

Excerpt from *The Bones of St. Clare* (Maggie Dubris)

On the last day of June, 2007, I received a registered letter informing me that St. Clare's Hospital, where I'd worked as a medic for over half my life, was closing in sixty days. In August, I decided to write a book about it. I got a dispensation from administration to wander around the building and take pictures, as long as I didn't do anything nefarious with them. My first stop was the Catacombs, a maze of narrow hallways on the 6th floor where Mother Teresa had stayed when she founded the AIDs unit in 1985. The rooms here smelled of sweat and the glue from old bandages. Each one was barely bigger than a twin bed, with a tottery radiator in the corner, and a single window that looked out onto the startlingly blue New York sky.

I knew a few of the people who lived in the catacombs. There was Tom, an Irish nurse who'd been recruited to St. Clare's with the promise of free housing. An old fellow named Harold Yaeger. Mother Teresa and her nuns. And once they were gone, another set of nuns from India whom administration had inexplicably dragged over to improve relations with the Hispanic community.

The rooms were all pretty much the same. Dingy gray walls that had once been white. Incandescent light sockets hanging from the ceilings. A few of the windows had ancient, nearly transparent sheets draped over as curtains.

Then I came to one that looked totally different. It was painted a violent green, the walls covered with loops of brown graffiti. Wires had been strung everywhere and led, for some reason, out the window, which was open a few inches. The wires were chopped off at the ends and dangled out into nothingness. There was an open padlock on the door. I wondered who had lived in this room, fixed it up to resemble to inside of a lunatic's head, and then cared enough its contents to buy a lock? Not a nun sworn to poverty. Not Tom, a perfectly normal Irish nurse.

It had to be that froggy looking specter, Harold Yaeger. I saw him every night for years, but we never had an actual conversation. He was a lumpy man who always sat in the last row of the waiting room, next to the security guard's desk, watching television and eating hard rolls. At a certain point, shortly after dawn, he'd vanish. One night I said to the guard, "What's with that old guy? Does he live here?"

"Actually, he does," the guard said. "That's Harold Yaeger. He lives on the 6th floor." As years went by I heard wisps of information about him; the gist of which was that his wife had been killed in some terrible act of medical malfeasance, and as a settlement he'd been granted a room. No one knew when this had happened, or who had given him this macabre gift, to live out his life in that place where his wife had lost hers, but it kind of made sense. The president of the hospital, Mr. Yezzo, took care of people. He gave money out of his own

pocket to bury Tex, a neighborhood man who sold scavenged trash in front of the hospital. Why wouldn't he decide that, since the hospital had deprived Harold of his wife, it should provide him with what a wife provides? Clean sheets and hard rolls.

I took a couple shots of Harold's room, and walked on. Up a short flight of steps where the walls bulged inward. Into another hall, more rooms, and a barricaded exit door at the end with a red sign nailed onto it. THIS IS NOT AN EXIT. As I wound my way back to the main hospital, I wondered what it was, if it wasn't an exit. In fact, what was any of this? How could a hospital that operated in the heart of Manhattan in 2007 have a big section in the middle that looked like a bowery flophouse? As I continued my rambling, I discovered more bizarre places. Cul-de-sacs that had simply been sealed off years ago and left to moulder.

Such as, the old ICU on the third floor. I'd almost forgotten about it. In my early career at St. Clare's, we accompanied the Medical Director on rounds here once a month, in order to understand what became of our patients. But I hadn't been here in twenty years. It was a more dilapidated version of the grim place I remembered. Dark, blue-green walls that matched the curtains once hung between the beds for privacy. A florescent light above each bed. Industrial tile ceilings and fake wooden dinner trays, a small sink that looked like it belonged in a tenement next to the nursing station.

One evening in the early eighties I'd come here to visit a save, a man who went into cardiac arrest while driving towards the Lincoln Tunnel at rush hour, and glided his car into the one ahead. Bystanders pulled him out and started CPR. I remember as I started the IV thinking, even his arm looks dead. Like old meat. A few minutes later, we shocked him back into his body. He started to breathe, and by the time we got to Clare's he was fighting the tube. Later that night, he sat up in the ER bed and asked where his car was. Then they took him upstairs, and we hadn't seen him since.

