

# BROTHER BROKEN

A Memoir of Three Brothers and Suicide

Cecile Beaulieu

Copyright © 2023 Cecile Beaulieu

Second Edition —2023

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of Cecile Beaulieu.

ISBN

978-1-7777765-1-0 (Paperback)

## CHAPTER NINE — THE SEX TALK

**Tuesday, March 2, 1993, 9:47 a.m.**

*I'm busy, don't bother me. Things don't get themselves done, you know.*

If it's broke, I fix it. If it's empty, I fill it. If it's dirty, I clean it. If it's garbage, I chuck it.

The to-do list keeps growing faster than I can make it shrink. I don't remember what free time looks like anymore. It's a rare thing to stop and just sit.

It was a hell of a start to the year. *"Happy New Year . . . your mom's been mowed down by a car. Have you made any New Year's resolutions? Maybe you should put those on hold for a while."*

I'm with my dad, and he's a little less stressed because I'm here. I see fear in him. It makes his step less sure, it interrupts his sleep and lingers long in his space like a stench. Anxiety is out to conquer him.

It's hard to see him vulnerable. He used to be so large in life. He had authority. He was the parent. But now, he's showing me a look, the kind he might have given his parents a long time ago. The look of a small boy, lost and afraid.

I don't know how to turn this around. I fumble, and sometimes add to his worry instead of take away from it. I think he can sense my defects and wonders how the hell he got strapped with such an incompetent caregiver.

Today, he volunteered to make breakfast.

"That's a great idea, Dad. I sure could use a taste of old-time normal."

## BROTHER BROKEN

I had been working on him, trying to help get him out of his funk, and this small gesture of cooperation was the tiny light at the far end of an uphill tunnel.

He's no stranger to the kitchen, he's made meals before. He adds his own unique flavour to a dish. Pepper is his preferred ingredient. If meals had a label showing a breakdown of food content by volume, the second item on the list would read "rolled oats" or "brown sugar" – rolled oats for filler and brown sugar for the palate.

When Dad was in charge of fixing meals, which wasn't too often, the menu included porridge for breakfast and hamburger patties or baked beans for all other meals. Dad claimed that pepper brought out the best in porridge and that hamburger went a lot further to feed a family when cut with rolled oats. He added extra pepper and sugar to baked beans to make them tangy and candied.

My siblings and I had our own opinions about ample zest, and the rock-hard of what we called, puck-burgers. Our palate preferences rarely aligned with Dad's, but we knew better than to voice ours. We could always fill up on bread in a pinch.

This morning, Dad prepares breakfast following his usual standard. I don't complicate his menu with suggestions. The meal is easy for him to make and that's the whole point—build up confidence for him to become his own caregiver. The peppery sweet porridge tastes best when he serves it with a dash of independence.

He's ingesting a small measure of accomplishment with every spoonful. Breakfast is a feast laid out to celebrate a win. It raises us above our immediate concerns and chases away worry.

We are filled and at peace—the two of us at the table, taking a breather from uncertainty. I watch Dad in amazement. There is determination in him yet, though circumstances keep chiselling at

his resolve. He hunches because it's easier than straining weary back muscles grown tired with age and creeping osteoporosis.

Dad's arms, which once rippled with hard bands of muscle, are feeble now, their tone languid and spent. His bony-thin arms are like two cornstalks propped at the edge of a lonely field. They dangle from slumped shoulders that have carried sorrowful burdens for too long.

I survey the top of his head while he studies his coffee cup. His hair is wiry-thin and the skin at the roots is waxen, and I'm thinking I can press my thumb there and leave a print. There's a line like the edge of a shadow on his forehead where the tanned part starts. He used to wear a hat to block the sun, but it didn't protect his face from catching rays. His skin is leathered where the sun touched and carved creases into a frown.

The skin is pleated at the rim of his upper lip, and his cheeks are sunken where the absence of teeth shapes his jawline. It gives his face the look of an elongated oval, like an alien's silhouette. But Dad's eyes aren't empty like alien eyes. Dad has sadness and love and a deep yearning in his, though he often wears a lost and rankled look.

The frustration of getting old and feeling useless sometimes gets the better of his mood. It's hard for him to be patient with himself while remembering how easy it once was to get things done. The mechanics of his limbs and digits have failed, slowing his attempts to a stall. And then, trying became too much of a bother for him.

He misses her... my mom. He can't think of her without an ache welling up inside him. They didn't always use hugs and kisses to prove affection, and saying *I love you* was awkward for them, but facing life's challenges together solidified the bond between them.

Their history wasn't always a flower garden. More than once, they arrived at the brink of calling it quits. Many indignities tested their limits, and they each pulled punches to salvage what was left. But seeing her in a state of near-annihilation knocked him on his

## BROTHER BROKEN

ass, and he remembered the little French farmgirl he had fallen in love with in his youth.

