

BROTHER BROKEN

A Memoir of Three Brothers and Suicide

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Includes Excerpts from the Journal of

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www.brotherbroken.com

EPIGRAPH

A brave man once requested me
To answer questions that are key
Is it to be or not to be
And I replied, "Oh why ask me?"

Mike Altman and Johnny Mandel

M.A.S.H. theme song:
"Suicide is Painless"

I wanted to use words from the song 'Suicide is Painless' in the title of the book, but it seemed absurd and inappropriate, considering the piece was meant to be the "stupidest song ever written" (Robert Altman).

As M.A.S.H.'s movie director, Robert Altman wanted it sung during the staged funeral of a medic who had faked suicide. The director's son, 14-year-old Mike Altman, wrote the lyrics in under an hour and it became a No. 1 hit in the UK. Music lovers obviously didn't consider it a stupid song.

The lyrics are brilliant, the tune is catchy and when it gets in your head, it won't leave. That's how it's been the whole time writing this book. There is something soothing about the piece and I wanted to mention its significance.

CHAPTER ONE — IMPERVIOUS

I'm not a nice person. If you could read my thoughts, you would know this is true.

On first meeting, I may project the image of a rather pleasant, well-mannered person. Our conversation could revolve around a variety of interesting subjects, none of which reveal anything tangible about me. You would provide most of the dialogue and I would prompt you with lead-ins so you'd think you were controlling the conversation.

I wouldn't interrupt your rambling. As long as you did all the talking, I could avoid sharing.

Without bringing attention to myself, I'd scan the room to avoid eye contact with you and note anything I could use to distract from our discussion. Eventually, the tedium would get to me, and I'd find any excuse to break from the harsh hell called *small talk*.

Please don't take it personally. I treat everyone the same. My family is no exception, and I love them very much. Monopolizing my attention feels like an attempt to invade my isolation. That's something I can't tolerate for very long.

The sound of the phone ringing assaults my calm, its whining screech triggers panic. I get spooked, like a doe startled by a predator's approach. I won't answer anyone

who attempts to reach me this way. I'll assess the message left and consider whether to reply.

A text message is more likely to be acknowledged, but only if a response is necessary.

I don't do social media.

If you ring my doorbell, you'll be left standing outside. I'll ignore the pressure to open the door. Unless you break it down, you won't obtain access to my home . . . or me.

I'll avoid you if there's a chance we'll run into each other.

Grocery stores are especially challenging. It's an art to shop while scanning the aisles to dodge accidental encounters. One advantage to public locations is that no one notices other people's movements unless they are consciously paying attention—which is what I do. My mission is to get the crap I need and get out, unobserved.

Sometimes, hostility builds inside me and I itch to get in someone's face. I look to release some of the agitation I've repressed. I dream of planting a golf club through a windshield—preferably that of a very nice sports car whose driver has perturbed me. It pacifies me to imagine swinging a club and landing it somewhere wicked.

I don't golf, but I could find a golf club . . . if I were to try.

But mostly I brood behind closed doors, and only dream of confrontation.

I know why I wake up most mornings with acrimony in my bones. I have nightmares. Actually I have the same

nightmare, over and over again. It goes something like this.

I'm the lone traveler on a raft that's been set adrift down a slow-moving river. The river is carrying me further from the dock, and it's the only dock in the world. I see silhouettes of three boys – only sometimes, they are men. The trio are standing near the edge of the dock. I recognize them.

“Hey, can you throw me a rope?”

They ignore me.

I call out: “I'm sorry, I'll change!”

They look at me with disdain, and show their backs to me.

I begin to panic as the river's flow quickens, moving me fast away from the dock. The man-boys walk away together, paying no mind to my distress. They are the only ones able to save me from being swept out to open sea. Instead, they abandon me.

The dream ends, and I learn why I can't redeem myself. It's because I've caused them pain. I've been a bad sister, and they're done with me.

I'm done with me. I can't seem to fix me.

