



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title:

Freshly Fourteen: An Original Creative Nonfiction Manuscript and Analysis of  
Trauma in the Memoirs of Three Women Writers

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

The thesis “Freshly Fourteen: An Original Creative Nonfiction Manuscript and Analysis of Trauma in the Memoirs of Three Women Writers” focuses on the psychological idea of releasing trauma through writing, with attention to some elements of craft memoirists employ to speak what some psychologists have labeled the “unspeakable.” A critical foreword analyzes three memoirs by women who experienced trauma. The foreword discusses ways these memoirs give voice to trauma, and also employs feminist rhetoric to interpret women’s shared experience. “Freshly Fourteen,” the original manuscript, explores childhood sexual abuse and failed adult authority, and is contextualized within this discussion of some of the mechanisms necessary to access and write trauma.

Keywords: Memoir, Trauma, Psychology, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Authority

FRESHLY FOURTEEN:  
AN ORIGINAL CREATIVE NONFICTION MANUSCRIPT AND ANALYSIS OF  
TRAUMA IN THE MEMOIRS OF THREE WOMEN AUTHORS

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## I. Introduction

Psychologists Judith Lewis Herman and Joseph Davis both categorize trauma as “unspeakable.” Paradoxically, it is only through speaking one’s trauma that one can begin to heal. Further, Herman asserts that when trauma is spoken, a “creative energy” is released (2).

One of the ways this energy can take form is memoir. Memoirists write of the self, but the author of a trauma memoir relies upon certain mechanisms in order to access and speak trauma. This thesis concerns itself with the idea of releasing trauma through writing, with attention to elements of craft memoirists use to speak the “unspeakable.” Considered here are three memoirs by women who experienced trauma, discussed in a foreword to an original creative nonfiction manuscript. Not only do these memoirs have in common the giving of voice to trauma, but they also bring to light the positive effects of these women’s shared experience.



## II. Trauma

Herman asserts that traumatic events not only diminish one's control, they also "call into question basic human relationships" (51). Additionally, they shatter the "construction of the self... in relation to others," weaken one's belief system that "gives meaning to human experience," challenge faith in an order of the world, and "cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" because her world is no longer what she thought it was (51). Everything a trauma victim knew about the world and the people in it is challenged and changed by a traumatic event, especially one perpetrated by another person. Safety, positive views of the self, and meaning are destroyed (51). Because a victim's sense of basic trust is lost, she feels isolated and alienated, and these feelings pervade all relationships (51). In personality development a "secure sense of connection with caring people" is needed, but when this connection is severed, the traumatized person "loses her basic sense of self" and needs to rebuild identity all over again, as she did when she was a child (52). The rebuilding of an identity is a challenge but memoirs provide an avenue through which a victim can begin recreating her identity. Importantly, the victim can choose her identity after a trauma because she can control who is and is not present in her life, which she was unable to do as a child. Memoirs are writings of the self, so rebuilding the self after a trauma is an important step in being able to write trauma. Rebuilding the self can be achieved through the creative energy that is released when trauma is spoken or written.

According to Herman, when traumatic events involve the betrayal of an important relationship, the victim's faith and sense of community is even more damaged because of the social nature of humans (55). The basic structures of the victim's self are damaged

during any trauma and she experiences a loss of trust in herself and other people (56).

The sexual abuse victim also experiences a blow to her self-esteem as she experiences humiliation, guilt, and helplessness; the pre-trauma identity is destroyed (56).

“Disempowerment during adolescence,” which female memoirists Wendy Ortiz and Margaux Fragoso faced, “compromises the three normal adaptive tasks at this stage of life” (61). These tasks include: “the formation of identity, the gradual separation from the family of origin, and the exploration of a wider social world” (61). In her reflections in her memoir, Wendy Ortiz acknowledges that her abuser took advantage of his position of authority to cause her harm. Ortiz wrote of the common occurrences of teachers who took advantage of their female students. Watching the news, reading the paper, or listening to the radio, Ortiz hears “another tragic display of power dynamics at their worst” (42). Margaux Fragoso, whose relationship with her abuser lasted fifteen years, also had to rebuild her identity after her abuser’s suicide. She writes in her memoir: “Where exactly did he end and I begin?” (308).

Herman explains a common feeling in sexual abuse victims is shame. Shame occurs because the victim felt helpless, experienced a “violation of bodily integrity,” and suffered indignity in the eyes of another person (53). Guilt is another unearned feeling victims experience. A victim feels guilt because they believe their actions were not enough to prevent their trauma (53). A possible understanding of guilt is that it serves as an “attempt to draw some useful lesson... and to regain some sense of power and control” (53-54). The idea that one could have done more in the face of the trauma is a better alternative than to “face the reality of utter helplessness” (54). Indeed, Ortiz didn’t tell anyone of her abuse because she was ashamed and “afraid of being blamed” (105-6).

Writers of trauma memoir may still be experiencing these feelings, so to be able to have control over them and their trauma is important to speak trauma.

After a traumatic event, a full recovery of a victim's identity is necessary for her to move beyond the trauma. There are many ways in which a victim can begin recovery, but isolation is not one of them; the victim needs the same kind of connection to others she had when first forming her pre-trauma identity (Herman 133). Herman asserts that the victim must be the "author and arbiter of her own recovery" (133). Because trauma robs the victim of control, the main goal after trauma is to reestablish control. The first step in gaining control is to speak the trauma, sequencing it in a narrative psychologists refer to as an account (Davis 170). A victim account acknowledges how the past has shaped the victim, but its larger objective is to help the victim "take control of her life, life circumstances, and her future," (Davis 259) which is why a survivor must first identify as a victim. When an author writes her story she is able to change it from a victim account to a survivor account, because she has an authorial choice in how her story is told. Memoirists must first create their victim account to be able to transform it, using specific mechanisms, into a survivor account, from which they can explore their trauma and write it.

Because traumatic memories are encoded as images, and women are comfortable communicating through metaphors (Belenky 18), traumatic memories have the ability to become spoken. Karen Foss, Sonja Foss, and Cindy Griffin relay feminist rhetor Mary Daly's interpretations of metaphor. Metaphors can be used to "express woman-identified thought" as well as "introduce a new logic" (qtd. in Foss 147). Furthermore, metaphors can "elicit change... and suggest alternative visions, realities, and possibilities" (qtd. in

Foss 147). When a metaphor acts as an alternative possibility, or introduces new logic, communication opens up. The possibilities for new dialogues and new ways to view events allow people to consider alternate truths.

### III. Mechanisms

Memoir writers frequently seek to speak trauma. Feelings of fear, helplessness, and loss of control typify traumatic experiences (Herman 33). Traumatic events are also capable of disrupting one's sense of meaning since the events overwhelm the individual (Herman 33). Traumatic memories are different than normal ones. Because the psyche is protecting itself, traumatic memories "lack verbal narrative and context" and are instead stored as "vivid sensations and images" (Herman 38). Viewing trauma this way, it is literally, unspeakable. However, there are specific ways memoirists can speak their trauma.

When memoirists write their traumatic experiences, they must employ certain mechanisms to create the careful analysis a memoir entails. One technique memoirists employ is metaphor. Metaphors create images which can suggest cultural and emotional connotations. To name a trauma as something different than what it is lends control over it, simply by calling it something else. Additionally, when metaphor is used, the distance between the trauma and the traumatized is widened, since the trauma has been transformed into something else. The trauma can now be conceptualized as being stored in a box, the metaphor, which the author has created. The box gives the author the choice to open or close the lid on the trauma at will.

One way authors are able to write their traumas is to take control over them as much as they can to lessen the enormity and power of the traumas. Herman and Davis support the idea that control is needed when confronting trauma. One form of control authors employ is to choose a specific metaphor for the titles of their memoirs. Selecting controlling metaphors as titles allow the authors to work within the confines of their

chosen metaphor to explore their trauma. Because their traumas have been transformed into a different idea, they can be approached without the emotion their trauma truly entails. This transformation allows the memoirist to contain her trauma within a certain parameter so she can examine what happened to her, in what ways she participated, and how she was changed. This thesis is interested specifically in how women memoirists are able to write trauma.

The selection of an operative metaphor is an important choice because it dictates how the memoirist organizes her narrative and how the reader is expected to approach the story. Wendy Ortiz's title, *Excavation*, is a metaphor for her unearthing of her past in a careful, controlled way. Ortiz's metaphor positions her in the role of an archeologist, dispassionately sifting through the artifacts of her life. With an excavation as a metaphor, there is no implied victim, but instead an almost scientific analysis of buried stories and events. This metaphor confines Ortiz's trauma to that of the objective, where she can explore and write her story in an analytical way. Ortiz's memoir is by no means void of emotion, but the emotion is controlled because of the metaphor she employs. It allows her to distance herself from her trauma since she examines the materials of her life from the position of an archeologist. Additionally, an archeologist connotes intellect, curiosity, and a sense of discovery of the past. It does not connote a victim of childhood sexual abuse.

Margaux Frago's title, *Tiger, Tiger*, refers to the animal she pretended to be when she played with her abuser as a child. It also brings to mind William Blake's poem "The Tiger." Blake's "The Tiger" was published in the collection entitled *Songs of Experience*, while another poem by Blake, "The Lamb" was published in a collection

titled *Songs of Innocence*. These two poems often appear alongside each other in modern anthologies, setting up an implicit relationship between them.

*Songs of Experience* might represent Peter, the older abuser, and *Songs of Innocence* may symbolize Margaux, the young, innocent victim. While these connotations set readers up for the expectations of an older male predator and a young blameless girl, Fragoso does not portray either character in this way in her memoir. After Fragoso begins menstruating, she devises a plan to get pregnant by Peter, who needs convincing, so that she and her mother have a reason to leave her father's house (Fragoso 252). In this instance, it is the victim who deceives her abuser into getting what she wants, but the price she ends up paying is far too high.

Her metaphor has taken modern society's expectation of what a childhood sexual abuse story should be, and made it her own, which inverts the readers' expectation of how her story will be told. Because her controlling metaphor connotes Blake's poem, the implications of this must be considered. In "The Tiger" the narrator asks about the creation of the tiger. It is clear that no "immortal hand or eye" (Blake 3) could have created such a creature with such "fearful symmetry" (Blake 4) yet there is a sense of wonder and awe at the creation of such a creature. The narrator asks: "Did He smile His work to see? / Did He who made the lamb make thee?" (Blake 19-20). These questions connote a sense of satisfaction from the creator of the tiger, as well as a surprise that the same entity that created the tiger also created the lamb. Because Blake's poem frames the tiger as a creation rather than something terrible, Fragoso depicts the characters in her memoir as being created much the same way the tiger was: by some sort of force which does not regard its creations as monsters. In this way, Peter the child molester is just

another of God's creations, much like the tiger. And the lamb, the memoir's author, was created by the same God. The creator of the tiger and the lamb does not judge them, but Fragoso wonders at the implications of judgment. In a hospital after she tried to kill herself, Fragoso speaks with another patient about molestation and rape. She realizes that everyone in the hospital would hate Peter because he is a child molester, but she "loved him still and had protected him from jail. So what did that make [her]?" (279). Here Fragoso is aligning the tiger (Peter) with the lamb (herself) and judging them equally, just as the creator of the animals did in Blake's poem.

Another memoirist, Cheryl Strayed, writes of the trauma of her mother's unexpected death and her own deficiencies in successfully mourning her loss. Her memoir, *Wild*, focuses on her time spent hiking the Pacific Crest Trail after her trauma. The metaphor of wilderness represents Strayed's lack of control over her life following her trauma. However, her decision to hike the Pacific Crest Trail shows her exerting control over her life and how she wants to change it. She had set out on her hike to reflect upon her life, "to think about everything that had broken [her] and make [her]self whole again" (Strayed 84). Further, Strayed is pleased to recognize that her complicated life could be made simple; that everything she needs to survive she can carry in her pack, and that she can "bear the unbearable," (92) which echoes being able to speak the "unspeakable."

"The wanting" of things to be different for Strayed "was a wilderness and [she] had to find [her] own way out of the woods" (27). Because she has set her memoir up as quest to find inner peace, Strayed uses her metaphor to explore her trauma in terms of a journey, both literally and symbolically. Strayed's metaphor calls attention to the visceral



experience of hiking the trail. Since her trauma is transformed into a journey through the wilderness, Strayed is able to distance herself from her trauma through metaphor. After her trauma and subsequent divorce, she chose Strayed as her last name because “its layered definitions spoke directly to [her] life” (96). The dictionary definitions she list include: “*to wander from the proper path... to be lost, to become wild, to be without mother or father... to move about aimlessly in search of something*” which are situations Strayed finds herself in (96). Strayed has asserted control after her trauma by choosing a new last name that reflects who she was at that point in her life. Additionally, using the wilderness as her controlling metaphor calls attention to the name she chose for herself.

Not unlike authors of other types of writing, all three authors separated their memoirs into chapters to control how their stories unfolded. The difference is these authors’ chapter titles represent parts of their trauma. Just as these memoirists chose specific metaphors for their titles, they also had deliberate choices for their chapter titles. This control over the names of the chapters allowed the memoirists more control over their trauma. When breaking down a trauma memoir into chapters, the memoirist is simultaneously breaking down her trauma into smaller pieces. In terms of using metaphor as a form of control, it makes sense that the memoirist would name these smaller pieces of her memoir in the same manner as she named the whole memoir. To call these small pieces – chapters – by another name than the trauma they truly are allows the author to have control over that particular part of the trauma.

Ortiz chose to break up her memoir chapters using dates. Not only does this decision inform readers of the temporal space she is writing in, but it also works well with her metaphor of an excavation. Chapters with names like “September 1986” and

“Early June 1989” label her work as an archeologist would. Additionally, her reflective chapters are titled “Notes on an Excavation” which lends more to the idea of Ortiz as an archeologist who recorded her findings as she came across them.

The chapters in Frago and Strayed’s memoirs are named according to the content of the chapter. Strayed’s first chapter “The Ten Thousand Things” refers to how much her mother loved her three children. “The amount that she loved us was beyond her reach,” Strayed writes (13). “It was the ten thousand named things in the Tao Te Ching’s universe and then ten thousand more” (Strayed 13). As a memoirist, to name a chapter is also, in some cases, to use metaphor. Strayed’s first chapter is an example of this. Other chapter titles represent Strayed’s thoughts or feelings at a point in the memoir, like the chapter “Splitting” where she notes her “life had split in two” (35).

Frago’s chapter titles are often lines from the chapters. This technique puts importance on those lines, such as her first chapter ““Can I Play with You?”” In this chapter Frago meets her abuser for the first time and initiates contact. This question has child-like qualities and forces the reader to consider the implications of this line since it is written twice. Other chapter titles like “Our Little Secret” or “Tying the Knot” give the reader an idea of what is to come but still allow Frago to narrate her own story.

When crafting trauma memoirs, another aspect authors use to control their trauma is pacing. This technique is not unique to memoirists but it allows the memoirist to control what readers read and when. Wendy Ortiz utilizes this technique by inserting her “Notes on an Excavation” throughout her memoir. In these “Notes,” Ortiz reflects on different aspects of her trauma such as when she visits the La Brea Tar Pits and how the pits fossilized a woman who lived 10,000 years ago (233). The La Brea Woman reflects

Ortiz in that both were discovered; the La Brea Woman by archeologists and Ortiz by herself acting as an archeologist. Not only does her pacing and use of reflection allow her to control how her story unfolds, she interjects her survivor voice into her trauma narrative. Ortiz also reveals the source of her trauma early in her memoir. The organization of Ortiz's narrative places her trauma to be read almost immediately. This placement allows her control over her trauma in the narrative since she has exposed it from the outset. Further, since readers know what Ortiz's trauma is from the beginning, she is able to focus more on the way she tells her story than on her actual trauma.

Integral to the pacing of her quest narrative, Cheryl Strayed employs flashbacks throughout her memoir, which are interwoven into her narrative. Each flashback is used to highlight an element of Strayed's past before she began hiking the Pacific Crest Trail to illuminate the different reasons she decided to do so. When Strayed first begins hiking the trail, she continuously questions "*what have I gotten myself into?*" (50). Strayed wonders at her ability to follow through with the promise she made herself: "It was a deal I'd made with myself months before and the only thing that allowed me to hike alone" (51). Recalling this promise prompts her to think of why she decided to make the hike to begin with. "I'd imagined six months ago, back in December, when I'd first decided to do this" (51). This example allows Strayed to make the flashback a part of her present narrative.

The flashbacks not only add exposition to Strayed's trauma memoir, they control the pacing of the narrative so that Strayed reveals what she wants and when she wants. Strayed's flashbacks bring in pieces of her past to unfold in the present, which tells a bigger story. Like Ortiz, Strayed reveals her trauma early, in her prologue, and then

expands in her first chapter on how deeply it affected her. Since Strayed locates her trauma so early in her memoir, she is able to expand on it throughout her novel through the use of flashbacks. This organizational technique of pacing does not make Strayed's trauma the climax of her memoir, which gives her more control over her trauma.

Like Strayed, Margaux Fragoso discloses her trauma in her prologue in an attempt "to make sense of what happened" after her trauma ended (3). With these words and the placement of her trauma in the beginning of her memoir, Fragoso is free to explore her trauma with a specific goal in mind. Since readers already understand Fragoso was the victim of childhood sexual abuse, she uses her memoir to present what happened to her. Fragoso chose to write her memoir in a strictly chronological way. Another important element all memoir writers must consider is what to include and what to leave out. Because Fragoso's memoir spans fifteen years, she needed to decide what was most important to the story she told. With her operating memoir as a tiger, Fragoso included scenes from her childhood where she pretended to be a tiger. One of the many games she and her abuser Peter play is "Danger Tiger" where she would always play the tiger and Peter would play different characters she rescues (33-34). This instance of Fragoso rather than Peter representing the tiger supports the idea that Peter and Fragoso are to be judged the same. The controlling metaphor Fragoso chose led her to approach her memoir in a way that would have been different if she had selected another metaphor to stand in for her trauma.

#### IV. Shared Experience

Memoirists face many challenges when they explore the self with the intention to share it with readers. Women memoirists face an additional challenge because they write in a male-dominated culture. Because we live in a society that “emphasizes rationalism and scientific thought” (Belenky 55), “women’s talk,” described as “hesitant” and “question-posing,” is devalued (Belenky 17). When women write their memoirs, they transgress against the dominant culture which views men as having authority, because the authors are ignoring other voices of authority to look for truths in the self.

Feminist rhetoricians Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule hold the view that though women feel as they have something important to say, often they “feel unheard” because of the “male-dominated majority culture” where knowledge, truths, and values have been constructed by men (5). Whereas generally men see truths as black and white, women tend to see grey areas (8). Dialogue and an exchange of views allow people to be understood on their own terms (8) rather than the ones society imposes on them. To come to a consensus about how to resolve disputes of truth, women typically agree that mutual understanding is most beneficial (8).

The self becomes more important for women when their “social arrangements collapse and demands for change are imposed” because they must now look inward for truths rather than relying on outside authorities to provide them (Belenky 51). One truth women must engage with is the truth of the self, their identity. An important part in defining the self is to discover one’s voice after a trauma.

A supportive community is essential to traumatized women attempting to find their voice and trust their self. Victim identities are social constructions intended to make

sense of a cultural phenomenon. Sociologist Jennifer Dunn explains that when a cultural phenomenon is socially constructed, sociologists are “bringing our attention to the ways in which the world is meaningful to us and to how people interpret their experiences and themselves” (1601) because meaning is not inherent, but assigned (1607).

Able to influence society’s views, claims-makers draw upon and create images of victims harmed by a particular problem to gain wider audiences to care about the problem (Dunn 1610). Often claims-makers will highlight specific characteristics of a victim and gloss over others to portray an image that will garner the most attention and sympathy (Dunn 1610). Because claims-makers have provided an image of what a victim ought to look like, if a victim does not look and act the way the public expects, they are met with suspicion. It is only after a victim conforms to the claims-makers’ images are they able to prove they are guiltless (Dunn 1611). Since authors Ortiz, Fragoso, and Strayed refused in their memoirs to gloss over any unseemly character traits they held, they present a more realistic victim account to readers.

