometimes did barbecues.

Much of what I remember from childhood centres on my father: sharing his lap with my brothers in the living-room rocker; sharing a pew with him in church. That was Precious Blood Parish, the big wooden teepee that was so dark inside. The rituals were solemn and the homilies were long, but if I started making noise, my father would calmly reach over and give my leg a squeeze. As the squeeze got harder and harder I would look up, and meet his gaze, and I would stop.

It was hard to keep still though: the pews were hard, the kneelers were hard, the floor was hard. The floor was hardest at Christmas, because it was midnight, and because at Christmas, all the people in the world came to Precious Blood Parish. They filled up all the pews, and stood along the wall all around the church. (Because the place was circular, I really can't say that they were at the back.)

We had to stand in that thick, smothery crowd of people through all of Midnight Mass. Everyone had their coats on because the racks were already full. I was hot, and my feet were sore from standing on that hard tile floor for such a long time, and I couldn't even see anything of what was happening down where

the priest was. All I could see was coats and boots, and I could hardly breathe from all the closeness, and then my father picked me up. I could see, and breathe, and rest my sore feet.

My father spent a lot of time reading the newspaper. He wasn't reading the comics, or the parts where there were stories and pictures, but the part where it's all tiny little words and numbers that, to a five-year-old, are very mysterious, but otherwise uninteresting. I often saw my father poring over those pages. He would tease a pencil in one hand and occasionally mark an item on the page. It was much later that I learned of the "stock market", of "speculation" and "investment". To my five-year-old eyes, those larger realities of the wide, wide world were invisible. All I saw was my father, fascinated by those columns of tiny words and numbers.

As a child I was not conscious of any marital friction between my parents. I have since learned that there was some all along. But they never let on to me, and till I was nine I lived in complete confidence, in a household built on domestic tranquillity. My parents were pillars of the community. Maman was akela to the local pack of cub scouts (in French, "louveteaux"). Papa was a member of the Knights of Columbus ("Chevaliers de Colomb"). Together, my parents contributed time and energy towards launching an annual winter festival in Saint Boniface. It came to be known as "Festival du Voyageur". When my uncle Brian, Maman's brother, was a teen-ager in trouble, my parents took him in. Later on, when he was getting married, I got to be "ring bearer" at his wedding. Papa made a comfortable living as Secretary Treasurer, Norwood School Division. When he came home from work, he and Maman kissed at the door. We ate the supper Maman made while singing in the kitchen. Then, Papa would spread out the newspaper on the dining-room table, and scrutinize those columns of tiny words and numbers.

I may have had my first real inkling of the wide, wide world at Grandfather's house. We visited there often, and between meals and card games, my father and grandfather often sat in the living-room and watched television. Sometimes it was hockey and

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sometimes the news (but always, of course, when there was something infinitely more interesting on the other channel!).

Papa and Pepère (that was how we addressed them) would enter intense discussions on current affairs, and the affair that was current in those days was a thing called "Watergate". I tried in vain to comprehend a gate in water, and in vain to imagine reasons for such fuss over gates in water, but I did grasp that it all revolved around a man named Nixon. He was a Very Important Man, because he was in the news all the time and when he spoke, everyone listened closely. One day at Pepère's house, the news was on, but there was little discussion. Mr. Nixon was speaking, with a piece of paper in front of him. He used the word "resign". I think I already knew what "resign" meant. I understood that this man was beaten, that he had lost some great contest, or that things had gone badly for him in his work, because he was quitting his Very Important Job and wouldn't be a Very Important Man any more. This was an Event in the wide, wide world, but somehow I knew that it was not a happy one.

Chapter 2

I recall no announcement as such, only that we moved out of our house on Balsam Place and went to live in a housing complex, in a thing I suppose one would call a row house. It was one slice of a long, long house, with an upstairs and a downstairs, but with walls on either side which were shared with the next door neighbours.

At no time was it clear to me that this new arrangement was temporary. I thought this was to be our new home and accepted it as such, intrigued by the novelty of our new situation. My brothers and I started settling in, making the acquaintance of children more or less our own age living in the vicinity, lying awake nights as we went over with one another our Christmas wish lists (for that was the season), and generally taking events in stride as children do. Then one day we went to visit at Pepère's house, and we never went home again. We stayed there for days and days and days.

Then we moved again. Things were beginning to take on the aspect of an adventure. We were leaving Saint Boniface, leaving Winnipeg, indeed, leaving Manitoba altogether. We were moving to Saskatchewan, to a town called Assiniboia, to start a new life.

The details were sorted out for me much later. How Papa gambled every cent he could scrape together, right down to the equity in his house (which he sold), how he even quit his job at the Norwood School Division, putting it all in nickel shares and penny stocks, betting everything on the fortunes of an obscure mining company, all in response to a dream in the night; these things were explained to me later. While we waited on the outcome, we lived at Pepère's house, and in that row house where we shared walls with the neighbours. Then Papa struck it rich. The penny stocks became dollar stocks. Then, for reasons which Papa explained to me much later, but were unknown to me at the time, Papa took his capital gains and bought a business in far away Saskatchewan. It was an automobile dealership in Assiniboia, and that's where we were going. Our household possessions were loaded into a huge moving van and sent along, and we arrived in Assiniboia, in the cold of midwinter and the dark of night, at the beginning of nineteen seventy-four.

Presumably, our new home in Assiniboia was not yet ready for us. Perhaps the previous owners had not yet vacated, perhaps the purchase of the house was not yet finalized. In any event, we settled into yet more temporary accommodations, this time in a place forever enshrined in my memory as "The Johnson House". Palatial compared to the little story-and-a-half which had been our home in Norwood, it nevertheless had certain shortcomings. It was old, ancient in my childish view. It was thoroughly furnished, decorated, indeed cluttered, with the household effects of its former occupant, which was apparently an old widow woman who had recently been committed to an old folks' home.

I was afraid in that house. I couldn't bear to find myself alone in any part of it, especially the basement, which was dimly lit and crowded with ill-defined shapes, no doubt still more of the chattels belonging to the house's owners, but to my seven-year-

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old mind, myriad burrows and hiding places for unimaginable horrors. I've since been told that Maman was prey to similar irrational fears in that house, and that my fears were somehow derived from hers. But if Maman so influenced me, she did not do so in any overt way I can remember: I must have picked it up subliminally.

One evening I needed to go to the washroom, but someone was already using it. I waited until my need became acute, and then I started to complain. Papa responded by reminding me of the washroom in the basement, and when he saw my hesitation, he lost patience. "Use the washroom downstairs!" he insisted. My bowel movement was imminent, and Papa's tone of voice signalled forthcoming enforcement, so I found myself deprived of options. With faintness of heart and dryness of mouth, I went downstairs and used the basement washroom. I might have an inkling of how soldiers felt venturing into the jungles of South-east Asia, so certain was I of the dangers I braved going down those stairs. After I had relieved myself of my burden of masonry, I beat my retreat with utmost dispatch. Odd how my expedition failed to dispel the ghosts I imagined were haunting that house. How pleased I was then to learn that we were moving yet again. I could not wait to be quit of that place.

We moved out of that house I so feared and hated, and into our new house. It was a ranch house, with main floor and basement. The basement was shallow enough to afford sizable windows illuminating the lower level, part of which was finished into bedrooms for my brothers and me. It was a large, modern house, with an open floor plan to accentuate the spaciousness. Upstairs, there were kitchen, dining, living room, family room with bar, a den, the bathroom and two bedrooms. The master bedroom had a bathroom of its own, complete with a huge bathtub made of tile, sunken two steps into the floor.

The driveway was in front and served a two-car garage, which was fully attached to the house. There was a second driveway in the backyard. In back, there was also a concrete patio, three or four steps up from the ground, hard against the house and accessible from the family room through a set of sliding

glass doors. Here Papa put his new propane barbecue. This was a new neighbourhood, so the trees weren't tall like in Saint Boniface, but our back yard had some special things in it to compensate: cacti, and large blocks of petrified wood. These I thought rather remarkable, even exotic.

Our new home was on Empire Crescent. This was a more or less circular street, with a park of sorts in the middle, and the houses arranged around the perimeter, facing inwards. That little park in the middle had no trees, so it was a great place to throw a ball around. With a lot of children our age on that block, we found ample opportunity for play. Among our neighbours, there were the Himboldts, the Hunts, the Waitings and the Schrenks, all with children who became our playmates. In winter of course, we played street hockey, or "shinny", as we called it. In summer it was kick the can, cops and robbers ("guns" for short), and G.I.Joe.

I've seen the modern-day G.I.Joe toys, and they bear little resemblance to the original. Our G.I.Joe was a doll twelve inches high, with removable cloth uniforms, and all manner of adventure gear. Christmas and birthdays spawned great hopes that additions would be made to our collections of such toys, and many hours were spent, indoors and out, playing with them. We campaigned all over Europe under Montgomery and Patton. We hunted abominable snowmen and white tigers on the Roof of the World. We staged daring helicopter rescues, engaged in stealthy Cold War skulduggery, and plunged beneath the waves to spear man-eating sharks. G.I.Joe was already among our favourite playtime activities before we moved West, and when we found a similar enthusiasm among the neighbours' kids in Assiniboia, we knew our summer was made.

Our first summer in Assiniboia was hectic. In addition to finding new playmates and enjoying their company, we saw many other things going on. Tradesmen came and paved our front driveway. Others came and installed mahogany cabinets in the den. Maman and Papa took delivery of some new furniture, including an eight-foot-diameter round bed, a round glass coffee table three feet across, and a pair of swivel chairs I thought must have been filched from the set of *Star Trek*.

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All was not fun and games, however. With all the space out back, Maman launched a new enterprise: Gardening. Guess who was dragooned into pulling weeds? My brothers and I, of course. My reaction to gardening was similar to the one I'd exhibited towards piano lessons. Then our parents invited my brothers and me to paint the back fence. They even offered a cash inducement, but in my case at least, this somehow failed to cure the "piano lesson" malaise.

One of the highlights of summer was visiting Papa at work at his new car dealership. All those shiny new cars, the gas pumps, the garages with their lube racks, compressors and tools, and those big, vaguely frightening men; it was all rather exciting.

On occasion such visits turned out badly. One time I was playing in the car lot with Vincent. We were playing tag or something of that nature. He was on one side of a row of cars, and I was on the other. We were both running in the same direction, parallel to one another, with the row of cars between us. I was running flat out, with my eyes fixed upon my brother, when I was decked by a sharp blow to the head. I would have seen that light standard, had I been watching where I was going. As it was, I was bawling, and Vincent was torn between trying to console me and laughing his guts out.

Papa took his work home with him too, in the form of new cars. He would drive around town in a different car every few weeks, just to be seen in new examples of his merchandise.

Sometimes Papa took us along on visits which were of a business nature. That's how I met Len Forness. He worked for the weekly paper in Assiniboia. I've heard it said that people express their character through their automobiles. Well, Len Forness had an automobile that made a statement. It was a station wagon, which usually means practicality and modesty, but this station wagon was a piece of work. It was painted in jungle camouflage, with RCAF insignia on the doors. It even had simulated battle damage, strings of machine-gun bullet holes painted onto the sheet metal and glass.

Len Forness was a cartoonist. He had an offbeat sense of humour and a keen wit, and he designed Papa's advertising campaign. He created a character called "Egdod" (Guess which manufacturer Papa's dealership represented?). Egdod was a little car, always drawn in silhouette, and featured on all of Papa's newspaper ads. Our uncle Ken, Maman's brother in Manitoba, made for us a real-life Egdod, in three dimensions, in his auto-body shop. It was a cute little car, patterned after the cartoon, and we entered it in parades. I even got to ride in it, and I jumped out now and again to distribute Egdod buttons to parade watchers. It was all great fun. To this day I do not know whether Len helped us sell cars. But I am quite certain that we helped him sell newspapers!

Chapter 3

In Saint Boniface, English and French were almost interchangeable. I slipped back and forth between languages effortlessly. But in Assiniboia, it's a different story. Assiniboia has a French community of only a few families. Otherwise, Assiniboia is an English language monolith. Maman didn't like the idea of my brothers and me losing the use of French, but there was no French instruction in Assiniboia schools. (She was perhaps tipped off when we started calling her Mom.) There were other towns however, which boasted stronger French representation and did have French language Catholic schools. Someone floated the idea of sending French school children by bus to some such destination on a daily basis. Whatever was the process of jurisdictional wrangling that made it possible, my brothers and I, after five months of study in Assiniboia schools, began our career as students in Willow Bunch. That was in the fall of nineteen seventy-four, at the start of my third grade.

The French Catholic community in Saskatchewan is thinly dispersed, and must go to some effort and expense to keep in touch. The sixty minutes I spent on a bus every day was an example of this. Though small and scattered, the French minority

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in Saskatchewan does have an activist streak. This activism was supported, encouraged and emboldened in the Seventies by Ottawa. The Trudeau government set up policies and programs, and money flooded out of the federal treasury. Some of that money was directed towards French minorities outside Québec.

Using the money flowing from federal coffers became a bit of an industry. People of French ancestry asserted their ethnicity, and my parents were no exception. Sending my brothers and me to Willow Bunch was part of all that. The children riding that bus and their families became part of a network of friends and acquaintances whose common ground was Frenchness and Catholicism.

Trudeau was popular in that network. Once he came to an election rally in Assiniboia, to help Ralph Goodale get elected. Maman brought me to that rally. There was Pierre Trudeau, in the bright lights, with cameras rolling. Here was I in the same room with a Very Important Man, like Nixon on television. On his way out, he used the aisle that passed right by the table at which I was standing. He shook my hand, and kissed Maman. (Two of his children were born on Christmas, just like me. I thought that was neat.)

My mother's love of music and her enthusiasm for French (our family's activism was mostly hers) began coming together. Piano lessons for the boys changed to guitar lessons, the theory being that guitar might be more interesting to us than piano. However little I liked piano lessons, they did connect us with Mr. Anderson. He was our piano teacher. He also seemed to be included with our piano in a boxed set. He taught us piano in Norwood, and when we moved to Saskatchewan, he moved there too. In subsequent years, we moved from town to town, but we always brought our piano, and we always found that Mr. Anderson had moved also, and was in the neighbourhood. He was an Anglophone who had learned some French, and he became a family friend. When music became more to the family than piano lessons and vinyl records, there was Mr. Anderson, accompanying us in our music and our travels.

Other strange events began to transpire. We had three television sets in our house, and they all went on the fritz together. This was a delight to Maman, but to me was a cause of chagrin. I liked television, as most children do, but Maman hated it.

Our family took counsel together, and as summer was upon us, debated whether or not to repair or replace the broken-down T.V. sets. We all agreed to a trial period, to encompass that summer, in which our house would be "T.V. free". When we looked back on that summer, and saw how little we missed television (even I), it was decided that our "T.V. free" status would continue indefinitely. Music had done much to fill the vacuum up to that point, and our musical pursuits were stepped up. Our guitar class went to Calgary, attended a contest, and won trophies and ribbons. We boys went with the family, and other families in our "French network", and attended a singing contest in Prince Albert. We were about to enter into a musical partnership with some of those friends.

Mr. and Mrs. Bergeron operated the school bus that shuttled us to and from Willow Bunch. They had two children, both of whom rode the bus with us. One was Gilles, the other, Jacinthe. Jacinthe, the Bergerons' daughter and the elder of the two children, happened to have a good singing voice. She was also endowed with a good stage presence, being utterly lacking in stage fright.

In our circle of friends there were also the Legault brothers. The elder, Michel, was a guitar player. René, the younger, played drums.

Eugène, my eldest brother, had begun to shine as a guitar player himself, and he also had one of those fine boy-soprano voices. Vincent and I also sang, as did Papa and Maman. Papa had also started strumming the guitar, just barely keeping up as my gifted brother Eugène learned to play. And as Providence would have it, Mr. Anderson had moved to Moose Jaw, a short drive from Assiniboia.

From these ingredients was distilled a French folk band we called "Laboss-Ber-Gau-Son". We toured Saskatchewan on holidays and weekends, making appearances in towns that harboured a large enough French community to fill a hall when we

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showed up. Gravelbourg, Bellegarde, Vonda, Prud'homme, Bellevue, Zenon Park, Debden, Ponteix, Saint Brieux, these were all venues we visited frequently. Find them on the map and you'll see: we did quite a lot of travelling.

