

*Angelique couldn't believe it! Not only* was Joseph's pony not dawdling, he was galloping. She clung to her younger brother's back as they began to outdistance the screeching Red River carts. The carts were moving even more slowly than usual, carrying their loads of buffalo hides and pemmican. The hunters and their families were starting the long, slow journey home. It had taken the people from Batoche three days to get here. It would take much longer to get back.

Nobody cared. There was a mood of celebration in the air, and it promised to be a perfect prairie day. Anyone who could was walking rather than riding in the carts. Someone had begun to sing.

*"Les souliers mous ki-ka-kiskanaan,"* warbled Joseph. *"La viande pilee ki-ka-miichishunaan."* He had a clear, sweet voice, Angelique thought, almost as good as her own, though he often sang the wrong words to tease her. Today, though, he seemed to be right in the spirit of things, and she was glad. The morning could not have been more perfect.

Angelique ran through the list of good things to be thankful for one by one, like beads slipping through her fingers.

At the top of the list was that Papa was riding Michif. She could see them with some of the other hunters who were riding along a nearby ridge overlooking the carts. The hunters made sure that everyone was moving well and that there were no stragglers. Michif's beautiful white tail streamed in the wind. When he cantered, he showed no sign of having been gored by the buffalo.

Angelique had loved the pinto horse since he was a foal, even though she knew she could never ride him. Only a hunter could ride a buffalo runner. And Michif had proved to be everything Papa had hoped—until the injury. Everyone said that her good care had cured Michif. She smiled. No limp. He moved with his old, smooth gait.

She went back to her list. It had been a good hunt, and no one had been killed. Indeed, Marie's father, who had been thrown from his horse and trampled during the hunt, was well enough now to be driving his own cart loaded with pemmican.

Even riding with Joseph was a pleasure. His pony, Gurnuy, was behaving and so was Joseph. If this kept up, riding with her brother home to Batoche would be much more pleasant than riding in the dusty, noisy cart. Angelique loved camping and all the feasting and dancing—all the excitement of the hunt—but it would be nice to be back in the little log cabin that Papa had built last fall. It would be good to stay in one spot for a while. It would be good to have a home.

She glanced up at the sky, ready to add the perfect weather to her rosary of happy things. The wide blue sky stretched on for miles—as far as she could see. Except—were those black clouds lying just above the horizon? It was early for a prairie storm. The clouds usually rose in late afternoon, and then the downpour would begin. Heavy rain would be a bad thing. Their camp would be a sea of mud in no time. They wouldn't have a dry spot to set up their tipi. And tomorrow the track would be full of mud, making the carts move even more slowly—if they did not get stuck and stop altogether.

Suddenly she caught herself and pulled away from the gloomy thoughts. She could almost hear her mother's voice: "Angelique, *ma petite*, do not borrow sorrow!" With her strong imagination working most of the time, Angelique knew that she not only worried about things before they happened, but she also worried about things that weren't likely to happen at all.

She laughed softly. She had done it again! She had imagined the storm and the mud so vividly that she could almost taste the rain washing over her face and feel the mud sucking at her moccasined feet as she tried to walk through it.

The ominous ribbon of clouds seemed to diminish before her. The clouds could easily move and storm somewhere else. The men would camp early if they thought there was a storm coming. Everything would be all right.

"Angelique!" The pony was walking now as they climbed a hill, and Joseph was pointing to the right. She had been so intent on looking at the horizon that she had not noticed the group of riders now just disappearing.

"How long have they been there?" she whispered, even though it was unlikely that the strange men could hear her.

"I thought you would have seen them too," Joseph twisted around to stare at her. "Were you gathering clouds again?" Joseph used their mother's words for Angelique's daydreaming. It made her smile, for she really had been with the clouds.

Joseph turned and reined Gurnuy around. Angelique knew he was going to ride back to tell Papa and Monsieur Dumont what he had seen, but it annoyed her that he hadn't answered her question. The pony began to run stiffly down the rise with a kind of hopping motion. Angelique hung on. It reminded her of why they had named Joseph's mount Gurnuy. When the pony had been a foal, they'd laughed at its way of bouncing around on stiff legs when it played with the other young ones. "He's a frog!" their mother had said and the Michif name for frog had stuck.

Angelique remained quietly seated behind Joseph while he excitedly told Papa about the riders. "There were seven men," he reported, knowing he was the bearer of important news, "and they turned as soon as they saw me and rode away—fast!"

“Were they Cree or Sioux or some of our people?” Papa’s question was really directed to Angelique. Because she was the oldest, he expected her to be able to tell what the strangers were by their dress. Luckily, she was saved from having to confess that she had been cloud-gathering and not seen the men at first. Joseph was not about to let her answer.

“They were too far away to make out their clothes, but I’m sure they were not Metis like us. Why would they ride away from us so fast if they were?”

At last, she could put in a word or two without telling a lie. “They *were* going very fast,” she said, “as if they were trying to avoid us.”

“Maybe,” said Joseph, “when they saw us coming over the hill they thought we were a man. Angelique is getting tall, you know ...” he added with a grin, “for a ten-year-old.”

Monsieur Dumont spoke at last. “I doubt that seven men would run from one ... even if he were a *very* tall man.” He looked thoughtful and, Angelique thought, a little worried. “More likely,” he said, “they knew that we had camped nearby and had been watching us.”

Papa nodded. “Not Cree then. They would have met with us and known we’d had a good hunt and would share some meat with them. The Sioux raiding parties come up from the Cypress Hills sometimes.” He squinted, looking into the distance. “We must be extra careful guarding the horses tonight.” He smiled at Joseph. “You did well, my son, to be watchful and bring us the news, but—” his face was stern and he looked at Angelique too, “don’t ride so far ahead of us next time. Had the men been closer, they might have decided not to risk having you report back and taken you prisoner.”

The warning was not missed. Angelique could feel Joseph’s tremor of fear as he leaned closer. He was, after all, only six years old, although he rode like an expert.

Monsieur Dumont looked at Gurnuy now. “Yes, and those horse raiders would have yearned for a steed such as yours!” His face was still serious, but Angelique could see the corners of his eyes crinkle as he teased. *He is a kind man*, she thought. *He wants us to know the danger but not be terrified.*

She’d heard Monsieur Dumont called “*le grand Gabriel*,” but it was not because he was tall. He was a short man, although very broad in the shoulders. In fact, he’d been called that because he was respected and admired for his strength and bravery and for the way he looked out for others. He could certainly handle the matter of possible Sioux horse raiders.

Still, as they rode back to the slow-moving carts, Angelique wondered if she might be able to arrange to sleep with Michif tonight to protect him from being stolen.