The need to conform to society’s expectations is unfortunate because many women do not align their experiences of trauma with the ones the claims-makers, and therefore society, have provided. This disallows them from claiming victim status in society and can confuse them as to whether or not they are truly victims. Dunn has also noted that women who feel as though they were complicit in their deviant relationships or were victims of sexual coercion are unwilling to claim a victim identity because they do not see themselves as free from guilt (1608). This is important because claims-makers and society often look for a blameless victim before they will believe the victim truly is a victim.

However, only seeing oneself as a victim inhibits her from taking control of her future and “acknowledging her true strength and courage” (Davis 191). Because the victim suffered trauma and lived to tell it, she is instead a survivor who possesses the resources “that enable victims to persevere” (Davis 193). This same strength and courage not only allows a trauma survivor to take control of her future, it gives her some of the tools she needs to construct a memoir where she can speak her trauma. Further, belonging to a supportive community is important for women memoirists who write about men and authority.

To find one’s voice requires trust in the self and the belonging to a supportive community that will accept one’s voice. Once women find their voice, some want to use it to “make a difference to other people and in the world” (Belenky 133). Women without the shared experiences of others can broaden their experience base because they have encountered new knowledge. Because women “find it easier to believe than to doubt” (Belenky 113), writers’ stories are accepted as truths which can generate new truths.

Belenky et al. assert that “society teaches women to put their trust in men as defenders,” (57) and that men “hold the power... and have the ultimate authority” (58). However, there exists failed male authority. This “loss of trust in male authority” (58) leads women to seek out others with shared experiences. For these women, truths are no longer handed down from men in authority, but rather shared and “grounded in the firsthand experience of others most like themselves” (60). Belenky et al. note that in the twentieth century, “only one out of twelve published and acclaimed writers” were women (17), suggesting an alarming lack of female voices in the literary community and a need for more. Memoirs function as firsthand accounts of a personal experience. This means

that women are able to look to memoirists who have gone through a similar experience for truths. Women are able to gain knowledge by observing the self and others because they “draw comparisons between their own and other people’s experience” (85). Because women rely on a sense of connectivity, a sense of shared community is important, especially when attempting to define truths.

Women memoirists can be seen as transgressors against the dominant culture which views men as having authority, because the authors ignore other voices of authority to look for truths in the self. When the opinion that our society “values the words of male authority” (Belenky 146) conflicts with a woman’s opinion of truth, a disagreement arises. Many women feel that when authorities begin to inflict their opinions on them, the experience is hostile (88). Rather than an “invitation to growth,” women see these authorities as attempting to stifle and silence the voices they have worked so hard to gain (88). When women’s memoirs are about failed male authority, the view of them as transgressors can increase from the dominant standpoint.

However, women memoirists who have experienced failed male authority can use their memoirs to gain back some of the control taken from them. Two such authors, Wendy Ortiz and Margaux Fragoso, wrote of the failed male authority they experienced as victims of childhood sexual abuse. Herman suggests that the women who are able to find meaning in their trauma “that transcends the limits of personal tragedy” are the ones who are able to recover most successfully (73). According to Herman’s assertion, Ortiz, Fragoso, and Strayed have recovered from their traumas successfully because they have shared their “personal tragedies” for others to learn and grow from (73). These authors



have realized the value in opening their lives to others and have decided to share their “personal tragedies” in the hopes of positively affecting others.

Joseph Davis discusses the positive effects of attending support groups and reading autobiographical accounts by women who have been through, and survived, trauma (178). Trauma memoirs can legitimize the trauma victims have experienced, and provide an “immediate, deeply personal, unquestionably sincere, and often highly charged testimony to the profound, long-term consequences of abuse and the possibility of their successful resolution” (Davis 178). Davis and Belenky et al. both see value in women reading others’ accounts as a reference to compare their own experiences (178, 85). An additional benefit to reading others’ trauma experiences is that the reader no longer sees her behavior as “weird, idiosyncratic, flawed, or shameful” because she can see others who had been victimized reacted in similar ways (Davis 186). These shared experiences among women reinforce their sense of self and may provide the push to create a victim account to begin recovery from a trauma.

## V. Ties to My Creative Portion

These memoirs share firsthand lived experience of a trauma, as does the thesis manuscript forwarded here. This manuscript concerns childhood sexual abuse, and employs some of the methods discussed here for gaining control and speaking trauma. The manuscript utilizes flashbacks, and reflective portions control the pacing. Like the previous memoirs, the trauma is revealed early in the narrative to allow exploration into what impacts the trauma had and how it was able to occur.

This manuscript does not yet operate from a controlling metaphor. As it progresses, an operative metaphor would allow for a more focused organizational approach from which to speak trauma. This manuscript explores not only issues of failed male authority but also failed authority in general, and the failure of adults in power to own up to truth and responsibility. By speaking its truth, this manuscript allows power to be gained back from a disempowering situation.

## *Freshly Fourteen*

### Preface

I didn't care about her. I didn't care about any of them. I cared only for myself at the moment in which I was living. I didn't recognize her in my journals. She was more like a movie or a memory of dream. It would take me years to feel anything, positive or negative, for her. It would also take me years to see that my dad was actually an irresponsible pothead. He was an adolescent in the body of a fifty-year-old. Though my feelings for my mother remain mostly negative, I am now able to recognize the struggles she went through and contemplate what made her act the way she did. I am beginning to feel pity and understanding toward my mother.

The "her" I didn't care about in my journals is actually me at fourteen. Me at fifteen and sixteen and even all the way up to where I am now. I didn't care about her until recently, when I started reading my journals and I realized how stupid, ignorant, and naïve she was. I realized she wanted so many things so desperately that she made so many huge mistakes in trying to get them. I see she was fooled, tricked, and lied to her whole life. I see she needed more than anyone could give her. I see that I can try to give her now what she needed then.

I was sixteen and dressed what I thought was nicely for the forensic meet that day. After the school van dropped my classmates and me off in my high school parking lot, I waved goodbye to everybody and got into my car, still smiling and happy from the high-scoring performance I had given. I fingered the tiny medal I won before slipping it onto my key ring, not knowing my life was about to change forever. The weather was nice so I cracked my windows and sunroof as I drove home, singing along with the radio. I wanted to get home quickly to change out of the stiff clothes. I needed to change into my work uniform. No matter how many times I washed my work shirts, they still smelled like bread and pickles. But they were comfy. I had gotten good at parallel parking out of necessity, and I hummed the last song I had heard on the radio as I walked up to my house. When I got inside I went to my room and tossed my things on my bed. I wandered out to the living room to see who else was there.

I went towards the bedroom in the back to brag about my forensics meet and the medal. Through the closed bedroom door I could hear a voice. I softened my steps and moved slowly, hoping to eavesdrop on a juicy conversation.

The afternoon sun was trying to push its way past the frosted window of the plastic back door to my right. I remember thinking it was odd that the bedroom door was closed, because it rarely was. Something important or secret was happening. At first all I could hear was the voice. It was difficult to decipher what the voice was saying, but the closer I came to the door, it seemed to be speaking with conviction. It was bold, matter-of-fact, and enunciated every syllable as though trying to prove a point on a pulpit. Once

I got close enough to the door, I was able to begin making out the words. I was surprised. I recognized them. They were my words.

“I looked over at Madisyn and she was staring at me,” I heard the female voice say. I instantly knew what she was talking about. She was reading an excerpt describing in vivid detail a blowjob I had given.

My stomach plummeted. I felt my ears begin to burn and ring. I felt as if I was having an out-of-body experience. I had no control over my limbs. I was a puppet with a drunken master controlling my strings. Hoping to avoid making my presence known, I quietly crept back from the door, facing it as though it was a wild animal whose eyes I could not break contact with. I used the kitchen table to steady myself, and once I reached the living room carpet, I turned and sprinted in the other direction.

At that time I had no idea what would eventually end up happening. All I knew was that I was in deep shit. My secret affair was no longer a secret. I didn't know how this was going to be handled. I also had no idea that I had stepped into a line of familial tragedies. It would take me years to glean what information I could about my family's past and the heartache that entailed. The truth is still coming in bits and pieces. It is a puzzle with no picture as a guide to help me to the end.

After I made my way to the other end of the house, I felt safer in my own room. But I knew I needed to leave before the voice was done reading. I knew what else happened in the scene the voice was reading. I had an idea of what scene came next. I tore off my nice clothes and wiggled into my work uniform before I snatched my car keys and purse. I had become quite good at being sneaky, so I left my room and walked quietly through the living room. I opened the front door with the technique I had

perfected over the past couple years. I took my time to make sure the door made no sound, and kept my ears trained toward the bedroom with the closed door. The last thing I wanted was to be seen and questioned.

Once the door was shut behind me, I jogged to my car and zipped out of my neighborhood. My mind raced and I couldn't stop thinking about what I had heard. I couldn't focus on what to do next. I just replayed the words over and over in my head. How could I spin this into a benign lie? How could I keep my secret when its record was in the hands of someone else? What would happen to me? The ten minute drive to work had never seemed so short. I walked through the chiming door at least half an hour early for my shift. A coworker, Nellie, told me as soon as I came in that my dad had called and asked for me.

“What did he say?” I asked anxiously.

“Something about a family emergency.” I told her what I had heard through the door through the tears of fear and dread that I could not squelch. Nellie knew about the sexual deeds and what this new revelation had the power to do. She offered to cover my five-hour shift. After enough time had passed that I thought the effect of crying would be absent from my voice, I called my house phone number and my dad picked up.

“Hey,” I started, pacing the back room, looking at the dirty black and white tiled floor, “Nellie said you called?”

“You need to get home immediately,” he demanded, his voice full of an unusual urgency.

“But I have a five-hour shift. I can't just up and leave,” I tried to reason. At that age, a five-hour shift was a big deal. There was a lot of money to be made and not many

of my coworkers would have been willing to pick it up on such short notice, if at all. Even though Nellie had already agreed to work it, I was doing everything I could to not go home.

“Your grandpa is in the hospital, and if you want to see him again I suggest you get here fast,” my dad lied. My maternal grandfather had been suffering from brain tumors. I knew he was not in the best of health but that he had been doing well recently. I recognized the lure my dad was throwing to me and was saddened that he was lying.

I knew he was the one to whom the voice had been reading, and I knew the voice was my mother’s. They both knew my secret. I could imagine my dad either laying or sitting on their bed, my sexual activities flying at him from my mother’s mouth. I imagined there were a lot of sighs, deep breaths, and guttural sounds. He probably covered his eyes a lot and shook his head in disbelief and wore an expression which read he did not know what to say or do.

My dad had never lied to me, except for the time I asked him about the truth behind Santa Clause and the Tooth Fairy. Something my mother had said shortly after one Christmas raised my suspicions so I went in search of my dad to ask about Santa. He admitted that Old St. Nick was indeed a farce. I was as devastated as an elementary school child could be after realizing Santa was a phony. What else had I been lied to about? Who else was imaginary? I once again sought out my dad to ask another question. He told me when I was older that he could not stand to see any more of my crocodile tears and quickly assured my younger self that the Tooth Fairy was, in fact, very real. This was the only time I knew of that my dad had lied to me and it broke my heart that he was doing it again now on my mother’s behalf.

I tried again to explain the plight of my five-hour shift, but he simply ordered me to come home and hung up, leaving me defenseless. It took a while before I gathered the courage to leave work. I walked around and cried, asking Nellie and Michaela what I should do. I have no idea what they told me, but I remember Michaela asking if I normally wore eyeliner. “No,” I answered, confused. It took me a few minutes to ask her why she wanted to know. It amazes me how my mind was working at that time. My parents knew at least some of my secret, yet I wanted to know why Michaela had asked about my eyeliner habits.

“Because if you did,” she explained, “it’s all gone now, and your parents would probably see that.” She knew the situation I was in. I had told her about my mother’s reading as soon as she came into the store. She was the first of my friends to know how it all began over two years ago. After I recorded my first kiss in my journal, I called her and gushed about it. She was almost as excited as I was.

My rapist is eleven years older than I and will have to register as a sex offender anywhere he lives. I was barely fourteen when the sexual abuse started. I’ve grappled with what word to use to describe my situation. After nearly a decade, I’ve decided rape is the most appropriate term, according to the society in which I live.

But I am ambivalent. I don’t believe it fully captures what happened between Jeremy and me. Any word I choose to categorize what happened will bring with it certain connotations and expectations. “Rape” makes me think of a crying woman, trying in vain to fight off her attacker. “Sexual abuse” brings to my mind a small child, unable to stand up for herself, and perhaps not realizing what is happening. “Relationship” seems too generous. It makes me think of small gifts, inside jokes, dates, and hand holding. Though



a woman can, and does, have a certain type of relationship with her rapist or sexual abuser, it is not the kind I would want. I now realize Jeremy did indeed mislead me to get what he wanted, but I wanted it too. Am I really a victim? Was I more of a co-conspirator? I believe I am a little of both.

Jeremy was a few days shy of his twenty-fifth birthday, married, and had an infant daughter when I recorded our first inappropriate encounter in my journal. I had turned fourteen a couple months before.

I don't remember the first time I saw him. It might have been when he was carrying furniture into his new trailer. He and his wife moved in next door to my family when I was in the fourth grade, and I was immediately possessed by a childish crush on him. He was short and stocky, muscled and tan from working construction. His tattoos gave me the sense he had a rebellious side and the way he smoked his cigarettes made it look cool and easy. His eyes were hard to ignore. The bright, clear blue of them seemed as though they held the waters of the Caribbean and his husky voice was nearly hypnotic.

He and Heather soon became friends with my parents, which allowed me to spend time around him during shared dinners or casual conversations on the large deck he built for his home. Jeremy never treated me like the child I was, and I appreciated that. It made me even more intrigued by him. He would joke with me as he would my parents. He didn't ask about school, as adults often did, but talked to me about the music we both liked.

Jeremy was to be my first date. He told me he would take me to the movies as my parents looked on, smiling. I was thrilled. My first date! With a handsome man whom I was very much interested in. In my room that night, I mentally constructed what I would

wear. The date never happened. He probably forgot he had even promised it. What did end up happening was far beyond what my imagination would have ever allowed me to think.

According to the research I've read, people who read this story may say without a doubt that I was a victim of sexual abuse. Any sexual contact between an adult and a minor is illegal. I agree that I was a victim of sexual abuse, to an extent. But my experience with childhood sexual abuse and rape was messy and confusing and not as clear-cut as what the media portrays on TV. The kind where there is clearly a damaged victim and a monster of a child abuser. I know. I lived through it.

Women from all walks of life are raped. Old, young, rich, poor, educated, married, promiscuous, chaste, black, white, and every color in between. I live in the Bible Belt, where rape, stereotypically, doesn't happen.

Rural Kansas has always been my home. I can't imagine what it would be like to live somewhere where I couldn't experience all four seasons. Summers are hot and humid, especially when there's a storm on the way. The humidity makes breathing a chore and my undergarments sticky and my hair frizzy. Every year, when it's over a hundred degrees in the shade, I always remark how I forget how hot it gets. The opposite can also be said for winter. Each January, as I clutch my coat around me, I realize I have forgotten how cold it gets here, too. Though a foot of snow from a single storm isn't common, it's not rare either. Below zero wind chills make my fingers hurt and my body shake a little too dramatically.

I spend hours driving up and down I-35. For most of my drive, it's scenic. I pass small towns. I pass fields of cattle and horses. There are trees and wide prairies full of

long grass and wild flowers. Where I drive, however, I don't pass any corn or wheat fields Kansas seems to be known for. Our state flag features a large sunflower on it, our state flower. I have never seen one of these monstrous yellow-petaled things, the face as large as a hand. The sunflowers I do see grow in clusters, the blooms no bigger than a rose. My state isn't as flat as the stereotype suggests. There is rarely a time I can see more than a couple miles ahead of me unless I'm on a hill.

Tornadoes are a threat, as *The Wizard of Oz* makes clear, though I have never seen one myself. Kansas is located in Tornado Alley, and the tornado sirens blare most often in spring. The dusk sky turns an eerie green and rain rushes to the earth in torrents. Hail usually comes right before the calm, which means the tornado is close. I've been through this pattern enough times to be mostly unafraid of the destructive wind tunnels, though I've seen their damage on TV. As a child, my family would make the twenty-minute drive to my grandparents' house when the sirens sounded. My dad grabbed his baseball card collection while my mother toted picture albums to the car. My grandparents had a basement and my family lived in a trailer park which didn't have sufficient shelter.

Growing up, my neighborhood was the kind where if you wanted to play with another kid close to your age, all you had to do was walk down the street until you came upon a yard with an unsupervised youth in it. The only rule on which the neighborhood seemed to unanimously and unofficially agree was that when it got dark, all children were expected to be home. Other than that, we had as much freedom as we could want. Besides our imaginations, there were two points of interest just outside the trailer park's borders.

The first was a set of winding bike trails in the woods overlooking the Kansas River. The dirt ramps and trails had been made by the kids who came before us. As far as we were concerned, they had grown in the woods as the trees had. I watched with a jealous awe as other kids flew through the air on their bikes. I was too scared to go fast, afraid I would lose control and hurt myself. As a child, going off the dirt ramps as fast as my shaking legs would allow my bike to go gave me the same type of thrill as experimenting with pot and the opposite sex would later, in my early adolescence. Although people's homes must have been no more than one hundred yards away at the most, the dense foliage and lack of man-made structures assured us we were hidden away from the grown-ups.

The second location, from which my brothers and I had officially been banned from going, was a bridge that held up the frequently-used train tracks and allowed a slow-flowing stream to pass through into the river. Of course we went anyway. Going to the bridge was such an unforgivable offense that when my youngest brother came with our middle brother, Brandon, and me, his beloved tricycle was used as leverage to keep him quiet. We would threaten to throw it away if he told our parents we had gone to the bridge. He never told. The colorful graffiti, which only went about a fifth the way up the walls, always interested me. When taking in the underbelly of the bridge as a whole, the graffiti seemed so congested since it was confined to where people's arms could reach. The north side of the bridge was where the natural part of the creek was, and when my brothers and I soaked our feet in it, little fish would come to investigate. This was a place I would visit throughout the time I lived in the trailer park, either with my brothers, friends, or alone.

I had been breaking my parents' rules since I was young. They tried to protect me, to keep me from drowning in the river where the bike trails were, to keep me safe in my seatbelt in the car, to keep disease away via vaccination. My parents protected me from obvious threats, threats that never ended up hurting me. My mother had taught me to be mistrustful even of police officers. I was to never answer the door if one knocked. What she and my dad didn't think to warn me of lived next door to us. Our neighbor, who was married with kids and good friends with my parents, was someone they trusted. I was someone they trusted. The three of us were so naïve.

Just as the bike trails, the bridge was another place where childhood exploration gave way to adolescent curiosity. Unlike the bike trails, the bridge was much more heavily secluded and nearly impossible to sneak up on. I would later learn the teenagers called this place Smoker's Tunnel. They would go there to get high. The steep drop off and narrow trail used to reach the bridge only made arriving at it more satisfying. The concrete which formed the base and floor of the bridge had broken off in large sections as the ground underneath had eroded away with time. Eventually, an essential piece of this floor fell away into the concrete graveyard below, and the only other way of getting under the bridge was too dangerous for even us trailer park kids to brave. By the time the floor had crumbled away, I stopped visiting the bridge so frequently. Besides, what more could this place offer me? I had gotten drunk and high there, played dangerously with fireworks, and even had sex with an on-and-off boyfriend. The scar on my ankle makes me laugh at this memory. Since there were only huge rocks and concrete, I had rubbed away the skin on my ankle bone in the throes of hurried, clumsy, Vodka-fueled sex. I had

a car by that time, which was much more interesting than the serene, man-made waterfall, and it allowed me more freedom.