Religion was a big deal in my life from early on. I treasured the little New Testament that was given to me by the Gideons in Grade Three. Though I would often pretend to sulk about my birthday being on Christmas, way down deep I felt a special bond of kinship with Jesus. To me it was a real privilege to share His birthday, and that bond gave Christmas an extra sparkle just for me, as though I could look at the little figurine in the Nativity display and exchange winks.

The cathedral in Gravelbourg was one of my favourite places. The bishop, Noël Delaquis, had the same birthday also, and his first name and my middle name were the same. He presided over my confirmation, and when he anointed me with oil, the solemnity of the occasion permeated my being. One of the most moving experiences I've had was Midnight Mass in Gravelbourg Cathedral. The choir and the great pipe organ between them had such an effect on me that I imagined myself at the very gate of Heaven. To me that was a choir of angels, even though, looking over my shoulder, I clearly saw the faces of ordinary people with whom I'd had dealings every day.

My Catholic parents did not load me down with unnecessary baggage. I was sheltered from the tradition of hostility between Catholic and Protestant. The Chaplain of Collège Matthieu, Abbé Carignan, showed me something called "Spire Christian Comics". Comic books? I liked comic books a lot. Comic books with a gospel message? That was cool. Published by Protestants? So what?

Clerics figure prominently in my childhood. Besides Bishop Delaquis and Abbé Carignan, there were Père Thessier and Père Alarie at Precious Blood Parish. Abbé Hébert at Powerview, who presided over the wedding when Papa and Maman were married, was a real outdoorsman who brought us shooting, boating and snowmobiling. (We were sad to hear that he'd died in a motorcycle

crash.) Soeur Guislaine was my third-grade teacher in Willow Bunch. Jacques Cornet was a young man in Saskatchewan whom we knew before he joined the Franciscans. (We called him "Frère Jacques" from that time on.) Père Gérald Labossière, a relative of ours in Manitoba, caught the "Roots" bug, and researched the Labossière family tree. He became the unofficial but authoritative genealogist for the Labossière tribe, which happens to be quite large. (French Catholics have historically been quite prolific.)

Mimi was born on the eighth of July, nineteen seventy-six. I wasn't the youngest any more. Now I had a baby sister. It was around that time that "Laboss-Ber-Gau-Son" dissolved. It was an unwieldy arrangement, after all. So many lives had to be kept in sync so that we could tour together, and it often wasn't possible.

Then "La Famille Labossière" came to the fore. Eugène and Papa were coming into their own as guitar players. Vincent had embraced the drums, and played them with gusto and growing skill. I picked up a bass guitar as large as I was (just as heavy too, I thought!) and Eugène taught me to play it. Maman assumed a role that suited her to a "T": she became lead singer.

And Mimi? Did she interfere with our musical career? On the contrary, she enhanced it. Even as a baby she appeared with us on stage, and were she only to share a rocking chair with Maman while Maman sang "Brahms' Lullaby", she was sure to reduce every grandmother in the place to tears.

So our family band acquired its definitive format, and as "La Famille Labossière", we toured and sang, growing in proficiency and popularity. We were part of a crop of family musical ensembles which began emerging in rural Saskatchewan, both inside and outside the "French Catholic Network". La Famille Campagne (now known to the public as Heart Rouge) and the Johner Brothers (whom we met when they were teenagers) are other examples. They've gone on to enjoy what measure of success they've managed to win for themselves. We, on the other hand, were in for some unexpected twists of fate.

Chapter 4

Papa's trade in automobiles was not doing well. Things looked rosy enough the first year (our material prosperity was evidence of that). But Arab cartels were raising the price of oil. Sales in fuel-sipping Japanese cars were booming, and the Detroit motor car industry was suffering. Chrysler especially was tottering ominously, the very company whose cars Papa was trying to sell. Events in the wide, wide world were closing in on us. In Assiniboia, selling Chryslers and Dodges was a bit of an uphill struggle to start with. The last thing Papa needed, from a business standpoint, was to give his customers excuses for shopping elsewhere.

I've heard speculation to the effect that we may have done exactly that by going to school in Willow Bunch. Did we offend against the wholeness of the community by asserting our ethnicity? I suppose we'll never know for sure. The mechanics of the process and the psychology that governed it are perhaps immaterial, but the process itself was unstoppable: Papa was slowly and painfully going out of business.

Here I insert a footnote of sorts: At Papa's invitation, my uncle Joe (Papa's younger brother) moved to Assiniboia with his family, and joined in partnership with Papa. He wasn't there very long, only a year or two, and his help wasn't enough to turn things around. He went back to Manitoba, after having suffered some financial loss.

Assiniboia Chrysler Dodge was on the rocks, and our house on Empire Crescent was up for sale. Indeed Papa had pledged it to guarantee loans gone sour. We found ourselves looking for both home and livelihood.

Unexpectedly, both were offered from the same quarter. Collège Matthieu in Gravelbourg had an art school called "Le Mat". The job of running it was offered to Maman. The benefit package included the use of an old convent, on campus, for accommodations. So we moved to Gravelbourg.

The convent had eleven bedrooms upstairs. The kitchen/dining/living area had in former times been a chapel. This

was separated by a hallway from yet another huge room. There we installed "the Studio". This was the room in which we practised our music and added material to our repertoire. There we had Maman's piano, Vincent's drum kit, and all our other instruments.

We children adapted to the new surroundings, the new schools and new acquaintances. We remained in the French program of the Catholic Separate schools, as the schools we attended in Gravelbourg were part of that system. Maman adapted to her new life as faculty member. And Papa made regular trips to Assiniboia, to throw dirt on the coffin containing his dreams.

Perhaps as an escape, he joined us on an ever more vigorous campaign of "cultural" pursuits. We sang, and toured, and even dabbled in film and television production with people like Bernard Lavigne and Laurier Gareau. I didn't know yet how much Papa hurt from all this, but I learned later: these events dealt him a mortal blow.

Chapter 5

Papa got a job with an accounting firm in Regina. For a while he commuted, but in the end he prevailed upon Maman to leave her job at the Collège, and we moved again. We settled into a rented house on Lockwood Road, at the south end of the City. It was the property of Papa's new employer.

It was a new house in a new neighbourhood, a four level split, large and pretty, but not well built (The bed froze to the wall in the master bedroom). The parents and Mimi slept upstairs, kitchen, dining and living were on the main level, and the lower level had a large yet cozy rumpus room. There we enshrined the new component system we acquired to replace our venerable cabinet stereo. This was an indulgence we could hardly afford at the time, but I was certainly not about to look the gift horse in the mouth! In the rumpus room we also installed the Studio. Room always had to be found for the Studio. Down in the basement, a bedroom was set up for my brothers and me. I must say that we were getting used to large houses.

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Papa's accounting job in Regina was at some point replaced by a new job, this time working for a French-language weekly called "L'Eau Vive". (This means "quick water", which is a translation of the Indian name "Saskatchewan".) Papa sold advertising. The paper's editor was a man by the name of Jean-Louis Fontaine. He and his family became friends of ours.

Jean-Louis was a showman and promoter, a "P.T.Barnum" kind of guy. He arranged a tour of Saskatchewan in which we participated, a tour called "Tournée du Patrimoine" ("Heritage Tour"). In addition to ourselves, this variety show featured performers from other communities, Saint Brieux being one of them. Jean-Louis was master of ceremonies, and he and his sons, Jean-François and Jean-Pierre, played the roles of magician and comic. More than just entertainment, this roadshow was also a commercial for "L'Eau Vive".

Jean-Louis was a man of foresight, but to pirate a line from a dead poet, "His reach ever exceeded his grasp." He once invited Papa to join him in business, renting out movies on video cassette. Too bad. Neither Papa nor Jean-Louis could scrape together a grub-stake. (Hindsight bears witness to the accuracy of Jean-Louis's vision.)

Finally, their Eastern roots beckoned, and the Fontaines moved back home to Welland Ontario. They invited us to look them up if we were ever down that way, and we promised them we would.

Chapter 6

Having started Grade Seven in Gravelbourg, I completed it in Regina, at Saint Pius X Separate Elementary. Thus I continued in the French program.

I vividly remember the bus trips to school: they were by "Telebus". Telebus was an urban transit alternative to taxicabs. Little busses with city-employed drivers were dispatched to people's homes in answer to telephone requests. In our case, pickup was by prearranged schedule, and we were then fed into the city transit system at a transfer station. Those drivers must

have been in a dreadful hurry. They drove as though they were way behind and if they didn't catch up, they'd lose their jobs. They made the daily trip to Saint Pius X a hair-raising, whip-lashing, stomach-turning ordeal.

Fortunately, we didn't stay on Lockwood Road very long. We soon moved (again!) to McPherson Avenue, which was closer to the schools we were attending. We quickly abandoned the use of Telebus, catching the regular city bus at a nearby bus stop in winter, and walking to school in summer. By then I was the only one attending school at Saint Pius X. Vincent had joined Eugène at Dr. Martin Leboldus High School, the only secondary school in Regina offering the French Catholic program.

The house we rented on McPherson was a brisk fifteen-minute walk from Leboldus. It was in a mature neighbourhood, with tall trees that were sorely missed on Lockwood Road and Empire Crescent, but reminded me of Saint Boniface. This house was a bungalow with full basement. It had four bedrooms upstairs. One was for Mimi, one became a sewing room for Maman, and one was made into an office for Papa. My brothers and I once again made our home downstairs, sharing the basement with the Studio.

Saint Pius X was a place of awakenings for me. It's where teachers became real people, with whom one might cultivate relationships, endure clashes of personality, even disagree on matters of importance.

In grades seven and eight, the girls in my class were changing into women. Grownups aren't surprised when youths undergo this process, even if those youths are themselves being run off the rails somewhat. Some of the girls in my class were having a difficult time. I witnessed great shouting matches between them and some of my teachers, on matters which had nothing to do with academia. Girls screaming and crying in class, in fits of blind rage, were a new thing for me.

Over all presided Monsieur Morin. He was, I suppose, trying as best he could to fill some parental void in his students. Dozens of times he suspended instruction and addressed matters

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of the heart. Over and over he returned to the theme of Respect. He wrote it on the chalkboard. Each time the topic was broached, the same scene was repeated: Monsieur Morin drew upon himself a storm of venom and vitriol from those certain girls, and in the end they were reduced to tears.

I admired Monsieur Morin. My opinion of some of his colleagues was much lower. One teacher, whose name escapes me (I only remember the pejorative nickname his students used in his absence: they called him Snake-eyes), I remember for two things, Science and Catechism (He taught both). Our grade seven science class was to participate in a science fair. I was to put together an experiment, a display, and a presentation. The whole thing was so foreign and intimidating to me that I put everything off until the last possible instant. Finally, in desperation, I cried out to my family for help, and the day before deadline I cobbled together (with Eugène's help) a setup which met with snickers from my fellow pupils and frowns from my teacher. He did give me a passing grade on it, however (just barely!). I thought that was rather generous of him.

It's in Catechism that he and I really didn't see eye to eye. He would read the Bible to the class, now and again offering some comment. One time he said, "Personally, I think the Creation Story is a bunch of garbage!" He didn't express doubt concerning the literal truth of the tale while conceding to it some spiritual value. He didn't modify his statement at all. This opinion was not new to me, but it surprised me to hear it in class, proceeding from the mouth of my Catechism teacher, in a Catholic school named after a pope! I seethed in silence.

In Grade Eight I learned that heretical concepts were working their way into the curriculum itself. My Catechism textbooks were revisionist, whittling away the great Scripture epics of Moses and Joshua until God Himself was a mere figment of the prophets' imaginations. Our family was devoutly Christian and Catholic, and I grew up learning that the Bible was literally true. I was discovering that such orthodoxy was now the minority view, and was no longer upheld even in the Catechism. Still I seethed in silence.

One of my teachers in Grade Eight, Monsieur Sylvestre, was fond of "round table" discussions and often had us arrange our desks in a circle. During the course of one such discussion, he was so bold as to venture the opinion that there was nothing wrong with homosexuality. I couldn't seethe in silence any longer. I spoke out in objection to the heresy I was hearing.

I was shouted down by my teacher AND by all the students. I was dumbfounded. Any kid in my class who got angry at someone called him a "faggot". This was the basest insult available in the vocabulary of the average grade eight student, and it was used quite liberally, sometimes on me, by these same kids who were shouting me down. Here they were, siding with the teacher against me, and championing the cause of tolerance towards homosexuals, when they knew as well as I that "homosexual" was a term they reserved for people they hated. What a role reversal that was! I was more likely to be the teacher's pet. Here I found myself alone against the teacher and a class full of "brown nosers"!

Graduation came. I bid adieu to Saint Pius X Elementary, and joined my older brothers at Dr. Martin Leboldus High. What a strange place! Regina is the provincial capital. Politicians, magistrates and functionaries raise their children there. Perhaps it's because of its location, or perhaps because of its bilingual curriculum, but in those days at least, Leboldus was the school of choice for the children of judges and cabinet ministers. Snobbery was evident. The parking lot was full of students' cars (many of them late model) and the atmosphere was one of "cautious wantonness". By this I mean that the kids were looking for trouble and looking over their shoulders at the same time.

The physical layout of the place was odd as well. On the outside it was monolithic, with huge stretches of uninterrupted masonry. Inside, the place was dominated by a cavernous central gallery. This atrium cathedraled up to the roof. To one side were the gymnasium, the theatre, and the administration office. To the other side were the library, classrooms, laboratories and lockers, on two floors, with a balcony overlooking the gallery. It was big and roomy, and might have been airy and bright, but the shortage

of windows and the utter lack of skylights made it dark, gloomy and stuffy inside. Near the doors, the carpets were marbled with burn marks left by students as they extinguished their cigarettes. My parents smoked too, but never this carelessly. It was in this place that I was introduced to the hectic pace of high school life.

Chapter 7

Our musical pursuits did not slacken through all these transitions. Indeed the most fun I ever had on tour was in nineteen eighty. The Province of Saskatchewan had declared a jubilee celebrating seventy-five years in Confederation, and had invited performers from all over the province to participate. Acts were selected to represent the various ethnic groups which made up the province's population. That included us.

A road show was assembled, which featured dancers demonstrating folk styles from the various cultures represented. There were Scots blowing on bagpipes and dancing with swords, Ukrainians kicking and whirling in a blur of colour and motion, Hungarians doing a dangerous looking number with wooden sticks, and a Plains Cree lad who performed the famous Hoop Dance. We were the singing portion of the variety show, along with a musical drama troupe from Nova Scotia, who joined in the festivities and toured with us.

We were used to touring by ourselves in an ordinary Dodge van, with our gear stowed in a utility trailer. This was different. It was new and exciting. We went from town to town in a greyhound bus full of musicians, singers and dancers, telling jokes and having a blast. That was a great summer.

That drama troupe from Nova Scotia had one member who was Acadian. We occasionally met other talented musicians who were Acadian, like Edith Butler. We also saw a travelling band calling themselves "1755" (in French, "Mille Sept-cent Cinquante Cinq"). They named their band to commemorate the pivotal event in Acadia's history. That year the British, determined to win the upper hand over the French in America, demanded an oath of

allegiance of the Acadians. The Acadians were already sworn to neutrality. They refused to declare themselves for one side or the other. So the British forcibly uprooted the Acadians and scattered them throughout their empire. This moving tale, which sounds as though plucked from the pages of Scripture, was the one told in song by that travelling band.

A large part of the Acadian diaspora ended up in Louisiana. We met a "Cajun" fiddle player. He was from Louisiana, and his name was Hadley Castille. We befriended him, shared the stage with him, and had him as guest at our house. It was great fun to hear him describe life in far-away Louisiana, and to fill him in on the harshness of Saskatchewan winters. He was amazed to hear about a machine designed to run over snow, and thought it a remarkable concept. Before he left, he invited us to pay him a visit, if ever we came down Louisiana-way, and we accepted, wondering if our path would ever take us that far.

Sometimes we entertained locally, sometimes far afield. Regina holds an annual celebration called "Mosaic". For a week or two each summer, ethnic associations each select a church basement or banquet hall and set up a pavilion showcasing the song, dance, food, drink, language, dress and art of their ancestral homelands.

In winter, the Catholic French in Regina stage "Carnaval", a winter festival in imitation of similar events in Québec. This would coincide with the famous "Mardi Gras" celebrations with which Catholics everywhere welcome the coming of Lent. We participated in Carnaval on several occasions.

Festival Du Voyageur, the festival my parents helped create, is still an annual event in Saint Boniface. To this we were invited to return, this time as performers, in nineteen eighty, and so we came. We played, we sang, we "knocked 'em dead".

