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Author's Note

The children in these stories are much like any other children, with the same feelings and triumphs and failures that “Rilla” experienced in this book. Although the setting and cast of characters are different, many types of experiences are the same for all of us.

I remember dreaming of being a real, true author some day, and God has made it happen. This is a collection of short stories based on memories that have been hidden in my mind. Isn't the mind a wonderful thing? Some memories are so crystal clear, and others need to be gently coaxed out of yesteryear. I wonder what makes the difference.

I purposely chose not to write this story with all the events in chronological order. I wanted to focus on the plot itself instead of boring young readers with a timeline. I have taken the liberty of changing names and even altering some events to protect others.

The “homeplace” in these stories has a story of its own. When my mother's family left the Hutterite colony in Raley, Alberta, they were blessed to find a property in the Stirling area with thousands of acres and two houses. Several more houses were added so that each family could have their own home.

“Rilla” grew up during a difficult transition when her family and extended families were attempting to

make a change from a “Hutterite” lifestyle to more of a “Mennonite” one. It never completely happened. We continued many of the traditions of a Hutterite colony, gradually dropping some. To this day, many things my generation says and does are a direct influence of our wonderful Hutterite heritage. Many of our favorite recipes would be common fare in Germany. We speak the *Hutterisch* dialect and love clean houses and farming and homemade noodles.

I thoroughly enjoyed writing this mini autobiography. Sometimes I feel such a yearning for the “old days” when I was a carefree girl rollicking through a wonderful childhood. But time hastens on, and the past is but a fleeting memory that can never be revived. And that’s okay. God’s way is perfect. His timing is perfect!

I hope you enjoy traveling down memory lane with this *Prairie Child*.

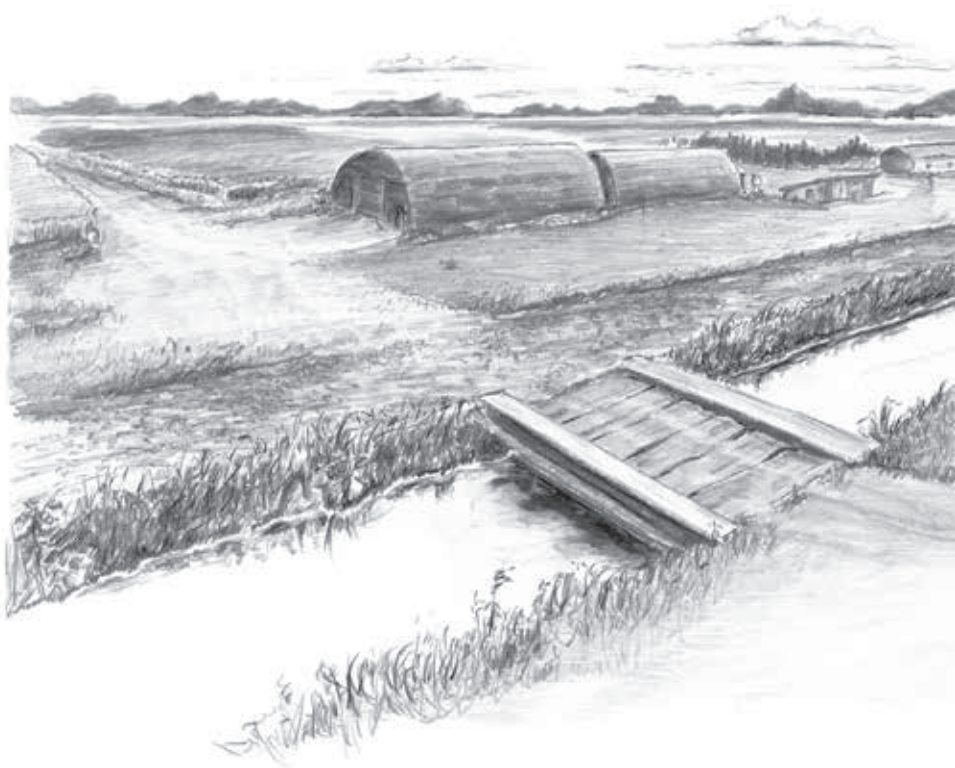
Chapter 1

Homeplace

Rilla slipped out of bed and ran to the open window. She breathed deeply of the fresh summer air. Was there any place in the whole world prettier than *this*? Around the big house, a lush green yard held all kinds of trees and bushes and flowers, for Mother's passion was growing things. A gravel road led down to the old communal kitchen. A wide canal flowed through the farm, with two bridges over it. A flock of white geese was hurrying along. The cows were returning to the pasture from the milking barn, with Dad right behind them.

