HOLIDAY READING

CMAJ

The cure is a gift

1682 in northern Italy

On a quiet night in the city of Cremona, Padre Fabrizio Cambiati lay in bed listening to the rain when he heard a timid knock at the door. He thought perhaps he was dreaming, but a moment later it came again. Timid, but insistent.

Fabrizio shuffled to the door and opened it on the damp night, the flame

of his lamp wavering. An old woman inched forward into the constricted circle of light, her scarfed head bowed. "Don Fabrizio?"

Cambiati soon learned that she had heard a cart approaching along the road that night. From her doorway she then heard someone dragging something into the reeds by the water. After the cart left, she had wandered out to look. It was then she had found them.

She looked into the priest's eyes. "The bodies of two men."

"Alive?"

She shrugged. "Come. I will show you where."

He dressed and followed her into the night.

The priest and the old woman came to the place near the river.

"There," she whispered.

Cambiati approached. Sinking up to his ankles in cold water, he stared at 2 forms that had been tossed on the soggy ground. He went to the first man and lifted his head, which had been thrown back and immersed in a pool of brackish water. Bringing his face close to the man's, he noted pustules marking the skin. He determined that the man was old and quite dead.

Cambiati turned to the second man. Younger, but the same pustules marred his face. He could not determine if the man was breathing. He shook him. Nothing. He forced the eyes open. No sign of life. Nothing. The other man was obviously dead, but this one — he wasn't sure. With a gesture to the woman to look away, he pulled the man's trousers down and moved his testicles and member out of the way. With his hardened fist, he struck with all his strength at the perineum. "Whoo!" the man grunted, and his eyes shot wide open.

Lifting the man onto his shoulder, the padre headed back to the city, mumbling prayers for the man he now carried like a sack of peas over his shoulder.

Back home, he laid the young man in his own bed. He removed his clothes and inspected him. Weeping sores covered his body from head to toe. Cambiati knew it was not the plague, but he did not recognize the disease. He washed him thoroughly. After applying an unguent that he hoped would be helpful, he slept on the stone floor next to the bed.

For 2 weeks Fabrizio administered

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Eric Field

a variety of herbs, applied both internally and externally. He spooned thin soup into the patient, kept him cool when he was hot and warmed him when he was cold.

One morning the stranger awoke, his eyes wide and clear. "I believe you have saved me, padre. I must thank you."

"It's nothing," said the priest. "What is your name?"

"I am called Rodolfo."

"Tell me what happened. Who left you to die in the reeds, and why?"

Rodolfo turned his pockmarked face to the window. "My brother. For years he has longed to keep our father's farm for himself. I am the eldest and would have had it soon, since our father is ancient. I told my brother he could have the land himself — I am no farmer. I long to wander. But he would not believe me, always saying that I

would come back and claim what was mine. He feared that greatly. When we took ill, my father and I, I was too weak to resist when he dragged us to the cart, and my father ... my father, where is he?"

"Gone to God, my son. He died in the reeds where you were left."

Again he gazed out the window. "I see."

"Rest now. Rest. I will get you some soup."

* * *

A day later, Rodolfo stood at the door, ready to leave.

"Where will you go?"

"I will begin by avenging the death of my father."

"No. You must not."

"I will."

"I have not cured you for this." Fabrizio stood and shook his head, a pained expression on his face. "No. I have not cured you for this. You must not kill. I have not cured you so you can take another's life."

Rodolfo spoke calmly. "Padre, the cure is a gift — once given, it no longer belongs to you."

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The author adapted this story from his novel, *Fabrizio's Return* (Knopf Canada, 2006), which received the Trillium Book Award.

Ottawa poet and novelist Mark Frutkin has published 11 books. His latest work is *Erratic North: A Vietnam Draft Resister's Life in the Canadian Bush* (2008).

Time to heal thyself: Christmas Eve

It is time. I have levied love enough
I have showed it to them, wrapped in a bow.
It is Christmas, and it is time
for me to stop doctoring the books.
I am a mere recorder, a cheerleader for time,
watching men and women work
with what they are given, mostly chasing grief.
I am the Santa Claus of regurgitant hearts,
of watching the driven snow pelt on a white Christmas Eve.
I make the most, but tonight I refuse to make too much.
Wrap up the end of the day in a bow for me,
no longer a crutch to limping souls, but to my own.
For I will give it away soon enough,
as a heartfelt pawn.

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