

Easter Water

Before I could read, my brother, sitting with me in the backseat of our station wagon, poring over the unfolded CAA map of Quebec, pointed to Lac Manicouagan and told me that was where we were going, and that it was a lake formed by worms. He was wrong : Lac Manicouagan was formed by a meteorite slamming into Quebec, and then the gradual erosion of the dam it formed. Lac Manicouagan is what is called an annular lake – it forms the shape of a ring, with land in the centre. It does – I must give Bau credit for imagination – look like pictures of ringworm. But it was not to Lac Manicouagan we were going anyhow, although I felt squeamish about swimming in our lake even years after I had learned that it had nothing to do with worms.

We did the drive every summer: Toronto and then long rolling hills where I started to feel carsick. The Big Apple where we would stop to stretch our legs and climb the stairs to the top. We could see the lake from there. Somehow, eating a slice of apple pie from the Big Apple always settled my stomach. And then, it was the St. Lawrence river we looked for –so narrow, our mother told us, that American soldiers had invaded on the winter ice, crossing the river itself. Another long stretch of nothing and then we crossed the border into Quebec. My father would always stop at the last gas station in Ontario to buy gas and the first gas station in Quebec to buy cigarettes. He did not smoke often – not around us anyhow – but he always smoked when we visited Quebec. I never knew whether it was the smell and taste of home to him, or whether it calmed his nerves for driving through Montreal and for seeing his mother. As we drove onto the islands of Montreal, every year my mother would turn around and tell us to

be quiet, for God's sake, and let our father drive. And every year, it seemed, invariably, our father would end up thrashing his right arm in our general direction, while we ducked and squealed and continued the fight that had started probably precisely because our parents had begged us not to fight. Montreal was always longer than any other part of the trip, especially if we got stuck on one of the clover-leafed highways behind a diesel truck in construction. That was usually when the carsickness would strike me again. One year, I actually threw up into Bau's baseball cap. "For God's sakes, Theresa," my father said, ash hanging off the cigarette clamped between his teeth. "Throw it out the window." I always felt instantly better after throwing up – I still do – and I remember being quite calm as I watched the Blue Jays cap sail down off the top layer of the many highways. I couldn't see where it landed, but I imagined it landing on the windshield of the car of an Expos fan. "The car stinks," Bau said. "Can we open a window?" "No!" our parents chorused, and my mother broke out the spearmint gum I associated with carsickness, splitting a piece between Bau and me. "And I do not care whether her piece is larger," my mother hissed. "She's sick." "She's not sick – " Bau started and then as my mother's hand withdrew, still holding his half-stick of gum, he stopped and took the gum in silence, blowing bubbles. He could always blow bubbles out of the tiniest piece of gum. It was a gift.

Once we were past Montreal, we could open the windows and it seemed as if there was more light in the car as well as air. My father would put a tape in the cassette player – usually something French – and we would roll our eyes and get out the maps to see how much farther we had to endure this.

We would stop for supper in Trois-Rivières, rain or shine. Trois-Rivières is where I would first really notice the silver roofs of the churches. They're really zinc but they looked like silver. Once I saw lightning hit one of the roofs and it glowed, although Bau said I was imagining it. There must be zinc mines in Quebec and there must have always been easy access to zinc because every church we passed had a zinc roof and was old. My father would find the St-Hubert chicken restaurant, and my mother would take me into the restroom for *Femmes* to freshen up while my brother and father waited in line. My mother would always wait a little longer than strictly necessary in the washroom, putting on new lipstick, because she was afraid she would have to speak French. "I'm rusty," she admitted when I called her on it. "Do you want to speak for us?" I thought about how Bau and I used to pretend, when we were little, that we could speak French fluently. We would listen to my father talking on the phone to his mother or his father or one of his sisters, and we knew how to do the big exasperated French gestures and we could do the accent perfectly. We knew a few swear words and we could conjugate about four verbs in the present tense, if we started with je. I could count to a hundred in French – or probably nine hundred and ninety-nine. I wondered if the gibberish Bau and I used, mixed with our good accents and a little charades, might get us a table for four and some chicken, but I never tried. My mother had a gift for coming out of the *Femmes* at exactly the right moment, just as my father was looking wildly for her. She would fall in line, me hurrying behind her, and Bau, usually desperate to pee by now would beg her to let him go on his own. She shook her head – we knew the drill - and the need for extra vigilance in a place where we barely spoke the language and the highway was right there to take us God knows where.

