Indomitable Identity: A Consciousness of Survival in Childhood Memoir

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Master’s Thesis Abstract

My creative thesis consists of two parts: a literary analysis of four memoirists’ work, and a dual narrative memoir that I wrote. Memory and narrative are inseparable tools life writers utilize in the creation of identity through childhood memoir. Saint Augustine’s precedent of confessional autobiography laid the foundation for 1960s confessional literature, which incorporated life’s most traumatic experiences as subject matter. 1960s confessional literature in turn laid the groundwork for modern memoir, which converts the shocks of life into art.

The four memoirists whose work I chose to analyze are Jeannette Walls (The Glass Castle), Mary Karr (The Liars’ Club), Dorothy Allison (Two or Three Things I Know for Sure), and Frank McCourt (Angela’s Ashes and ’Tis). I selected their work from among scores of memoirists, for the indomitable nature they convey through various literary techniques. Included among these techniques are embedded narrative; a loosely chronological, associative approach to narrative which includes dreams springing from the unconscious mind; prolepsis and analepsis; lyrical realism; and multiple narrative voices which weave with one another to create identity. The work of Walls, Karr, Allison, and McCourt communicates endurance, strength, and humor in the face of trauma caused by extreme poverty, neglect, and even abuse. Memoir serves the dual purpose of entertaining readers, and informing readers about childhood trauma.
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Possibly the first prehistoric form of life writing, cave renderings and engravings of Cro-Magnon artists deep within the Lascaux caverns in Dordogne, France, date back to 15,000 B.C.E., and depict wolves, bison, mammoth, and other animals hunted by prehistoric people. In an art class I took long ago, the instructor speculated that these drawings in red and yellow ochre exemplified sympathetic magic, wherein the cave dwellers drew a successful hunt as part of a positive thinking ritual which aided them in going out and capturing their prey. I add to this speculation that perhaps these cave artists were our first autobiographers. A particularly noteworthy hunt might be rendered on the low ceilings or walls of the caves to preserve the story for retelling to future generations. The drawings' proximity far from the inhabited and day-lit sections of the caves rules out “purely decorative purposes” (de la Croix and Tansey 26 – 8) and gives credence to the sympathetic magic theory, but it is equally likely that cave people’s renderings aided their memories in retelling old stories.

Life writing serves the purpose of reconstructing identity as one recalls the past, which is a type of sympathetic magic, or the belief that the outcome of future events can be influenced through ceremonies which conjure the desired positive outcome mentally
and pictorially. I have chosen memoir as my story’s medium, in order to focus on specific events related to the theme of survival of a traumatic childhood. Memoirists Jeanette Walls, Mary Karr, Dorothy Allison, and Frank McCourt had less than ideal childhoods. Silence and invisibility accompanied shame associated with poverty, neglect, and abuse. Through various literary techniques, these four memoirists create a sense of hope which affects identity positively. Their prose about childhood’s trauma was infused with humor or personal insight, which uplifted me as the reader. Virginia Woolf writes about these exceptional “moments of being” (Woolf 70; Larson 30) that stand apart in memory from the forgotten events. For Woolf, the exceptional moments too often ended in despair—caused by the painful realization that people hurt one another—but occasionally ended in satisfaction (Woolf 71). The memoirists I analyze are characterized by their ability to absorb the shocks of life, and then write about childhood in ways that positively constructs identity and uplifts readers.

Woolf suggested that her ability to absorb the shocks of life, and then explain them in written form, is what makes her a writer. She believed that a hidden pattern connects all humans in a work of art, and that by writing about the sledge-hammer blows, those shocks had lost their power to hurt her (72). She supposed that “[a]ll artists...feel something like this” (73). I feel fortunate that I can recognize the process others use of narration to reconstruct memories and turn the shocks of life into art. For me, it is what sets these memoirists apart from others. My literary analysis emphasizes
each author’s narrative in terms of the way narration appeals to readers and connects with the hidden pattern Woolf spoke of, that turns life, shocking life, into art.

Memory may marshal one’s confidence in the future, but for children who experience trauma—especially at the hands of significant adults within their own families—those memories are likely to impact identity negatively. Identity formation in children is dependent upon mirroring provided by trusted adults, but when trust is broken, identity suffers. Life writing facilitates reconstruction of identity through the magic of “putting it into words” (Woolf 72). Woolf said, “It is only by putting it into words that I make it a whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me” (72). Walls, Karr, Allison and McCourt experienced the wholeness offered through life writing as a means to connecting with this hidden pattern Woolf called art.

Philippe Lejeune defined autobiography “as the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (Lejeune viii). James Olney’s working definition of the genre extends it to include, “confessions, autobiography, memoirs, …and—the most frequently employed term—life-writing (Olney Memory xv). While autobiography and memoir are used interchangeably, memoir usually deals with a specific time period and a single underlying theme, whereas autobiography generally covers the lifespan of the author and may convey multiple themes.

Paul John Eakin explains that “critics have coined an umbrella term, life writing,
to cover the protean forms of contemporary personal narrative, including interviews, profiles, ...diaries, Web pages, and so on” (Eakin 1). Life writing involves crafting the past through biography, autobiography, memoir, confession, or frequently, through highly autobiographical fictionalized novels, such as those of Junot Diaz and Allison.

Confessional literature of the 1960s laid the groundwork for modern memoir by incorporating

the use of the writers’ most extreme life experiences as literary material.

This grew out of the confluence of the Beats (Burroughs, Corso, Ginsberg, Kerouac) on the West Coast of the United States, and Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jerrell and John Berryman, who represented the East Coast poetry establishment. (Cline and Angier 70)

Adherence to the truth is essential and expected in confession. Saint Augustine observed the following guideline, which also applies to memoir: “Life writers are free to tell a story—but they have a contract with the reader not to invent, to tell as far as possible what actually happened (Cline and Angier 1). Augustine’s method of honest self-disclosure—confession—was later subverted by Rousseau’s unreliable narrator.

Autobiography for the purpose of confession dates back to Saint Augustine’s Confessions in 397 C.E. Confession functions to expose one’s secrets, and has been viewed, mystically speaking, as healing for the psyche. Literarily speaking, confessional memoir was initially viewed negatively for its first person orientation. Augustine’s
unprecedented autobiographical prose flew in the face of literary tradition, written in the first person, with no equivocation about using that literary form. Other “pilgrims in the labyrinth of self-knowledge” such as Michel de Montaigne, Goethe, and Michel Leiris sought gnosis, mystical knowledge of the self, but “gnosticism of the I, …[is] restrained within the limits of personal identity” (Olney Studies 127). Olney elaborates, “certain themes of a personal myth come through, invocations of the individual daimon who is seeking his life in the spaces within” (127). Self-knowledge presupposes truthfulness about and with oneself.

Rousseau broke with this tradition of honesty when he wrote his confessions: he incited distrust in the unreliable narrator due to his propensity for taking on alternate identities with various female conquests (Olney Memory 153-54). Reliability is crucial in writing memoir, just as one’s word is what builds or breaks one’s trustworthiness in others’ eyes. McCourt was aware of this distinction between truth and fiction when he wrestled with whether to label his autobiographical account of childhood a novel or a memoir (Forbes 474). While all memory is subjective to some extent, McCourt understood the legal and moral obligations of telling the truth in memoir. Since he took literary license by telling the story of his parents’ courtship, he stretched his autobiographical account to include events that occurred before his birth, and yet he ultimately chose the label of memoir. On the other hand, Allison chose the label of novel for Bastard out of Carolina. She recounts the main character, Bone’s involvement in
robbing, at the age of twelve, the local Woolworth’s (*Bastard* 220-26), which is reason enough not to take confession so far as to go to jail for commission of a crime many years after the fact.

