

PART ONE

So You Want to be a Nurse

Holy Cross Hospital, Calgary, Alberta, February 10, 1959: My mother sat beside me in the dim, narrow hallway used as a waiting room. A small discreet sign beside the door read: *Sister C. Leclerc, s.g.m.*

Director of Nursing

An elderly housemother at the reception desk, partially hidden by a Plexiglas partition, quietly answered the telephone and sorted mail. "Nurses' residence," she said softly into the headset. Waiting in front of the partition sat a girl with three battered shopping bags overflowing with clothes. Her shiny black hair was as tousled as her bags of clothes and she looked pale and thin. I felt sorry for her, all alone the first day of nursing training, when Sister had specifically asked all the new students to bring their mothers. I waited for her to lift her head. I would smile at her to let her know, it's okay if you don't have a suitcase, or a mother. But she sat folded into herself, eyes downcast, as if trying to hide from the world.

Above us, the student nurses' quarters were silent. I strained to hear the gentle murmuring of those angels in white, but the only sound was the occasional buzz from the switchboard and the constant hum of the large black-and-white electric clock on the wall behind me. I inhaled deeply, again, and again, hoping for a whiff of the hygienic hospital, but could only smell the freshness of the new building and the waxy, wooden floors, so shiny that when I leaned over, I could see my fuzzy reflection -- short dark hair, round face, hazel eyes. In a Black Watch tartan kilt skirt that my mother had made, I fidgeted in my chair and smoothed the skirt over my knees, feeling as if I was about to write an exam.

Mom turned to me and smiled her happy-you-made-it-my-little-girl, smile. She wore her Sunday black dress and had her mouton-lamb coat draped over her shoulders. Mom was petite and delicate, angelic looking, actually, with bright blue eyes, high cheekbones and a soft bow to her lips.

Sister Leclerc's door opened. A girl with her black hair combed neatly into a pageboy, and her mother in an impressive red hat with a floppy feather, stepped out. They gave a cursory glance at the pathetic lone girl across from me, the red hat acknowledged my mother with a nod, and they disappeared into the elevator. My heart pounded and my hands shook. I was next.

"Miss Yates," Sister called from the doorway of her office.

Sister Leclerc was a tiny woman immersed in the billowing black and grey habit of the Grey Nuns, Sisters of Charity from Montreal, Quebec. Her face was barely visible beneath a tight-fitting hood embossed with two stiffly starched scrolls of material that stuck out from under her chin like a shelf and rose on each side of her face like blinkers on a buggy-horse, ending in a perfectly symmetrical V above her forehead. Someone had once told me that nuns shaved their heads and I wondered if a bald head truly lay beneath that hood. The large silver cross around her neck Director of Nursing reminded me of Ingrid Bergman's cross in the movie *The Bells of St. Mary's*. The association convinced me that all nuns are kind people.

Sister smiled as my mother and I sat down. "*Bon*. This is a really important day for you, Miss Yates," she said, crisply, with a French accent. "You will have to adjust to a new way of living. We have our rules that you must obey."

"Yes, Sister," I said.

Sister sat rigid, her hands folded on her desk. "The Holy Cross Hospital is a most valued and respected institution," she said. "And this hospital offers one of the best training programs available. It's a privilege to train at Holy Cross. We are really proud of our nurses. Your conduct must always bring credit and honour to our hospital and school."

"Yes, Sister."

“Your conduct outside of the school also reflects The Holy Cross, Miss Yates. If you exhibit good conduct outside, then you no doubt will use good judgment on the wards and become a good nurse. The two must go together.”

“Yes, Sister.” I was so excited and happy, if Sister had told me to jump out of the window, I would have said, “Yes, Sister,” and jumped.

Sister’s sharp eyes looked hard at me, now, deep into my soul. “Life in residence is very different from the life you have been living, Miss Yates. This is your home now.”

Then Sister smiled and said, “*Bon,*” again, and gave me two keys, one to my room and one to my mailbox. Mrs. Schriefels, one of the housemothers, was waiting to escort us to my room.