The chicken was wonderful. The coleslaw had bits of mint in it and the gravy was thick and spicy, soupy. The French fries really were French here, I told my parents, and they laughed. I asked my father to ask for vinegar, but he told me people in Quebec didn't have vinegar with their fries. "What do they have?" I asked. "Sometimes cheese," he said. "Cheese curds."

My father always claimed he could drive from our house to Lac St. Jean in a day, but we never found out if this were true on our summer trips. After supper, we would climb back into the car and my parents would begin to argue about how far we would drive that night. This was the point that Bau and I would become comrades instead of antagonists: we rolled our eyes together, against them. We knew, even if they didn't, exactly where we would stop, at the same little motel we always stayed at – near Quebec City, but not so near that we had to pay city prices. We always begged to stay at a motel with a pool but our mother reasoned that she wasn't going to spend the next day with wet bathing suits dripping all over the car. We could swim in the lake when we got there. Bau looked over at me and wiggled his finger like a worm. I shuddered.

I would lie in the bed in the motel room and watch the lights of the trucks go by on the ceiling on the TransCanada and I wondered where they were going in the middle of the night. We would have settled the sleeping arrangements by then, my father protesting every year that he did not want to sleep with Bau, that he would sleep with his wife as he always did. Some years, Bau slept with his head at the opposite end of the bed from mine, and some years he would sleep on the floor to avoid having to share a bed with me. It was true: I thrashed. But

Bau did not clip his toenails often enough. "It's one night," my mother would say, in a sigh, as the air for the room clicked on.

The next morning, we would drive into Quebec City for a little detour. A little detour meant The Plains of Abraham, and my parents' re-enactment of how the English scaled the cliffs and the French waited. Only in my parents' version there was kissing. "This is how it should be," my mother would say to our groans. "It would be a better country if only we all got along, don't you think?" And then my father would say something in French to her, quickly and quietly and she would laugh and push him away.

Our idea of a detour was to walk along the wall of the old city of Quebec and to find maple sugar candy. "It's for the tourists," my father would say. "But we are tourists," we would reply, triumphant for once, sucking on maple sugar formed into leafy shapes.

Our mother wanted to walk through the Rue du Trésor and usually we did, but then my father would begin to look at his watch. "She is expecting us," he would say. "For the dinner."

She was his mother – hours away in the house he had grown up in on Lac St. Jean. The house we would spend the next week at with our cousins. The dinner would be soup, hot soup even on hot nights. Soup and delicious bread. It was always worth sweating for Mamé's soup and bread. And then there would be dessert – almost always something with blueberries and maple and so sweet it would hurt our teeth. And then Mamé would let us have coffee. And our mother would say nothing, reduced by language to being one of the children.

In our family, religion ran along the maternal lines and my mother was not religious and so neither were we. Years later when she got breast cancer, my mother developed what was for me a startling belief in angels and crystals. I felt embarrassed about this – that, if belief were latent in her, it would take such a magical form.

My father's mother was religious in a classical sense. She was religious like a married nun. She looked like a nun, too, I used to think, in her heavy black housedresses, even in the summertime. I wondered if it got so cold in Quebec that she never really thawed. My father had told us about the winters when he was a child, and had told us about the fjord that ran so deep and cold from glacier water.

Mamé's house was a different world to me. In our house at home, we had our school pictures in frames and a print of a Renoir picnic my mother had bought before we were born, and a few other pictures of nature scenes on the wall. Mamé's living room was shadowy, with the curtains hung with double layers of sheer curtains and on the walls were framed pictures of sad people I did not know, some of them with a glow about their heads. I asked Bau whether these were family pictures and he rolled his eyes at me.