Jacques Derrida spoke in favor of autobiography during an interview in 1989:

‘Autobiography’ is perhaps the least inadequate name, because it remains for me the most enigmatic, the most open, even today....The idea of an internal polylogue…the adolescent dream of keeping a trace of all the voices which were traversing me…and which was to be so precious, unique....I don’t dream of either a literary work, or a philosophical work, but that everything that occurs, happens to me or fails to, should be as it were sealed. (ed. Attridge 35)

By “sealing” our memories, memoirists capture the strongest impressions, the humor, the serendipity, or the epiphanies that contribute most to identity formation. Derrida mentions Gide, Nietzsche, and Rousseau as the writers who impressed him most with autobiographical reflections which were neither “literary, nor philosophical, but confessions” (35). In memoir, as in the novel, the subjectivity of the author is assumed. The author writes the story as seen through his or her eyes. The author’s “confessions” relate perceptions as he or she experienced them. McCourt, who began writing *Angela’s Ashes* at sixty-four years old, was asked by a review writer how he remembered “having a sore between his eyebrows when he was ten.” McCourt’s answer was, “How
can you not remember? Obviously that writer had a very happy childhood, or no childhood” (McCourt, Learning 78). We remember the outliers of experience. I have journals to refer to, as McCourt did, but I rarely need to consult them. I remember the novel and shocking events (Kotre 93) best, and I recall, as Toni Morrison put it, “the proceedings too terrible to relate” (Morrison, The Site, 193). Morrison is willing to present the truth without the veil (191), and asserts that truth cannot “exist without human intelligence” (193). The procedure for presenting the truth palatably is to present it without self-pity, and in such a way as uplifts or even entertains the reader.

If life writers—like Allison—are uncomfortable with the prospect of others reading their autobiography, life writing may be fictionalized when writers wish to shield themselves from undue exposure. Grazia Deledda used this technique in Cosimo (Scarpato and Wilson 40-1). In the memoir part of my thesis, I chose to adhere to the truth to the greatest degree that memory allows. In order to protect the privacy of the lives of those people with whom my life is intertwined, I have changed all of the names in my memoir. Pseudonymity can be taken as reluctance to name the writer (Saunders 143), and while I had some reluctance, I was willing to name myself. I was dissuaded from using true names by a professor more knowledgeable in life writing than I.

As a young adult, I considered my memories of childhood superbly preserved. However, the more I advance in age, the less distinct those memories are, especially of inconsequential events. Memory’s diminishing capacity is evident in my recollections of
movies as well: I could distinctly recall lines of dialogue, plots, and endings of movies almost photographically in my twenties and thirties, but that ability has diminished to the point where, unless I keep a journal of movies I watched, I forget many titles. As I wrote my creative thesis and wished to more clearly paint a picture of a scene in my readers’ minds, I became aware that I do not truly remember the color of the chair in which the man sat, hidden behind the newspaper, so I made up that detail, because it is not crucial to the truth, but such a detail helps a reader with the imagery. By journaling throughout my life, I was able to work out what was “not ready to be published” (Olney Studies 134), and preserve memory while it was fresh. Karr admits to creative license in recreating conversations between her father and his friends (Garner 2) which flesh out Karr’s narrative. In the same way that McCourt took creative license about events that took place before his birth, I add detail which enriches imagery for readers without altering the important facts or events.

Paul John Eakin describes Lejeune’s theory of life writing:

Lejeune asserted that “autobiography is above all a narrative, which follows in time the story of an individual” ...Lejeune claimed for Michel Leiris the honor of having realized “the secret project of all autobiography, the discovery of the order of a life,” precisely by “inverting the importance and role of chronology and meaning” customarily observed in traditional or classical autobiography, thus “giving
precedence to thematic order and relegating chronology to a distinctly secondary level of importance.” (Lejeune xi)

In terms of importance, chronology plays a secondary role to the meaning derived from the themes of one’s life. In Augustine’s *Confessions*, spiritual conversion is his underlying theme; for McCourt, Karr, Allison, and Walls, the prevalent theme emerges of surviving a difficult childhood; my memoir includes both themes.

Within the survival theme, a sense of hope, and occasionally humor, elevates the somber elements of our stories. The memoirist naturally seeks the meaning and order of his or her life, and through that order, identity is redefined as the author sees it, rather than forming as a result of other people imposing an identity upon the writer. As I wrote my memoir, I selected significant events which, in turn, formed identity: whether it was surviving a trauma or experiencing some serendipitous event, what I recount in my memoir makes a significant statement about my identity.

Motherhood is a secondary thematic undercurrent in my memoir and in the memoirs I will analyze. Motherhood is integral to identity because mirroring is a function often provided by mothers, usually the primary caregivers. Mothers “mirror” or reflect back the image they hold of their children, and from this, children gain self-confidence. When mirroring is absent or lacking, identity is likely to suffer unless positive forms of mirroring are found elsewhere. All of the mothers in the memoirs I analyze had a diminished capacity for protecting their children, either because of
mental illness to some degree, or co-dependence upon an alcoholic husband, or due to unwed motherhood at age fifteen, in Allison’s case. Whether diminished protective capacity stemmed from societal hierarchies or from weakness of mental or emotional fortitude, this leads to the issue of ethics involved in life writing.

Eakin writes extensively of the ethics involved in life writing. I will summarize how his main points informed my own writing by way of a brief synthesis of his tenets. Quite aside from familial obligation to secrecy to protect family honor, Eakin referenced David J. Garrow, constitutional law historian, who “concludes that the Supreme Court, once the champion of a constitutionally protected right to privacy… has since abandoned it. The court, [Garrow] observes, is less open to privacy claims now than at any time in the last hundred years” (Eakin 7). This fact, unfortunately, did not help Augusten Burroughs, who was sued for libel by his adoptive family, the Turcottes. They charged him with fabricating events in his memoir, *Running with Scissors* (Walls, Truth, 74); the Turcottes won an undisclosed sum in their lawsuit in 2007.

In being true to my perceptions in my memoir, I revealed practices that caused others (and me) harm. It causes some angst in me to injure another’s pride as I write about childhood. In discussing my doubts with other family members about revealing my perceptions of the failure of others to protect children, I am reassured a hundred-fold, and encouraged to write my story. I have done my best to write with as non-judgmental a voice as first-person narration allows. The best memoirs are “written with
love[, and] elevate the pain of the past with forgiveness, ...[with] no self-pity” (Zinsser 5). I waited until adulthood to tell my story, adhering to McCourt’s claim that “you can’t write about that kind of childhood until you’re mature enough, until you have some self-esteem” (McCourt, Learning 63). I built self-esteem through academic and professional achievements after becoming a mother. I tell the events of my story in a factual fashion, the truth as I remember it, and readers will draw their own conclusions.

David Parker writes of “our need to be oriented in moral space” (ed. Eakin 60), a space that fosters identity. Parker concludes that if one lacks evaluative framework, one suffers “a profound psychic disorientation; and] self-life writing cannot but reflect the self’s orientation, or pattern of orientation, in moral space” (61). Privacy in our interpersonal lives is shared, and lacks the autonomous individualism necessary for the demarcation of personal privacy (ed. Eakin 6, 8). This presents tension between the “right to free expression” and privacy rights (15). I feel this tension in memoir-writing, but in doing my best to forgive and have empathy, I find I can stand up for myself, while being of help in a practical way for the one who protected neither herself nor her children. In a recent telephone conversation with my mother, the subject of my homeless sister arose. My mother commented, “It’s time for her to grow up, move on.”

I countered, “It does damage to a three year old to be nearly drowned by her father for not obeying his sexual demand. She was too young to process that.”

My mother was curt: “I doubt that ever happened.”
I was firm: “I doubt she’d make it up.” My mother and I live within a strained truce: we divide over why my sister is homeless, but my mother and I agree that there is hope for my sister. I do what I can to help my mother, who no longer drives. I take her to the grocery store regularly. I help in practical ways, showing forgiveness, but I am always aware of the separation that occurs in homes such as ours was, growing up.

While life writers are as fallible as any human, their ethical assessments provide a “public examination of the process of moral judgment” made in daily life; this in turn provides “an incentive toward better ethical reflection” (Barbour 97). Reading Eakin’s anthology on the ethics of life writing alleviated some of the misgivings I had about relating another’s deficit, which was integral to telling my story. Moral assessments are often based upon “self-serving and vindictive tendencies” (Barbour 97). When I engage in life writing, self-reflection occurs as often as reflection upon another’s actions, which minimizes the tendency toward self-service. Vindictiveness does not motivate me or my writing. I have believed, since the age of sixteen, that when I refuse to retaliate for wrongs committed against me, the law of retribution does a better job than I ever could, of distributing justice. From this belief springs the title of my memoir, Gentle as Doves, which is based on Jesus’ words admonishing us to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (New Chain Reference Bible, Matt. 10.16).

