

Screaming in Silence

by

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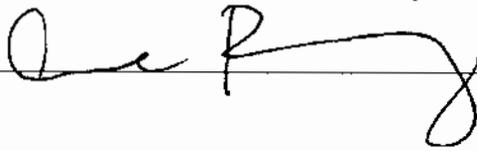
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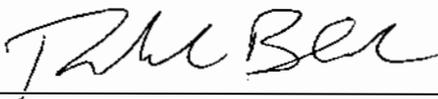
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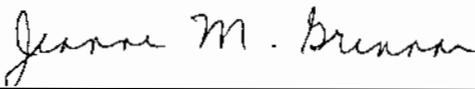
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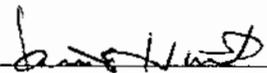
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Introduction

Possibly one of the questions most frequently asked of servers in the restaurant business is: “What else do you do?” Like many others, my answer for the past ten years has always been the same. “I’m in college,” I say. This commonly sparks interest from my inquisitors, eyes light up and eyebrows raise, as if they somehow feel special that their personal server is actually getting an education. That perhaps one day the person who filled their water glasses, ran back to the kitchen to bring mayo (*I’m sorry, I should have told you before*) for their hamburgers, that the starched uniformed, bow-tied girl with the pony-tail who dollupped whip cream on top of their key lime pie, will one day become a doctor, a politician, a lawyer, or even (*you poor dear*) a teacher. “What are you studying?” they ask. “English,” I say. And they smile sympathetically, “Oh, you want to be a teacher.” When I answer no, they appear perplexed, disappointed even. “Well then,” they say, “what are you going to do with that?” I tell them I’m writing a book. They appear excited, “Ooh,” they say, “are you writing a novel?” I always smile before answering. “No,” I tell them. “I’m writing a memoir.” And they always shoot me a look that reads, “Who do you think you are, Anne Frank?”

No, I’m not Anne Frank. Nor am I Madonna. I’m not Hillary Rodham Clinton, Susan B. Anthony, or Jackie O. I’m just me, Kristen Reisig (perhaps I should spice my name up a bit), and contrary to popular opinion, I have experienced life too. In his article, “Life is Also Here: Toward a Manifesto of Memoir,” Greg Lichtenberg quotes a recent book review. He writes:

Once upon a time, literary memoirs were
written by gray-bearded eminences basking
in the forgiving twilight of their fame. . .

All that has now changed. For many young authors today, autobiography is the topic of first, not last, resort. Scarcely has the debris of childhood been packed off to the attic than they're unpacking it again. . .(102)

Lichtenberg confesses that he was “seduced.” That although he had set out to write short stories, he has spent the last five years baring his life, revealing what had previously been his private experiences. And I too, have fallen captive, have been mesmerized by the art of memoir and entranced by the tell-all truth of both reading and writing non-fiction.

Like Lichtenburg, my writing adventure began with creating fiction. With a literary background in short fiction, sparked by my amazement with Joyce's *Dubliners* which I both read and fell in love with in eleventh grade English Class, my first attempts at writing were short fiction. I began creating stories, many based upon people I once knew, and avidly read fiction how-tos. I took advice offered by Anne Lamott in her book, *Bird by Bird*. “‘If he was famous for having long toenails,’ she writes, ‘make them nasal hairs instead. If he dyed his hair black, have him use foundation instead and maybe the merest hint of blusher’” (227). What is the meaning of fiction?” asks John Gregory Brown.

. . .The meaning of fiction is, I believe, the grand and glorious leap we make, both as we speak and as we listen, from our own lives to those of others. The meaning of fiction is our empathy, our ability to recognize ourselves in others, others in ourselves. (33)

And I attempted creating unique fictional characters and situations. The more I wrote however, the more I felt that my strongest “stories” were becoming closer and closer to actual experience. And the “stories” (original versions of “Coyote” and “The Blue Room”) that had been negatively critiqued in my fiction class had begun to receive positive reviews from my peers in Creative Essay workshop. And I realized that my short stories weren’t really short stories at all. They were essays. Or they were becoming chapters of a memoir. This was quite a disappointment. Autobiographies, after all, were history and non-fiction works were synonymous with non-fun texts. Until I read *The Liars’ Club*, by Mary Karr and suddenly, she became my major influence. “The missing story,” she writes in her first memoir, “really starts before I was born, when my mother and father met and, for reasons I still don’t get, quickly married”(10). The harrowing account of her tumultuous childhood intrigued me from beginning to end, thereby piquing my interest in this newly discovered fourth genre.

“Why memoir? And why now?” Vivian Gornick asks in *The Situation and the Story*. She contemplates, “What has happened over the past decades to account for the vivid shift in interest, from one genre to another, that is overtaking the common impulse, alive at all times, to shape one’s own experience through writing?” (89). Hardison, the author of “The Singular First Person” asks a similar question. He writes, “Why are so many writers taking up this risky form, and why are so many readers—to judge by the statistics of book and magazine publication—seeking it out?” (189). Both authors feel it due to mass pop-culture.

The essay is a haven for the private, idiosyncratic
voice in an era of anonymous babble.

Like the bland-burgers served in their millions
along our highways, most language served up in

public these days is textureless, tasteless mush...
 by contrast, the essay remains stubbornly
 concrete and particular: it confronts you with an
 oil-smearred toilet at the Sunoco station, a
 red vinyl purse shaped like a valentine
 heart, a bow-legged dentist hunting deer
 with an elephant gun. (Hardison 191)

Similarly, “Memoir,” Lichtenberg writes, “is trashy by nature: the natural genre for our trash culture” (103). For example, we peer over fences and through keyholes; we pick up the extension in the bedroom to overhear a private conversation. We watch Oprah and are becoming addicted to the new reality shows that are springing up by the week. As readers we are thirsty, starving for the truth that is submerged beneath the conversations in our actual, everyday lives and common experiences. And Sven Birkerts, author of “Biography of the Dissolving Self” agrees: “...we turn to biography as compensation, to gather in vicariously what we are losing in the public sphere” (91). Further, I attest, that as memoirists and essayists, we are recording our present, our trend of current social conditions with a smack-you-in-the-ass kind of truth: “Truly, when it came to convention, I had a lot of double-dog fuck-you in me by then” (*Cherry*, 38).

Recognizing my need to turn my poorly masked—read true—fiction into memoir or essay, I began looking to other non-fiction writers and critics for the how-to, exasperated to find only blurring rules and almost no vocabulary with which to discuss the elements of this fourth genre. For example, there are no characters (the people are real, not contrived); there is no plot development (the whole story is really already written). Non-fiction lacks in theme, motif, and often even in climax. Hey, you can’t write what didn’t happen. The only advice I could find for

sure was: tell the truth!

In the essay, you had better speak from a region pretty close to heart or the reader will detect the wind of phoniness whistling through your hollow phrases. In the essay you may be caught with your pants down, your ignorance and sentimentality showing, while you trot recklessly about on one of your hobbyhorses. You cannot stand back from the action, as Joyce instructed us to do, and pare your fingernails. You cannot palm off your cockamamie notions on some hapless character.

(Hardison 191)

This seemed easy enough, I could tell the truth. I might piss people off sure, embarrass and humiliate myself on the page, but aren't those a small price to pay for such a great accomplishment? Honestly, I've yet to see. For example, if ever published, how will my step-father react to the first five essays included in this collection? And how will my daughter's father react to "Firewalker?" I am thinking, they would not be pleased. But regardless, the essays, these experiences, are my stories to tell. And I tell them in truth. Or rather, what is, or has become, true to me.

For the memoirist, more than for the fiction writer, the story seems already there, already accomplished and fully achieved in history ("in reality", as we naively say). For the

memoirist, the writing of the story is a matter of transcription. (Hample 24)

But, I soon discovered that truth itself is not cut and dry. How can a non-fiction writer recall an exact conversation occurring five, ten, fifteen, or twenty years before? Imagination, I believe, strongly effects or perhaps even sometimes shapes memory and I realize that it is quite unlikely that one is able to transcribe events exactly as they occurred. I think however, that Truth is what is true to the writer while he or she is writing it. And of course, Truth, I've discovered, seems to vary from author to author, person to person and is utterly subjective.

So am I to conclude that since I have written the Truth, that since I have transcribed my experiences from my memory to the page, that my essays are successful? What is it exactly that makes for a successful essay? In a review of Karr's *Cherry*, Lisa Schwartzbaum suggests:

Everyone's story is interesting to someone,
of course, but at this point in the literary
onslaught, I've gotten tough on what it takes to
hold my interest: A memoir is worth finishing
only if (1) the life lived is so extraordinary
that the ordinariness of the writing is of little
importance, or (2) the writing is so extraordinary
that the ordinariness of life is of little
importance. (72)

It seems that the success of a memoir or essay lies somewhere within its murky development. And Mary Karr agrees. Wendy Smith, a contributor of *Publisher's Weekly*, quotes from an interview with her:

What makes a truly good memoir, I think, is the voice. The memoir is relatively cheap in form in terms of overall structure, it's not like a novel which, whether it's driven by plot or by language, has to have a structural integrity. You're freer than that with a memoir, but you have to have a voice that's interesting and engaging to the reader. I think you also have to know yourself, or at least the self that you knew at the time. (52)

So with these suggestions, I look for examples. What exactly was it that sparked my interest in this fourth genre? Voice? Tone? Language? Point of view?

