

# A Matter of Compulsion

*The Story of  
Flory and Armand*



**Juliette Pilon**

Edited by Charmaine Bradley



**A MATTER OF COMPULSION**

*The Story of Flory and Armand*

**JULIETTE PILON**

Edited by Charmaine Bradley

Poorly written  
Horse behind cart  
No fancy words  
Straight from the heart  
No apologies  
Soul won't allow  
Needs a transfusion  
Don't know how

J.P.

This is Juliette's story, told in her own words.  
Some names have been changed.

Juliette was always deeply grateful for the love Flory gave to all her children. She was also truly thankful for the many artistic gifts she inherited from her Papa, Armand.

## FOREWORD

How do I describe growing up with my mother? With something delicious roasting in the oven, a painting-in-progress perched on the back of the washing machine, and the sewing machine whirring away like crazy, times were never dull.

In later years mom gave up the sewing machine to write her story. Whenever I visited her one-bedroom apartment there was still a painting on the go. Now, as well, her manuscript would be spread over her dining room table.

During those times life was a joy for mom. She couldn't wait to rise each morning to begin another busy and fruitful day. The evening was her time to relax, watching her favourite television programmes, a scotch and water by her side.

Editing mom's book has been years in the doing. It was, at first, a daunting task: the handwritten pages had been lovingly worked and reworked, her pencil longhand erased over and over again. Working on the manuscript reintroduced me to the vibrant characters I had heard about from mom and her sisters all my life. As I worked on the book these characters came alive for me again, as I hope they will for you.

I have to thank my daughter Jessica for her many hours of editorial help, as well as her husband Shawn for designing the layout of this book. Especially with new baby Jack in our lives, taking the time to help me is so very much appreciated.

Juliette turned ninety on January 20, 2005. Because her memory has failed her, it saddens me to know that she is no longer aware her labour of love has been published. I believe that in another time and place she will become aware again.

My small contribution to this book is a labour of love for my family, Jamie, Jessica, Shawn, and Jack. But mostly, Mom, it is my labour of love to you.

Charmaine Bradley

## CONTENTS

The Goat With The Crooked Horn	1
Mama's Life	3
Québec	7
Going West	15
Beatrice	19
Reminiscences	27
Jane's Visit, Beatrice's Departure	33
Beautiful Hair	39
Visit to Brownsburg	41
Trapping	47
Willie and the Gun	55
Edmonton	59
Whisky Blanc	67
Moving to Town	71
Boarders	79
Yvonne	83
Napoleon Demarne	89
The Snowmobile	99
Armand's Inventions	107
M. Lecroix	117
M. Chalot	123
Juliette's Headache	127
The Boys	131

The Blind Pig, Rose's Visit	139
St. Jean Baptiste Day	145
Rose's Marriage, Cecile's Absence	151
Picnic and Playhouse	155
Rose's Arrival	163
Flory's Store, Lenny's Hand	169
The Goodbyes	177
Cold Lake	183
The Dance Hall	191
A New Way of Life	197
Living Quarters	205
The Trial	215
Old Man Renard	223
Corsets and Shoes	229
More Troubles	247
Berry Picking	253
The Hospital	263
New Baby, New Scheme	269



## THE GOAT WITH THE CROOKED HORN

“Flory, I am calling you. Do you hear?”

“Yes, Armand. I’m coming.”

Flory pronounced his name *Ahma*, with the accent on the first syllable. That was as close as she could come to the French pronunciation with its silent *d*.

“De mean cow wit de big horn puncture de *bébé* sheep in de belly. His gut are on de groun’. It will not live. I am t’inking I should put it out of misery.”

“Maybe we can save it.”

“I believe you cannot. It is not ver’ pretty to look at.”

The lamb’s bleating and baaing were a heartbreak. Blades of loose grass, weeds, and hay clung to the intestines.

Flory insisted. “Go to the well for water while I get the boiling kettle and disinfectant. I have heavy linen thread and clean bleached flour bags.”

Armand held the lamb while Flory washed the intestines, gently pouring water to remove loose hay and dirt.

“You are not a *docteur*, unless you keep it from me. How you put de gut back? How you know where dey go?”

“We can only do the best we can. If it dies at least we have tried.”

Flory didn’t know how or where to place the intestines, but she said a little prayer. The needle was threaded, she took a long breath and held it deep inside of her.

“Flory, take bigger stitch. You are not making one of your quilt. You are *nerveuse*?”

“No, Armand. Well, just a bit. I am glad it isn’t one of my children.”

“You do a good job. Now I will get a gunny sack. It will keep your flour sack clean. Also, it will serve as a corset.”

The lamb was taken to the sheep shed where it was put in a sheltered corner on a clean bed of hay.

It was a long, restless night waiting for the first stream of light to peek from the edges of the green blind. Not a sound was made as Flory dressed herself. She hurried to the shed, and with a gentle hand stroked the lamb’s head. It opened its eyes and gave a trebbled “baa” of thanks.

“It’s alive, Armand. It’s alive! It opened its eyes and baaed.”

“Do not have high hope. Maybe tomorrow he will not baa. Den you will be baaing.”

## A MATTER OF COMPULSION

“I have a feeling that it will live. I’m going to put milk in one of my bread tins. I’ll set it close. You never know. It may be thirsty.”

\* \* \*

“You will be happy today, I know for sure. Your sheep is standing on his feet. I say you are a good *docteur*.”

“Oh, I hope it’s strong enough. If it falls over it could die.”

\* \* \*

“Come, Flory! Come and see! Your little sheep is walking wit de udder sheep. Gee cripe dat is a miracle, eh?”

“Oh, Armand, it is a miracle! I feel . . . well, I feel it’s the greatest thing I ever did.”

“You do many t’ing dat is great Flory.” He pinched her bottom and said, “Tonight, Flo: watch out below.”

“Not tonight, Armand. We’ll have to keep on having it during the day when Rosie’s in school. I’ve asked you time and again to put a partition in that one long bedroom. Is it too much to ask? Rose is ten years old. Do you think that’s right? And Leonard will soon be ten.”

“I am sure dey sleep wit bot’ eye shut. You worry for not’ing, but if it make you happy, I do it.”

## A MATTER OF COMPULSION

said you were coming home.”

“Gee cripe, what is all de commotion? I tell Maman I come home. Is dere somet’ing wrong?”

Flory sat quietly with a little smile on her face. “Everything is fine, Armand. I only told the children when you would be home.”

“How do you do that Maman? Can you always do it?”

“Not always, but when I do I’m never wrong. It comes to me so strongly. I can feel it through my whole body.”

\* \* \*

Word spread throughout the village. Pilon was going to have his snowmobile ready and on the road Friday after supper. Flory couldn’t understand why he had chosen that time. It would be dark. *Maybe*, she thought, *if he fails, they won’t see the disappointment on his face.*

The snowmobile had been at Joe Beauchamp’s for some time now. Wop May’s propeller would be attached and it would be all shined up and ready to go.

“It’s Friday today, Armand. Are you taking the snowmobile out tonight? Why isn’t it here?”

“I have not change my mind. I am going to pull it here to my house. Dat is where I start to build it an’ dat is where I start from.”

When Armand returned with the snowmobile, Flory asked if he was hungry.

“Look at my snowmobile, Flory. It look good. It have a good line, eh? No, I am not hungry.”

“There are people out there, Armand!”

“What you expect? Dis is a big occasion. It is not everybody dat t’ink to build a snowmobile. Dey t’ink de world end because we have de airplane an’ de automobile? It do not end. It will keep going.”

“Do you feel all right? Are you nervous?”

“I feel good. Don’t worry about me. I have two stiff drink of whisky. Yes, pure wit no water. Dat make you fly an’ dat is what I am going to do.”

“Fly? Is that why you put the propeller on? Oh, Armand, you are a strange man. You seem to have a love for that darned propeller. You even wanted to put a clock in its centre, remember?”

Flory looked out. The sidewalks were lined with people now. *Why shouldn’t I*

## ARMAND'S INVENTIONS

*go out on my own porch if I choose to. I'm not that shy, am I? I know darned well the Roberts and the Benets are watching.*

She could see people with their arms flying in different directions, their heads thrown back in wild laughter. *Dear Lord, don't let him be the laughing stock of the village.*

Armand put on his heavy coat, pulled on his muskrat hat, and tied his long blue scarf around his neck. "I go now. If you can manage to, wish me good luck."

"Oh I do, Armand! I do!"

When Armand pushed the snowmobile to the road and revved the motor until the vibrant echo filled their ears, the crowd cheered and hollered, "Good luck, Pilon!"

Away he flew, his muskrat hat pulled low over his ears, his scarf blowing at a straight angle. Flory spoke out loud. "Let it be right, Lord, so we can hold our heads up high." She stepped out as far as the sidewalk. He was still going strong, then over the hump in the road until he was out of sight. Everyone was running to catch up, thinking he would stop at the hotel. No, Armand decided to drive past the hotel and on to Rochon's corner. He would make a good round turn there and head back to the hotel.

When Armand arrived they were all there waiting, cheering and shouting his name. Beauchamp thought perhaps Armand couldn't shut the motor off and was on his way to Edmonton. Romeo and Leonard were proud. Their friends, the Regimbal and Chavalier boys, had come far from the country to see how fast the snowmobile would go. When it flew past the hotel, Leonard said, "It's the first time the old man forgot to stop there."

*Now, Armand thought, dey will know dat when Pilon say somet'ing he mean it. I do a big happy t'ing tonight.*

\* \* \*

"Sit down, sit down, Pilon. The beer is on us. Now we understand what you talk about. We used to say Pilon has crazy ideas all the time. We did, eh Zanon? But your invention works and it travels fast."

"Yes it works, an' now I know what to do. You have to try it to find out an' tonight I learn dat my snowmobile can be more simple still. Yes, no fancy frill. I am happy tonight and I know dat Flory is also happy. She don't say much about my invention but I know Flory very well."

## A MATTER OF COMPULSION

It was a special night. Everyone was asleep except for Flory. She stayed awake, hoping that Armand would drive the snowmobile home. It was one special night when she hungered to have her man close to her. So many thoughts rushed through her mind. *He drinks, he's lazy, he's cruel, and he's cocky. I keep forgiving him over and over again. I'm putty in his hands. I hate myself for it.* All the hurts whirled round and round in her mind, only to be defeated by an overwhelming surge of love that she could not control. She lay still and sobbed quietly. She thought of his honesty when he told her he had had two stiff drinks without water. *I liked that. I didn't half mind. I'll bet the hotel is doing good business tonight.*

\* \* \*

Napoleon Demarne had a black horse named Pet. He kept her well groomed. Her coat was soft and shiny as satin. He had a black buggy with red and gold scrolls bordering the edges. A scalloped red flannel throw was folded and placed over the back seat where Flory sat. This time she had left Venice at home and taken Juliette. Napoleon had placed a blanket on the floor of the buggy where Juliette and Baby would sit. The only thing of interest the children could see were Pet's huge flanks with her tail swishing up once in a while to pass gas. They giggled down their coat collars. Then Juliette leaned over and whispered loudly, "Baby, you'll think I'm crazy, but I really like that smell, don't you?" She laughed so hard it made both of them stare at Pet's tail, hoping to see it go up again.

Baby had a mop of curly hair like Grandpapa Pilon's. She was tiny, shy, and looked like a sad doll. When she was little, her legs were bowed. Flory wondered if the child had rickets. As she grew her legs grew straight, Baby was M. Demarne's favourite. He never came to the house without bringing her candy drops or gum. Being very shy, she would only peek around the door, but the minute he was out the door she would ask, "Maman, when is Mr. Gum coming back?" Venice had been in school since September. Now Baby was the only one at home.

"Nap, you have no idea how many people turned out to see Armand's first ride in the snowmobile. Why, they were cheering until I couldn't believe it. Oh, I was happy when the cheering started and kept on going, Nap. He had worked on it for so long, but he did have high hopes. He was brave. I wasn't half proud of him."

Nap looked at Flory steadily, with very little expression on his face. She suddenly realized what she had done.

*A Matter of Compulsion* is the true, poignant and often humorous story of a family's struggle to survive in Northern Alberta, Canada during the Depression. Armand, a French-Canadian dreamer and Flory, an English pragmatist, had little in common. Even so, their love endured through the birth of eight children, life in a dance hall, and Armand's growing dependence on alcohol.

Armand was known throughout Cold Lake, Alberta for his remarkable ideas and his gregarious personality. His schemes ran the gamut from opening a speakeasy in his front parlour, to building a dance hall connected to his house. In between, he found time to invent a clothespin, hair tonic, and what may have been the first snowmobile. He regaled his friends at the beer parlour with stories of his latest scheme while Flory was forced to develop her own schemes to support her ever-growing family.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Juliette Florence Pilon was born on January 20, 1915 in Legal, Alberta. This year she celebrated her 90th birthday.

She inherited her father Armand's creative nature, and as well as writing, won prizes for her oil paintings, sang, played the piano by ear, took in sewing to support herself, and concocted amazing recipes, rarely using a cookbook.

All this she accomplished with only a grade-eight education.

Juliette married twice, raised two daughters, Charmaine and Donlea, and has a granddaughter, Jessica, two grandsons, James and Dylan, and a great-grandson, Jack. She lives in Victoria, B.C.



ISBN 1-41204469-3



**TRAFFORD**  
PUBLISHING