I identify most with Augustine’s description of the way life writing allows for expression of the connection between memory and incorporeal experience—in my past,
those serendipitous events that seemed like little miracles. James Olney wrote,

Memory is altogether specific to the individual, according to Augustine, but beyond its particularity and uniqueness it also affords a bridge between time and eternity and is the non-locatable locus where the individual may discover God, "the embracement of my inner self—there where is a brilliance that space cannot contain, a sound that time cannot carry away, a perfume that no breeze disperses, a taste undiminished by eating, a clinging together that no satiety will sunder" (Olney, Memory, 17; Augustine Conf., 10.6, 211-12).

Augustine had uncanny deftness for creating sublime prose which captured life-impacting incorporeal experiences. I cannot phrase my most memorable moments more adroitly than he was able to. Despite the difficulty of finding words to capture serendipitous, ethereal events, life writing proved to be cathartic and free-flowing. While life writing was arduous labor at some points, it also proved effortless, insofar as the memories were fully formed, waiting patiently for liberation from numerous journals I kept through the decades, preserving my memories before time eroded them.

I wrote the story of my siblings’ and my childhood in tribute to the sense of hope that made us indomitable. Expressing our story in writing was a labor of love that I planned for twenty-five years. Writing is laborious: choosing the exact word; staying in the correct verb tense; maintaining the proper tone for audience appeal, and so on.
Where victims of childhood trauma are concerned, I subscribe to the importance of these individuals telling their stories, should they wish to do so, as part of their self-actualization process, or the process of reforming identity, which had suffered as a result of child abuse. One is validated by telling one’s story in a safe environment, whether or not it materializes into print. My drive to write memoir is propelled by my desire to express gratitude for the fortifying hope that instilled in me the will to embrace healing and life. My story illustrates the conviction that beauty exists in the midst of the ugliest events. The thematic core of my memoir depicts endurance and self-actualization. An abused child is often silent. Shame prevails, suppressing one’s voice. Because I survived with hope intact, I write from that perspective, highlighting little miracles that kept faith in a better future alive. Through life writing, I negate life’s hurtful power and convert it to art.

Whether one writes one’s own memoir, or (as a ghost writer) the biography of another, this tendency toward pulling some memories to the foreground and releasing other memories shapes identity and contributes to self-actualization. Susan Friedman points out that while Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan take different approaches to individuation, they both “think of the process of individuation as story” (Bree, Autogynography 173). Friedman also suggests that “the...characteristics of the autobiographic text are inseparable from the concepts of self held by the writer” (174). For children of abusive or poverty-stricken families, memoir serves the process of self-
actualization when one pulls the hopeful, positive experiences out of the past. Wilhelm Dilthey said, “The person who seeks the connecting threads in the history of his life has already, from different points of view, created a coherence in that life which he is now putting into words” (Olney Memory 225). The connecting threads that drew my attention are the same threads that led me to self-actualization. I rendered my story to the best of my ability and memory, in the hope that I can affect social change positively.

Memoirists reshape damaged identity, as did Jaycee Dugard, a victim of child sexual assault (CSA). She was kidnapped on the way to school in Lake Tahoe at the age of eleven, by forty-year old convicted sex offender Phillip Garrido and his wife, Nancy. Dugard then endured eighteen years of imprisonment and regular rape in a sound-proof storage shed in the back yard of her captor, just 120 miles from her home. Dugard gave birth to two of Garrido’s children during her captivity, without help from a physician or midwife.

Despite neighbors’ calls to local law enforcement, reporting children living in the back yard, and despite sixty visits from parole officers who failed to look just thirty feet away—from the home to the back yard—Garrido went un-apprehended. When two brave female campus police officers at the University of California, Berkeley acted on a hunch and brought Jaycee in for questioning, she could not even say her own name after the loss of identity and abuse she had endured. Her first step toward regaining selfhood was to write her name onto a piece of paper for the officer who gently
questioned her. Thus she began her journey to regain her identity in a safe environment.

Dugard bravely undertook the task of writing her autobiography, partly to prevent other children from having to endure abuse within a flawed system that failed to rescue her. In her autobiography, *a stolen life – jaycee lee dugard*, she reconstructs her stolen identity and conquers the shock by putting it into words. In life writing, one is not forced:

> to relive the past trauma. Rather, it allows [the writer] to revisit the past in the safety and companionship of the present while armed with the coping tools of the present. [With] these conditions met, [one] should be able to tell [ones] story and...[b]e angry when remembering how you were betrayed and abandoned by ‘caretakers’ while feeling secure in...present relationships. (Trappler 109-10)

Dugard drew from the strength and support offered by her mother, and she also followed the example set by the Women’s Movement of the seventies and eighties. Aligned with the Confessional Literature Movement, the result was an outpouring of confession “about incest...[and] violence against women” (Cline and Angier 70). Confessional life writing affected positive political and social change for women.

I gravitate toward reading the work of fiction writers and memoirists who not only tend—like Dugard—toward healing and hope in their prose, but who also see and narrate humor. Memoirists are keen observers and recorders of events. As Thomas
Larson puts it, a memoirist is the “Family Watcher...assigned the observer role in the family, [and] a natural at it” (Larson 74). Jeannette Walls is a natural at observation, narration, and humor, and I will begin my literary analysis with her memoir, *The Glass Castle*.

Walls’s narrative rivets my attention from the beginning of Part I:

I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster....

Mom stood fifteen feet away....It had been months since I laid eyes on Mom, and when she looked up, I was overcome with panic that she’d see me and call out my name, and that someone on the way to the same party would spot us together and Mom would introduce herself and my secret would be out. I slid down in the seat and asked the driver to turn around and take me home to Park Avenue. (3)

The adult Walls narrates these opening lines, setting the framework for her book by establishing that, whatever she is about to reveal, she ultimately ends up a success, living on Park Avenue, un-reconciled with the reality that her mother has chosen homelessness. How can her mother, a woman who regularly read Shakespeare aloud to her children, be homeless? Adjacent to the title page of *Glass Castle* is a wedding photo of Walls’s parents: dapper father in a white tuxedo jacket and black trousers, black bow
tie. Mother in a stunning, lace adorned gown as delicate as snowflakes, holding an equally stunning bouquet in white lacy gloves. A large-scaled altar and multiple candelabras in the background suggest importance of place and of ceremony.

On the back cover of the book, a photo of Walls—which matches or perhaps surpasses her mother’s beauty—is placed beside her brief biography, which states, “Jeannette Walls lives in Virginia and is married to writer John Taylor. She is a regular contributor to MSNBC. The Glass Castle also won the 2005 Elle Readers’ Prize and the 2006 American Library Association Alex Award.” Her expertise as a journalist has taught her not to waste words. Her riveting narrative, in first person, internal focalization, soon shifts to Jeannette the child, but not before she explains, “What could I do? I’d tried to help them countless times, but Dad would insist they didn’t need anything, and Mom would ask for something silly, like a perfume atomizer or a membership to a health club” (4). Already her humor sparks me to a chuckle:

After ducking down in the taxi so Mom wouldn’t see me, I hated myself—hated my antiques, my clothes, and my apartment….I told her I wanted to see her…so we agreed to meet for lunch at her favorite Chinese restaurant….

She started talking about Picasso. She’d seen a retrospective of his work and decided he was hugely overrated….He hadn’t really done anything worthwhile after his Rose Period.
“I’m worried about you,” I said. “Tell me what I can do to help.”

…She thought for a moment. “I could use an electrolysis treatment.”

“Be serious.”

“I am serious. If a woman looks good, she feels good.” (4-5)

The thought of her mother rooting through a Dumpster with a gleam in her eye one moment, then the next moment, critiquing Picasso’s career, appeals to my sense of the absurd and the incongruous. In the taxi scenario, Wall’s self-recriminating candor solidifies her credibility and endears her to me as a kindred spirit with the common experience of eccentric relatives. Whatever comes in this story, it promises to be an entertaining ride.

When Walls confesses to her mother that she ducked down in the taxi, her mother admonishes her to simply tell the truth rather than hide who her parents are (5). Walls’s masterful use of frame narrative sets a safe stage for even the queasiest of readers to bolster confidence and jump headlong into the unfolding embedded narrative (Barry 227). Part II begins the sequence of Jeannette Walls’s childhood, and

“I WAS ON FIRE. It’s my earliest memory. I was three years old….I was standing on a chair in front of the stove” wearing a pink tutu, cooking hotdogs (9).

