

Excerpt from “Not In My Father’s Footsteps”
by Terrence Rundle West © 2011

Chapter One

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Montreal

“One to go,” Alice mouthed to Rita as they finished the last bed on the ward and headed for room 691, the semi-private with the mysterious patient. The girls were careful not to run, lest Sister Yolande spy them from her perch at the nursing station and tack on more duties. It’d been a shift from hell. Twelve hours of bedpan steaming, patient washing, and bed carbolizing. And all under the watchful eye of the meanest supervisor in L’Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal. But at last, with Sister glued to her stool at the far end of the ward, they might be able to cut a few corners; maybe even get to sit down to dinner with their first-year classmates for a change.

Ordinarily there’d be two patients in room 691, but “John Doe’s” mean streak had necessitated the evacuation of his roommate. He’d been there two weeks, but they still knew no more about him than when he came in. The girls’ best guess put him down to a wannabe soldier, which, judging from the grenades he’d launched—plates, cutlery, catheter—could be close to the mark. Not that it was all bad; he’d calmed down lately and wasn’t incontinent like many of the old gaffers on the ward.

The Franciscan priest looked up as the girls swished their blue-cotton uniforms into the room. “Evening, Father,” they said in unison, nodding their snowy caps and trying to hide their annoyance.

The priest sat slouched in a chair at the end of John Doe's bed, wiping his cataract-plagued eyes with a dirty handkerchief. Visions of shortcuts began to evaporate. There'd be no skipping the sponge bath or bed change tonight, unless they could distract him. Why couldn't he be on his knees in the chapel, or down in the staff room soaking up the news out of Europe with the other off-duty workers? These were exciting times. The Third Reich was flexing its muscles. Germany was blaming the Czechs for unspeakable atrocities and was in the process of soaking up Bohemia and other places no one had ever heard of. Normally, few would care about Hitler taking over Czechoslovakia, but the broadcasts claimed he was hungry for more. The Brits and French were getting antsy and Canada, once again, seemed ready to give its customary, "aye, ready, aye," response to the Mother Country. It was beginning to look like the Great War all over again.

In view of all the drama on the world stage, what could "mystery man" possibly have for the priest that could trump that? Sure, once they'd found him a bed big enough to fit his tall frame, the screaming meemies had stopped long enough to let them cut his blond hair and shave him. He was even beginning to look almost attractive; especially, with the sores on his face healing. Once, when he'd been sleeping, Alice had gone so far as admitting that, with some meat on him, she might be up to smuggling him into the residence for a while. But other than the wild eyes and the occasional tantrum, there was still no communication. Nor visitors, save the good Father. For all Rita knew he could be a German. Maybe even a spy. Perhaps the poor old cleric was a secret government operative sent to keep tabs on him. Rita smiled inwardly. Fantasizing passed the time, even though it was nonsense, because John Doe, in spite of his youth, had been admitted in the same condition as the other burnt-out winos—running sores, bleeding gums, protruding ribs, repugnant odour, and socks so fused

to his feet that they had to be removed in the OR. No, there was no Nazi intelligence ring for the aging Franciscan to unravel here, just a conversion in the offing; perhaps a last notch on his belt.

Rita wagged a finger at John Doe. “No funny business,” she mumbled. “It’s been a long shift.” Together the young nurses swung the patient’s legs over the edge of the bed and worked him onto the chair. In his emaciated state, one of them could have handled him alone, but having seen his violent side they were taking no risks. Kicking a chamber pot on the floor had been bad enough; plastering the crucifix on the wall with rice pudding made him certifiable. It had been days since the last outburst, but the lingering hint of chlorozyleno from the Detto, splashed around in cleanups, still bit into the tear ducts. Today, if he made one false move, they’d be on him, like Joe Louis on Max Schmeling.

The priest’s effectiveness was beginning to trouble the girls. In most Catholic hospitals, having a cleric about soothed uncooperative patients. But this one’s presence seemed to coincide with John Doe’s outbursts. Alice wondered if she detected a cause and effect.

“The radio’s set up for the news in the staff room, Father,” Rita said. “Wouldn’t you like to get the latest out of Europe?”

The priest clenched his teeth. “It’s all bad.”

Alice moved around to the far side of the bed, her large backside blocking the cleric’s view. “What do you get out of these visits, Father?” she asked. “It’s not as if he talks or anything.” The girls made eye contact. Decision time. Both linen and patient were passable; no visible stains. If they could keep the good Father occupied, they might get away with some minor sheet-tucking and pillow-fluffing.

“Wrong,” the priest replied, stretching his legs in front of him and folding his hands in his lap. “He comes to life when I recite the rosary. I see it on his face.”