When we walked into the ICU that night, we were assaulted by the smells of urine and rubbing alcohol, the clamor of beeping EKG monitors and hissing respirators. Our save was in the last cubicle, the only one with a window. He was sitting in an easy chair, reading the Daily News. He jumped up when we walked in, crying, "I know it was you. Don't try to deny it." Then he hugged us. "You're the two girls who saved me, you're my heroes." He was pink and cherubic. I felt terrible for thinking he'd looked like meat. He didn't remember anything from when he was dead, or even from afterwards in the ER when he'd asked about his car.

"I've been thinking about it," he said. "All this. What happened. And I think, why me? Why was I spared?" He looked puzzled. "I think it's because I have one good thing that I do. Every time I pass a little animal killed in the road I say, 'God bless its soul'. I think that's why."

The chair he'd sat in was gone now. Where it had been were some splintered wooden pallets and a cardboard box. Sun streamed through the window, with green treetops visible outside. It wasn't an institutional looking window at all. I never noticed when the ICU was full of people, but now, alone, I noticed everything. It was a wood frame window like you'd find in a house. And there was a fisheye mirror in the corner of the room, up high, where you might expect a security camera to be.

The more I looked around the more I had the sense of being in the Twilight Zone, the episode where everyone in the world has vanished except for one man. The door of the medication cabinet was hanging off crookedly, there were ashtrays at the nurses station, with cigarette butts in them. But no people. Not in the ICU, not in the hallway leading to the ICU. Not even in the chapel, which I'd never visited the entire time I'd worked here.

The chapel was by far the most luxurious room I'd ever seen at St. Clare's. Its walls were set with marble panels and high painted arches, and there were three enormous stained-glass windows, flanked by gold icons. Every July, for as long as I could remember, a flyer had been taped to the elevator announcing the celebration of St. Clare's birthday in the chapel. It was invariably accompanied by a little bio which said only that she was a "friend of St. Francis." Statues, candles, and flowers were strewn everywhere. Her birthday was July 16. These must have been the remnants of her party. A Botanica candle

picture had been taped to a makeshift shrine by the door, with the words, “In Memory, Gracia Santa Clara, DO NOT REMOVE!”

I’d been told that somewhere in this chapel were the actual bones of St. Clare. I searched around for a likely spot. There was so much marble, they could be anywhere. In the grotto under the statue of her praying with her eyes closed. Behind one of the icons. Beneath the heavy marble altar in the front, where most of the candles and flowers were concentrated. I pictured the bones as being in great disarray, crammed into a cremation box, a marble one like my uncle had. And they’d have to be labeled. There was a camera in the back of the chapel that took in the altar and most of the room. It broadcast continually into the patient rooms as, “the St. Clare’s channel”. I didn’t want to do too much digging around, in case anyone was watching. Eventually I left without seeing the bones, or at least, without knowing that it was the bones I was seeing.

As I sat in the ambulance room, amidst the rapidly dwindling supplies, I thought about what I knew of this place. I’d worked here for so long. I hadn’t planned to. When I got hired I thought maybe five years. Ten at the most. Then I’d move on. But something kept me here. An unpredictable strangeness, a sense that this small hospital set smack in the middle of the largest, richest, most modern city on earth was completely outside the pale. I didn’t know if it had always been that way. My knowledge of the hospital before I arrived was

spotty, and once you got past the memories of the people I knew personally, it dwindled to the few facts I'd gleaned from the official St. Clare's website.

The hospital was founded by a group of women "about a hundred years ago" as a rest home for themselves. Sick people kept asking for their help, so they turned it into a hospital, then gave it to some nuns in 1890. That sounded fishy; not even the dates were consistent. According to the website, it had once been the best hospital in the area.

When I first arrived in 1980 there had been traces of that heyday left. A brilliant ophthalmology department. Private rooms for all the patients, unlike Roosevelt, which still had wards. A great emergency room; medics were more likely to bring a shooting to Clare's than to Rosie or even Bellevue. But by '84 the hospital was gutted. The rooms were shabby, the equipment obsolete equipment, the lights dim. There wasn't even a hospital-wide system of installed oxygen; tanks were wheeled to a patient's bedside if they really needed it.

I shook the memories away and went outside. An ambulance was parked in front of the ER, its engine idling. My old partners Joe and Seth sat in the front. The bones, they informed me, were gone. Stolen, right under the noses of any patients who were tuned in to the St. Clare's channel. It had to be a nun. We all agreed on this fact. Who else would have known where the bones were? Who else, in the middle of August, would have a handy-dandy habit to hide their

loot under as they snuck it out of the chapel, out of the hospital, and off to wherever poor St. Clare's next resting place was destined to be.