Want some advice? Stay away from me – protect yourself.

Here's a reminder: I am not a nice person.

Just so you know, I wasn't always like this.

CHAPTER TWO — THE DUCK HUNTER

It was summertime. I was barefoot and trailing after John, though I didn't always manage to keep up with him. He was, after all, my big brother, older by two years. I selected him to be my guardian, whether he liked it or not—and only because I didn't want to be left behind, especially by him.

John could venture farther than I was allowed. When he was off somewhere beyond where I was permitted to roam, I would be stuck at home with my little brother Mitch, whose babyish interests provided me little intellectual stimulation.

John was worldly. He had been exposed to ways far beyond the one-block radius of my confinement. I craved his independence, and I needed to tap into his vast experience. He held the secret to living freely, outside the perpetual scrutiny of parents.

At five years old, he had already managed to establish a wide network of social contacts who depended on him to drop by for regular visits. Granted, most were senior citizens. They were wrapped around his little finger. His intensely inquisitive eyes drew people in, and women envied the abundant curls of his baby-soft hair. He carried charm in his back pocket, and doled it out

generously. He knew whose allegiances he could secure, and he had it pegged where to score the best treats.

John had all the companionship he could want. Perhaps he thought being shadowed by a little sister might cramp his style. Then, one day, for no particular reason, I became John's ally, which meant my role was his sometimes-partner-in-crime, the easy target of his pranks, and his potential scapegoat, lookout person, and holder of the bag.

Eventually, Mom relaxed the range of my boundaries, and I was finally permitted to tag along with John when he ventured about town. I was pumped to keep up with him, step for step. His route was tried, tested, and true, and it encompassed the village's entire six blocks.

At any given time, the population of our village never exceeded one hundred. It occupies a very small piece of ground in Northwestern Saskatchewan. The community sits on the edge of northern boreal forest. Farming is the area's main industry. Our village borrows its name from the Cree language. The word is *Makwa*, which translates to "loon." Most would agree that the name Makwa holds a nicer flavour than its English counterpart, especially since "loon" holds two meanings. One is an aquatic bird that frequents the nearby lakes. The other is a term describing a state of mind, inferring insanity. Strange things can happen in Makwa, so in either sense the name fits the village. For what it's worth, Makwa exists on the opposite side of the bush-line from normal. Being normal is boring, and Makwa was anything but boring.

If it truly takes a village to raise a child, we were in the perfect setting. There was a shared intimacy, and people respected each other's space – usually. As a rule, people looked out for one another, and my parents had no need to fuss over our whereabouts every waking moment.

John could be gone for an entire afternoon. Sometimes, he didn't show up for mealtime, which initiated *the search*.

“Go find Johnny.”

Within fifteen minutes, because our village was small and John's habits were predictable, someone would locate him.

“He's having supper with Mrs. McGuiness.”

It wasn't uncommon for Mrs. McGuiness to feed the strays who appeared at her doorstep. She was an elderly widow who lived by herself and looked forward to company. She welcomed him into her household: “Come in, Johnny.”

He was comfortable with her, and made himself at home at her table. She was genuinely happy to see him, and lavished him with good eats. John was the welcome visitor who saved Mrs. McGuiness from another evening dining alone, though his showing up at her place on that *particular* night may have had something to do with it being liver night at our house.

Dad was a WWII vet. He had served in the Royal Canadian Navy. After the war, he pedalled a bicycle four hundred miles north of his parents' home in

Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan. He bought land and started a farm.

Dad caught the eye of my mom with his drop-dead good looks. She was the cute little farm girl whose family lived nearby. She stole his heart, and they married in 1949.

Marguerite and Jean were their names, but most people called them Margaret and John, the Anglicized version of their French names. They were French-Canadian Catholics, expected to populate with more French Catholics, so they started *une famille*.

Their first-born was my sister, Pauly. After Pauly came Rod, Denis, John, me, Mitch, and Gus. Two parents, seven kids. My family calls me “Céc,” which sounds like “pace,” not “peace.”