With both *The Liars' Club* and *Cherry*, Karr has found an engaging voice. Memoir seems to contain a bit of magic, I feel, granting the author a gift of reflection through memory. This somehow allows the writer to write and think as an adult, yet the voice reads as a child's. For example, in *The Liars' Club*, the genre of memoir allows Karr to speak about molestation from an adult perspective, using adult language to describe how she felt when she was a child. Her adult voice interrupts the little girl and says:

I should also point out that there is something familiar about a hard-on, even when the fundamental feeling coursing through you is wrong wrong, and you are wrong wrong for having been selected for it. (245)

Furthermore, she uses a similar technique in *Cherry*. Amidst the adolescent vocabulary of “hard-ons,” “ying-yangs,” and “headlights” (her teenage terms for penis, vagina, and breasts) and between discussions of: “After a date, throw your panties against the wall, and if they stick, you had a good time”, are affirmations made by Mary Karr, the adult. At the memoir’s conclusion she alludes, “You’ll spend decades trying to will Same Self into being. But you’ll keep shape-shifting” (276). In his collection of essays, *Where Rivers Change Direction*, Mark Spragg uses this method as well. In “Wapiti School,” for example he writes about his boyhood experiences with his classmates and nearing the end of the essay he begins telling the reader of his recent connections with his lost childhood friends (89-90). It seems then, that this technique helps the writer assume two different voices for the piece allowing the reader to see both Karr and Spragg as children yet understand them through an adult field of vision.

Both *The Liars’ Club* and *Where Rivers Change Direction* are written rather traditionally (as memoirs go), a telling of events from the first person point of view. And so following these great examples, I began my essay, “Coyote,” conventionally. I began with “I.” With “I sit eating breakfast alone.” Like Karr and Spragg, I was casting myself as character, however, the voice coming through the page sounded whiny and self-absorbed, it pleaded for sympathy (yet seemed to evoke disgust) from the reader. And, it seemed I couldn’t write the piece successfully without gaining some much required distance. *Augusta Gone*, a distressing memoir written by Martha Tod Dudman concerning mothering her wild adolescent teenage daughter, runs this risk as well. She writes, “It wasn’t always like this. We used to have wonderful times...I raised the kids alone” (11). “I have my boyfriend,” she begins chapter two, “But he’s sick of me” (18). Although the language, the voice and tone, she captures in the memoir is eloquent, I found it a bit melodramatic for my taste. So, I went back through “Coyote” and changed all of my “I’s to

“shes” and found the whole tone of the piece immediately shifting. It created an essential distance and while writing I felt as if I was watching myself, as if I was a reader watching someone else and became delighted. However, having never read a piece of non-fiction entirely written in third person point of view, I was not positive it would or could ever be a success. Until I read Coetzee’s *Boyhood*.

Coetzee writes his entire memoir from the third person point of view in present tense. This allows him, I feel, to examine difficult material through a lens: an impartial narrator, perhaps, someone other than himself. Therefore, this narrator provides a kind of filter for the author. It seems to restrain the voice of the piece and restrict the “he” (the I in the traditional narrative memoir) from over-experiencing emotion thereby demanding sympathy from the reader. It also allows Coetzee to write with a more mature vocabulary because the narrator is obviously an adult. Consider:

He shares nothing with his mother.

His life at school is kept a tight secret from her.

She shall know nothing, he resolves, but what appears on his quarterly report, which shall be impeccable. He will always come first in his class.

His conduct will always be Very Good, his progress Excellent. As long as the report is faultless, she will have no right to ask questions.

This is the contract he establishes in his mind. (5)

This is how chapter two of *Boyhood* begins. His voice fills me with mystery and allure and leaves me wondering what is wrong with this little boy. This alternate point of view technique

enables him to “establish contracts” and speak of resolutions, both concepts yet unrealized in a young boy. In *Cherry*, Karr abandons the first person tradition as well. Although she begins her second memoir picking up where the first left off, she adopts a second person point of view by part three, right when her material begins to get very difficult. She enters adolescent Hell, full of drugs and sexual encounters, and chooses to switch point of view. The second person point of view, I believe, enables us to watch with her: “You were there to watch,” Karr writes.

With my essays and stories, I have experimented with different tones, points of view and tense; I have revisited, reworked and revised. I have torn, twisted and tried Truth and the pieces to follow tell all.

*I did not know then
of the sometimes dangerous
entrances of men, how some will lift
what others will slowly drown.*

Andrea Hollander Budy

Scrapbook

Although I'm only five at the time, I remember standing witness when my mother remarries. I'm wearing a dress she made for me from a Butterick pattern: white and flowing, patterned with tiny rose and periwinkle flowers. I wear my party socks trimmed with lace ruffles, my fancy white shoes with shiny silver buckles that tap, tap, tap against any floor. She has curled the ends of my long hair with a brush and blow dryer, pulled it away from my face and secured it with an elastic in what we called a "pretend" ponytail. I am crowned with delicate Baby's Breath.

She and my daddy-to-be are both wearing khaki and white. It's a simple wedding with just the three of us and a Justice of the Peace. He marries them and pronounces us a family right in his living room. Just like that.

My new daddy drives us to a park along the sunny banks of the Arkansas River where we take pictures: I take one of my mama and new daddy, my mama takes one of me and my new daddy, my new daddy takes one of me and my mama. He flags down a jogger and asks her to take a picture of the three of us. He cradles me on his hip in the middle, his other arm wraps around me and my mama both, my mama holds up her left hand to display the shiny, gold band on her ring finger. We smile.

A week later, when the film is developed, we sit on the front porch and flip through photos. There we are, mama and daddy, me and daddy, me and mama...and the picture the jogger took: a cloudless, September sky and a dark shadow outlining a man, a woman, a child.

My father sends me a bike for my birthday. It's the prettiest, sparkliest pink I've ever seen. It has a clean white seat and matching pedals and handlebars. At the village tennis courts

my new daddy takes off my training wheels and teaches me how to ride the two-wheeler. He holds on to seat and runs with me, laps up and down the green court. When he lets go, I ride around and around in circles while he cheers me on. He tells me I'm getting to be such a big girl. We walk the bike down the street toward home together. "I've got a mind to give you a real seat," he says. "I've got one you can have, it's real special. I'll even put it on for you."

When we reach home, we head toward the garage and he pulls his bike from the back corner. He gets a screwdriver from his tool bench and goes to work removing his seat. "I rode on this one across country--all the way from New York to California," he says. "Most comfortable thing ever made." When both seats are removed he attaches his to my bike. "Give it a whirl," he says. He holds mine in his hand. "I'll take care of this one for you."

I wheel the bike out of the dark garage into the sunlight. The pink has lost its sparkle. All I see now is a big, scuffed, torn black seat with its stuffing poking out.

Southern winter progresses and ends mildly and the sun warms March for spring. We are busy getting ready for the arrival of a new baby: a bassinet, blankets, booties and bottles. I awaken one night to the sound of sirens and my mama entering my room. "There's going to be a tornado," she says. There are men outside driving up and down my street on a fire truck. They have a horn and are saying, "Take shelter now. Take shelter now." Our house has no basement, only a crawl space for storage, so we retreat to closets. My mama and I nestle into her bedroom closet, my daddy and his Golden retriever, Rip, take the closet in the hall.

When the storm ends and we emerge finding everything still in tact, daddy says that Rip's breath is awful. "It's so bad," he says, "that I think I would rather have been right in the middle of the twister." We all get a good laugh out of that.

In school the next morning a little boy in my class says that the tornado took off the roof of his house. Sister instructs us to pray and at our desks, we all fold our hands. "Our Father, who art in heaven. . ."

At recess I stand around the tree in the center of the school yard with most of the other girls. We're all in plaid navy and green jumpers and yellow blouses, navy knee socks and matching shoes. We hold hands in a circle, the tree in the middle. "The Devil lives inside," a girl says. "My sister says that we must test our faith by looking into the tree." She says that we will see Satan rocking back and forth in a chair in front of a fire. She says, if we've been bad, he'll snatch us from the circle and pull us inside.

I don't want to see the Devil. But I don't want all the other girls to think that I am bad or afraid. I close my eyes and on a count of three, take a step toward the center, peer into the bark. Someone screams and we break our chain, scampering across the yard. "I saw him," someone cries.

I saw him too.

A little girl falls from the monkey bars onto the concrete. She cracks open her head.

One Saturday, my mama, my daddy and I go to Burns Park. My favorite amusement park. I climb across the swinging bridges and up the ladder to the big, red slide. My daddy follows me and I sit between his legs and we slide together. On the way down my arms get pinched between my body and rubber side, leaving a red welt.

