



Snowchild



A novel by

MARIE-BERNADETTE DUPUY

LES ÉDITIONS JCL
Extrait de la publication

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NOTE TO READER:

Only those notes deemed essential for immediate comprehension of the text have been added as footnotes. Literal translations of French songs can be found at the end of the text, and the references for these notes are preceded by an asterisk (*).

1

The Child

Val-Jalbert Village, January 7, 1916

The man looked at the imposing building which housed the convent school under the patronage of St. George. He gazed hauntingly at the iron cross which protruded out over the slender bell tower. Beneath a brown wool tuque hid a stranger, seemingly indifferent to the cold wind and the heavy, damp snow that soaked his boots. More than once, the silhouette of a nun clad in black garb and a white cornette approached the beaming bright windows, but she failed to notice the stranger under the cover of fir trees where he sought refuge from the public gaze.

He wasn't from around here, but would have loved to have belonged to this village. The residents of Val-Jalbert had comfortable homes and were even said to have modern heating and electricity. The stunning convent, with its lamps casting yellow halos out into Saint-Georges street, did little to dispel this rumour.

"There are windows, new boards, well-built roofs," he thought. "They certainly like to spend money around here."

He was gripped by the tantalizing aromas of sugar and cooked meat which the icy air only seemed to exaggerate. Famished, his mind was tortured by scrumptious images of little brown tarts covered in maple syrup and chicken dripping with grease.

"None of it is for me!" he sighed under his breath.

He glanced worryingly at the houses in the distance, lined up along a never-ending road which had been morphed into an icy path by daily traffic.

The man now stood near the steps of the convent which was flanked by four wooden pillars and protected by a large balcony. He shifted from one foot to the other, clutching a heavy package. It looked like a package of furs. It wasn't uncommon in Val-Jalbert to see trappers selling animal pelts.

But they weren't the type to cradle their merchandise in their arms.

Sister Sainte-Lucie's baby face appeared once again in the window. She had inspected the classroom used by the middle-level students – the eldest, and often rowdy and misbehaved ones. She was worried about Sister Sainte-Madeleine who had gone to the general store to buy flour.

"She should be back by now!" she grumbled, pulling the screen. "What a brilliant idea it was to not wear the snowshoes the Mayor had so generously given us! If she breaks a leg, that would be the icing on the cake," she quipped, sarcastically.

She turned around to inspect the cleanliness of the main room. The floors, the wooden dividing walls and the desks still smelled slightly of sap, like the smell of a wild forest. Everything was new – sparkling new. The convent school, as the villagers called it, had been built over the summer. The nuns from Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil had arrived from Chicoutimi nearly a month earlier, on December 10, to teach the children of Val-Jalbert. The population soared as the Pulp & Paper mill on the Ouiatchouan River continued to lure in families with its high-paying jobs.

The nun moved towards the brown bakelite switch to turn off the ceiling light. A clicking sound signalled that the electrical current had been shut off. All of this was brand new to her.

"If anything ever happened to our little scatterbrain!" she whispered.

Sister Sainte-Madeleine wasn't aware that she was notorious for forgetting instructions and getting lost easily, which is why Sister Sainte-Lucie was rightfully wor-

ried. Nonetheless, the young nun was indeed on her way back to the convent. She had gotten sidetracked at the general store, which was fine by her. She was gleefully examining all of the merchandise on display. It produced a symphony of eye-catching colours which seduced her artistic side. There was also a tempting scent of stew wafting through the air, which made her salivate. A lot of the Val-Jalbert residents wanted to speak to the sisters who had come to teach the children. These blessed individuals would be ensuring the education of their children, and so, when they met, the introductions never seemed to end.

While walking down Saint-Georges street, Sister Sainte-Madeleine could still hear the two customers who had spoken to her at the store counter.

“I’m Ovide’s mother – the little boy with green eyes and brown hair. Be firm with him – he’s a rascal!”

“My daughter Rose is with the bigger kids. She takes care of her little brothers in the evening. She’s a good child.”