Alice rolled her eyes, then like a baseball catcher signalling the pitcher, moved her hands at her waist. Rita nodded. A minor straightening was the call. They’d be dining with their classmates tonight.

“Could be anger,” Alice said. “You sure he’s even Catholic?”

“Has he eaten today?” the priest asked.

The girls bobbed to each other across the bed as they snapped the wrinkles out of the sheets. “Didn’t notice,” Rita replied. “No food on the walls. That much I know.”

The priest stared at the patient, as if expecting confirmation, but John Doe’s eyes were locked onto the crucifix. “Maybe with strength he’ll find his tongue,” he said.

“And probably cut us up when he does,” Alice replied, helping Rita get him back into bed. “Some people are born ingrates.” She began humming “Red River Valley.” Doe raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, look!” Rita said. “Maybe, he’s a cowboy. He seems to know that one.”

Alice stopped the music. “Figures,” she said, chuckling in a low voice. “It’s an old hobo song. Bet he picked it up in some jungle near a railway track.”

The priest shook his head, frowning and glancing at the door, as if wishing them on their way. The student nurses folded the top sheet under John Doe’s chin. They had begun their escape when they were stopped by a mucousy cough, followed by a Humphrey Bogart

whisper. “That song,” it said, “the words I know have nothing to do with cowboys and everything to do with a valley called Jarama.”

The cleric leapt to his feet. The student nurses turned at the door. John Doe hacked up phlegm which he spat into the enamel bowl at his side. “My God!” Rita exclaimed. “It speaks! Maybe now we’ll find out . . .”

The priest’s hand came up for silence. His eyes locked onto John Doe. The patient swiped at the spittle on his chin and wiped it on the bedclothes. “Ever been to Spain, priest?” he groaned.

A beatific smile spread across the priest’s face. “What? No!” he stammered. “Never been there myself. But Father Blouin now, from the seminary, he served in Barcelona as a young man and he says . . .”

“You priests killed it.”

The cleric’s smile collapsed. “Killed what? Barcelona? You’re confused. I’ve seen pictures of it in the *Messenger St. Antoine*. It came through a bit of a bad spot there, but still looked pretty good to me. That cathedral, what’s it called?” He glanced up at the crucifix above the patient’s head for assistance.

“La Sagrada Familia,” John Doe snorted, struggling to pull himself up to a sitting position.

“Yes, that’s the one . . . you’ve seen it? Incredible. Right?”

Doe’s eyes rolled. “Too much stone to burn.”

Excitedly, the priest approached, fumbling for words, as if terrified of a relapse into silence. “It’s an uplifting story. They’ve been building it for forty years, you know, and it’s still only partly completed, which isn’t surprising given the civil war, but Father Blouin says that with common sense finally restored in Madrid,

they'll be moving on it again, probably pretty soon, even if the costs are out of this earth because . . .”

“Mother of God!” Doe cut in. “Is that all you black robes think about? Money and the state of your property?” The priest dabbed at his eyes to hide a scowl. He turned, shooing the girls from the room with a flick of the hand. Doe continued. “How about a prayer for Spain and the vulgar crimes committed in her name?”

Father clasped his hands in front of him, his head bobbing slowly. “If you’re referring to the viler transgressions of the civil war, I’m aware of them and, yes, they say it was very bad. Not only did the Bolsheviks shoot priests, but,” he turned to see that the nurses were gone, “nuns were despoiled and young girls forced into prostitution.”

John Doe stared at him for a second then looked away. “Jesus Christ,” he moaned, “you don’t know shit.”

The Franciscan stiffened as he exchanged his handkerchief for a rosary. “I admit, some of the details are fuzzy, but,” his chin came up, “I am acquainted, albeit in general terms, with the horrors endured by the church and all God-fearing Spaniards in that ghastly conflict.”

“And exactly where would you have gleaned this insight, Father? That publication for clerics, *Messenger St. Antoine*? Missives from the Pope? One of Adrien Arcand’s rags, perhaps?”

A hint of colour found its way to Latendresse’s cheeks. “Other sources, too,” he replied. “A series of articles come to mind. They appeared in the papers a couple of years back—accounts by a young Montrealer travelling with Franco’s troops. Unfortunately, he disappeared; supposedly swallowed up by the Republicans. But,

while he was still writing he set the record straight on what was going on over there, I'll tell you."

John Doe's laugh might have echoed off the walls, if not for the protesting lungs that turned it into a coughing fit. "Those articles," he said, when he'd regained control, "you might want to cross-reference them."

The Franciscan glared at him. "You're entitled to your point of view young man and I to mine."

"Oh, I get it. Can't accept the word of a drunk, eh?"

"*Au contraire*. I trust anybody who gives me a convincing argument. 'Course, that requires civil conversation, a concept that appears to elude you."