He sits at the head of the table, because that's where Dads sit – right in that place of authority. He's so quiet, I have to lean in to make sure he hasn't fallen asleep.

“Dad, would you like some more coffee?”

He perks up. “Sure.”

I serve us both a refill, and we resume our hush at the table.

The lull gives me a chance to remember a long-ago moment shared between Dad and me. It was a different time, and his embrace had been enough to give me comfort. I was a teenager again, feeling the sting of disappointing him. He draped his arm around my shoulders and kept me close as I cried. I was afraid of the daunting challenges looming in my future.

I was eighteen, unwed and pregnant. It's not the path he had envisioned for me, but it was the one I was travelling down. I'm not sure whose heart was more broken – his or mine. I suppose I had a romantic notion that being in this state would guarantee me the support of a mate. Instead, I was joining the expanding population of single mothers – and I was scared.

I remember sitting with him, side by side on the couch, watching a television show. I was in the final weeks of my pregnancy. My teary breakdown interrupted the program, and Dad cradled me and simply let me cry.

Sometimes a good bawl with the support of a loving parent is all it takes. I hung onto the resolve it helped me foster. I had made a pact with my young self that I would get us through this. I'd find a way to survive. I'd rely on my wits and hope that my efforts were good enough. And I'd be shrewd and badass to protect what was mine – especially my child and my spirit.

Seeing Dad now aged and worn, I hope that I've measured up to his expectations. Actually, he told me recently how proud I had

made him. I cling to that. It helps me to know that I can add *good daughter* to my short list of honourable traits.

He lifts his head to look at me with squinty eyes like he's studying me, seeing me anew and considering my confidence. He puckers his brow, as though a question is itching to wriggle free of his thoughts. His mouth gapes open, but nothing escapes. There is a sense of vulnerability about him, and I recognize that, at this moment, I should remain attentive.

There was an incident that happened decades ago, and he's trying to tell me about it.

Some things you need to know about my dad:

He was a good, practising Catholic.

He was a member of the Knights of Columbus.

When I was small, he used to come to church with us all the time.

Then he didn't.

I watch him struggle to get words out. He's focusing on his coffee cup, perhaps expecting it to give him a cue. The first attempt at sound comes out as garbled gibberish. He clears his throat and begins again.

"One time, I went to a conference in Prince Albert for Knights of Columbus. Four of us went."

He pauses to take a sip of coffee and stares into the cup. It mustn't have been syrupy enough, because he picks up a spoon and adds another scoop of sugar. After he's stirred in the sweetness, he takes up the yarn again.

"There was me, two other guys, and the priest."

As he catches his breath, I say, "That sounds like it would have been a good experience."

"No." He spits the word, as if it's gone sour in his mouth. "We had to stay overnight. It was for two days."

More stalling.

## BROTHER BROKEN

“We had to get a hotel room. Our room had two beds, so two of the guys took one of the beds.”

Dad’s tone is taking on a bothersome edge, like a growl and a moan competing for the same air.

“I had to sleep with the priest in the other one.”

I’m starting to feel nervous, and I want to interrupt him, but words refuse to come out of my mouth. My eyes won’t blink, and I am held captive, waiting for him to go on.

“All night long, he kept putting his hands on me, and I had to keep fighting him to stop it . . . the cocksucker.”

He draws a quick breath, like a hiccup. He shudders for a brief second and goes quiet again.

And now my guts are quaking.

There’s a tune by the late Jim Croce called “I Got a Name.” The song played on the radio and lingered near the top of the charts during the 1970s, so I heard it often. I never paid attention to the words before, but now a couple of its lines shout out to me:

*I got a name, I got a name  
And I carry it with me like my daddy did  
But I’m living the dream that he kept hid*

I suppose the words could mean the good dream or the bad dream. The lyrics send chills up and down my spine, and the reason my innards are doing a twist and flip. I can’t help but wonder if this priest did more than simply molest my dad. Something tells me there is more to the story, but the trail has likely gone cold, and fact-finding will be difficult. Too many years have passed, and not enough witnesses remain.

**Sunday, May 16, 1965, 9:45 a.m.**

When the church bell rings, it’s time to get to Mass. Sunday mornings are a ruckus of primping and fussing. Boys have their hair slicked smooth with Brylcreem, women cap their lids with

pretty bonnets, little girls wear tiny white gloves, and Dads shine their shoes.

My family walks from home to church, which is only half a block. We fill the third pew from the front on the left side, facing the altar. Mom and Dad sit at each end of the bench to keep us hemmed in. The rest of us cram in the middle, except for whichever brother's turn it is to serve as altar boy.

