

*Foreword by bestselling author JANETTE OKE*

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# *The Diamond Ring*

Non-fiction  
*N. J. Lindquist*

The other guests at the birthday party appeared to be having a wonderful time. I was counting the minutes until I could go home and read a book or design more clothes for my paper dolls. As soon as we'd eaten the birthday cake, I said I had to leave early. Dressed in my best party dress and wearing my white sandals, carrying a little basket of candy and trinkets, I fought to hold back the tears that started the moment I closed the door.

Our house was on the outskirts of town, and to reach it I had to cross a set of railway tracks. I stopped and walked along the rails. By now, I was sobbing in earnest, and I didn't want my parents to see—didn't want them to worry. I also was trying to figure out why I wasn't like other people. For a moment, I thought it might be a huge relief if a train would come along and erase the pain.

It was 1955, and I was seven years old.

I had two loving parents, a dog and a cat, a nice home, no worries about getting enough food, no fear of being abused in any way. I was a child who apparently had everything a child might want—and yet loneliness was my constant companion.

I spent whole days reading books and making up stories with my paper dolls. I perplexed my mother because her only daughter wanted toy six-guns instead of a new dress. I lived in another world, spending hours staring out a window daydreaming, having to be called 10 times to come set the table for supper because I was engrossed in a book and hadn't heard my parents calling. And even when I responded, I might go to the kitchen and forget what I'd been asked to do. Or set the table with a book in one hand. I rarely spoke, especially to people I didn't

know well; and when I did, I was inclined to say exactly what I thought instead of making small talk; too much like *Little Women's* Jo and Amy, with none of the gentler attributes of Meg or Beth.

And because I was adopted, my parents had no frame of reference to understand me. They couldn't say, "She's just like your sister," or "I know exactly how she feels because I've felt that way, too."

When I got home that day after the birthday party, my mother was coming out the door to look for me. My classmate's mother had phoned.

I told Mom I was fine. Hadn't felt good. Hadn't had much fun. And, as usual, my mother worried about me. But neither she nor I knew what to do.

Fortunately, God did. And He sent exactly what I needed to see me through the coming years.

Seven months after the party, my mother, my dad and I were in the kitchen of our two-storey frame house in the village of Crystal City, Manitoba. We'd finished eating supper and were about to have home-canned peaches for dessert.

When the phone rang, Mom jumped up to answer it. At first she sounded confused. Then she furrowed her brow and looked over at us. Her tone grew higher as she became excited. Finally, she picked up a pen and paper from the nearby counter and wrote something down.

My dad and I kept looking at each other. Mom's side of the conversation made no sense to us.

"That was my Aunt Olive's widower, Frank Miksell," Mom said when she finally hung up. "He must be 80 years old, but he's coming all the way from San Francisco to give me a diamond ring!"

My mother's wedding ring was a simple silver band. Although they'd been married 18 years, my dad had never been able to give her an engagement ring. While Mom didn't complain, clothes and appearance were very important to her. She was thrilled at the thought of having a diamond ring.

The events leading up to that phone call were actually set in motion decades earlier in Orillia, Ontario, in the late 1800s.

A boy named William Bruce MacDonald had a sister, Olive Margaret. The two were very close. But while Bruce and Olive were still young, their parents separated. The mother took Olive with her to the United States; the father took Bruce to Manitoba to be raised by his grandparents.

Bruce grew up and became a barber in Rossburn, Manitoba. He and his wife Alice had seven children, the oldest of whom was named Olive Margaret after her aunt. Bruce died from a heart attack when he was 55.

Bruce's sister Olive wrote now and then over the years from her home in California. After her first husband died, she married a man named Frank Miksell. When Olive's health became poor, Frank began to keep in touch with her relatives, especially Olive's sister-in-law Alice. Because Olive never had children, when she died, Frank decided that he wanted to give the engagement ring he'd bought for her to her eldest niece and namesake, my mother. Hence, the unexpected long distance telephone call.

As we drove across the border to meet the train from San Francisco at Rugby, North Dakota, I wasn't exactly looking forward to the next couple of weeks. What does an eight-year-old say to an eighty-year-old stranger? Besides, I'd have to sit next to this visitor in the back seat on the long drive home. I dreaded the moment when his train would pull into the station. But the train arrived, only a few minutes late.

At first glance, he looked just as I'd anticipated—old and wrinkled. A small, thinnish man with snow white hair, he was dressed formally in a black suit and white shirt and a tie. He looked as if a small shove would knock him over.

But in spite of his fragile appearance, he held himself erect and firm, and his sharp, bird-like eyes seemed to see everything. Eyes that held an unexpected twinkle. Thin lips that smiled.