At work, I wasn't reminiscing about the bridge as I gathered the courage to go home after my dad's phone call. After putting off the inevitable for as long as I could, I finally went to my car and began driving. There was an exit I had to take to get off the highway, one that veered off to the right. The speed limit told me to slow from sixty to thirty before I exited. The city added that sign after a school bus tipped over. Between the exit and the highway was at least a thirty-foot drop with only a guardrail as old as who knows protecting drivers from the lush greenery. It was all grass, no trees, and constantly manicured by the city. I had always thought it was a drastic contrast in elevation as compared to the road the state allowed fourteen year olds to drive on.

The exit itself was higher than the area surrounding it; there was a steep drop-off on both sides. As I was coming up on it, I wondered how much time I could buy myself if I didn't turn the wheel. Would my parents forget about what they had read if my car kept going straight, leaving the asphalt and flinging me into the deep valley of grass? If I was hurt enough to be hospitalized for a few days or even weeks, would their concern about my survival overshadow the information they had discovered? I pictured myself hooked up to numerous cold, beeping machines which told the people who knew how to decipher them how my body was doing.

I was so desperate to avoid going home to face my parents, I actually visualized my body all torn up in a hospital. I would have done almost anything not to go home. As it turned out, I was too much of a coward to take that chance, and I pointed the wheel right when the time came.

My mother had me at twenty. I've looked through pictures of myself as a baby. She snapped them, using up rolls of film at a time to capture the different faces I made. When my two brothers and I were younger, she tried to be the kind of mother you'd expect to see featured in a parenting magazine. She was creative, hands-on, involved. Every Christmas season when I was young, my mother made homemade candy, fudge, and treats to be shared with our extended family. I remember her allowing me to crush the peppermints she would use in one recipe. I would sit on a barstool at the peninsula which separated the kitchen and living room in our trailer and watch as my mother moved seamlessly from one recipe to the next, never burning anything. The ample countertops and kitchen table would be full of treats in various stages of completion.

This side of my mother was the one that wouldn't be expected to let her daughter sneak around with the neighbor who was eventually sent to prison for it. My mother's good side would have been ever watchful for small lies, vague explanations, or the way her daughter began showing her sexuality. This type of mother would have monitored her daughter's clothes more closely to ensure there wasn't an unseemly amount of cleavage. This type of mother wouldn't have let her daughter be raped for over two years. But my mother was not always this type of mother. When she wasn't the good mother, she struggled with the demons of her past. She simply could not get rid of them, no matter how much beer she used to try and drown them.

My childhood had two sides: the one my family showed the world, and the one which we kept secret. Though our neighborhood was safe enough for kids to wander and play alone for hours, my parents once locked us kids out of the house so they could get high with some of their friends. My story's pieces don't add up the way they ought to for

a sexually abused girl. My neighborhood, upbringing, parents, and personality don't typically lead to what happened to me, what is expected to happen to a girl in my position. But they did.

The way my mother behaved when she was good shouldn't have produced my affair. My childhood was mostly good. I had two parents in the home. I was friends with my brothers. My girlfriends were fiercely loyal and fun. I did the types of things normal teenage girls did. I got good grades, had a job, played sports. There is no way my upbringing could possibly lead to a sexual relationship with a man nearly twice my age. My early life is the opposite of the stereotype of girls who have been raped. There is an unaccounted-for idea that something in their early home lives opened the door for sexual abuse. This is simply not true.

Some research I've read has unearthed a correlation between difficult home lives and sexual abuse or rape. However, my psychology teacher's voice from community college plays in my mind: "correlation does not equal causation." The upbringing of the girls in these studies suggests that their early lives led them to see the world differently than other girls, and to make decisions those other girls wouldn't make. They put themselves in positions which led to their abuse. There is probably some truth in this, but I very much doubt any woman wants to be raped.

I wonder if anything in my early life might have led to my sexual abuse. Do I fit into any of those categories the researchers explored? Both my parents wanted to see me do well. I was always clothed and fed. There was some physical abuse, sure, but not anything that put me in the hospital. But what about my need to please my mother? What about the affirmation I seemed to need from others? What about my mother's drinking



and wrathful temper? What about my dad's constant state of being stoned? What about his frequent absences? Did any of these things put me on a path to sexual abuse?

My mother wasn't a monster. She could come close to one when she was drinking, but for the better part of my childhood she acted as though photographers from *Ladies Home Journal* might show up unannounced to snap pictures of the birthday parties and snacks she had created. She kept the house clean, kids fed, and bills paid like most mothers. But I never saw any of my friends' mothers take such care in creating Halloween cupcakes, making homemade Valentine's Day cards from construction paper, or tallying the number of trick-or-treaters who visited each year like mine did.

Christmas morning always brought excitement and wonder as to what was wrapped and stacked so neatly under the tree. Before my parents found out my brothers were allergic, we had a live tree which we decorated as a family. There were the ornaments we kids had made, strings of popcorn, which my youngest brother, Bronson, was photographed eating off the tree, and colorful blinking lights. My mother taped up all our school-made snowmen, reindeer, and Santa creations on the kitchen cabinets.

There was, however, a protocol for Christmas morning. We were not allowed to wake my parents until seven. My brothers and I would sit in front of the tree, real or not, and wait with the impatient anticipation of tearing open wrapping paper. We could not get started until a pot of coffee was brewed, so once I learned how, I made the coffee to cut down on wait time between my parents' arousal and gift time. Once my mother was in place with her camera, we were able to begin with our stockings.

Every year, without fail, there was a toothbrush in each one. Santa was apparently very concerned with our periodontal health. We kids would pass out the presents to their

respective owners and wait for the go ahead from my mother. She would sit in a recliner with a trash bag in front of her so we could clean as we went. She reused paper boxes from one year to the next, a habit I picked up, so we had to be careful not to damage them. Only one gift was unwrapped at a time, with all eyes on the person opening it. This was to make the morning last longer. After each item was revealed, we were to hold it up next to our smiling faces and allow my mother to document the moment. Maybe that's where I got my need for documenting.

The wrapping paper from Santa was always different than the kind my mother used, and his 'a's were written with the hook above, to mask my mother's handwriting. She was thorough in keeping Santa alive. One year my dad sought out a grey hair from his moustache and neatly placed it on the lip of the glass of downed milk to help keep the idea of Santa going. My brothers nearly wet themselves that Christmas morning. Since I knew the truth about St. Nick, I smiled and agreed that it was indeed amazing.

Brandon found out about Santa's existence at school. He in turn did Bronson a favor by letting him know as well. Even though my mother knew all of her kids were fully aware that Santa was a lie, we still received gifts from him every Christmas morning. They were always in different wrapping paper than my mother's, and the 'a's were still fancier than my mother's.

I wasn't thinking of how great my mother could be as I drove home. I was more concerned with how terrifying she could be and how much I did not want to be doing what I was doing.

I figured I would be grounded once I got home, so before I went, I drove a block further than my usual turn and parked in an empty grocery store's parking lot. The car I

drove then had a six CD changer, but it was in the trunk. I popped it open and retrieved the compact metal casing wherein my favorite CDs were housed. I knew my parents would more than likely take my car away, so I wanted to at least have my music available during the long stretches I would serve in my room. I knew the circumstances surrounding the words I heard my mother read had the potential to reveal earth-shattering consequences, yet I did not react in a way that reflected that. My mind worked in a very logical way. I had to deal with one thing at a time. Whatever was most pressing got bumped up to the top of my priority list. In the abandoned grocery store's parking lot, my mind decided the CDs called for more attention than the personal hell I was about to go home to.

Before my secret was discovered, my family had been keeping secrets for generations. It seems we are a family of secrets. My great-grandmother, Ruth, was tall and loved to wear flashy, gaudy costume jewelry, some of which she gave to me when I was young. A Methodist, Ruth had a love affair with a man her father did not approve of. Their relationship resulted in a love child, Barbara, my maternal grandma. Ruth's father sent her away to have my grandma. A man of influence, Grandpa Barnum (of Barnum and Bailey's Circus) had an obituary printed in the newspaper so Ruth would believe her lover was dead. Ruth signed a paper agreeing to give up my grandma for adoption in return for food and shelter at the place her father sent her. Grandpa Barnum, learning of the paper, took my grandma, his first grandchild, once she was born.

At first, Grandpa Barnum kept my grandma because he didn't think Ruth could take care of her. Once Ruth married an acceptable man, Grandpa Barnum gave my grandma back. That man died, and my grandma was plucked away once again. She lived

with different family members throughout the county, but spent much of her childhood traveling with Grandpa Barnum.

When Grandma was around twelve, she tracked her mother down. Ruth was living in Kansas City with her new husband, The General. Grandma left Minnesota to live with them. The General officially adopted my grandma, but didn't behave as a father should. He abused her verbally, physically, and sexually. He told her if she didn't do what he asked he would send her to an orphanage, something grandma didn't want to live through again. For her own survival, Grandma went along with her living situation and kept it a secret. After high school, she moved out to room with some girlfriends.

She married my grandpa, Andy, once she turned twenty-one. Grandpa had family secrets of his own. His brother-in-law had sexually abused his younger sister. The family, wanting to avoid a scandal, kept it secret and went on as though nothing had happened. The family would get together regularly, including the brother-in-law. My grandpa never told my grandma about what the man had done.

When my mother was around twelve, my grandma told her the secret regarding The General, to protect my mother. Grandma became increasingly anxious about the state of her secret and went to see a psychologist for advice. The second visit to the doctor included my grandpa. The psychologist told him my grandma had control over the events that were revealed in the office, and that he was not to react once they left. Not knowing what the events were, grandpa agreed. The doctor told him what grandma had told her. The General's abuse was laid bare for my grandpa to know. Grandma planned on telling Ruth about the abuse, but my grandpa snatched that away from her.

Grandpa, who had been working for The General, stormed into my great-grandparents' house, cussing and throwing his tools down, quitting his job. Ruth had no idea what was going on and the two couples became estranged.

Grandma was pissed. Her husband had not done what he promised he would do, and she never got the chance to tell her mother about the abuse. The relationship among the four of them remained strained for years and there was no contact until my mother and uncle decided they wanted their grandparents over for a holiday. Even though my mother knew what The General had done to her mother, she still wanted a relationship with him, which boggles my mind. When I found out, I instantly hated The General. When my grandma told me recently he was moved to hospice care I thought, "Good. I hope he dies soon." My grandparents consented begrudgingly with the visit, as though there was nothing they could do. Visits became more frequent, though they must have been laced with tension and negative feelings from my grandparents.

I wonder what made my grandparents allow The General and Ruth back into their lives. If my husband confided in me that he had been molested by a family member, there would be no contact between that person and us. Period. How can someone allow their wife's abuser into their home, share conversations, and eat a meal, like everything is normal? "People will do almost anything to keep the family unit intact," my grandma's psychologist had told her. Maybe this was the normal my family needed, was used to. I don't know how the couples could interact with each other the way they did, but that was how it was. Grandpa had already gone through interacting with his brother-in-law after he knew that man had abused his younger sister. Perhaps he didn't know another way of acting but to keep secrets. Though everyone but Ruth knew what had happened between

my grandma and The General, there were still holiday get-togethers. That secret, though exposed, lived on. I had no idea of my family's complicated history as a child. All I knew was we went to Ruth and The General's every year for Thanksgiving, and they came to my grandparents' on Christmas day. It seems nearly every family member had their own secret to bring to the table. I didn't have one yet, but mine would lend to the tradition of secrets and living with and through those secrets.

My conception was what kept my parents together in the infancy of their relationship. Dad had told me when I was a teenager that he had been thinking about leaving my mother before she announced the pregnancy. I felt enormous guilt, believing I was the reason he had decided to stay with her, but he assured me he had wanted to.

My father, a plumber, met my mother at a sandwich shop where she worked, and a date ensued. Their Catholic wedding was planned a couple years later, but the surprise introduction of my small beating heart led them to elope to Las Vegas. My parents moved from my grandparents' house into a new trailer in the biggest trailer court Kansas could boast and created two boys before we moved into a house when I was seventeen. Even at a young age I sensed my role in our family.

I was a semi-caregiver and the "good" child. For some reason, I had a nurturing instinct that came quite naturally to me, and my younger brothers profited from it, especially when my dad's union job took him away from home and we were left to deal with my mother. Even when he was home, my father could not always protect us from her.

One morning before school I was in our kitchen near the sink. I didn't need to turn on a light. The sun was bursting through the windows. My mother appeared out of

nowhere, as she had the eerie ability to do and, without a word, walked up to me and slapped the left side of my face. The other side of my face bounced off the edge of the Formica-covered countertop. I could not have been more than four feet tall since my face met the counter's unforgiving edge so squarely. I immediately began to cry as the skin around my eye started to slowly swell and begin its flashy parade of showing off the different colors it was able to produce, as though the impact was an alarm clock, waking the men in charge of a Macy's day float.

My mother grabbed my chin and turned my face to look at my eye. She went to the phone to inform my elementary school that I would be absent that day. I was more upset that I would be missing out on the school's cinnamon roll breakfast that I had signed up for than I was about being slapped and injured by my mother, because I wasn't surprised by her actions.

Although violence directed towards me was not unusual, my brothers definitely had it worse. I was much more afraid of my mother than Brandon was and his ass was spanked the most out of the three of us. Bronson fell in the middle, wavering between avoiding corporal punishment and being like Brandon, whom he idolized as an older brother.

In their baby pictures, the only way to tell my brothers apart is by their eye color. Bronson inherited brown from my dad, and Brandon and I had gotten our mother's green. Brandon is about four years older than Bronson, who gladly wore Brandon's hand-me-downs for much of his childhood. Both boys were always skinny, and as they grew their shoulders broadened further than my dad's, though Brandon's grew more. His lanky limbs and wide shoulders force him to wear XL shirts to cover his stomach. Bronson is

more proportional, able to wear more fitted shirts. As they grew, it was easier to tell them apart in pictures. Bronson had lighter hair and his teeth needed much more orthodontic care than Brandon or I, though we all went through the fun of having braces.

Brandon and I were sometimes mistaken for twins when we were younger. This intrigues me now, as we didn't look terribly alike. We shared many facial characteristics, but my cheeks were fatter, and his nose was slimmer. Perhaps it was our size and the fact that we were brother and sister that made people assume we were twins. We were born only 16 months apart.

Spankings were not palm-over-pants, but belt or Matchbox cars plastic racing track on bare skin. These weapons were put into use when my mother felt her hand was not doing a sufficient job of inflicting pain. I assume this discomfort was meant to punish us in order to teach us something, but I cannot remember what lesson my mother was trying to teach me as she dragged me down the windowless hallway by my long hair. My feet tried in vain to get under my body so they, rather than my hair, could support my weight, and my hands groped frantically upward for hers.

Though my mother was emotionally, verbally, and physically abusive, this is not a story about abuse. I could have easily turned to Jeremy for comfort, as an excuse to be compensated for what my mother did to me, but that wasn't how it was. The abuse I suffered at the hands of my mother is part of my story, but she was not a terrible person. At an early age my mother had turned to drinking to cope with her problems. She used alcohol to numb herself. When she was drinking, she could not be a mother. She drank often.



My mother liked cleanliness and order, so she taught us how to clean her way. Every week my two brothers and I would rotate areas. The kitchen, laundry and bathrooms, the living room. Though there were a plethora of specific actions to be taken in each area, no checklist was ever given; it was memorized. I would play with the dishes in the soapy water of the shallow sink, using a clear glass to examine the bottom or search for forks when I made the water too hot. I hated cleaning the chairs at the kitchen table. They were cumbersome to move and sat precariously upside down on the table as I scrubbed their legs and spindles. I'm surprised none of them ever fell. Luckily, I never got a splinter from wiping down the plywood shelves in the cabinets with vinegar and water. We did this to deter bugs, but it also helped keep my mother's large Tupperware collection in order.

By age seven I could wield a toothbrush around the bottom of a toilet and not flinch. By age eight I could scrub away my brothers' dried piss with only a sigh. I knew by heart where each of my mother's shirts belonged in her dressers or closet. I knew where each glass angel was supposed to go after dusting the shelves of the entertainment center. I knew not to spray cleaner directly on the stove because of the pilot light for the gas. I knew the orange streaks of water that raced down the wallpaper when I sprayed it with cleaner were from my mother's cigarette smoke. I knew not to stand directly under a fan whilst dusting it. I knew the best time to clean a shower was right after one was taken. I knew if I did not do something right the first time I would have to do it again.

As an adult, I am thankful for what my mother taught me about bleach and Pine Sol. Her fanaticism about keeping the house clean has led to my preference to do the same, though I'm not as extreme as her. My mother knew where everything was in our

house and could tell me with confident reliability how to find it. While she was busy trying to keep the house clean and orderly, our lives were becoming anything but. The older I got, the more family secrets I had to keep. I didn't tell anyone about the night my mother used the living room furniture to barricade the front door to keep my dad out. I didn't tell anyone when I found my dad's huge pot stash above the kitchen cabinets, or when I learned he was selling it. I didn't tell anyone my parents had brought in a new year with an eight ball of coke.

The mindset of doing something right the first time allowed my achievement-oriented personality to flourish. I was good at school; I liked it. School came easy for me and I was the type of student many teachers would like to have. I always did every part of my assignments, asked questions if I didn't fully understand something, and participated with earnest in class discussions. I took charge in group work and made checklists of homework assignments. In fourth grade I volunteered to cash in my recess time to help first graders with their math skills, using a pointer to direct them along the board of multiplication tables. In seventh grade I volunteered some of my Saturdays to help my English teacher with whatever she needed. I was constantly on the honor roll, and my soccer coach would always call my parents to congratulate me, since it was printed in the local newspaper.

I was also good at being good. Seeing the way Brandon was treated when he misbehaved reminded me to not to as he did. My chores were always done, I was home before curfew, and I rarely lied about where I was going. I made cards for my parents on their birthdays, a habit I had picked up from my mother. She believed handmade cards meant more than store-bought ones, and they were much cheaper. I wrote thank-you

notes, an etiquette my grandma taught me. I picked wildflowers from our backyard and put them in a vase the kitchen because I knew my mother liked it. Even as a teenager, I held my dad's hand because I knew he liked it. He would always comment on how my hand used to only fit around one of his fingers. I smiled every time.

Considered mature for my age, I enjoyed the special attention and responsibilities I was given. I was proud that my parents recognized something unique in me and did whatever I could to make sure they continued viewing me that way. When parent-teacher conferences rolled around, I basked in the positive ways my teachers described me and my behavior. The warm feeling continued as my parents would tell me how proud they were of me on the car rides home. I was good at this, at being a good student, a good daughter, so I strove to please my mercurial mother and continue to be my dad's princess.

Because I was "good" it might have come as more as a shock to my parents when they learned I was sleeping with Jeremy. A "good" girl wouldn't have done that. A "good" girl would have told her parents what happened when Jeremy tried to kiss her in his trailer. Like my mother and family, I had two sides as well. My "good" side was the one I let everyone see and admire. My secret side, the one that smoked cigarettes and pot, drank, sneaked out, and had unprotected sex, was for my journals and sometimes my closest friends.

The pageant my mother entered me in when I was in third grade was not a beauty pageant, rather it was one that highlighted "good" attributes about its contestants. During my personal interview, I told the three adults my favorite part of soccer was working together as a team. I described how I helped paint the elderly women's fingernails when I

volunteered at a local convalescent center. By the end of the pageant, I had won so many first place awards I was automatically eligible for the national competition.

By the time I was fourteen, my parents had gotten used to my good girl behavior. I no longer received five dollar bills for each 'A' on my report card. If I didn't complete a task perfectly, I was chastised by my mother. It seemed I had set the bar too high, and I needed to constantly live up to it or my parents would either be mad or disappointed. I had created a paradigm for myself, one that eventually I could no longer reach as easily as I used to. I was burning myself out at the age of fourteen. Brandon had decided to rebel against my mother at nearly every chance he got, so much of my parents' attention was directed at him and the trouble he caused either at home or school. Bronson was often caught up in Brandon's at-home shenanigans, so he was disciplined as well.

