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THE CALLING

BY JOCELYN BROWN



PHOTO BY SEAN DENNIE

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DELPHINE LALONNE IS CALLED at 8:15 a.m. on 12 April 1885 in the ninth-from-the-front, left-hand side pew of St. Bartholomew's Church in Longue Pointe, Québec. She has just received first communion, has successfully gone up the aisle to Father Paul, presented her tongue, and, as her mother had instructed, stuck the host to the roof of her mouth so it wouldn't fall out when she said Amen. She is spreading the Body of Christ inside her right cheek when Christ speaks to her. "I'm hungry," he says. She looks up. Everyone is kneeling, heads down, devout or pretending to be so. On the wall beside her is the fifth station of the cross, a plaster tablet of Simon helping Christ. Jesus turns to look at her. "Learn to cook," he says.

That night, Delphine helps her mother boil beef and cabbage and, within a month, she is cooking all her family's meals except for Friday's fish. After another month, her mother happily hands over the creamed cod and turbot stew recipes too. Delphine learns how taste depends on touch and smell, and trains her nose and fingers to be precise. Her sense of touch is especially refined, and she delights in slapping mutton, squeezing lard and brushing her cheek against freshly turned dough. Every night, Delphine's family hears her run her fingers through the bowl of dried beans she keeps under her bed. When her parents express concern about her sensory preoccupations, she assures them that everything she touches and tastes is in service to Christ. "He is in all of us," she says, "and I must feed him. He told me to."

Her mother takes her to the Longue Pointe Lunatic Asylum. "Delphine, feel this wall, you feel how cold? Smell this place, you like that stench? You like it? You keep reaching out to touch everything, Delphine—my god, the fur collar on Madame Casgrain's coat—and they will think you are a lunatic. This is where they will put you. You keep talking about feeding Jesus, Delphine, and Regarde! Regarde! That is what you will eat." Two nuns lug a massive pot onto the table, and one fills bowls with mucousy grey porridge. She clunks the metal ladle in and out of the pot, other nuns unlock heavy doors, and patients emerge from all directions. "Feed me, feed me," Delphine hears, perhaps from inmates, perhaps from Christ. She presses her hands against the wall, feels the cold seeping between lathe and plaster, presses her hands against her heart and smiles at her mother.

"I have been called," she tells her mother the next morning, and, that afternoon, presents herself to Sister Ignatia, the asylum director. When she has proven she can reliably start the wood stove at 5:30 every morning, fill each of two porridge pots with twelve quarts of water, and, after breakfast, wash two hundred bowls and spoons, she is gradually allowed cooking duties. First she gets to salt the water and after a few more weeks, she adds four cups of meal to each pot with dried crusts of bread. And then, one morning, the cook says, "Delphine, tend the porridge," and goes back to bed.

Delphine becomes close friends with Frances, another

apprentice, a girl raised by the nuns who loves steamed cabbage and is planning to become a saint. Delphine helps Frances to accumulate sacrifices and charitable acts, helps her, at the end of every day, to calculate the amount of good performed. Frances helps Delphine to improve the porridge minutely day by day, so no one is scandalized when, eventually, it contains sweet milk, a little butter, a teaspoon of brandy, and the tiniest bit of grated nutmeg, nutmeg not being an approved flavour among the older nuns. Apart from the daily tally of Frances's good deeds, their friendship is quiet, as solid and calm as a well-deserved rest. They share lunch each day, always with buttered cabbage, and in the afternoons, they take a break outside if it's warm, silently leaning against the sunny wall, holding hands.

