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French School

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French School (from *Farewell, Little Canada: A Memoir*)

By Charles Gargiulo

One

Monday morning finally arrived, my first day in my new school. My mom and I had moved to Little Canada in Lowell where she had relatives after my dad just left one day. We couldn't stay in our old house in the town next door. We found a tenement apartment that Mom could afford, and she found the school that she thought would be a good one for me. I had been at a Catholic school in our old town.

I got up and put on the required blue dress shirt and a tie, said goodbye to Mom when Dicky came by, and then walked with him down Austin Street and took a right on Moody Street, past Aiken Street to the school—St. Joseph Elementary School—a four-story brick building with a really big metal fire escape that practically covered the entire front of the building. There was a tiny area behind a short, four-foot-high iron picket fence where kids gathered until the bell rang. This crowded area was where we would get sent out to play during recess. It was like the worst playground area ever. You were jammed in between the iron picket fence, the school building, and the convent, which was a three-story house where all the nuns who taught in the school lived. On top of that, the ground we played on was paved with tar. You could hardly move because it was so small and jammed with kids. If you tried running and tripped over someone, you'd scrape your skin and ruin your clothes skidding on the tar. Or gouge an eye out if you landed head first on the spear-shaped ends of the iron picket fence.

I hung out with Dicky until the bell rang and the nuns came out and called our names to assign us to our classes. Dicky and I ended up in different classes because he had stayed back one year and was still only in the sixth grade while I was assigned to the seventh grade.

Dicky was a nice kid, but I always felt bad for him because he had bad eyes and wore glasses. He was short and skinny, an easy target for bullies in the neighborhood. A week before school started, he was beaten so badly that he landed in St. Joseph's Hospital, which was on the edge of Little Canada. He still had stitches for the cuts and the kind of black-and-blues that turn pale green and brown when they fade. Any punk would have to come through me now to get to him. Dicky would give me or you the shirt off his back and give torn-up bread to the local pigeons and sparrows who were hungry.

My class was on the top floor in the front overlooking Moody Street. The nun leading my class up to the room had this weird little wooden thing that she'd use to make a click-click sound and it meant we were supposed to follow her, or shut up, or sit down, or stand up and all kinds of things.

Apparently, if a nun could communicate without talking, it made them more holy or something. I found it annoying and stupid and could feel my temper rising.

The nuns wore long grey outfits that covered their heads with some white cardboard thing underneath the hood. A big metal crucifix necklace hung down their chests. And then to my shock, they talked to us in French. How the heck was I supposed to understand what they were saying? My mom spoke French, in fact almost all the grown-ups in Little Canada spoke French. Most of them would keep going back and forth between English and French when they spoke, but all of us kids spoke English. All the other kids knew French because they grew up around it, but I never learned French because my father was Italian. Mom and Dad spoke English to understand each other. So, since I spent my entire life living with them until he split, I never learned French.

The classes themselves were taught in English, but in between classes we were supposed to talk in French with the nuns. Kind of hard to do when you don't understand the language. But that wasn't the main issue with me, since most of the talking in French amounted to saying stuff like "*Oui, ma Mère,*" "*Non, ma Mère,*" "*Merci, ma Mère,*" or "*S'il vous plait, ma Mère.*" It was the principle of it that made me mad. Why did I have to speak French if my father was Italian?

Two

I also didn't want to call them my "mother" in French, English, or any other language. The only other nuns I knew before I went to St. Joseph's, we used to call Sister. That was fine, but as you might have figured out by now, I was a little touchy about people dumping on my mom. And now they wanted me to call somebody else my mother? What made these nuns so special that they got promoted from being a Sister to a Mother? I was already scared to death of losing my mom, so I wasn't exactly too keen about calling somebody else my mother.

Mom had red hair, and reminded some people of the actress Ann Sheridan, which was weird because she made me think of the kind of character that a movie rough guy like Humphrey Bogart would call "a tough broad with a heart of gold." She was funny. I loved it when neighbors visited and joked around. When she started, she couldn't stop laughing, long and hard until tears came. Nobody I knew laughed like that, almost as if she was afraid that if she stopped laughing the feeling might not come back.

Once again, I found myself in a situation where I knew it was only a matter of time before something bad caught up to me. We had two different nuns teaching my seventh-grade class. One was very nice, the other one mean and nasty. Standing next to each other, the two nuns looked like

female versions of Laurel and Hardy, except the nice one was tall and heavy and the mean one was short and skinny. Fortunately, the nice nun was my home-room teacher. She had the coolest name, Noëlle Chabanel. Not only did it flow off your tongue and feel good saying it, *Noël* means Christmas in French. All the kids used to call her Mother Christmas. That's funny because she sort of looked like a very young female Santa Claus with rosy cheeks and a pleasingly plump face with sparkly eyes behind wire-rim glasses.

