

Forensics, by: René Balcer

I grew up in Montréal, Canada.

Montréal is a place of refuge. My mother's family came in 1640, Huguenots escaping Catholic repression in France.

Ukrainians are the latest to find shelter there. Syrians before them, following Haitians and Lebanese on the run from chaos. My eighth-grade homeroom teacher was a refugee from the Algerian Civil War, a so-called *pied-noir* shunned by France and Algeria alike. Far from the warm beaches of his youth, he turned his broken-hearted cynicism on the snowbanks piling up outside our classroom windows.

In the 1970s, refugees from Latin America found their way to Montréal. These refugees weren't running from poverty or crime, but from their own repressive governments. First came the Chileans in late '73, fleeing the Pinochet regime. They were followed by Ecuadorians and Argentinians, as one by one the countries of Latin America fell to the juntas, until all but four were ruled by dictatorships.

Many of these exiles were college-aged like I was. I was in university, and I'd run into them at the student union and in coffee houses. Many had left their homes just ahead of the police, after finding out that their friends or relatives had disappeared. Some didn't get off so easy — arrested and tortured—they'd been released with a warning to get out of the country.

Many in the Canadian government worried about admitting so many "foreign leftists." But we Québécois felt a natural kinship with these refugees from Latin America. Beyond our similar temperaments, there was our shared Catholic tradition and the Church's contradictory mission of ministering to the poor while sucking up to the rich and powerful. Both our societies suffered from the Church's alignment with repressive forces.

Wary as cats, the refugees kept mostly to themselves, careful to avoid conduct that might get them deported from their refuge. For the most part, beyond providing them with shelter, sustenance and sympathy, we locals left them alone. Because in those days, we were still dealing with our own brush with authoritarian rule.

In the 1950s and 60s, French-speaking Québécois awoke from the coma of English rule and began the process of de-colonization. But Québec's "quiet revolution" moved too slowly for those of my generation—for us nothing less than full independence from Anglophone Canada would do. Like students around the world in those days, we took direct action, rocking the streets of Montréal with *manifs* (demonstrations) and strikes that defied state power, to the point that Mayor Drapeau issued an edict (that still stands today) forbidding all demonstrations in the city. The *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) was the armed manifestation of the independence movement, responsible for a wave of bombings against Anglophone institutions in Montréal.

In October 1970, FLQ cells kidnapped a British consul and a Québec politician. In return for their release, the FLQ demanded the reading of a manifesto on national television, the release of political prisoners, safe passage to Cuba and \$500,000. Under the pretext of stopping a nascent armed insurrection, the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau responded by invoking the War Measures Act, putting Canada—in particular Québec and Montréal—under martial law and suspending *habeas corpus*.

Overnight, the Canadian Army rolled into Montréal and set up check points and armed patrols. Given a free hand to arrest whoever they pleased, the police rounded up hundreds of suspected FLQ members and sympathizers, including singers, poets, union leaders, professors, journalists—and my cousin Lise.

Lise was a veteran of students strikes and a militant *indépendantiste*. She was close to the FLQ cell members who had taken the hostages but had split with them over the kidnappings. Still, there she was, under arrest and held incommunicado, shuffled between detention sites and subjected to fierce interrogations without benefit of an attorney. She was 21.

I was 16 and still finding my feet politically. I had marched in a few *manifs*, a couple of which had turned violent. Ever since my mother dragged me in from the backyard on a sunny August afternoon in 1963 to watch the live broadcast of Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech, I've been for the underdog. At a school public speaking contest when I was twelve, I gave a breathless speech denouncing the Vietnam War. During school church services, instead of the hymnal, I read Mao's Little Red Book, just to annoy my teachers. I devoured everything I could about the Black Panthers and Malcolm X—I even read the Kerner Report on the 1967 riots in American cities. It didn't take much injustice to spark my outrage. But, at 16, it didn't take much of anything to spark my emotions. My troubled home life, my close friends, my girlfriends real and imagined, my sausage-factory school – all had equal priority with righting the world, and all kindled my passions.

Though I wasn't aware of it at the time, much as I had nudged the boundaries up till then, as a young middle-class white male in a liberal democracy, I had no real skin in the game. There was a bottom to what the state could do to rein me in. But in October 1970, that bottom fell out.

It wasn't just that my Montréal was now a city of curfews and arbitrary detentions buzzing with the same APCs and Huey gunships we'd see in reports from Vietnam on the evening news. There was something else deeply disturbing. It was how easily everyone fell in line.