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Singing at the Festival of the Voyageur.

Aimé Labossière



Eugène

Papa

Maman

Me (Aimé)

Mimi

Vincent

*This cassette we recorded soon before our
Great Cross-Canada Adventure.*

Chapter 8

For reasons which Papa explained to me much later, but were unknown to me at the time, Papa approached the family and made a grand proposal. "We're pretty good musicians," he said. "They liked us in Manitoba and want us back next winter. Why don't we make that trip part of something bigger?" What was Papa's proposal? "A year-long tour of Canada. You boys can skip school for one year. We'll tour out West in the fall, come home for Christmas, and head East after New Year's. The Festival in Saint Boniface will be the springboard for our Eastern swing, and we won't stop until we've reached the Atlantic. What do you say?"

I can't say that I was very much surprised. It was, after all, a natural outgrowth of previous developments. I was enticed by the prospect of adventure, but at the same time felt a lump of trepidation forming in my stomach. What settled it for me was the thought of being left out and missing an historic moment (I even remember thinking that way). So, except for Mimi, who neither knew nor cared what we were talking about (she was only four), it was unanimous: we were going national! I packed everything, including my little Gideon New Testament, which I'd gotten in Grade Three.

The salesmanship began. We pitched the concept to our teachers at Leboldus, who endorsed it with enthusiasm. We even went to City Hall. As Providence would have it, Regina was retiring her Telebus fleet and discontinuing the service. (Perhaps the drivers were tired of being in such a hurry. Perhaps the cab companies were protesting the competition. Or perhaps I wasn't the only passenger who'd found himself stifling the urge to vomit.) The city had all these surplus buses to unload, so my parents approached the mayor and asked to borrow one. (His children happened to be our schoolmates.)

They capitalized on our history with Mosaic, Carnival and the Jubilee Tour of nineteen eighty. They offered to serve as goodwill ambassadors for the City of Regina and the Province of Saskatchewan, and to bear their flags across the country. To

anyone who asked us to explain our rationale, we told them that after six years without television, we had "saved up" a year, and had one coming to us. Instead of spending it in front of a T.V. set, we would spend it on the road.

Finally, it all came together. The mayor loaned us a bus, the interior of which Papa made haste to camperize. The mayor also gave us some nice big flags to wave when we could, and a banner to display in the bus's back window, with "La Famille Labossière" in bold letters. He gave us some souvenir buttons to distribute, and attended a press conference at our house to see us off. Merci, Mayor Schneider. Bon voyage, Famille Labossière.

Not just a government town, Regina also boasts a university. Our house had become a drop-in of sorts for students from Québec, French speakers who had come West to improve their English, and otherwise broaden their horizons. Some of them became involved in our musical endeavours. Indeed we hired them, one as agent, in hopes of securing bookings for us down East, one as driver, and a third as roadie and sound technician. We anticipated a busy Eastward swing, and thought these three would provide welcome help. Others among our drop-in students we left behind as sub-let tenants, to keep the house occupied in our absence, and to give them a place to live, close to campus, for the semester.

The lady we hired as agent we put to work early on, burning up the phone lines lining up engagements... or so we thought. As things turned out, she had merely run up astronomical phone bills chatting it up with friends, and when September rolled around, we had as yet no bookings whatever. Nevertheless, letting bygones be bygones, we piled ourselves and our three Québécois companions into our new Telebus, and with instruments and gear stowed in our utility trailer, we set off for our old stomping grounds, Saint Boniface. We booked a few gigs ourselves and did a mini-tour in Manitoba. We were warming up, and we were giving our agent another chance to book some shows for us out West.

Our trip was eventful from the start. We paid a visit to my uncle Allan (Maman's brother) in Saint Vital, and that's where we spent our first couple of nights.

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Our first or second night, there was an unfortunate incident involving our three Québécois friends, the Telebus, and a bottle of whiskey. There were no injuries, and property damage was negligible, but an already strained relationship was broken. All trust was gone, so my parents cashiered the three of them then and there. We resigned ourselves to continuing our tour without them. We hired a new agent, this time a lady by the name of Jeanne Léger. She booked gigs for us on the fly. We didn't know where our next appearance would be until she told us on the phone.

Here I must insert a disclaimer of sorts. I have to admit that my recollections of the Tour itself are not altogether intact. Events followed a certain sequence, but in my memory that sequence is somewhat jumbled, and there are parts missing, fallen through the cracks as they widen through the years. I was a fourteen-year-old boy, after all. The Tour for me was One Big Event, and the details, which exhibited a certain repetitiveness, didn't always register. I was on the Road, and I was watching the country go by.

That happened to be one of the mildest winters on record in Western Canada, which was great for us, living as we were on the road. Through November we were in Alberta. I recall visiting an aunt, Papa's sister Jeannine. She was in Sangudo, where she was managing a motel.

We also spent a fairly lengthy period in and around a town called Plamondon, where it seemed everyone bore the same name as the town. There was much warmth among the people of Plamondon. They were very hospitable. (How I enjoyed their venison steaks and rabbit roasts!)

The coldest and snowiest stretch was while crossing the mountains into British Columbia. After overnighting in Revelstoke, we made it to Kelowna, where Papa had a cousin. Her name was Georgette. I was finding that we had kin-folks just about everywhere.

After that frigid and snowy mountain passage, how strange it was to awaken to the sound of lawn-mowers in December! I saw

first hand what attracts so many flat-landers to the sunny Okanagan Valley.

Kelowna was as far West as we got. Afterwards, we went back home to Regina, in time for Christmas.

Chapter 9

For us the run-up to the Festival included a whirlwind tour of Manitoba schools. Papa knew that we would be spending much time in Manitoba, so he decided to bring two vehicles. Our old Dodge van broke down en route, in the one brief spell of truly cold weather that winter. We made arrangements to have it towed into Winnipeg, consolidated our cargo and crew into the one vehicle (that marvellous little Telebus which had become our new home on wheels), and we completed our own journey to Winnipeg.

We criss-crossed the province, often doing shows in more than one town on the same day, all to foster interest in the upcoming Festival. When the Festival began, we were in the parade.

The nightly entertainment was at several venues throughout Winnipeg. We were to make our nightly appearance at a hall in Saint Vital. We were surrounded by friends and relations, and the place filled up with people eager to hear us sing.

Maybe the hectic pace and heavy workload of the previous weeks were too much for my constitution. Whatever the case, I got sick. The Festival had barely begun. We were between sets, and I suddenly found myself unable to stand. An old friend, Marcel Poiron, who happened to be a practitioner of holistic medicine and reflexology, came to the rescue. He brought me to his house and put me to bed. I convalesced for days, racked by bouts of fever, while the family soldiered on, performing nightly without me. Marcel called it exhaustion, a diagnosis I found entirely credible. I rejoined the family ranks before the Festival wrapped up, but not until I'd gotten some real rest. La Famille Labossière was once again whole, and finished the Festival in grand style.

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We took it easy until the Spring. We rented a house. We took a large chunk of our accumulated earnings and gave them to Jeanne, our new agent. Then we sent her East with a mandate: "Find us bookings!" While waiting for her return, we skated and played hockey, visited old friends and relatives, and refined our musical skills in preparation for the continuation of our tour. The library had always been one of my favourite places, and there I spent a lot of the time available to me.

Jeanne came back with bad news. Her expedition had proven fruitless. We did not blame her. Cold-calling agents representing unknown bands in large urban markets have a hard sell to make. She landed us one solitary engagement, in Fort Frances Ontario. In the Spring of nineteen eighty-two, with the Grant Devine government newly elected in Saskatchewan, and on the strength of our one and only booking, we headed East.

Fort Frances is a pulp-and-paper town. One of its features most striking to a newcomer is the smell. I found it most unpleasant, but our hosts, whose livelihood depended on the industry, called it "the smell of money".

Our hosts in Fort Frances were the Messervier family, friendly people indeed. Their daughter, a girl whose name was France, became infatuated with me. I was a little shocked, and much confused, by the whole scene. She was a pretty girl, a bit younger than me, but I was a bit of a runt. I liked her, but as yet had nothing in me capable of responding to infatuation.

Faced with relationships I didn't know how to deal with, and odours that made me feel like I was on a bus ride to school, I found myself eager to leave. But that wouldn't happen until our engagement was honoured, and we had delivered our performance.

In subsequent months, we exchanged correspondence, France and I. But the intervening miles and future events put an end to even that.

The show was over. We had played and sung all that we were going to play and sing. Somewhat saddened by the

premature conclusion of our tour, we nevertheless resolved to celebrate the end of our adventure. Just before departing on our return trip, we treated ourselves to a banquet in a fancy restaurant.

Little did we know the surprise in store for us that evening. People sitting at the next table, who had attended our performance, approached us to offer their thanks and congratulations. We thanked them in return, and as the conversation got going, this person introduced that person, this person floated that idea, this person offered that suggestion, and before we knew it, phone calls were placed and we were invited to make one more appearance. They would have us appear once more at a school in Fort Frances. Our departure was postponed. The very next day, we happened to meet an old acquaintance of Papa, a Catholic priest to whom he had sold a car years before in Assiniboia. He invited us to do a show for his parish in Rainy River. This led to still more contacts with people, people eager to invite us to their hometown further East. Just like that, we found ourselves under sail on the Sea of Serendipity, blown along by a Wind of Providence.

When at last we bid a tearful adieu to our new friends in Fort Frances, we were not heading West, as we expected, but East. So began our new adventure, as vagabond troubadours, living hand-to-mouth and day-to-day, one tankful at a time and one show at a time. School principal spoke to parish priest, and we were handed off from one town to the next, appearing before audiences of eighty, fifty, twenty people, audiences assembled on almost a moment's notice. But always we went East.

Chapter 10

We stopped in Manitouwadge, the little town in Northern Ontario where I was born. I can't say that I remembered the place of my birth. I only felt a nagging, déjà-vu kind of familiarity. It was the "feel" of the place more than anything I could remember specifically. But people there remembered us, old friends of Papa

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and Maman, who welcomed us with exclamations of "My how your children have grown!"

On we went. We were met in Sault Sainte-Marie by Père Fortier, the parish priest. He had a very clever dog. Sometimes Père Fortier paid his own dear mother a visit. She lived in a high-rise seniors' lodge, where pets were not allowed. He smuggled his dog in anyhow. He had taught the creature to hop into a piece of luggage, which was then zipped up to conceal the animal entirely, except for the tip of its nose, which protruded just enough to allow the dog to breathe. The dog would lie, still and silent, as though he knew he were party to a dark secret. The priest then carried the bag down the halls and up the lift, right to his mother's flat.

Dubreuilville is a lumber town, far from the highway on a company road. The entire population is composed of transplanted Québécois. We were shown warm hospitality there, as indeed we were everywhere we went. The folk of Dubreuilville even took us on canoe trips.

The show we did in Dubreuilville was an outdoor affair. Electricity for our equipment was supplied by a portable generator (I remember the purr of its engine between songs). We used a flat-deck trailer as a stage.

Once in a while, as we progressed on our journey, people would mention a place near Ottawa called Plantagenet. They said that there was a wonderful place there called "Centre de l'Amour" (the "Love Centre"). They described it as a good place to rest, recuperate, and be spiritually rejuvenated. It was a Catholic retreat house. My parents thought that it might well be a good idea to pay the place a visit. They resolved to do so, should the opportunity present itself.

When we finally arrived in Southern Ontario, we had a promise to keep. We visited Jean-Louis Fontaine in Welland, and he rolled out the red carpet. He took us on a grand tour of the Niagara Peninsula. We saw the orchards in bloom, the Ship Canal, the Falls. We watched killer whales frolic in the Marineland

Park, and gawked at statues in the Wax Museum. We even spent a day at Crystal Beach Amusement Park in Fort Erie.

For our entire stay in Southern Ontario, Jean-Louis took us under his managerial wing. He booked us, promoted us, and kept us busy for several weeks. He even found a house which served as our temporary accommodation.

I got sick again. This time it was some kind of allergy, which surprised everyone, including me. My brother Vincent was the one who had previously been prone to bouts of summertime hay fever, not I. Yet he, strangely enough, was unscathed. We supposed it to be caused by some plant that thrives in the hotter climate. The doctor prescribed pills which I dutifully took, but without effect. I finally discarded them in disgust, and my symptoms immediately cleared up.

We did go to Toronto, but we cruised right on by without stopping, so to me Toronto is a ten-lane freeway with a tall pointy tower beside it. I'm amazed by the sheer density of population in Southern Ontario, and somewhat repelled by it. The frenzy of activity gives day-to-day life in such places the feel of a roller-coaster ride, like at Crystal Beach. Rides like that are lots of fun, but I wouldn't want to live in one. Coming away from the Niagara Peninsula meant rounding the "Golden Horseshoe". All those cities blended into one another, with no intervening stretches of countryside, to one who was raised a flatlander were a real shock. I guess out on the Western Prairies, "room" is a luxury taken for granted.

We followed the Saint Lawrence River downstream, and took a side trip towards the vicinity of Ottawa. At Plantagenet we overnighted at "Le Centre de l'Amour", to give the place an appraisal. It was a made-over motel, operated as a lay ministry on a charity basis. The principal personage there was a man by the name of Jean Turpin, singer-songwriter and lay preacher. He, and guest speakers from all over, would hold retreats and seminars scheduled well in advance. We were comfortable with the whole arrangement, and decided that, on our homeward journey, we

would stop in again, and treat ourselves to some serious "R and R".

Some of the preachers that had currency at Le Centre de l'Amour were on audiocassette. We helped ourselves to some of those and listened to them on our way. That's when I heard about "backward masking", and other diabolical devices used by rock-and-roll bands to bewitch their unsuspecting audiences. Those revelations gave me quite a fright, and I resolved to give "heavy metal" music a wide berth, which was easy enough for me, because I didn't like heavy metal music in the first place.

Louise Haudegand was a gregarious, enthusiastic, "take-charge" kind of person, a real mover and shaker who seemed to love taking on ambitious projects and carrying them through. We met her in Cornwall, and she was in the middle of organizing a spectacle. This was a choir festival, to be held in a big church in Cornwall, and she invited us to participate. She adjusted the program to include our segment, and somehow made it fit. Her grand design was to fill that church with the sound of hundreds of voices singing in harmony. She pulled it off, too. She directed that choir personally. The church was full of people, which was fine for us, because it put us before our largest audience East of Manitoba. The whole event was a great success.

Madame Haudegand was a Montrealer. When she found out we were headed that way, she invited us to visit her family there in Montréal. We promised her we would. Still, I recall being perplexed by something. I was asking myself, "If she's a Montrealer, and her family is in Montréal, what is she doing in Cornwall?"

Chapter 11

We crossed the river and entered Québec. Our first order of business was to pay a visit to Louise Haudegand and her family. Her daughters took us boys on a grand tour of the city. We rode the famous Métro, something we had never before experienced. Those young ladies showed us the Forum, Olympic

Stadium (the Big "O"), the Expo site, and "Vieux Montréal". We had a blast. In return, we told them all those horror stories we had heard on those cassettes we'd obtained at Plantagenet. We made their skins crawl. They were avid heavy metal fans.

Before leaving Montréal, we visited l'Oratoire Saint Joseph, Montréal's famous basilica. It was a monumental tribute to the memory of a dead cleric, whose faith is credited with working miracles. On display are stacks of crutches, ostensibly discarded by pilgrims who'd been healed of their afflictions. From the huge domed structure of stone and glass, visitors pass over a purpose-built foot bridge to the little wooden church over which the dead clergyman had presided. His little church hunkers in the shadow of the edifice since erected in his honour.

We came away from that place a little disenchanted. The whole thing had the smell of a tourist trap. Small wonder then that Quebecers have lately found it hard to rely on the Church for spiritual guidance.

Père Gérard Labossière, our relative the amateur genealogist, had told us where the original Labossière homestead was. It wasn't far, and wasn't really out of our way, so we went to see it. It was at Saint-Ours-Sur-Richelieu, and after asking around, we found the place. The homestead was still occupied, though not by actual father-to-son descendants of the first Labossière. The couple living there were history buffs and antique collectors. That's the very reason why they lived on that spot. Their house was a hundred years old, but it wasn't the original. They showed us the old foundation. It was still there, close by. They were delighted by our visit. They thought it was wonderful that descendants of the homestead's founders came back from far away to see it.

Strangely enough, we did little performing in Québec. We followed the Saint Laurence some more and took in the sights. Québec is very different from Saskatchewan. The centuries of European settlement clearly show, in the big stone churches at the height of every town, and in the long narrow fields that line the

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banks of the Saint Lawrence. By comparison, Saskatchewan is very much a frontier country.