As we left, the girl in the hall was still staring at her hands in her lap. As I stepped into the elevator, I heard Sister call to the girl with the shopping bags, “Miss Kaufmann.”

The nurses’ residence was a new, state-of-the-art eight-floor building with a science laboratory, gymnasium, beau rooms (for visiting family or beaus), a reception hall, and television room. The student nurses occupied floors two to six, a small group of student nursing assistants lived on the seventh floor and the nuns on the eighth.

My room was on the fourth floor, third from the end of the hall, very small. As I gazed around the room I thought: For the next three years, this will be my home. I had a little sink, and across from a long wooden desk, a single bed with a deep blue, cotton bedspread. A crucifix hung above the bed. An armchair was squeezed in front of two windows that framed the south side of the hospital where the bright, winter sun was turning the stained glass windows of the chapel into a gleaming kaleidoscope. To the east, one short block away, was the curving Elbow River with its shallow rocky banks and willowy trees arching over the clear mountain water. In the distance, the snow peaks of the Rockies stood majestic on the western horizon.

“What a darling little room,” whispered my mother, in awe. She slowly moved to the window and gazed longingly at the hospital with its Roman-style façade and classic pillars. Mom had always wanted to be an RN, but the Depression had forced her out of school to work as a practical nurse in a private home. She turned and wrapped her arms around me. “I’m so proud of you, my little girl,” she whispered. “I know you’ll make a wonderful nurse.” Then Mom snapped open her purse, took out her black kid gloves and slipped them on. My door made a soft click as she closed it behind her.

After my mother left, I opened my small suitcase, which we had carefully packed together. One by one, I found a place for my family pictures and favourite treasures. In the position of honour, smack in the middle of the bookshelf above my desk, I placed the heavy metal horse my brother Allan had given me. He’d won it at the Calgary Stampede, knocking down roly-poly pins. I also had a little ceramic skunk with a furry tail my friend had given me in grade six and a small gold plastic horse Grandma Yates had given me when I was a child. On my cork bulletin board, I tacked a large picture of Cisco Kid on Diablo, and a picture of Lester Brennen, my boyfriend, beside the corsage he’d given me for our high school graduation dance last June.

As I hung up my few clothes, the yellow duster, garter belt, white nylons, each garment on its own hanger, and took my nurse’s shoes out of the box and placed them on the floor, I thought: These are the clothes I will wear for the next three years. Shopping at the Hudson Bay with my mother, I had even discovered a nursing bra, but when I held it up to show her, she laughed and shook her head and said, “That’s not for nursing students, Donna.”

When I had finished unpacking, I sat down in the armchair and stared out the window. Now and then a car pulled around the u-shaped driveway in front of the residence and deposited a new student with a suitcase and a mother.

“Hi, there! Up here. I’m up here!” I heard someone shout. The girl who had just stepped out of a car, looked up at the residence. “Welcome to Holy Cross!”

The residence curved slightly to the right; I could see a fair-haired girl leaning out the window, waving a rag. “Welcome!” she called again.

It was a clear crisp February afternoon. Calgary, with almost a quarter of a million people, lay at my feet. I looked down on bare, twiggy elms and evergreens, older clapboard houses in muted earthy colours and grey stucco homes with front porches and picket fences. I turned my gaze to the hospital beyond the driveway. Its windows mirrored the blue sky and gauzy, white clouds of this perfect day. It stood silent, mysterious, secretive. Smoke snaked into the brilliant afternoon like a ribbon of black velvet.

I tried to imagine beyond the windows -- a nurse in crisp white, laying her cool hands on a fevered brow, a patient propped up in bed with pillows, a relative at the window, waiting, hoping. But somehow I couldn’t imagine myself beyond those windows. I was here, just a heartbeat from the hospital, the patients, the nurses, all I had dreamed about for so many years, yet I began to wonder: Had I make a mistake? Could I do it? I’d never lived in a residence before, never left my family. Besides, I was a Protestant. I had never been around nuns before. I began to feel lonely for my mother. I opened my rulebook.