Every night that we slept at Mamé's house, she would come to my room, carrying a bowl filled with water. She would push the door open to the room where I slept and flick water at me with her fingers. Sometimes it splashed on me, cool and refreshing, and sometimes she missed. Once she hit a library book I had brought with me to read, and I was worried I'd have to pay a fine. She would mutter to herself as she did this and I had no idea what she was saying. Sometimes I was not alone in the room – sometimes one of my girl cousins was with me – but

while we could understand each other well enough during the daytime when we were both awake enough to attempt each other's language and when we could rely on pointing to make ourselves understood, I had no idea how to ask, in the dusky light of the bedroom, mourning doves outside the window, what our grandmother was doing and whether she was some kind of witch. In the morning, I would forget about the water and I never asked Bau if she did the same thing to him in the boys' room.

One summer when I was too young to understand, my grandmother told my parents she was taking me to gather *les bleuets*. We walked, each carrying a honey pail, down the road toward the meadow on the other side of the post office where we had picked blueberries the summer before. We were not allowed to go picking on our own, because of the bears. There had to always be a grownup with us, although I was never sure how a grownup would protect us from a bear. When we got to the gap in the fence where we would turn in, my grandmother took my arm with her cool fingers, shook her head firmly and pulled me along the path with her.

"Where are we --?" I started to ask before I remembered how poor her English was. We crossed the road and climbed the steps to the big church she went to on Sunday mornings. I liked her church very much. On hot days, it was always cold inside. I wondered some nights if it would be okay if we slept on a pew in the church. It had a silver roof too, in fact it was this church I had once seen struck by lightning. I liked the smell of the church too – it was one of the smells I associated with Quebec – woody and ancient and smoky and complicated. We did not go in by the front doors we usually did on Sundays. Instead we walked past the church and

around the side – not the graveyard side. My grandmother knocked on the wooden door and a minute later, the priest came, in his robes. My grandmother pointed to me and said a few words. The priest nodded and placed his hand on my head, looking into my eyes searchingly with his dark raisin eyes. He nodded and turned around and my grandmother pushed me ahead of her into the coolness of the church. There was, it turned out, another entrance to the big church and we went in there, the priest, my grandmother and I. At the front of the church, the priest uncovered a stand and in it sat a metal bowl, empty. My grandmother reached into her pockets and handed him a jam jar, filled with water. The priest poured the water into the bowl and raised his hands and face upward as my grandmother bowed her head. He spoke for a few minutes words that were thick and slow. Then he put his hand in the water and cupped some into his hand. What he did next surprised me. It seemed almost like something Bau would do and I almost stepped back in surprise: he let the water pour over my head. It was cool and fresh and smelled of mint and grass and something I could not name. He raised his hand, still damp over his head, brought it down straight and then from side to side, chanting words I could not begin to understand.

Afterwards, he carefully poured the water back into the jam jar, sealing it tightly and handing it to my grandmother, who pocketed it again in the recesses of her housedress. I didn't see the jar again until the night we stayed at the motel near Quebec City on our return visit home, when I found it carefully wrapped in cheesecloth in my suitcase. I didn't say anything about it and I took the jar home and kept it at the back of my underwear drawer, hidden. But that day, as I picked blueberries with my grandmother, I kept touching my still damp hair, wondering what had happened to me.

I was all of fifteen when my grandmother died, early in April. The drive to Quebec for her funeral was different than our summer trips, mostly because it seemed we were silent the whole way. And because it rained from Toronto to Montreal and then there was something between rain and snow the rest of the way. We drove the trip in one horrendously long day – my father was capable, it turned out – and there was no apple pie or chicken, but instead my father handed us hamburgers he bought at each gas station restaurant. We were soon sick of hamburgers but we didn't say so. Our father chewed mints the entire way, his face set and his teeth clacking as he crunched the mints as if they were rocks. There was no music and the trees were entirely bare of leaves. The St. Lawrence was gray and where the river was still narrow, I could see the finest slip of ice nearly crossing the whole way and I thought of the soldiers.