Once the gloves were off, everyone wanted in on the game. Never mind that civil rights had been suspended and that innocent people were languishing in jail, Pierre Trudeau and the War Measures Act had the overwhelming support of Canadians. Pierre Trudeau, the poster boy for progressive politics, who had liberalized the penal code and "taken the government out of the nation's bedrooms," who as a student had thrown snowballs at Stalin's statue in Red Square, even *that* Pierre Trudeau had a taste for authoritarianism.

My cousin's arrest blew through our family like an ill wind. Ashamed and fearful, my parents told my brother and me not to talk about it with anyone outside the family. Silence is what they cautioned.

Two days later, the headmaster of my school pulled me into an empty classroom during recess to question me about FLQ plans to attack the school—a private Anglophone boy's school for the scions of the Anglo ruling class (except for me, of course). He thought I had a direct line to the FLQ via my cousin. I told him I didn't know anything. I wasn't lying. I hadn't seen Lise since I was nine or ten. I didn't know much about her, except that when she was eight she'd lost her father, a war hero who landed at Normandy on D Day and was wounded on the way to Berlin. The headmaster warned me that the school was keeping tabs on me through its network of old boys in high places; if I knew of any threats against the school, I'd better speak up or suffer the consequences. Without breaking stride, this educator had recast himself as an agent of state security.

The other shoe dropped the following Saturday night. I'd just left my girlfriend's house in Westmount, the affluent neighborhood where the British Consul had been kidnapped. I was walking to a bus stop when I saw a checkpoint up ahead. Two soldiers and a Montréal cop. I hesitated, thought of turning around. Too late—the cop called out to me in French, told me to take my hands out of my pockets and come forward. I obeyed.

The soldiers hung back on either side of me, holding their guns pointed at the ground. Two more soldiers were keeping warm in a covered jeep, another cop huddled in an idling patrol car. The cop asked me what I was doing in the neighborhood so late. I told him. I kept my girlfriend's address vague—I didn't want to get her in trouble. My thin chivalry made the cop suspicious. He cracked some lame joke about my long hair and was not sure it was a girl I'd been visiting. He asked for my ID. All I had was a city bus pass with my name on it. He read my name out loud, then went to the patrol car. He gave my bus pass to the cop sitting there. That one picked up the car radio. The soldiers kept their eyes on me. I avoided looking at them.

The cop came back, giving the soldiers a little head nod. The soldiers braced. The cop asked me if I knew Lise Balcer. I said she was my cousin. By this time, the other cop had come over. They told me I had to go with them to the police station. I told them I had to get home. They grabbed me and marched me to the patrol car.

Twenty minutes later, I was sitting alone in a room in the basement of Station No. 10, a police station with a bad reputation. It was my first time being locked up in a police station. My first time feeling I was in big trouble.

Four guys came in—two in dark suits, one in a brown windbreaker and one in a blue Expos jacket. The suits sat down at a table against the wall, they each had a yellow pad. The other two pulled up chairs and sat down facing me. They told me they were sympathetic to the separatist cause, and they understood how a *ti cul* like me could get impatient and frustrated and want to

take direct action. All they wanted to do was prevent more violence. They were nice, they gave me a cigarette.

They asked me about Lise. I told them I didn't really know her. The guy with the Expos jacket rose and told me to stand up. I did. He shoved me hard. I tripped over my chair and fell down. He told me to get back up. I did. He pushed me down again. I told them I wanted to call my parents. They ignored me. To say I was scared is an understatement.

They asked me the same question a dozen different ways, but since I didn't know anything, nothing I said satisfied them. They raised their voices. They pushed me around the room, bouncing me off the walls. Expos Jacket put a Montréal phone book on the table and started pounding it with a nightstick, threatening to do the same to my head.

At some point he did put the phone book against my head. He must've whacked it with the nightstick, I'm not sure because the next thing I knew, I was in a windowless cell by myself. My head was pounding. There was water in a paper cup. I sat there under a dim light, my body aching, imagining the worst, for I don't know how long.

Around noon the next day, they put me in a car, drove me to a bus stop and left me there. By the time I got home, my father had gotten a call from a nameless detective who told him I'd been picked up for curfew violation but because of my age there'd be no record of my detention. This was good news for my parents—my bright future would be unstained by an arrest record. Again, they told me to be silent. I never told them about my headaches or showed them the bruises on my body. Not that it would have occurred to them to ask. This was Montréal, after all, not Chicago or Birmingham. I just toughed it out. In silence.