We played tourist in Québec City, and visited the old walled town with its historic land marks. I remember how hot it was that day. I've never felt such heat, except in a sauna bath.

I do remember performing once in Québec. On the Gaspé Peninsula, there's a town called Causapscal. Strawberries are the local speciality and claim to fame. We arrived just in time for their annual strawberry festival. That was our last stop in Québec. We were a hop-skip-and-jump from the New Brunswick border.

At last we reached our goal: the Maritimes! We had hired all that help, and we had taken all those steps to make things easier and more predictable. The help turned out to be a hindrance, and predictability turned out to be both unattainable and irrelevant. In the end, we got by without them. We were drawn along as if by an unseen hand. Even when the way had seemed blocked before us by insurmountable obstacles, an opening was found and we were able to proceed.

We went to Caraquet, on New Brunswick's North Coast. The town styles itself the unofficial capital of Acadia. Someone had even designed an Acadian flag, and it was flown proudly in Caraquet. Seaside beaches, inshore fishing boats, this was the Seacoast! Our hosts brought us out on the tidal flats to dig for quahogs (in French they're called "coques"). They boiled them and fried them: either way, they were delicious.

Our venue in Caraquet was a steak-and-lobster, bar-and-grill place called "La Chaloupe". We played for the patrons, and the proprietor assured us that our arrival made his place a whole lot busier than usual. He would have had us around longer, but somehow we knew, it was time to turn our bus around.

In large measure our homeward journey to me is a blur. I must have been sleeping a lot, because long stretches of country went by unnoticed. I guess I woke up in Ontario. We were at a tiny village near Ottawa called "L'Orignal" (French for "The Moose"). There was a pancake house there, and it was unique. The place

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was circular, with a cathedral ceiling, a little bit like Precious Blood Parish in Saint Boniface, only brighter, more cheerful inside. The kitchen was in the very centre, in plain sight to all the patrons. It was as if to say, "Our patrons have nothing to fear, and their hosts have nothing to hide." The proprietor showed us his "pièce de résistance": an adjacent building in which he had a wood-fired oven. He baked his own bread the old fashioned way. His patrons were well treated indeed. We were invited to supply mealtime entertainment to those patrons. That was our last engagement.

Close by was Plantagenet and Le Centre de l'Amour. To this place we resorted. We were going to get some of that "R and R" we had promised ourselves.



*La Famille Labossière with the Telebus
which the City of Regina loaned us.*

Chapter 12

We didn't get what we expected at Plantagenet. What we did get was a big surprise. I remember waking up one morning at the beginning of our stay, and hearing beautiful music. I followed the sound to one of the smaller meeting rooms. There was a "worship session" in progress. A small group of people was in there singing to God. I'd seen that a thousand times before, but not like this. At one point the words became unintelligible, just babble, but it was beautifully harmonious, like carillon bells.

The featured speaker that week was a man by the name of Allan Bowen. Again we were surprised, because he was "Pentecôtiste". A Protestant evangelist preaching at a Catholic retreat house? These "Charismatics" were really open-minded. Mr. Bowen was an American from the Deep South, a "missionary" to the Québécois, who'd started a church in Québec City (The Québécois we'd met so far, we thought couldn't be hurt by a missionary or two).

The way Mr. Bowen spoke French we found enchanting: scrupulously correct, but with a monstrous accent. I only remember fragments of his sermons, but the spell, God's spell, was taking hold, in myself personally, but especially in Papa.

The details were sorted out for me much later: how Papa, riding a high of validation and divine benevolence, watched helplessly as his world collapsed; how his fortune, acquired by what could only be called divine inspiration, was consumed in that business misadventure in Assiniboia; how his family life, governed by strict adherence to orthodox Catholicism and traditional values, had become mired in marital conflict my parents tried so hard to conceal; how our every public appearance, which to our audience gave the semblance of family harmony in the face of modern immorality, was to Papa a painful act of hypocrisy. These things all came to a head together, and in a silent prayer of desperation, Papa launched our Trans-Canada Tour, hoping against hope that somewhere, somehow, he might find some answers.

The God whose Wind of Providence propelled our family's ship across the Sea of Serendipity, the God whose unseen hand drew us across three thousand miles of Canadian landscape to bring us to this very spot, that God touched Papa. He shook loose all Papa's cares and burdens, things which to me at that point had not yet even been visible.

The first tangible evidence of Papa's transformation came when Papa gave up smoking, something he'd tried before without success. He brought his pack of cigarettes to the front of the meeting hall and stepped on it. He left it there on the floor, and to this day he asserts that he was at that moment delivered of the habit. Not once did he feel the pangs of withdrawal.

We were baptized at Plantagenet. I'd been christened as an infant, in typical Catholic fashion, and I still remembered Bishop Delaquis and my confirmation, but this was somehow different. I had always known that God was real, but now I felt that He was close. The God who'd touched Papa had touched me too. We were baptized Bible fashion, full immersion, in the swimming pool. Jean Turpin did the honours.

I was permeated with gladness, and reluctant to leave, as I knew we must, and departure day was suddenly upon us. Like the Patriarch Jacob, Papa went to our hosts and said, "I don't want to leave until I have received everything, everything God might have in store for me here."

Jean said simply, "Robert, be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Papa collapsed on the spot. Papa later told me that all the pain in his life surfaced at that moment. He could feel a sensation in his fingers, as though someone were clinging to him and refusing to let go. What I saw was my father, lying on the pavement, at times moaning and weeping, at times giggling and laughing. He later told me that all the poisons from his past were exiting his body through his sobs, and peace was taking their place. This scene took hours to play itself out.

Some men gathered around, and brought him into one of the rooms. We all joined in prayer. The thought of Papa being healed of his hurts made my own gladness all the greater, even though I didn't know what those hurts might be. For days

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afterward, Papa kept saying that he felt light, so light that he should hold onto whatever chair he might be sitting on, to keep from floating away.

Papa and I were not the only ones there. My brother Eugène was going through related experiences. While Papa was lying on the floor that day, Eugène went through some sort of "empathic" episode. He suddenly cried out in pain and fell to the floor. "My hands are burning!" he screamed.

I found Maman on the bus. She had a look on her face the likes of which I'd never seen on anyone. It could only be described as pure terror. "What's happening?" she said, her voice laden with anguish. That was the first clue I'd seen that showed Maman's experience to be different from Papa's, and from my own. I saw other hints later, but at that moment, prey to an unassailable euphoria, I could only say words of reassurance to her. I didn't bother myself with the puzzle before me.

When we at last came away from that place, our bus was a mixed bag indeed. I was happy, like I'd never been before; Papa was as light as a balloon; and Eugène felt like he was full of water; Vincent was Vincent; and Maman? Well, let's just say that from then on our story started to get interesting.

Aimé Labossière



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Part 2 "As for Me and My House..."

Chapter 13

I was at peace inside, but outside there was war. Maman, while singing praises to Jesus, nevertheless demonstrated conclusively that her God and Papa's were not one and the same. She too quit smoking, but complained bitterly of withdrawal. And she fought Papa.

Papa, in his Great Cleansing, vowed to God that he would "throw the baby out with the bathwater". He started from scratch. He knew nothing, he declared, and would let himself be taught by the Scriptures unmingled. He assumed all teachers to be discredited, because they were so much at odds with one another. He would depend upon God to teach him through Holy Writ. So he started "chowing down" on Bible in a big way.

Over and over, Papa would exclaim in our company that he'd been revealed something extraordinary, and we would sit and listen in rapt attention as he would read the passage of Scripture which had blown his mind. And all too often, when Papa did so, Maman would blow her top. This conflict between my parents I found wholly incomprehensible. The peaceable home-life I'd taken for granted all my life evaporated. I was treated to the spectacle of fits of rage with dishes flying. I became a conspirator of sorts, endeavouring to conceal from others the true condition of the household which was no longer a home. I even found myself making awkward attempts to comfort my little sister, who would cry in utter distress, not knowing where her place of safety lay.

At the root of the conflict lay Papa's reassertion of paternal authority, an authority he had relinquished over the years, inch by inch, in little compromises with Maman. That authority was there in the beginning, supported by orthodox conservative Catholicism,

the religion which was our family's practice. By the time of "The Tour", Papa's paternal authority was all but gone.

After we returned home, Papa's scriptural feeding frenzy yielded mountains of proofs upholding the position of husband and father. Every time Papa presented those proofs, Maman went through the roof. All she saw was a power play being attempted by Papa. The Scripture proofs didn't faze on her for an instant.

My parents went to all the counselling sessions and seminars, but to no avail. Maman accused Papa of deliberate twisting of Scripture for personal gain. Oddly enough, Papa was asking no more of Maman than what she promised in her wedding vows, yet now the request turned Papa into Adolph Hitler in her eyes. (No exaggerations here; that's exactly what she called Papa to his face.)

I did not see Papa trying to impose his own will upon Maman. I saw Papa adopting a definition of relationships that was Bible-based. The biblical definitions Papa was acquiring he voluntarily imposed upon himself, and he invited us to do likewise, but that wasn't Maman's take on the situation at all.

Things went from Bad to Worse. Papa had gotten a new job selling insurance for a close friend he'd made in church, a man by the name of Glen Stead. On Glen's behalf, he made a business trip to Saskatoon, a trip of uncertain duration. He stayed away for several weeks, which were for me a period of relative quiet, but unrelieved tension.

At last Papa came back. Maman welcomed him like the repentant prodigal, but Papa had a surprise for her. He informed her that his stay in Saskatoon had been for him a time of meditation, prayer, and Bible reading. He told her that his former position was reaffirmed, and with steeled resolution, he was reclaiming his house. He was assuming his position as spiritual head of his family, and was never leaving again.

"Honour thy father and thy mother," says the Scripture. What then are three teenage boys to do? They want to do the will of God. They are sons of one father. He too wants to do the will of God. They have one mother. She too claims to love the Lord and

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want to do His will. But when the Word of God is quoted, dishes fly.

It was Vincent who took the initiative. He convened a family conference and demanded the attendance of all concerned. "Is this the Word of God?" he asked, holding up a Bible. "Can we not agree to live by its precepts? I know I do. How about you Dad? How about you, Mom?" We all voiced our agreement. "Is it settled then? Can we move on now?"

After we boys left the room, a commotion started. We rushed back in, only to see Maman flailing away at Papa with her fists. "You've turned them against me, you monster!" she said.

On July twenty-first, nineteen eighty-three, Maman packed some bags, bundled up Mimi, and left. It was Papa's birthday. As of this writing, eighteen years later, neither Maman nor Mimi has come back.

Chapter 14

What a strange time that was! I flunked Catechism. Nobody ever flunks Catechism. In fact I nearly got myself kicked out of high school because I put tracts and pamphlets in students' lockers. How ironic. Teachers could call the Bible garbage with impunity in a Catholic school, they could with brazen confidence refute Catholic doctrine and dogma before the students in their care, but I was threatened with expulsion for my missionary zeal.

My Grade Ten Catechism teacher was Monsieur Saint-Pierre. I put him through a great deal of static that year, and it was his class that I flunked. More irony: his name was Saint-Pierre, and I, like Saul of Tarsus, was withstanding him to the face. I felt like Martin Luther, waging the Reformation campaign all over again. But when Monsieur Saint-Pierre suddenly took ill, and quickly died, I felt guilt and loss. I'd been unable to visit him in hospital, and I berated myself, because I'd squandered my only chance to make peace with the man.

I've since come to regret and repudiate much that I said in those days. I just thank God, Papa, and Monsieur Saint-Pierre for showing me such patience. Monsieur Saint-Pierre did more for me

than I knew at the time. In his Catechism class, he challenged me with questions that deserved answers I did not yet have at my command. He also uttered a dire warning. He told me that those young men he'd met that sounded like me ended up committing suicide. Of course, at the time, to me that sounded perfectly silly.

We never officially ceased to be Catholic. We came home from "The Tour", and the following Sunday went to Mass, in the very church in Regina that it was our habit to attend. The proceedings were the same as always, but in our eyes everything was different. We wanted to tell our parish priest about our experience, but he would hear none of it, none of it at all.

We were alone in the world. The God whose worship had inspired the founding of mighty institutions had touched us, and the very institution that had helped bring that contact about now had distanced itself from the result. One of the helping hands that we'd met on our way home had given us a referral. He told us of an organization called the "Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International". For lack of any place else to go, Papa looked it up in the phone book, and placed the call. He reached a man, a former Catholic, whose name was John Grimalowski. He brought us to his new church, Avonhurst Pentecostal Tabernacle. We ended up attending there for the remainder of the time we lived in Regina.

Pastor Peter Tarling, a Welshman by birth, an evangelist by vocation, and the then current minister at Avonhurst, presided over an active and enthusiastic Fellowship. There was plenty of fine music, raising of hands and praying in tongues, and that suited us at the time. But I remember Tarling's sermons: "Get into the Word!" he'd say. So we did, and Papa most of all (he didn't need much encouragement in that regard). So when it was revealed to Papa that he needed to be a disciple, he went to Pastor Tarling, and offered to be his disciple, and make Pastor Tarling his apostle. Pastor Tarling didn't know what Papa was talking about.

Maman perhaps felt it unfair that the whole burden of submission seemed to be dumped on her. What Papa felt was

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unfair was this: he knew himself to be in need of an apostle under whom he was to be in submission as a disciple. This apostle would take responsibility for him and confer on him the innocence he needed to obtain ultimate reconciliation with God. And he could find *no one* who would fill the office. In his struggle to comprehend this revelation, and make it applicable in a world in which such an idea has no place, he went to Pepère in Manitoba. He spoke to his own father and offered to take him out of the old folks' home and into his own house. Pepère declined the offer, but I could tell: he was touched.

Papa was getting worried. He learned things in the Bible and tried to share them with those in his circle of fellowship, and got mostly blank stares. He shared them with his wife, and she threw dishes at him. Was he mad? Had he somehow been run off the rails? Papa was beginning to wonder.

After a while, he found that the only man that showed signs of spiritual kinship was Glen Stead. Mr. Stead was also one whose first marriage had failed. Papa joined Glen's insurance agency, where the staff held daily prayer meetings in the morning. After Maman left, it wasn't long before we moved out of Regina and into Saskatoon. Papa went there on Glen's behalf.

Central to Papa's new business philosophy was this: the prophets of old had railed against the "shepherds who eat the flock". Papa believed that the Kingdom of God would never be built by pastors who fed on their sheep. He believed it should be the other way around. So he envisaged a business that would profit in the world and allow the pastor to feed his flock. Glen Stead was in agreement with Papa, and together they devised the "Family Security Club". They were going to sell "term life and invest the difference" packages while recruiting members who would join the sales force. The concept included investment funds and pyramid-style marketing, very trendy notions in the eighties, but it didn't work out. Glen Stead quit the insurance business and joined the ministry to become a pastor. Papa was on his own.

Chapter 15

Papa joined a different stable of salesmen. This one had him making regular trips into the Carrot River Valley region, in Eastern Saskatchewan. He was spending a lot of time on the road, and all of his business was in that same area, so we moved there. We went to Star City, rented an acreage South of town, got a dog, bought some horses, and settled in.

We met many fine people in Star City, at the Pentecostal church there: people like the Meier family, the Shaw family, the Coles, and Earle and Edith Leach. Those two in particular have been a big part of our sojourn in Star City.

About that time Eugène left. He had been going up into the North Woods country to commune with God. He declared that he had to go out into the wilderness for his "Prophet's Fast". So he went to New Mexico, and was away for almost a year. Eugène was home from New Mexico only a couple of months. He wasn't satisfied with the wilderness experience he'd had down there, so he left again. He did odd jobs from Saskatoon to Vancouver, accumulating airfare to Australia. He'd felt a call in his soul to that place for years. So once again he was gone. He left without Papa's blessings.

It was also about that time that Papa met Diane. Maman had made it clear that further contact with Papa was out of the question. She even went to Southern Ontario and disappeared amid the throng. She severed contact with her brothers, sisters and mother, so completely was she burning the bridges behind her.

I went with Papa to church in Winnipeg, one Sunday morning. The service was being held in the tavern, in the hotel where we were staying. The congregation consecrated that tavern every week, as they did not yet have a building of their own. There we were introduced to Diane. She was from Melfort, a town close to Star City, and there we were, making her acquaintance in far-away Winnipeg. Papa was intrigued by the circumstances of the

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encounter. Some follow-up was in order, and Papa's defunct marriage to Maman was no obstacle at all.