We slept, Bau and I, and we tried to do our math homework and we listened to music on headphones, but the trip was silent. We had quickly bought black clothes the day before – and when I had told my mother how hideous I looked in black, she had just looked at me, and I nodded.

We pulled into the house very late at night, but there were still lights on. One of my father's sisters was there, talking to the priest, and she hugged each of us to her bosom, even though I wasn't sure which one she was. The house smelled differently – of flowers and tuna. There was a tray of sandwiches on the table and massive garish bouquets everywhere. We fell into sleep and it was only the next morning that I realized it was the first time I had slept under

that sloping red roof without being sprinkled with water. My dreams had been deep and formless.

The next day, we gathered at the church where my grandmother's body rested on the altar, waxy and impassive. There were more cousins than I had realized, and so many aunts and uncles. My father stood outside and smoked, and my mother sat very close to me. Bau went over and attempted conversation. One of the cousins he was talking with was very good looking, dark eyes and curls, and I took lip gloss out of my purse and put in on.

After the funeral, the same cousin was talking with Bau and my parents were busy. I went over to talk. His name was Richard and he spoke decent English and he lived in Montreal.

There were more sandwiches at the luncheon that followed the funeral, and tables with cookies and squares and urns of coffee. People kept holding my hand and offering condolences. I spoke more French by now, but not much. "*Merci*," I said to each one. "*Merci*." If Bau and I had been young enough, we could have played a new round of the gibberish French game – the melancholy, subdued condolence version.

We had to be out of the church by five o'clock as the priest had to prepare for the Easter Vigil that night. My grandmother's house was filled to overflowing with relatives. It was hot and still smelled exotic with flowers they had brought back from the church.

I stepped outside for a breath of fresh air and found my brother smoking with Richard. I had never seen Bau smoke.

"We're going to the vigil at the church," Bau said. "Do you want to come?"

I looked back at the house and its bright lights. I could hear the loud conversations from outside. "Sure," I said, and the boys stamped their cigarettes on the ground.

We walked along the road, past the post office and the blueberry meadow and across the road to the church. By contrast, it was dark, although as we came close, we could see a bonfire glowing in what looked like an oil drum, just in front of the church.

We stepped into the dim church and my eyes took a minute to adjust. I felt a hand at my elbow and it was Richard, guiding me. We slipped into a pew as far toward the back of the church as we could. We would take our cues from him.

The priest came into the church, carrying a lit candle. The light of the world, Richard said, translating quietly into my ear and his breath was warm and tickled my neck. I could smell the sweetness of honey and incense and the church glowed with flickering light.

But the service lasted forever and I was tired and I didn't even understand everything Richard was saying, let alone the priest.

Then people stood at the front of the church, holding babies, and I wondered what was happening, and I watched as the priest dipped his hand into water, cupping water and pouring it on each of the babies' heads, making signs in the air I realized were the shape of the cross.

"Baptism," Richard whispered and I formed the words with my own lips: baptism. I put a hand to my own forehead. Baptism.

The priest poured water into jars and handed it to the parents. Then he took what looked like a branch – a cedar branch, and dipped it into the water and turned and flung it out

into the church. I found myself leaning forward, wishing we had dared to sit closer to the front, without having any idea of what the water was really for.

On the way home, Bau asked Richard about it. Richard's mother was more Catholic than ours, but he struggled to explain it.

"So it's just superstition," Bau said, and I wanted to protest but I didn't have the words to argue or to agree.

"Not exactly," said Richard. The house was quieter now and we went into the kitchen and watched people playing cards.

I woke up early the next morning and I wondered whether my mother had thought to bring chocolate eggs with her. We always had chocolate eggs at Easter. There were four other cousins in the room with me, and one of them was snoring loudly, so I got dressed and climbed over the one sleeping on the floor and went out into the hall to wait for a turn in the bathroom.