Sitting beside him on the trip home, I quickly discovered that Uncle Frank was unlike any adult I'd ever known. Unfazed by his long train ride, he took a newspaper he'd read on the train, made a sailor hat out of it, and put it on his head. When I asked him how he'd done that, he made one for me—gleefully, as if he was having the time of his life. At

the same time, he talked about California and his train ride, and his words brought both to life. My shyness disappeared. I'd known adults who expected me to answer all manner of questions that I didn't think were any of their business, adults who didn't know what to say to me any more than I knew what to say to them, and adults whose attempts to joke with me had made me feel awkward. But this man didn't fit any category—he almost seemed to be a child himself.

I can still picture him sitting on the green carpet in our living room, surrounded by scraps of newspaper, making his *pièce de résistance*—a newspaper ladder. And I can still remember the excitement I felt. We had no television, no videos, only the odd film at the town's theatre, so this was first-class entertainment—and it was happening right in my own living room!

Of course, he hadn't come to entertain me. He'd barely known of my existence. He'd come to make sure my mother got her aunt's engagement ring. As he presented her with the large diamond on a platinum band, my mother was ecstatic. The ring was far beyond anything my father could ever give her. And it also had a connection to her beloved father's only sister.

Diamond rings are nice, of course. But Uncle Frank gave me something far more valuable. Though we were worlds apart in age and experience, we were bound together because of who we were. Like me, he was "different." Simply by being who he was, he gave me permission to be the person I was. He made me feel, for the first time in my life, that I wasn't alone. I now knew there was at least one other person in this world who was "different" like me.

When he returned to California after a couple of weeks, he left something to take his place. Knowing that Olive's niece had a young child, he'd brought along a copy of *A Child's Garden of Verses*. Over the following months, I read the book over and over until I had most of the poems memorized.

I can still feel the emotions I experienced as I read Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "The Little Land."

When at home alone I sit  
And am very tired of it,  
I have just to shut my eyes  
To go sailing through the skies...<sup>1</sup>

It was as if Uncle Frank had given me permission to dream.

For Christmas, Uncle Frank sent me *Peter Pan* and I learned to fly. The next summer, when school was over, *Alice in Wonderland* arrived. I decided to learn how to play chess. Neuberger's *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police* appeared the next Christmas. I remember thinking how funny it was to get a book about Canada from an American. The banister around our porch became a horse, and I rode it all over the Prairies.

The summer I was ten, Uncle Frank came to visit us again in Souris, Manitoba, where we now lived. This time, he made the journey without the excuse of a ring. But he brought both Hans Christian Andersen's and the Grimm Brothers' books of fairy tales. He hadn't changed, except he was more wrinkled and even more frail. Inside, however, he was still more alive than anyone else I knew.

When he left, the fairy tales mesmerized me. I particularly loved the story of the ugly duckling, since it gave me hope that no matter how different I felt from other people, in the end a swan might yet emerge.

I read those books over and over until I probably could have told the stories from start to finish without missing any details. They were my retreat, my textbooks on creativity, and my doorway into another world. Like Robert Louis Stevenson, I soared on magic wings beyond the tangible world to a place where I could be anyone I wanted to be.

Uncle Frank sent me a few other books, and several puzzles. And then we learned that he was gone.

It wasn't until second-year university, when we did a raft of tests for our experimental psychology labs, that I began to understand why I had always felt so different. My results showed me—for the first time—that I tested in the top percentiles for IQ and creativity.

I know we did IQ tests while I was in both elementary and high school, but no one ever told me, or my parents, that I was gifted, and that this might make me emotionally sensitive. That it might cause trouble relating to my peers. That I might feel isolated.

Today, I sometimes wear the diamond ring that never left my mother's finger while she was alive. And I still have the books Uncle Frank gave me. Each one is inscribed "To my little sweetheart," or "To Nancy Jane Shaw, who I love very much." To me, they are treasures of far more value than mere diamonds.

My four gifted sons have read these books and many, many more. And they, more easily than I, have learned to unfurl their wings and delight in who they are.

I've been back in Manitoba a few times in recent years, taping television interviews, teaching workshops, and talking to booksellers who carry my books. On one of my trips, I decided to drive to Crystal City. It's still there, a small village nestled in the midst of fields of sunflowers, rye and canola. Our house is gone; there's only an overgrown field where it once stood. But the railway track is still there.

I parked my rented car, walked along the rails, and remembered that day long ago when I had felt so very much alone. I thanked God that He had made it all work out for good—that the ugly duckling had become a swan after all.

I don't know what compelled Uncle Frank to make that long trip by train from San Francisco instead of sending the ring by courier, but I know Who was behind it. And I know that the only reason I can write the books I write, and speak on the topics I speak about, is that I once was a lonely little girl walking on the railway tracks wanting the pain to go away.

1. Poem "The Little Land" by Robert Louis Stevenson. Copyright 1913, Public Domain.

This selection is adapted from the forthcoming book *LoveChild*, copyright © 2008 by N. J. Lindquist (That's Life! Communications/[www.lovechildministries.com](http://www.lovechildministries.com)).