



SUMMER FICTION DEPT.

SUN LIFE

“In my family we run around burying feelings the way squirrels bury their nuts then forget where. I’d once thought the world was going to be nice.”

BY PETER BEHRENS / ILLUSTRATIONS BY NATALIE REIS

I did not go to school with men—I was a boarder at the Sacred Heart Convent—but I have been dealing with them all my life, one way or another. My brother Jack, right from the start. He was a bit of bully, though we got along well enough.

Jack got a military funeral. They wrapped his coffin in a Union Jack, loaded it on the back of a shiny truck, and six airmen in uniform paraded behind it all the way to the church. *The honour guard*. Maybe they did funerals every week, though most of the boys killed that summer were being buried overseas, if they were buried at all. But Jack

had come home to die, so his funeral Mass was at Ascension of Our Lord, my family’s parish church in Westmount. It stood back-to-back with the French church, St-Léon-de-Westmount, and across the street from Presbyterian St. Andrew’s, St. Matthias and Shaar Hashomayim.

Montreal was crammed with churches, archbishop’s palaces, temples, chapels and whatnot.

The Catholic Church ruled in the province of Quebec. There was more pressure on us to be good Catholics than there was on Protestants to be good Protestants, Jews to be good Jews. Wherever you



After withstanding an hour, I collected my hat and purse from my desk drawer and scrambled out of there, like a little nun absconding from the wicked, boozy, howling world. Outside, in the marble corridor, nonchalant Bill Metternich stood hat in hand at the elevator bank watching the bronze arrow working its way up the dial. He surprised me by turning and gazing straight at me.

"Are you feeling quite all right, Frankie?"

"Sure." "I have a car. Can I drop you anywhere?"

Well, yes. Anything is better than a tram when you're feeling hateful. At the last moment, some noisy others flung themselves into the elevator with us, and two of them—sailors—tagged along with us outside when they realized Bill had a car.

I might have hated him if he'd been driving a better machine but it was nothing special, an Olds coupe with a smoky tailpipe. I gave directions then kept quiet. The sailors in the back seat, both Loyola boys, were passing a bottle of rum back and forth and whispering sea shanties. When we pulled up outside Number Ten the lights were blazing, and I felt like someone airborne on a parachute plunging into mortal combat with a fully realized sense of hell. The drunks kept right on chanting.

"Good night, good luck, Frankie. Hope I'll see you soon," Bill smirked. I bid my adieux, slammed the car door and careened into the house where everyone for the next few days was excited and stimulated and specifically alive: maids scampering like squirrels, delicious scents of roast beef and ham thrusting

like fists from the kitchen. Daddy had swung into action like a battleship, phoning grey men in Ottawa, threatening deputy ministers, rearranging schedules of eminent surgeons, demanding and getting the useless best of everything for his dying child.

A thrilling, nauseating, futile ten days, culminating with a coffin reeking of furniture polish, a glinting funeral with banging guns and the morbid tea party. I'd thought of Bill Metternich from time to time over those ten days, but only in fragments, never whole. The pitch of his voice rehearsed in my mind like a movie. His right hand, sinewy on the gearshift. And when the maid summoned me, saying there was a man on the telephone, of course I figured it was him, because who else could it be? Every other man I knew was overseas or munching salmon sandwiches in our living room. It had to be him. But when I picked up the receiver and the voice said, "Uh, is this Frances?" I knew, dead on, it wasn't.