Diane was a divorcée. She was also an evangelical Christian, and the mother of three boys, more or less comparable in age to my brothers and me. Papa made no attempt to attract Diane, and indeed would not have been attracted to her, except that she agreed with him.

All of those revelations that provoked blank stares at best, and flying dishes at worst, were met with complete and enthusiastic agreement on the part of Diane. She even said this: "When I met you in that tavern in Winnipeg, I heard a voice say, 'Behold your king!'" Papa exposed her to all of those terrible truths that had so provoked Maman, and Diane agreed with all of them.

Finally, daring to consider that maybe, just maybe, God had given Papa his "soul mate", he married her. But, because Papa's divorce was not yet official nor legal, his marriage with Diane was not official nor legal. She came to live with us through one growing season, but left with the onset of winter. She ended up opposing all the things she had espoused, and disagreeing over all the things about which she had appeared to agree. It was around this time that I committed to paper my pledge of allegiance, and gave it to Papa.

The pastor of the church in Melfort that we had attended with Diane came and helped her move her stuff. As she was about to leave, she turned to me and said, "Your father has a devil." I was quite disgusted. I told her to get out. She did, hastily.

As a post script, we later learned that the pastor who had come to Diane's rescue later suffered a marital breakdown of his own. The scandal, involving infidelities between the pastor's wife and a member of the congregation, shattered the church and scattered its membership. We were not surprised.

Diane's departure perplexed Papa in the extreme. He was confused and hurting, especially considering all the promise shown in the relationship at the beginning. His car was his prayer closet, and while out driving he asked God, "Why? Why did marriage fail for me twice? I was trying to live marriage according to your instruction! Why didn't it work out? What's happening?"

The reply he got was this: "I'm tearing down all the phoney-baloney marriages!" This word shocked Papa, but he understood, and we have seen the fulfilment of it since. The institution of marriage is going extinct. God was telling Papa that the Christian practice of marriage was a misrepresentation of Divine Ordinance, just as Christianity itself, as practised by Christians, was an expression of unfaithfulness to Christ. God was passing judgement on both. The revelation that Papa received from God was that he'd been given to experience things from God's point of view. Like the prophet Hosea, Papa was given to experience relationships which were a reflection of God's own relationships with people who claimed to be His. Men were worshipping their wives, though they were called upon to worship God. The proof was that any attempt to apply the Biblical model to a marriage union resulted in the destruction of the marriage. The woman would not stay unless the man compromised the model. So God has been pouring out His wrath upon men through their wives. Wedded bliss is henceforth an all-but unattainable goal, as headlines in every newspaper in Christendom attest.

I, Aimé Noël Robert Joseph Labossière, in accordance with Scripture, do affirm divine unction bestowed upon Robert Hector Joseph Martial Labossière, as prophet, priest and king over myself.

I do, therefore, pledge unreserved and total submission to the aforementioned, and do so on this, the thirteenth day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and eighty-six.

*Signed,
Aimé Noël Labossière*

Chapter 16

Papa had not yet given up on the Family Security Club. He redesigned it, so that members no longer needed to join the sales force. Instead, they would be awarded Patronage Dividend Points, redeemable for rebates on other purchases at the Club. He even envisioned allowing other products to qualify, so that Club outlets would be one-stop shopping centres for members.

To make it all happen, Papa needed an insurance agency of his own. As licensing new agencies can be difficult in Saskatchewan, he tried to buy an existing one. He put a non-refundable down payment of twenty thousand dollars on an agency in Domremy. I camped out there for a couple of months. I watched over the building we'd rented, and worked on my schooling. I was finishing high school by correspondence at the time.

Papa had investors lined up, committed to backing his venture. Then came Black Friday. Once again, events in the wide, wide world intervened. The great market correction of nineteen eighty-seven deflated the net worth of Papa's investors and the whole endeavour collapsed. Papa lost his twenty thousand dollars. But, as he said then, he'd been there before. His experiences to date had devalued money in his eyes. His goal was still, in his words, "to build God's House, not my own." Money was just a tool like any other, and its loss was just, in Papa's estimation, Divine Guidance.

We later saw other businesses using ideas identical to Papa's in their own marketing campaigns. He just smirked, and shrugged, and said, "What did I tell you?"

Papa took his lumps on the Family Security Club, and accepted the verdict of Providence. If the House of God were to be built, and the Kingdom of God established, the insurance business was not to be part of the equation.

Papa had dreams of a place in the country like the one described by Jeremiah. Papa envisioned a place where he could be the host on God's behalf, where people could come, and be

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received, and have their feet washed, so to speak. There they could be sheltered from the world for a while. There they could discipline their bodies by working with their hands in the open air, in God's nature. And there Papa could share with his guests the Bread of Life.

Out of the blue, an acquaintance approached me with a proposition. I consulted with Papa on the matter, and he encouraged me to go along with it. The proposition? This acquaintance of mine, one Rob Berday, was a courier owner/operator. He was resigning his route and leaving the province, and he offered to groom me as his replacement. So, in nineteen eighty-eight, I became a courier driver. Vincent was engaged to be married, Eugène was home from his wilderness pilgrimages, and Papa had a new sweetheart. Her name was Carol.

Papa met Carol at a "minus-one" dance, a get-together for widows, widowers and divorcés. They hit it off immediately. Papa no longer harboured any great expectations, he said. He would just enjoy feminine companionship as a gift from God, and receive it as it was offered. He no longer intended to place demands on any woman who might want to share a slice of life with him. Any relationship would last as long as she cared to prolong it. His own focus would remain the same: God first. He told Carol as much. He warned her that someday God would call him to full-time service, and that when that call came, it would be up to Carol to keep up as best she could. She let on that she was satisfied with that.

Papa bought nine acres adjacent to the town of Tisdale, East of Star City. We moved into the little old house at the North end of the property, and started construction on a new house for the site. We dug the basement in Tisdale, but built the house in Bjorkdale, thirty miles away, because that's where the carpenter's farm was. We then had the house moved and installed on our basement. Papa intended to turn that nine acre lot into three separate acreages, sell them, and buy a farm with the proceeds. He was still trying to set up a place in the country where he could

start building the House of God. Our day jobs supplied the cash, and we put in sweat equity on weekends and after hours. It looked like we were on our way.

Vincent lived for a while in that house we'd rented at the start of our sojourn in Star City, there with his new wife Nola and his infant son Aaron. Then he bought a home quarter from the same man who had gotten me into the courier business, Rob Berday. At last he had a place to call home. As of this writing, in the year two thousand, Vince and Nola are still there, along with their children: Aaron, Paul, Nigel, Leah, Jonah, and Sarah.

Vince had had enough of our peripatetic existence. He resolved to sink deep roots into the rich Carrot River Valley soil. Vince's marriage to Nola had Papa's blessing, but it bothered Papa that Vince would not make common cause with us. He wished Vincent would help him "build God's House", instead of building his own. I'm sure that's not how Vincent would have characterized what he was doing. Nevertheless, Papa proffered several practical arguments in favour of "incorporation": each of Papa's sons could assume duties that suited his tastes and aptitude; the labour could be divided, and we could specialize; our capital could be pooled and our expenses split; our income could be shared, and the tax load could be reduced; we could get ahead much more quickly together than apart. Vince wouldn't go along. He needed his own house for his own family.

Chapter 17

I need to backtrack a little. I was both observer and participant in all these events, but I was also experiencing a peculiar sub-plot of my own. I fell in love at Avonhurst. Her name was Cheryl. She was pretty and friendly, but to her I was just another kid in the youth group. I saw her kissing a big man with a moustache and a leather jacket, and it broke my teenage heart.

My misadventure with Cheryl could have been a simple case of "biter bit". How could I avoid drawing a comparison between this episode and the one in Fort Frances, when the shoe

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was on the other foot? But this new experience did more. It drove home a fact I found alarming: I was a late bloomer.

Youthfulness runs in my family. Both of my parents were Labossières. I was worried that I'd thrown "snake eyes" at the gene pool crap shoot. Year followed year, and my body refused to mature. I finished high school by correspondence. The excuse was that I moved around too much. The reason was that I couldn't stand sharing a locker room with boys my age.

We moved to Saskatoon. We moved to Star City. Papa married twice and three times. Vincent married and had sons, Aaron, Paul, Nigel. Eugène grew a beard and trotted the globe. I entered my career as a courier driver, talked on the phone with dispatchers, and talked face to face with customers. My twentieth birthday loomed, and I was still a boy.

One night, Papa was about to retire and I was already in bed. I called him into my room and said, "Papa, may I change my first name?"

"Why?" he asked.

"Everyone I meet mistakes me for a woman," I replied. The beautiful name my father gave me, the name that every day reminded me that I was beloved, that name was compounding my distress. It is never used in the masculine in the English speaking world.

"I've been negligent," Papa said. "I should have seen your plight long before now. Go to the doctors. Maybe they can help you."

I didn't want to hear that. In my prayers I had hounded God over this. I wanted so much for Him to finish creating my body. I didn't want to resort to doctors, or expose myself and my problem to them. But I went.

My worst fears were realized. The doctors examined me. The nurses sampled my blood. I was referred to other doctors who examined me, to other nurses who sampled my blood. I knew the diagnosis and the treatment before the doctors told me. I was a eunuch. They prescribed hormone therapy: testosterone.

I went to the pharmacist and showed him my prescription. He filled it, keeping a straight face. Then began my regimen: monthly injections in the buttocks.

I changed courier routes. That meant new doctors, new nurses, new pharmacists. My first doctor was a paragon of discretion and tact. By comparison, my new doctor was a bull in a china shop. He discussed my case out loud, in a voice clearly audible to the patients in the clinic's waiting room. When he met me by chance while I was out doing my rounds, he enquired into the progress of the treatment, right in front of my customers!

Testosterone is a potent drug. All feelings of shame and fear of exposure aside, I felt huge transformations taking place, not just in my body, but in my mind. My very personality was being altered. The fact that my character had already had twenty years to form itself gave me perhaps a clearer view of the process than has a lad of fourteen years. I felt myself inhabited by a trapped wolf, rattling the bars of its cage.

I endured these torments for a full year. Then one day I met my appointment at the clinic and didn't arrange another. I simply stopped going. For me the cure was worse than the disease. I confessed to Papa that I'd stopped taking the treatments. He asked, "How long were they supposed to last?"

"Forever," I replied.

"I couldn't go to the doctors forever neither," he said. I was immensely relieved. I endured the process as long as I did to honour my father. No other motive could have carried me through.

The whole experience was a wondrous exercise in humility for me. It taught me something else: my compassion for my fellow man was enhanced by an order of magnitude. Hormones being what they are, namely, a formidable hurdle between us and God, it's a wonder then that there is any spirituality at all in the world.

Chapter 18

Carol was a divorcée. She had two children, Andrea the elder, Adam the younger, both of them in elementary school. Carol had no religious pretensions whatsoever, a rudimentary education, and a hearing handicap. Carol was much younger than Papa. She was pretty, sweet, and effervescent. He liked her a lot. I liked her too.

Papa and Carol moved in together, and I must confess that it bothered me. I feared for Papa. Would he get stiffed again? But I wondered about what he was doing for other reasons too.

I guess Papa wondered about what he was doing as well, because one day he asked me what I thought he should do with Carol. He sounded genuinely perplexed. I answered his question with a question. I asked him, "Is this the example you wish to set for me?" I was careful to avoid letting a critical tone enter my voice. Criticism was honestly not my intent. I wanted to know the answer to the question, and I thought Papa needed to hear the question asked.

Papa reacted by marrying Carol. This time it was fair, square and legal, since Maman's divorce was finalized by then (we had to post the divorce petition in Eastern newspapers, because Maman was still *incommunicado*). A justice of the peace presided over the wedding, and we videotaped the event.

Papa gave his name to Carol's children. She had their last name officially changed to Labossière... but custody remained exclusively hers.

Eugène was back from Australia. He'd been detained and deported for over-staying his visa. He stayed away from home for several months more, picking fruit in the Okanagan Valley. Before finally coming home, he stayed for a while in Saskatoon. When he finally did return, he announced that there was a woman in his life. Her name was Carolyn. She was a divorcée, an evangelical Christian, and the mother of two small children. Eugène said that he expected Papa to take her in as well as himself. Papa told

Eugène that he could remain with Carolyn, or come back home to work out his reconciliation with Papa, but not both. Eugène broke things off with Carolyn, and came home. But everyone could tell that inside, he was seething.

Eugène was grumpy for months, and he bristled with ill-concealed hostility towards Carol. He and she often exchanged words, and Papa had to step in on several occasions. He reminded them both that their conflict was not with each other, but with Papa, and with God for putting them under Papa's authority.

I took Eugène with me on vacation in ninety-two. I had a good time, but it seemed as though to Eugène it was all one big imposition. Papa gave us two weeks off. He and Carol took our places as couriers (we had two routes by then), and Eugène and I headed South. It was February. Two weeks of rambling brought us as far as the Gulf Coast.

In Louisiana, I was happy to pay Hadley Castille a long-delayed return visit at his home town of Opelousas. There was one thing Eugène did want to see: the Creation Evidences Museum in Glen Rose, Texas. He was quite intrigued by the writings of Dr. Carl Baugh, and wanted to see the site of his discoveries first-hand. Apparently, the man has found human footprints preserved in limestone along the banks of the Paluxy River, the same limestone which shows dinosaur tracks. Dr. Baugh's museum, and the stretch of riverbank where he made his discoveries, are a stone's throw away from Dinosaur State Park. It would have been really something to see freshly exposed tracks for ourselves. We went down to the river, and found a few suspicious-looking pits and indentations in the rock, but nothing fresh or clear. We weren't about to dig into the riverbank with a backhoe.

I wish I could have been more like the prophet Samuel. It's written of him that, as a boy, he never let a word fall to the ground. I must confess that words of mine have littered the countryside over the years. I used to listen to radio talk shows, and I often phoned in to take part. But as I said before, I had a hard time with my first name, so I referred to myself by my middle name. I called myself "Rob". It's a monument to Papa's longsuffering that he

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tolerated such actions on my part. I only hope that I have not too atrociously misrepresented him.

I also subscribed to more than one news magazine. I wrote letters to the editor, lots of them. I got a kick out of seeing my material in print. I toyed with the idea of becoming a professional writer. In fact one of my high school correspondence teachers invited me down to Regina to help him write text books. Specifically, he solicited my services as translator. I declined the invitation. Papa was not in Regina.

I took up shooting. I asked if Papa objected. He said no. So I bought a rifle. Then I bought another rifle. Then I bought a shotgun. I joined the local gun club, took my hunter safety course, got my firearms acquisition certificate, my hunting license. I burned thousands of rounds of ammunition. Finally, my groups were down to two inches at a hundred yards, with a .303 and a four-power scope. Carol was raised on elk meat. She wanted elk, not deer. So, I got elk tags, and spent a week hunting for elk out by Porcupine Plain, Carol's home town. I saw no elk, just flocks of deer.

Chapter 19

We were prosperous again. We had two courier routes, and Papa had a job selling office equipment. In nineteen ninety-one, we were grossing over a hundred thousand a year. Papa had the engineers come out to survey our Tisdale acreage for subdivision. He found two decent used houses that had to be moved, so he bought them. We dug two new basements, built two new foundations, and had those two houses moved to our place.

Papa took Carol shopping in the States. The exchange rate was favourable. And, as I said, I took that two-week holiday with Eugène. Papa started casting about for that farm he wanted to buy. And he found it.

Larry had a half-section of tilled land, another half-section fenced and seeded to pasture, and a ten-acre homesite, South of Tisdale, in the Rural Municipality of Pleasantdale. He wanted to

quit farming and move to town. He was a trucker, and his children liked horses, so he needed a place with lots of room. Papa did a land swap with him, and they moved into each other's houses.

Papa shopped around for some farm implements. He bought a John Deere "forty-twenty" tractor; two swathers, one self-propelled and the other a pull-type; a round-baler; and a self-propelled combined harvester (all used, of course). We were becoming farmers!

The year we became farmers, we put in a crop of canola, and we grew a field of alfalfa hay. We also put a herd of cattle on the pasture. That was the Year of Flood, when the Mississippi River reversed its course, and all mid-continental North America got soaked. Once again, events in the wide, wide world turned our steps. The cattle all got pink-eye and foot-rot, and several of them died of pneumonia. Our canola crop failed. Half our hay crop spent the winter in swath under the snow. In the spring, we found it to be a mess of black yuck, so we burned it. In other words, our foray into farming appeared not to enjoy Divine Blessing.