Home . . . with miles of dirt roads, fields of waving wheat, a wonderful old barn, four little chicken houses, and just as many big ones. A busy highway ran between the barns and the cluster of houses. Behind the steer pen was a piggery that Uncle Lee took care of and a large horse pasture. There were steel Quonsets and several wooden granaries that were perfect to play in. The white church house stood a little way off, with the narrow highway on one side and a tomato patch on the other. Here and there were long rows of trees that the early settlers had planted to protect themselves from the fierce Alberta winds.

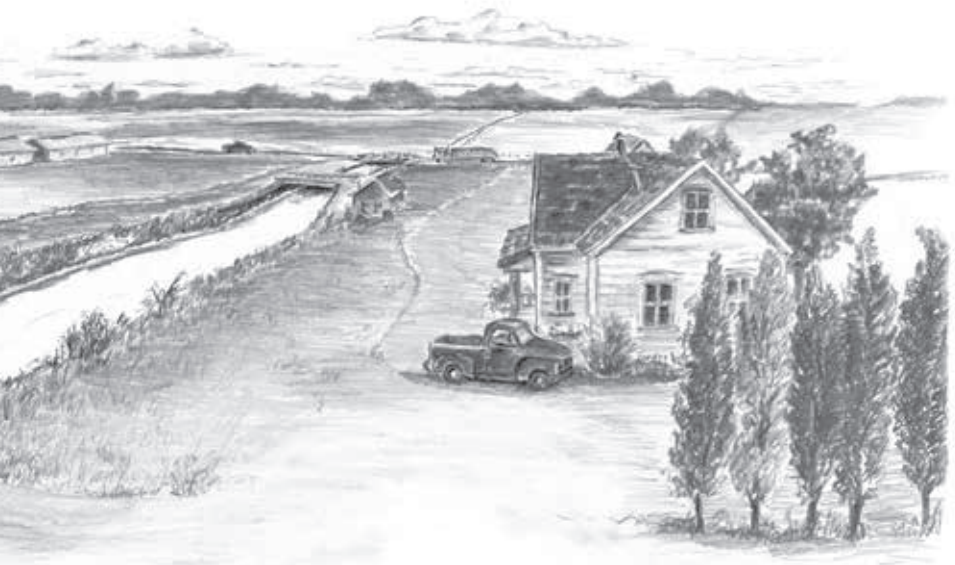
"Every tree you see here in southern Alberta was planted by hand," Aunt Maria said. "There was nothing



but the wide open prairie when the settlers first saw this place. They had to work from sunup to sundown, and in the winter they gathered buffalo dung to burn in the woodstoves because there weren't any trees."

Five families lived on the homeplace. Mother's family had moved here when she was sixteen. When Rilla was younger, they had all lived as a community, eating together in the old kitchen, similar to a Hutterite colony. Now they lived more like the Mennonites with a smaller kitchen in every home, but the farming, gardening, and butchering were still done together. That meant there were always lots of cousins to play with.

Rilla loved everything about it.



Dad prayed in High German before and after every meal, and Rilla knew the prayers by heart. *“Herr Gott himmlischer Vater, Segne uns und diese deine Gaben, die wir vor dir empfangen haben, durch Jesus Christum. Amen.”*¹

After the meal it was *“Gott, Lob und Dank für Speis und Trank; Gottes Segen hat und gespeist, leiblich; Speis uns, Herr, auch viel mehr geistlich, durch Jesus Christum. Amen.”*²

1 Lord God, our Heavenly Father, bless us and these gifts we will receive from Thee, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

2 God, praise and thanks for food and drink; God’s blessings have nourished our body; feed us, O Lord, much more spiritually, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dad . . . with his wavy, jet-black hair and blue, blue eyes and skillful hands. Dad could fix just about anything. He fixed old army tractors, augers, and all kinds of machinery to work the fertile fields. He fixed the old wringer washing machines down in the community washhouse. He fixed chicken feeders, cellar pumps, toasters, and butter churns. He had designed the root cellar and built most of it, and the vegetables kept crisp all winter long.

Sometimes Dad would escape with his family to the mountains for picnics of fried chicken and chocolate cake and homemade apple turnovers. Dad loved to fish at the Cross Coulee Dam where he knew all the best spots and inlets and islands around the whole lovely place, and rarely did he come home without a great northern pike or two.

Dad was just the best!

Mother . . . with her slim waist and dark, parted hair. If she wasn't reading, she was tending to the yard or garden, always hoeing or mulching or fertilizing something, for Mother had a green thumb. She planted cotoneasters, red alders, mountain ash, and flowering crabs to attract the birds. Her binoculars were never far out of reach, and the whole family knew when she spied some new winged visitor.

"I can already see that you are a nature lover," Mother told Rilla. "Isn't it just marvelous what all God created by the word of His mouth? And these atheists want us to believe in the big bang! Imagine!"

There was no danger that Rilla would ever believe in the big bang theory. Not ever! The idea absolutely horrified Mother!

