

# CHAPTER ONE

## Broken Up and Upside Down

In the early 1950s, Chaparral Bowman<sup>1</sup> ran away from the Saint John, New Brunswick, Good Shepherd Reformatory and Industrial Refuge Laundry. Her escape is a fitting entry point into her story because it marks a critical shift in her life, crystallized in her memory as an intensely frightening and emotional experience. Her emotions were amplified by an anxiety about the unknown world that she was escaping into and by the enormity of the rules that she was breaching in her escape. Chaparral climbed through an unbarred second-story window, crossed the reformatory's internal yard, and scaled a beam that supported the high fence enclosing the institution. After edging her way through a tangle of barbed wire at the top of the fence, she was shocked to find that there was no similar beam supporting the opposite side of the fence. However, Chaparral decided to jump down what she figured

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1 In this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, all quotations attributed to Chaparral Bowman (nee Georgina Williams) are taken from a series of interviews between Chaparral and Rie Croll, which took place between 2009 and 2013. Georgina Williams is Chaparral's legal name, but she preferred Chaparral, and was called Chaparral by her friends. The story of her name change follows.

was the ten-foot height of the fence. She said she could not remember having seen the outside of the reformatory's fence prior to that moment.

Chaparral was born in 1934 to Delcina, then thirteen and pregnant from a rape. Her parents had apparently sent her to the reformatory upon the advice of a priest. This detail in Delcina's story was significant to Chaparral because it was evidence that her mother "wasn't put there by law." Her mother, she repeatedly told me, had committed no crime. And yet, after Delcina delivered Chaparral, she remained confined in the laundry for years, until she was no longer able to work. Chaparral too was detained there, for the first eighteen years of her life.

Like other Roman Catholic laundries, the Saint John Good Shepherd reformatory had been established as a mission "for the purpose of reforming women and girls who have lapsed from virtue" (Fenety 1895, 406). Yet, behind this mission was a thriving and lucrative laundry business, so successful that it posed a threat to similar Saint John businesses. In fact, as early as April 1896, competing business owners in the city were aggravated because, according to a report in the *Saint John Daily Sun*, the Good Shepherd's "steam laundry ... employed convict labor." In speaking about this on behalf of other "laundrymen" in the city, Mr. Ungar said that the labour was supplied by "convicts sent there by magistrates. A magistrate can send any Catholic girl there instead of to jail. The Sisters get three years' work out of her for nothing." The "girls sent to such places," added Ungar, "were rarely reformed" (*Saint John Daily Sun* 1896). Ungar maintained that the Good Shepherd business was thriving because its working conditions were exploitative:

Any girl could be sent to the convent from any part of the province, either by her father or guardian if he found he could not control her. Then the sisters had the benefit of her labour. They did laundry work so cheap that their starting up had interfered, to a considerable extent, with the other laundries.

He claimed that the laundry had an unfair advantage by not paying taxes, even water taxes, and that he could take the girls at the Good Shepherd reformatory, provide them with better conditions, and still provide laundry services at cheaper rates. Chaparral's escape came more than fifty years after these criticisms were publicly lobbed at the reformatory.

Once free, Chaparral felt a sense of panic that would persist for years. She later understood this reaction to be rooted in "not knowing a thing and pretending to be normal." For she quickly realized that she was operating at a huge deficit regarding the "rules" of the society around her and assumed that everyone she encountered could see this. She felt that she wore the disgrace of the reformatory all over her. She had always been told how and when to sit, stand, and speak and had rarely made her own decisions. She had been provided with few skills for coping in a non-institutionalized environment and, as a result, the outside world was frequently a frightening and chaotic place. "At least in there," Chaparral said, "I knew what to expect, bad or not."

After her escape, Chaparral would sometimes creep back at night and "sit with a bottle of booze" in the dark outside the reformatory. Her Christmastime experience of doing this was a particularly strong memory; she recalled looking through the windows "at the lights and the nighttime rituals" of the nuns and inmates within. Those moments were frightening because, if she got caught, she might be re-incarcerated forever. And yet, the institutional routines were almost soothing to revisit because, given her childhood spent in captivity, they represented all that she had known. Despite the loneliness and dislocation that came with life on the outside, the allure of habitual routine did not entice her to return to captivity. However, for years, she experienced a profound sense of being overwhelmed by the chaos of society outside the institution.