Sparse parental supervision was not atypical. When the nurse at the hospital squeezes her hand and tells Walls she will be okay, she replies, “I know, …but if I’m not, that’s
okay, too” (10). When pressed for details by the nurses about how she got burned, her reply is, “Mom says I’m mature for my age,… and she lets me cook for myself a lot” (11). After skin grafts and six weeks in the hospital, her father snuck her out of the hospital without paying the bill, saying, “You don’t have to worry anymore, baby….You’re safe now” (14). They were “[a]lways doing the skedaddle, usually in the middle of the night” (19). Her father is a hard drinker who has trouble keeping a job. Paying bills is a luxury. Walls combines en embedded narrative with flash-back or analeptic (Barry 226) narration of her childhood, consistently in the first person, thereby buffering the reader and creating identification between the reader and Walls. In what reads more like a comical novel, the funniest prose, in Part III, describes their move from Phoenix, Arizona to a new elementary school in Welch, West Virginia, which held the distinctive title of having a river, the Tug, with “the highest level of fecal bacteria of any river in North America” (133). “Dad pointed to the toilet paper up in the branches along the river’s banks.”

“‘What’s fecal?’ I asked.

Dad watched the river. ‘Shit,’ he said” (133). Walls’s sense of comic timing maintains her narrative’s humor as she describes her father watching the river before his one-word-reply. Her ability to entertain crescendos when she narrates the scene of her mother taking Jeannette and her younger brother Brian to register at Welch Elementary:
She marched confidently into the principal’s office with us in tow and informed him that he would have the pleasure of enrolling two of the brightest, most creative children in America in his school.

The principal looked at Mom over his black-rimmed glasses but remained seated behind his desk. Mom explained that we’d left...in a teensy bit of a hurry...and unfortunately, in all the commotion, she forgot to pack stuff like school records and birth certificates.

“But you can take my word for it that Jeannette and Brian are exceptionally bright, even gifted.” She smiled at him.

The principal looked at Brian and me, with our unwashed hair and our thin desert clothes. His face took on a sour, skeptical expression. He focused on me, pushed his glasses up his nose, and said something that sounded like “Wuts et tahm sebm?”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Et tahm sebm!” he said louder.

I was completely bewildered. I looked at Mom.

“She doesn’t understand your accent,” Mom told the principal. He frowned. Mom turned to me. “He’s asking you what’s eight times seven.”

“Oh!” I shouted. “Fifty-six! Eight times seven is fifty-six!” I started spouting out all sorts of mathematical equations.
The principal looked at me blankly.

“He can’t make out what you’re saying,” Mom told me. “Try to talk slowly.”

The principal asked me a few more questions I couldn’t understand. With Mom translating, I gave answers that he couldn’t understand. Then he asked Brian some questions, and they couldn’t understand each other, either.

The principal decided that Brian and I were both a bit slow and had speech impediments that made it difficult for others to understand us. He placed us both in special classes for students with learning disabilities.

This scene illustrates Walls’s acute awareness of her “otherness,” while her tone is neutral and devoid of any revelation about her emotional status. She does not explicitly state how she felt about being placed in Special Education classes.

Her prose incited empathy in me for her plight, not because she appealed for it, but because she deflects any plea for sympathy by converting an acutely unfortunate scene into comedy. Walls’s narration conveys a tone wherein she consistently loves and respects her parents, while simultaneously being able to accurately depict their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities. Her living conditions, in extreme cold, no heat, no plumbing or electricity, a large hole in the ceiling where rats infiltrated their home, and
her constant malnutrition—not to mention her scarred body—give her license to be angry or indulge in self-pity now and again. Instead, her long-suffering nature and excellent survival instincts come to the fore as she patiently endures her childhood while climbing the ranks of journalistic prowess as chief editor for her high school newspaper. I was left with a sense of awe at Walls’s resilience. She afforded me comic relief, and the effect is that I can remain on that page to peruse the tragedy of the moment. Walls brought me with her on her journey because she turned a tragic event into comedy and a work of literary art.

She treats the extent of her overbite with humor: “Mom told me my overbite gave my face character. Brian said they’d come in handy if I ever needed to eat an apple through the knothole of a fence” (200). When she learns braces cost twelve hundred dollars, she decides to make her own, rather than save baby-sitting money for four years to pay for them (201). With a coat hanger and thick rubber bands, she fashions braces that impress her father, who asks: “What the Sam Hill’s that on your head?”

“My brafef,” I said.

“Your what?” After he inspects her handiwork, Dad proclaims, “Those are a goddamn feat of engineering genius....You take after your old man....And I think they’re by God working” (202). Walls takes self-improvement seriously, and narrates this scene using mimesis, which shows or dramatizes “in a scenic way, ... making use of dialogue which contains direct speech.” (Barry 223). Mimesis creates the illusion that
we see and hear, first hand, the scene the author recreates (223) in a close and personal way. Diegesis, on the other hand, involves telling about events, or relating them to the audience in summarizing fashion, in the interest of efficiency (223), or to distance or protect the reader. She pokes fun at how she talks while wearing the braces. The identity she fashions here is one of resourcefulness, cleverness, and adaptability, converting the shocks of life into art. The reader gains an intimate connection to the humorous aspects of Walls’s memoir, which in turn buffers from more difficult aspects.

In the final scene of her memoir, Part V, the Thanksgiving meal is finished at the home—an old country farmhouse—Walls shares with her husband, John. Her mother—who now lives with Jeannette and John—raises a toast to her now deceased husband, and says, “‘Life with your father was never boring.’ We raised our glasses. I could almost hear Dad chuckling at Mom’s comment in the way he always did when he was truly enjoying something” (288). No recriminations on Walls’s part for either parent. When Walls read the completed manuscript of Glass Castle, she felt sure readers would consider her “just a poor white trash loser” (Andriani 38). Millions of readers assure her otherwise: Walls wrote a subsequent true-life novel, Half-Broke Horses, about her maternal grandmother, and the New York Times Book Review honored it as one of the top ten best books of 2009. Glass Castle ends where it began: with a fine balance “between turbulence and order” (288). Walls took a turbulent childhood and turned it into ordered success, reflected in the identity which shines through in her non-judgmental
yet appraising narration. Her refashioned identity and her memoir are works of art.

Memoirists who survive and thrive, laid the foundation for me. In my own memoir, as in *The Glass Castle*, I embed the more disturbing secondary narrative, framing it in the primary narrative of current, far less difficult life. I also memorialize serendipitous events where nature and that “unseen pattern” behind the harsh or mundane aspects of life offered evidence, through those little kindnesses, that hope and love exist in this world. Through these methods, I buffer the harsh realities of the past.

The second memoir in my analysis is Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club*. Larson describes Karr’s tenacity and honesty in writing about a childhood which simultaneously traumatized her and codified her into a woman with a spine of steel, plucky enough to take on the sources “of her family’s lunacy” and dredge the truth out of her mother about what drove her mother to be institutionalized for a time (Larson 75). Karr begins her memoir—similar to Walls’s fiery scene—sitting in the aftermath of flames. Her mother has just burnt the house, and all of the family’s belongings, down to the ground (Karr *Liars* 3-9). Unlike her second memoir *Cherry*, which she narrates in second person, *The Liars Club* is in first person perspective, using internal focalization (Barry 224), in prose that confides in the reader:

> Because it took so long for me to paste together what happened, I will leave that part of the story missing for a while. It went long unformed for me, and I want to keep it that way here. I don’t mean to be coy. When
truth would be unbearable the mind often just blanks it out. But some
ghost of an event may stay in your head. Then, like the smudge of a bad
word quickly wiped off a school blackboard, this ghost can call undue
attention to itself by its very vagueness. You keep studying the dim shape
of it, as if the original form will magically emerge. This blank spot in my
past, then, spoke most loudly to me by being blank. It was a hole in my
life that I both feared and kept coming back to because I couldn’t quite fill
it in.

I did know from that night forward that things in my house were

Not Right… (Karr Liars 9)

Karr, at seven years old, cannot process the causes of her mother’s destructive break-
down, but when she becomes an adult, Karr is the catalyst who coaxes her mother to
share her stories so that her mother might begin her own healing process. The story is
set in Leechfield, Texas, the site where Agent Orange is manufactured (33). Mary’s
mother is deeply dissatisfied with living there.