My daddy and I ride the scrambler next. I think it's the best ride ever. My mama, cradling her swollen stomach, waves to us each time we fly by, spinning and spinning. Daddy loses his wallet. Never would have lost it, he tells me, if he hadn't ridden that damn ride.

They go to the hospital that night because my mama is having the baby. I stay with the neighbors. "I hope I have a sister," I tell her before she leaves. "Me too," she whispers.

I do.

That fall we leave Arkansas. My mother and I pack up our things, say good-bye to all our friends, leave our schools (she's a teacher), and move out of our house. We leave because we have a new family, with a new daddy and a little baby. We leave because he has a job waiting there for him. We exchange our lives for his. We leave for New York without knowing that nothing will ever again be ours.

Joker

On Fridays, my mama and I sit in the living room watching the hands on the clock tick toward five. The toys have been put away, his ashtray cleaned, his chair dust-busted, and supper is simmering on the stove, ready to serve. When he comes through the door, we smile brightly. “How was your day?” He retreats to the bathroom, to wash up and change out of his oil-stained clothes. Mama and I scurry to the kitchen to ladle the stew and pour the milk. We are sitting at the table when he enters and takes his seat. “The toilet paper’s on upside-down,” he says. “Feeds from the top, should feed from the bottom.” Mama apologizes, promises to change it first thing after dinner. “No need,” he tells her. “Already taken care of.”

He begins to sing, “Don’t fence me in. . .” I join in the song but, after a verse, he slams his fist down on the table, rattling the glasses, upsetting the stew in the bowls. “No singing at the table,” he says.

When he has had his second helping, he jokes with me. “What’s green and red,” he says, “and goes fifty miles an hour?” I shrug. “A frog in a blender.”

Because he laughs, so do I.

“What do you say to a Mexican in a suit?” he asks. Again I shrug. “Will the defendant please rise,” he answers.

And because I know nothing of defendants or of racial slurs and more importantly, because he is laughing, I laugh too.

He picks me up from my chair and sits me on the counter, situating himself between my legs, his hands resting lightly upon my knees. “What do you call four blondes standing in a

row?”

“I don’t know,” I say, laughing.

“A wind tunnel,” he roars. He slaps my leg playfully.

“Hey,” I tell him, “I got one.”

“Shoot,” he says.

“What’s big and gray and has a trunk?”

“Well, that’s easy,” he says. “An elephant.”

I laugh. “No,” I say. “A mouse going on vacation.”

He frowns. “That’s dumb,” he says. “Help your mother clear the table.” Then he laughs.

So I laugh too. “No,” I tell him. I am still joking. I am easing myself off the counter when his large hand strikes the side of my face.

“Don’t you talk to me like that,” he says.

Startled, I touch my cheek with my left hand and look to Mama who is standing at the sink, having stopped washing dishes. “She shouldn’t speak to me like that,” my new daddy explains to my mama. “She needs to be taught respect.”

Storyteller

Sometimes on Sunday winter evenings, he tells me a story. “Pretend,” he says, “you are in the woods.” He sits on a chair and I sit in front of him on the floor. He will have closed the blinds and turned off the lights. Holding a flashlight under his chin, his blue eyes are wide as he speaks. “There’s nothing around but the deep, dark woods, woods so thick, even the moon can’t shine through the trees. All you can hear is the hoot of an owl, the howl of a hungry coyote. You’ve lost your way,” he says, “and your compass--never lose your compass,” he interjects. “I always attach mine to my belt loop.”

I nod.

“So you’re lost,” he continues, “and you’ve been walking for what seems like hours. Canteen’s empty and your stomach’s rumbling and it’s getting darker and colder by the minute. You keep walking, through wild, overgrown bushes and over twigs and limbs snapping beneath your step. You’re following the flow of a creek, because you’re smart and you know that down stream will surely lead to a village of some sort. Finally, you see a break of light in the distance and you head toward it. You’re sure you’ve found your way out when suddenly,” he slaps his thigh, “you hear a cry.” He lets out a loud, whoop-whooping noise and his right arm wildly makes circles above his head. A sort of lasso motion. “You are captured by a band of Indians who want your scalp.” He pause and asks, “Do you know what that means?”

I think I do, so I nod. “Your hair,” I say. “They want to shave my head so they can keep my hair. Mama says I have beautiful hair,” I tell him. “Bonnie Brown, like in the song...’Girl with the Bonnie Brown hair.’”

“No,” he says. “They don’t care what your hair looks like. They want your whole scalp. Top of your head and all. A trophy.”

My stomach turns.

“Now, listen,” he says. “They tie you to a tree while they go get their leader, leaving you there to wait,” he says. “What are you going to do?” he asks.

“Untie the ropes,” I tell him.

“Exactly,” he says. “But, can you undo knots?”

“Sure.” I’d practiced in Girl Scouts and tell him so.

“Oh yeah,” he challenges. “But can you do it without being able to see? When there is nothing around but darkness?”

I remind him I had just found some light.

“Gone,” he says. “The light is gone. Can you do it behind your back without looking?”

“I’ve never tried,” I tell him.

“Well,” he says, “you need to know if you can. Indians won’t tie your hands in front of you, they’re not stupid,” he says. “They’ll tie you arms around a tree, behind your back. You’ll have to know how to do it by the feel,” he says. “If you want to get away before they come back for your scalp.”

He stands and pulls four pieces of rope from his pocket. Then, he sits me in the chair, pulls my hands behind me and winds a piece of rope tightly around each of my wrists. When he finishes, he steps before me, taking each one of my legs, tying them to the legs of the chair. “For extra practice,” he says. He backs away, towards the entrance of the living room. “I know you can do it,” he says. “Make me proud.”

I promise him that I will.

For an hour, I twist, turn, tug and pull at the rope with my hands, wriggling my fingers. I try shifting my weight from one side of the chair to the other, try standing and slouching, stretching and slinking. My wrists begin to burn, but I finally free one arm. Reaching across the front of my body with my free arm, I untie the other with little trouble. I bend down and free my legs. Gathering the rope, I saunter into the living room triumphant. He sits in his recliner. I hold the pieces of rope as an offering. “Daddy,” I say, “I did it.”

He peers at his watch. “Took you over an hour.” He drags his Marlboro, taps it on the side of the ashtray resting on his side table. “Those were just simple slip knots,” he says. He exhales. “Indians don’t make slip knots. You’d have never gotten out,” he says. “We’ll try again another time.”

Later, while I am brushing my teeth for bed, my mother points to my wrists. “What happened there,” she asks. I tell her I’d been making friendship bracelets. “They must have too tight.”

Superdaddy

My brother is born right before Christmas and since my mama and daddy can't agree on a name, we call him Babykins. Mama and I joke lightly about Babykins on the football field but, my daddy doesn't think this is funny at all and insists that he be called by the name on his birth certificate. The name he chose.

Mama begins teaching math at a nearby school the following fall but my daddy doesn't really like that either. He especially doesn't like it when, one Friday afternoon, he comes home from work before mama and finds the babysitter still in his house. After he sends the babysitter home and I am playing blocks with my sister on the rug and my brother is caged safely in his pen, my daddy begins asking me the whereabouts of my mama. But I don't know. "Groceries," I suggest. "Car trouble?" The car my mama got after selling her new one was old and blew a lot of blue smoke. It seemed like a likely explanation, but my daddy says no and impatiently flips through the channels on the TV. When Mama walks through the door, my daddy stands up immediately, demanding to know where she'd been.

"Happy Hour," my mama says. "Some of the teachers from school went out for a drink after work." Looking at her watch, she says, "You must've only beat me by a few minutes."

Daddy grumbles. "What's for dinner, Supermom?"

"Supermom?" Mama asks.

"Yes, Supermom," he answers. "While you're out drinking and having a good time, your husband and children are home starving." He approaches and stands just inches in front of Mama. His voice is still controlled. "What are you going to feed us, Supermom?"

Mama shrugs. "McDonald's?"

I say, "Yes, McDonald's."

"McDonald's?" yells Daddy.

There is a moment of silence. "You're out getting drunk and slutting around," Daddy says, "and you expect to get away with feeding us that shit?"

I want to say that I like McDonald's but knowing better, quickly decide to stay quiet.

"Slut," Daddy says.

Mama opens her mouth to speak but, is cut off by a quick hard slap to her cheek.

Startled, she steps back and looks at me. "Come on," she tells me. "Grab your sister." Mama takes my brother from the playpen and the four of us rush out the front door, leaving my daddy standing in the middle of the living room. We make our way to the car and as we are piling in, we hear Daddy still screaming "Slut" and "Supermom" from the front porch.

"Where are we going?" I ask Mama.

"McDonald's," she says.

At the drive-thru Mama orders cheeseburgers, fries and Cokes. "Six-seventy-eight," the drive-thru guy says. "Please pull forward." At the window, the man hands over the bags of food, the tray of sodas. "That'll be ten-twenty-seven," he says. "The car behind you says you'll be paying for his meal too."

