

Franco American Orphanage

One Sunday, my family went out for a long drive. I was ten years old then. We ended up in Lowell, Massachusetts in front of the Franco-American Orphanage.¹ Three stories high, this building was huge.



One side of the property was open lawn stretching down toward the Merrimack River. The other side included a wide delivery driveway, swing set and jungle gym with shin bars and ladders. At the end was a cavernous shrine made up of large boulders, outdoor lights and fronted by permanent seats. Statues of the Stations of the Cross sat on raised boulder platforms that edged the large driveway.

The Sisters of Charity of Quebec, an order of religious Sisters, ran the orphanage. We all exited the car as one of the Sisters came out the front entrance and walked down the driveway to greet us. Her conversation was in French, so I showed little interest. At one point, my mother told my brother and me to go play on the swings. We were the only children in this area, so we explored every inch of the gym set with excitement.

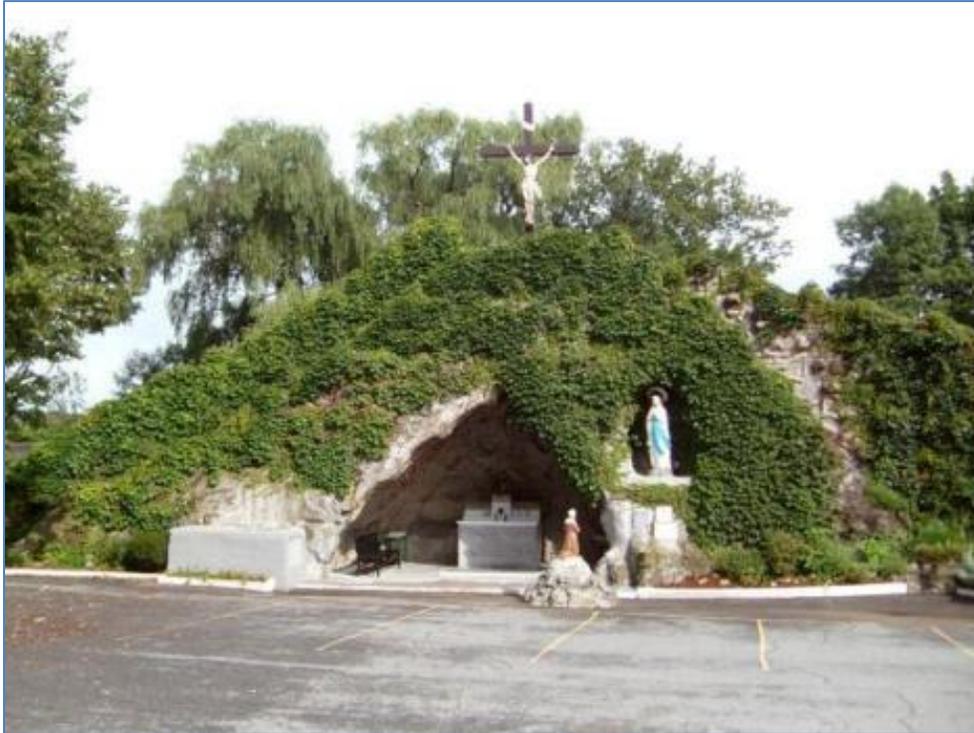
Eventually, my mother opened the car trunk and pulled out a small suitcase, handing it to the Sister. After a few minutes, she called us back to the car.

¹ When French-Canadians could not care for their children, they sent them to orphanages. The most common orphanages in Quebec were Catholic orphanages. This custom, which originated in France, continued in Canada as the population expanded. Orphanages proliferated and educational institutions grew. Religious orders from France and later England backed the hospitals, orphanages, lower and higher educational institutions that spread throughout Canada.

As my brother and I approached the vehicle, my mom took my hand and walked toward the Sister, introducing us. She transferred my hand into hers.

“Joyce, you’re going to stay here,” she said.

The Sister distracted me by asking questions about my schooling, what subjects I liked, all the while holding my hand firmly. She pointed to the back of the property at a large stone grotto. As she spoke, the car turned around and drove away.