A team of horses came charging ahead. Sister Sainte-Madeleine had just enough time to seek cover under a pile of snow which had formed a slope on either side of the path created by the daily traffic of carts and carriages. The horse, a big red beast, made a sudden swerve. The rider greeted the nun with a gesture.

The nun adjusted her woolen cape. The wind was frigid. Tiny little crystals that resembled shards of glass began to fall from the sky. The young girl leaned forward and trudged on, her head hung down to protect her face. The massive silhouette of the convent appeared to be only steps away, like a safe haven planted there by the hands of the Almighty. Winter was setting in, the cold was taking over, but that warm and cozy abode would always be there to welcome her.

“I’m frozen!” she sighed. “Sister Sainte-Lucie better keep track of what she has stored, because if the temperature drops any lower, I won’t be running to the store. Not enough flour! How foolish!”

There was an abrupt wail that sounded as if it came from very close by. It could have just as easily been the call of a raptor as the bark of a fox. The frail nun was frightened. She looked in terror in the direction of the bell and crossed herself. Despite the public lighting put in place by the factory managers and the reassuring sight of houses, they were still surrounded by thousands of acres of forest, where wild beasts roam.

“I’m such a coward,” she murmured, relieved to have finally reached the steps of the convent.

This time, the sound of a muffled cry resonated beneath her feet. Sister Sainte-Madeleine tripped over a bundle of pelts which was bound in two spots and leaning against the door. Her heart pounded as she bent over to examine the strange package up close. The lantern clinched under the balcony emitted a vague beam of yellow.

“It’s a baby! A tiny baby!” she exclaimed.

Within the nest of fur, a tiny and furious face revealed itself. There was no mistake about it.

“Sweet Jesus!” the nun wailed, stupefied.

She picked up the package and immediately dropped the sack of flour as Sister Sainte-Lucie was opening the door.

“Look! A baby!” Sister Sainte-Madeleine screamed. “Who would be so cruel to leave such a small child out in this cold? They wanted this baby to die! Quick, let me in!”

Mother Superior, Sister Sainte-Apolline, was also on the main floor. She walked closer, frowning. After adjusting her glasses on her nose, she flicked away the fur stuffed around the baby whose cries were growing stronger.

“Why did you bring this child here?” she asked. “Sister Sainte-Madeleine, explain yourself!”

“But Mother, I just explained. The baby was on our doorstep. Someone put it there while I was gone.”

Sister Sainte-Apolline didn’t say a word.

“Mother, look how red this child is,” added Sister Sainte-Lucie. “Touch its forehead – it is burning up! This is a sick child.”

“Children usually turn red when they cry that loudly. Poor little thing, we’re going to have to take it upstairs. Give it to me.”

Young Sister Sainte-Madeleine hesitated; at twenty-eight, she had an exacerbated adolescent sensitivity.

The weight of the fur bundle and its shocking contents caused her to have a violent emotional reaction. Mother Superior grabbed the bundle and, whipping her black garb around, turned her heels. As she climbed the stairs, the nun’s brown eyes were met with two piercing blue pupils which glistened with tears.

“How sad,” she sighed.

Sister Victorienne, the lay sister¹, was keeping an eye on the cooking. She shrieked in shock at the sight of Mother Superior entering with her load.

“Did somebody’s mother die in the village?” she stammered. “The priest would have told us!”

“We’ll clear this up later!” replied Sister Sainte-Apolline, somewhat dryly. “A child has just been placed in our care. Regardless of where it came from, we can’t leave it outside.”

The first floor contained the nun’s rooms, a church hall and a large kitchen where the nuns would gather until bedtime. The room had a table with chairs and two cabinets facing each other. A large cast iron stove with enameled sides gave off a pleasant heat but the rest of the building benefited from central heating.

In a region where the temperature could sometimes drop below 40°, it was a luxury, and the nuns were well aware of it.

The four ladies leaned over the baby whom the superior had just laid on the table with a rolled up cloth to use as a pillow. After being pulled out of its nest of fur, the little one gave off an unpleasant odour.