Mama and I turn to look over the car seats, beyond the little heads of the babies, and out the back window. We watch as Daddy's truck slams into the back of our car. We lurch forward. Mama throws money at the man in the window, slams the car into drive and speeds all the way home. Daddy trails just inches behind.

Coyote

Someone has put the wallpaper up in the kitchen the wrong way. Rows and rows of brightly colored fruit: bananas, apples, oranges and bunches of grapes, forever grow upside-down. In my Strawberry Shortcake two-piece, baby-doll nightie, I eat breakfast alone, Cheerios with spoonfuls of sugar and a small glass of grape juice. Purple sugar-coated mustaches.

Out the window is my silver and blue swing-set. The middle swing has been taken off its hinges and in its place hangs the stripped, crimson carcass of a deer.

“Beep-beep. Road-runner, if he catches you you’re through...” They watch that show every Saturday morning together. Her mama is out with the baby, down to town for the day, running errands and shopping for groceries. She is sprawled out on the floor, eating Stella Dora Breakfast Treats; he is lounged in his easy chair in a wrinkled white t-shirt and torn gray sweat pants. He’s breakfasting on Marlboro’s, glasses of water and little round aspirins.

After *Land of the Lost* and *Lost in Space*, he follows her up the stairs, a soft step followed by a loud one: soft, loud, soft, loud. They retreat to their respective bedrooms to change. She hurries, shuffling through her drawers to find her frayed pair of work jeans and stained purple sweatshirt. She’s trying to beat him back down to the living room, but while she’s pulling her sweatshirt over her head, he’s already knocking at her door. “What are you doing in there,” he says. “Hurry up. We have lots to do.”

Quickly, she snaps the button on her jeans and opens her door. His hands clap with a crack. “Let’s go, let’s go.”

It's a dull October morning, almost noon, and the light drizzle chills her slightly. She pulls her hood over her head and ties the strings in a neat bow, tightly beneath her chin. Only a half-step ahead of him, she walks down the porch steps and with a sharp turn to the right, descends another flight. When they reach the sidewalk, he pushes ahead of her, crossing the street for his truck: Old Blue. She continues down the walk, toward the garage while he starts up the old beast. It growls to life and he shifts it into gear, backs it to where she's standing. "Old girl's still running fine," he calls from the open window. He kills the engine, climbs from the truck and walks toward her. She notices him noticing something and in mid-step, he stops. With his hand, he motions for her to come toward him. He points, "What's that?"

It's her bicycle. She'd left it out overnight. She knows better, by now. She knows that after riding the day before, she should have pushed it up the hill, lifted it onto the back porch, put it where it belonged. But somehow, she'd forgotten. She knows that she will be punished for this, for her laziness, her stupidity, her constant lack of regard for her belongings. She wishes to go back to yesterday.

"I asked you a question, girl," he says. "It's disrespectful not to answer."

"It's my bike," she says.

"I can see that," he says. "Plain as day." His head shakes in disapproval. "Why," he asks, "was it left there?"

Her mind races for a moment, searching for a plausible excuse. She finds none. "I must have forgotten."

He agrees. "Must have." He walks toward the bike and upon reaching it, fingers the brightly-colored, plastic streamers hanging from one of the handlebars. "I ought to put this away," he says. "Teach you a lesson."

She hangs her head. "Please don't take my bike away," she whispers. "I'm very sorry."

"Very sorry, huh?"

"Yes, sir," she says. "It'll never happen again."

"I'm not sure," he says. "You're so damn irresponsible."

"I know," she agrees. "I'll try harder not to forget."

"Punishment's for your own good, you know."

"Yes."

He considers for a moment. "Okay," he says. "I'm going to let you slide this time."

Someone must be looking over her, she thinks. "Thank you," she says. "I promise to remember."

He grunts. "Put it away before I change my mind."

He has put up the kickstand, is balancing the bike by holding the handle bars, and she rushes toward him. She doesn't want the bike to fall, so she darts beneath his arms, between his body and the bike, and scrapes her ankle on the pedal's metal spikes. "Ouch," she says. He lets go and she straddles the bike, begins walking it toward the hill.

"Stop," he says.

She pauses, looking at him.

"What did you just say?"

"I said, 'ouch'."

"Ouch?"

"Yes," she says, "ouch. I didn't want the bike to fall," she explains, "so I was trying to scoot between you and the bike...but you were too close...and I scraped my ankle."

"I was too close," he says.

“Yes,” she says, “but it doesn’t matter. Doesn’t even hurt.”

“I was too close...” he repeats.

“Forget about it,” she says.

“I didn’t do anything,” he insists.

“Right,” she agrees. “Never mind.” She turns her back to him, begins walking the bike toward the hill. In an instant he is behind her straddling the bike, his hands land over hers, his belly presses against her back.

“Always trying to blame someone else for your mistakes,” he says. “Did I do...like this?” His big, brown boot comes stomping down on her left foot. “Or like this?” His other boot makes contact with her right.

She screams and her daddy walks back toward the truck. “Hurry up,” he says.

Old Blue is some hybrid creation of a truck and a van or a hearse and an SUV. Its back doors open out and inside are stacks, behind stacks, beside stacks of chopped wood. “Go on,” he tells her, “Get in there.” She climbs on the bumper, stands inside. She can still fit without crouching. “Come on,” he says, “pass me a log.”

With both bare hands, she reaches for one off the top of the closest pile. The chipped rough wood is a familiar touch and her palms sting immediately. She pulls the triangular log off the pile, heaves it toward him, and once he has caught it in his arms, she turns quickly for the next. “Thatsa girl,” he says. “Keep them coming.” While he goes into the garage and puts the log next to the steel furnace, she waits at the edge of Old Blue with a second one.

It goes on like this for awhile. She’s one step ahead of him each time he comes back for more. He continues to praise her: “Good girl.” And she’s empowered. She is a good girl, a

strong girl, a tough girl. She's as quick and as strong as him, she thinks. She thinks he is proud to call her his daughter.

In all time they've spent together, she's learned every lyric to every Willie Nelson song and while they work they sing. He has a great voice and he says he thinks hers is getting better. Together, they sing. She sings louder: "Sioux City Sue, Sioux City Sue... Hair is red, eyes are blue, swap my horse and dog for you. . ."

Then, as she has to go further into Old Blue to reach the wood, she begins to tire and so when she turns, she finds him at the back door, already waiting. "Keep it up," he says. "We're almost done. Don't cop out on me now." She drops the log in his arms and nods, though she knows she's going to disappoint him. She's started feeling dizzy and lightheaded and her torn palms are traced with tiny streams of blood. She grabs another log and turns to find him waiting again.

"You're no good to me anymore," he tells her. "Get on out of there."

"I can finish," she insists.

"Nope, nope," he says. "Go on inside and make us some lunch. You're of no use here." He grabs her arm, pulls her from the truck. "Sometimes I forget you're not my kid."

As I walk down the walk toward the house and up the stairs leading to the porch, I hear him call: "Remember, I like my sandwiches cut in rectangles, not those damn triangles like your mother makes."

Boyfriending

My boyfriend and I are perfect for each other. His last name is my first name. Only spelled different. He lives around the corner. We go to confirmation classes together. We run against each other for class president. We watch "Goonies" in a dark theater and just before the end, he holds my hand. On Halloween, he is Billy Idol. I am Madonna. He's my first kiss. And I am his. He loves me until he can't take it anymore.

My boyfriend calls me Little One because he's a foot and a half taller than I am. A year and a half older. He's almost seventeen. Has a license. Very cool. He drives his mother's Jeep and comes over at night to watch movies. St. Elmo's Fire. Breakfast Club. About Last Night. We laugh together and drink cheap vodka with lemonade. He's had lots of sex. Gina, Robin, Maureen, Julie, Stacy and Heather. But not me. I think that's why he likes me. But we make-out all the time. I'm not a prude. But I'm not a slut either. So I let him use his fingers. We start out on the rug in front of the TV, but I squirm and an hour later we are across the room in front of the door. I make him stop and walk him outside. I stand on the second stair of the porch. He stands on the walk. We kiss good-bye.

My boyfriend lives in the "Lower Deck." He's a "River Rat." His phone number has three zeroes in it. He has dreadlocks, wears Vision Street and skates all over town. He plays bass in a band. They do a song called "Drink More Beer." He wishes he were Sid Vicious. "Sid is dead," I tell him. "Sid will never die," he says. He Bics his head and wears black Docs with

white laces, listens to Ska, starts saying, “Oi,” and walks around with a big black X on the back of his hand. He and Matt go out “Nigger Bashing.” But when his hair starts growing back in, he sports a pair of Adidas, buys an NWA album and chills with Jamel. He loves me. But Chrissy answers his phone. He loves me. But when I get to the party, he’s making out with Nadia.