On 6 May 1890 it is chilly and they are inside when fire breaks out in the laundry. They run upstairs together but are separated by chaos and smoke, and Delphine gropes her way outside. She stands, large and still, near the kitchen entrance where Frances can find her. Patients sit round, propped against Delphine and each other, comforted by her steadfastness. Jumping from room to room like a squirrel bounding up a tree, the fire spreads to the men's furious ward on floor three where Frances tries to pull a man out of his bed. "It's been burning for years and I knew it," says the man. "It was burning right under my bed every night." He will not leave, she will not abandon him, and she has the luxury of dying with no remorse. Eventually, Delphine and her cluster of patients are moved to the parlour of another asylum, where Sister Ignatia tells Government Inspector Goyer that ten sisters are known to have perished. When Frances's name is listed among the ten, Delphine's stomach contracts permanently.

Delphine wants to die and decides to fast until she does, fasting being common among the sisters. She will not get as close to God as Frances, but in the hope of being in the general area, at least close enough to wave, Delphine moves into the convent as a nun potentiate. Here she can stock up on prayer and sacrifice like she used to can peas in the fall with her mother. With luck, her spirit will be well supplied by the time her body has wasted.

Sister Ignatia, of heightened sensitivities herself, acquaints Delphine with the convent kitchen, requires Delphine to cook dinners and requires her to join the sisters during meals. "Eat or don't eat, but you must sit with us," she says. Delphine lights the stove, and her calling, having been fully embraced and embodied so many years ago, asserts itself over her grief. Despite herself, she cooks with divine competence and produces a stew that makes the sisters pray. A rosary in one hand, a spoon in the other, each nun recites a Hail Mary per mouthful, and lingers, eyes shut, in an ecstatic flush before tasting the next bite and fingering the next bead. A warm mist rises from the table, breathes the room like the Holy Spirit, and Delphine understands that their pleasure has been transmuted to her. Still intent on dying soon, she is displeased to feel her body rejuvenate, but like a pork flank in wine, she absorbs. Every evening, for sixty to seventy-five minutes, Delphine marinates in pleasure, and without actually eating, which she will never do again, she regains her vigour. Grief remains within her, but around it develops a frame so robust that Sister Ignatia chooses

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her to come on the long journey west to found a new hospital in Edmonton.

The train trip from Montreal takes a week, and by the time they clatter through the Alberta prairie, passing heaps of buffalo bones, Delphine's dreams have leaked into day. Most nights, Delphine dreams of Frances leaning against the brick wall of the asylum, face tilted to the sun. Once a week or so, Frances reassures Delphine that they will someday be reunited, but fades away when Delphine asks when and how. Now, as the train pulls into Medicine Hat, Frances appears in the seat across from her, her body compressed between the Swiss couple. She talks more than she ever has, dead or alive, and for the first time, she complains. Heaven is not what she hoped for. "Heaven is a big bath, Delphine," she says. "A warm bath to slide into. When you die it is very nice. But now Delphine, it is cold, and terrible things float by and bump into me, things that feel like dead fish. I must get out."

On the last leg of the trip, the twelve hours between Calgary and Edmonton, Delphine understands that Frances is departing from her dreamlife too. Delphine promises to die as soon as she possibly can, pleads with Frances to say put. "Frances, you'll never find me," she cries, and realizes the Swiss have woken and Sister Ignatia is pretending to sleep, because she, Delphine, is speaking aloud. When the train stops outside of Ponoka, Frances says she has to go. She promises to return as soon as she finds out how, promises to make herself known to Delphine once she arrives all fresh and new. Delphine hums *J'irai la voir un jour* to keep from shouting after her. Sister Ignatia keeps her eyes closed, a few Catholic passengers wonder if this is a holy day, and the most alert travellers, including Delphine and Sister Ignatia, feel a breeze as Frances wafts away.

Eventually, Sister Ignatia and Delphine are ferried across the North Saskatchewan River, from South to North Edmonton, as the last load of bricks for St. Mary's Hospital is being carted from the R.J. Pym brickyard in the river valley. After the official opening, St. Mary's is a celebrity—"the city's grandest, most expensive building" the *Edmonton Bulletin* declares on

5 November 1895. The front page photograph shows Mayor Frank Gulliver on the front steps, with Sister Ignatia beside him and the three other founding sisters beside her, all of them pinched with cold. Delphine cuts the article out and tucks it into her bible. She had stood behind the mayor for the photograph, had managed to gently stroke the back of his ceremonial beaver pelt. Two years later, in September of 1897, the *Bulletin* takes another photo of the hospital and Delphine is more visible. She is nuzzling the skin of a wayward circus elephant who wandered into the hospital's garden. The photographer did not quite know how to ask her to move out of his way.