Suddenly shrieks of laughter jolted me back to reality. I followed the sound down to the lounge and was delighted to find real-live nurses. The seniors, also living on the fourth floor, had just come off duty. Still wearing their caps and blue-and-white dresses, they were stripping off their white bibs and aprons and tossing them on the floor.

“That bitch made me stay after the delivery and clean the whole bloody case room,” one of the students snarled as she pulled off her white apron. My jaw dropped. Such shocking language. She threw the apron on the floor to join the heap of uniforms growing in the middle of the lounge. “And I’m a senior!”

“Yea! Thank God!” Everyone cheered.

These girls were nurses? Angels of mercy? There was nothing celestial about them. Nothing! They were absolutely human.

My realization brought with it a rush of relief. Of course nurses were human. Wasn’t it silly of me to have thought all these years that nurses were real angels? Suddenly I smiled. Becoming a nurse as a mere mortal would certainly make my task ahead much easier.

I returned to my room. Wondering how I would ever get up enough courage to go down to the hospital cafeteria for supper, I felt someone’s eyes on me. I turned quickly to the door, and there stood a tall, sweet-looking girl with honey coloured hair that hung way below her shoulders.

“Porter,” she said shuffling toward me in fuzzy, pink slippers. “Lynn Porter.” She peered into my face and smiled. “Hi. Sorry I don’t have my glasses.”

“Hi. I’m Yates, Donna Yates.”

Her deep-blue eyes quickly scanned my room. “Gosh, you’ve fixed it up real nice. Like your horse,” she said. “It’s kind of lonesome, eh?”

I nodded.

“You from Calgary?”

“Yeah.”

“Me, too.”

“Was that you, hanging out your window a while ago?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, running her fingers through her hair like a comb. “And now I’m in a lot of trouble. Sister called me down to her office and really told me off. But they were awfully dirty, you know -- the windows.”

“I would think she’d be happy to get the windows cleaned.”

“It’s not professional to be hanging out the window like that, she said. And she was really mad. Said I have

to always ask before I do *anything* that's not in the rulebook. Golly, I don't know if I'm going to like it here."

"Don't be silly," I said, trying to sound like I knew something about residence life. "Sister wouldn't hold that against you. She's a nun. If anybody will understand, she will."

"Well," Porter hesitated, "I don't know about that. She didn't seem so understanding to me. Anyway ... you hungry?"

"Starving."

"Let's go," Porter said.

After supper, I returned to study my rulebook. *May your three years with us find you fitted not only professionally and physically for your chosen career, but also that you may be morally and spiritually equipped to meet the obligations of a Christian nurse.*

Suddenly my door opened and a blond, winged-capped head slowly peered in. It was a student in uniform with short, curly hair and a big smile. Her entrance was accompanied by an outburst of cursing from the lounge.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Beverly Church, your big sister."

Church held out a small package wrapped in tissue paper, and an envelope. "This is for you," she said.

"Welcome. Just remember, I'm always here if you need me, even if you just want to talk. The Holy's a great place, but it can get kind of rough at times. I'm on the sixth floor. Come up any time."

I opened the envelope and read: *Welcome to The Holy. I wish you luck in your training -- many happy days ahead! Have fun -- but if you ever need a shoulder to cry on or a friendly chat, I'm here. Best wishes, your "big sister."*

I opened the white tissue paper; it was a small teddy bear with a big smile on his embroidered mouth and "Rah-Rah" written on a banner across his chest.

"I'm six months ahead of you," Church said. "I'm in the September class."

"Were you nervous when you first came in training?" I asked.

She grinned and nodded. "Yeah, petrified. But you'll get used to it. It doesn't take long."

After she left, I sat the teddy bear on the end of the bookshelf above my desk and felt a little less lonely.

Then I walked to the phone at the end of the hallway and telephoned my mother.

"I have a new friend, her name is Porter," I said, my news bursting forth in a great breathless rush. "I've got a big sister who's going to watch over me and I had pancakes and maple syrup for supper -- it's Ash Wednesday. We're the class of February '62 and we're called probies. And I saw the emergency room, Mom," I added excitedly.