The thing was, no one knew anything for sure. Were there even bones? Why would she be buried in some dumpy hospital in midtown? And, was it all her bones, or only a few? Like, her skull. Or a metatarsal in a velvet-lined box.

I went home and looked her up in wikipedia. Apparently, she was more than just a friend of St. Francis. She founded something called, "the order of the poor ladies," fought off men who invaded the convent by clobbering them with a blessed sacrament, and was declared by Pope Pius to be the patron saint of television. Her bones were supposedly reposing inside a wax mannequin in Italy. But a quick search of the web revealed that there were enough chips of her floating around to construct an elephant. One of them could easily have found its way to St. Clare's. And if it had, I was going to find out what happened to it.

The following are sample calls from a journal I kept in the 1980s and 90s. I plan to integrate some of these into the book, possibly to introduce each chapter.

At sunset on the pier the Chinese fishermen with their white plastic buckets sitting just outside the fence, a group of martial arts students working out into the darkness. Later a couple drinking beer at the end of the pier and crackheads away from the water, made visible by the flash of their lighters.

A man in a theater with a blood pressure of 80/palp who wouldn't talk to us and barely could be bothered to sign the RMA. "He's so stubborn," his wife said, but in a proud way, so there was no way to get to her either.

A tenement fire on 9th Avenue. All the power dead with hoses and water everywhere, and in a third floor apartment an asthmatic sitting in a room lit with

flashlights. Water kept spraying into the room though the firemen said the fire was out.

An emaciated AIDS patient who was convinced he had been poisoned by the spray the landlord used to kill roaches. He only took herbal medicines, and was sitting on the steps of a crackhouse.

A spectacular accident where a jeep had broadsided a car, then plowed into an abandoned building, knocking the front down. No one in the jeep was hurt, and I spent the entire call trying to locate an elusive “fat man” who had been driving the car. Finally I found him at a pay phone a block away. He wasn’t hurt either.

In the driveway at Bellevue a man cried out, “Miss, can you help me? I was attacked by skinheads.” He was a black man shot below both knees and he had taken a cab to the hospital. He was wearing a “no fur” patch on his hat.

An old Spanish man with pain down one leg who spoke no English. His apartment was filled with yellow pictures of a younger man holding a guitar that I think was him.

A poor old man with stomach pain we brought in in the middle of some big brawl in the ER between a naked man with a disconnected IV spewing blood from his arm who kept trying to sit at the nurses station, and the nurses who were trying to get him under control while security refused to do anything. The old man walked out after about half an hour of this.

A cardiac arrest; a woman who had been having chest pain all night, then felt better, then collapsed, her family crying around her. She had cut her face when she fell and her husband silently mopped the blood as we worked. We took her in and there was another arrest already in bed one. After they pronounced them, they both lay there for hours since the elevator wasn’t working. All night we rolled patients past the closed curtains.

A rich gay man with his ear cut completely in two. His apartment was filled with white, football shaped cats waddling around, but very neat, as if there had been no struggle.

“I’m very drunk. I don’t remember how it happened.”

“Even a man who’s drunk remembers getting his ear chopped off.”

“Not me.”

A woman at the Bryant Hotel who had been beaten up two days go and now seemed to be dying, of the beating or of AIDS it was hard to tell. Her hand was broken, rings cutting into her broken fingers, her face battered, she had a fever of 105, and at the hospital an O2 sat of 40. She didn't want to go but we dropped her off with the help of her friends, a sad collection of crackheads and junkies grown too weak to support their addictions, now trying to make some sort of last stand in that noisy hellhole with the elevator that never runs.

A drunk in the park who wanted detox and insisted on showing us the high school equivalency diploma he had gotten two weeks earlier which had melted to a ragged clump in his pocket.

A man dying of AIDS in Penn Station, not speaking, breathing 60 times a minute. He was so thin I could have carried him myself, his skin dry as a moth's wing, his tongue white with thrush. At the hospital he refused all care. The doctor was angry that we had brought him in.

“Why didn't you let him die at home?”

“His home is Penn Station.”

A window washer who was clipped by a car, his ankle hugely swollen but he absolutely refused to go to the hospital. He lived on the pier so finally we had him sign off, gave him a ride down there, and left him with two icepacks and the advice to soak his leg in the river all night.

A skel with asthma who claimed to be a friend of the Mayor, and said the last time he met with him he had told him, “You are obsessed with Fiorello LaGuardia and I suggest you get over it,” and thus got banned from the inner circle.