Though my parents' attention had shifted away from me and my good deeds, this is not a story about an isolated girl craving someone to pay attention to her. Many child abusers tend to prey on girls who are desperate for attention. Yes, it was at this time my neighbor began showing a significant amount of interest in me, but I had friends and teachers who were also paying attention and doling out praise. Jeremy simply gave me a different kind of attention. A kind I had never known before but wanted. I was curious, flattered even, that this attractive man wanted to be around me.

Whenever my parents left us in the care of a teenage babysitter, I would lie in bed thinking of all the terrible accidents that could happen to my parents. Car crashes, robberies, and other tragedies I saw on TV played through my mind. I would pretend to be asleep when the babysitter checked on me. I stayed awake until I could hear my parents' voices. The knowledge that they were safe was comforting in a way I can't

explain. Only after I knew they were okay could I allow myself to sleep. I had some kind of need to know that my parents would always be around. Even with all their flaws, they were my parents, and I needed them. I needed the stability my mother's chaos provided. I needed my dad's affection. Though they were by no means perfect parents, they were my parents, and I was used to how we worked as a family.

Once my affair with Jeremy began I thought I was living the most incredible lie. What I didn't know was that my family had been living lies for decades. Though he told me not to tell anyone about us, and that he could go to jail for what we were doing, I couldn't keep our relationship confined to the pages of my journal. I told my best friends. I told girls who were just friends. I told boys to impress them.

I didn't know at the time was that I was not the only one in my family who was living a lie. Keeping secrets. Once my relationship with Jeremy was discovered, it led me down a rabbit hole of familial lies, cover-ups, and secrets. Though it would take years to learn of these, I might not have unearthed them without my secret being exposed.

Jeremy's presence did not create this story. He is just a part of it, just as I am a part of my family's story. Jeremy did, however, allow me to learn about my family's story. He allowed me to learn about myself, about where I came from. I am the one, however, who will determine where I will go and who I will be. He gave me tools I never imagined I would need. My mother gave me tools as well, as did my dad. But nobody could ever give me everything I needed. For what I was lacking, I got myself. I had never been helpless, my mother made sure of that. As I got older, I learned more and more how to get what I needed.

At fourteen, Lindsey had been my best friend since fourth grade. We were nearly inseparable. Almost permanent fixtures at each other's homes, we each called the other's mother "mom" and were treated like a fourth child. I went on vacations with her and her family and she practically lived at my house the summer we met Josh and Jeremy.

The brothers were a year apart in age and we each had our eye on one. What started as a friendship among the four of us lead to Josh and I dating on-and-off. Regardless of Josh and I's relationship status, we all managed to continue our friendship for a couple years. Most summer days Lindsey and I would ride on the back pegs of their bikes as we cruised around the trailer park. Sometimes we visited Smoker's Tunnel so the boys could get high while Lindsey and I threw rocks off the bridge or flattened pennies on the nearby train tracks. Mostly, though, we walked up and down the streets, talking, laughing, and making fun of each other.

As we entered high school, Lindsey and I joined the tennis team. Neither of us was very good, and I was exceptionally terrible. This, however, didn't bother me since I joined for the social factor and to practice playing with my dad, who was very good at tennis. I also ran and eventually threw javelin for the track team. Though I was a mediocre sprinter and an awful thrower, I stayed on the team because of the new friendships it forged. In addition, track meets are notoriously long, so I was able to socialize with friends and boys for hours in between events and on the bus rides to and from the meets.

I had played soccer since I was four or five up until I was twelve, so when my high school formed a team, I immediately joined. Soccer was a sport I was passionate about; I had grown up with it, as had my brothers. My mother attended nearly every game

we played as kids, yelling from the sidelines. My dad helped coached my first team, when I was more interested in playing in the dirt in the goalie's box than paying attention to where the ball was. The recreational teams were always co-ed, and the boys were much better players than I. To make up for my lack of ball control, I was aggressive. I loved seeing the shocked faces of the boys on the opposing team when I slammed into them with my whole body and stole the ball. Just because I was a girl didn't mean I wasn't tough. Shortly after I joined the soccer team at my high school, I met a boy who would become my first serious boyfriend. To spend more time with him, I left the team. I was doing everything a normal girl my age was: playing sports, spending time with friends, dating.

I got my first period the summer I was thirteen. Lindsey and I were swimming at another friend's house. When we went to use the bathroom together, I noticed blood on the toilet paper. I told her excitedly. "Let me see!" she demanded. I wiped again but there was hardly anything. Lindsey went to tell our other friend, who already had gotten her period, and she gave me a tampon. Since I had practiced using them before for when the time came, I inserted it like an expert.

When we got back to Lindsey's, she let everybody know what had happened. "Of course you would get your first period here," her dad said, and everyone laughed. I felt as though I was somehow different, as though that blood was symbolic. Though I still felt and acted like a child, my body told me differently. When I got home and told my mother, she asked to see the tampon. I pulled it out like an odd trophy. She held it up by the white string as if examining her own handiwork.

She gave me some advice, like how no matter how many times I wiped, there would always be blood, and to let her know if I was on my period when we went to visit her in-laws because the big dogs could smell it and might bother me. She gave me a diaper-like pad to sleep in, and went over the basic laws of gravity. All my pride about getting my period seemed to leak out of me and onto my favorite Scooby Doo shorts during the night. I awoke in pain and blood was everywhere. Of course my mother had been right about gravity, she was right about everything else. Apparently I was expected to sleep like a corpse while menstruating to avoid leakage. My first day of being a woman let me know my carefree childhood days were over, at least as far as my vagina was concerned. My mother gave me advice that I would have figured out on my own. She neglected to give me advice about what would truly hurt me, the man who lived next door.

I had my first real kiss when I was fourteen. I say real because there was tongue involved. My body had recently shed its childlike characteristics and had begun the painful metamorphosis into a woman. My growing breasts were constantly tender. My dad had to explain to my younger brothers that they could no longer wrestle with me like we used to. I would find bruises on my breasts after playing with my brothers, and the dark colors on my newest features frightened me. My nipples had begun to expand; their tenderness exceeded that of my breasts. I could no longer wear the lacy bras Heather handed down to me. Once I had to cover a nipple with a Band-Aid because it was chafed so badly from the rough, yet sexy, womanly material. Despite the pain my breasts brought me, they also provided joy and pride. I grew them. They were mine. I was growing up.



And then the stretch marks came. Thick, dark, erratic, purple lines on my love handles. My body decided I needed more fat around my hips, and it was impatient. My skin did not share the urgency of my body. It saw no reason to change what it had been doing for thirteen years. Growing, protecting, dying, falling off. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

At the time, my mother drove a minivan and my brothers sat behind me. I sat in a captain's chair in the middle of the van. One day I was getting out, walking awkwardly, hunched over, my shirt pulled up in the back and my stretch marks were bared. "What is that?" my youngest brother asked, pointing at the embarrassing marks.

"I was scratched by a bear," I told him. In truth, they did look like scratch marks, all five or six of the long, terrible, indented, scraggly lines on me. I got them on my breasts as well, but at that time nobody but me was looking at my breasts, so the marks were hidden under bras and shirts.

Apparently I wasn't the only one who noticed the change of my breasts and hips and butt. Jeremy did as well. He whistled from his porch one spring day as I was walking home from school. I went to talk with him inside. It was not unusual for me to go to Heather and Jeremy's alone. I loved playing with their infant daughter and enjoyed spending time with my older, (but not too old) cool neighbors. As I ascended the steps to his porch that day, I could not have known what my actions would lead to.

When my secret was discovered, I had no idea what effect my personal story would have on others in my family. Without my secret, I doubt I would have learned many of the secrets I know now. I wonder how differently things would have turned out for me had my secret stayed that way. Or if I never had that secret at all.

I was not thinking about my family's habit of secrets as I drove home. I was only concerned with mine. When I went home to my parents' house that day I had no idea that what had happened two years ago could have led to the confrontation I was about to be dragged through.

It had started off so simply. I was fourteen, and Jeremy whistled at me as I passed his trailer to go to mine. It wasn't a catcall, just a whistle to get my attention. Turning toward him from the sidewalk, I smiled and waved. He motioned me over and I walked up the stairs and opened the screen door. The front door was already open, letting the March light flood the living room. Immediately my attention went to his daughter Madisyn, who was crawling around. I sat on the floor and urged her to crawl over the green carpet to me. She did and I smiled with pride. As I made faces for her and blew in her face, Jeremy moved from the couch and lay close to me on the floor. We began to talk. I don't remember what we talked about. I do remember the excitement and anxiety I felt rolling around in my lower belly and that in that moment he was paying attention to me.

Suddenly, Jeremy grabbed my ankles and pulled me about five feet along the floor. He stood, bent over, and helped me up so we were standing face-to-face. I laughed it off and lay back down to play with Madisyn. He bent over and tried to tickle my stomach but I didn't know what to do. Finally, he got up and said, "I tried to make a move on you and you didn't even take it." I didn't recognize the move. Couldn't have picked it out if someone showed me a tape of the situation and told me to look for it.

“Well, why don’t you try again?” I asked, and the swarming in my belly increased. I felt like I was going to be sick. He crawled over to me and lay alongside my left side with his face close to mine. His arm was around my waist and our noses touched. I pecked his mouth with mine and immediately sat up when I felt his mouth begin to open, my back straight. I held Madisyn up between us, a human shield. I spoke to her, made faces to make her laugh.

“What?” he wanted to know.

“Not now.”

He kept asking, “Now?” and pulled me toward him by my ankles, trying to kiss me again.

“How about I put Mady down and leave?” I said, and stood as I made sure she was safely on the ground.

“Later?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I agreed, “later.”

It had begun so easily. A whistle, a touch, a kiss. It had gotten so complicated. And it was about to end so awfully.

And now, here I was, coming up on my parents’ home, trying to pretend I didn’t already know what they knew. I parallel parked my coupe in front of our brown trailer. Before I got out, I shoved the CD casing to the bottom of my purse so my mother would not be tempted to take it away out of spite if she spotted it. She had eyes like a bird of prey. My body felt as it had outside the bedroom door and I staggered up the five steps our porch required to gain entry into my mother’s fortress. I was still trying to keep up the ruse of my grandpa’s illness when I opened the door, even though I knew it too was a

lie. My dad called me back to their bedroom. “Are we going to the hospital?” I questioned as I walked towards his voice, hoping my own voice wasn’t giving away what I already knew.

Only an hour earlier I had heard my mother’s voice reading my journals and I now thought I had some kind of upper hand. I knew what this little powwow was really about. But this “upper hand” might have really been a curse. My dad has always told me that knowledge was power. Walking in through the front door, I held more power than they knew. I was already aware that I was about to be bombarded with questions I could not neatly explain away. I wonder if my ignorance to the situation would have been better. It would have at least given me one last hour of the seemingly carefree life I was tied to.

I wonder if my parents had read that part of my journal; the beginning of my relationship with Jeremy. I had been so excited I dug out the only journal I had and recorded every detail I could remember. Writing in my journal would be something I did religiously for the two years that followed.

After my dad didn’t answer my question, I took a deep breath and walked through the living room, kitchen, short hallway to their bedroom. I stood near the open door. I tried to make my face show no emotion. My mother stood near the open on-suite. “Sit down,” she commanded. My dad was to the right of her, leaning against her dresser. I saw my journals on her dresser and I knew I had lost my “upper hand.” The light from the bathroom behind her shone on them. I knew it was useless to ask about grandpa again.

I scrunched my body in a corner of my parents' bed as close to the headboard and as far away from them as I could get, as if space could protect me. As usual, my dad was the calmer of the two, at least outwardly. As I sat miserably, still in my work uniform, my mother read portions of my journals aloud as she stood in the middle of the room. I don't remember what she read. I didn't care. I inwardly winced because of my dad's presence. I didn't want him to hear what his little girl had done and what had been done to her. My face remained stoic as she threw accusatory glares in my direction. I had failed. I had gotten caught. Whatever happened next would be my fault. My dad leaned against my mother's dresser, his arms and ankles crossed and his head bowed. Whenever I gathered the courage to sneak a glance at him, to plead with my eyes to make my mother stop, all I could focus on was the balding circle near the back of his head, so I looked down at my hands and the grey blanket on their bed.

"Are you sleeping with Jeremy?" my mother hissed, a journal still in her claw. I cracked immediately. I had never been a good liar, and with the overwhelming amount of proof my mother held in her hands, my story that everything I had written was just sexual dreams and fantasies would not hold up. Both my parents were standing, already displaying their dominance over me. I could not say for sure if this was their intention, or if they were too wired to sit, or if they were revolted by me to be any closer than they already were, but they felt bigger than normal. Or maybe I just felt smaller.

"Yes," I quietly admitted, so low I hoped my parents would hear a "no." I was defeated. Now my head was bowed. I focused on my hands resting in my lap and was intensely sad that our relationship was coming to an end like this. We had managed to keep it mostly a secret from everyone for over two years. Of course my friends knew;

something that exciting could not be left untold on my young lips. My mind raced. What all had she read? Did she read everything? How far into the stack of journals did she make it? Did she read the passage where I wrote about rape?

*I had a sudden flash of what if he rapes me? What if he doesn't stop? Before I said stop, I thought I don't want Jeremy to be my first. I don't want it now, here. So then he stopped and tried talking me back into it but I refused, so I gave him head. After I got home I checked (just joking not really thinking) to see if I was bleeding. I stuck my finger with toilet paper up and I was! I saved a piece and put it in a baggie. Oh, while I was giving Jeremy head, I asked, I have to make sure, was that sex? No. Are you sure? I asked later. Yes.*

Although I did not grow up as a member of any church and did not consider myself particularly religious, I used to pray. Every night before I went to sleep I had a short list of favors I would ask God for. The first major request I always opened with was that I didn't fall in love with Jeremy. I don't know why I prayed for this. Maybe even at the time I knew our relationship was all fantasy, that nothing of any real substance would or could come of it. The second favor was that we did not get caught. Divine intervention or not, only one was granted. Jeremy would not be happy and it was because of me. I had gotten us caught. My sadness quickly turned to panic when my mother mentioned Heather's name.

"Why would she need to know?" I squeaked out from the corner of the bed. The situation was becoming more out of control and I had to try and handle it. I had thought that once my parents knew about Jeremy the relationship would be terminated and that

would be that. Nothing else would change. I was stupid to think my mother would be satisfied with that. She was a woman of conclusions.

“Well I would think she would want to know what’s going on when the police come to arrest her husband,” my mother shot at me. My stoics switched to begging and I pleaded with her not to tell Heather. But my mother always got her way. She ignored me as she slid into a jacket and gathered up a couple of my journals. I didn’t move from the bed and my dad stayed silent.

When she moved to the living room, I followed. She took her keys from her purse and I watched her walk out the front door with my journals tucked close to her side. I sat in the living room, deflated and unbelieving. Did she want Heather to read my journals? Would Jeremy’s kids see him get arrested? When would I see him again? What would I say? How could I possibly express how sorry I was that I had fucked up and gotten us caught?

Her plan was to make the forty-five minute drive to Heather and Jeremy’s to give Heather a heads up before the cops came for her husband. My journals were her proof. My mother thought the police would act immediately, which is why she went to Heather’s before calling them. She was wrong. I would learn years later that our family had been invited to the barbeque she was crashing. My mother would later tell me through the tears in her eyes that pissed me off to no end that she was doing Heather a favor. She had known there would be drugs at the party and she didn’t want Heather’s kids to be taken away because they, like Heather, like her very own daughter, were innocents, she told me. She had already decided who was innocent and who held the

guilt. Although now I can see she did the right thing, I was furious that she was meddling in my relationships. In my affairs. In my life.

My emotions could not decide what they wanted, so they played the roulette wheel to settle on what I would feel at any given moment: terror, anger, disbelief, numbness, worry. I have no idea where my brothers were in all of this but I do not remember seeing them. To top it all off, I had no chance of getting my journals back. They were already in my mother's possession, and now the police were going to be invited to my mother's party. The thought of not having my journals in my control made my chest tight. I had always had my belongings tucked away where they belonged in my room. Nothing of mine was outside the four purple walls of my oasis. And now, several of my most important belongings were no longer under my control.

When my mother returned, she called the police from the kitchen, my dad and her sitting at the table. I was still in the living room, too scared to pay attention to what my mother was saying over the phone. I wondered what Heather said. What Jeremy did. What he thought. How she felt. Was he mad at me? What did Heather think of me? Would I ever see them again? I had so many questions, but no one to answer them, and I certainly couldn't ask my parents. They wanted to see Jeremy in the back of a cop car. They didn't seem like they would care that I was afraid for him, for our relationship.

And why would they be? He had hurt their daughter. He needed to be punished. I don't think they realized at the time that I was being punished as well. I had feelings for Jeremy, the man they now hated. I felt so alone and terrified, yet they stood as a united front against Jeremy. Against me. And the cops were on their side.



I had never before thought about what it would be like to have the police called on me. I had been pulled over for speeding, and not stopping fully at a stop sign, but those traffic violations seemed normal. I knew I what sort of questions I might be asked. I knew I would probably have to show my license and registration. I knew I may or may not get a ticket, which I would pay and the whole offense would be over. I was familiar with interacting with police in these types of situations. So when the police came to my house because of something I had done outside the realm of vehicles, I had no idea what to expect.

The firm knock at the door startled me. The cops had to know someone was expecting them, so why did they knock as if they were executing a search warrant? My mother opened the front door and showed them into my world. Their presence made everything very real. I sat rigidly in the green recliner in the corner of the living room and noted how out of place they looked in my home. Their rich cornflower blue uniforms were official, starched, and authoritative. They sported clean, short haircuts and spoke professionally. Their badges glinted when the light struck them and I could see the pressed creases in their pants and on their short shirt sleeves. Black guns on their hips, notepads held secure by their Velcroed breast pockets, pens standing at attention. Everything about them was neat and proper.

I felt as though I was in a movie, that what was happening was not my real life. Only criminals have the police called on them, but I certainly was not a criminal. I was in a dream-state as they introduced themselves to my parents and got right to business. They didn't bother to shake my hand or even ask who I was. My parents walked the cops

through the living room to debrief them in the kitchen behind me. It was as though I was not even there.

There were so many entries my mother could have showed them. I wondered if they would read the one where I lost my virginity to Jeremy.

*Wednesday, August 13, 2003 10:13 pm*

*We were talking and both getting turned on. So we went up on the roof. First, we were facing my house. He was fingering me and I was giving him a handjob. Then, we go to the roof of his shed, on the opposite side. The slope was very steep, so I was a little nervous. I went down on him until he came. Then we went back down to the porch. We were talking and I guess sort of bonding. He asked me why I would ask if he was doing stuff with Summer, "she's Heather's sister." I go, well, I'm your babysitter. He laughs and goes that's what's so funny. So as we got down, though, he goes, do you need some water? And laughs. He goes, there's some coke behind you. Then he goes, so do you like me? Or am I just an experience? I go well, I like you and you are an experience, what about me? He goes, let's just put it this way, if I was your age, we'd be going out. [smiley face]. Then he says, if you were 18 and I wasn't married... and laughs. I ask, so what made you want to do stuff with me? He shrugs and goes I don't know. Cuz you have a smokin' body.*

As the cops and my parents passed the wicker shelves on their way to the kitchen, I noticed the knick-knacks my mother had been collecting for years. I saw the ribbons my brothers and I had won throughout the years. I saw my parents' marriage license held in its thin gold frame. I once sprayed those shelves with bleach. I also sprayed the curtains

in the kitchen because my mother made me rescrub the entire kitchen floor on my knees because I didn't do it right the first time. This was before Jeremy.

In the kitchen, my mother did most of the talking. I wasn't paying attention to what she told the men about Jeremy and me. My parents sat in the wooden chairs they had bought years ago. My brothers and I used the boxes they came in for a makeshift clubhouse for weeks. They took up the entirety of the hallway to our rooms. My mother made us get rid of them once they started drooping beyond repair.