"Your Father and I are very proud of you, dear."

"Thanks, Mom, I'll call you in the morning."

And that's what I did at seven the next morning and once a day for the rest of my training.

That first morning I awoke to the visions of patients curled up in little beds. I floated among them like an apparition and they rose from their sick beds, miraculously healed.

I dressed in my class uniform, a grey skirt, white blouse and navy jacket with the crest of our hospital on the left pocket. I pinned my name pin, Miss Yates, on the right lapel, and rushed to breakfast.

Down in the cafeteria, there was a long line. I fell into line behind Hazel White, a tall girl with black hair and pale skin. A small group of seniors arrived and pushed in front of us.

"Hey," White said, turning around. "What's going on?"

"That's the hospital caste system," Porter whispered.

Wilma Niven, a redhead with a face full of freckles, and as tall as White, joined our small but growing knot of probies at the end of the line. "Christ," she said in a loud voice, "I've been in this brainless line since seven

o'clock! I was almost up to the food when those damn seniors bumped me back here."

"Shh," said Jean Perry, the girl who roomed next door to me. She held her finger to her lips. "The rulebook says we have to be courteous at all times to senior students and grads."

"To hell if I'll be courteous when they won't even let a person who's been standing here for 20 minutes get near the food." Niven spoke just as loudly as before. "I'm just as good as they are. Aren't I?" She had turned and was speaking to the darkhaired probie who had just rushed up behind us. "Well, aren't I?" Niven repeated like a command. It was Delores Kaufmann, the girl without a suitcase.

Kaufmann quickly pulled her chin to her chest without looking up. She smiled and moaned at the same time, then whispered, "Yeah ... I guess-s-s...."

"Geez, it's almost 7:20," Jean Perry said. "The rulebook said we're supposed have eaten breakfast by the time Sister gets here for our prayer at 7:25."

"Oh, well la-di-dah -- and I'm Sister Superior," Niven intoned.

Finally we made it to the food. Porter leaned into the glass counter and squinted down at a row of stainless steel containers, steaming heartily -- but only three had food; stark white hard-boiled eggs, limp toast and slimy-looking porridge.

"Come on, for godsake, shake a leg, Porter," Niven said.

Porter quickly chose a bowl of cornflakes and a glass of milk. We found our table at the back of the student nurses' cafeteria.

Perry sat beside me, nursing a cup of black coffee. "I'm so nervous," she said. "Can't swallow a bite. Sure wish students could smoke in here."

As I took my first bite of cold soggy toast, a loud voice pierced the din of chatter.

"Sister's coming!"

Sister Leclerc had rounded the corner on her way to the cafeteria. Through the open double doors I saw her gliding down the hall looking like a little music box doll. The students pushed their chairs from the table and sprang to their feet in a collective abrasive noise that echoed throughout the cafeteria. We turned to the crucifix on the wall opposite the door. I fumbled in my pocket for the piece of paper on which the prayer was typed, Morning Prayer: To Memorize.

Dear Lord, I begin my day of duty with the hope that I shall serve Thee faithfully. I have consecrated myself to the service of Thy sick and suffering. I have pledged my loyalty and devotion to the noble principles of my calling.

Each task I offer with the sincere hope that it is prompted by my love for Thee. I shall not shirk any duty however unpleasant. When I cool the fevered brow, moisten parched lips or comfort the aching body, I shall remember that I bring comfort to Thee. Help me find in every patient another soul created by Thy infinite love. I pray that my calling may find me always a real lady, kind, courteous and considerate of those who face the trials of sickness. Besides, I shall find hope in the thought that the more perfect my service, the more genuine my sacrifice, the more I shall be like to another Lady — the Lady you honoured in such a striking way as to call her, Mother.

I shivered with excitement as I said the prayer. This was the kind of nurse I wanted to be.

