

# By Whatever Name

A Novel

Elizabeth Reimer Bartel

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BY WHATEVER NAME

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‘A rose is a rose by any other name and smells as sweet.’

William Shakespeare

I am calling this work historical fiction. But what is fact? Well, I *did* have a grandfather. And he told wonderful stories. Upon much reflection I have come to realize what is true: that good is good by whatever name. That happiness is a state of mind and can be chosen. That love never fails and joy, that other worldly thing, comes and goes at the Spirit’s bidding. So here’s to the memory of my mother and grandfather.

This book would not have come about without the patience and encouragement of friends and family who listened to me over the years, nor without the love and support of my husband Dennis and the help of a great editor, Dianne Hiebert.

Elizabeth Reimer Bartel

*But true love is a durable fire  
In the mind ever burning;  
Never sick, never old, never dead,  
From itself never turning.*

From "Pilgrim to Pilgrim"  
Sir Walter Raleigh

## Prologue

It is March 30th, 1965. We are on our way to celebrate my grandfather's one hundredth birthday. It is a very special occasion. A year ago he wrote his memoirs. The little booklet I hold in my hand is so slight, to have covered the events of one hundred years. Twenty pages? No more. Twenty pages he has painstakingly typed on his ancient typewriter. Hundred-year-old fingers don't always obey his commands.

"He's probably left out all the good parts," I say to my husband who is driving. He chuckles and gives me a quick glance. He knows me well enough. I want the nitty-gritty, the unexamined jealousy, secret scheming, forbidden love.

Inside the car it is warm. I turn the heater off. The sun blazes out of a dazzling blue March sky. I loosen my scarf, undo the buttons of my fur jacket, turn to the first page and begin to read.

*I was born on March 30th 1865 in the village of Morgenau, one of the many Mennonite colonies in the south of Russia.* "Too brief by half," I say as I roll down the car window, then quickly roll it up again. In Manitoba spring is only a word. Arctic wind whips across the empty fields glazed with icy white. The crows, returned from their winter quarters, are assembled along a barbwire fence like so many frock-coated diplomats at a conference. The highway to Greenland has been swept bare of snow. Loose gravel spurts under our wheels as we turn off onto a secondary road that leads to the Greenland home where my grandfather is a resident.

The land around here is flat as a table. I wonder how it looked in 1874 when grandfather arrived here as a boy of nine with his parents, his older brothers and sisters, his grandparents, uncles and aunts. It will have been all untilled prairie grass, no fences or roads, with a few scattered trees and bushes. Since then it has been drained of most wetlands and become the richest farmland in Manitoba.

We turn off the road into the parking lot at the Greenland Senior's Home. Already, the cars are lined up like obedient horses, their noses all pointed one way. Their chrome trim glitters in the

sun. I wonder if all his children will be here this afternoon. He has so many descendants; the Toews family is prolific.

I know already how my Waldeman relatives will look—the women in dresses all cut from the same pattern, of dark blue or brown, sometimes grey, small black kerchiefs covering their smooth hair, framing their faces. No rings on their busy fingers, or brooches, or beads around their necks. I think of nuns with their serene eyes, their smooth cheeks without a hint of rouge or powder. The husbands look more like my picture of Old Testament prophets with full untouched beards. Their many children seem like children anywhere—innocent and happy in their games.

These devout people deny themselves what they believe is worldliness: pictures on the walls of their spotless homes, curtains on their sparkling windows. They frown on the use of cameras and photographs, eschew academic degrees, rationalise the most up-to-date automobiles and farm machinery but don't own a radio or television.

We are the black sheep, my family. The worldly Mennonites. My father ever belonging to the Waldeman Church is beyond my furthest imagination. My mother has never allowed herself to be so persuaded. Being curious, I have asked her once or twice how she had the fortitude to resist the heavy urgent exhortation of those fire-breathing church elders. So far she has always been vague in her replies. I mean to ask her again. Then I think of my grandfather, and cannot imagine him coercing his beloved daughter to act in a way she cannot rightly agree to. My mother married outside of the Waldeman fold. We children always thought it very romantic when we pored over the photographs of their wedding. One shows two people, their heads close together as if she is telling him a secret. My father looks handsome, his white shirt collar stark against his dark formal suit. One lock of his fair hair has fallen forward over his brow like some English poet. My mother is beautiful in a dark silk dress with beading all down the front, her dark hair soft around the oval of her face.

“We stopped in Ste. Anne to receive my father's blessing.” She always tells this story in a firm and decisive voice as if there can be

no doubt that her father loved her. No wonder my father smiles so reminiscently when my mother tells that story. “My knees went weak the first time I saw your mother,” my father has told us. He loved her, still loves her. I have always known that as we have always known that our mother is my grandfather’s favourite, although he does his best to hide it.

Now I let all my remembrances go as we gather to honour this fine old man. Inside, my mother, is looking pleased in a flowered silk dress, her fur coat draped over her shoulders against the chill of the room, her new spring hat still on her head. She sits beside her father at the festive table and hands him the cards that have come in the mail. The message from the queen is uppermost. My father, distinguished in a dark three-piece suit and silk tie, a little smile on his lips, opens each envelope with his penknife, which he always carries in his vest pocket. His relationship with my grandfather goes back a long way to the time he wooed and wed his favourite daughter.

My mother, with her green eyes and olive skin, reminds her father of the love of his life—his dearest first wife, Catherine, the one he always cries over, dead in child-birth at thirty-four, leaving behind a squalling infant and several young children. I think of that Catherine, whose loss I believe caused, in my grandfather forever after, even in joy, a gentle melancholy.

Catherine’s story was the one that haunted us as children. We would crowd around our mother, my youngest two sisters right in her lap, and promise to be good so she wouldn’t die and leave us motherless. We had been told how she stood on a stool beside the coffin to kiss the suddenly cold lips of a mother she had barely been weaned from.

“Happy birthday, Grandpa,” we greet him. He smiles like a satisfied child, as I give him a proper kiss on the lips which he always insists on. After we have greeted the others, we move towards the tables set for faspá. Over the buns and cheese, the sugar cubes strained through coffee with lots of cream in good old Mennonite fashion, the talking and visiting begins.

Later on our way home, I turn to the first page of my grandfather’s diary and go on reading. *I was born to Aganetha and Isaac Toews*, he writes. I try to imagine how it must have been.

*I have desired to go where springs not fail  
To fields where a few lilies blow  
And I have asked to be where no storms come*

Lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins