

Excerpt

The Box House

As Told by Cassie to Brigid

By

Brigid Marlin

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This book is based on a story told to the author by a third party. Names and some identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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Dedication

“Cassie” would like to dedicate this book to her lovely children and adorable grandchildren and thank them all because “if it wasn’t for them I wouldn’t be the person I am today.”

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Preface

The Box House is a story told to me by the person I've named "Cassie", the central character in this book. This story is based on the "real" Cassie's life, but I have changed the names of places and of people in order to protect their privacy.

Although I first met "Cassie" when she was a child, I only heard the story over the years when she had grown up. As a child she didn't want to upset me, so protected me from hearing about her terrible life. Finally, when she was able to speak about her childhood, I wrote it down as she told me, in her own words.

Prologue

The Invasion

The year was 1966 in an English town called Westfield. We were a young couple with three small boys and a cat. In my dreams I wanted to be a famous artist, but I was actually a typical Catholic suburban wife and mother.

Every Sunday we walked to Church, where we were friends with the priest, Father Foster. One Sunday, just as Father Foster was starting his sermon, the Church door banged open. A noisy group of children burst in. They looked like something from Oxfam posters: dirty, ragged, and rather smelly.

These children had no idea how to behave in Church. They stormed up to the altar and began bickering. The poor priest struggled to give his sermon.

I looked around, outraged. Why didn't they do something to control these ragamuffins? They shouldn't allow this to happen.

Looking around desperately, I realised I was the nearest adult. I shrank back into my pew. I didn't want to get involved. I wasn't good with children, apart from my own boys.

There was a little girl of about eight, with a thin dirty face and matted hair, bending over a toddler who had an obviously heavy cold. Two boys of about five and six were hitting each other and shouting.

The toddler escaped and headed for the pulpit. The priest hesitated in his sermon and appealed to me with his eyes. Still I hung back.

I sent up a prayer, which was really more like a whine: “Dear God, do I have to help?”

Back came the answer. “No, you don’t *have* to help, but you will gain a great deal if you do.”

I looked up again. The girl with the matted hair had rushed after the baby girl, who was closely followed by her two brothers. They were now running round and round the pulpit. I jumped up and gathered them into our pew.

I sat the baby girl with the dripping nose on my lap, instantly regretting my mistake - it wasn’t only her nose that was dripping.

But disgust soon turned to pity. Her legs were icy from the wet and cold.

Meanwhile, the boys were pushing and hitting each other. Their older sister tried to control them. I put her on my other side, and handed the two boys some picture books which I had brought for my children. My own three boys, confronted by these ragamuffins, had become unnaturally good.

Giving the toddler on my lap a key ring to play with, I turned at last to the older girl beside me, still sitting with shoulders hunched and head bent.

“What’s your name?” I whispered.

She looked up with startled grey eyes and whispered, “Cassie”.

Something in her pinched little face went to my heart. It was as if I saw myself as a little girl. I wanted to reach out to her, but still a cautious voice inside warned me away from getting involved.

The boys on the other side were getting restless. They had lost interest in the books.

On a sudden inspiration I dived round the child on my lap and reached for my handbag, pulling out a notebook and pen. I began to sketch the little boys. They stopped wriggling and watched in fascination as I drew. Then, with great excitement, they recognised themselves. Their grubby faces beamed.

“Draw a car”, they said. “Draw a train.”

“I’ll do it if you will keep quiet now,” I said. “It’s time to pray.”

After some persuasion they all knelt down and were moderately quiet during the Communion service.

When Mass was finally over, I watched them go with relief. I was exhausted and my damp skirt stank.

As they left, the thought crossed my mind that perhaps I should do something, notify some authority about them. But I couldn’t help thinking: this is *England*. And Westfield was a prosperous town; surely no child could starve here. Welfare workers were, no doubt, already involved.

All week Cassie’s pinched face haunted me. I dreaded meeting the children again on the next Sunday, but I brought some ammunition in case they turned up.

To my surprise, I felt a little disappointed when they did not appear. I had come with crayons, paper and pencils and a plastic tablecloth.

Then, in the middle of the sermon, I heard a ruckus at the back of the Church, and my heart sank. Storming up the aisle came Cassie, leading the children. Their beaming grins were touching. The toddler held up her dirty little arms and I spread the plastic tablecloth and put her on my lap. The boys surged past and spread themselves on the pew, to the disgust of my sons, who had to make way for them. I handed out paper and crayons and they happily coloured my drawings.

Then I turned to Cassie, who was hunched on the other side. I put an arm around her thin shoulders. She flinched at first – as if expecting a blow – and her large eyes gazed into mine. All my self-protection evaporated.

“Would you like me to teach you about the Bible, Cassie?” I asked. “Then you could belong to this Church?”

She gulped and nodded, and all through the service she leaned against me in silence.

This time, when the children had gone I spoke to Father Foster, and asked him if there was somewhere near the Church I could teach the children something about religion. He offered a room in the Church Hall below. When they turned up again next Sunday after Mass I led them into the room and started my private Sunday School.

It was hard going at first, because the children knew almost nothing. But I persisted, telling them about a man called Jesus, who would always love them. I brought a picture, which Cassie loved, showing Jesus with his arms around a group of children. There was one little girl in blue hanging back shyly, and Cassie seemed to like her best.

One Sunday, Cassie came in to Church alone. When I asked where the others were, she looked pale and tearful, and said her Mum had taken the whole family to visit their Gran.

“But why didn’t you go?” I asked.

“Mum said I weren’t part of the family, and she didn’t want me.”

I was furious. “Well, I want you,” I said. “You’re coming home to lunch with us.” She seemed very nervous, but she came with me and seemed to enjoy herself – once she had got over her fear.

On the next Sunday the family was there again, with Cassie pushing a large pram with a baby which she parked in the aisle for most of the service.

Afterwards, in the hall, as it was getting near Christmas, I decided to tell the children the Christmas story, about when Jesus was born. I drew pictures of the manger and the angels, and then told them about the shepherds arriving, and what a surprise that must have been for Mary.

“Imagine if your Mother had had a baby, and some strange shepherds came to honour him!” I said enthusiastically.

Cassie thought it over. “She’d tell them to fuck off.”

One Sunday, instead of the four children, there were only the two little boys at Church. Their names were Davey and Bobby.

When I took them to the Church Hall for their lessons, I asked where Cassie was.

“She’s in a Home, in’t she?” said Bobby.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She bin taken in Care, with the Welfare, you know,” said Dave.

I felt concerned for Cassie. What had happened to her? The boys didn’t seem able to explain. I asked them what was their last name. Drover, they said. Davey could even spell it for me.

I couldn’t stop worrying about little Cassie. What was happening to her? Part of me wanted to take her home and look after her, but I knew my husband wouldn’t agree. We weren’t rich; we couldn’t just take on an extra child. We also had a problem with our eldest son, who was epileptic and

subject to serious fits. Yet I wanted to do something. I knew I would never be at peace until I found out whether Cassie was all right or not.

Then I remembered I had Cassie's last name. I could ring the Social Services.

Next morning I telephoned and was transferred to the right department. When I mentioned the Drover family there was a groan on the other end of the line. I explained that I would like to talk to someone about helping Cassie, and they said they would send someone out to see me.

Mrs. Bateson arrived the following morning. She was an attractive woman in her late thirties, with curly red hair and a lively sense of humour. She was able to tell me a great deal about the Drover family. They were "famous", or rather, notorious, even in a big town the size of Westfield.

"We've had a lot of contradictory reports about that family," she told me. "The mother is very cunning and has been able to hoodwink several inspectors, but of course the reports from school reveal that the children are badly neglected."

"How many children has she got?" I asked.

"Let me see." Mrs. Bateson ran her fingers thoughtfully through her bright curls. "There's Margaret, the oldest. She left home, and has never made contact again. Then there's Rosie, she's fourteen, she's left school early. Then Mike, thirteen, he's already been in trouble with the police, I think he'll end up in Borstal. There was a boy next, Martin, but he died. Then there's Cassie, eight, who's now in Care. Then there's Ellie, seven, Davey, six, Bobby, five, and Aggie, who is three. She has speech difficulties and a kidney problem." I certainly knew about the kidney problem.

“Then there’s Jimmy, the new baby. He’s only one, so he doesn’t have a Care officer yet. That’s nine living children, but several others have died in infancy besides Martin.”

I shuddered. “Why does she...?”

“You may well ask. But you have to look at it from her point of view. While she’s having the baby, she’s the centre of attention. She’s looked after in hospital. Maybe someone sends her flowers or chocolates. At any rate, she feels important.”

“But the pain of giving birth?”

“She seems to have her babies without too much pain. And she seems to love babies, in fact. The trouble is that she loses all interest in them once they start growing up. Even there she makes distinctions. She prefers the boys. They’re not treated too badly, and she has a fancy for the blonde girl, Ellie, because she’s pretty. The other girls are worse off, and Cassie is treated worst of all. She seems to vent all her hate on Cassie. She’s the runt of the litter, as it were.”

“This is awful! Poor Cassie!”

“She has been treated desperately badly. The others at least sleep in beds. Cassie is made to sleep in newspapers on the floor. She’s beaten, and her mother has stubbed her cigarettes out on her.”

I was furious that she could sit there calmly telling me this. “Why hasn’t something been done earlier? Why hasn’t she been taken away before?”

“It’s not as simple as that. The mother won’t agree to any adoption of her children, not out of any great mother-love, but because then she will lose the child’s family allowance. And then, when Cassie is in a Care home, she keeps running back home.”

“Back to that?”

“It does seem strange, but it is home to Cassie. First of all, she has the love of her brothers and sisters. She’s been like a mother to the younger ones, because she was kept home from school to look after them. Then, her father lives in the neighbourhood and she sees him fairly often. Also, her mother isn’t *consistently* cruel, at least not only to her. Recently the oldest boy, Mike, has been the scapegoat because of being in trouble with the police, so Cassie has got off more lightly.”

“Why is she in Care now, then?”

“Because she isn’t getting any schooling. She’s too useful looking after her younger siblings, so her mother won’t send her to school. The only way she will ever get an education is to be in Care.”

“Can’t her father do something for her?”

“He seems to be an ineffectual man. He’s often out of work, and he lives with brother who dominates him.”

“Can I visit her in Care?” I asked. “I want to help Cassie, but I’m afraid of doing the wrong thing. I see that it’s a tricky situation. A part of me wants to scoop her up and take her home and look after her, but that isn’t possible.”

“No”, agreed Mrs. Bateson. “It’s not”.

“Then how can I help her? Can you tell me the best way?”

Mrs. Bateson looked at me appraisingly. “I’m glad you want to help, but you mustn’t go into it with any illusions. Cassie may have picked up some bad habits. That family think nothing of lying or stealing. They are very good at exploiting people if they see an opening.

“If you really want to help Cassie you must think everything through. It would have to be a real commitment. The worst thing you could do is come rushing in with presents and promises and then tire of the whole thing and drop her.

She's had enough disappointments in her life already. Decide how often you want to see her, even if it's only once a year. Once you have given her expectations, you must never let her down."

I sobered up. I saw then that my concern for Cassie must involve me in a commitment for life. I hesitated. This would be too great a responsibility.

But I saw Cassie's hungry little face before me. I could manage something. I could visit her once a month.

I looked up at Mrs. Bateson, who had been watching me, and nodded.

"Yes, I'll visit her regularly once a month. I can manage that."

For the first time she gave me a warm smile. "I'm so glad!"

"It seems so little. Hardly a drop in the bucket."

"On the contrary. If you can be a steady influence in Cassie's life, this will be more of a support to her than you can imagine. She lives in a desperately insecure world."

I began to feel awed by the responsibility. "Is there anything I should be careful of saying to her?"

"Yes. Don't speak against her mother. She may not be a good mother, but Cassie still needs her. Don't try to take the place of her mother, either. Also, it might help Cassie if you sometimes let her know that you have problems, too. It will help her to accept her own."

Chapter One

Cassie's Story

The worst day of my life was the day Dad left home. Dad did a lot of protecting of me. He could usually get Mum to stop beating me. He'd say, "Why are you hitting her again?" and Mum would say, "She's getting on my bloody nerves" or "She's in my bloody way," but then she'd usually stop.

That morning, we all woke early because Mum and Dad was having a row in the next room. Dad came into the bedroom where all of us girls was sleeping. The others was in the big double bed. Mum made me sleep on the floor on newspapers, but every night Dad would sneak in and put his big coat over me so I'd be warm, and every morning he came in early to take it off, so Mum never knew.

When he saw I was awake he said, very sad, "I'll have to go, Cass. She's got a boyfriend moving in."

I already knew it was going to happen because of the rows before, but I lay shivering on the newspapers till I remembered my plan.

Rosie, my big sister, was shouting at Aggie the same as she did every morning.

"Oh bloody hell, Aggie! You've wet us all in the bed again! You're disgusting! I'm fed up with this! Here, Ellie, you sort the bed out, I'm off downstairs."

Rosie took her clothes down with her. She kept her clothes separate from ours, which was all jumbled up in a pile in the

corner. Rosie's was kept hanging on the nails which held up the curtain by the window. It was the only curtain in the house. It was torn, but it stopped people looking in. Mum didn't mind, but Rosie did.

Davey and Bobby was fighting in the other room where they slept with my big brother Mike. Ellie and me took no notice of them. We had enough to do looking after the little 'uns. The baby was crying now so I took him and Ellie took Aggie. We got them cleaned and found some clothes for them and I made the baby a bottle.

The others had eaten the bread that Mum had left out. She never left enough in any rate, so the first ones down always got it. We ate spoonfuls of the baby's powdered milk, which wasn't bad when there was any sugar to go with it. Ellie said, "It's your turn to wear the shoes and go to school." But I said, "You can go today instead of me," because I was thinking of my plan.

Ellie was pleased, so she washed the sheets quickly, though it was hard to get them clean in the cold water. Mum never let us have any hot. When she hung them out of the window she went off.

Mum came down all dressed up. She could look very smart. Because of my plan I was glad it was Monday, which was Family Allowance day. She was always out a long time on Mondays. I knew she'd get the money and go to Oxfam or any one of them second-hand places, and then she'd try on clothes for herself and spend a long time arguing and trying to get things cheaper. Then she'd go to a restaurant and have a sit-down dinner. They all knew her in them places and she'd do a lot of chatting with her friends. She would be away for at least three hours.

I put Aggie to sleep on the sofa with a plastic bag under her, and I put the baby to bed again, and then I went up to Dad,

who was getting his few things together. He never had a lot to get together.

I said, "Dad, I'm going to make you breakfast."

He said, "Where are you going to get the food? You know she locks it all away."

"Wait a minute!" I said, and I ran to the end of the garden where I'd hidden a box under a pile of rubbish. I brought it in and laid out all the food I'd saved on the table. There was three pieces of bacon, two slices of bread, two eggs, a tin of tomatoes and half a tin of baked beans. I'd meant there to be a whole tin, but last night I'd been too hungry.

I was determined that Dad was going to have a feast before he left. Dad stared at all the food as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Where did you get it all?" I didn't answer at first, but he kept asking.

"The night before last, Mike and I was in the kitchen when you all was asleep, and Mike said, 'I'm fed up of being hungry!' and he broke the lock on the cupboard under the stairs where she keeps all the food.

"She'll kill you for this!" I said, but I started collecting some things too.

"No, she won't," Mike said, and he broke the outside lock. "I'll tell her burglars did it."

"The next morning Mum believed him. She should have guessed, though, because Prince didn't bark, like he would have done at burglars."

"So that's why she's been on about burglars!" said Dad, and he had a good laugh.

"I'm going to cook it for you now," I said.

“How can you do that?” said Dad. “You know she’s taken all the knobs off the stove.”

“With the pliers in your pocket,” I said, and he laughed again.

“Oh, so you knew about those!” Then he lit the stove and I cooked the meal best I could, but I weren’t a very good cook, being only eight and never having had no practice. The grilled bacon was a bit burnt, the eggs was like bullets, and the fried bread was soggy, but when I laid it all out for Dad he sat down to it with a big smile.