Mary and her sister Lecia cope with her parents’ constant, raging arguments by
dramatic reenactment, Mary playing the part of her father, and Lecia acting their
mother’s part, mimetically narrated by Karr to bring humor close to the reader:

We’d sit cross-legged under the blue cotton quilt with a flashlight, doing
parodies of their fights. “Reel Six, Tape Fifty-one. Let her roll,” Lecia
would say. …She had a way of shining the flashlight under her chin and sucking in her cheeks, so her eyes became hooded and her cheekbones got as sharp as Mother’s. She also had a knack for Mother’s sometime Yankee accent, which only came out under stress or chemical influence. Think of a young Katherine Hepburn somehow infected with the syntax and inflections of an evangelist: *I wish that whatever God there might be had struck my car with lightning before I crossed the bridge into this Goddamned East Texas Shithole.* Sometimes she’d just cry, and Lecia’s imitation of that was the cruelest: *There’s no hope, there’s no hope,* she’d say with a Gloria Swanson melodrama, her wrist flung back to her forehead like it had been stapled there. (38)

Karr narrates resilience and life writes an identity of indomitability. She and her sister generate and enjoy humor as the vehicle that transports them to a state of tough resilience in their dire surroundings. She faces life squarely, and endures.

Two other examples provide insight into what is at the root of Karr’s propensity for either dredging up the truth in an overt manner, or if that fails, then allowing dreams to speak the truth from the unconscious. In diegetic narration, Karr explains:

daddy…worked with a guy whose teenaged son had gone berserk with a twelve-gauge shotgun and marched one summer day into the junior high, where he shot and killed a guidance counselor while the principal (the
alleged target…) hid in the school safe. The men on Daddy’s job right away nicknamed this kid the Ambusher. The week the local paper carried a story about the boy’s incarceration and lobotomy in the state hospital…, the guys at the refinery pitched the kid’s daddy a party complete with balloons and noisemakers. I shit you not. Daddy claimed that the card they gave the poor fellow read: “Here’s hoping the Ambusher can finally hang up his guns!” (159-60)

Karr protects the reader by gaining distance through diegetic narration—explaining the tragedy in a rapid, panoramic way (Barry 223). Her purpose is to explain that the theory behind this ugliness “held that not mentioning a painful episode in the meanest terms was a way of pretending that the misery of it didn’t exist. Ignoring such misery…was viewed as more cruel…than…the sad truth” (160). In memoir as in life, confession and clarity cleanse the air and crystalize identity. This “consciousness of a collective identity” emphasizes “the importance of interpersonal relations in the formation of a sense of self” (Olney Studies 174). By identifying with his neighbor during this time of loss and misery, rather than shunning him, Mary’s father leant him support.

The final excerpt from The Liar’s Club portrays a scene wherein Mary, her sister and her father go visit Mary’s mother at the mental hospital. In crystal clarity, Mary introspectively describes her thoughts and feelings as she visits her mother. Mary writes of how Mother and Lecia share “some invisible circle of understanding… while
Daddy and I were exiled to a duller realm with which Mother had no truck” (172-73).

As Mary leaves after visiting hours, she sees her mother’s hand pressed up against the screen of the window. That night Mary dreams about her daddy “hacking up some large, dead animal on the…table in the kitchen” (173). Her daddy tells her to go back to bed, and Mary notices her daddy holding up “an actual human arm, hacked off at the elbow. At the end of that arm was Mother’s hand wearing Grandma’s wedding band” (173-74). Her dreams help her process aspects of life she cannot understand.

This dream of Karr’s reminded me of the dream I had at about age four, in which I saw a ghastly sight as I stood on a front porch, causing me to gasp awake just as Mary did. My unconscious mind began processing the shocks of my life before I was aware of what was happening. I marvel at the brain’s capacity for processing the shocks of life through dreams. Karr makes sense and order out of the profound unhappiness causing her mother’s mental illness. Mary dreams associatively, employing the subconscious to help explain what might be the culprit of her mother’s illness. Through diegetic narration, Karr protects the reader while she takes the reader into her confidence, sharing the experiences and dreams that come to the forefront of her memory.

Dorothy Allison is the third memoirist I will analyze for her “lyrical realism” (LeMahieu 660) literary technique. She combines lyrical prose and photography which enhances the realism in her memoir, Two or Three Things I Know for Sure. It “was originally a performance piece, and eventually became the subject of a documentary
film” called *Two or Three Things and Nothing for Sure*, released by PBS in 1998 (Adams 82, 98). A photograph in Allison’s memoir of her mother at fifteen years old depicts a beautiful young lady who became pregnant by her equally young boyfriend who ran off and left Allison’s mother to raise the baby by herself (*Allison, For Sure*, 20-1). The photo of Allison’s mother, seemingly untouched by life, belies the future that awaits her. Allison’s prose is a “linguistic sign” which combines with the “photograph as sign, in relation to a reflection on identity, truth, and selfhood” (Raynaud 45). Allison struggles to establish identity apart from the one imposed upon her by her stepfather, who sees her as a stubborn tomboy which he must break (*For Sure* 45). Her narrative is both proleptic and analeptic, more associative than chronological, and the photographs follow no chronology. This technique of juxtaposition of “linguistic sign” with “the photograph as sign” was also utilized by Walls, providing readers with the opportunity to ponder “the visual and the textual” (Raynaud 45). Photographs serve as powerful signifiers within a silenced childhood. Allison is dragged as an unwilling girl by her stepfather into the country of sex and violence (*For Sure* 55). She must outgrow her rage before she can begin to heal. Her prose describes the metamorphosis of her healing.

Allison writes in first person, diegetic narration: “Let me tell you about what I have never been allowed to be. Beautiful and female. Sexed and sexual” (32). She puts her finger on the pulse of identity when she reveals,

My family has a history of death and murder, grief and denial, rage and
ugliness—the women most of all.

The women of my family were measured, manlike, sexless, bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt. ...Solid, stolid, wide-hipped baby machines. We were all wide-hipped and predestined. Wide-faced meant stupid. Wide hands marked workhorses with dull hair and tired eyes, thumbing through magazines full of women so different from us they could have been another species. (32-3)

One aunt took an appraising look at young Dorothy, then told her, “Lucky you’re smart.” Another aunt told her, “You’re like me....Got that nothing-gonna-stop-you look about you, girl” (35). These conversations are preserved in Allison’s memory because of their great consequence upon her identity formation as she sorts them out lyrically.

What this prose lacks in humor, it makes up for in intensity. She tells the truth:

Let me tell you the mean story.

For years and years, I convinced myself that I was unbreakable, an animal with an animal strength or something not human at all. Me, I told people, I take damage like a wall, a brick wall that never falls down, never feels anything, never flinches or remembers....

That’s the mean story. That’s the lie I told myself for years, and not until I began to fashion stories on the page did I sort it all out, see where the lie ended and a broken life remained. ...
Behind the story I tell is the one I don’t. …

Behind sex is rage, behind anger is love, behind this moment is silence, years of silence.

The man raped me. It’s the truth. It’s a fact.

I was five, and he was eight months married to my mother. (38-9)

Allison sorts out the past through life writing, telling the story of standing up to a monster as “magic to use against the meanness in the world” (68). She summons vast courage to overcome the taboo against speaking about incest.

According to Jen Shelton, PhD, Associate Professor of English at Texas Tech University, when abusive fathers force secrecy upon “daughters to keep incestuous contact secret[,] culture, symptomatized by Freud, reinforces secrecy by teaching daughters that stories of incest reveal not the father’s crime but the daughter’s pathology” (Shelton 227). Shelton counters that silencing “undergirds the compulsion to tell the story” (228), referencing Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past.” Life writing and therapy help Allison reach the point where she can decide who she wants to be, rather than letting trauma define her. She declares, “I am no longer a grown-up outraged child but a woman letting go of her outrage, showing what I know: that evil is a man who imagines the damage he does is not damage, that evil is the act of pretending that some things do not happen or leave no mark if they do, that evil is not what remains when healing becomes possible” (For Sure 44). Her prose empowers readers and life writers.
Allison writes of her turning point:

It came together for me when I was fifteen and that man came after me with a belt for perhaps the thousandth time and my little sister and I did not run. Instead we grabbed up butcher knives and backed him into a corner. And oh, the way that felt! For once we made him sweat with the threat of what we’d do if he touched us. (47)

I felt strong identification with Allison’s desperation, which caused her to resort to brandishing a knife: in Chapter 4 of my own memoir, fourteen year old Melanie, an incest victim, contemplates using a butcher knife in self-defense, but she cannot summon the courage to use or even brandish one, in contrast with Allison’s fierceness.

Through self-reflection I ponder the paradox of why, in order to guard my teenaged daughter from an intruder in our home, I would with unflinching certainty, take up a gun in protective instinct. Motherhood brought definition to my life, causing me to rise above fear or timidity. Abused children too often have self-protective instincts trained out of them, so I wonder at the anomaly of having abundant protective instinct as a mother. My own childhood taught me I had no value, but mother’s instinct allowed me to love another human being to the extent that I learned, by extension and through caring for my daughter, how to care for myself as well. This type of self-reflection is a natural result of reading and writing memoir, and contributes to gnosis and identity formulation. Allison’s internal focalization exemplifies the gnostic journey.
The passage that impacted me most is a clear statement by Allison about identity: specifically, she will not let incest define her. She relates:

I am the only one who can tell the story of my life and say what it means. I knew that as a child. It was one of the reasons not to tell. When I finally got away, left home and looked back, I thought it was like that story in the Bible, that incest is a coat of many colors, some of them not visible to the human eye, but so vibrant, so powerful, people looking at you wearing it see only the coat. I did not want to wear that coat, to be told what it meant, to be told how it had changed the flesh beneath it, to let myself be made over into my rapist’s creation. I will not wear that coat, not even if it is recut to a feminist pattern, a postmodern analysis. (71)

Other incest survivors echo this sentiment, striving to live down the shame imposed within a patriarchal society. Allison, who openly admits to her illegitimate birth, also authored *Bastard out of Carolina*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a girl nicknamed Bone Boatwright (Henninger 83-4), and her mother, Anney. A movie was made of *Bastard out of Carolina*, by the same title, and was released in 1996, starring Jennifer Jason Leigh and Glenne Headly, directed by Angelica Huston. The novel and movie graphically depict the crime of incest, similar to Toni Morrison’s depiction in *The Bluest Eye*. Allison gives credit to Morrison’s novel for exemplifying how to tell the story of incest and violence in a way that does not alienate the reader (Allison, *Conversations* 43).
Allison accomplished that task by protecting the reader with anecdotes about her downtrodden but supportive aunts and uncles. The key, according to Allison, is to intersperse humor in a three to one ratio with trauma. She accomplished this in her novel, but regrets that Huston, who has a keen understanding of childhood trauma, did not effectively intertwine humor with trauma in the movie. For this reason, Allison finds it difficult to watch the flawed movie because it does not protect viewers (Allison, The Power). Allison’s realistic literary renderings transform trauma into art, refashioning identity for incest survivors who refuse to “wear that coat.”

The aforementioned memoirists all won numerous prizes and critical acclaim for their life writing. Frank McCourt exceeded the others by winning the Pulitzer Prize for Angela’s Ashes. Economic desperation drove his family from New York back to Ireland from whence they had come. The first page of Angela’s Ashes establishes McCourt’s prowess with prose: “When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood” (Ashes 11). McCourt had me at paragraph two, having had the Irish Catholic miserable childhood myself, but he continues, a master story-teller, appealing to my personal knowledge of Ireland:

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version; the poverty; the shiftless
loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the
fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible
things they did to us for eight hundred years.

Above all—we were wet.

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly
up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. (11)

I wondered how the Irish kept their cheery countenance with all the dreary rain and
mist when I was in Ireland for ten days in 1991. In the middle of many an emerald-
colored lawn, a circle of bright, multi-colored flowers offered cheer that still didn’t
explain the sunny countenances of the Irish people. Sunniness prevailed, unless you
walked into a pub, where the dairy farmers, done with their work by noon and planted
on a bar stool by one o’clock, glared at you for violating their sacred domain.

McCourt’s prose about his miserable childhood utilizes wit and humor to protect
the reader from harsh realities such as malnourished siblings dying. He remembers:

The master says it’s time to prepare for First Confession and First
Communion, to become good Catholics, to know the difference between
right and wrong, to die for the faith if called on.

The master says it’s a glorious thing to die for the Faith and Dad says
it’s a glorious thing to die for Ireland and I wonder if there’s any-one in
the world who would like us to live. My brothers are dead and my sister
is dead and I wonder if they died for Ireland or the Faith. ...Mam says it was disease and starvation and [Dad] never having a job. (113)

As in this excerpt, McCourt used first person, present tense narration through the vast majority of his first two memoirs, giving the reader a sense of immediacy and intimacy. One exception is where McCourt used third person omniscient narration to describe his parents’ marriage “four months after the knee-trembler,” and his own birth and baptism (Ashes 15, 17-19). He occasionally used third person to begin a chapter and draw the reader in (’Tis 27). He utilized future tense, dreaming of what it will be like when Dad brings home the first week’s wages (Ashes 23). This wishful projection draws the reader into young Frankie’s hopes; the reader knows this wish will not come true.

McCourt elevates the concept of indomitability. With characteristic humor, he describes when his parents met: “With Angela drawn to the hangdog look and Malachy lonely after three months in jail, there was bound to be a knee-trembler. A knee-trembler is the act itself done up against a wall, man and woman up on their toes…” (15). Here are a man and woman embarking upon one of the most poverty-stricken and misery-fraught marriages of the Great Depression, and McCourt frames it in humor.

McCourt weaves identity through various narrative voices. “McCourt as Author” forms identity through authorial “Performance as an Adult.” He narrates others’ voices, influencing readers through “Performance as Other Characters.” Other narrative voices are expressed through “Performance as Child;” and “Performance as
Fabricator,” (Forbes 479), for those times he took literary license to fill in the gaps where memory failed, or when he was not there, as during the knee-trembler—he wasn’t conceived yet, and I doubt either of his parents would have told him about it. McCourt’s multiplicity of voices explain what others’ opinions are. This allows McCourt to stage “himself further in the background of the narrative” (Forbes 481) as when Mrs. O’Connell and Miss Barry discuss McCourt’s departure for America, and how he has snubbed the Irish Postal Service job that has been offered to him (McCourt Ashes 337-38). “Performance as Other” is accomplished through two methods: an “omniscient, third person narrator” and stream-of-consciousness dialogue (Forbes 483).

The example Forbes uses for stream of consciousness narration is as follows:

Dad comes home and Mam swears. He says that’s nice language to be using in front of the children and she says never mind the language, food on the table is what she wants. She says it was a sad day Prohibition ended because Dad gets the drink going around to saloons offering to sweep out the bars and life barrels for a whiskey or a beer. He brings home bits of the free lunch, rye bread, corned beef, pickles. He puts the food on the table and drinks tea himself. He says food is a shock to the system and he doesn’t know where we get our appetites. Mam says, They get their appetites because they’re starving half the time. (Ashes 22-23)

According to Forbes, the lack of quotation marks and fast moving narrative style “is
reserved for the instances in the text particularly strong in pathos” (483). She posits that the aim is to move “the reader quickly through this particularly painful memory” and thereby protect the reader (483). These narrative devices in combination with McCourt’s humor, protects and uplifts readers, lest they grow weary of the relentlessly sad tale.

When performing as child narrator, McCourt uses the language appropriate to a child, as in the story of the seesaw:

I’m in a playground…with my brother, Malachy. He’s two, I’m three.

We’re on the seesaw.

Up, down, up, down.

Malachy goes up.

I get off.

Malachy goes down. Seesaw hits ground. He screams. His hand is on his mouth and there’s blood.

Oh God. Blood is bad. My mother will kill me.

And here she is, trying to run across the playground. Her big belly slows her.

She says, What did you do? What did you do to the child?

I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what I did. (Ashes 19)

McCourt is too young to understand physics, and explains these events to communicate his ignorance. “The omniscient, third person…narrator is phased in only one time in”
this passage, when child McCourt uses, “She says” for his mother’s dialogue (Forbes 485). This technique gives readers “more information, wisdom, and experience” and lets “readers feel they are more capable than…young McCourt to evaluate and draw conclusions” (485). Forbes theorizes that this method fosters a “protective, nurturing, and almost parental response from readers” (486). Yet again, McCourt interjects humor into the scene when, in the days following the see-saw incident, Malachy competes for attention as neighbors visit to admire the newborn twins:

For days Malachy’s tongue is swollen and he can hardly make a sound never mind talk. But even if he could no one is paying attention to him because we have two new babies who were brought by an angel in the middle of the night. The neighbors say, Ooh, Ah, they’re lovely boys, look at those big eyes.

Malachy stands in the middle of the room, looking up at everyone, pointing to his tongue and saying, Uck, uck. When the neighbors say, Can’t you see we’re looking at your little brothers? he cries, till Dad pats him on the head. Put in your tongue, son, and go out and play with Frankie. Go on.

…He won’t let me push him on the swing. He says, You uck kill me uck on seesaw. (Ashes 22)

The result of McCourt’s “Performance as Child, Author, and Other” is that he “creates
in readers’ minds the identity of the young McCourt as a positive, upbeat, and promising individual[,]...charitable[,]... responsible and powerful[, and]...generous” (Forbes 487). Life writing provides an opportunity to construct identity for children who lacked mirroring. In turn, the skillful life writer protects and uplifts the reader through humor when possible, as McCourt does, and through narration of those magical moments when the pattern-in-the-world-that-is-art reveals itself in our lives.

McCourt’s cyclical plot comes full circle, providing the reader with a sense of uplifting completion at the conclusion of McCourt’s sequel memoir, ‘Tis. Angela’s Ashes alluded to the fireplace throughout his first memoir, but in ‘Tis, the ashes are Angela’s, post cremation (‘Tis 366). Soon after McCourt’s mother’s death, his father dies, which unleashes a plethora of emotion within McCourt, who decides, regardless, to leave America and attend his father’s funeral in Northern Ireland. McCourt reaches an epiphany at this time, and humor deflects the pain into which he might sink. Thinking his father’s face looks like a seagull, McCourt covers his face and hunches in spams of laughter. Others think he is weeping and reach out to comfort him, unaware of the humorous uplift occurring for McCourt and for the reader (365). McCourt gathers his wits and, before departure from the casket, thinks, “All this was your doing, Dad, and even if we came out of it, your sons, you inflicted a life of misfortune on our mother” (366). Nevertheless, McCourt remembers his Dad’s quiet conversation around the glowing fire, about Ireland’s sufferings, and these thoughts become “pearls that turn
into three Hail Marys there by the coffin” (366). Blame and grace coincide. Grace wins, despite three of seven siblings dying as babies. The laughter I experienced turned to poignant, reflective identification with McCourt’s grace and lack of self-pity. This pattern of grace and uplift is a pure art form. I identify with it and want to emulate it.

In my own memoir I frame one story within another story and have two narratives unfold in succession. Chapters One and Two begin the narrative in Melanie’s first person account. The undercurrent theme of motherhood appears immediately in the first two pages. I utilize mimesis and a combination of internal (inner thought) and external focalization (events only observable externally) to draw the reader into a suspenseful hike in the woods. Melanie is on vacation, hiking with family and her dog in Chapter One, then studying to take the GRE in Chapter Two. Melanie disappears up into the third floor turret to begin her book. The book she writes is italicized to eliminate confusion for the reader. The narrative fluctuates back and forth, from Melanie’s current life and reflections about the recent past, then shifting to the book she is writing. It isn’t until Chapter 8 that the reader can, with certainty, piece together Melanie’s present (in the non-italicized chapters) with her past (in italicized chapters) and be certain Melanie and the woman narrator are the same person. This strategy simultaneously softens reality for the reader and maintains suspense.

I wrote the narrative for Melanie’s childhood in omniscient third person because childhood, with its trauma, is a lifetime away. Third person was appropriate for the
early chapters of Melanie’s story, but as the story progresses, Melanie finds her voice and does speak in first person. Chapter Four was written in second person to let the reader identify with this lighter, more enjoyable narrative. The nature of the difficult content surrounding Chapter Four necessitated a break with the somber subject matter.

Critical opinions vary about third person narration depersonalizing the writing and reading experience. Lejeune believes that all variants of third person narration fulfill the author’s desire “to distance him/herself from the past self [but]...Starobinski notes, autobiography written in the third person can have the opposite effect, heightening the presence of the narrator” (Lejeune 43). Non-italicized chapters told in the anonymous female woman’s voice will be loosely chronological, covering an eight year span; the majority of the narration will deal with the most recent three years. Three chapters are told from her three siblings’ perspectives, extending much farther back in time, to decades ago. The three siblings speak in their own voices, in non-italicized chapters. Their memories give the story a more complex texture, and contribute to a fuller understanding of a combined reality. My brother told me, in reference to my writing a memoir as a creative master’s thesis: “I support this journey you’re on. It’s healing.” In saying this, I believe he spoke just as much of his healing, as of mine. Through sharing his stories with me—the self-appointed scribe—he experienced liberating validation by narrating his voice.

Additionally, the representation and symbolism of nature throughout my
memoir causes the reader to reflect upon why animals protect their own, but humans do not always do so. Paradoxically, a wolf surpassed our mother’s diminished capacity to protect my sister. The wolf became protective of my sister because she fed it regularly, and when a gang of neighborhood children threatened her safety, the wolf came to my sister’s defense (in a way our mother had not) and chased the gang away.

Going back in time from the confessional poets of the fifties and sixties, to war and Holocaust memoirs and to slave narratives, life writing plays a crucial role in social change. Numerous examples exist of the power with which written and spoken words are endowed. At the age of twenty-two, William Lloyd Garrison knew he was destined to make a difference in the lives of slaves, but he had no idea where to begin. Determined to live out God’s will on Earth, he believed ending slavery to be the cause that would give his life meaning. Vilifying a slave-trader landed Garrison in prison, but a New York sympathizer with the abolitionists’ cause bailed him out. Garrison had powerful enemies, but he also had a plan to start a newspaper of his own, with the cause of abolishing all traces of slavery. He realized his dream on January 1, 1831, with the publication of the first issue of his Bostonian newspaper, The Liberator. He wrote, regarding slavery, on the first page of the first issue, “I will not equivocate. I will not excuse. I will not retreat a single inch, AND I WILL BE HEARD” (Abolitionists). Like Garrison, I do not know where to begin to represent the cause of childhood trauma victims. I am certain that life writing is an integral component for making children’s
stories heard, and for reconstructing identity through mirroring supplied by a community of readers and writers.

Gillian Harkins writes about the trauma of incest in particular, stating:

[a]ccording to early feminist interventions, incestuous trauma was the result of failed social recognition. The lack of social audience to bear witness to incest testimony made its social reality “unknowable,” resulting in the “psychic” trauma of the father’s law.... Stemming from this understanding of incestuous trauma, speaking out about incest has become the privileged trope of political empowerment for its survivors, purported to debunk the myth of the taboo and to testify to the traumatic reality of incestuous violation. (Harkins 287)

Survivors rebuild harmed identity when they speak out within a supportive structure.

Slave Sandy Jenkins encouraged Frederick Douglass to carry a special root in his pocket for protection from beatings by slave-breaker Covey. Similarly, the words we speak hold a mystical quality which facilitates having a voice and redefining one’s identity. Childhood trauma victims may utilize life writing as an identity-building device. Suggesting—through life writing—a positive outcome or a hopeful direction is not meant to undermine the severity of the injustice or pain sustained by the victims. Rather, when we read literature, we search for elevation from the harsh realities of life. Our words have power, sympathetic magic, to guide the outcome of our lives in a
positive direction. Life writing is a vehicle wherein childhood trauma victims may be heard and be healed.

When Mary Karr wrote *The Liars’ Club*, “the book that jump-started the current memoir explosion” (Garner 1) she often fell asleep on the floor after an hour or two of composing. She attributed this to the emotional work involved in processing the past (5). What is the force—other than Karr’s immediate need for money—that drives a person to face a troubled past and, from it, create a work of art? Connection to others was the subject of C. S. Lewis’s sermon in the movie *Shadowlands*. Played by Anthony Hopkins, Lewis’s words were: “We read to know we are not alone.” I sit surrounded by two of Karr’s memoirs and three other favorites, comforted by the knowledge that “reverse entropy,” uplifts and defies the forces of nature that would cause the disintegration of everything around us (Peck 264-66). I read and write to identify grace and serendipity. Beyond this need for gnosis and connection, a social responsibility presses me to make a difference.