At lunch that day, Sister Ignatia had looked out the window and said, "mother of God, there's an elephant devouring our cabbages." Delphine flew out of the hospital to the cabbages and the elephant and said, "Frances, is it you?" Over and over, with hands and

face against the elephant's side, she cried "Frances is it you? Finally you?" The elephant had empathized, having lost his sister and mother. Delphine nuzzled for a long time, long enough, Sister Ignatia would claim three months later, to contract a fatal bacterium unknown to the West. "Prior to the appearance of this elephant," wrote Sister Ignatia in a letter to the Health Ministry, "Sister Delphine was of vigorous good health. Immediately after contact with the beast, she fell into delirium, fever, and could not be saved. We request that you severely restrict elephant access to this country."



As she dies, Delphine hears Frances's voice among the praying nuns and spirits who cram her room. "No no, Delphine," says Frances, "no no, you must stop. I am coming but it is complicated, the waiting time for Edmonton is very long." Delphine tries to live, but a lufloxix virus cannot be denied, and five days after the priest performs last rites, her breath refuses to continue. Wrenched onto the other side of life, she braces herself from going any farther than the hospital, turns away from light and the greetings of Sisters Carmel and Bérubé, both dead from cholera. "Yes, Frances, I am waiting, I am here," she yells, and hears, she thinks, a faint happy sound.

For the first time in seven years, Delphine is hungry, and soon discovers that afterlife dining has a certain ease. She enjoys her first lunch via Marcel Rêve, whose morose nature makes him porous and as easy for a spirit to melt into as cheese onto toast. Madame Rêve is an excellent cook, and Delphine gratefully inhabits Marcel for two meals a day, her pleasure lingering on his tongue after she leaves, his tongue then able to speak of love. For many years she eats meals cooked by anxious, loving relatives, feasting via French, Italian, Ukrainian and Cree patients especially.

After a century, though, Delphine tires of waiting for Frances. She has whispered "is it you, Frances," to tens of thousands of newborns, has had her hopes falsely raised by many confused babies, and, finally, her sturdy faith relaxes like old elastic. She becomes as vaporous and humid as the other hospital spirits and settles into a cool spot. For some time, she is comfortable on top of a distilled water cooler in the staff

kitchen. But one hot day when the staff are very thirsty, she is jiggled so much she remembers Frances. Once again, she longs to hear "yes, Delphine, it is me, I came back for you." She rolls up the stairs to the main entrance where she curls up at the base of the Virgin Mary statue. Without meaning to, she seeps inside the statue, and this is where she remains, mostly dormant, but faithful enough to rise when she smells cabbage or hears French. Looking through the statue's eyes, she does her best to say, "Frances? Is it you? Finally you?"

Notes: The Longue Pointe Asylum fire did occur in 1890 (seventy patients died); the train trip between Calgary and Edmonton actually took twelve hours in 1895; at least one circus elephant munched on the cabbages of the Edmonton General Hospital's garden in the late 1890s; and a ceremonial beaver pelt continues to distinguish (or mortify) Edmonton's mayor.

Jocelyn Brown is the winner of our 2005 short story contest. She was born in Gimli, Manitoba, and has lived in Edmonton most of her life. She is currently doing an artist's residency at the Fundación Valparaíso in Spain, an experience she highly recommends. "The Calling" is an excerpt from a novel in progress, Mistakes and Improvements. Her first book, One Good Outfit was published in 2000, and her short stories have appeared in various publications. In 2002 she won the McClelland & Stewart Journey Prize for "Miss Canada."

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2005 winner:
Jocelyn Brown

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