Papa was content to break even that season. His priority was still "building God's house, and seeking His will". He refused to call that year's events a misfortune, preferring to see them as Divine Guidance. The money did not matter. He said these things to our friends, Dwayne and Gordon, with whom we'd been doing regular Bible studies. He said these things to his three sons, when he brought them out for an overnight stay in Prince Albert, to have a heart-to-heart with them. And he said these things to his brother Rémi.

Rémi is... different. He's a dry alcoholic whose marriage broke up many years ago. He, like Maman, listens to the Voice of God coming out of his own heart. His particular version of the Voice of God brought him all over North America chasing visions of Mary. He came to visit us, and brought a woman, Mary-El, and her daughter, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had seen visions of Mary. A clergyman had turned her into a dog-and-pony show, and taken her, her mother, and Rémi, on the road. The three of them finally shook themselves

loose from that clergyman. When they came to our house, Rémi was the self-appointed guardian for Elizabeth and her mother. Elizabeth was a child looking for a childhood, and Mary-El was a mother determined to give her daughter a normal life.

To this day we do not know for sure what motivated Rémi to come to us. We heard that he was persuaded to come by his son, but we can't imagine why Rémi's son would have made such a recommendation. These are relatives who live far away in Manitoba, and we had few dealings with them. Papa offered to share with Rémi everything God had taught him from the Bible. Rémi wasn't interested. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, all the angels and saints regularly came down from Heaven to speak to Rémi. He had no need of Papa, or of the Bible. Papa offered to share with Rémi his house, his table, and his labours, everything God might bestow as earthly blessing. Rémi wasn't interested. He wanted a day job, a house of his own, and a steady pay-cheque, things Papa could not give him. Rémi packed up his stuff, the woman and the girl, and went back home to Winnipeg. With him he also carried a grudge, which he figured was worth five hundred dollars.

Chapter 20

Papa had been resolute in resisting the temptation to go out teaching. He'd seen the chaos that resulted when people rushed out to afflict one another with every kernel of revelation, as soon as they received one. In their haste to make a name for themselves, would-be teachers were filling the world with noise, and instead of clarifying matters, they only added to the confusion. Instead, Papa gobbled the Word in long learning sessions. When Papa felt himself glutted, rather than go out teaching, he applied his efforts at putting into practice what he'd learned. When the results were less than ideal, he knew that there were more learning sessions in the offing.

Papa was on record. He had prayed to God that He let Papa come closer to Himself. How close? Into God's very bosom. He prayed that he wanted to follow Christ, and that he wanted to

be where Jesus was, just as it is written in the Gospel of John. He invited God to remove any obstacle between him and his goal. Eugène and I joined our prayers to his.

God must have heard that prayer. One frigid winter morning, I trashed the engine on my delivery van. The courier company did without me that day, while I arranged the purchase of a replacement vehicle. A few days later, the news broke: our company had lost the bank contracts. Those contracts were the mainstay of the courier business in rural Saskatchewan. We weren't overly worried. Typically, the owner-operators signed on with the new company, painted over their vans, donned new uniforms, and it was business as usual. In all of Saskatchewan, that's exactly what happened... *except in the Carrot River Valley*. The new company made a curious exception in our district. It awarded the contracts for the entire region to a single operator who had his staff of drivers already hired! The new company had no room for us, and neither did the old one. We were out of the courier business... for good.

The new situation complicated matters. The farm purchase from Larry had to be revisited. Papa tried to do the honourable thing. He tried to uphold his agreement with Larry, but had to ask him for a more flexible arrangement. Larry was, on the contrary, quite inflexible, and was quite angry on account of how things were turning out. He got his half-section of pasture back, along with a quarter-section of cropland, but kept the house in town. We kept the acreage in the R.M. of Pleasantdale, along with the nearby quarter-section of alfalfa. We wound up selling the acreage to Larry's brother, whose own house and yard were right next door.

We shipped that poxy, blighted herd of cattle to market, and replaced it with another. We consecrated this herd. We called it God's herd, and we resolved not to avail ourselves of any veterinary medicine. We dropped it off in a rented pasture. Those cattle disappeared amongst the trees, and we only caught glimpses of them that whole summer.

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Papa, Eugène and myself became a threesome, studying Scripture and praying. We read the Bible out loud to one another, and prayed together, for hours each day. We did not apply for social assistance, and we did not look for jobs.

By some bizarre coincidence, while we were undergoing this spiritual crisis, the community around us was enduring a crisis of its own. A little girl disappeared in the woods South of town. This little girl, Ashley Christianson, was known to us. She was daughter to a friend of Carol's. Carol had even babysat the child a time or two. Volunteers turned out in droves. The Army came, with soldiers, helicopters, and heat sensitive scanning equipment. Trackers were even brought in from the United States, with bloodhounds, and it was all to no avail. We heard the voice of God in the whole circumstance. *Do not seek the girl*, He was saying, *seek Me. I know where she is*. We shared these reflections with Dwayne and Gordon, our Bible study partners. That did not dissuade them from joining the company of volunteers. The focus of national attention was fixed on Tisdale that month. We could not help but feel it personally.

Carol did not understand. She figured, quite reasonably, that Papa and his boys should be out there hustling a living from the world. She had not experienced Papa's encounter with God, Papa's walk with God, the teaching he had received from God or the experiences he had lived which proved that teaching. The place to which he had progressed, and to which I'd been following, hot on his heels, all this time, was incompatible with her world. She wanted to stay with Papa. Her affection for him was strong. But the path he was walking frightened her.

Papa had warned Carol at the outset of their relationship that this day would come. The day had arrived, he informed her. He had received his summons. Carol did understand this much at least: she was not being blind-sided. She was such a good sport. She left, but there was no rage, no name-calling, no smashing dishes. She found a new home, a new job, and that was that. Her children went with her, but kept their new name.

Papa was sure that, financially, our net worth was still positive. He took to heart the admonitions in the Gospels to "sell

what you have and give to the poor". He came to Vincent with a proposition. He offered to give him his assets. He asked Vincent to take them over such as they were, retire the outstanding debts as he saw fit, and keep the balance. He included a voluntary settlement for Carol in the package. Vincent agreed.

Vincent shipped the cattle to market. They were all fat and slick, not one was lost, and there was no sign of disease among them. He also got the quarter-section of hay land, the acreages in town, and all the farm machinery we had left, tractor, combine, swather, baler, everything. He even got the horses. There was some outstanding paper, which Vincent consolidated into one big note, but the worth of those assets was far larger. He still has much of what we gave him. There were even some surprise windfalls: The quarter-section had fifty or so acres of marketable timber on it.

Chapter 21

Papa finally knew whose disciple he was. He had prayed so long for God to send him an apostle. He finally realized that he'd been under one all along. His apostle, the one sent to him by God, was John. It was John's gospel which had been recommended to him by Jean Turpin and Allan Bowen in nineteen eighty-two. It was John's gospel that had so far inspired him, and had provoked in him the strongest reaction. John quickened Papa, and fed his spirit. No other book of Scripture had such an effect. John was Papa's connection to Jesus Christ.

I wondered about all this. Why should one evangelist be preferable over another? Where did that leave Matthew, for instance? What would following Christ look like if John's testimony were applied? I found Papa's assertions perplexing, but suppressed my feelings of unease.

On one point we three were altogether in agreement: Christ was waiting to be followed. We knew that Christ was not being followed in the Church at large, and that lip-service "worship" was unsatisfactory. Christians were complacent and

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self-satisfied, persuaded of their "rightness", and uninterested in the quest for greater closeness to God. They were "saved", God was off their backs, and they were free to do their own thing.

The factional division of a Church fractured along a million planes of cleavage was proof enough that this position was unfounded. The "red letters", the words of Jesus, judged the Church, and found it wanting. For us at least, the time had come to do something about it.

Uncle Ken, Maman's brother, the man who had built us our "Egdod", had a place out in the country near Richer, Manitoba. There he lived with his second wife Liz, raising two step-daughters and a barnyard full of animals. He commuted to Winnipeg each day, to ply his trade in the body shop where he worked for Uncle Allan, his brother. One of Ken's favourite things was to kill a pig and barbecue it, and have a hundred people over for a feast. In nineteen ninety-four, he invited Vincent and his family to just such an event, and in passing, invited the three of us. We all went together and had a blast.

We met the congregation of the Protestant church in Richer of which Ken and Stan had become members. We visited with Ken and his brothers, Stan and Brian, whom we'd not seen in a good long while. The three of them had recanted on their Catholicism and become Protestants. They were all divorced and remarried. We met our new aunts and new cousins. Allan is one of a minority in Maman's family, being still attached to his first spouse. He did not attend Ken's party.

After all the horseshoe games, and singsongs around the campfire, after most of the guests had left and most of the overnights had gone to bed, a few were left sitting around Ken's dining room table: Ken, Stan, Vincent, Eugène, myself, and Papa. Stan turned to Papa and asked, "What's been happening in your life lately?"

We all sat in silence while Papa told his tale. He told of the Tour, and what his life had become since. He told of hearing the call of God in the words of Jesus, of giving away all he had, and of taking up his own cross to follow Christ. He told of years of searching, of a process launched in nineteen eighty-one, finally

coming to fruition in the present. When he wound up his story, all eyes were agog, all mouths agape, and a minute passed before anyone could muster a response.

Eugène and I were already up to speed. Everyone else around that table was very surprised indeed, including Vincent. Much had transpired without his knowledge, even though he was in close proximity. I had watched Papa struggle to comprehend the Will of God since Assiniboia. I had watched him apply his process of experiment and elimination. I had watched him probe the Scriptures and pursue God in prayer.

Papa knew that the House of God was not an edifice made of wood and stone, but of souls of men. He knew that the Kingdom of God was not a geographic expression. It was not a jurisdiction that could be drawn on a map. It was the sum of those who were God's subjects, who knew God's will and were willing to comply.

We went back to Tisdale and wrapped things up. I sold my guns and gave away my hunting knife. Vincent had placed at our disposal a ten-year-old Honda wagon. We packed a few personal effects into it. In nineteen ninety-four, on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, at the eleventh hour, while the warbirds flew in "missing-man" formation over the town of Tisdale, we departed, headed for Winnipeg.

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Aimé Labossière



(Revelations 12:11)

Part 3 "If any man will... "

Chapter 22

I was in bad shape. I was full of opinions on what following Jesus should look like, and my expectations were not being met. In retrospect I can say that I had a big bubble of vainglory inside of me, a bubble that very much needed popping. It wasn't altogether clear to me just then, but I was standing in front of the door to the Kingdom, and I was too big to pass through. Papa kept telling me that all God wanted for me was that I become innocent, and that innocence was there for me, free for the receiving, if only I would accept it in discipleship.

How ironic. For years Papa prayed that he'd be given an apostle to follow, and none appeared. He had a humility that I lacked, so God let him in "on the ground floor". I had an apostle before me. I had the answer to Papa's prayers, and in a fit of perversity, of pathetic self-importance, I spurned him. I did not do so openly, but I built a barrier inside myself, a barrier of mental reservations and conscientious objection. It tore me up inside, and when I looked in the mirror, I saw Judas looking back at me.

How had I come to this pass? What destroyed the unity I had with Papa in nineteen eighty-two? The only answer is that I'd been contaminated with the "leaven of the Pharisees". I learned to my shock that I was suffering from the same malaise that had afflicted the doctors of the law in Jesus' day.

Central to the understanding that Papa had received from God was the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil". This expression symbolized the very exercise of conscience itself. The first commandment ever heard from God by man prohibited the exercise of conscience and defined sin. The exercise of

conscience is the underlying fact which makes a sin out of any action. Until a man can put an end to his exercise of conscience, that man will forever be in sin. That is the problem that Jesus was sent to address.

Jesus was a sinless man. He always did that which pleased his Father. The Father presented Jesus as a place of innocence to which men could be attached in discipleship. By relinquishing their consciences to Jesus in the surrender of discipleship, His disciples acquired from Him the innocence they otherwise lacked, the innocence without which any reconciliation with the Father is impossible.

Jesus, by delegation, presented His disciples as places of attachment for others. By conferring on them the office of apostle, He passed on to them His own mandate. Anyone who was moved to obtain reconciliation with God had to come to them. When Jesus departed this Earth, they were man's only contact with God.

The doctors of the law withstood Jesus to the face. His answer to them was simple: "You say you see, therefore your sin remains." His disciples, after having received from Him the unction, went out into the world to continue His work. They met another doctor of the law, another Pharisee, who withstood them to the face. His name was Saul of Tarsus.

Chapter 23

We left Tisdale and came to Winnipeg with the proceeds of the sale of my hunting gear. We came to Uncle Rémi. Papa gave him the money, to settle the grudge Rémi had been harbouring. We stayed in a flat Rémi was keeping. He stayed at Mary-El's house while we were there. We hung around for several weeks, praying and fasting, and going for walks in the Saint Boniface I knew as a child.

I wrestled with my mental reservations and my conscientious objections. Papa asked Eugène and me if we saw God's unction on him. I took Papa for a walk and confessed to him

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all the troubles I was having. His response was this: He told Eugène and me that if we thought we could follow Christ on our own, we were free to seek God as we saw fit, and we were welcome to try. My reply was that I could do nothing but stay with Papa. As I told him then, it was the humblest thing I knew to do. Eugène stayed too, but Papa told us that he was no longer our father but our apostle, and we were no longer his sons, but his disciples. We agreed to those terms. But I was still aching from trying to fit that big bubble of mine through that narrow door.

We visited with Uncle Brian. He drove bus for the city, and would stop by for visits on breaks and at shift changes. He invited us to come and visit his brother Ken. We told him we were willing if God was willing.

Brian and Ken have fascinating stories of their own, best told by them. Suffice to say that they studied for doctoral degrees at the School of Hard Knocks. Brian told us that Ken was in trouble and could use Papa's help. When we went to Ken's place in the country and I hugged him "Hello", I could feel his pain. He was wound up like a coil spring.

Ken was at loggerheads with the church he was attending. He fought with the leadership there over matters of doctrine and practice. He was conflicted, both internally and externally, over contradictions and hypocrisies that surrounded him and permeated his life. He described it as "drowning in the blood of Jesus". When we came to his house, and told him that we'd left all to follow Christ, fulfilling the intention we'd expressed during our previous visit, Uncle Ken called us "the three wise men". (We came to his house at Christmastime.)

Something happened to Ken. He received Papa. After a brief period of scepticism, he abandoned all caution and started swallowing everything Papa had to say without criticism. And he was transformed. His internal conflicts evaporated, as did the enmity he had felt towards the leaders of his church. His pain and confusion were gone. Even his health improved. He likened it to the resurrection of Lazarus. As he put it, he was "born again again"!

Ken's wife Liz invited us to stay at their place, an invitation Ken more than gladly endorsed. We ended up staying there for a couple of months that winter, "turning logs", as Ken would say. (His house was heated with wood.)

Eugène went to stay at Brian's house for a while, so Ken had just Papa and myself as guests. We all met together three or so times a week, in pizza pig outs, rap sessions and Bible studies that lasted long into the night. Brian would bring Eugène, and Uncle Stan would come too. During the day Papa and I would crack the books, because Ken expected a nightly revelation when he came home from work. He heard some doozies.

Chapter 24

It was during our stay at Ken's house that we finally came to grips with the Pharisee. We had so long wondered why the Church was forever succumbing to decay, why it was being trampled by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. We received the shocking revelation: the Church had been sucked into a counterfeit, substitute gospel introduced by Saul of Tarsus. This was the "leaven of the Pharisees" Jesus' disciples warned us about in the Gospels. Everywhere, the gospel according to Saul was given precedence over the Gospel according to John. All along, what made Papa unique was the fact that the Gospel he had received was centred on John, the faithful and true witness.

Everything made sense. I understood the painful bubble of vainglory inside of me was kept there by Saul's doctrine. It was keeping me out of the Kingdom, as it had done to Christians everywhere. I had to receive the discipline of God in humility, and allow myself to sprout from the Vine of Christ. I had to surrender to a living apostle of God, just as Jesus' disciples did, and just as their own disciples did later on. I felt myself catapulted back in time to the first century.

It was not a pleasant experience. I went through a period of severe misery. I remembered my pledge of allegiance. I also

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remembered Monsieur Saint-Pierre and his warning. There were moments when these, and my determination not to fulfil his prediction, were the only things keeping me going. I knew that my choice was between discipleship and the snowbank.