My brother John was born in January 1957. Within a few months of his birth, Mom and Dad had worked up a worry—there was something wrong. John wasn’t progressing the way they thought he should. It was somewhat obvious, but not drastically apparent. My parents needed reassurance. Instead, doctors validated their concerns.

The fix was surgery to repair kidney blockages. Mom and Dad took him to a hospital hundreds of miles from home. John’s stay amounted to weeks of stress. His tiny body bore scars like railroad tracks on each side of his little torso. I imagine a 1950s operating room scenario—a surgeon with a cigarette dangling out one side of his mouth while manipulating tiny organs, and a nurse offering assistance or an ashtray.

Maybe surgical practices weren't quite so scary. John recuperated, even though the recovery room was a grim place to occupy. Patients weren't comforted with physical touch. They were mostly left on their own, laid out on hospital beds, receiving occasional care and attention from a nurse. There was no warmth of human contact, so John rocked himself to sleep bruising his little temple against the unforgiving rungs of the hospital crib. That was how Mom found him when it came time to bring him home.

I wonder how he reacted to being held lovingly during the five-hour trip home. Did Mom's caring embrace provide comfort, or was it a strange unrecognizable sensation of closeness, warmth, and containment? Did Dad's tenderness affirm an immediate sense of belonging and security, or did it take a while for John to get accustomed to it? Did he relish the attention his older siblings gave him, or did he take it all in stride? However it played out, he quickly became a favourite in the family.

John may have been a little slow out the gate, but once he launched, he was revved to full throttle. There was no stopping John from plucking the best out of every moment. His little legs would take him any direction his curiosity pointed.

Ma famille lived on a farm until 1958, which was slightly before my time. Dad decided to move off the farm and into town for his kids to have more advantages. He kept on farming, though he had to commute an extra eight miles every day.

The modified granary that served as my parents' first home had become inadequate to meet the needs of a growing family. There were limitations on how much Dad could adapt a single-room dwelling to accommodate six individuals. It was a constant effort for Mom to keep babies and toddlers away from the woodstove used for heating and cooking.

Every crack and gap of the poorly erected structure extended an invitation for cold to enter. During winter, frost formed like crystal gauze growing up the walls. Beds were situated along the perimeter of the room, and frost fused with almost anything it touched. My parents spent many mornings peeling frozen blanket fringe from the wall.

A suitable home for the right price became available in town, so my parents loaded up the truck and moved. Our new home had been used as a rooming house. It was built during the first decade of the twentieth century. By the time my family acquired it, the house was run down—but still a marked improvement from the granary. The main floor had a lobby, an eating area, a kitchen, and living quarters. Guest rooms and primitive bathroom facilities were on the top floor.

Along with its many worthy features, the house had issues. The space was larger than my parents' previous home, meaning it required more wood and coal for heat. Dad explored other heating options, and before long, he had a forced-air furnace installed in the cellar. It burned fuel oil. Floor ducts were piped to the furnace, a thermostat was attached, and heat was dispensed with

the flick of a switch. Only my parents could fully appreciate the value of an uncomplicated heat source. The distribution range was limited to the main floor, though, due to the furnace's restricted capacity and Dad's determination to curtail heating costs.

The lobby served as a telephone office. Before my parents bought the place, it had provided phone service to the entire village. By obtaining the home, my family also acquired a home business. Mom became the new telephone operator for the village. Actually, we all became telephone operators as soon as we were mature enough to reach the switchboard, operate the hand-crank, and follow simple instructions.

Mom put us through the training and showed us how to facilitate a call. We started with a clear, concise inquiry: "Number, please?" Meaning, *to whom do you wish to place the call?* When the caller provided the info, we jammed a phone plug into the proper jack and rang up the number. We had to spin the hand crank to trigger the buzzer on the receiver's end and wait for a response. When someone answered, we flicked a switch and freed the call so they could have their little chat. By the age of five, John and I were old hacks at the job.