As a young adult, Chaparral needed to develop ethics for situations she had never seen modelled. She was forced to steal food from a local market in her first weeks living on the streets in order to survive. She took vegetables mostly, convincing herself that, because they were "of the land," they did not really belong to anyone. She drew the line at taking meat because

she felt that it would be stealing directly from a farmer. Rationalizations of this kind typify Chaparral's ethics as she tried to survive in a foreign social world, largely unprepared for its rules and habits.

Living on the streets of Saint John, Chaparral found refuge in a new friend who helped her find her first job and taught her some necessary life skills, such as how to cash a cheque. This young woman lived at what Chaparral described as a "whorehouse," where Chaparral also soon came to live. The matron and her workers' protective and "family-like" environment warmly embraced Chaparral, temporarily filling some of the void she felt. It was not long before she took up prostitution, which raised further ethical challenges. For example, while she was still eighteen, one of her regular customers was a police officer who was married with children. His illegal and extramarital sex with her produced a moral conflict that she begrudgingly lived with at the time, reminding her in some ways of earlier abuses by priests and nuns. Although as a child she had confused abuse with much-needed affection, as an adult she had come to regard each of these incidents as damaging and confusing violations by trusted authority figures. Abuse and neglect contributed to a storehouse of cynicism and hurt, which for decades she could only express as anger.

In the years directly following her escape from the reformatory, there was no way for Chaparral to understand or mitigate the harms of institutionalization. Nor did she have the time or the capacity to do so. What she needed foremost was to concentrate on her survival, which meant quickly absorbing the social rules she needed in order to pass as "normal." Even still, she experienced a chronic sense of incompetence. Chaparral described a time shortly after she had made her way to Toronto when the mere act of crossing busy University Boulevard was an overwhelming task. In her days in the laundry she had always been forced to walk in lines of inmates, and stepping out of those lines meant punishment. Following institutionalization, even the thought of stepping out of line, let alone "going in her own direction"—such as crossing a street alone—proved remarkably stressful.

Based on her Good Shepherd experience, Chaparral devised a way to

approach unnerving urban intersections. She would wait for groups of pedestrians to gather and then cross the street with them, even if they were moving in a direction that initially took her out of her way. She did not feel “worth enough to have traffic stop for [her] alone,” and so this approach helped her to maintain a semblance of normalcy and keep anxiety at bay. When she finally did cross by herself, “right across the whole boulevard without stopping,” she experienced such a feeling of elation she thought passersby could read the triumph on her face.

Chaparral attributed her capacity to endure to what she called a surviving spirit, which she credits to her ancestry. “My ancestors,” she told me, “were First Nations survivors, *big time*.” Chaparral knew little of her family, except that they were of Indigenous descent and had lived on a reserve on the outskirts of Fredericton before moving to Saint John.<sup>2</sup> Chaparral’s grandmother told her that her grandfather did not want Delcina around during her pregnancy because her presence would serve as a reminder that white men had raped her. He feared, too, that her child would look white. In desperation, Chaparral’s grandparents took their daughter to the local priest, who advised them to put her in the Good Shepherd reformatory. After Delcina gave birth, he reassured them, the nuns would find the baby a home and their daughter would be returned to them. Chaparral’s mother never did return home. Delcina was exploited as a labourer until she was no longer useful to the nuns and a home was never found for her daughter. The nuns misinterpreted

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2 In our earliest conversations, Chaparral told me that she was unsure about the specifics of her Indigenous ancestry beyond her family’s migration from a reserve near Fredericton to Saint John, New Brunswick. This location could imply Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) heritage but she variously referred to herself as Mi’kmaq and Métis. Joan Sangster’s 2001 study of female delinquency in Canada from the 1920s to the 1960s provides an important consideration for reading Chaparral’s story. As a female of Indigenous descent born into a Canadian Good Shepherd reformatory, Chaparral was, in a sense, doubly marked. This reflection aligns itself with Sangster’s observation concerning the treatment of various categories of females who were said to have violated sexual norms. Prostitutes and Indigenous women, says Sangster, were seen as threats to the nation, whereas other sexually delinquent girls were viewed as redeemable (198).

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Delcina's lack of English proficiency and her trauma from her beating and rape as intellectual disability. Chaparral said, "they got this idea that she was retarded; that the men beat her so bad they made her retarded." Chaparral's grandmother did not question this interpretation. "Back then," said Chaparral, "you believed what people in authority told you."