My moment of crisis came on the way back to Ken's from a walkabout in Steinbach. I was in the back seat, sobbing. Papa asked me what was wrong, and I said, "What do I do about the part of me that still hates God?" Papa offered me his hand and said, "Trust me." I took his hand. I prayed, "God please change me." I felt the pain inside diminish, like gas escaping through a hole in a balloon.

Funny thing about leaven: it makes bubbles. It puts bubbles in beer and wine, and it puts bubbles in bread. Leavened bread is delicious and nutritious, but the Israëlites had to put the leaven out of their houses before leaving Egypt. Now we spiritual Israëlites, hoping to leave the spiritual Egypt, have to put away the spiritual leaven. Too bad we like it so much. The whole dilemma expressed itself to me in a dream. I dreamt I was in a big aeroplane, stuck in the middle of a large city, and I was trying to negotiate its streets. The wings were entangled in a maze of power and phone lines, and the propellers were menacing the traffic around me. In my dream, I knew that I was in the city of Saint Paul. I knew also that somehow, I had to get this aeroplane off the street and out to the airport where it belonged. If I didn't, I would never get airborne.

Jesus warned us to "beware the leaven of the Pharisees". Once a lump of dough has leaven in it, the leaven cannot be removed. To obtain unleavened bread, all the leaven in the house, and the contaminated dough, have to be discarded. That is the short version of what started at Plantagenet.

How hard it is to stop eating from the Tree! How difficult it is to stop exercising one's own conscience! It can only be done by receiving, and believing in, the one set apart by God. Those of us who have called ourselves Christian cop out by claiming to believe in Jesus. We call him the one set apart by God. But just as Moses promised to the Hebrews that God would send them prophets as

successors to Moses, so too Jesus sent his disciples, as apostles, to be successors to himself. The Hebrews paid homage to dead prophets while murdering live ones. Likewise the Christians withstood the apostles to the face while claiming to honour Jesus. Papa broke the cycle of rebellion by receiving John as Christ, successor to Jesus. After my time of wavering, I came back to my place as disciple to Papa. For me he is John's successor. The alternative hurts too much.

Chapter 25

Our stay at Ken's house got really interesting. We were in church with him one Sunday. After the service, Ken was chatting with one of his old church buddies. Ken opened his Bible to the passage that reads, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple... whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."

Ken pointed to these words and said to his friend, "I'm going to do this."

All hell broke loose. The men of that church started shouting and gesticulating, pointing their fingers in our faces and accusing us of being devils. The church minister joined the fray. He was the most moderate of our critics, but he did try to defend those members of his congregation that were lashing us with their tongues. We asked him, "How is it devilish to hear those words of Jesus and apply them personally?"

He replied, "That's what I've done myself."

Then Ken asked him, "So why can't I do it too?"

The parson didn't have much to say after that, but his parishioners still did. They kept right on yelling and vituperating until we left the building.

One man in the congregation did not participate in the altercation. His name was Dennis Kadobienski. He met us in the parking lot and shook our hands.

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Ken didn't leave his wife. He told her that he was deposing her from God's throne. He had to "love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength", and "come to God through discipleship". He invited her to follow along as he learned how to do these things, but she was quite hostile to the entire proceeding. He offered to liquidate the household assets and endow her with the proceeds. She accepted the offer and separated from him.

There are many passages of Scripture that seem not to belong in Holy Writ at all. This attitude is reserved for those passages which, when quoted and applied, make a normal life impossible. This is especially true of the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. When those words are given the weight they should deserve considering their source, relationships can no longer be maintained or cultivated in the conventional manner. And Christians all too often are the ones who offer those words their stiffest opposition.

Earle Leach is one of those kind, friendly people of Star City whose acquaintance we were so happy to make when we first moved up there. While we were in Manitoba with Ken, we learned that Earle's wife Edith had passed away. He invited us to the funeral, and we came back to Star City to attend.

We stayed a couple of days in Star City, then we returned to Manitoba. That's when we went to stay at Brian and Janet's.

Chapter 26

When our adventure in Manitoba began in nineteen ninety-four, we stayed at Rémi's, but we visited quite a lot with Brian. He often stopped to chat at the end of a shift. He told us about a group of bus drivers, a fellowship of Christian transit workers, "born-again" believers who met weekly for Bible study and prayer.

We attended meetings with that group, in Brian's company. The whole thing bore a strong resemblance to the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship, and I've no doubt that one served as the model for the other. We sat in while the men in the group

prayed together, and shared Scripture references which they felt weighed heavily on their hearts. This particular group paid special attention to the devotionals written by Oswald Chambers.

That group of bus drivers had an interesting time while we were in its midst. Every week those men felt moved to pray for the same things, and every week they were amazed when they all brought Scripture references that were closely interlinked. Those Scriptures all spoke to the three of us personally, confirming and reinforcing our endeavour. Brian, to whom we first divulged our doings, was dumbfounded. These men were outside our personal influence, but were being influenced anyway, from above, to shed light on our path. Brian saw it, and it moved him to tears.

We began to open up with these men. We started to show them the path we were on. For weeks our meetings continued. But the leader of the organization, a man we saw once in a while, when he started hearing fragments of the content we were covering, took exception. Then the fooferaw erupted in Richer, and some feedback reached the church that played host to the Winnipeg chapter of the Christian Transit Workers.

One morning we arrived at the weekly meeting to find that a letter had been printed up and circulated. This letter was about us. It was in opposition to us and everything about us, and warned that those meetings would no longer be tolerated if we were in attendance. I guess that's fair enough. After all, it's their church house. Sadly, the flow that those bus drivers were in, the wonderful connection they had enjoyed, it all just... stopped, the moment that letter appeared on the table.

We painted Brian's garage. We remodelled his basement. And while we stayed at his house, his freezer stayed full.

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*The following is a copy of the letter circulated
among Brian's colleagues on our account.*

Aimé Labossière

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March 1, 1995

To:

Winnipeg Christian Transit Drivers

Dear Friends,

Greetings in the Name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ!

We, as the Christian Fellowship Chapel, count it as a privilege to provide space to a group of Christian Transit Drivers. As a body of believers, we are thrilled to be a part of a ministry that encourages Christians among our Winnipeg Transit Drivers. However, recently we have been concerned about the content of your discussions.

We would like you to be aware that this Church believes: **a)** in the *Unity of Scripture* and that *ALL* Scripture is given by God; **b)** that the authors are *NOT* contradicting each other or the teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ; **c)** that husband and wife are one, consequently, the idea of separating from the spouse "*for the sake of Christ*" is not in line with the objectives and overall spirit of Scripture. We consider such ideas heresy and cultic; **d)** that men and women are standing (positionally) as equals before God (Gal. 3:28, 29). Although equality does NOT dismiss hierarchy (Eph. 5:22-24), hierarchy, however, should never lead to the idea that women are subordinates or inferior (keyverse: Eph. 5:21). We have to love our wives as Christ loves the Church (Eph. 5:24,25).

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As a member of the *Commission on Churches** of the "Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches" (FEBC), I am also acting on behalf of all affiliated Churches, and therefore, I have to inform you that teachings which contradict the FEBC Articles of Faith will **not** be tolerated on the premises of FEBC affiliated churches.

We must request that those within your group refrain from sharing beliefs which are not in line with what we, as the FEBC, have accepted to be Scriptural. Please take note of our beliefs as outlined in this letter and the Articles of Faith of the "Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches".

May the Lord bless you and give you wisdom in your efforts to serve Him.

In His Service,

John H. Bartelings, Th.D., Ph.D.

(*) COMMISSION ON CHURCHES; Assists FEBC churches seeking pastors; examines pastors for licensing and ordination; renders aid/discipline to pastors and churches.

Chapter 27

Once, while we were staying at Brian's house in Saint Vital, it was decided that we would go to a restaurant for Sunday brunch. Ken, who by then had moved into the city, would join us there, after making his own way from his place in Saint Boniface.

We stepped out into a blizzard. We got into the car and drove out into the street. There was a city snow plough in front of us, clearing the way. For our whole drive out to the restaurant, the street was being cleared by a snow plough right in front of us. Otherwise the city was paralysed. The airport was closed, and Ken never got out of his driveway.

In the restaurant, Brian had a good long talk with Papa. Papa said, "Isn't it wonderful? God shut down the city of Winnipeg, then cleared a path to this place just for us."

There was enough staff to run the restaurant, but there were no customers. The place was empty except for us. We had a very pleasant brunch.

That day Brian declared himself ready to be a disciple, and he acknowledged Papa to be the apostle sent to him.

Not long afterwards, Brian's wife Janet, a sweet lady and gracious hostess, nevertheless told us we were no longer welcome in her house. Brian was ashamed of the whole situation, but Papa reassured him, saying that a solution was already set up by God. That's when Janet told us there was a phone message from Vincent. Papa got on the phone with him and learned that our friend in Star City, Earle Leach, wanted Eugène and me to come and stay with him.

When we were packed and ready to go, Brian was crying, and so was Janet.

We came back to Saskatchewan. Eugène and I went to Earle's house. He was lonesome after the death of his wife of forty-five years. We were to keep him company, look after the housework, and give him a hand with projects which keep emerging from his fertile mind. Papa stayed in Star City for a few

days, but then returned to Winnipeg. I spoke to Papa on the phone a few days later. He was back at Brian's. Brian had insisted.

While we were at Earle's, Papa stayed at Brian's. I spoke to Papa on the phone as often as I could. I updated him on goings-on in Star City, and he related to me some of his own experiences. He spoke of interesting episodes while shopping with Brian for auto parts, and interesting exchanges during Bible studies. It was during one of those telephone conversations that Papa told me, "God has answered my prayer. I'm in his bosom."

Chapter 28

What a strange time that was, our stay at Earle's. I had "carte blanche" when shopping for groceries, and a stack of cookbooks to peruse. Earle had a project on the go, to build prefab fence panels according to a pattern of his own devising (it was quite ingenious). We helped Earle with his projects, looked after his housekeeping, and tended to his ailments. He took us on visits to all his friends and relations. We had fun, but I missed Papa.

Once in a while Papa came to visit, and Earle had to do without my company. As nice as Earle was and as nice as the people were with whom we visited, I felt myself craving the spiritual life I had in Papa's company. Earle even offered to be my mentor (he had no sons, only daughters). I told him I already had a mentor. I said, "Earle, of the tens of thousands of people I've met in my life, only one follows Christ, and that's my dad. He is closer to God than I am, and I can follow no higher calling than to be like him."

Earle took that rather hard. He was a devout Christian. "Your dad will never preach in this town," he said.

"That's Star City's loss," I replied.

Our stay at Earle's was complicated, because Eugène and I both were there, and he and I were... different... from one

another. His walk since Plantagenet bore almost no resemblance to my own. In consequence, Earle was getting from us... mixed signals. Winter passed into Spring, and Papa came and fetched me back with him to Brian's. Eugène stayed at Earle's, on Papa's recommendation.

Chapter 29

I was with Papa at Brian's during the Flood. This was not the flood which had turned our path away from the farming business, but the one which afflicted Manitoba in the Spring of nineteen ninety-seven. Lake Morris was approaching. We went to Uncle Allan's place in the country and helped him place sandbags. We went to a church in Saint Boniface and helped the congregation move stuff out of the downstairs hall. They wanted to minimize water damage.

At Brian's, Papa and I were saying, "Our Father sent this flood. It's our flood. Our Father is inviting the Christians of Manitoba to re-examine their priorities."

At the same church where we'd helped move stuff, we heard the preacher on Sunday, saying the most remarkable things. He said, "I dreamt that God was sending a flood of clear, pure water with which to wash our city and purify it, cleanse it of its filth. But all the Christians were stacking sandbags and building dikes, to keep the cleansing water out." He confessed that he had no idea as to the meaning of the dream. He said another thing: "I went to the dikes and saw the people of Winnipeg working together side by side. It bothered me to realize that Christian and heathen worked together, and *I couldn't tell them apart*." Papa and I were amused by that.

A couple of empty-nesters who were members of that church had us over for supper. They were eager to hear our story, but they couldn't keep from explaining our experiences to us. This was another thing Papa and I found rather amusing.

Papa and I were amused by this too. Just like in nineteen ninety-four, when we'd cloistered ourselves in prayer and Bible

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study, preparing for our November departure, once again the eyes of the nation were riveted on the town where we were living. The Army came to Tisdale to find a little girl, and the newsmen came to Tisdale to follow a story. Again here was the Army, this time in Winnipeg, this time fighting the Flood, and here were the newsmen following the story. Both times the Army came, not in response to an act of foreign aggression, but in response to an act of God. Both times the Christians around us made common cause with the world. And both times we felt ourselves called to a new degree of closeness with our Father.

Brian was frightened by the flood, and he was angry with himself for being frightened. His little blue heaven in the suburbs was at risk, and he felt guilty because it mattered to him as much as it did. Papa said, "It's not about being indifferent to the things of this world. It's about deciding whether or not you want to get closer to God. If you decide you want to get closer to God, then tell Him in your prayers. He will gradually wean you of the world. One by one, He'll remove the obstacles between you and Himself. He'll teach you to rely on Him, and He'll take care of you in the process. You've seen Him in action already."

Brian knew he couldn't hold onto all his possessions. Regardless of what the flood might do, he was over his head in debt. He had child support commitments in favour of children by a previous marriage. These, in addition to his mortgage and consumer debts, meant that he was always one step behind. He decided to sell his house and retire his debts. Janet went along with this, but she was still quite uncomfortable with the notion of Brian being Papa's disciple.

Chapter 30

We stayed at Brian's more than once. When we left Ken's, we came to Vincent's house. He had a project in Saskatoon, and needed the help. We helped him dismantle an old greenhouse the proprietors of which had gone out of business. Vincent wanted to set up a market garden back home in Star City. One project led to another, and we ended up spending several months at Vincent's. A pattern began to establish itself. We would spend a few months in Saskatchewan, and a few months in Manitoba.

We came back to Star City. Earle Leach went a-courtin', so Eugène rejoined us at Vincent's. We helped neighbour farmers put in their crops, and helped them take them off again. We helped Vincent take buildings apart in the city, and helped him reassemble them at his place. We helped him harvest timber and make it into firewood. We went logging and sawmilling, and remodelling basements.

We went back to Winnipeg. Ken completed his separation from Liz. He bought, then sold, a house in Saint Boniface. He shocked his brother Allan by retiring from the autobody trade. And Ken came with us to Star City.

Ken felled timber with us. He split firewood and milled lumber. With us he worked harder in retirement than he'd done while holding a day job. And, like us, he did it all without remuneration. The hard work we did with our bodies we called "the rock pile". The hard work going on inside us, the work of humbling ourselves and conforming to the will of someone else, for this Ken coined a peculiar term. He called it "eating seagull".

Earle Leach got remarried and moved out of his old house. Vincent rented it from him, and made it available to the four of us. We moved out of Vincent's basement, and refinished it to make room for his growing family.

We enjoyed the use of Earle's house immensely. It had a huge glazed-in sun-space on the South side of it, which to us was

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a piece of summertime that comforted us all winter long. Ken had for years harboured a fantasy, that he might one day move to South America and live in a tropical wilderness. As he put it, Paraguay had come to him.

Our relationship with Vincent was a strange one. Our help was welcome, and we worked very hard. We gave Vincent all discretion in directing our efforts and administering affairs. We sometimes rankled under his leadership, especially Papa, to whom the whole situation was against nature. But he subjected himself to it as an exercise in self-denial and subordination to the will of someone else.

I'm not sure how Vincent saw things, though sometimes he let on that he considered himself our benefactor (which he was, though perhaps not in the manner he believed himself to be). One thing is certain: at no time were we permitted to discuss spiritual matters in his house. This was a cause of sadness, especially to Papa.

Chapter 31

We had occasion to take a few days off. Papa suggested that Eugène, Ken and I go to Winnipeg and visit Brian. He wanted to renew contact with Brian and Stan, But at the same time he wanted to remain somewhat aloof.

Ken was with us, but hadn't yet sold his house in Saint Boniface. Brian, having sold his house, was in the process of moving into a housing co-op. Stan had moved to Alberta. We went to Winnipeg, and it was to Ken's house that we repaired. Brian met us there.

At the outset of our expedition, I had prayed, "Where is the God of Robert?" He didn't take long to manifest Himself. The first thing Brian said when we arrived was that he wanted to go to Alberta to visit Stan. I said, "Take me with you!"

Brian replied, "I was hoping someone would come with me. I hate travelling alone, especially in winter." It was decided then and there: we were all going to Alberta together.