My boyfriend has long strawberry-blond hair that completely covers his face. He never takes off his black leather jacket. I love him in the very first minute. At lunchtime we sit in the courtyard together and we share his bagel with cream cheese. On weekends I watch him play drums in his band, “Teenage Dayz.” They are the best band ever. In my yearbook he writes that he hopes our love lasts for years, eons even. I read that over and over. It lasts long enough for us to have sex twice, my first and second time. And then once again after he breaks up with me. I sleep with the guitar player to make him jealous, but he never finds out.

my b/f has a pc with a cam so i can c him when we im 25/m/fl at nite he sends me a link n we go roomin laffin at all the peeps who cant talk chat or he links me w/ our buddies n makes a room in the ts he sez ygm n senz me pics of his hummer system n of hemms house n garden in the keys i say brb n mail him me lol lmao lmfao roflmao he sez hes givin me a big wet kis i say omg ty baby i say ttyl he sez gtg n 1 day he iggys me off his buddy list

My boyfriend is the saddest person I’ve ever known. He has deep, dark circles under his eyes and almost never smiles. He’s so beautiful. We go to the falls with ten or fifteen of our friends and because I’m afraid to jump off the cliff, he holds my hand and jumps with me. We drive around town and sing melodic punk together: “Every Sunday...my little girl and me...take

a ride...just get up and go...blood shot eyes...rollin' down the road." At a party, he plays guitar and I sing into a mike. Together we hypnotize a crowd. I'll love him forever. We sleep in the same bed every night until we get pregnant. But I never have our baby and he moves 1500 miles away.

My boyfriend's a biker, but his brothers in the club call him Misfit 'cause he shaves his head. We ride the Sportster everywhere: Niagara, Mystic, Pt. Pleasant, Atlantic City. We never make it as far as Daytona. We go to a party together and a girl brings us in the bathroom and pulls up her shirt to show us her nipple ring. Her nipple's all swollen red and there's yellowish crusties around the silver hoop. "You should go back to the piercer and get your money back," he tells her. "That shit ain't right." He makes me laugh and is the biggest guy I've ever seen. He calls me: Quiet little mouse. I answer, "Big ugly monkey."

My boyfriend's the bartender at the hottest club in town so I get free beers and Captain and Cokes. I love to watch him work, I swear, he must know every drink ever mixed. He's gorgeous, simply but absolutely gorgeous. All the girls think so, their mothers do too, they all give him their phone numbers. But he always throws them away when they're not looking and leaves with me at the end of the night. I think no girl has ever smiled a broader smile. We rent an apartment together, it's the first lease I've ever signed with someone. One night while he's working, I get a phone call from his friend. He's been fired, he tells me, and he's been at a bar down the road from his work all night. He just took a header down a long flight of stairs. I leave and pick him up. Sloppy, sloppy. I pay the rent, the electric, the phone, the cable, his insurance and his \$300 truck payments. I buy him Camels. He goes out and the phone rings in the middle

of the night. The officer asks if I can pick him up. He's been arrested for DWI and has totaled his truck. When we get home I tell him to sleep on the couch. The next afternoon when he wakes up he calls his mom to come and take him to live with her. While he packs, she stands in my living room tapping her soft-soled shoe. She says to me, "I hope you figure out what you want to do with your life."

Firewalker

I stand in the dark shadows watching him, the firewalker, as he climbs the eight-foot heap of blazing wood. I watch him step carefully, securing each foot before attempting the next, holding his arms out for balance as he ascends. Sparks fly and boards crackle and although the pile shifts beneath his weight, he reaches the peak, triumphant. He raises his arms in victory while the flames lick at his ankles. Teasing them, he jumps this way and that, as if he is dancing, as if his is taunting them. The crowd nearby cheers, "Firewalker, firewalker." Behind me, a smaller fire has been lit and a boy drives a metal stake through a pig's middle. Mounting it between two rods, he begins roasting it over an open flame. Through the evening and into the night, he will turn the pig, over and over, until its flesh has been cooked, its skin brittle.

I hear footsteps approaching from behind, feel a hand close around my neck. I am spun around. "Hello," he whispers, "it's been awhile."

Although it had been difficult to avoid him in the small town where we both lived, I'd managed to steer clear of him for a month. It had actually been a month since I'd stuffed my clothes into clear, plastic garbage bags, grabbed my pillow and the few belongings I rightfully owned, and drove down the street and around the corner, to my friend's house, where I'd moved in. He must have known where I'd gone, I assumed, because he never once came looking.

I spent three of those summer weeks inside, sitting on a blue milk crate, watching my friend Lynn build the walls of the gutted apartment around me. Hammering, nailing and spackling, she blasted rock tunes at top volume from a boom box that sat on an overturned

cardboard box. There were no casings on any of the outlets; there was no mirror in the bathroom; the wall and floors were spattered with various colors of paint. I found the noise and clutter as soothing and as comfortable as the unopened cans of tuna Lynn stored in the refrigerator that no longer worked. It was chaos and heyday but, it was okay. Okay, because it was just the opposite of the life I'd just left.

By the start of the fourth week, I'd filled out the appropriate forms, met with the right people and registered for classes at our local, two-year Ag and Tech. Lynn would be leaving for Savannah College of Art and Design within a few days. But when she pleaded with me to accompany her to the annual August Pig Roast, I'd initially declined. I didn't want to risk running into him again. But after discussing it, we'd decided that it wasn't his crowd, that he was very unlikely to attend. She convinced me that it was time I got out, had some fun. We left around seven, driving her parents' Volvo up into the mountains, while the sun began to set.

It is just before midnight, Lynn has gone off for a swim in the pond and the daring firewalker has just finished his act. It's just about midnight when he approaches me.

"I've been missing you," he says.

I tell him it's done. It's over. He tells me he understands. He asks me to give him just a minute or so, so he can apologize. He has a few things he needs to say, he says, if he is ever going to forgive himself for all he has done.

I don't want to give in to him, not again, but he looks so sad and sorry. His eyes are droopy and his head hangs in what appears to be shame. It makes me wonder if maybe I have broken him and consequently, I feel guilty for denying him. I gave him two years, I think, and now today, I'm not willing to give him one minute. He only asks for one minute. One minute, I

think, I'm being ridiculous, and with all the people around, I convince myself I am in no inherent danger.

"Take a little walk with me," he says. His head motions toward the dirt road. Then, he must sense my tension because, he adds, "Just to get away from all the noise." I tell him I won't go far and he nods a gracious thank you.

We walk slowly down a dirt road lined with thick trees and the moon filters through the leaves. My friends are only a straight shot back and I can still hear intermittent chanting: "Firewalker, firewalker." While I can still hear the rallying, I know I am safe.

When he begins to speak, he takes my hand and tells me he knows he's made some mistakes. He knows, he says, that he needs to learn to control his temper. "I never meant to hurt you," he says. "The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you." I thank him for his apology, tell him that I know, of course he never meant it, and he begins to cry. "I need your help," he pleads. "I am nothing, nobody, without you. I will go get help," he says, "if you're there for me." I had been asking him to go to counseling with me for over a year.

I am about to give in, again, I hate to see him cry. Tears are forming in the corners of my eyes and then, just then, I begin having flashes. It is as if my mind, my body, are instinctively providing a defense to protect me. His nicknames for me begin echoing through my head: Sweet Meat, Meat, and his favorite translation for my real name: Krusty. I hear doors slamming, dishes shattering, the thud of furniture being overturned. My eyes begin to sting as I recall the beer he'd thrown in my face the past fall. I remember him dragging me across an entire bar, in front of everyone I knew, by my hair that previous winter. And in the spring, right before I finally left him, he'd thrown me full force into a wall and then down a flight of stairs. The rickety stairs that led to the apartment we'd shared. I hear him saying, "I never hit girls." He'd never hit me.

“I love you,” he says.

I think about the new life I’d proposed while sitting on that milk crate all those weeks. I think about Lynn heading off for Savannah and about me finally getting to college. “All girls,” he’d always said, “who go to college, turn into sluts.”

I think I am changing my life, making it better, and I tell him simply, “I can’t.”

I am wishing him luck, truly wishing the best, and am turning to head back up the road, toward the crowd. “Wait,” he says, “I want you to come back with me.”

“Not this time, Jeff,” I tell him. I walk away from him for the first time in my life. And the crowd’s chant grows louder: “Firewalker, firewalker.”

Within an instant, he is at my back, his arm around my neck, his fingers clasped tightly around my throat. “You are coming with me,” he says. He drags me down the road until he reaches an old blue Ford, its engine running. With his free hand, he opens the back door and begins shoving me in. My head knocks against the door’s frame, he gives a harder push and I am inside, he’s sliding in next to me. “Let’s get out of here,” he says to the boys in the front seat. The tires skid along the dirt road. He puts his arm around me and smiles.

The boys: Kevin, Rodney and Danny are riding in front. Kevin’s the driver, big Rodney’s riding shotgun, and Danny, a little scrawny thing, is riding bitch with one leg on either side of the shifter. While we drive the fifteen minutes back to town, the boys are smoking a joint, singing in a chorus: “Oh, Mama I’m in fear for my life from the long arm of the law. Hang man is coming down from the gallows and I don’t have very long.” Jig is up, I think.