The policemen stood near the sink. They asked questions and took notes in their tiny notebooks. They listened mostly. They were less than ten feet away from me, but for all I knew they were on TV, muted. They were probably judging to themselves silently. I wonder now what they might have said to each other when they left. What did they share with the rest of the policemen at the station? Had they heard stories like this before? We lived in a small town; how many rape cases have they been involved in? Did they tell their wives about their day, about the girl whose parents had called the police on her for having sex with an older man? Do they remember me now?

I sat in the chair, and stared at the ground in front of me, not thinking of anything, though I know I should be thinking of everything. What could I say that would get me out of this? How could I lie my way out of there? No answer presented itself. My belly was heavy with anxiety, and I wished the four of them would talk forever so I wouldn't have to face whatever came next. The sun was setting, and it brought the chill of the spring night into the room through the open door. I pulled up my legs and hugged my knees to my chest for warmth. *What was going to happen to me? To Jeremy?* I was numb, yet felt everything. The fear I had been carrying for years was unfurling like a

hideous flower. It was finally happening. I was really caught. We were really caught. The realization that the secret I had been keeping for years was exposed squashed me. I was worried; the unknown has always been an obstacle I hated facing. I liked order much the same way my mother did.

I looked over the counter and saw my mother had my journals stacked one upon the other on the kitchen table. A rainbow of varying spine widths that held two years of my adolescent life. All my secrets, thoughts, feelings, handjobs, concerns, fears, winks, hopes, sins, kisses, expectations, let downs, caresses, tears, laughs, blowjobs, lies, truths, actions, fucks, dreams, fantasies. My self. I wrote about how my virginity came to an end:

*Then we talk about the first day, the day we kissed. We talked a lot and I didn't get home 'till 9, so if I remember more I'll write it. But we were discussing sneaking out and agreed to meet behind my shed at 11. I told him to bring a condom just in case. (We were talking about doing it, but I wasn't sure if I could.)*

I don't know why I kept the journals. I wrote in my first journal off and on for years with no real dedication. The day Jeremy kissed me changed everything. There was an unexplainable urge to record everything that happened between us. I didn't want to forget a thing, no matter how small. I wrote everything. I kept a pen and piece of paper hidden near my bed so that if I remembered something that needed to go in a journal I could jot it down and write it the next day. I created my own shorthand to save time. A single word stood for an entire event. Each journal entry was dated and time stamped. Some days I had more than one entry. I would still record the time of each new occurrence.

Something inside me knew this kiss with Jeremy was important. It changed me; it was my first kiss. Indeed it deserved to be memorialized with a description in my journal. But my writings were more than recording what happened to me in a day. They made my life permanent. The words made the actions true. If it was written down, it had to have happened. I wrote so I wouldn't forget. I wrote so I could go back and relive my own life. As it turns out, rereading the journals makes my stomach hurt. I don't relive my own life. I relive hers. I feel pity for the girl who wrote her life. She was so blind. I feel anger toward the man about whom she was writing. Sometimes, I feel nothing.

I began to bring a journal to school with me. I would write in it during Latin class, pretending to be taking notes. Often my hand would cramp because I simply had to write everything in one sitting.

*I go out to the kitchen to get some water, (mom's passed out, her meds, Jeremy was getting her drunk and high so she would pass out.) and I see him out the kitchen window. He starts humping the air. I turn on the light and show him my boobs. This is about 9:45. He motions for me to come out. So I sneak out my window and go through the backyard. He's waiting for me at the end of the fence. I join him and Heather comes out. I wait until he comes back. He pulls my pants down and starts giving me head. Oh MY GOD! The he comes up and we kiss and he rubs my boobs. The pulls his shorts down and puts it between my legs.*

I stopped writing shortly after my journals were taken. My entries became fewer, and there were more days separating them, until eventually they stopped. A family friend told me she thought writing in a journal helped fill a void for her, and once whatever she needed to happen happened, she stopped writing. I still don't know what my void was,

nor if I even had one. Did I write to tell what was happening to me or was there something more psychological at work? Were my diaries like a captain's log, or were they companions that listened without judgment? They took my stories and held them safe between their covers, promising to hide them from others. They did their best. But their best was not enough. Many others read what I had written.

*He gets behind me and bends me over. After many unsuccessful attempts to get it in the hole, he asks me to help. Then, he gets his fingers wet and rubs me to get it really wet. I help him in and it HURTS!!! He's pumping from behind and I tell him he'd better not come anywhere near me. I won't. It hurts a whole hell of a lot at first, then starts to hurt but feel Really Really good at the same time. Then, just as the hurt starts to recede, he pulls out and jacks off until he comes. The pleasure part felt good all over. So he comes and goes, well, I guess we'll try it again later. I go yep. He says, see ya next time. I can't wait. It felt really, really good. Maybe tomorrow we can sneak out.*

When I first started transcribing the journals on my laptop I was amazed at how unattached I was towards my own life. It was as though I was writing about someone else's life events instead of my own. The writing was so technical, as though I was simply describing the facts of what happens during a chemical reaction. I was distancing myself from myself. Was it to protect myself? To keep at bay the pain? To make it fiction? As though it did not really happen to me but to a character? Someone who wasn't real?

Is this why I chronicled my life in my journals the way I did? With such detail and lack of emotion? Why did I need to capture every moment, everything I could remember about the events that transpired? So they wouldn't take up any memory in my

actual brain? So I could revisit them if I needed to later and still have everything the way it was, like a file saved away on a computer? But memory doesn't work like that. There are many entries I read and don't remember at all. The only way I know they are real is because they're in my journals. I would never write something in them that didn't actually happen. If I had a dream, I would write that it was a dream. If I made up a fantasy, I would remind myself at the end that it was fiction with a "Gotcha!" Everything in my journals was real and the way I saw my world.

People could tell me a million times in a million different ways that what happened wasn't my fault. That it is never the victim's fault. I was manipulated, he used my emotions against me, etc. And they are right; I know they are right. Logically, I have no real defense against their argument. I agree with what they say, what I have been told. But I *feel* differently. And feelings and logic often don't mesh well together in my experience.

My parents and the two cops made their way into the living room and stood in a semi-circle around me, the cops closer than my parents. I was still in the recliner. One of the officers asked in his professional voice if I knew why they were there. I answered, looking at the floor, "Because I've been doing things I shouldn't have." My tone revealed my frustration, anxiety, anger, betrayal, responsibility, terror, and all the emotions which don't have names. I don't think anyone but I caught all the weight that came out with my words. I believe the four adults thought I was being difficult and uncooperative, moody and aloof as teenagers often can be. I don't think they understood I was doing everything I could not to break down and start sobbing. I was terrified. I hated myself. I hated my parents. I hated the police. Interestingly, I didn't hate Jeremy. I was worried about him. I

gave the answer my mother would approve of. I knew she thought what I had been doing was wrong. Honestly, I shouldn't have been doing the things I did with Jeremy, so I wasn't lying. But for fuck's sake, I was sixteen that day.

As I look back as an adult, I wonder why neither of the policemen offered me an alternative. That the things I had done weren't wrong. That I wasn't the criminal. After all, they had listened to my mother talk for a while. They knew the basics of the story. How in anyone's mind was I, a sixteen-year old high school sophomore, in the wrong? They said nothing else to me. My parents ushered them to the door, and thanked them. My parents also did nothing to comfort me. I was in trouble. I wasn't treated as a victim yet. Why was my mother so angry with me? Was she projecting the anger she might have felt toward herself onto me? Since she couldn't protect me from Jeremy, did she blame me? I didn't see her for the rest of the night.

The cops told my parents they would take the journals to the station, which was less than a mile from where we lived. Their original intention had been to make copies of the journals' contents, but since there were so many, they decided to use the journals themselves rather than copies. Apparently they gave up copying once they realized how much time it was taking. I don't blame their shortcut. I had even made it easy for them. I had numbered the journals, indicated their start and stop dates, and tallied up on the back inside flap how many times I had had sex and with whom. Sometimes the tallies were dated as well. It was almost as if I was doing the district attorney's job while writing about my sexual escapades. You're welcome, Wyandotte County.

The journals kept all the secrets I didn't even dare tell my best friend. They were unfiltered in a way that didn't translate to my communication with people. My fourteen-



year old self held back no detail, no matter how minute, awkward, disgusting, or unimportant. Every single thing my memory recalled was recorded in pen, lest the graphite from a pencil be rubbed away. The journals were meant for me. Just me. There was no style, no anticipated audience, and no desire to appeal to anyone. There were just facts. The facts of what I did, what was done to me, what words were spoken and to whom. There was just me.

I wonder now, since there were copies of me at the police station, who had one? Did an officer sneak a passage whilst he was flipping the pages to be scanned? Did he take it home; imagine faces to the names, curves and hair and teeth and tongues and genitals that my original left out? Was he aroused? Did he use me for sexual pleasure? Were there more than just him? The pages read very much like an outline of a porno scene, giving the actors, locations, stage directions.

All anyone who read my journals needed was a little imagination to make the words come alive. To make me come alive.

After the police left, I hurried to my room and lay on my bed and stared into the nothing that had become my life. I had an infinite amount of impossibilities ahead of me. I could feel the metal bars of the futon support beneath me, as though I was the princess who could feel the pea beneath dozens of mattresses. My gaze was stopped by the matching black bars above my head, the ones that supported the upper bunk of my bed. I could see the purple mattress cover showing through the evenly spaced bars. The ladder that led to the top bunk was made of the same metal rods and they hurt my feet spectacularly when I climbed them.

My dad had installed some pipe insulation on the bars, though it had become loose with use. My mother insisted I sleep on the top bunk in order to preserve the bottom mattress, though nobody used it but Lindsey and me. She wasn't sleeping on it so why did she care how flat it was becoming? My dad took my side on this particular disagreement, asking the same question I had, but my mother won. As always. My consolation prize was the padding. My mother needed so much control in the house, she dictated where I slept in my own room.

When my dad came in he didn't knock. He just opened the door and walked in. He walked a few steps and leaned against my mirrored dresser, his arms and ankles crossed, head slightly bowed so he could see me better, lying on the low bed. He was about seven or eight feet from me, standing to my left once I turned from my back. My room wasn't very big. I had my bed, two dressers, and desk. They took up nearly every inch of wall space. I had to scoot closer to the edge of my bed to see my dad's face. It seemed far away since he was standing and I was lying down.

His weight might shift the precarious picture frames I have on my dresser, I thought to myself. One of them didn't have a support on its back. It was being held upright by strategic placement and gravity. Everything in my room had a specific place, and I could always tell when something was amiss. When I was younger I would watch my friends with anxiety as they inspected my treasures in their hands, waiting for the moment they put them down, in the wrong spots, so I could return them to where they actually went. Sometimes I only moved them half an inch.

The dresser dad leaned on was old. My parents bought it, along with its taller mate and matching desk and chair, at the Fort Leavenworth Post garage sales once they knew they needed furniture for a child. It is made of real wood, and has been painted numerous times to reflect my age. At the time, it was matte black with light, almost white, lavender paint flung and drizzled upon it. Before that, it was white with the pink trim my mother labored over like Michelangelo. In the kitchen, I helped her paint the drawers.

I don't know with certainty where it is, but there exists a picture of me in a hideous over-sized sweater with a terrible knitted design. One of my parents has it; they split up the pictures after their divorce in 2009. There is a paintbrush in my hand. My dresser drawers are on top of spread newspapers to prevent any paint from dripping on the kitchen floor. I am young, in elementary school, and smiling broadly at the camera. My dad must have captured the moment, as my mother is crouched next to me, looking intently at a drawer with a crease in her forehead.

I still have that furniture. It has come with me to every place I have lived since I moved out of my parents'. Now it is all matte black, yet there are lighter patches showing

through from where the paint has scraped off. I don't bother to fix it. I keep the furniture because I can't afford to buy a new set. I also like that it is made of real wood, and not cheap particle board dressed up to look expensive. I like the idea that the set is mine and has been with me since birth.

My dad looked at me for a while. I became increasingly uncomfortable, not knowing what was going to happen. "Did you know Jeremy was pissing blood?" dad asked. The question came from nowhere. I was quite surprised that of all the things he now knew, this is the one thing he wanted an answer to. I looked away from his face and noticed the flashy, magenta-colored trophies on a shelf to the right of him. I won the four of them when I was nine, right before Jeremy moved in next door. Back when I was still a good girl.

It was such a strange question my dad had asked, one I was not expecting. My mind needed a break from everything that was happening with Jeremy. I stared at the trophies and remembered how I won them.

I was in the third grade at the Distinguished Youth of America Scholarship and Recognition Pageant and had just won my first of four first place trophies. As I returned to my seat I saw my dad flash me a thumbs up before he went back to his. Undoubtedly he was taking pictures. After the second or third trophy I heard my dad yell "You go, girl!"

When we first brought the trophies home (there were five total), my parents displayed them atop the entertainment center in the living room. After their novelty wore off, the trophies ended up in my room, where I still displayed them with childish pride. My dad looked at me with a dark face.

I was probably only silent for a few seconds, thinking about the trophies. Though I was surprised by dad's question I did not hesitate with my response. "Yes," I answered, as I turned toward him more, proud of my knowledge about Jeremy. Glad that I know this intimate thing about him. Heather had told me about it and how stubborn Jeremy had been about going to see a doctor.

"And you still had sex with him?" his voice lowered in tone at the end of his question.

"Yes," I said indignantly, yet a little unsure.

"Disgusting," he replied. He unfolded his arms and legs and left. He shut my hollow door as he disappeared into the hallway.

*Disgusting.* I was devastated. *Disgusting.* My dad thought I was disgusting. What a horrible thing to say to a sixteen-year old. *Disgusting.* I sobbed into my pillow so no one could hear. It was one of those cries where your whole body gets involved, as though to say to your heart and mind, "don't worry, I'm here for you." My stomach was one clenched muscle, which rounded my back and shook my feet. My throat hurt from the gulps of air I tried to take in through my pillow, from the small howls my vocal cords produced of their own accord, from being stretched open to allow the sounds and saliva out.

It wouldn't be until years later that I questioned what happened with my dad that day. Why did he not take this moment alone with me to ask a different question? There were infinite possibilities of what we could have discussed. He could have asked me how everything started. He could have asked how I was feeling. He could have asked if I was scared. He could have hugged me. At the time I was too engrossed with that word,

*disgusting*, to think about any of these other questions. Now, as an adult, I wonder why he didn't try to comfort me. He had to know I was hurting. At the very least, he knew I was scared. In such a vulnerable state, I needed someone on my side, someone to tell me things would be okay, even if it was another lie.

When I was young I believed my dad and I had a special bond, one my mother and I would never know. He was always honest with me, even when it was awkward. Once, when I was young, we were driving somewhere at night in his work van. He pulled over on the on-ramp to the highway to light a joint. "Look away," he instructed me. "I don't want you to be able to say you saw this." I watched other cars zoom pass on the highway as the sickening smell filled the van. This was a secret he trusts me with, I thought. He knows I won't tell mom. Once he was high enough, he let the joint burn out, and steered the van back onto the ramp and we continued our journey.

He didn't hide his drug use, and as we got older he would tell us if he was high, if we asked. Of course, we could always tell. The telltale sign was that his eyes would be red. Usually in these instances my brothers and I were angry with him for smoking. It pissed my mother off and allowed her to take out her anger on anyone who moved. When he was high he didn't even try to stand up for us; his daze allowed him to be calmer than usual and totally silent. We perceived it as indifference.

After my crying tapered off and my breathing became steadier, I rolled on my side to face the wall and wondered what was happening to Jeremy.

I would not find out until a few weeks later that he had lawyered up. Denied the accusations. Filed a restraining order against me. Claimed I was lying and that I had an

unhealthy obsession with him, which led to the fantasies I had recorded in my journals.

He turned on me.

But before I knew all this, I still had hope that we were in the fiasco together. He had insinuated so many things. Once I turned eighteen... if he wasn't married... if we were the same age... I was so enraptured with him and our dizzying secret that I had never thought twice about the unrealistic nature of what he was saying. Eighteen was still years away. He *was* married. We were *not* the same age. It must have been so easy for him to seduce that fourteen year old girl and keep her close with a well-placed sentiment or kiss. "We have all the time in the world, baby," he would tell me, and this became what I thought of as a secret phrase shared between lovers. I now wonder if our relationship ever resembled a game to him. *How long can I keep her around? How much pleasure can I derive from her? If I get caught, I have a card up my sleeve. She'll never tell. She is too infatuated with me to know what is really going on. She likes it. I'm helping her. I'm teaching her. She gets pleasure, too.*

In early May I came home after track practice, salty with dried sweat from the spring heat. I had had a good day. My parents had recently lifted my grounding and gave me my car back. They had taken it when I ran away to Jeremy's for a few hours after a fight with my mother in December. It felt good to be behind my steering wheel, listening to music I liked, rather than riding home on the bus. As I parallel parked in front of my house, I couldn't avoid seeing his old house. It was right next to ours, twenty feet away maybe. I looked away and tried to focus on the good day I was having as I walked to my front door. Practice had been easy. My friends had made me laugh. Bob Marley moaned about Mr. Brown through my speakers.



The front door was open. Before I could put my book bag and track bag away in my room, my mother called me to her. I dropped the bags down near the front door and walked through the bright living room and wondered what she was about to say. Would she ask me questions I didn't want to answer? Had she found new information? Was I in trouble again? How would I feel after? Her voice was different when she called my name. It sounded like it did when she told me my great grandma had died; tight, a little forced, uncharacteristically drawn out. She sat at the kitchen table in Bronson's chair. It was the one closest to the sink and on the opposite side of the table where she usually sat when doing bills. She was in the middle of the room, directly under the terrible fluorescent light fixture. I leaned against the hard peninsula, less than five feet from her.

I looked down at her. I could tell she was struggling with what words to use, as though she was about to yank a band aid off a day-old wound. My stomach tightened from the unknown. Her thin hair was in a high ponytail, held up with one of her ridiculous scrunchies. There were books and papers surrounding her, but I barely glanced at them. I could see her hurried, cursive writing had filled up pages of notebook paper. She had been reading about child sexual abuse lately, from books borrowed from the next town's library. Our town wasn't big enough to have its own. She kept trying to get me to read the books, too. I read the first paragraph of one a week before and decided it was bullshit, though there was something, a part of a sentence, which caught my eye. Maybe it'll be important later, I told myself as I pressed the book closed.

I can't remember what that sentence had told me. I'd like to think it tried to comfort me with the words "it is never the victim's fault" but I can't be certain. And anyway, for years I didn't consider myself a "victim." I was a willing participant. I

agreed to meet Jeremy, to sneak out, to keep our secret. I wanted his attention, and if he wanted my body I was glad to offer it. I was the one who went back to the shed for that first tongue kiss. I was the one who didn't leave his trailer when he said he had tried to make a move on me. I felt guilt more strongly than I felt victimized. His wife lost her husband to prison. His kids lost their father for their childhood years. He would not be around for birthdays, school holiday pageants, Little League games, report cards. He would not be the one to teach them to ride bikes, as my dad had done. He would not show them how to cast a line, as my dad did. I was a home wrecker. I could have stopped at any time. But the rush I felt when I thought of him or was with him was too powerful. My will was weak. It was my fault. It would be years before I realized how fucked up that view of myself was. What's even more fucked up is that I still believe all those things.

There are good qualities my mother taught me growing up. I knew how to clean well, how to balance a check book, how to get what I wanted by being firm but nice. When she wanted something, she did whatever it took to get it. I also got that from her. In certain pictures of me now, there is a strong resemblance to my mother. Nine years after my mother had read through those books, I was sitting on my couch, hunched over an article about abuse looking for similarities between what the authors said and my own experience. The paper was filled with yellow highlights and notes and questions in the margins. I lifted my highlighter with the thought, "This is exactly what my mother did all those years ago." She had spent hours poring over those books, researching, looking for answers. I had always told myself, and even her, that I would never be like her. But she is my mother, and I can't outrun biology.