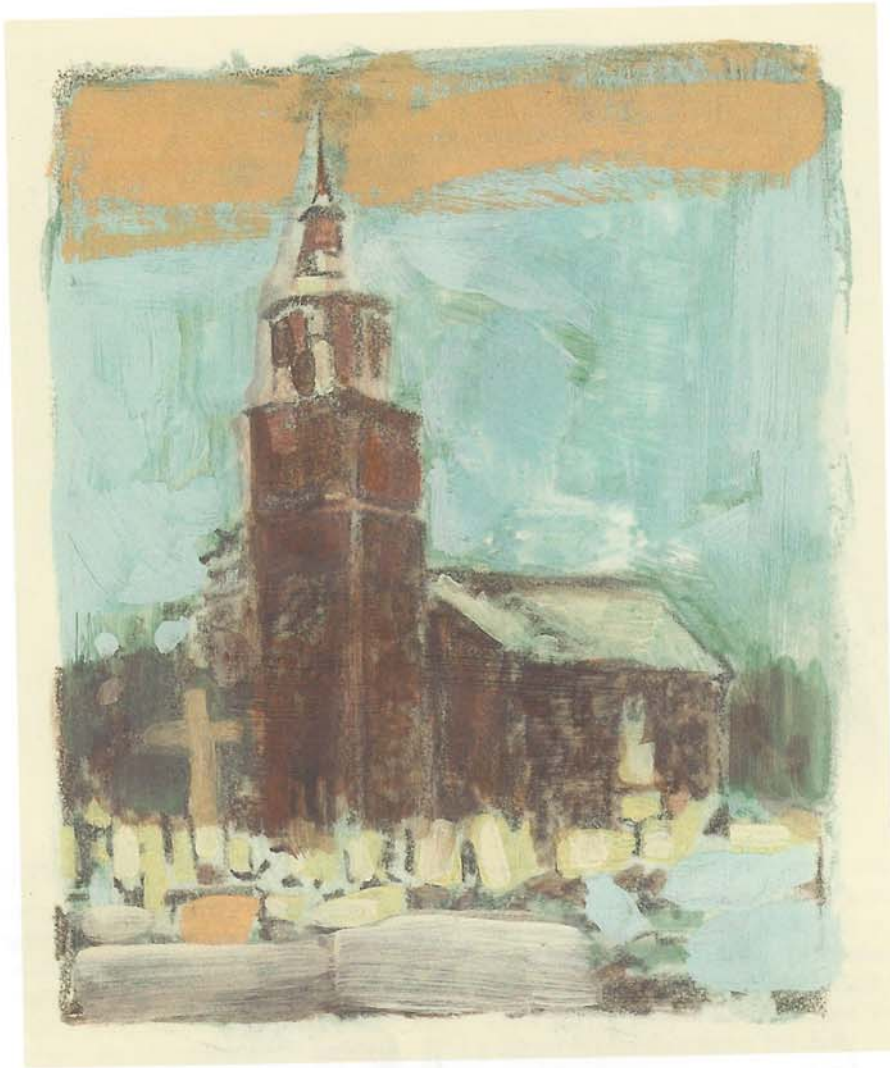
For one thing, no one I knew called me *Frances*.

"Who's this?"

"I'm a pal of your brother John."

And no one ever called my brother *John*, though that was the name, *John Fergus O'Brien*, that would be carved into the war memorial in front of Westmount City Hall.

"Hell, I'm in this clip joint," the voice continued in a not-unpleasant, boozy rush, "and I'm thinking, give the little sister a call. Get together, have a few drinks."



“You knew my brother?”

I could hear him pull on his cigarette. I knew I ought to hang up, but I've always been fascinated by people behaving badly, have usually felt closer to them than to those behaving well.

“I sure did, sure.”

He wasn't a confident liar, wasn't brazen enough to pull it off.

“Johnny. Nice guy. Great guy.”

Strictly an amateur.

There was a pause, and I could almost hear him thinking, or whatever lonely, stupid men do that passes for thinking. Calculating. Reckoning odds, measuring appetites. Brutal and simple.

“Listen, little sister, I was in the honour guard. Seen you in the church, I asked around, who's the one with the black hair?” He was slurring, and I knew he had wet lips and probably had spent long, blue afternoons playing hockey on some frozen cattle slough, chasing a puck into a headwind screaming out of nowhere. I could almost smell the rye whiskey.

I could hear the guests talking, their voices roaring

and teacups clinking on saucers like screams, like tiny bones being snapped. I didn't particularly want to go back to that.

I tried recalling the faces of the men of the honour guard, but couldn't. He was probably from someplace far away, Saskatchewan, and getting stewed in a blind pig down on de Bullion Street, where the whores were.