After Mass, Mom rushes home to make sure the chicken in the oven isn't over- or undercooked. The priest is coming for dinner. She sets the table with nine plates, one more than the current number of family members.

The house is clean and tidy. Mom spent the previous day scrubbing and waxing floors to a shine. Pauly and I dusted furniture with polish that smelled like antiseptic lemon. Rhubarb pies, waiting to be served for dessert, sit on the counter.

Mitch and I follow Dad home from church while the rest of my siblings linger with friends in the churchyard. It's a beautiful spring day, and we want to ride the tire swing.

With one free hand, Dad helps us gain elevation on a rubber doughnut. With the other, he raises a smoke to his lips. I have an image of him still – an almost-dandy, leaning casually near the base of the swing, cleanshaven, wearing pleated trousers and a dress shirt, with a fedora cocked on his head. I think I saw that figure once before, in a movie on TV where the star catches the leading lady's eye.

Pauly walks across the yard toward the swing and joins Dad to keep us airborne. Mitch lets out a squeal and tightens his hold on the ropes. He relishes the thrill of flying. I hear Rod, Denis and John cavorting from down the street as they make their way home. Soon, they want a turn on the swing, too.

No one notices him arriving. There's no sound to alert us, except perhaps the gentle rustle of his robe over the grass. I look up and squint my eyes to see a dark figure looming over me, blocking light



## BROTHER BROKEN

from the sun. A dark, towering silhouette without a smile or emotion. I quit picking dandelions, the boys step away from the swing, Pauly holds the ball that Mitch wants to keep kicking, and Dad stubs a cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. Play stops, and we are somberly attentive when the priest shows up.

Dad ushers Father into the house, where Mom is busy with dinner preparations. She is startled momentarily, wipes her hands on her apron, and welcomes the priest. Dad leads him to a chair at the end of the table, the place normally reserved for the head of family. Dad chooses a seat right of the priest, which also happens to be the server side for altar boys. Perhaps it's a force of habit.

Mom brings them each a cup of fresh coffee. The priest reaches for the mug and brings it to his lips. They discuss church business while Mom pulls food from the oven.

There's no need to ring a dinner bell. We know, almost by instinct, when the food is ready. We file into the house and take our seats at the table—except Mitch, who's place is taken by Dad. There's an empty chair beside Mom, and he doesn't seem to mind the switch.

Various details are stranger than most, and the notion of Dad being less than the boss at the table doesn't sit well with me. Something's amiss trying to fathom the priest's posturing. He appears larger than life. The harsh angles of his face framed by wire spectacles don't help soften his persona. A row of buttons run the length of his garment from collar to floor. Perhaps the black uniform is deliberately tailored to convey authority, even though the chain and crucifix hung around his neck imply servitude.

The priest touches his forehead with the fingers of his right hand and makes a sign of the cross. We follow his lead and bow our heads as he prays a blessing over the food. The prayer comes out like mumbled chatter, perhaps in Latin, because I can't make out the words. He could be delivering the punch line from a Bob Hope

joke and we'd never know. We cross ourselves again and respond, "Amen."

The priest gets first dibs on the food. His is the only physique at the table that's portly. I watch him pile his plate and wonder why Dad hasn't barked, "Are you gonna leave food for the rest of us?!"

I know bread's purpose is to fill the void, and I forgive him for the oversight, but it doesn't stop me from giving Father the stink eye. The priest doesn't notice that I'm bothered. He's too busy shovelling roast chicken into his maw. That's understandable, because Mom is the best cook in the Catholic Women's League.

I don't recall many more dinners that my parents hosted priests. There was a shift in the way church life influenced our family. Dad stepped back from participating, and it may have caused friction, but I didn't particularly notice. Perhaps I was too busy shovelling bread into my maw.

Dad became grumpy. He didn't want to play with us much anymore. I used to pester him to play catch with me, which was something we both enjoyed. Perhaps age was making his body hurt, so I found other ways to sharpen my game. Even his social life stalled. He and Mom had friends who came to play poker once in a while, but not the same men who used to talk church business. I only saw those during Mass, and they didn't pay us much attention.

Mom held up the torch, leading us to church every Sunday. She doubled down, helping to run lay-led liturgies after the last priest moved away. Our church became a mission post. One priest served several missions, so Mass was held only once a month. But that happened about fifteen years after the dinner that I remembered.

I didn't feel ostracized, though people might have wondered why Dad stopped going to church and they used it as an excuse to give us the cold shoulder. No stories circulated, no heads rolled, and there were no threats by church authorities to keep him from spilling secrets. Dad may not have felt we were at risk, so he didn't

## BROTHER BROKEN

utter a peep. But I would wager that humiliation and shame played the biggest part in maintaining his silence.