In the kitchen I was to my mother's right. She took a deep breath and, as though her strength would leave her unless she hurried, strained, "Asshole has filed a restraining order against you." Asshole was the name she gave Jeremy the day she read about our affair in my journal. She paused and looked closely at my face, perhaps trying to detect a change. "He's denying everything, and says you're lying. That you made it all up."

I nodded, as though I had expected this to happen. The linoleum floor and its predictable pattern were suddenly fascinating. I couldn't lift my head. Inside I was crushed, and flinched at her words, his actions. My stomach felt as though it was full of sandpaper scraping away its lining. "Are you okay?" Her face scrunched up to resemble what concern ought to look like. "Talk to me, like how you would Dr. Courtney."

Dr. Courtney was the therapist I had recently started seeing. She had been recommended by the Sunflower House, where my statement had been taped and my vagina and blood inspected for STDs. My mother was nothing like Dr. Courtney. She didn't have the compassion or patience my therapist did, and I certainly didn't feel like talking in that moment.

I breathed out. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just a little upset." I turned away stiffly and made my way down the hall to the bathroom my brothers and I shared. I concentrated on each step as though one mistake would send me to the thinly-carpeted floor. At least my parents believed me, I thought. The door to the bathroom was a joke. The doorjamb was busted years ago from my brothers and me using the cheap door as protection from one another. It didn't even close, let alone lock. I slid the wooden stepstool in front of the door. It was heavy enough that we kids understood the bathroom was occupied if the door resisted our light pushes. For some reason, we never thought to knock.

I turned on both handles and pulled the dial up on the faucet in the shower. As the water took its time to heat up, I sat on the toilet and stared out the frosted window, the same one I had once stripped in front of for Jeremy as he whistled from his roof, when he still lived next door.

Stripping was his idea. I had never stripped for anyone and did not have a clue as to how to make it sexy. He had tapped on my bedroom window one night. I slid it open. “What are you doing, playing with yourself?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Why don’t you? Go ahead, strip.”

“Someone will see me!” I said, my voice high.

“Yeah, me.” After a few seconds of thought he said, “Well, go in your bathroom.”

“Can you see me in there?” I asked.

“I’ll get on my roof,” he said, and hurried away.

It had only been a month since he kissed me for the first time. After he left, I changed out of the sports bra I had been wearing and put on a pretty red bra. I also changed into a thong and found a tank top and shorts. I grabbed a bottle of lotion as a prop and walked nonchalantly into the bathroom. After I shut the door and secured it with the footstool, I opened the window as far as it would go so he could see. It was the kind of window where you had to turn the opener like a car’s window, and the glass would protrude outward.

Jeremy whistled to let me know he was there. I could see the ember of his lit cigarette. I set the lotion on the tiny counter. I turned to face the window and pulled the tank top off over my head. I shimmied out of my shorts. I tried to undress in the sexiest

fashion I could think of, but it felt as though I were taking my clothes off as I would any other day. I slipped my thong off and whipped it around my finger so he could see. I couldn't see him. Unsure what to do next, I began rubbing my legs with the lotion, using the toilet to prop them up one at a time. "Take it off!" I heard him say. I stood up straight and unsnapped my bra and slid it off. I began rubbing my breasts with the lotion, looking his way and smiling, though I felt ridiculous. Was this what new strippers felt like? I smoothed the lotion onto my butt, hoping I was doing what he wanted. After a while I couldn't think of anything else to do, and felt too silly to continue, so I redressed and loudly whispered to him that I'd be going back to my room.

Looking back, he probably wanted to watch me masturbate. That was the first question he had asked me through my window, if I was playing with myself. My fourteen year-old self didn't realize this was his most probable desire, as she was too focused on stripping and trying to make her first attempt look stage-worthy. She put a lot of energy into trying to act older than she was.

Eventually I pulled myself up from the toilet seat, undressed, and stepped into the shower. As soon as the water hit me I began to cry. I sat on the floor where the falling water mixed with my tears. I hoped the splashing was loud enough to cover the animalistic sounds of my grief as I hugged my legs to my chest. I felt the water come down on me, steady and indifferent, doing what it always had. I looked at my toes through the streaming hair in front of my face, emotions and thoughts falling on me, through me, like the water from above.

As I looked at my painted toes I thought: How could this be happening? How had I gotten here? Why did I think everything was going to turn out the way he half-said it

would? Why did I trust such a good liar? I knew he was a liar. He had kept me a secret for years.

And then I remembered being with him at his new trailer in Leavenworth county. Just a few months before, we walked side by side in his large, dark yard. His strong hand brushed mine and my belly flushed with fire. The light was far behind us, pouring out from his kitchen window. We didn't hold hands in case someone happened to look out. "I'm not sure what I feel. It could be love," he said softly. *Love. Love. Love.* The flush spread from my belly throughout my body, making my scalp tighten and my nipples harden. *Love.* I didn't know what to say so I didn't say anything. I just smiled to myself in the dark, looking down at my feet. *Love.*

The memory made me angry. What a fool I was. Of course he never loved me. He loved, if that is the appropriate word, what I did for him. What I could do for him: stroke his ego, suck his dick, obey his every order, give up my virginity, and meet him outside so he could fuck me from behind. I was a toy. I was no different than his dirt bike. He rode both for fun and the rush of adrenaline.

At sixteen, I thought my tears in the shower only represented the betrayal I felt from Jeremy. Looking back, I realize I was crying for much more than the loss of that dysfunctional relationship and the bitter emotions which followed its end.

When someone dies, people get a chance to grieve. When I was seventeen, my dad called to tell me my grandpa had passed away and I cried. I saw him in his dark, pre-determined suit at the wake. I smiled through my tears as strangers shook my hand or hugged me while they told me how sorry they were for my loss. I clenched Kleenexes at his funeral and saw his engraved name on a cemetery stone. Afterwards I ate, though I

wasn't hungry, and posed with my remaining family for a rare group photo. Whenever I hear a certain song on the radio, I think of him, and sometimes I cry. I grieve his absence because I once had him.

There are steps people take when something they love is taken from them. When a dog dies, it is buried in the backyard with some of the customs of a funeral. But how does one grieve for something they never had?

How can someone mourn an abstraction? How do you know when to grieve? What to grieve? How to grieve? What do you do when you realize you've lost something you never really had to begin with?

I knew my grandpa. I have memories and pictures of him. He was real. I touched him. So when he was placed in that wooden casket, I knew what would happen to the man who always made a big breakfast on Sunday mornings.

I have memories and pictures of my childhood, yet I don't know what happened to it. Unlike my grandpa, I don't know where it went or when it is appropriate to be sad about the loss of it. I had a grandpa, but I never truly had a childhood. Instead, I had lies and secrets to keep hidden. My childhood was stolen away by these lies and secrets.

My grandma sometimes tells me the story of when she took me to a psychic fair when I was young. She had her palm read with amazing accuracy. I wanted mine done, too. The woman said I was too young for the lines to be fully formed but took a look anyway. Surprised by the deepness of the lines on my palm, she told me wonderful things about myself. She told me I was smart, ambitious, kind, responsible, and other adjectives people want to hear when they are being described. As I looked at the variations of

crystals nearby, she looked at my grandma with a sad face. “That poor girl,” she said gravely. “She will grow up too fast.”

And I had.

I mothered my brothers. When my mother was at a bar or passed out in her bed I would make dinner for them. This usually consisted of eggs and toast, but it was better than nothing. I let them, especially Brandon, vent to me about our mother and her unpredictable and unfair ways. We had developed a kind of Morse code between ourselves. Since our closets shared the same wall, we could knock on the sheetrock and be heard. I made up a list of what the knocks meant and taped one on each of our closet walls. One knock meant “mom’s coming” and acted as a warning. Two meant she was asleep or passed out. Three was code for come to my room. Though we didn’t use the code often, it was there in case we needed each other.

I was the kind of girl who picked out my clothes for school the night before. I said goodnight to everyone, giving out hugs and kisses. I set my alarm earlier than I needed to. I made sure I had gloves in my coat pockets. I told my brothers to wear hats. I shared my umbrella with Brandon on the way to our bus stop.

While I was busy trying to please my parents, I had forgotten to learn how to make myself happy. My happiness depended almost entirely on what others thought of me. Once Jeremy began showing me the attention I craved so deeply, he became another source of happiness. A call from him or tentative plans to meet up filled me with an excitement that lasted all day. I just had to make sure I kept him interested, and my image was consistent for him. I was the fun girl. The one who was up for anything. I was



everything his wife couldn't be. I could not have him second-guessing my usefulness lest he lose interest in me. Who was I to him if he didn't want me?

After I was cried out, I stepped out of the plastic shower-tub as though I had not been crying. It didn't happen all at once, but I eventually adopted the mindset of a much more cynical and worldly girl than the one who had stepped into that shower. My world was no longer Barbies and rainbows and sleepovers. It was lawyers and district attorneys and court dates and pelvic exams and STD screens and taped depositions. It was sleeping on a blanket in the living room so I could be closer to my parents as I had done when I was scared as a child. They were on my side, and their proximity comforted me. It was squeezing tight to my stuffed dog as I slept, the one I had gotten when I was five and only held when I was sick. It was trying to focus at school, knowing I had to leave during 3<sup>rd</sup> period to attend a hearing. It was pretending I was fine. I did a lot of pretending. I had gotten good at it.

As I read chronologically through my journals for the first time, I transcribed them and also reflected on what I felt and thought as my former self was exposed again. A couple weeks into transcribing, I wrote this after reading its corresponding entry in my journal.

*Monday, June 10, 2013 1:07 PM*

*Even as Jeremy was trying to penetrate me for the first time, I was thinking about him raping me, and that I didn't want him to be my first. Those thoughts alone should have said something about the type of relationship we were in. Nobody should think their first sexual partner is going to rape them while in the throes of trying to have sex. Usually people feel regret after the sexual act, not during. I can't remember if I felt*

*regret, but I knew I did not want Jeremy to take my virginity. I even had to ask to make sure we had not had sex. A person should know whether or not sex has taken place; there should be no questions or grey areas. But my fourteen year old, inexperienced mind could not tell. I think I wanted to make sure we had not had sex so that I could still be a virgin and have my first be somebody else. I needed confirmation that I was, in fact, still a virgin. Our entire relationship was one big grey area.*

When I was twelve, my mother had to be hospitalized for about a week. The pills she was taking, mixed with an excess of alcohol, had essentially turned her blood to poison. Call it a miracle, fate, or just dumb luck, but my dad had overslept his alarm for work that day.

He usually left before dawn, so when he went to kiss my mother goodbye on that particular day he somehow noticed the grayish hue of her skin. By the time he had awakened me to try and rouse my mother, he had already called 911 and our neighbor from across the street. Dad came into my room, woke me, and said something about helping him wake my mother. Careful not to miss a step, I climbed down from my top bunk, still in a daze from sleep. As I walked through the living room and kitchen, I could see my mother laying in bed as I went to her. Her loud snoring was unusual and a sobering hand wrapped its fingers around my stomach and fully woke me.

I sat on the bed next to her. The heavy drapes my mother utilized to help insulate their room were closed, so everything was in shadows. I tried to get a response from the snoring body that was my mother by trying to appeal to her anger.

“Bronson’s climbing the doorframe in the hallway,” I said. “He’s not listening to me.” I told her anything I could think of that I knew would piss her off. She continued her

melodic snoring, her chest rising and falling in tandem with the inhales and noisy exhales her mouth produced. As I sat rigidly on the queen-sized bed next to her, my dad paced the still-dark room. I don't know why he hadn't turned any lights on. It might have been because that simply hadn't occurred to him, or because he did not want me to see my mother's color. I think it was probably the former, as my dad has never been known for his forethought.

I have always been told that I have an old soul, the ability to know things beyond my years, so I stayed calm and hopeful, trying to make my dad feel better. He walked aimlessly around their bed and raked his strong hands through his thinning hair. I was still on the bed near my mother, feeling useless and as if I had disappointed my dad through my inability to awaken her. He told me to step back so he could put some clothes on her. I stood up and watched him struggle to wrestle a tee shirt over her rolling head and limp arms. I turned my head at times to avoid seeing her breasts, trying in a way to preserve some of my mother's dignity. He slipped a pair of underwear onto her and waited for someone else's help.

In actuality, it was unnecessary for him to dress my mother, since the first thing the EMTs did was remove her clothes. I was not present to see them unwrap all the tubes, colorful little knobs, and odd medical paraphernalia, but for days my dad left the bed in the same hurried state the paramedics had created. He slept on the couch while my mother was in the hospital.

Hearing a knock at the door, I went to answer it to help relieve the stress my dad was under. Looking through the peephole, all I could see was a blue-colored shirt. Thinking it was the paramedics, I opened the door, only to be surprised to see Penny, our

neighbor from across the street. My dad had called in a favor from her: to look after us kids. I helped her wake up my brothers and corral them to a back bedroom in her home. They had no idea what was going on. In their sleepy state, they were able to fall back asleep quickly. I, on the other hand, watched from Penny's living room as the ambulance announced its arrival with only its lights. I watched as they loaded my motionless mother into the back as if she was cargo being shipped across country. I watched the ambulance unceremoniously drive away with my dying mother and worried dad. Then I watched Penny's TV as colorful cartoons danced across the screen. They were just moving colors to me. My mind was on my mother's condition and my dad's promised phone call.

Before the ambulance had taken my parents, my dad jogged over to Penny's to tell us he would call when he knew anything. I asked if my mother was going to be okay. "I don't know. I think so," he answered.

While my mother recovered in the hospital, I truly stepped into the shoes of a caretaker. I made sure my brothers were at soccer practice on time, walking them myself to the fields about a half mile away from our home. I encouraged them to complete their homework before watching TV, I made meals for them the best I could, and I cleaned every room in the house the way my mother had taught me so that she would have one less thing to worry about when she came home. I remember asking my dad for money so I could buy groceries. I picked out canned green beans, among other things, and carried home all the food twenty dollars allowed me to purchase.

I had felt ambivalent in the grocery store. Normally my patronage there consisted of Crunch candy bars and sometimes a pop, but on this trip I needed a basket. I felt very out of place, as though the workers and other shoppers somehow knew the reason behind

why I was selecting canned goods and bread instead of cheap sweets. I felt as though they could see through me and were judging my family and me. The fluorescent lights seemed to burn a little harsher, the aisles felt a little longer, the looks from others appeared a little more hostile. I kept a running total of the items in my head, so I would not be further embarrassed at the checkout by not having enough money to pay. Being only about a quarter of a mile away from the trailer, I walked home with the plastic bags cutting into my hands and wearing out the muscles in my small arms.

When my dad took us to visit my mother in the hospital, I wasn't prepared to see all the tubes and machines hooked up to her. I nearly started crying, but she smiled and told me not to be scared. It was an awkward visit. I didn't know where to stand or what to say, and I was relieved when my dad took us home. Under her doctor's suggestion, my dad bought all sorts of smelly vitamins and healthy food. We dumped her cans of beer down the sink together, and I was looking forward to having a healthy and sober mother. The doctor had told her if she continued drinking she would more than likely end up in the hospital again, so I was under the deep impression she would give it up for good.

For a while, my mother did well with her new lifestyle. She managed to keep the vitamins down, ate the food, and didn't mention beer. She even quit smoking. Like all good things in my life, however, this too would come to an end.

My heart dropped the day she asked me to fetch her an ashtray. I begrudgingly did, while trying to hide the disappointment and beginnings of tears in my eyes. I told her I no longer wanted to be asked to help her participate in her habits, and that might actually have been the last time I retrieved an ashtray for her. Not long after, she arrived

home with a twenty-four pack of Busch Light, and I knew the fantasy we all had been living in was over.

After she discovered my secret, my mother had contacted my doctor and requested medication for the anxiety she assumed I was suffering. I didn't go to my doctor for a prescription. The bottle simply appeared on the kitchen counter shortly after the police had taken my journals. I had no say in the matter and swallowed the pills. It would be years until I questioned why my mother acquired them for me. Had the pills been to make me feel better, or was she trying to control the situation? Did she think I needed them, or was she taking another decision out of my hands to make up for her failure to notice what had been happening? She never asked me if I felt anxious. She may have assumed, but she never consulted me. She rarely asked about my emotions from the day she confronted me with her proof about Jeremy and me all the way up until I moved out two months before my high school graduation.

Before we went to court the first time, she told me Jeremy had hit on her, too. We were in the kitchen, the nucleus of everything terrible, where everything in my life had been falling away one layer at a time for months. We were standing near a counter, facing each other. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she croaked out that if only she had taken him up on his offer, maybe I would have been spared. "Where did I go wrong?" she screeched. I told her that if she had given into Jeremy, he would have just been sleeping with us both. Her eyes released the tears that had been building up and she pulled me into a hug.

I don't remember if I cried with her or not as she clutched me in that awkward hug. Somehow she had turned what Jeremy had done to me into an instance where she

was the victim. Where did *she* go wrong? If *she* had slept with Jeremy I wouldn't have. *She* didn't protect me from the big bad wolf. It was *her* fault. She should have known something was going on. She had lived through abuse before. All the signs of misconduct were there. She just either didn't look hard enough or didn't want to.

As an adult, I think back to this episode in the kitchen. I was seventeen, had been statutorily raped for over two years, was drugged on Klonopin, about to go to court where more people would hear what happened to me, and my mother was clasping me for comfort. *I* needed the comfort. I needed to be told everything would be okay. I needed confirmation that I wasn't bad. I did not need to be taking care of my mother again.

My mother is complicated and I don't think I'll ever understand her. I'm not sure I want to. She thrived on drama. I now think she created it in our home to feel something besides her own pain. My relationship with Jeremy was certainly dramatic, and this was a perfect opportunity for her to soak up all the attention she knew would come with a trial. She invited her friends to our days in court. On sentencing day, she had more of her friends than Jeremy did in the courtroom. At the time I didn't care. I was too focused on what his lawyer and wife were telling the judge. His lawyer reminded the judge that Jeremy had been attending classes to get better. Heather begged for leniency and used their children to pull at his heartstrings.

I hung my head in shame as the prosecutor read off the charges. My brothers were hearing this, was all I could think. They didn't need to know such things, I felt. But my mother had insisted this was a family ordeal, and we needed to stick together. As I look back on those court days, I am not so much angry as I am sad. She needed her friends to witness what had happened to her family. They sat behind us during the proceedings and

hugged my mother afterward. She seemed to be showing off. She behaved as if she had caught Jeremy and the court proceedings were because of her. I am saddened by all of it, and that she needed so much, that she couldn't be content with simply having her husband there as support. I'm sad that she used my personal tragedy as a spotlight for herself. She used her time to speak in court to address Jeremy directly. Standing between the opposing aisles, she read from paper after paper of everything he had disrupted in her family's life. The judge had to tell her a few times to hurry up. I was embarrassed.

The pills from my doctor made me sleepy. My first class of the day was art, where I was enrolled in an independent study to work on charcoal drawings of celebrities' faces and interesting landscapes. My tall teacher noticed the shift in my behavior and asked if I was all right. I told her I was taking a new medication which made me drowsy. That was true. I could barely stay awake and often slept through her class, which was totally unlike me, but I left out the reason why I was taking the pills.

I was ashamed. I didn't know how much my teachers knew, but I suspected they knew more than they were letting on. I had always been a good student and didn't want to tarnish my image. Because of the restraining order my parents had filed against Jeremy on my behalf, they shared it, and the situation, with the three guidance counselors in the office. In turn, the counselors contacted my teachers to let them know I was on a new medication which might make me drowsy and to please excuse this.

In my high school you could roam the hallways with your boyfriend without getting caught, passing notes and kisses until you would see him again at lunch. Lunch was full of rowdy conversations, gossip, and news of couples' relationships. Friends shared ex-boyfriends because there weren't a lot of boys to choose from.



As in every high school, there were cliques. I was in the popular one. Not cheerleader, involved in every activity, teacher's pet popular. Popular meaning my friends and I made up the largest female group in our class, and we were relatively pretty. Many of us shared classes along with our secrets. My friends knew about Jeremy, they had for years. They treated him as though he were another high schooler, fawning over the things he told me, expressing their excitement when I divulged my latest encounter with him. The only friend I didn't confide regularly in was my best one: Lindsey. She had expressed her disapproval of the relationship shortly after its genesis in middle school, and she was still a virgin. That's not to say she didn't hang out with Jeremy and me at my house, she just didn't want to hear any details about what happened when we were alone.

My school was small. There were barely over a hundred people in my graduating class, so when my parents made their news debut, some of my schoolmates' parents recognized them, and knew what had happened between Jeremy and me.

Because Jeremy used to live next door to us, as soon as his mug shot was released, a local television station showed up at his old house with cameras, microphones, and a reporter. My parents saw the news van and went to do some investigating of their own. I was at work when my mother called to tell me about it. "I'll record it when it comes on the news tonight," she told me excitedly. I was scrubbing the back room counters with a damp rag, the phone pressed to my ear, as she spoke. I was unsure of how I felt about the situation. My stomach hurt.

True to her word, she had the segment recorded on a VHS tape. I was with my then-boyfriend and Lindsey, and we watched it with my parents in the living room. The whole thing was fraught with exaggerations and lasted only a few minutes. My parents

were interviewed on our front porch, their testimony interrupted by the condescending voiceover of the reporter in charge of the story. It has always amazed me how much all reporters sound the same. They use the same inflection, have the same superior tone of voice, the droning sound of their words, the focus on all the wrong aspects of the story. The female reporter honed in on the use of the “family computer” in the exchanges between Jeremy and me. In reality, he had only written me once from the email account he had set up exclusively for that purpose. That email was never used in court and had nothing to do with his plea agreement.

My parents looked like white trash, standing on the roomy porch in front of our trailer. Neither had been prepared to be on television so they were in their normal hangout clothes. What made them look like white trash in my eyes was the fact that they were discussing their daughter’s “tragedy” with a total stranger, who would then have it edited to share with thousands of other total strangers. Their clothes made them look like witnesses to a robbery which had happened at two in the morning while they were out for booze and cigarettes, the kind of witness you wouldn’t invite into your home unless they were family. Their eagerness to talk made them look like the witnesses who saw the smallest possible part of a story to count as a witness and wanted their face on TV. They looked ugly and rude and self-serving. My mother didn’t cry and my dad didn’t express outrage. They could have been talking about a creek that had flooded in their backyard. Who were these people? They weren’t the parents I recognized.

Wanting to help the reporter, my parents divulged Jeremy’s new address. His sister showed up onscreen yelling for the reporter to turn the camera off and leave. She was rushing down the hill from Jeremy’s house to the long gravel driveway where I

assume the crew's van was parked. Her arm stuck straight out in front of her like a linebacker. She looked more dignified than my parents.

Once the video finished, my mother pressed the eject button with a satisfied click of her fingernail and smiled. "What did you think?" she questioned me, as if it were an audition video of herself. I didn't know what to think. I reverted into myself because of my company and acted as though I had just viewed a commercial or trailer for a terrible movie. I shrugged and went to my room to try on the new shirt I had bought earlier that day. I didn't speak of the tape again. I didn't feel the betrayal yet. I didn't feel it for years.

My parents had taken my journals, *me*, and told my story to thousands of strangers. I can imagine those strangers who saw the news that day shaking their heads and saying, "what a pervert; that poor little girl." I can imagine the news outlet being excited they had gotten their hands on such a salacious story and were able to capture the footage they had. I can't imagine what my parents were thinking when they agreed to the interview.

After the story aired, my best friend's aunt recognized my mother. My maternal grandpa's friends did, too. Because of the tumors in his brain, Grandpa Loftus sometimes got confused or had trouble getting his words out. But that didn't mean he couldn't understand things, so my mother and grandma had decided it was best not to tell him about what had happened to me when they first found out, continuing the habit of secrets. He was dying and my mother didn't want him to do anything drastic with the time he had left, as though she could predict people's actions. My mother warned my grandma about the broadcast that would be appearing on the news that night and grandma vigilantly

watched for signs of it, her hand close to the remote which she normally had no interest in. She was successful in keeping my parents' interview a secret from her husband, until a friend of his showed up to visit.

The friend mentioned he had seen my parents on TV. My grandpa knew nothing of it and my grandma was trying to shut my grandpa's friend up, but it was too late. After the friend left, my grandma told my grandpa that I had been molested and left it at that. I would later learn that he had heard the same story, but with different casts, at least three times before. I still can't imagine how he felt with those words attacking him again. I was not the first to be molested in his family, I was just the latest.

Seeing my mother with a cozy-wrapped beer in her hand was never unusual. She would sit at the kitchen table, sifting through and paying bills in her methodical way, the can never out of reach. Some nights she drank too much and insisted on trying to have deep, meaningful conversations with my brothers or me. We entertained her questions, our minds on other things. I didn't realize until I started staying over at friends' houses that their mothers didn't rely on a can to get them through preparing dinner or cleaning a bathroom. I didn't know at the time my mother was an alcoholic or what had made her one. It would be years later that I learned more about my mother's life before she had become a mother and how those events led her to seek escape in the bottom of a cheap tin vessel.

My mother's version of warning me of men came in the form of a drunken, broken story about herself which lacked any specific details. I was in middle school and finished with my homework for the night.

I sat on the loveseat in the darkened living room, the light from the TV cast the room in shadows. The loveseat once was brown but is now a mossy green from the sun. If I were to lift up its arm protectors I could see its original color. It, along with the matching couch, was once my grandparents'. The television show became hard to focus on when my mother came and rested her body on the arm. I didn't look at her for fear of her thinking I wanted to talk. I could see her beer and knew she was drunk. "Brianna." Her slurred and slow speech confirmed this.

"Huh?" I still looked at the TV and willed her away in my mind, but knew it was useless. Once she decides on something, it happens.

“I want to talk to you. About something that happened to me when I was younger.”

I could feel my muscles tighten slightly. She wanted to have a serious conversation, I thought. I hated these types of situations, and I had told her so in the past. Every time I told her though, she was drunk, and I was sure she used that to her advantage, as though she could say she didn't remember. But she always remembered.

I didn't move my body, and she took a swig from her can. “My uncle abused me when I was around your age,” she confided.

My muscles tightened. How do I respond? I looked her way, knowing she was trying to tell me something important about herself. The least I could do was look.

Her green eyes, the same ones I have, were half-closed. Her high cheekbones still had the pink blush she applied that morning. Her pointy nose, which I don't have, was bright with oil. Her thin hair was still trying to hold its hairsprayed shape, though it didn't have the volume it did twelve hours ago. Even though she was mostly sitting, she swayed, and used the loveseat for support. “There are still places on me even your father can't touch,” her words floated to my nostrils, heavy and sour and smelling of hot beer. I remained silent. She didn't want a conversation, she simply wanted to talk.

She did not elaborate. I hadn't known this about my mother. This explained why she would only allow us to let my grandparents in when she and dad were gone. She didn't trust anyone, even family. What a terrible burden, I thought, that dad had to be careful and my mother was anxious after over a decade of marriage. What happened? I wondered.

In my mid-twenties I learned from my grandma that it had been her brother-in-law who had abused my mother. It happened in a motel. Everyone trusted him so when my mother asked if she and her friend could go with him, my grandma didn't think anything of it. He gave my mother and her friend alcohol and once the friend was passed out, abused my mother. Not even grandma knows the details. My mother had told a school counselor, who turned the matter over to Child Protective Services and, ultimately, the police.

The uncle had abused his sister-in-law in the past, but the family kept it hidden for fear of disgrace. They apparently wanted to keep their image clean. When the police came to talk to my grandparents, grandma thought my mother was in trouble. She was often truant because she didn't fit in at school. She thought the teachers were condescending and enjoyed trying to make her feel stupid. When the officers told my grandparents the reason for their visit, my grandpa growled, "He did it again, that son of a bitch."

Grandma didn't know what he meant. She had never been told about the previous abuse. Once she learned of it, she was furious at her husband. She felt betrayed. She could have used knowing this to make different decisions, she told me.

My grandpa's family wanted to cover up my mother's abuse as they had with their daughter, but since my mother had told her counselor, it was out of the family's control. My grandma, though she would not have ignored the trespass, was grateful she did not have to fight with her mother-in-law about how to handle the situation. It was in the system.

My mother did not testify. She was sent away for the trouble she had been causing in school. My grandma saw this as unspeakably unfair, since the uncle was able to walk around as he pleased before the trial, while my mother was away from her family and friends, as though she had done something wrong.

The uncle had a criminal record and files of his suspected involvement in other crimes nearly a foot tall, my grandma reported, holding her hands out. "I kid you not," she added for emphasis. "I saw them." He was an arsonist, setting his own buildings on fire to collect the insurance money. He eventually went to jail for what he did to my mother, but not for very long.

Grandma saw him once more after that, at a community fair where people peddled their crafts or food goods. He came up to her with a much younger woman to say hello. My grandma looked at the woman and said, "I hope you don't have any young daughters." The uncle quickly ushered the woman away.

After knowing this, I hold different views of my mother. She was protective of us kids because she knew the betrayal of someone close. I believe she told me her story, though short and bland, in order to convey to me the importance it had to her. Undoubtedly she did not want the same for me. To cope with the abuse, along with the other problems in her life, she had turned to alcohol. Since my grandparents owned a liquor store, it was never a problem for her to get any. My dad told me she was wild as a teen, doing drugs and drinking heavily. That was before he met her, so she must have told him.

What makes me angry is, for all the ways my mother tried to protect me, and for everything she knew about abuse and secrets, she was completely blind when it came to



Jeremy and me. As I read my journals for the first time at age twenty-four, I could see innumerable occasions where my mother could, and should, have noticed something wasn't right.

Why did no one think it was odd that I spent so much time with a man eleven years my senior in his shed? Why did no one question why I always asked to tag along with him when he made beer or cigarette runs? My mother knew I had had a crush on him for years. Did she really think he and I were just kindred souls with so much in common a friendship was bound to happen? As I thumbed through the pages of my journals, I kept thinking, "How did we not get caught sooner?" There were so many telltale signs. What would I have to talk to Jeremy about over the phone? How did no one ever notice the looks and smiles we exchanged? How is it that I had to spell out what was happening for my mother to see?

I had been cutting for years, even before I became involved with Jeremy. The first time was when I was thirteen. It started as an accident. I was shaving my legs and in my haste I cut myself fairly significantly on the back of my heel. Watching the amount of blood it produced was so mesmerizing I did it again a few days later. I pressed the razor deeply against my Achilles tendon. I held the razor firmly against the wrinkled skin and yanked it upwards. When I brought the razor to eye-level, I could see the thin, nearly two-inch strip of skin it held between its blades. Physically, the pain wasn't as bad as I had anticipated. Emotionally, I was excited to see the blood run down my heel and mix in with the shower water to make its way to the drain. To me, the more blood, the better the experience. This was a technique I would use again. The only downfall to it was that it made walking in tennis shoes difficult, as the backs would rub up against the bandages, wearing them loose. This was a small price to pay, however, for the way seeing my blood made me feel.

Under the railroad bridge in the woods behind the trailer park, I had once found a broken bottle. I used it to cut into my shins. I was alone and unafraid of discovery, as the layout of the bridge would allow me to hear anyone coming. I sat on a rock which had been captured by the cement of the bridge's floor and listened to the water pass by and splash on the rugged rocks below. I was huddled into a ball to be able to see my shins better and took the glass carefully in my hand, so as not to accidentally injure myself. The piece itself was rather small, the shape of a tortilla chip but half the size. This experience wasn't about seeing blood, as I would have nothing to clean myself up with, and I would still have to walk home. Here I simply wanted to feel pain. I placed the chip to my leg

with the intensity of a surgeon. I dragged it only about an inch and a half along the taut skin, just hard enough to let me know I was doing it right. I made around a dozen incisions, going over only a couple of them more than once. Because of the prickly bushes and other inhospitable plants which led to the bridge, I had a cover story for the scratches. I always had a cover story. Faint as they are now, the scars are still there.

I have used razors, scissors, broken glass, and knives. I have always had an excuse or reason to explain away the marks. I have shared this fact with few people, though I am not ashamed of it. I have not yet realized why I cut. I have heard people cut to gain a sense of control, to release psychological pain, or because they are toying with the idea of suicide. I have cut for all of these reasons.

My biggest wound needed stitches, but I couldn't tell my parents. It was deep, wide, and long. It looked like an angry dark red slit with maroon blood leaking from it. I had been planning it for months. I sneaked the knife sharpener my dad had gotten for Christmas the year before and the best knife from the kitchen and had been sharpening it regularly. Sitting in front of my open closet door, I hunched over the paraphernalia and dragged the blade through the sharpener's channel in steady, rhythmic stokes. *Scratch-click, scratch-click, scratch-click*. I always sharpened it in intervals of ten. Once I was satisfied with my sharpening, I would wrap the two items up in a dishtowel and return them to their hiding place deeper in my closet, shutting the door with a strange anticipation.

The night it happened I was distraught. It was the latter part of December, and my mother wanted a family meeting. I knew how these "meetings" went. She would air her grievances and yell at everyone in a beer-fueled rage, disallowing anyone else's opinion

or logic. My two younger brothers sat on the blue, tattered loveseat and were visibly relieved when it became apparent the “family meeting” was really a chance for my mother to yell at me. I sat alone on the couch fuming as my mother screamed at me from across the kitchen counter. My mother was using the kitchen peninsula as a parapet during this rant. I watched the ashes from her Marlboros fill the ashtray and fall like dirty snow onto the counter when she angrily tapped her cigarettes. She started in on me about not folding the laundry correctly, not mopping well enough, forgetting to write down my work schedule for her to see. After a while I blocked out what she was saying.

My father was leaning against the coat closet between my mother and me, his head bowed, arms crossed against his chest, and ankles crossed as he used the door for support. I tried to defend myself and argue back, but my mother had many more years of pent-up anger and practice at arguing. So I sat silently, picking angrily at my cuticles and devising a plan as she wore me down. I was not sure yet if I would follow through with the plan, but it was exciting and the thought of it made the barrage from my mother bearable. The longer my mother spat, the stronger my resolve became to follow through with it.

When my dad realized I had not been participating in the meeting for quite some time, he called for a time-out to allow tempers to cool down before we regrouped. I was too giddy with the knowledge that I was going to execute my plan to be angry with my dad for not simply calling the farce of a meeting quits. I nearly skipped to my room to begin.

I would grab some change and call Jeremy from a pay phone, asking for a ride. Both he and Heather knew how my mother could be when she was drunk and angry, so I

was sure that even if Heather answered the phone I would be going to their house. The thought of spending time with Jeremy, even if we weren't alone, made me smile.

Once my door was safely closed, I gathered make-up, my work shirt, and coat with adrenaline-pumped hands. I wrapped my make-up up in my work shirt and shoved it into the pocket of the hoodie I was wearing. I coaxed open my screenless window and carefully crawled out onto the front porch steps. I was silently sliding the window shut when I saw my down coat lying on my bed. I did not know how much time I had before the time-out was up, and I certainly did not want my dad to walk in on me sneaking out by the glow of the Christmas lights, so I went on without it.

I jogged down the street, checking for anyone outside my house before crossing the road. The closest pay phone was a couple of blocks away, and I was paranoid one of the numerous cops who frequently patrolled the streets would stop and question me. I crossed two other streets, keeping on the sidewalk and close to the cars parallel parked along the street to avoid being spotted, and to allow me to duck for cover should a car's headlights pop up. By the time I reached the pay phone I was really regretting not snatching my coat. I picked up the receiver, and its severed cord fell out from the shelf and brushed my thigh. I retraced my steps and had to be doubly cautious as I re-crossed my street because I had been gone for at least ten minutes by now, and my parents might have figured out I had left. I crossed three more streets full of trailers before I felt safe.

It was cold out, and the frosty air stung my throat and lungs as I jogged breathlessly down the path through the woods I had taken so many times to go to the convenience store. The grass was worn down to dirt from the park's kids taking the shortcut. The dark night was somewhat menacing, but the streetlights near the store gave

me plenty of light to see by. I made my way to the pay phone outside the store, but there was no dial tone when I picked it up. I did not know of any more pay phones, so I walked inside and said hello to the cashier. I knew his face but not his name. He was always friendly to me so I asked if there was a phone I could use. He went to the back and brought me a cordless one. "Don't go too far," he warned. I smiled and dialed a number as I turned my back to him.

"Hello?" Heather's voice answered.

"Hey, Heather. It's Brianna. Um, Angie and Brian are fighting." I tried to disguise what was really happening because the cashier was listening behind me. I did not want him to know that Angie and Brian were my parents and then call the police on me as a runaway. "I'm at the gas station by the post office in Edwardsville. Can I stay with you guys tonight?"

"Angie and Brian? Your parents? Is everything okay?" She sounded concerned and confused.

"Um. Well," I glanced at the cashier, "not exactly."

"Okay. I'll have Jeremy come pick you up. Are the boys okay?"

"Yeah, they're fine. I'll see you in a little bit. Thanks." I handed the cashier the phone and thanked him. Since I had some time to kill, I bought a Cherry Vanilla Dr. Pepper and talked the cashier into selling me a pack of cigarettes. I was leaning against the building outside smoking while I waited for Jeremy. I wondered if he was going to come in the new piece of shit Camaro he was fixing up or if it would be his wife's Geo Metro.

After a while I went back inside and sat in a small booth by the window. There were some men smoking and playing pool behind me. I lit up and hoped no one would ask questions. Finally, I saw Heather's dull red car pull up, and I went outside and slid in.

"Hey you," Jeremy said after a long draw from his cigarette.

"My mom is such a bitch," I complained. I buckled my seatbelt.

"I know. So, you staying the night?"

"Yeah I guess. If that's okay with you and your wife," I smiled slyly and I looked at him from the corner of my eye.

"Don't worry about her." He put the car in reverse and started backing out of the stall.

I took a swig from my drink before I started in on my mother. "I think she hates me. She's always bitching about –"

"Yeah, but one day you'll be eighteen and you won't have to deal with her shit anymore," he cut me off.

I wanted to go on. To explain what my mother had done to push me so far away I never wanted to go back, but I did not want to bore him. That was what his wife did. I liked to think of myself as fun. I wouldn't argue with him like his wife, or pout, or be upset when our plans to meet up didn't work out. I always smiled, always gave him what he wanted. I was his escape, his sanctuary. I was happy around him and made him feel good. I was everything his wife wasn't. I pictured myself being someone he would choose over her.

He put one hand on my thigh and slung the other one over the steering wheel as he got on the ramp to K-7. "So. You up for some road head?" I had never really liked that

kind of thing, but I was eager to please, and so I obliged. I had had my braces removed about a year earlier, so sucking his dick didn't tear up the insides of my lips like it used to.

Afterwards I washed the taste down with what was left of my drink, and he sang along with Led Zeppelin on the radio. "There's this mechanic school down in Phoenix. I can learn how to fix motorcycles. Maybe in a few years we could be living in the desert," he slid me a sideways glance and smiled. "I could see the two of us together."

"What about Heather? What about Madisyn and Seth?" Though I was secretly pleased he was talking about leaving his wife for me, I had never pictured myself living anywhere but Kansas.

"Don't get me wrong, I love my kids. I would see them in the summer and on holidays and stuff. Maybe even get full custody, and you could help take care of them. You have been their whole lives anyway."

"Well, yeah I guess that's true. But that doesn't mean they wouldn't hate me for breaking up their parents." My stomach, while full of excitement, was also beginning to fill with worry about the future. After all, I was only fifteen, and eighteen was still years away.

"Well, it's not happening today, so let's not worry about it." He turned the radio up.

Heather was drinking coffee in the kitchen when we walked in. "I made up a bed in the den," she said. She hugged me. "You okay?"

I saw the blankets and pillows near the Christmas tree, its lights blinking methodically. *On off. On off. On off.* "Yeah. I should probably call, though. So she



doesn't call the cops on me." I took the phone into the bathroom, shut the door, and dialed my home phone number. I breathed deeply as it rang, trying to calm my nerves.