Our trip to Alberta was uneventful. The weather was fine. We talked and laughed all the way. I happen to like travel for its own sake, and take special delight in traversing unfamiliar country. I hadn't been in those parts since nineteen seventy-eight. The novelty was stimulating.

Stan's new home was in Coalhurst, just outside of Lethbridge. Stan had moved to Coalhurst to open a restaurant. He'd been unsuccessful. When we visited him, he was back to plying his old trade, painting cars.

Ken, Stan, and Brian, three of my mother's brothers, were all in the circle of prayer and Bible learning that had formed around Papa. This development, considering Maman's departure, was our own peculiar irony. Stan, like the others, felt the quickening in his soul whenever Papa taught. And he too encountered all sorts of trouble summoning all the truth he learned, and bringing it to reality in his life. That's the hard part. The world throws up obstacles everywhere, inside a man, and in the people around him that he loves. This we knew from experience and observation. Those three brothers knew it too. Stan's wife was hostile to us, and had been so since that first encounter in Manitoba in nineteen ninety-four. Our visit to his house in Alberta happened to coincide with her time away visiting relatives.

When Papa had sent us along, he'd confided in us a message for Brian and Stan. While we were visiting in Coalhurst, we relayed that message. It was simple, just four words: "It's the eleventh hour." Papa felt a gathering urgency.

The time came for us to return home, and the question arose: Do we return first to Winnipeg? The question was answered for us. A blizzard straddled the Trans-Canada Highway between Regina and Brandon. Brian brought us home, in clear weather all the way, and ended up visiting for a couple of days with Papa.

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"Once again God has used the weather to give us time to discuss matters of importance," Papa said to Brian. "Once again He is asking us if we really do want to be with Him, or if we just want Him to be with us."

We'd left our van in Winnipeg, so Ken went with Brian to fetch it home again. Brian went home with much to think about.

Aimé Labossière



(Revelations 12:11)

Part 4 "That the world may know..."

Chapter 32

Ken went back to Manitoba for a while. He needed a break from eating seagulls. He had a circle of friends in Richer: Jake and Maria; Lucien and Eugenia; Derek; Karl. He went and lived among them, helping out with building and remodelling projects, and otherwise finding uses for his special talents. His friends were keepers of livestock and big game hunters, and they welcomed Ken's help when the time came for castrating boars or dressing out carcasses.

Papa enjoyed a windfall. Some old business from his life insurance days had yielded some residual income over the years, and the company sent him a sum of around eight thousand dollars. "Whatever shall I do with the money?" Papa wondered. He spent a portion of it helping Vincent get repairs done on his Treefarmer line skidder. He also bought a mini-van, and so disposed of the balance.

There was a windfall of another sort. Bill Ripley owned two grocery stores in Star City, one beside the other. One he ran as a going concern, the other was closed up and dormant. The vacant grocery store had apartments upstairs, the whole setup having been stripped of its furnishings, and more or less in a state of disrepair. Bill Ripley gave us that building. "Whatever shall I do with a building?" Papa wondered.

The Pentecostal church in Star City no longer had a pastor. Dave Meier, the man who had first welcomed us to the Carrot River Valley, was now presiding over the congregation as interim pastor. Eugène and I visited that church a few times while

we'd been living with Earle Leach. At one of those services, we'd heard Dave Meier say from the pulpit, "If something doesn't happen in this town soon, we may as well close our doors for good."

On one of our trips to Winnipeg, a strange thing happened. Vincent asked us to run an errand for him in Melfort on the way out. This was an unusual occurrence, and it brought us off our usual and intended route. We noticed this, and it gave us a certain sense of anticipation: would something noteworthy be happening on our trip? As we traveled South, Papa mused, half-jokingly, "Does God want me to build a church in Star City?"

We were Southbound on the Can-Am Highway, and meant to turn East when we struck the Yellowhead. At the junction where the two highways crossed, we stopped to refresh ourselves at the service station. There we bumped into Dave Meier and his family. They were going North towards home, and had stopped at the same place, at the same time, and there we said hello.

"The congregation has chosen a design for the new building it wants to put up," Dave said. "It sent me down South to look at a building down there because that church used the same plan."

We came away from this "chance" meeting, shaking our heads in wonder.

Chapter 33

As the Pentecostals began building their new church house, an idea was building in Papa's mind: if God had given us a building, then it could only be for the purpose of setting up a "place of learning". Breaking rocks and eating seagulls are often unpleasant experiences, but they contribute immensely to spiritual growth. Papa called this the "Boot Camp". Papa envisioned a place to which men starved for answers could repair. There they could receive instruction in the truth God had revealed to Papa. There they would also find a venue in which that truth could be put into practice.

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Our connection with Vincent had involved us in the lumber business. Thanks to our efforts, Vincent now had a line skidder, four chainsaws, a log-splitting machine, a band sawmill, and a head-rig sawmill. Strangely enough, Vincent had never really intended to go into the logging and milling business. Papa began entertaining the notion of buying him out.

Ken came back from Manitoba. As unpleasant as it is to eat seagulls, it was preferable to him over the sterile environment he endured among his acquaintances in Manitoba. As eager as they were to have him around helping them do their thing, they were equally eager to avoid any discussion of the new life he'd received from Papa. He found his relationship with them rather one-sided.

Our dealings in the lumber business brought us into contact with a man by the name of Dennis Robertson. He was originally from the country just North of Melfort, but had gone into business in Rocky Mountain House, in Alberta, logging and milling in the foothills. He came to visit us, he and his brother. We talked shop, and he described a scragg mill he had, that he might sell to us. This machine promised to dramatically improve both our rate of output and our rate of lumber recovery. We talked of other things too. We found out that the Robertsons were devout Christians. They wanted very much to continue the visit, but were expected elsewhere that evening. They broke the meeting off with reluctance.

Earle Leach sold the house. It was time for us to move. We considered setting up camp in the building Bill Ripley had given us, but we hadn't done any improvements in it. The building's purpose had not yet been clearly defined, and Papa didn't feel a definite mandate for its use. There was an upstairs flat above the store Bill still owned. Papa decided to approach him with an offer to rent. As it turned out, Bill had sublet the store to new operators, Dave and Jackie. They were eager to have tenants, and were glad to see us move in.

Chapter 34

Ken had gone back to Manitoba for a short stint among his friends in Richer. Once again he returned to Star City, this time with a woman and a little girl. The woman's name was Lena, and the girl was her daughter Dorotea. Their family name was Doerksen, and they were of Mennonite stock... from Paraguay. Paraguay had come to Ken once again.

Papa celebrated Lena's arrival. He viewed all relationships as learning experiences, object lessons in relationships. This was no exception. Ken and his two charges moved in with us in the upstairs flat, an arrangement that proved to be somewhat... cramped.

Brian and Janet accompanied Ken and Lena on their trip home to Star City. They visited with us for a few days. Once again Papa asked Brian how serious he was about wanting to be with God. And once again Papa expressed his feeling of urgency.

Once settled in, Ken rejoined us working at Vincent's. We had a new toy to play with: a Daewoo skid-steer loader which Vincent had recently bought. We also had a tool in need of rebuilding: a board edger, which had come to Vincent, by way of Winnipeg, from Northern British Columbia. It rolled into Star City in tow behind Ken's one-ton truck.

Papa had money again. While Ken was away, Papa's mini-van had been damaged in a freak accident. Papa had wished he could sell the van, but was reluctant to put it up for sale. Being hungry for divine guidance, Papa hesitated to take the initiative to sell the van. The accident had turned that dilemma into a straightforward insurance claim.

What a queer accident it was! Our van was parked in the street. Further down the street there was a pub, and one of its patrons was going home. He raised the hood of his vehicle and started it from outside. It slipped into gear and started rolling before he could climb into the driver's seat. As its owner chased

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alongside, the vehicle wove from side to side up the street, caroming off one obstacle after another until it slammed into the side of our van. The vehicle's owner then climbed in and drove away.

Gale Jones, a Star City man, saw the whole thing. He called the RCMP, then came thundering up the stairs to alert us to the event. Papa was on the phone with Ken in Winnipeg. I answered the door, and met a rather agitated Mr. Jones. At first I had trouble understanding what he was trying to say, but I finally let him lead me downstairs. He showed me the damage and told me what had happened. I caused him some consternation when I burst out laughing.

Papa already knew what the money was for. He had said, "If I come into some money from a source outside of Vincent, it will mean that it's time to go visit Dennis Robertson in Rocky Mountain House and go see his scragg mill." So that's what we did. We went to Rocky Mountain (a pleasant summer holiday) and paid Mr. Robertson a visit. We let him show us his machine, and we talked.

Dennis was a devout Christian. Papa told him that he didn't want the mill, but that he was answering to divine guidance. "If God wants me to have a mill, then I'll accept to have a mill." Dennis responded by offering the mill to us at cost, payable at our convenience, and on a free trial basis.

"Bring it home and try it out. Fix it up as you see fit, and if it fits your program, buy it. If it doesn't, just bring it to my place in the woods near Smeaton and we'll call it even." Those were his words.

We went home. It was starting to look like we were going into the lumber business.

Chapter 35

Papa hired a truck and fetched home the scragg mill. Vincent was not pleased. Though Vincent had told Papa that he wanted to relinquish control of the lumber business, his reaction was quite negative when the thing started happening.

Papa borrowed some money. He used the money to buy an engine for the scragg. It turned out to be the original power plant that had driven the scragg when it was new. Papa found it with the scragg's original owner, a man in Edson Alberta. Papa also financed repairs on Vincent's board edger.

Star City's mayor owned an old lumberyard in town. He was using it as a storage shed. Papa saw its potential as a site for setting up a pallet mill. He talked to the mayor and struck a deal. The property had two buildings on it. The smaller of the two we refurbished inside, to make of it a place to live.

The strain of living together in the upstairs flat had begun to take its toll. So, while Ken and Lena were away in Manitoba, we moved out of the flat and into our lumberyard. This way Ken and Lena could have the flat to themselves. Ken was surprised by the manoeuvre. He had spoken in his prayers to God: "I will be happy in Bob's house." This response had taken him off guard.

We rebuilt the edger and used it to process a backlog of second-cut slabs which had accumulated. The load of lumber that resulted we shipped to the company which had sold the edger to Vincent. Oddly enough, after all the effort, the outcome was that there was still money owing on the edger.

We repaired the scragg, and built some lumber-handling apparatus to go with it. We did a test run, and found the machine to work superbly. It produced lumber at a formidable rate. Then Vincent announced that his buyers in the city were no longer buying. This gave us pause.

Papa made a loan application to a government agency. He struck a proposal to set up a pallet mill in Star City. This would

allow us to use the lumber processed by our scragg mill ourselves. We would further add value to the lumber by making cargo pallet kits, ready to assemble, and ship them to end users instead of the middleman in the city, who appeared to be in some kind of trouble. Papa thought that perhaps this was how the Place of Learning would take shape.

Chapter 36

All along, Papa had misgivings about the lumber business. "If God wants me in the lumber business, why isn't it falling into place?" Vincent had all but chased us out of the bush, and had started selling round logs. Our scragg mill was sitting idle, as the market for square timbers seemed to have evaporated. And getting into the pallet-milling business entailed dealing with that government agency, a chore Papa found loathsome. "If God wants me in the lumber business, he is going to have to do more than this to persuade me," Papa finally said.

Papa decided to change his assumptions. He would function on the premise that God wanted him out of the lumber business, and let God persuade him otherwise. He resolved to start taking steps towards liquidation. He would retire the debts which had already been incurred, and dispose of the assets which were in his name. He also decided to withdraw the loan application he'd made to the government agency.

Stan came to visit. We had barbecued pork and home-made beer. We had other guests over for a "God party", like the ones we had in Manitoba. Our friends from Tisdale were there. We spoke of personal experiences, the Vine, and unity in Christ. We spoke of urgency. "If I had but three years to live, what would I be doing?" Papa asked.

When Stan was leaving to go home to Alberta, Papa said, "I don't want to spend my three years chopping wood. I want to spend them talking about my Father. That's when I really feel alive."

On Friday, January twenty-eighth, year two thousand, Brian died. He was forty-five.

Chapter 37

We went to Manitoba to see Brian off. He'd appointed Ken his executor, and left instructions that there should be no funeral. There was a reception instead. Funny how it matters little how people treated someone while he was alive. It's when he's dead that people remember how much they loved him. I also heard fear in the voices of several of those in attendance. Brian's death was untimely. It made people nervous. Many eyes shed tears that evening. Ours did not. We knew that all the conflicts which beset Brian, internally and externally, were now behind him. For him we knew that death came in some ways as a relief. After the reception there was a banquet at Brian's favourite restaurant. We could tell that he was in attendance.

When we came home, Papa undertook a new endeavour. "The trail we are walking is a cold one," he said. "We're slashing through some stretches that are badly overgrown. We need to record our progress, and leave fresh sign for a true seeker to follow."

We'd made heavy use of Strong's concordance and Bible Dictionary. We'd also included interlinear Bibles in our researches, and found that Bible translation depends very much on the mind set of the translator. His editorial bias in large measure determines the selection of words used to represent the original in the translation.

The revelation which illuminated Papa was in the sweep of Scripture, the theme it unfolds from the very beginning. He was shown that theme, sometimes in spite of apparent deviations from that theme in the detail of the translation. Whenever we consulted the Bible dictionary over some problem passage, we would find that the original text did indeed contain the meaning which conformed to the theme Papa saw. It had just been stroked the other way by translators who had a different axe to grind.

I And My Father

Papa began "restroking" the Bible, returning the translation to conformity with the theme which other translators had been able to obscure, without being able to erase it completely. Papa had seen that theme in the ordinary New King James Bible from which he'd been inseparable since nineteen eighty-two. He did see a use for making that theme easier to see. This revelation of which Papa seemed up to now to have been sole beneficiary had to be made expressible to others.

I must make it clear that there were no visitations from "angels and saints"; no little voices bringing new bodies of hidden knowledge to light; no dreams or visions, and no prophecies from the imagination of his own heart. He read the Bible, and saw vast stretches of spirit country covered by Scripture, but never visited by people claiming to be spiritual leaders. The flocks of the world are never brought to those pastures by their shepherds. Any time a sheep mentions those pastures to a shepherd, he is usually rebuffed.

The "restroking" was on two fronts. The first was in the gathering together of passages of Scripture which best illustrated the Bible's theme. Eugène likened this to what computer programmers call "defragmenting". This process had already begun as early as nineteen eighty-three. The result was already in a workable form when we visited Ken in ninety-four. It was the main instrument by which God had breathed new life into Ken and delivered him of his pain.

The second front was this: all the time we spent studying the Bible was rendered frustrating by incessant trips to the concordance and dictionary. Over and over again, we found that translators had taken liberties with the text in order to defend some sacred cow. We didn't want our work to go to waste. So, Papa started recording the results of our researches in what amounted to a retranslation. We were interested to hear the sound of Scripture once impediments to its theme had been removed. So, where to start? Why, of course, in the Gospel of John.

Interestingly enough, our calendar had been cleared for us. A protracted stretch of winter had been made vacant. *We had nothing else to do.* Papa did his rewrite by hand, and we, Eugène

and I, committed the result to disk, using a second hand computer we bought from a farmer down the road. By curious coincidence, it was at that time that we heard the Pope confessing the sins of the Church.

At the beginning of April, we went to Vincent's house, and used his printer to make our first copy of the reworked Gospel of John.

Epilogue

It has been nearly 18 years since I wrote this book, and much has happened since that time. Prime Ministers and Presidents came and went. Wars were fought. Technological advancements were made. And computers and cellphones are the new weapons of mass distraction never seen before. Now, we can instantly insult someone face to face on the other side of the world more easily than in person. And if we do not speak each other's languages, we have access to instant online language translations which, at times, leave the recipients confused. In essence, we have built a magnificent tower that reaches into heaven whereby anything is now possible. The only problem that we are now facing is how do we distinguish the truth from lies in the immense ocean of ever increasing babble?

In 2007, Papa wrote a book entitled "Confronting The Cloudiness" which deals with this dogging dilemma. It would benefit this world immensely to genuinely and honestly read and deal with the subject matter he presents. How long must we stubbornly cling to conflict, suffering, and death? Is there no end? No hope? Or must we destroy the very Garden of Eden which we violently stole from its owner? Or is it possible for the prodigal son to return to his Father?



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Born in Manitouwadge, Ontario

December 25, 1966

Passed away
August 9, 2009