The War Measures Act was lifted in January 1971. My cousin languished in jail yet bravely manifested her activism during court appearances, at one point embarrassing the provincial legislature into over-turning a ban on women serving on juries.

Pierre Trudeau remained Prime Minister of Canada until 1979, and then again from 1980 to 1984. His reputation as a liberal progressive defender of personal rights and democratic freedoms remained largely untarnished at home and on the world stage.

As politically naïve as I was at 16, I was stunned at how placidly Montréal society—and Canada as a whole—accepted the suspension of *habeas corpus*, the one law that insures our freedoms. How little fuss was made about it, during and after the October Crisis. I saw how thin the veneer of democracy and liberty really is, and how easily that veneer can be stripped when power feels threatened. The cynicism of my eighth-grade teacher suddenly made sense.

In the years that followed, I led a restless life. What home I had after my parents split up, I stayed away. An infrequent student, I hit the road every chance I got. I crisscrossed the country a dozen times, hitchhiking, hopping freight trains, sleeping by the roadside or on hard cots at the Sally Ann, in abandoned farmhouses and railyard shacks, I worked odd jobs. From my fellow vagabonds, I heard stories about police beat-downs, Indian school horror shows, one-way Mountie sleigh-rides. And every story, I believed, because of course it followed that whatever

was done to this white middle-class kid under the pretext of the War Measures Act had been done a thousand times worse to my brothers and sisters of color without need of any pretext at all.

When I could afford to, I continued the photography I began at 14. I found my photos becoming more attuned to the disquiet of the quotidian, to the monsters laying just beneath the polite surface of Canadian society.

When I returned to Montréal in 1974 to resume my studies, I heard *castellano chileno* wafting through the smokey coffee houses of the student ghetto. Two years of high school Spanish was no help in penetrating the thick accent of the Chilean exiles. Still, I learned their stories, of missing friends and relatives and days of terror in a soccer stadium and desperate gambits for sanctuary. This was the full picture of what had merely been a sketch in October 1970. Their experiences gave context to my own.

An essay on the Left Wing and Media earned me admission to the Communication Arts program at Loyola College, at the time one of two such programs at North American universities. There, I began to experiment with film, television and photography as means of expressing my concern with social justice.

Latin America was never far from my reality, as more exiles and their stories arrived from Argentina. Their Dirty War had raised the stakes and taken on an unimaginable scale. Yet, for me, it had familiar refrains, from the Church's complicity to the middle class's conspiracy of silence.

One by one, countries from Guatemala to Argentina were overtaken by bloody-minded regimes. I felt a connection with their people's struggle for freedom and looked for ways to express my solidarity.

When the Sandinistas overthrew the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, I was taken by their embrace of Liberation Theology and their inclusion of two activist priests in their new government. I helped organize a book tour for the Sandinista commander Omar Cabezas and his memoir *Fire from the Mountain*. Cabezas cut a romantic figure. But the honeymoon didn't last. Pope John Paul publicly reprimanded the Sandinista priests and disavowed Liberation Theology. As for Commander Cabezas, he split with his fellow revolutionaries when the Sandinistas under Daniel Ortega took a turn toward authoritarianism. Once corruptible hands grab the levers of power, they are loathe to let go.

My engagement with Latin America continued over the years through art and friendships and by virtue of my long-standing interest in Indigenous issues in the Americas.

When I came to Buenos Aires in December 2009, I heard echoes of Montréal. The familiar churches. The familiar colonial history. The familiar settler disdain for Indigenous people.

But mostly it was the silence. The silence my parents counseled. The silence of fear, shame, indifference. The silence of complicity.

Lining the quiet streets of Recoleta, elaborate *porteros electricos* guarded the entrances of posh apartment buildings. Expertly crafted, dutifully polished, they spoke to the privilege of their residents.

To me, these electric doormen spoke to something else. To the willful blindness of those within in whose name dirty wars are fought. In Buenos Aires or in Montréal.

Designed to intimidate, these cold steely mechanisms of disconnection mean to keep accountability at bay. But it's an illusion. The final accounting comes to every man and woman.

The poor have no such illusions. Their doors are wide open.

On that day in 2009, the *porteros electricos* posed a question—wherein lies the greater crime? In those who commit the horrors, or in those who stay behind their locked gates, who shut their eyes and close their hearts?

I had my own answer—what I saw before me was a crime scene.

So, in a nod to Ed Ruscha before me, camera in hand I went up one side of the street and down the other and did my forensic work.