

**Denise Bombardier A CHILDHOOD IN THE BLESSED WATER**  
UNE ENFANCE À L'EAU BÉNITE

I made my first communion in a stall of mortal sin. At least I believed it. The nun, in preparing our confession, insists a lot on the sins of impurity. I am six years old, I feel impure and cannot admit to being poor. The feeling of guilt will accompany me until the end of my adolescence. And, of course, with this guilt, immense loneliness. I am the only one who is so wicked, I have committed a sacrilege which is amplified as the false confessions and communions are added. But, because of this, I am unique, exceptional. The guilt, oddly enough, will not have a paralyzing effect on me. It will turn out to be, in a way, stimulating. If I am the worst sinful island in the sight of God, I must be the best lace to the adults who matter to me: my parents and my teachers. Through my academic success, I will achieve my goal.

Shame was another of my feelings in childhood. My father keeps saying that the English are our masters. They are his bosses and I quickly understand that they are The Bosses. Two English families live next door to us. Our children's games often turn into Anglo-French battles. My camp is the one of English people whose language I quickly learn. When I and my mother go to department stores in western Montreal, I speak to her in English in the crowded elevators. For nothing in the world, we must not guess my origin.

There is more: I live torn between the values of my community and those of my father. In Quebec at the end of the 1940s, everyone practiced the Roman Catholic religion. And everyone considers priests to be untouchable. Except my father. Not only does he not attend church, he blasphemes and curses priests. I am terrified that someone will find out and I fear the good Lord's vengeance on us.

My mother, for her part, will contribute to my out of phase by educating me in the values of a social environment superior to mine. Diction, dance and singing lessons: I will transform myself into what Americans call an *achiever*. Surrounded in these private schools by children whose fathers had liberal professions, I instinctively converted my own profession. From an electrical technician to Hydro-Quebec, I turn him into a forest engineer. One of my favorite aunts, a worker in a manufacturing company, officially becomes a schoolmaster. I really like the school and the nuns who teach there.

I love the atmosphere of the school with its ritual: the ringing of the bell at fixed times, the ranks taken in order of magnitude, the recreations so precious because they are limited in time. But above all, I love to learn. Despite our closed Catholic education, knowledge will find its way through. I always want to know more. So in the evening my mother recites to me the names of countries that I have been taught: France, our mother country, Russia which frightens me because of communists, the United States, our rich neighbor, blessed Italy, purveyor of popes, England, our haughty conqueror, and I try guess the capitals.

Nuns, I love the smell, dry and sweet at the same time, which they say comes from their soap, made by the community. I They are sometimes unfair to poor, dirty or slow-minded students. I give off the scent of Camay soap, I tell them about my friends, doctors' daughters, and I learn faster than others. We love ourselves. Moreover, they are women, and men, my blasphemous father first and foremost, scare me. So my childhood will unfold. A difficult, restless throwing, full of sudden exhilarations and raw pain. The childhood of a young French Canadian, culturally destitute but eager, to the point of obsession, to learn. Without any books at home and with biographies of saints in school, the challenge is great.