The mean and nasty nun with a wrinkly face never smiled. She could have been a female Moe from the Three Stooges in wire-rims. Her name was Rose, but the kids already called her Mean Mother, and just my luck, it was Mean Mother who caught up to me with a French question between class. I told her I didn't understand her question because I didn't speak French. She got all red in the face and practically spit out that I had to speak French and better learn it fast and, in the meantime, I was to address her as *ma Mère* and use words that I know in French like *Oui* and *Merci*. I said I wouldn't call her *ma Mère* or speak to her in French because I was Italian.

Then it was off to the Principal's office, even though the Principal was technically supposed to be called MOTHER Superior. And of course, just to add to my problems, I refused to call her that and I just called her the Principal. When I got to the office, Mean Mother got all bent out of shape and told the Principal what a trouble-maker I was and how disrespectful I was being. The Principal tried to give me the stare down and asked me if I wanted to be expelled. I tried explaining my position, but she wasn't having any of it. She said the school had rules and if I didn't like them, I could go to the public school.

I told her I didn't care and that I was only going here because that's where my mom sent me. Then she said if that was going to be my attitude then I was suspended, and I would be expelled unless my mother came to meet with her. It felt like she threatened to put a dagger through my heart, but then she gave me one more chance to avoid being suspended and letting my mother know. She asked if I would stop this nonsense and attempt to speak French when speaking to nuns between classes and address each one as *ma Mère*. I said no, because I didn't speak French, and I already had a mother.

Three

It was horrible. I couldn't understand what the heck was wrong with me. I knew I was being really stupid and childish over something not worth fighting about, and yet something inside me felt like it was breaking and the more they pushed and threatened me the more it felt like that something was going to break completely. I was also so angry I thought my head was going to explode. Couldn't they

see how miserable I was? Didn't they care? Couldn't they just back off a little bit and give me a chance to deal with this?

No, of course not. And now they were going to drag my mom into it. I was sent back to my class for the rest of the day and I was given a letter to bring to my mom, saying that I would be suspended unless she showed up with me to address this issue with the "Mother" Superior. Fortunately, my last few classes of the day were with Noëlle Chabanel. I don't think I heard a thing the rest of the day as I just daydreamed about how miserable it was going to be when I got home and told Mom. When the final bell rang, Noëlle asked me if I could stay after class to speak with her.

Even though she's a really nice person, I was expecting her to do her teacher job and give me a lecture about how dumb I was being and to explain to me about how serious a situation I've put myself in if I didn't wise up. But instead she said it hurt her to see how much pain I was in and she knew I was just being loyal to my dad. She said he would be very happy to see how much I loved him, and that was a good thing, and she wished that I wasn't caught up in such a tough position.

Talk about being taken by surprise. Here I was getting ready to be stubborn and defiant, and she sucker punches me with being kind and understanding. I actually had to turn my head to the side for a second so she wouldn't see my eyes starting to get wet. Sneaking in a quick dab to dry my eyes, I got myself under control and before I got a chance to say something she gently asked, "What do you think we can do about it?"

This time I'm sure she saw that my eyes got a little wet as I said in a really pathetic voice, "I don't know . . . I don't want to hurt my Mom but . . . know it's stupid but...I can't help it! I just can't help it! Why does this have to be such a big deal? It's not like I killed somebody. I'm not speaking French, and I'm not going to let her make me!"

I didn't mean to yell and get so emotional because she was only trying to help me, but like I told you it felt like something was broken inside of me and I didn't know how to fix it. Then to my shocked surprise, I noticed that Noëlle's eyes were watering up. I said I was so sorry, and I felt bad because I knew she was trying to be helpful. Then I asked her, "Is it the same for nuns as it is for priests, you know like if I wanted to talk with you that you would have to keep it a secret?" She said that if I wanted to tell her something in private that she would never tell anyone.

Then I told her about my dad. I told her how much I missed him and all the reasons why I did and how sad I felt that I would probably never see him again. It was kind of nice to be able to talk out loud about him and tell somebody how great a guy he was and all the cool memories I had about our time together. I must have gone on forever. When I finished, Noëlle said, "Wow, your dad sounds

like a wonderful man. No wonder you miss him so much. I know you are afraid that you'll never see him again, but given how strong a relationship the two of you had, I'm sure he misses you very much and as soon as he figures out whatever it is he's dealing with, he'll be back into your life."