As a child, Chaparral worked alongside Delcina in the laundry and learned she was her mother only when Chaparral was a young teen. Before this discovery, Chaparral sometimes joined the other inmates who, steered by the nuns, cruelly derided and abused Delcina, who was punched and hit and ridiculed regularly. In the laundry, pregnant unmarried girls "were the scum of the earth," said Chaparral, and "an Aboriginal girl was even more so." While Chaparral's small role in Delcina's abuse ceased with the discovery that Delcina was her mother, it nonetheless created lifelong feelings of guilt and remorse for her. Chaparral also deeply regretted that she never grew to love her mother:

Years later they said they knew that my mother had syphilis; they knew she was a diabetic, and they let it go on until her death. And that is a pain that I cannot express because I had no love for my mother, I mean, I still don't. I don't understand love between people. I have a lot of friends and I really like them but I've had some who have died and I don't feel what I see other people feeling or showing. So, I don't have that, whatever "that" is.

So, while Delcina and Chaparral had a relationship of sorts, it was distorted by institutionalization, Delcina's progressive disease, and the nuns' demonstrated contempt for Delcina. Without regard for her condition and lack of skills, Delcina was released from the Good Shepherd reformatory and put out on the streets, where she died in 1968.

When Chaparral was almost eight years old, her work assignment shifted from general cleaning to the laundry. It was there, she remembered,

that she stole an article of clothing, Mrs. R's nightgown that had been sent in from the community to be laundered. "There was this pink nightgown," she said, "that had lace on the top and it smelled like what I thought a mother would smell like. And I stole it. I put it underneath my uniform, under my apron." The theft left Chaparral feeling sick with fear, since such an offence was immense by the nuns' standards and the consequences for her, should she be found out, would be likewise:

And while I was in the bathroom I was physically sick because I knew I would be beat within an inch of my life for stealing something like that and then I went to the nun and I said, "Mother I am really sick" and she looked at my face and I guess it looked ... I looked so scared that she told me to go up to the infirmary and to go to bed. So, I went straight to bed and I took that nightdress out and I put it under my mattress. And I was a bed wetter and the mattresses were straw, so it wasn't long before that nightdress just smelled to high heaven. And I would take it out at night and I would hug that nightdress, and it became ... it wasn't Mrs. R's nightdress anymore, it became my mother's. It was my mother's nightgown.

This theft was an emotionally complicated act. Later, as an adult, its significance continued to resonate with Chaparral; she compassionately understood its meaning and what her child-self needed and lacked.

### The Order of the Day

Each day in the Good Shepherd reformatory, the tolling of bells marked prayers and silences tied to the nuns' religious rituals. Inmates too operated under this regimentation, thereby ensuring around-the-clock order. This regimen shaped Chaparral's childhood and rendered her inflexible to change

when, in the outside environment, she began to encounter unpredictability. The nuns regulated each day to the minute:

Quarter to six the bells would ring. The nun would put the lights on and she would start with “In the name of the Father,” and everybody would get out of bed, on the floor beside our bed, and we said about ten minutes of prayers. And then you lined up for the bathroom. And you had to line up in your rows, your bed rows. Beside your bed was a basin, and a bar of soap and your towel and you went over to the sinks and you poured water into your basin and brought it back to your stand and washed your face and whatever. And you went and emptied the basin and you emptied your basin in the same order as your bed rows.

Following this, inmates would make their beds and go downstairs to Mass. Chaparral explained that, once inside the chapel, the girls would check the altar for the number of candles: two candles signified a Low Mass and that meant that breakfast would be in half an hour; three meant High Mass and a one-hour wait until they ate. Following chapel, the girls filed in a line downstairs to breakfast.

The formula of daily life under the Good Shepherds rarely changed. Uniformity and conformity were rigidly imposed upon all aspects of everyday life. Inmates had no freedom to wander or even to step out of line. Meals were served at precisely the same time, most often with the same food, and inmates were always seated next to the same person. Choice in anything was rare, and there was little variety, even in terms of whom you could speak with. Chaparral remembered that when seated at the long dark brown refectory tables, “you couldn’t talk to the people on either side or holler down the table, you just spoke to the one directly opposite you.” An older inmate-monitor supervised conversation. More than anything else, they were not allowed to speak of things outside the reformatory’s walls.