I am trying to plan my way out of this mess. Safety, Lynn’s house, I assure myself, is just around the corner and down the street from his apartment. I would play it cool, get out of

the car and just...walk. I would just walk home. Or maybe I would run, depending on how dire the situation became. Regardless, I am pretty sure, almost positive, that he won't do anything too drastic in front of his friends. That had always been unspoken word among the boys. No one cared what one guy did to his girlfriend at home, don't however, ever beat a girl in public. That would just be uncool.

Kevin slows the car where Route 10 turns into Main Street, and at 198 he pulls the car onto the shoulder. Jeff thanks him: Drive fast and if the cops are on your tail, drive faster. Advice given from experience. I'd been sitting in our living room one night, just watching TV, when I saw red and blue flashing lights through the window. I, of course, got up immediately to look. I saw Jeff's Chevelle come to a sudden stop across the street, watched as he jumped from the car and over the neighbor's hedges. I saw him take off down the Platt's driveway, losing sight of him as he ran through the field behind their house.

I'd wished they would catch him, that night, put him away for good.

Worried that the police would come knocking at my door looking for him, I flushed all his pot plants down the toilet. Lucky for me, when Jeff returned sometime before morning, he was too excited about the high speed chase through town, about outrunning the police, about not getting another DWI conviction, to be too mad about his plants.

He gets out of the car and I climb out after him. Kevin, Rodney and Danny are busy rolling another joint and don't pull away just yet, for which, I think, I'm thankful. I follow Jeff around the back of car and tell him I'm going home. "I can walk from here," I say.

Instantaneously, I see his anger and he has a firm grip around my throat again. And with force, he throws me on to the trunk of the car. My back, shoulders, and then my head slam against the metal and I hear the car crinkle upon impact. He positions himself between my legs

and tightens his hold on my throat. I close my eyes so I don't have to see his face.

I become somehow aware that Kevin, Rodney and Danny get out of the car. I hear one of them. "What are you doing, man?"

From Jeff, there is no answer.

Another one says simply, "Dude?"

But none of them make an attempt to come near us. Jeff has a bit a reputation around town. I don't know how long we're like that, probably only a minute or two, but long enough so I begin feeling dizzy. Long enough so the pain, the choking sensation, becomes muted and everything feels light. And I'm sure I am going to die. I am going to die on Main Street, *Main Street*, in Delhi. Right there on the trunk of a shitty, old car with an audience of complete fuck-ups.

But, I don't want to die. Not then, not like that. So I think, what's one more time, after two years, what's one more time, if it will save my life. I make a plea to him by opening my eyes and he lets go and pulls me off the trunk. Kevin, Rodney and Danny get back in the car and drive away.

Jeff takes me by the hand and leads me up the hill, up the path, up those rickety stairs that lead to his apartment. Our apartment, the place I used to live. He opens the door and I reach for the light switch on the wall. The place still looks the same. The dining set we picked out together is still in the middle of the kitchen. The cabinets that I shelf-papered still wear the same pattern. Okay, shelf-papering the outside of cabinets is weird but, not as weird as having puke-green metal, workshop cabinets to shelve my dishes. And the black scorch still stains the wall from the time I caught a paper towel on fire from the stove's pilot. I'd stood there, paper burning in my hand, until he ran from the living room and grabbed it, throwing it into the sink. "You're

so stupid,” he’d said.

He appears at my side and grabbing my hand, leads me into the living room to the couch. We stand as he pulls my summer dress over my head, then he kisses me and yanks down his zipper, steps out of his jeans. He kneels, kisses my stomach, slides off my underwear. He pushes me gently onto the couch and lays on top of me. He’s inside me.

“I love you,” he says.

While he goes through the motions, the repetitive, all too familiar motions, I close my eyes. “This is an end,” I think. An end and a beginning. While I feel him finish, I think of school and of the new friends I’d be meeting. I think of the party and of the brave firewalker. And I think of the poor pig who, just yesterday, didn’t know that today, she would be sacrificed.

The Blue Room

The door has just been closed and the room is still and quiet. It is April. My elbows rest on the padded arms of a wheelchair, and I sit staring out the window at the cloudless blue sky cradling my three-day old son in my arms. Across the street from the vast parking lot below, is a church. Tall and majestic, so confident, its steeple reaches high into the blue, the cross glimmering in the sun's rays. The point appears as if it may actually tear a fine rip into the atmosphere and allow the deep black of space to seep in. Engulfing.

But it doesn't. So the room, like the sky, is blue.

Blip. Blip. Bleep. Bright florescent lights. All the faces blurrrr together. All the faces but the one at the foot of my bed. The blonde woman with the large glasses. Doctor. She puts something between my legs. Inside me. The noise. The grinding. The sucking. The pulling. Rip. I scream. The sound propels through my lungs, vibrating its way through my throat. Out my mouth. It all comes out. Everything. Everything inside lets loose with my voice. I am wasted. I am tired. I want to sleep. Sleep...

The bed shifts and rattles. Someone tries to push, but the wheels lock. There is panic in his voice. *I can't...I can't get...*

The levers. Release the levers.

I hear it. The urgency. Time.

Down the hallway. My eyes flutter open and I see a woman. A woman full of baby. She draws her arms around her swollen stomach in a hug and looks at me. Looks into my eyes with

fear. Fear. Fear and relief that she is not me. I smile lazily as if to comfort her. I want to tell her that I am not in pain.

I don't hurt. Just need a little nap. Tired. So very tired.

But I can't find my voice. Where are the words? My eyes close. *Later...*

Ding. We are going down. Going down. Out. Bump-bump. The wind blows my wet, matted hair. So cool.

Slide and turn. The wheels of the bed skid. My lids can't block the light. I shut them more tightly.

A mask. Covering my lips and nose. *Breathe*, someone says.

Breathe. *10, 9, 8, 7...*Sweet. Sweet air, sweet, sweet dream.

From my bed I can reach the button. Morphine. Drip. Drip. Drip.

There is a woman in the bed next to me. By the window. Her belly is no longer swollen. The fear in her eyes has disappeared. She cradles her newborn daughter, feeding her from her breast. A man is sitting beside her, carefully at the edge of her bed, and he stokes the baby's fuzzy head. Proud Daddy. He is smiling.

A man in a white coat enters the room and approaches my bed. He proceeds to the other side, drawing the white curtain. Closed. "I am Dr. Lewis," he says.

"Hello." My voice sounds raspy and distant.

"I am your son's pediatrician," he explains.

Silently, I wait.

"Your son," he says, "has suffered serious oxygen loss during delivery." He sits in the plastic chair beside my bed. "At the present time...he is hypertensive."

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“He is very tense,” he says. “All of his muscles have tightened up. And he does not exhibit any of the infant reflexes. The gag reflex is not apparent, nor does he seem to have the ability to urinate. However,” he says, “he is breathing on his own.”

“So...”

“So,” he says, “it seems that the loss of oxygen may have affected his brain, although at this point in time we can not be sure how seriously, if at all, he has been injured. Therefore,” he continues, “I have conferred with the other physicians on staff and we all feel that he should be sent to a neonatal intensive care unit. We just do not have the facilities here to treat him properly.”

“And will I go with him?” I ask.

“You will have to speak with your doctor in regard to that matter,” he says.

“I would like to see him,” I say, “before he goes.”

“Of course.” He nods and stands. “I will have a nurse bring him in for you.”

Perhaps the light is too bright for him. Perhaps it reflects off his glass case. His hair dark as ebony, his eyes...green? Blue? I haven't seen them. His tiny fists are clenched into tight little balls and his body is stiff. All his joints are extended. As if he is angry. But he breathes. All by himself, he breathes. In...out...in...out. I can reach him from my bed. Thread my arms through the round openings in the case and touch him. Comfort him. Encourage him. He is warm and soft. Warm, soft and pink. He looks like me.

“We must take him now,” the nurse says.

I lightly kiss the tip of my finger and reaching through the opening, caress his hand.

Good-bye baby boy.

He flies by helicopter. I ride for four hours in the back of an ambulance. Every bump, every turn, every stop, sends sharp pain shooting through my body. The attendants administer morphine. I slip in and out, in and out, of consciousness.

My bed is hoisted out of the back doors of the ambulance and wheeled through the emergency room doors down a corridor to an elevator. Up, up, up...to the seventh floor. High risk maternity ward. I have my own room.

Two men lift me from the transport bed onto the bed in the room. They leave and I look at my deflated stomach. I have bled through my bandages. Crimson has colored my white gown. As if on cue, a doctor enters.

“Blood,” I say, “all this blood.”

“Nothing to be concerned about,” he says. He pulls a pair of gloves out of his pocket and snaps them on his hands. “Not uncommon to clot when taking a long ride after surgery.” He smiles. “We’ll fix you right up. Try to relax.”

I breathe deeply and force a weak smile.