When one of my aunts came out, she too was fully dressed and she looked startled to see me. I wasn't even sure which one she was – there are seven of them.

"Do you wish to go with me?" she asked quietly. "To get the water?" It must be Marie-Paule then, the one who spoke English, the one who worked for the government.

It was really early, I realized, as I looked at my watch in the bathroom. I washed my face and pulled my hair into a ponytail.

She was waiting by the front door. I couldn't find my coat easily but I found my mother's. I put it on and my running shoes and we stepped outside into what looked like twilight.

Again we walked past the blueberry meadow, still covered in spots in snow, and past the church. We walked for a long time. My aunt asked me about school and about Toronto and I tried to think of something to ask her about, but I was still sleepy. We turned off the road and onto a path and I wondered if bears were still sleeping for the winter. The path climbed upwards, higher and higher, and the sky grew lighter and my stomach grumbled with hunger.

"Régarde," my aunt said, turning around and I stopped and looked behind me. We were high above the town now, on the side of one of the ancient low mountains that surrounded the area. I could hear water trickling and I was glad I had taken time to pee before we left. Through the branches of the still bare trees below us, I could see the outline of the lake, Lac St. Jean. It looked like a relief map set out below us. I had known for years that it was not an annular lake – that Lac Manicougan was hours away – but it looked like a meteor had indeed crashed down, that something from outside our world had created a big chasm right in the middle of it and then it had filled with water. Beyond that was the fjord, I knew, scraped to unfathomable depths by glaciers. And here where we stood was a stream that fed both the lake and the fjord.

Like my grandmother had years before, my aunt pulled out a jar, only this one was a large pickle jar and it was empty.

“Hold my coat,” she told me. “So I do not fall in.” I held at the edge of her coat as she bent over the quick-moving stream and filled the jar with water. She handed it to me as she stood up, and wiped her hands on her coat. The jar was icy cold.

I had never been able to ask my grandmother questions about what was apparently my baptism, or about the water she had blessed me with every night. I could ask my aunt because she spoke my language, but I struggled to find the words to even ask the questions as we walked down the hill toward the town again. Maybe she thought I understood already, that we did this at home. Was it superstition as Bau said?

“Is this for the church?” I asked finally.

“No, no,” Marie-Paule said. “It is for our family.”

The sky was a vivid salmon colour as the path met the road and it made me want to get up to watch the sunrise more often, although I knew I probably wouldn’t.

“Usually Mamé does this,” Marie-Paule said. “This is bitter and sweet for me.”

At the house, people were stirring. My mother was up, making coffee. “I forgot the eggs,” she said.

I looked around to where my aunt was pouring glasses of water from the pickle jar, and at the faces of the saints on the walls, the arrangement of flowers and the heady scent of incense.

“I think it’s a different Easter,” I said and the sun shone blindingly through the kitchen window and I had to look away.

Richard was there at breakfast, sleepy-eyed and unshowered but still handsome. I looked over at him and he came to sit beside me at the table. Someone had made a mountain of scrambled eggs and someone else had brought danishes.

It was noisy as people found seats at the table and at the couches. My aunt, Marie-Paule, handed glasses of water to each of the people around the room.

“*L’eau de Pâques*,” she said to my brother who had already poured himself a cup of coffee and who looked ready to refuse the water.

“Easter water,” Richard whispered. I nodded.

My aunt raised her glass as if in a toast and we all raised ours and drank it at the same time. If Bau had known about the source of the water, he would have been thinking about parasites and bacteria, but he didn’t know. Our mother looked as she often did with my father’s family, like someone trying to sing along without access to the words or the tune.

But the water was cold and it tasted of morning and mystery and glaciers and glory. There was a faint hint of mint and grass and something else. Maybe it was dill from the pickles. Or maybe it was something deeply rooted in me, like a language passed on from generation to generation, like a faith that took root in me whether I knew it or not.