“Oh come on, beautiful,” he moaned, “come on down.”

“Why should I?”

He had no comeback. Wasn't quick. No snap, no repartee. Maybe he'd never played hockey, never played a single game of anything in his life, maybe there'd been nothing for him but empty gulches and ragged overalls and a devious kind of sorrow.

I hung up. In the front hall, people were discussing golf, cars and gasoline coupons. Women in ugly hats were boasting about victory gardens though it was the West Indian maids who did all the work. I almost regretted having hung up on the sad sack.

Almost wished I'd call a cab, and sped straight the hell down to de Bullion Street or wherever the guy was doing his drinking. I wondered if the honour-guard boys were on a drunk together. If they'd known each other before or were strangers thrown together for the duty. If they shared their pay, cigarettes, liquor and whores. If they protected each other from the dope peddlers and policemen prowling de Bullion Street.

I hadn't seen Daddy since we came home from the cemetery. The daylight was dead yellow and green in the house, not summer light at all. I went upstairs and knocked on the door of his study. "Go away." Daddy's rumble could sound like a transmission in low gear.

I waited a whole minute and didn't hear a thing. I knocked again. Tap-tap-tap-tap—TAP-TAP. *Shave-and-a-hair-cut—TWO-BITS*. Daddy had taught me that when I was little.

Blessed Frankie of the Knock, they used to call me.

I heard the squeal of castor wheels on his desk chair, and the door unlocking.

He was wearing a silk smoking jacket Mother had given him and holding the Archbishop's Mass card. A photograph of Jack, tanned and healthy—*Merry Xmas to you all, Jack*—was in a silver frame, right next to a bottle of Seagram's Old Chief Canadian Whiskey that Daddy must have acquired from Jerry the barman. Daddy slit open a fresh pack of

cigarettes, stuck one between his lips and lit it with his desk lighter. "Want a snort?" he said.

I shook my head. I was on the horsehide sofa, uncomfortable with bare knees. A set of French doors led out to a little balcony, where sparrows nested under the eaves.

"I'll take a cigarette though." He raised one eyebrow, then tossed the pack to me, quickly, so I nearly missed it.

I used to go with Daddy on drives around the city, Daddy never saying a word if he could help it, driving through neighbourhoods no one we knew lived in or even visited. It was his way of getting away from things.

"When are you going to get married, Frankie?" "I'm not getting married."

"You will."

"Is that what you're worrying about?"

He didn't say anything. He was looking at Jack's picture.

"What will you do, if I do? Get plastered at my wedding?"

You could never tell how angry Daddy was, or wasn't. I'd never talked to him this way before, but any house is changed after a corpse has laid out in the living room, and it excited me to suddenly feel capable of saying anything.

Any changes in the pattern of family life upset him, and my sisters and I had always anticipated him making a fuss at our weddings. He'd kept sober





seemed to be always running in the baggage room at Windsor Station, just across the square from Sun Life.

I was waiting at the corner when Bill Metternich's little yellow coupe made the turn from Westmount Avenue and came chugging up Murray Hill. He pulled over and I climbed in. I felt dizzy from having gotten away so easily. We didn't say much. I didn't look at him but I smelled him. He smelled of energy.

I could have been in a plane lifting off—that's how it felt, leaving behind our house with the people and the feelings it contained.

Someone—maybe it was my brother—once said that Montreal brick is exactly the colour of dried blood.

"Hungry?"

Food had it been some time since I had eaten

Chez Chiriotto was a roadhouse, out near the racetrack, on a highway leading out of town.

"All right."

Chiriotto's had a reputation. There was a motel attached, and if that wasn't horrifying enough, the owners were sons of a gangster who had been hung just before the war. The café was flashy and noisy, always jammed with salesmen and black marketeers. And ex-convent girls, probably. It was just what I needed. Bill didn't seem to require conversation. That was fine with me—I was used to driving around with Daddy for hours. All those boulevards named after saints, and neither of us saying a word.

At its edges the city seemed frayed and bleak—as ugly as anywhere in the world—but I was glad to be in that car, moving. There is a feeling you get