I know she meant well, but as soon as she said that it was like a dark cloud came over me and I angrily yelled out, "No, he won't! He'll never come back! Because it's my fault that he left. He left because I was bad to him. I don't blame him for leaving because it was my fault that he did. Just like I'm being bad now and it's going to be my fault that my Mother will be taken away from me. See, look at me, if I don't speak French, or call every stupid nun my Mother, I'm going to be expelled from school. And when they expel me, it'll destroy my Mom and she'll get blamed by the Welfare guy for being a bad mother because I'm such a bad kid and they will take me away and put me in an orphanage. But even knowing that, I'm so bad and selfish I still won't speak French. I'm no good, that's why my Dad left and it's why I'm going to lose my Mom!"

The last thing I remember before I got up and ran out of the classroom and out of the school building was Noëlle's eyes getting really big and her mouth opening like she was trying to say something. The next hour or so was just a blur, and I don't remember what I did. I think I just walked around in a daze, totally lost and feeling completely hopeless. And I still had a letter to deliver to my Mom.

Four

Since it was Friday, I decided to give myself a day to collect myself before I told Mom. I holed up in my room pretending I was doing homework and mostly just read and listened to the radio until my mom went to work. Mostly, I just laid on my bed and thought about my dad.

When I got up Saturday morning, I still couldn't get up the courage to give Mom the letter I got from school and the bad news that came with it. I started doing a bunch of push-ups and sit-ups and delivered deadly palm strikes over and over again to the cardboard face hanging from a thread. Then Dicky knocked on my door and I invited him in to hang out in my room. He asked where I was after school, and I told him to keep his voice down so my mother wouldn't hear us. I told him what happened. Not the stuff about my dad, just that I was in trouble because I didn't want to speak French, they were going to expel me, and I didn't know what to do. I could tell he was confused and thought I was nuts, but he was cool about it and acted like what I was doing was totally reasonable and I was being screwed royally. I told him Mother Christmas had said to me that the only thing she couldn't keep a secret would be if I was going to hurt myself or somebody else.

Five

We hung around for a couple of hours listening to all of my records and talking about stuff until he had to leave because he had to do something with his father. I made the rounds, going over to see Raymond next door for a while, then dropping in to see Diane downstairs. We played some kid games with her creepy sons and then went over to visit my Aunt Rose. My Uncle Clarence and Daisy were out doing errands, so I caught up on things with Aunt Rose. Of course, she wanted to know how I liked my new school. I figured that was coming, so I started off by telling her how much I liked Noëlle Chabanel. Then I slowly came around to the fix I was in.

I guess I mean that I told her half of the fix I was in. I told her that I was being threatened with expulsion because I refused to call the nuns, “Mother.” I couldn’t tell her the French part because it was bad enough I was going to hurt my Mom’s feelings with that, but since I was a little boy my Aunt Rose used to pat me on the head and ask me if I was her “*petit bon garçon*,” and I would always answer, “*Oui, ma tante Rose*.” How the heck was I supposed to tell her that I refused to speak French because I was Italian?

Like Dicky, she looked confused about why I would be willing to be thrown out of school for such a stupid thing. Still, she could tell I was really messed up, and instead of saying something like “What the hell is wrong with you?” she talked to me like we had a very serious problem to solve.

Then good ol’ Aunt Rose came up with the perfect answer. She said something like, “I don’t blame you for feeling the way you do. It would be very wrong if somebody tried to make you call them your mom. But I don’t think that’s what they’re doing here. Think of it like this. When you talk to a priest, you don’t have a problem calling him Father, but if he wanted you to call him your dad that would be wrong and you wouldn’t do it. Try and think of the nuns in the same way. Calling them Mother would be just like calling a Priest, Father. It’s just a title. You are not calling them your mom. So, it’s okay.”

Amazing, she solved my problem. Almost. Because then she patted my head and asked me if I was still her “*petit bon garçon*,” and I said “*Oui, ma tante Rose*” and felt my heart sink knowing that the “Mother” Superior was still going to throw me out because I’m Italian. So, I hung out and watched the TV while she said a couple of hundred rosaries until Uncle Clarence and their collie Daisy got back. Uncle Clarence was all happy and bubbly and told us about all these wonderful people he met and amazing things he saw when he was out and Daisy respectfully went over to say hello to Aunt Rose by sidling up to her gently, knowing she was frail, and when Aunt Rose was done patting her, she bounded over to me, acting like greeting me made her the happiest dog in the whole world.

I hung around that afternoon while Aunt Rose made her famous tomato soup that had all different kinds of noodles in it. Some French people call this “*soupe rouge*.” I don’t know what she did to it, but it never tasted like anybody else’s tomato-flavored soup. I loved it and that’s saying something because I’ve always been a very fussy eater. We ate it with a fresh loaf of French bread that Uncle Clarence brought home from his errands. After finishing it up with “Pinwheels,” my Aunt Rose’s favorite cookies made up of marshmallow and cake and completely covered with chocolate, I said bye and headed home to tell Mom the bad news.