“This child has soiled its clothes, if it’s even wearing

1. Nun in charge of housework.

any!” Sainte-Apolline grumbled. “ I’d say it’s about 10 months old, maybe a year – there are a lot of teeth.”

“How are we going to change this baby?” the lay sister exclaimed. “We are not prepared! What will it eat? We need a bib. I can prepare some warm milk.”

Sister Sainte-Apolline looked up to the sky.

“Our soup will do. The most important thing right now is that the child is washed. Hurry, let’s go!”

The nuns worked together. One picked up a basin, the other poured boiling water into it. The lay sister got a bar of soap and some clean clothes. She inspected the furs more intently.

“Mother, these coats are expensive. There are marten and beaver pelts. The largest one is silver fox. My father was a trapper, so I can tell.”

“Regardless, I am not going to be bartering in the street,” Mother Superior replied. “It is unlikely that this child is from Val-Jalbert. Nonetheless, I will look into it. If nobody identifies it, we will have to turn it over to an orphanage.”

The nuns, overcome with sincere compassion, nodded their heads. The Saint-François-Régis orphanage, located in Vauvert, near Péribonka, accepted boys. Girls went to l’Hôtel-Dieu-Saint-Vallier, in Chicoutimi, which was founded by the Augustine-de-la-miséricorde-de-Jésus.

The young Sister Sainte-Madeleine smiled softly as she caressed the baby’s forehead.

“Maybe we can keep it, if it’s a girl, mother?” she said, her voice overcome with emotion.

Sister Sainte-Apolline didn’t respond. She began to carefully undress the child. Beneath the wool bonnet was a short amber buckled fleece. Under the coarse clothing was a plump body, covered in red blotches.

“My God!” exclaimed the lay sister. “It might be chicken pox!”

“Chicken pox!” echoed Mother Superior. “God keep us!”

The sisters looked at each other anxiously and crossed

themselves in a single gesture. Sister Sainte-Lucie rolled up her sleeves and dipped a piece of tissue in hot water.

“I had it when I was twenty!” she said. “The doctor who took care of me, in Québec City, said you only get it once. My cheeks still bear the marks, but God cured me. So, I never complained.”

With the flick of a hand, she removed the clothing that covered the baby’s bottom and stomach and started washing it.

“Oh, it’s a little girl!” she announced. “Mother, look how she’s blinking her eyes. The light is bothering her. Her skin is burning. Surely, her parents were hoping we would take care of her. The poor people must have thought the convent was a hospital. They must have been pretty desperate to take it that far.”

“In that case they should have knocked on the door!” replied Sister Saint-Apolline. “Abandoning a child on a cold night is not the Christian way.”

Sister Sainte-Madeleine discreetly wiped the tears from her eyes. She had a strong emotional reaction to the sight of the sickened child. She wanted to take care of her, take her back up in her arms, but she dreaded the illness, especially smallpox, which left deep scars on the flesh, if you were lucky enough to survive it. Sister Sainte-Lucie’s face was proof enough. She wouldn’t dare even touch the baby’s clothes. However, she knew what to expect when she entered the convent, as is the case for anyone – young or old – who commits to something. Mother Superior wasn’t about to be taken for a ride.

“Wash your hands and face with soap and cold water, Sister Sainte-Madeleine!” she told her. “And don’t panic, it might just be a case of the measles!”

While this was happening, the lay sister shook the fur and held it in her hands. A piece of paper fell at her feet. She picked it up quickly and read it aloud :

“Our daughter’s name is Marie-Hermine. She had her first birthday last month, before Christmas. With the grace of God, we have placed her in your hands. The furs are an advance on her room and board.”

“It isn’t signed,” she added. “Marie-Hermine! What a pretty name.”

Sister Sainte-Lucie read the message for herself. She frowned:

“These are educated people, there are no mistakes and the style is perfect.”

“They could have told somebody else!” said the lay sister. “Anyway, Hermine is a catholic name, which is a relief.”