“Is this the last breakfast of the condemned man?” he asked. I had a lump in my throat so I couldn’t say nothing. Then he said, “Get a chair and sit down too, we’re going to share it.”

“No, Dad, I made it for you,” I said. But he said, “If you aren’t eating any, then I’m not having any either.”

I sat down. He fed me bits and to make it like a party told me silly jokes, like “Did you hear about the man who sat around making faces all the time? He worked in a clock factory.”

When we’d finished eating Dad smiled at me and said, “You’re a rotten cook, Cassie, do you know that? But that was the best meal I’ve ever had in my life.”

Then suddenly I asked him something I’d been wanting to know for a long time. “Dad, why don’t Mum love me?”

Then I was sorry I’d asked him, because all the smiling went from his face and he said, “I don’t know Cass. Maybe because you had an older brother, Martin, who died, and she wanted you to be a boy.”

“But Ellie’s a girl, and Mum don’t hate her.”

“I know.” Dad gave me a hug and said, “I think she’s jealous. You’re so loveable and pretty, with your big eyes and

your little button nose.” He gave my nose a little tap with his finger. I was glad to see him smiling again, but I knew what he said weren’t true, because Ellie was much prettier than me and she was Mum’s favourite.

Then Dad got up to get his things and I cleaned away the dishes so Mum wouldn’t know they’d been used. Dad came in to say goodbye and I walked him to the door. He went down in a heap in front of the door and started sobbing. It was terrible to see him cry. Dad never cried. I knelt down beside him and stroked his head and at that moment I hated Mum for what she done to him.

After a while Dad got up and said, “I just hope you’ll be all right, Cass.” Then I knew why he was upset, because he knew he couldn’t protect me no more. He saw that I was worried too, so he tried to smile, and he said, “You’ll be all right, Cass, you’re a survivor. Remember that.”

Then I walked him down the road to his brother Len’s, where he was going to stay. It was only down the road, but Dad would be cut off from us because Len hated kids. We was forbidden to ever come into the house there. We wasn’t even allowed to come beyond the gate.

When we reached the gate, I panicked. “How am I going to get in touch with you, Dad?” He told me I could leave messages for him at work, and we could meet in the alley at the back of the houses. And every night when he went out to walk the dog, he said he would signal with the flashlight on my bedroom window. Three flashes would mean it was him wishing me goodnight.

So we hugged goodbye and I had to go back to the little ’uns.

When Mum came back she had bought a new dress from a shop because her boyfriend was moving in, and more bottles of gin to lock in the cupboard.

At five o'clock, when the others was back from school. there was a knock on the door. "Here I am, Peggy," I heard a man shout.

We was all huddled together in the kitchen watching. When he came in we saw it was Murray. We knew him. He was a big ugly man who used to try to get children to do dirty things with him by giving them sweets. I couldn't believe that he was the man Mum was bringing into the house.

Mum made us go into the front room and then Murray looked us over and said, "I'm living here now and I'm your new Dad. You can call me Dad from now on." Mum thumped me and said, "Are you listening to what he's saying?"

Murray looked at me with his little piggy eyes and said, "Make me a cup of tea."

"Make it yourself," I answered. "You got two arms and legs. And I'm never going to call you Dad. I've got my own Dad down the road."

He got up and kicked the back of my legs till I fell down and then pulled me up by my hair. He started shaking and hitting me. Mum said, "Pack it in, that's enough."

Murray said, "Shut up Peggy, and cook my dinner." But then he let me go.

He seemed to have calmed down, but at bedtime, when I was going to the toilet outside, he followed me and pinned me to the wall, holding me by the throat. He said, "Don't make trouble for me, I can make life very difficult for you."

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Then his hand went up my skirt. I said, "I'll tell Mum!" He just laughed. "She'll blame you," he said, and put his other hand round my mouth so I couldn't scream.

I bit his hand right in the fleshy part between his thumb and fingers. I bit it so hard there was blood. He let go and bashed my head against the wall, hard.

"I've lost interest in you now," he said, as if I was going to feel disappointed!