Six

It was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. I tried my best to cushion the blow by easing my way into it with “Isn’t it nice out?” and “How are things going on your new job?” and “I visited Aunt Rose today and she made her famous soup” and everything I could do to avoid the subject. Then I noticed that she started to make that “Wait a minute, what’s going on here” suspicious look, so I quickly shifted to, “Oh, by the way, I forget I was supposed to give you this from school” and handed her the letter. She looked at it and I could see her face literally go through a slow-motion change from curious to confused to What?, to WHAT THE HELL! Then she blurted out, “What is this? I don’t get it? They say you can’t go back to school unless I come in to meet with the Mother Superior. What did you do?”

I’m sure you can imagine that it didn’t make any more sense to her or make her feel any better when I explained to her why I was being threatened with expulsion. I could tell she couldn’t settle on an emotion as she went from anger, to sadness, to fear and then settled on calm and reasonable, talking slowly to me like maybe I had brain damage.

On Monday morning it was off to school with my mother. We had to show up an hour before school started. When we arrived at the Principal’s office, I was surprised to see Noëlle Chabanel sitting in on the meeting. Unfortunately, Mean Mother was there too. I could tell Mom was nervous. “Mother” Superior started the meeting and she was cold as ice. She told Mom about the not-speaking-French thing and the not-calling-them-Mother thing and about how I was told that I would have to conform to those rules if I wanted to be a student at this school, and that I still had refused.

Then she turned to me and asked me if I was now willing to follow the rules. I said I would be willing to address them all as Mother. She smiled and my Mother looked relieved and then “Mother” Superior said, “And you’ll address your teachers in French in between classes?”

I didn't say anything. Her smile faded and my Mom got tense and said, "C'mon Charlie, tell her you'll be willing to speak French." I still said nothing.

"Mother" Superior said, "Well, what is it, are you going to follow the rules?"

I said, "I told you I would call you guys Mother." Noëlle Chabanel then interjected and said, "That's really good," but then "Mother" Superior cut her off and said, "And what about the French part?" I said nothing.

"Mother" Superior said, "Okay, but you do understand that he will have to comply with the rules of the school. Since you are on welfare, you know we are allowing him to be enrolled here even though you can't pay full tuition. I hope you can make him understand the opportunity he has here." God, I wanted to kill her. The nerve to talk to Mom like that. I didn't know what to do, but I was NEVER going to speak French to them.

I was allowed to go to my class, and when I said goodbye to Mom she had the saddest look on her face. I hated myself. And I hated Mean Mother and "Mother" Superior. Fortunately, Noëlle Chabanel put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Okay, young man, please come with me now because it's almost time for our class to start." I really did like Noëlle an awful lot though.

The school day seemed like it took forever, and my mind wandered all day dreading what was going to happen when I got home. At the last bell, when I got up to leave Noëlle came up to me and said, "Just make sure you come back tomorrow. I want to see you at school tomorrow."

I said, "Why? I'm just going to be kicked out because I'm not going to speak French. I told you why. I'm sorry, but I can't do it."

She said, "No matter what, please just show up to school tomorrow."

When I got home, I could tell my Mom had been crying because her eyes were bloodshot. She hugged me and said she couldn't understand why I was doing this. She said she got me enrolled at St. Joseph after talking with the pastor at St. Jean-Baptiste (St. Jean the Baptist to me) to get him to waive my tuition expenses and now I was going to throw it away over something so silly. She said my behavior was scaring her.

I said I was sorry and didn't know what was wrong with me. I would address the nuns as Mother, but I wasn't going to speak French. She then asked if it was because I really wanted to go to the public school instead. I said no, it had nothing to do with that, I was fine with going to St. Joseph if they would drop that stupid rule. She said if I wasn't going to speak French, then there was nothing she could do to stop them from dropping me and that we would have to go enroll with the Lowell Public schools. I told her I was supposed to go to St. Joseph tomorrow because Noëlle asked me to come.

I went to school the next day, and Noëlle was happy to see me. Following her class on writing and reading, I had to go to Mean Mother's class for algebra. I saw Mean Mother outside the classroom door, and she asked me if I was coming to her class. I said, "Yes, Mother Rose." When I got to my seat, all of a sudden it hit me. She asked me in English, and I replied to her in English, and she didn't do anything. And from that point on, I just kept coming to school and I never spoke French, and nothing happened to me. I don't know why, but I'm sure Mother Christmas played some role in creating a miracle for me and my mom.