“This is hardly a time to chat!” Mother Superior interrupted. “The child has a high fever and there are no doctors or nurses in Val-Jalbert. We have all the modern comforts – electricity, phones, an 18-room house, a barber, a woodsman, but no doctor! No doctor! Who is going to take care of this poor little girl? Look, she’s dozing off. I’m afraid she might not make it through the night! I think we should notify the priest.”

Her threatening words reeked of dismay. Marie-Hermine let out a moan and nibbled on her fist.

“She must be hungry!” said the lay sister. “I’ll wash her tatters later. The best thing would be to wrap her in some clean sheets.”

Mother Superior took care of it. She sat down with the baby in her lap.

“The fever makes you thirsty!” she said. “Sister Victoriennne, we have some willow bark. Give her some – it is an antifebrile and it will quench her thirst. And you, Sister Sainte-Lucie, go get the priest! And go knock on our neighbour Miss Marois’ door too. Her son is 18 months, she’ll definitely have something the girl can wear.”

Her orders delegated, Sister Sainte-Apolline rocked the infant. Her lips were moving. The sisters saw that she was praying.

The man decided not to leave. Everything happened as he had hoped, but that didn’t stop him from sobbing, chilled to the bone despite his thick clothing.

He tried to comfort himself by imagining what was happening inside the big comfortable building. The sister he had seen walking away half an hour earlier had just found the child. The little one, well protected by the fur, didn't have the time to suffer the cold. It only took him two minutes to run and leave his child at the door, assuming the sister wouldn't be late. Now that his sacrifice had been made, he turned his back on the village and disappeared. But it came at a price. In his heart of hearts, he knew he would never again lay eyes on the little girl he loved so dearly, for he was a good father, and he was hurting to the very core of his being.

He took one last look at the convent and its surroundings. It was snowing heavily, but not enough to darken the lights dotted along Saint-Georges street. A shiver of grief ran through his veins. He bent over and put on his snowshoes before lighting an oil lantern.

“I could have gotten a job as a labourer, but I guess that's a job for an honest man,” he thought. “Please forgive me, my sweetheart, my love! Marie-Hermine! What a pretty name. You didn't get to hear your parents pronounce it many times.”

He thrust himself under the dense cover of spruce trees. The snow would erase his fingerprints well before dawn. With each step, he distanced himself further from his daughter and he had an urge to scream his despair.

“I hope the nuns can save her. At least she'll have a better life than we will.”

The man continued deep into the dark, infinite forest. The rumbling of the Ouiatchouan river waterfall seemed to be following him. The gigantic waterfall roared like a ferocious animal. The residents of Val-Jalbert no longer paid attention to it. It was that quiet time of day when the villagers nestled themselves in the warmth of their kitchens. The women served up soup and stew. Famished, the husbands and children would sit down and wouldn't say a word. The beasts were fed, sheltered by the buildings that had been afforded them. There was hardly anybody outside.

“Was she ever warm, that little girl. It was a fever. She was crying. She wanted me to hold her in my arms,” he mused. “God, if she had been old enough to call me ‘dad,’ I would have never been able to leave her side.”

He was tortured by his thoughts, his regrets and the painful stab of remorse. Bothered by the still damp snow and the low-lying branches which scratched his face, he sped up his pace until he reached a lumberjack’s cabin.

He was greeted by a group of yapping dogs with slanted eyes and thick, snow-white fur. They were tied to a sled.

“Shhh, rascals! Shhh! You’re not going anywhere before tomorrow.”

He could see a dim light inside. All of a sudden, he had the urge to run. Laura might be dead. Ashamed of his cowardice, he entered. A fire burning in an old iron can had been reduced to a bed of embers. The candle was still burning, but the wick was crackling, half drowned in a puddle of wax.

A gentle voice arose from a bunk that was wedged against the log wall.

“Jocelyn?”

“Yes, my love. I am back.”

He knelt down heavily and put his coarse hand on his lover’s purple cheeks. Laura was panting, her eyes fogged by the same fever that had gripped their little girl.