In starched bibs and aprons and blue-and-white striped dresses, the student nurses, wearing impressive winged, white caps, began their morning march in single file past Sister Leclerc. Sister was ruler supreme with the eye of a hawk. Students' hair must be at least one inch above the collar, no runs in nylons and the seams absolutely straight, shoes polished, bandage scissors in back waistband, and except for a light-coloured lipstick,

no makeup. Long hair must be kept in a hairnet. It was considered unclean by hospital nursing standards, as were rings with stones. Clear nail polish was permitted, except in the operating room. If the polish was chipped, it would trap bacteria and carry infection to the patient. The graduate nurse was allowed a plain wedding band. Student nurses wore no rings.

In this world of rules, Sister could, and did, cancel late leaves -- if our uniforms were not complete, clean or orderly at morning inspection, if we came into the residence late (we had three minutes grace), if we had lights on, or were in someone else's room after lights-out.

Now with an almost imperceptible nod, Sister pulled a few nurses out of the line. After the last student disappeared down the hall, Sister turned and spoke to each delinquent girl before allowing her to continue to the ward. Twenty minutes later, I was at my desk. We had 36 girls in the class and we sat in alphabetical order. I sat next to White -- where else, but the last seat.

White leaned over and whispered, "Did you fill your fountain pen? We're not allowed to bring ink bottles into the classroom," and I nodded.

After class, I retreated to my room to continue reading the rulebook: ... *For the next three years, your life will be intimately bound with that of the Sisters who conduct this Hospital and School of Nursing. They will be your friends and your guides....*

After supper that night, I sat in the lounge reviewing the rulebook with the girls from my class. We were on page four -- Discipline -- when Perry asked, "Hey, what's a misdemeanour?"

"I think it's a crime," said Porter, holding up her book within an inch of her face. "It's like breaking the law."

"It is," said Marie Guenette. She tapped the rulebook in her lap. "You pay dearly if you break one of these laws." Guenette was 33, old for a student nurse, with reddish hair and pale freckles.

"It says here," Perry said: *Any misdemeanour committed by a student while away from the school but which reflects on the good name of the school....*

"Aw, garbage," Niven said. "Who the hell would know if you commit a misdemeanour while you're away from the school? I live in Saskatchewan. You think Sister would hear about me down here?"

"It says right here that each student is on her honour to report any infraction of the rules that she's committed to the Honour Board," Perry said.

"Well these rules are stupid-crazy," Niven intoned.

"These rules are what makes Holy Cross the best nursing school in North America," Guenette said with authority. "I know. I checked them all out." She had been in the U. S. Navy for many years before moving to Canada to become a nurse. "Now if you want to know what happens if you break the rules in real life, I'll tell you. Look at Discipline again ... 3. If a student marries during her course, she is automatically dismissed from the school." Guenette looked around at us; we stared back.

"Yeah, so?" Niven finally said.

Guenette lit a cigarette. "Last night Sister got this anonymous phone call about one of the seniors -- the one who was supposed to give the valedictorian address at the graduation ceremony." Guenette took a drag on her cigarette and pursed her lips, slowly releasing a thread of smoke that curled across the lounge.

"Well, the squealer told Sister that the girl had secretly married two months ago and she wasn't even pregnant."

"You mean the girl's gone? Out of the residence?" Porter asked, squinting at Guenette with her myopic blue eyes.

Guenette lifted her hand and studied her fingernails for a moment, then looked up, and said, "You bet. And Sister's mad as hell. Won't allow the girl to participate in the graduation ceremony. Even wants to rob her of her

RN but she's already written and passed the Canadian and State Board exams -- thank God -- so Sister can't take that away from her."

Niven suddenly stood up and without even asking, snatched up Guenette's lighter and lit her own cigarette. She blew the smoke out in a gruff puff. "Shit," she said. "That bitch of a Sister gave that poor senior the royal shaft."

Wow! She used Sister's name in vain. I had never heard so much swearing in my life. I looked round the room and thought: These are the people I will live with for the next three years. Then my eyes fell on the open rulebook on my lap: *Good manners are the criterion of a well-educated lady...*