"Jeremy?" my dad answered.

I mentally slapped my head for not dialing star 67 so they would not know where I was calling from. "No dad, it's me. I just wanted to tell you I'm safe, and I'm staying here tonight."

"Who's that? Have Jeremy and Heather heard from her?" I could hear my mother yelling from the background.

"It's Brianna. She's over there," he yelled back at her.

"Like hell! Go get her right fucking now!"

"Don't get comfortable. I'll be there in half an hour," he told me.

I clicked the phone off and hung my head. My whole plan had fallen apart. I opened the bathroom door, and placed the phone back in its cradle. "My dad's on his way to come get me."

"You shouldn't have told him where you were. You shouldn't have called him," Jeremy said with a hint of irritation in his voice.

"I didn't want him to worry about me. Or my mom call the cops. She would do something ridiculous like that."

"Let's go downstairs. The kids are sleeping," Jeremy suggested.

The three of us sat around a large table in the garage. Jeremy broke up some pot while Heather listened to what he had not wanted to hear from me. He rolled two joints and lit one up. We all shared it while Heather told me about when she was younger.

"She's only trying to look out for you. I know she has a fucked up way of showing it,

though,” Heather said. I was high by the time my dad showed up. Dad took a seat across the table from me and lit Jeremy’s second joint.

“So what did you think you were doing?” dad asked. His voice was strained as he tried to hold in the smoke as he spoke.

“Getting away from mom,” I said to the table.

“How were you going to get to work tomorrow?”

“I brought my work shirt. I was going to give Heather some gas money.”

“So you were just going to what? Move in here? Do you have any idea how I felt when I walked in your room and saw your blinds open and you were gone?”

I did not look up. I had not wanted to hurt him. My stomach clinched up.

After a few charged moments of silence, Jeremy said to dad, “You got here fast.”

“Yeah well if any cop pulled me over I was gonna tell him my daughter had run away, and I was on my way to get her.” He took another hit.

Suddenly, the phone rang, startling me. Heather answered, “Hey, Ang. Yeah, they’re both here. Yeah, here he is.” She handed dad the phone.

“Yeah? I just got here. You know it’s a forty minute drive. Yes, Angie,” he looked at me, “we’re leaving now.” He clicked off the phone and handed it back to Heather. “Thank you guys for picking her up. I’m glad it was you and not some psycho. Of course, you wouldn’t have had to if she hadn’t run away.” He shot another disappointed look my way.

I followed him out the garage door and glanced back at Jeremy, smiling apologetically. The times I was able to spend the night there were few and far between,

since I could only do it when I was babysitting. Dad tossed me the keys when we got outside. “You’re driving. I took three Valium before I left to come get you.”

As we got into the still-warm truck, I could feel the tight dread forming in my stomach and worm its way throughout my body. My legs and arms felt unattached as I closed the driver’s side door. I had run away from my mother, and now I was on my way to face her again. Since dad had passed out, I smoked cigarettes all the way home, driving at least ten miles an hour under the speed limit to delay the moment I had to see my mother.

By the time I pulled up to the trailer it was well after 3 A.M., and I was so tired I did not care what punishment my mother had decided for me. I just wanted to go to bed. Unfortunately, she had other plans. She was sitting at the kitchen table smoking when we walked in. The light above her was the only one on in the house, making the kitchen table seem more like an interrogation table.

“Have a seat,” my mother commanded, smoke curling up around her face.

“I’m really tired. Can we just do this in the morning?” I begged.

“Well, you’re grounded for six months, for starters. But there are other things we need to discuss.” I knew there was no point in arguing. She was pissed and determined to have her way. “Why did you leave?”

“Because there was no point in the family meeting. You were just yelling at me, and I didn’t want to hear it anymore.” Dad had gone to bed, leaving me all alone.

“So you just thought you would pick up and leave and everything would be hunkey dory at Heather and Jeremy’s? Well guess what, your little plan didn’t work, and now you can’t go over there anymore,” she slurred.

“What?! How am I supposed to make money? You know I baby-sit Madisyn and Seth. That’s not fair!” I had to try and make it about the kids.

“I don’t care what you think is fair. Do you think it was fair to your dad and me to crawl out your window? And that isn’t even your real job. You have another one.”

“Like you really cared I left. You were probably glad I was gone! And what’s so terrible about me wanting to make extra money?” I knew that even though she was drunk, she would remember every single thing I said. I did not care, though. I was pissed and quickly becoming panicked at the thought of being banned from Jeremy’s. “That doesn’t make any sense to not let me go over there! They didn’t do anything wrong. They were just helping me.” I tried to make her reasoning seem illogical.

“They didn’t do anything wrong?” her voice raised. “They should have called *me* after they talked to you on the phone. They should have told me where you were – a block from home – rather than drive forty minutes to pick you up. And you shouldn’t have left! Like I said, I don’t care what you think is fair. You’re grounded, and you can’t see them anymore.” I hated when she repeated herself.

I was getting furious, and I knew anything I said would be detrimental to my case, so I asked if she was done with me so I could go to bed. I knew dad might try to help me later by talking her down to a lesser punishment. He sometimes had my back when it was clear my mother was being overly dramatic. There had been different times when he pointed out two months’ grounding was not really a suitable punishment for only being two minutes past curfew, or that I should not be forced to stay home from a school dance because I had forgotten to call my mother to check in at her required two-hour intervals.

“Fine,” she granted me permission to go to my room. “But don’t think this is over. You’re getting up early tomorrow for a lot of chores.”

“I can’t fucking wait,” I mumbled under my breath as I turned away from her.

When I got to my room I began bawling. The thought of not seeing Jeremy for the next six months made it hard to breathe. “How can she be such a bitch?” I wondered aloud. I began getting antsy. I was pacing and swiping the tears from my face. Crying was not relieving my pain, but I knew cutting could. I opened my closet and sat in front of it as I fished out the knife and sharpener.

The knife was so clean looking. Black and silver and shiny. I felt its cold weight in my hand, felt it almost calling to me. After I finished my sharpening, I wiped the blade clean. I lay down a towel and pressed the blade to the skin on my left forearm and softly drew a line. It was slightly biting, kind of shocking at first, like when you step into a very hot bath too quickly and the heat doesn’t hit you until both your feet are in, and it is too late to go back.

I retraced it tentatively at first, then with more pressure as I went on. Each time I put the knife to my arm I pressed a little harder and drew the line a little longer. Little beads of blood began popping up along the line, like bubbles in a fish tank. Eventually, the little bubbles turned into an angry red mouth and blood was not just popping up, it was dripping down. Bright red snakes were making their way down into my palm and in between my fingers. I kept going. I was feeling better now, could barely feel the steel as it pulled my skin apart. There was something hypnotic about it. It was like a challenge to myself to see how far I could go. The pain was like background noise to the intrigue I felt

looking at my arm. I had been doing this for years, but this was the furthest I had ever gone.

I took a look at my handiwork. I looked down at the pink towel beneath me. There was an alarmingly large circle of wet blood on it, and my arm was still letting blood. The towel almost muted the sound of it, but I could hear the drops as they fell onto the wet circle.

I grabbed a handkerchief that I had sneaked from Jeremy's truck once and wrapped and tied it around my forearm. I rolled the bloody towel up and shoved it to the bottom of my laundry basket. To hide any blood stains I might get during the night, I put on a black shirt and lay down. I usually slept on my stomach, so I put my bleeding arm under me with my cut against my heart to keep pressure on it. I drifted off to sleep thinking about how my mother would react when she saw my wound and knew it had been inflicted because of her.

Since it was winter, it was easy to keep the bandage covered by long sleeves. One day I was with my brothers in their room with a tee shirt on and one of them commented on my arm. I said it was nothing. My dad, who was also there, let his suspicions be known, "I think she gave herself another tattoo." I denied it, saying that was ridiculous, though I was full of terror that he would ask to see as proof. He didn't.

I kept it a secret for months. My dad was the first one to know and I hid it in shame from everyone else. When I finally told him what it was, we were in the dark living room and my diaries had been commandeered by my mother. I pleaded with him to get them back from her, appealing to his emotions. "Remember that band-aid on my arm over winter break? It was covering a cut I did myself because of her," I explained. "It's

all written in my diaries, and I don't want her to read it." He told me he would see what he could do and didn't say anything about my arm.

The first psychologist I saw did ask, though. Her office was cozy, and I always sat on the couch with a pillow in my lap as protection. The room was lit by lamps and the natural light of the large window. There were pictures of her grown children on the walls along with her degrees. She had been recommended by the Sunflower House as a good family and child counselor. I liked that I could speak openly with her since I couldn't with anyone else. She was a stranger who was an expert in my type of situation. Her degrees gave me comfort, as did her soft voice and open-ended questions.

I had been seeing her for months before the topic of self-harm was raised, so I felt no hesitation in sharing. I listed the places on my body where I had cut, and the different tools I had used. "Did it hurt when you were doing it?" she asked.

"No."

"That's not unusual," she went on to explain the physical pain was lessened by the psychological release I experienced when cutting. When she asked me why I did it, I could not offer an answer. I didn't know myself.

Though I never had the plan of suicide in mind while cutting, I did think about it on and off after my later adolescence. I came up with elaborate ways to kill myself, neatly arranging the details in my mind. When I was in my early twenties I told my third psychologist that I had imagined my death taking place in my apartment's bathroom. I could see myself in the tub, the water warm against my body. The light source was from the candles, which lined the floor. I had my favorite band playing on repeat from the computer resting atop the toilet. I had taken all my anxiety and depression pills and

washed them down with the burning, cheap tequila we had in the kitchen. Then, once I was drunk enough, I pressed the sharpest knife I could find along the vein on my left forearm. I pressed down harder than I ever had before, and went up the length of the visible vein. Then, I did the same on my other arm. I laid the knife on the edge of the bathtub, listening to Sublime, my arms letting out the vital fluid which kept me alive, and simply went to sleep.

Though I told myself I would never do it, I still needed reasons not to. The biggest one was that John, my now husband, would find me and be devastated. The second reason was concern for my family. I did not want to cause them pain. So, with the thoughts of others and what a huge favor I was doing them, I didn't kill myself in that rented bathtub.



Dr. Courtney asked when the court date was so maybe she could come because she “likes to see what these men look like.” It gave me the impression she had acted as a voyeur before with other patients’ perpetrators.

“Do you mind if I eat while we talk?” she asked.

I saw her salad encased in a clear plastic container. “No, that’s fine.” I watched her watch the fork as she moved it to her mouth, careful not to drop anything. Her polite chewing made me wait an extra one, two, three seconds before she responded to what I said. I waited in eager anticipation for her words to push out of from behind the teeth crushing the lettuce and fancy dressing.

My parents made me stop seeing her after she took me out for ice cream during one of our appointments. My mother’s justification was that dad’s insurance wasn’t footing the bill. Years later I found my second psychologist on my own.

Dr. Drew and I always met around three. It was a convenient time for me, right on my way home from school. He often yawned, yet I never said anything. It was, after all, three in the afternoon, the time most people are experiencing the crash of a workday. Though his yawns made me feel as though he wasn’t listening fully, I never commented on them, just as I never commented on Jeremy’s actions which made me feel as though his total focus wasn’t on me.

Together, Dr. Drew and I created a chart on Excel. It listed the amount of time I needed in a week to do things which made me feel good, like talking with friends, reading, or receiving positive affirmations from John. His approach to my therapy seemed computerized, as though the spreadsheet would make me better. He printed it off

and handed it to me at the end of the session. I threw it away when I got home. Straight lines and allotted timeslots were not what I was hoping for in a therapist. I wanted someone to listen.

I met Bonnie through a depression screening in college. My results indicated that I was “high risk,” so I made an appointment to meet with someone. Bonnie liked to end our sessions with a big hug. Though I only saw her twice, the hugs were comforting. She listened, asked questions, and affirmed my feelings as legitimate, but she never offered a course of action. I liked that she was wholly focused on me during our meetings, but I also expected she would be able to provide something that a good friend would not – the experience of a mental health counselor.

I didn’t take these people seriously because I didn’t take myself seriously. I wasn’t ready to be “fixed.” I still needed to feel the guilt and shame I had tortured myself with for years. I didn’t feel *raped*. I didn’t feel like a *victim*. I felt as though I was an accomplice, just as deserving of punishment as Jeremy was. I *liked* to wallow in my self-inflicted misery. My tears justified something. What I didn’t know every time I cried and felt sorry for myself was that I *was* trying to get better. I needed to feel pain and heartache so that I could legitimize what Jeremy did to me.

When I was a teenager, I didn’t recognize that he was, in fact, manipulating me. It took me years of crying during and after blowjobs, and the comforting words of my husband, to realize Jeremy *had* hurt me. Not physically, but much deeper. It took me reading my journals for the first time to see the words he used to keep me spellbound and the way he could act like a Broadway star. It took me using the word “rape” and trying to mean it. It took me looking at my own high school students and wondering how someone

in their early twenties could consider having sex with them. I didn't know all this when the abuse was happening. I didn't know it immediately afterward. I didn't even know it in the nine years that passed since he first kissed me. It took me almost a decade to cry tears of anger instead of grief.

June 24, 2014 10:53 PM

I wanted to break something. Throw glass. Lots of glass. I wanted to see something shatter into pieces.

“You can break my scotch bottle. It’s empty,” my husband suggested.

I pushed myself up from the bed and stated, “It wouldn’t be enough.” I needed more than one something to break. I looked out the bedroom door and saw the broken-mirror mosaic candleholders I had made in high school. My mother had done something crafty with the small pieces of broken mirror, too, but I couldn’t remember what. We were creating our projects in the kitchen, not in the seats we usually were for eating. This was before and after she knew. It was after she knew something was wrong. She knew I was lying and keeping something from her and my dad. It was before she knew what that something was.

I pictured myself grabbing the black and blue ceramic plates from our kitchen cabinets and throwing them against the wall, watching as they went from whole to pieces in a moment. I would throw every single one. The dinner plates, the salad plates, the bowls, the coffee mugs. I would move onto John’s pint glasses, work up a sweat as the clean shards and chunks of glass sprinkled the ceramic mess on the floor.

I saw myself throwing his empty scotch bottle from our balcony into the parking lot. I saw myself in an empty parking lot, throwing full, cheap beer bottles into the sky and watching them arc down to smash spectacularly on the warm asphalt.

By the time my tears reached my chin they were already cold. I swiped them away hastily as I stalked into the bathroom. John came in, looking down at me sitting on

the toilet. He crouched down, his face lower than mine. New, angry tears lined my cheeks as he looked up at me, the pity obvious in his face. "You look like you feel sorry for me."

"Of course I do. How could I not feel sorry for you?" He engulfed me the best he could in a hug. "Nobody should have to go through that." My body shook from the silent sobs. I had never been this pissed before toward Jeremy. There was sadness, of course, but mainly anger. I was angry that Jeremy was affecting my sex life. My marriage. My husband. Angry that it was John who apologized when I cried during or after sex. Angry I couldn't do what I wanted with my husband without memories taunting me, reminding me, as I did certain things. Angry that time had not seemed to pass or make anything better.

It's been over ten years since we got caught. Nine years since I've seen him. The last time was during his sentencing hearing. I think he was in handcuffs at the end. I wonder if he thinks about me. Not in a longing way, the way lovers think of each other. But in a way that reminds him why he was in prison. I wonder who thinks about whom more. He was released from prison October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014. He had served his time for what he did to me. But I'm not sure when I will be released from my self-imposed prison.

At sixteen, I thought my tears in the shower after I learned of Jeremy's restraining order against me only represented the betrayal I felt from him. Looking back, I realize I was crying for much more.

He had tainted me. From the moment my mother discovered my secret, I had been labeled a victim. After the sentencing hearing I somehow became a survivor. I did not choose these labels and actually, I detest them. I am now a member of the rape club, as are so many other women. I didn't want to join this club, just as I didn't want to be raped. I guess they go hand-in-hand. I didn't choose the word "victim" to describe myself. I didn't choose the word "monster" to describe Jeremy. The outsiders, the ones not in the club, did this, and we rape clubbers have to work around these words. We are the ones who navigate what others think we ought to say, what words we should use. If it were up to me, I would choose the word "stupid" for myself and "asshole" for him. But newscasters can't say asshole on air, so they stick with "child abuser," "rapist," "perpetrator." Always "alleged" until after a trial.

No matter how many showers I took, I would never be able to wash away the stain I felt. I felt as though people could see it, like there was some new mark on me. I could scrub and scrub, scouring my skin until it came off in layers, but I would never be clean. I would always be a victim. A survivor. Eventually I realized this taint, this pollution, was inside of me. Nobody could see it. But I can always feel it. I especially feel it when something triggers a memory of Jeremy, or the way my parents handled my abuse when I was sixteen. I am overcome with sadness, a sadness that usually comes at night when I'm alone, or when a memory springs up during sex with John. Tears silently

wet my cheeks, and then I turn to sobbing. My eyelids are always swollen the next day. It's as if the pollution inside me is trying to get out through my tears. But there will never be enough tears to clean it away. And so the stain lives on.

I am not a victim. I am not a survivor. I am a human. Something happened to me, something that happens to more people than is comprehensible, and I changed because of it. This happens all the time, and it doesn't always deal with rape. I had a boyfriend, and I changed. My dog died, and I changed. I became a sister, and I changed. I am always changing, but I am not defined by any one of these changes. They are simply added to my past. They are experiences which changed me into who I am at this point in my life. More changes will come, and I will change. It's how it goes. This is why I get irritated when researchers say "victim" and "survivor" over and over. I survived my dog's death. Does this make me a survivor in the same way I "survived" my rape? When I think of "survivor" I think of someone who narrowly escaped death, like a car crash. "Survive" literally means to live on, either after the death of someone or something, or an event. In this sense, I am a survivor of my dog's death, which doesn't seem as difficult as living on after a rape.

The first time I read my journals I was twenty-four. I had gotten them a couple years before from a Leavenworth county officer. I had had to call numerous phone numbers and talk to half a dozen people before I was able to get my property. The county had been holding the journals as evidence, but since there would be no criminal action taken against Jeremy, they were useless to prosecutors, and I wanted them back. A woman's telephone voice told me when and where I could meet up with an officer.

The meeting was set up to happen at Teepee Junction, just north of Lawrence and barely inside the Leavenworth county line. There is a huge concrete teepee, lending its name to the junction. Painted in black are two water lines with the dates where flooding overtook the teepee. Inside is a general store.

Though I lived only minutes away, I chain-smoked the entire drive there. I waited in my air-conditioned car as the officer's cruiser turned in, throwing up dust from the empty gravel parking lot. My stomach was swirling. We got out of our cars, and I immediately thanked him, unsure of what to do or say. He asked for my driver's license and, after inspecting it through his sunglasses, handed it back. The polite man fetched a clipboard from his cruiser and had me sign a paper, saying I was taking custody of the property.

He then handed me a thick brown accordion file full of journals. I was surprised the file could hold them all. It was nearly bursting. I got in my car and lit another cigarette. The journals sat in my passenger's seat, like a lost dog I had finally found. When I got home I put them in a corner in my closet, not even bothering to delve inside them. I only checked to make sure they were all there, which was easy because I had



numbered the volumes on the inside covers as I wrote them. They sat in that accordion file, untouched, for years.

I have read most of my journals, but not all. I'm still working my way through my younger self's life. Sometimes it's hard to read what she wrote over a decade ago. I want to grab that girl by both her shoulders and scream, *What are you thinking?* But since I can't question or warn her, I simply try to understand her. Looking at her words and pen-crafted hearts and smiley faces, I can see how she got caught up with Jeremy. But that same handwriting shows me how dysfunctional her life was.

I may never know with certainty what made her go into Jeremy's trailer that March day in 2002 where a threshold was crossed. But I do know with certainty I will not give up on her as so many others had. She didn't understand herself, and I don't understand myself, so that search for understanding for both of us is what will keep me writing. She can no longer participate in her search for meaning because she is stuck in the pages of my journals. I, however, extracted myself from them long ago. I will search for meaning for the both of us.

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