“Our little Hermine is safe. The nuns took her in. Those good ladies will take care of her. They will teach her well.”

“Oh, I can die now!” sighed the young lady whose delicate features were fading. “But I’m thirsty! Very thirsty!”

Jocelyn got her a drink. He could make the simplest gesture without missing a single sound the forest made. If one of the dogs grunted, he would stiffen up and cast a cold eye in the direction of his gun. He was being hunted, and was about to mourn the passing of his only love.

Élisabeth Marois had made supper for her husband very early. Joseph worked his shift at 11 at night and usually slept after his meal in order to be in shape for the factory. Their son Simon was asleep as well, filled to the brim with a maple syrup-flavoured barley mush.

The kettle whistled on the stove. Élisabeth was 19 years old. She took good care of the house. She was content with her life in Val-Jalbert. The pay was good and the house, cozy. She let down her hair – a mass of thick blond curls – and brushed it. Thin and well-built, the young girl consecrated some time each evening to taking a wash. In a short-sleeved shirt, she gazed happily with her green eyes towards the tub of hot water that awaited her. But there was a knock at the door.

Quickly, she slipped into her cotton blouse without buttoning it up and wrapped herself up in a shawl.

“Who is it?” she asked. “If Annette is looking to borrow sugar again, I’m going to give her a piece of my mind.”

Annette Dupré, a robust person of 30 years, had four children and a tendency of draining her neighbours of their goods. Élisabeth opened the door with a mean look on her face. Sister Sainte-Lucie, dressed in a cape covered in flakes, appeared before her. The young woman was relieved to see the white hood under the veil.

“Please, come in, sister! What brings you out on a night like this?”

“Oh, I’ve seen my fair share!” she replied, tapping her large boots on the doorstep. “I prefer the snow on these days when the frost freezes your blood and even your brain.”

Sister Sainte-Lucie surveyed the surroundings with a discrete curiosity. She never had the opportunity to visit one of the houses in the village. The black dividing walls, the pristine beige baseboards, everything was impeccable! The smell of wax was rising up from the floor which was made with large yellow planks.

“Something terrible has happened, Miss Marois!” she exclaimed, admiring the linen curtains hemmed with strands of lace.

“At the convent?” Élisabeth asked, shocked.

“Yes! We found a child at our door, bundled in fur. It was a very ill little girl. My superior sent me to Father Bordereau so that he could administer the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. This sacrament can often be miraculous! We also needed clothes, and Sister Sainte-Apolline thought of you, because your son is only 6 months older than the little girl. Some sheets, as well.”

“Of course!” said the young woman. “That poor little thing! I’ll get you what you need. It’s upstairs, in Simon’s room. Have a seat, sister.”

Élisabeth turned her back on her visitor and buttoned her shirt. She used that time to try to think of the four nuns’ names.

“Let’s see, Sister Sainte-Apolline must be the Mother Superior who wears glasses and teaches the eldest kids. The lay sister is Sister Victorienne and she takes care of the youngest. Then there’s that beautiful young girl with the angelic smile, Sister Sainte-Madeleine, I think. Then, the fourth one is coming to me. It’s Sister Sainte... Sister Sainte...”

She couldn’t think of her name. But that was the least of her worries. Sister Sainte-Lucie exclaimed:

“We think it’s chicken pox! The child has a fever and is covered in red blotches.”

Élisabeth backed up immediately, clinging to the dresser. She was not about to catch it, and was already frightened for her son.

“Smallpox are highly contagious, sister!” she panicked. “You have to close your school!”

“You have to pray!” the sister snapped back.

“My God, is she unconscious?” asked Élisabeth, whisking herself up the stairs. “I’m religious, but praying isn’t going to make chicken pox go away!”

The houses for the pulp and paper factory workers all had the same layout. On the main floor, there was a

26 *Oh Magali, my dear lover, let's run away, beneath the tree cover,
underneath the silent trees...*

27 *We won't be going to the woods anymore, the laurels have been cut/
Beauty is here before us...*