“Just a little pressure,” he says. He places one hand on my abdomen and with the other, reaches deep inside me. He pushes and I can almost feel his two hands touch, one from the inside, one from without, just a thin layer of skin and a bundle of nerves separating them.

I feel a scream ripping through me before it all goes dark.

The sun shines through the thick, cotton curtains and I awake before a tray of black coffee, chicken broth, and purple Jell-O. Breakfast. I call for a nurse. Within moments she

arrives.

“Good morning,” she says cheerfully. “Let me open these curtains.” She walks to the far side of room and pulls them aside. Her coat has bright pink and blue teddy bears scattered about it in a pattern. “It’s a beautiful morning.”

“I would like to see my son,” I say.

“Of course,” she replies. “But first, I would like to see us get some nourishment.” Her smile is the widest I have ever seen. “We need some energy for what lies ahead of us.”

“Maybe we do,” I say, “but before I can even think about eating, I need to see my son.”

She frowns. I have upset her. Clouded her bright day. Then, just as quickly as the frown appeared, it dissipated, the grin returning. “Tell you what,” she bargained, “I’ll go get us a chair to take us down to the unit if we can promise to take a few bites while I am gone.”

I nod and she spins around heading for the door. I choke down two spoonfuls of Jell-O and a swallow of bitter coffee wondering why she refers to me as us while she gets to be her own person. She enters with the blue chair and checks my tray.

She sighs disapprovingly. “I guess that’ll have to do for now,” she says. She squats down beside me and throwing my arm over her shoulder, hoists me into the chair. “Here we go.”

She wheels me down the hall, past a row of rooms with closed doors and around a corner. We enter through a door and she rolls me to the sink. “Let’s lift our hands,” she says.

I raise my arms, resting my elbows on the rim of the sink, and she picks up a bottle of pink soap off a shelf. She squirts some of the contents into my hands and turns on the faucet. “Scrub,” she orders.

I scrub and wash as quickly as I can and she hands me a sterilized towel to dry. “I’m ready,” I say.

She wheels me through another doorway and into the babies' nursery. We pass rows of babies. Some on ventilators. Some in incubators. Some attached to other machines, blipping and beeping. Some with tubes sticking out of all different places of their little bodies. One is small enough to fit into the palm of my hand. Until we reach my baby boy. He lies flat on his back on a table, only one monitor connected to a finger on his left hand. His hands. His hands are unclenched but his eyes are still closed.

"Big boy," she says.

"Yes." I smile.

She pushes me closer so I can touch him. "I'll be right back." She says.

I reach out and touch his tiny fingers. The nurse returns with a bottle of lotion. "Here," she says, "his skin seems to be a little dry. Rub this on him."

I nod and she turns and walks away. I squirt the lotion into my palms and rub it between my hands to warm it before touching him. I smooth it over his hands, his legs, his belly. For hours. For hours I just sit there touching him and whispering to him. Words of hope. Words of promise. Words of love. All of the other nurses and babies seem to just disappear. I tell him he will get better. I tell him he must get better.

The painkillers wear off and I need to return to my room for another dose. I have been taken off morphine and instructions have been given to administer shots of Demerol. The cheerful nurse gives me the shot and soon I am sleeping.

"I am Dr. Geissen—your son's pediatrician." He holds out his hand for me to shake.

"Hello," I say.

"Your son," he says, "has suffered a loss of oxygen during labor and delivery due to a

partial placental abruption.”

I look at him curiously.

“Apparently,” he says, “the umbilical cord was wrapped twice around the baby’s neck while you were delivering. Normally, this is not a problem, regular vaginal delivery is still possible. However,” he continues, “in your case, the physical stress and trauma caused the placenta to tear away from the uterus.”

“He was choking?” I ask.

“No, no,” he says. “Baby’s do not breathe until after they have been delivered and the umbilical cord has been severed. They receive their oxygen through their mother—through the placenta.”

“So how badly has he been affected?” I ask.

“Unfortunately,” he says, “we don’t know yet. It appears that there was an extensive period of time between the time of the abruption and the caesarian. Time is the key here, when the child is in distress while still in the womb. Your records however, indicate that the attending physician did attempt vacuum extraction to aid the delivery...but the twenty-seven minute span...” The doctor clears his throat. “He has,” he continues, “seemed to gain control of some of his reflexes, which is a good sign. He is urinating and his pupils are reacting to light, but we won’t know how badly, if at all, his brain has been injured until we perform a Cat Scan. It will show us the amount of brain activity.”

“And when will that take place?” I ask.

He looks at his watch. “In about an hour,” he answers.

“An hour.”

“Yes,” he says, “we will send someone for you as soon as the procedure has been

completed.”

“Thank you, Dr.,” I say.

He smiles. “Try and rest,” he says. “You have been through a severe amount of trauma yourself.” He turns and leaves.

For the next forty-five minutes I flip through the channels on the TV. All soaps. I lightly touch the top of my right hand. The IV pumping antibiotics through my system has made it sore and irritated; there is a metal taste in the back of my throat. Dr. Geissen returns.

I peer at him anxiously.

“He is still on the table,” he says. “We are still running the Cat Scan. But...”

“Yes...”

“His lungs are beginning to collapse and...we need your approval to perform a tracheotomy.”

A tracheotomy. My son will breathe through a hole in his throat. I feel the panic rising up from within me. “What—what do you suggest?”

“Well,” he says, “he will not be able to breathe without it.”

“Is there time to wait and see what the Cat Scan says?” For some reason it seems...cruel for me to put my baby through anymore unnecessary pain.

“Yes,” he says, “there is.” He nods. “I understand.” He quickly exits the room.

I wait impatiently. The next few minutes seem like hours. The IV bag empties and I watch my blood slither up the thin tube and begin to fill the bag back up. I call for a nurse. She comes in and changes the bag. Dr. Geissen returns. Without a word he lifts me off my bed into the wheelchair next to me and pushes down the hall to the neonatal intensive care unit. We do not stop to wash our hands this time. We go right through the doorway, down through the row of

surviving babies, and stop in front of my son.

“He won’t make it any longer,” he says.

I feel choking in my throat.

“No brain activity,” he says. “He never felt any pain.” He gently pulls the monitors off my son’s limbs and carefully lifts him off the table, placing him in my awaiting arms.

He gasps and my tears splash down upon his cheeks. Once more, his soft lips open and he draws in a breath. His last breath and we are wheeled into the room. Into the blue room.

Have You Seen the Bridge?

I am a manager at a restaurant and I hate it. I hate the long shifts and late nights; I hate the weekends that seem to never end; I hate going to work as my daughter steps off the bus from school. I hate the terms: “food cost,” “inventory,” “percent,” “profit,” and “loss.” But mostly, I hate the word: Manager. I manage people. What an awful concept. I don’t direct them or lead them or guide them; I don’t instruct them, influence them or even motivate them. I manage them. It’s something I’ve worked very hard not to do but, nevertheless, that’s who I am, it’s what I do, today.

So it is me she calls to say she is going to be late. “I’m stuck in the mud,” she says. “Triple A is on the way.” And she hangs up.

It’s the middle of March in upstate New York. There’s no mud yet. Not this year. This year there’s only ice, snow and hard, unforgiving ground. But, for the moment, I give Vanessa the benefit of the doubt because, she’s a dependable worker, one of our best servers. She can serve one of the biggest sections and can usually satisfy even the crankiest customer. She also carries one of the highest Guest Check Averages, selling the most beverages, desserts and add-ons. Consequently, we have her train many of our server candidates. “I can’t penalize her,” I think, “for not being a creative thinker.”

But, dinner shift begins and although I check the clock throughout the night willing her to show, she never does. And that’s what we call a “Voluntary Quit.” My GM writes a big VQ over her name on the schedule and circles her remaining shifts.

The cover page of our Log reads: MANAGERS LOG. The lack of apostrophe, the question of possession, always bothers me. Is it our log: MANAGERS' LOG? Is it our GM's log: MANAGER'S LOG, in which all of his assistants are meant to communicate with him? Or maybe it is meant as it reads, as a command: MANAGERS LOG. I suppose it doesn't really matter because, most likely, the person who has written it, our GM, probably doesn't have any understanding of the English Language and the importance of punctuation. One day, for example, he pulled out a box of generic brand decongestant that read: Pseudofed. This, of course, made me laugh out loud. "Sudafed, Pseudofed," I said. He looked at me like I'd lost it. "You know," I said, "like Pseudonym...you know, Pseudo..." He thinks I'm crazy. Maybe I am.

Anyway, we use this aforementioned log to leave notes concerning highlights, or more commonly, lowlights, occurring during our shifts and when I come in to open the store two days later, after my day off, one of the other assistants has left a note: Vanessa's sister called tonight. Her husband beat her up.

That's it. That's all he wrote, seemingly without regard, in black scribbly ink: Her husband beat her up. I am left with questions, unable to make any phone calls because it's only 5:00am, wondering if she's alive, if she and her four children are safe, if they have someplace to stay, how badly they have been hurt. I'm left to go through the motions, counting the safe and the register drawers, open the doors for the rest of our team.