"Convincing argument my ass. I've yet to meet a priest who's a good listener. Why would you be an exception? You say conversation, I hear monologue."

The priest plunked himself on the chair beside the bed, absent-mindedly wrapping the beads around his fist. "You surprise me, young man. For two weeks I've watched you, but never figured you for a church-hater. Question is, why?"

"No, Father. The question is, why you wasted fourteen days praying over me? There must be other patients more willing to lap up the mumbo jumbo?"

The priest stared at him for a long second. "No one's spiritual health goes unattended in this hospital," he responded flatly. "But the men in this wing are older and, frankly, goners. You've got your life in front of you." He leaned forward and proffered a hint of smile. "I'll admit, though, the instant they brought you in I figured you'd be a challenge."

“I bet.”

The smile receded. “Don’t you want to get back on your feet? Become a contributing member of society? Reconnect with family, perhaps?” John Doe shook his head. “There must be something I can do for you?”

“Sparing me the intrusion will suffice. And no, I don’t want to contribute to this society. Frankly, it sickens me.”

Father sat back. “Sorry to hear that. I was hoping I’d be able to lend assistance.”

“That’s bullshit. Plain old curiosity has kept you hanging around. You and those young nurses. I take in every word. I’m the Hôtel-Dieu enigma. You’re all dying to know what loathsome sin—greed, murder, sex—lies at the root of my downfall.” He winked at the priest. “Titillated by the possibilities, aren’t you?”

The Franciscan caressed the rosary with the palm of his other hand. “You’re an alcoholic. You’ve been delusional. Maybe still are.”

Doe came up on his elbows. “I *was* delusional when I went to Spain. Now I see crystal clear.”

“You may think so, but . . .”

“Tell me, Father,” Doe interrupted, “is it possible for a priest to concede that a church, so wrong on Spain, might just be responsible for my present state?”

The priest kissed his rosary before replying. “I daresay you’ve seen some terrible things, my boy, but time and trauma do strange things to the imagination. Past wrongs, however slight, grow in magnitude. Become uncontrollable demons.”

John Doe fell back on his pillows. “*Merde!*”

Father pursed his lips. “Which isn’t to say that Mother Church never makes mistakes. Priests are human. If it makes any difference, I’d already concluded that the church was somehow implicated in your problem.”

“And just how had you arrived at that?”

The priest squared his shoulders. “From the *jugum Christi* you were wearing under your shirt the day they brought you in.” The patient frowned. The cleric leaned forward. “The scapular. The Yoke of Christ.”

Doe bolted up. “You have it?”

“Course it was in bad shape. But I recognized it immediately. What puzzles me is how a man in your condition came to be wearing such a holy symbol? Are you a member of a religious order? Defrocked perhaps?”

“Not on your life!”

“I didn’t think so. These days few young clerics can be bothered with the chaffing and incessant straightening of the scapular.”

“You get used to it.”

“Which brings us back to why you’d have a scapular. Perhaps you stole it and wear it as some sort of sick joke. Is it possible you lifted it from the dead body of a Spanish priest? Say, as a trophy?”

An orderly entered carrying a tray. When he left, Father rose and cut the meat on the plate. He then straightened the pillows so the patient could sit up. When it looked like he was about to feed him,

John Doe grabbed the fork and speared a piece of food. “Where’s the scapular now?”

“Cleaned and safe at the seminary.”

“Have you told anyone?” The priest shook his head. John Doe pushed the food around carefully in his mouth to avoid the cankers. He chewed then swallowed with effort. “Scapulars aren’t that unusual,” he said.

“Ones with cardinal markings are.”

“Am I getting it back?”

“Depends.”

“I came by it honestly.”

“It’ll take more than that.”

John Doe put the fork down. His eyes wandered to the crucifix on the wall. “If we were to talk, it wouldn’t be under that cross dangling up there.”

Latendresse rose and removed it, smiling at the shadowed imprint left behind on the beige wall. His eyes then flicked momentarily to the portrait over the bed, a picture the patient had yet to notice. In it, a radiant, haloed, but troubled Jesus, clothed in fluttering white robes, ascended into heaven. The priest smiled, extending his hand. “Father Latendresse,” he said. “Pierre if you prefer.”

The patient hesitated before accepting. “Dollard,” he replied.

“Doll-aard . . . ?” Latendresse responded, stretching out the last syllable as he fished for a second name.

“Just Dollard for now.”

The priest nodded, his gaze falling on the battered glasses case on the bedside table. It had lain there untouched for days. His hand went out to pick it up, but something in Dollard's face made him stop. The fabric on the case had been ripped and worn down to the metal. To one side of centre was a small hole, large enough to insert a little finger. Latendresse shuddered.