Mother also loved anything to do with the weather. She eagerly watched the cloud formations. She walked

from window to window in the middle of the night to gaze at the stars. She read the forecast every day in the *Lethbridge Herald* and listened to the weather warnings—and worried too much about tornados.

Most of all, Mother loved to read—especially church history books about the Anabaptists, books about the Flood or Creation, and nature books. She was always trading a good book or two with someone.

Yes, Mother was just the best!

We have the nicest family in the whole world, Rilla often thought.

There was Jane, who was twelve and had a big soft heart but was always getting into trouble for talking too much. Then came Susie, who was eleven and so dependable that she hardly ever got into trouble. Billy was eight, and hardly a day went by when Rilla didn't have to tattle on him. She worried about him constantly and even prayed for him more than for anyone else. But it didn't seem to help because Billy was a handful. Jocelyn, or little Josie, as everyone called her, was only six. Rilla loved her fiercely, but the Aunties warned Mother that Josie was getting really spoiled. "That's usually what happens to the last one—all the rest spoil her," they decreed.

At nine years old, Rilla was right in the middle. Like Mother, she passionately enjoyed reading. She already knew the entire tribe of animal characters in the Thornton W. Burgess series, and she loved them all.

"Your dad wanted a boy. But when you came along, you stole his heart," Aunt Lottie told Rilla.

Aunt Lottie lived with Grandma, who was really old, and with Aunt Maria in a quaint white house that was at least a hundred years old. Only a few minutes' walk down the gravel road, their house was often a gathering

place. After church in the evening, the cousins and aunts and uncles would stop in and Aunt Maria would make sugared popcorn and Aunt Lottie would pass it around in plastic bowls.

Grandma and the Aunties were always busy. They loved to garden. They raised chickens, ducks, and geese. They baked bread and all kinds of delicious cookies and pies. They sang lovely old German songs. But most of all, it seemed they were always looking for ways to help others. Of course, there were more aunts and uncles and cousins living very close, but Rilla couldn't imagine life without Grandma's house!

Life was so very good!

Chapter 2

Night Raider

“**S**omething killed a bunch of chickens last night,” Dad said as he buttered a piece of fresh white bread and spread it with a spoonful of honey. “Aunt Maria found six of them this morning. Their heads are all torn up as if they were shaken to death, but nothing else is touched. I know it wasn’t a skunk or a coon, because they would have eaten some of the meat. So would a coyote or badger. It’s something bigger, because those chickens are roosting way up in the caragana bushes. I’m going down to set some traps, so keep the dog tied up until we figure this out.”

“What about the geese?” Mother asked.

“Didn’t touch the geese,” Dad replied. “Don’t worry, Nell. I’ll make short work of whatever it is. I’ve got traps to set out.”

“We played home free till after dark last night,” Rilla said anxiously. “What if that thing was behind our house? And it’s *terribly* dark behind the Aunties’ house at night.”

“We made enough noise to scare any animal away,” Billy answered quickly. “Besides, Lewis and I could easily catch it and tie its mouth shut!” Cousin Lewis loved animals and anything to do with the great outdoors.

“Well, I’m not playing any more outside games at night,” Jane said decidedly. “I won’t leave this house after supper.”

But the afternoon was very hot and sunny, and the ditch was running deep. Rilla soon forgot all about the “night raider.”

“It’s a perfect day to swim,” Susie said delightedly. “Let’s hurry with these dishes, Rilla! I already asked Aunt Lucy if Maggie could come, and you can go get Stella. She hates to miss swimming!”

While the girls dried dishes, Jane whipped up two egg whites with a bit of sugar, put a dollop of them on saltine crackers, spooned a bit of jam on top and popped them in the oven to toast. This was the usual snack on days when they went swimming. The cracker treats came out browned and crisp and altogether delicious.

“Aunt Lucy showed me how to make these,” Jane announced. “They’re quick and easy and don’t cost much.”

Before they finished drying the dishes, the kitchen door burst open. “Hey, Rilla! Wanna see a baby owl?” Billy wondered. “Lewis said it fell out of its nest down by the trees and there’s no way the mother will take it back! He found it just in time too!”

“A baby owl! Where is it? Can we call it Hooty?”

Billy grinned. “It’s up in the hayloft. Sure, call it anything you want! I’ll wait till you come back from swimming, and I’ll show it to you. Then you can help me hunt for baby mice, ’cause that little thing can eat like you wouldn’t believe!”

“Don’t go without me,” Rilla begged. A baby owl, just like Hooty in the Green Forest Series! Rilla could hardly wait.

At the irrigation ditch, Susie and Cousin Stella held their noses and did a running cannonball right into the deepest place by “the rocks,” a narrow pile of huge stones used to dam up the water in the ditch. Rilla got used to the