It was quite a shock. I was speechless. For months, I was visibly frightened as I tried to accept this unfamiliar and violent change in my life. There was no word from my family so I was very slow to relax as the school year started. Some other parents would adopt me. Back in 1965, the original Orphanage was more boarding school but no one mentioned this fact to me.

On Sunday mornings, many parents came to take their child out for the day. As we were huddled in the Day Room after Sunday Mass and breakfast, the PA system would announce a child’s name and that girl would leave the room. This behavior frightened me as I imagined one girl after another was about to meet prospective parents. I never did see the girl return, so I was very puzzled about these events. Girls did return from their visits, of course, but it was never clear under what circumstances. Rejected? New parents not interested in the candidate daughter?

As time went on, I explored the outside of the schoolyard investigating in which ways I could escape. I would meander by the Stations of the Cross, trying to estimate how close the Merrimack was to the back of the Orphanage and whether I could jump the fence.

From a few windows in the Orphanage, I could see how powerful the river was by the size of the white caps. If I needed to jump to escape, then I could probably swim it successfully. After all, I was a good swimmer. My father had taught me by repeatedly throwing me in the water. Eventually, it took.

Although the river promised the fastest escape possible, it would be a last resort. Innately I knew enough to respect the tremendous force of those angry white waves and the large rocks that lined the shore.



On Sunday mornings, I would sit in the Day Room and anxiously wait to hear the names of potential adoptees pierce the air over the PA system. I jumped in my chair at each announcement.

Three months later, I heard my name for the first time. I froze, not knowing how to extricate myself from this potential disaster. The monitoring Sister, the *Day Guard* in my mind, instructed me to go to the Mother Superior's Office.

I had not been to this Office since my first moments inside the building. Would I remember how to find it? Slowly, I walked down one dark hallway after another, up landings and down landings, rounding corners lined by hand-carved furniture, huge armoires, and gold-framed portraits of religious scenes.

Arriving at her office door, I hesitated. What do I do if some potential man and woman are seated inside, waiting to look me over? Would they examine my teeth as farmers did when buying a horse? Would they notice my difficult-to-control, fine hair? Would they inform me that my real parents had formally rejected me?

I gingerly entered the room and sighed in relief. No potential parents were visible. The Mother Superior, a formidable-looking woman of small stature sat behind her impressive desk. Standing to one side was the Sister that handled the Girls' Course, the collection of girl students in the Orphanage. In my mind, she was the *Everyday Girls' Guard*.

In French, the Mother Superior started to interrogate me.

“Savez-vous pourquoi je vous ai appelés ici ?”² she said.

“Non” I immediately and emphatically replied.

The Sisters looked at each other. I inclined my head and with arms rigid at my sides, my eyes searched both faces for a clue as to what I had done wrong.

“Avez vous déplacé vos reins?”³ Mother Superior continued.

I thought for a moment and did not know what “reins” were. As the seconds passed, I grew more and more angry. What business had this Sister to dare accuse of me displacing anything? Did they think that I took these missing “reins”? I was both insulted and frightened.

Throwing my arms up in the air and slamming them down at my sides, I screamed “I didn’t take anything” and ran out of the Office back to my Day Room.

As the months passed, I accepted that this was my new home. I questioned the oldest orphans. These older girls left the property each weekday to walk to a nearby High School. Months later, the Music Teacher assembled a group of girls to star in a special event. Being part of this special occasion helped to occupy my mind and postpone my eventual escape. We practiced both singing and dancing for weeks. At the last dress rehearsal, we were dressed in full costume and even hair and make-up.



² Do you know why I have called for you here?

³ Have you moved your kidneys? The Mother Superior was asking if I were unable to urinate.

The musical evening was a great success and finally I felt accepted among these lost girls. As a token of the wonderful event, one crafty Sister took black and white photos of the evening and water-colored our costumes to match the beautiful pastels of our crepe paper French period costumes.



After many months, I finally understood that the sign outside did not apply to 100% of the students and the school was just that – a school.

I never gave up my dreams of various and daring escapes, but do have fond memories of these young girls who sang and danced with grace and colorful style, and embraced me as one of their own in the early 1960s.