Vanessa's sister comes in for her shift around 9:00am. She looks tired, sad, breakable. I'm afraid to ask, but I have to. I approach her by the dish machine. "How's Vanessa?" I ask. "Is she alright?"

Marjana, her sister, looks at me but says nothing. She has tears already welling in her

eyes. "She'll be okay," she says. "It's not the first time." She excuses herself, heading for the break room, some privacy I assume.

For a few days, it's left like that. Although I want to inquire, I can't bare upsetting Marjana anymore than is already apparent. I convince myself that it is family business, I have no place, no right, to become anymore involved other than to playing out my role as assistant manager. So, when Marjana approaches me later in week explaining that Vanessa has moved in with her, that Vanessa is asking if she can be put back on the server schedule (which I write), I tell her that Vanessa has to call our GM. "He wrote her off as Voluntary Quit," I tell her. Although I speculate about the word, "voluntary," and think, "I wonder if she voluntarily got herself beat up," I tell her sister, "I cannot put her back on until she speaks with him." In a restaurant, the hierarchal chain of command must be followed.

Throughout the week I ask my GM if he's heard from her. His reply always: "No." And the next week he goes on vacation. It is then that I say to Marjana, "I thought your sister was going to call us." She tells me she has, that she's waiting to hear back from the GM. "She really needs this job," she tells me. "She's really leaving him this time." Marjana is tightly wrapping silverware in our white paper dinner napkins, securing them with a green wrap, which is sticky on one side. "She's hired a lawyer," she says. "To get custody of her kids."

It makes me think of the thousands of dollars I still owe my attorney. "I'll try to contact him," I tell her. "See if it will be okay if I put her back on." She thanks me. I do try but, I never reach him.

Two weeks later, Vanessa comes in with her sister's boyfriend to have dinner. She looks okay. She approaches me and attempts to give me a hug but I am reluctant and back away.

"Are you coming back?" I ask her.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” she answers.

“He still hasn’t given me the go-ahead,” I tell her. I ask her if she’s doing alright.

She says yes and returns to her table for dinner.

I must be the worst woman in the world.

The following week, I can’t put the server schedule into the computer because our GM is late putting in the projections for the business. I write them out by hand, leave them for him to put in because the next day, is my day off. When I return, the schedules have been posted, and on them is Vanessa’s name. She works four shifts in the upcoming week. We work our first shift together on a Tuesday night and she tells me part of her story:

“I wasn’t really stuck in the mud,” she begins. “but I was really going to come in that night. Even with the black eye and split lip. Even though I knew he had bruised my ribs. I was in my car...when the police showed up. I was trying to back out of the driveway to come to work. I guess I was hysterical...still bleeding, already bruising...but still trying to get to work. It was the only thing I could think to do at the time. And two cop cars pulled in behind me. Four uniformed men got out and walked up to my window. They asked where I was going and when I told them, they all laughed at me. Kristen,” she says, “They laughed right in my face.”

Her eyes plead for compassion and her thin hands flutter with nervousness. “They made me get into one of their cars, took me to a battered women’s shelter in the city. I had to leave my kids home,” she says. “They said I couldn’t take them with me.”

“Why didn’t they make him leave?” I ask.

“It’s his house,” she says simply. “His parents own it.”

“Why didn’t they arrest him?”

“I didn’t press charges,” she says. “It was all I could do just to get out.”

“And what about now,” I say.

“Now,” she says, “I have to be nice to him until we finish in court. Otherwise, he won’t let me see the kids on Wednesdays and Sundays.”

“The court lets the kids stay with him, even though he beats you up?” I ask.

“Kristen,” she says, “this is not the first time this has happened.” She pulls up the sleeve of her white oxford and reveals a deep white scar. The scar runs the entire length of her forearm. I gasp. “You should see my leg,” she says. “I needed pins that time.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I ask her.

“Right now,” she says, “I’m looking for an apartment, but since he cleared out our bank account the day after I left, I need as many shifts as you can give me.”

“Done,” I tell her.

“Except Wednesday and Sunday nights,” she says. “I’m hoping that won’t be a problem. If I miss a day with my kids,” she says, “it could mean losing them forever.”

I tell her not to worry and promise not to schedule her for those shifts.

“And,” she says, “before this happened I was a candidate for a certified trainer position. I would like to be considered again. I need to do something with my life,” she says. “I need more for me and my kids.”

I tell her she deserves more; I say I will help her by talking to our GM. I promise her I will convince him to give her the second chance. I reach out, touch her wrist. “I believe in you,” I say.

And I can see in her eyes that she believes in me too. She depends upon me.

That night’s a good shift. I feel passion, a sense of conviction. I have found a place in

this crazy, restaurant world where I can make a difference, institute a change. And the next day, in our office, I mention it to him.

I mention it.

And, when he says he doesn't think she's reliable enough, I don't launch into a speech. Instead, I nod meekly, walk out of the office, closing the door behind me. I go on vacation to Myrtle Beach for a week. I really need to get away and think.

And I do. While I sit on a balcony ten floors up, I watch the sunrise over the vast ocean and the waves crash against the shoreline. I watch as the young families below set up their umbrellas, their beach chairs and towels, claiming their spot for the day. I think of my daughter just inside, still snuggled safely in her American Girl sleeping bag. I think of how lucky I am, to be here on a beautiful ocean, on a vacation with my wonderful daughter. Then I think about Vanessa and her four kids, hoping they are as safe as I am now, yet knowing that they aren't.

I know because, ten years ago, I was Vanessa. I actually even worked for the same company as a server. I was one of the best too, highest GCA, highest beverage percent, great negotiator with the crankiest, most miserable of customers. And I too, was battered by my daughter's father. I fought to get away. I got a lawyer, went to court and spent thousands of dollars to retain custody of my daughter.

I was pushing for no visitation. I didn't want my daughter in an abusive environment. Even though he had never harmed her physically, I was insisting that my daughter was being harmed just by watching him beat up women. After all, she'd witnessed him beating up his latest girlfriend. She'd watched as the woman huddled in a corner while her father ranted obscenities, shouted insulting "fat" names, threw potato chip after potato chip at her. She'd watched as he almost beat the life out of his five-month pregnant girlfriend with his fists, his

feet. Watched as her dad broke two of his girlfriend's ribs. Then, she watched as the woman miscarried all over the wood floor. "Judges don't recognize violence against women as being abusive toward the children," my lawyer had told me. "The judge would think you were unreasonable if we demanded no visitation or supervised visitation." He recommended limited visitation and although I knew in my gut that the system was wrong, I concurred. Currently, I maintain sole custody and it is mandated that my daughter see her father for one weekend a month, but never in his home. He has to visit her at his parents' house. It's something.

But, in all reality, I am not her, I'm not Vanessa . I am not her because, I only had one child, not four children. Only one child and a loving, supporting family who not only encouraged me to go to college, but supported us while I mended all my broken pieces and worked my way through six years of post-high school education. Yes, six years. I hold not just an Associates degree. Not only a Bachelor's degree. I have a Master's degree. Well, a Master's minus the thesis, which is in the works, pushed to the wayside to make room for the sixty hours I spend in the restaurant, the leftover hours trying to be a single mother. My Master's will be in English, my Bachelor's in English and Women's Studies.

Women's Studies.

Just three years ago, I was student coordinator of our campus Women's Center. I was Vice President of our Women's Studies Organization. I had dinner with the President of the Feminist Majority Foundation, sitting right next to her speaking passionately about social justice and change, about laws that needed to be instituted to protect women from their abusers. Just three years ago, I marched on the White House and lobbied on Capital Hill to protest Violence against Women. And months later, at the graduation awards' ceremony, I walked across the stage before hundreds of students and faculty, accepting the Women's Studies award with a

sense of accomplishment, pride and empowerment.

And now, I turn my back on the first woman who looks to me for help. Choose the easy way out. No confrontations, I can keep my paycheck, my medical, dental, life and 401K. I can sacrifice a silly award and sell myself out and Vanessa short. Then, I can continue to manage people and Vanessa can choose to show up for her shifts or lose her job. She can choose a “Voluntary Quit.” She can choose to be financially dependent, choose to raise her children in an abusive environment.

She can choose to be beaten, maybe even to death.

Voluntarily.

There, that ought to clear my conscience. Not really, I know, but I’m on vacation and all this revelation is making me sick to my stomach. I’ll do something when I get back to work. I’ll march right up to the GM and demand Vanessa’s candidacy for certified trainer. That’s what I’ll do.

But, by the time I return from vacation, Vanessa’s already gone. She’s returned home, been beaten again, has been VQ’d. She’s lost and ultimately, so have I.

Within two weeks, I exchange my keys, my swipe card and my position of authority to embark on a journey of rediscovery and today, I spend my days thinking, reading and writing and my afternoons and evenings with my daughter. Sure, I am quickly depleting my tiny savings account and I have yet to discover where I belong and what I am meant to do, but I am confident that I am taking a step in the right direction. Telling this story is just the first.

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