I have no idea whether that particular priest tried molesting others, and I suppose I may never find out. I only know he didn't do anything to me. I'm not saying the thing was never done to me – just that it wasn't done to me by a priest. In retrospect, I had a hunch that something did happen to my brothers. There were signs and slip-ups and too much knowledge about things that shouldn't be known by young minds.

You can tell when someone is trying to cover something up. They try to disguise a lie with too much detail. They keep going on and on, attempting to convince others with elaborate strings of flap. You don't have to say a word, just let them speak and they keep digging themselves deeper and deeper. Some people eat up whatever is told them, because they can't discern the truth from a hoax. It's a comical thing to witness.

I saw cover-ups, but there was nothing comical about them. They were chinks in armour, and I knew how to spot them. When you build your own means of protection you learn to recognize tiny flaws in others' designs. Secrets are meant to remain hidden. You may not see them by looking directly at them. You need to look beyond where the light shines on them, to notice the thing they cast. Heat radiates off a hot surface, and you can't see heat, but you can see its shadow. You can verify the proof of a thing by following its shadow trail, and perhaps arrive at its source.

If it were easy to interpret actions, I suppose someone would have wondered about the progression of our inappropriate behaviour. Self-mutilation with cigarettes, excessive drinking, promiscuity, and causing trouble weren't part of normal for healthy kids, even in my generation. No one offered help, understanding, or fixes. Instead, we were shamed into toeing the line. I suppose it worked – there was no other way to right it or deal with it back then. We didn't totally self-destruct... yet.

John, Mitch, and I had more in common than just being from the same family. I believe all three of us were prey, but we didn't know this about each other.

Anger was one way we acted out, and we used it mainly between us. I didn't want to be the one left standing on the lowest rung of the ladder, and neither did they, so we fought each other for better ranking. We couldn't defend ourselves against predators, who outweighed, intimidated, and overpowered us. It was easier for us to fight amongst ourselves. We thought we could elevate our own status by keeping the other's dignity stunted. But in the end, we were all like rats, exposed and scurrying for cover.

I'm not sure if it had anything to do with gender, but it always seemed to be me against the boys. Maybe it was because I was the most stubborn, as I was told on more than one occasion. I fought viciously, and rarely succumbed. The unwritten rule was to get back up and never let them see you cry.

I imagine it was difficult for my parents to watch us become so bitter toward one another. We spent our teenage years chipping away at ties that once bound us together. It's sad to recall, but during that time, I think I hated my brothers.

I guess we were trying to prove something to the world and to ourselves – that we weren't losers.

Perhaps I wouldn't have fought so hard had I known that winning was going to feel this bad.

**Tuesday, March 2, 1993, 10:52 a.m.**

I continue watching Dad from across the table. He's nursing his coffee, and doesn't look up. I'm trying to think of how to respond, to take the edge off our conversation. I want to somehow give him peace.

His words sure have shaken me.

I play for time.

## BROTHER BROKEN

I neglect to drink my brew. I'm insulating the mug with my hands, but the contents grow cold anyway.

I wish Dad had a pet, so I could pretend it needs feeding or maybe the plants need watering.

I stall some more.

I can't simply not speak. But at the moment, I'm struck dumb. If I give myself a chance to recover, it's possible a word will come to mind. I could follow a script from discussions I've been having with myself for years. There were points I tried to make myself believe, like justifying actions with excuses and rationalizing secrecy for the greater good. I'm kidding myself. But perhaps there is something in there to console or help him.

Nothing comes to mind. So instead, I'm not going to think hard. I'll let my heart do the talking. I open my mouth and these words come out: "It wasn't your fault."

### **Letter to God:**

Dear other Dad,

I know everybody ever born is your kid and all, but it seems to me you could have tried harder to be a less absent parent. I think you gave us each a little too much room to freewheel. Some of us aren't cut out to take on the responsibility, and do the right thing with all that freedom. Obviously not everyone got your memo about following the golden rule.

What's up with all the kid-bangers running churches and schools? You think maybe you could have intervened there . . . a bit? Would have been nice and maybe saved some kids a lot of bullshit.

That one guy in particular, he really did a number on my dad – and maybe my brothers, too. He’s dead for sure now, and I hate to imagine him living the dream somewhere in your nice house. It makes me wonder about the fairness of it all. It gets me to thinking – that if this guy is there, way up there, celebrating shit, it should be really easy for me and my family to wriggle our way in. We didn’t do anything remotely close to the bad that dude did.

So, the logic doesn’t compute that you should ever refuse us access.

I’m thinking that everything there will be shiny, mellow, kissy-faced, and blissful. But just so you have a heads-up, I’ll be on the lookout for him. I don’t much care that I should be behaving myself inside your perfect realm . . . I will punch his fucking face in anyway.

luv,

Your other favourite kid (ha!)