Homi K. Bhabha’s words poetically put social justice and survival in these terms:

> Although Morrison insistently repeats at the close of *Beloved*, "This is not a story to pass on," she does this only in order to engrave the event in the deepest resources of our amnesia, of our unconsciousness. When historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of memory and the indirections of art offer
us the image of our psychic survival. To live in the unhomely world, to
find its ambivalencies and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or
its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a
profound desire for social solidarity: "I am looking for the join...I want to
join...I want to join." (Bhabha 1344)

Bhabha’s words leave something to the reader’s interpretation. Our unhomely world
splits and sunder the psyche, but through art we capture the image of our psychic
survival. Morrison’s book Beloved’s namesake’s, words, “I want the join,” echoes my
desire to reach out, as a woman who was once split and sundered, to those who are
likewise plundered, even though “this is not a story to pass on.” Limited attention has
been given to autobiographical discourse unless autobiographers enter the realm of
rhetorical address by entering “the special ethos of the autobiographer as advocate”
(Sullivan and Goldzwig 269). Those “who write from the margins or borders of
dominant culture write from autobiographical perspectives that make their ‘special
realities’ visible” (271). I look to the examples of the most uplifting among childhood
memoirists to show me how to realize the dream of a lifetime, and to pass my story on.
The canon of life writing becomes a surrogate mirroring device: if these children of
trauma survived and thrived, then so can others. Walls, Karr, Allison, and McCourt
offer me one more wonderful way to appreciate the beauty, strength, and goodness of
the indomitable human spirit, as represented in memoir.
Works Cited


Harkins, Gillian. “Telling Fact from Fiction: Dorothy Allison’s Disciplinary Stories.”


Character List

Melanie – main character, memoirist; Eleanor’s first-born

Carrie – Melanie’s daughter

Jim – Carrie’s husband

D.J. – Carrie’s father-in-law

Eleanor – Melanie’s mother; Sarah’s, Christine’s, and Shane’s mother

Willard; Will – Eleanor’s husband; Melanie’s stepfather; Sarah’s, Christine’s, and Shane’s father

Howard – Eleanor’s second husband

Jonathan – Sarah’s son; Melanie’s nephew; married to Beth

Danny – a man Melanie dated; father of two sons, Craig, the elder, and Greg, the younger

Sarah – Melanie’s younger sister; Eleanor’s second-born

Christine – Melanie’s younger sister; Eleanor’s third child

Shane – Melanie’s brother, the youngest of the four siblings; married to Susie

Grandma – Melanie’s grandmother; Eleanor’s mother

Uncle Al – Eleanor’s younger brother; Melanie’s uncle

Uncle Andrew – Willard’s younger brother, one of twelve siblings

Russ – Melanie’s first husband

Renee – Sarah’s daughter; Melanie’s niece
Cherie Swanlund

Master’s Thesis: Gentle as Doves

April 15, 2013

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The asphalt path through the forest stretches before us like opportunity and cuts a straight line toward Mendenhall Glacier. On either side of the trail, meadow grass stands tall in the sunshine and gradually turns to thick, shady forest where sunlight struggles to break through in shaggy patches. Carrie pushes the stroller, pausing to give Aron baby carrots and a sippy-cup of milk. Resuming our stroll, he sleeps, lulled by smooth forward motion. I hold Olivia’s leash, enjoying her gleeful exploration of new scents and giant ferns. I suggest we take the unpaved loop so we can see Mendenhall River which runs off to our right, but the knotted tree roots encroach on the packed dirt trail. Although Carrie’s running stroller handles off-road, she isn’t game because Aron’s asleep.

My seventy-eight pound Airedale Terrier—bred to hunt bears and mountain lions and rid farms of rats and foxes—bolsters my confidence to
take the loop and rejoin Carrie up ahead on the asphalt. A minute into my
diversion, I hear a woman yell, but the pines muffle her shout, which sounds
like “Mom!” I cannot fathom why Carrie would be calling me, but I quicken
my pace in case, nearing the bluish-white river. I hear another yell, and begin
to run. Olivia keeps pace with me, neither slowing me down nor pulling. The
outcries are intermittent. As I near the asphalt I clearly hear, “Mom!” and
then a young voice cries out in fear. It sounds like my grandson Aron.

I call out, “Carrie?!“

I hear her plea, “Mom!”

“I’m coming!” I yell, as I run toward the voices. As I run, I recall the
conversation around the breakfast table that morning. I’d descended the
spiral staircase from the third floor guest bedroom to the main living area—
kitchen, dining, living room, bath, laundry room, and three bedrooms—
which wise Alaskans situate on the second floor where it stays warmer. I put
the kettle on for tea and got the fire blazing in the wood stove. I noticed an
article in the paper about a boy in Kake, Alaska. As he walked home from
high school, he saw a black bear cub. He didn’t approach the cub, but kept
walking, then out of nowhere the mama bear appeared and swiped at him,
knocking him into the ditch below the road, where he lay unconscious.
When he awoke, he walked to the hospital where he was pronounced fine.

When the rest of the family emerges for breakfast, I ask D.J. how to pronounce Kake: he says it sounds just like cake. He explains that while Grizzlies are larger, the smaller black bears can be more aggressive. I ask which type populates Juneau. He replies black, but to dissuade our fears, he tells the story about hiking the trail in front of his house at the base of the back side of Thunder Mountain. Seeing a bear on the trail, he shoos it off the two-inch by twelve-inch plank walkway, and it backs down and lumbers off, giving D.J. right-of-way. I don’t buy that this shooing technique will work for me.

Propelled forward by what might be a threat to my daughter, I reach her. She explains that the minute I was out of sight, a woman came speeding toward her from farther up the path, talking on her cell phone, slowing down just enough to tell my daughter, “There’s a really big bear back there!”

Most Alaskans treat a bear sighting like Californians treat the sighting of a possum, so the woman’s alarm is contagious. I wonder aloud if Carrie’s screams caused the bear to retreat. I’m grateful that she waited for me, rather than running back to the car and leaving me to search for her, but I also feel anxious about her and Aron remaining there and being in harm’s way on my
account. She tells me people in Juneau say there’ve been sightings of a lone grizzly bear around the Mendenhall Glacier. That would explain the size.

The previous summer, on my first trip to Juneau, Carrie and I hiked that same trail all the way to the end and back uneventfully, so the bear’s interruption was the last thing we expected. I joined Carrie and Jim on vacation before they decided to short-sale their home in Oceanside. Jim spent his savings trying to keep their home when he lost his job in Long Beach because the price of a barrel of oil plummeted to fifty dollars and the oil rig he worked on shut down. When their money ran out, Jim’s dad invited them to consider renting the middle floor of the three-story home he and Jim built together, with a little help from outside contractors. The bottom floor is primarily workshop for wood and metal, master bed and bath, office and foyer/mudroom. D.J.’s wife designed the home’s architectural plan before she passed on.

The morning of my flight last summer, before they’d decided yea or nay about moving up there, I’d felt catatonic about the trip, and upon my arrival, Carrie told me they’d made the decision to move to Juneau. That’s an easier decision to come by in June when it’s a sunny seventy-five degrees outside, but with the economy flattening, Jim’s options were greater there
than in California. Carrie preferred to stay home with her infant son rather than returning to work as a cosmetologist. Jim got a job as a helicopter mechanic thanks to training he received as a Marine.

My survival strategy was to adopt a puppy for the first time since high school. I’d been a single parent since Carrie turned two. The thought of losing her and my seven month old grandson sent me searching all of Southern California, clear to Hesperia, for an Airedale rescue. A year later at the dinner table we feasted on D.J.’s Tangy Alaska Halibut Bake smothered in cream-cheese sauce, and recounted our adventure while my year old Airedale, Olivia watched from a distance, hoping for table scraps.
Chapter Two

Her Story was Bearable

I brought an ancient, yellowed Princeton Review GRE Study Guide with me to Juneau, leftover from the 1990s. Vocab, vocab, vocab was the most important element for a high score on the exam which would give me entrance to the literature and writing master’s program, so I made six hundred flash cards for words like ‘perspicacity.’ I felt cozy studying in the rocker, gazing up at Thunder Mountain, occasionally spotting an eagle or mountain goat. The white goats camouflaged near the snow-capped top, so D.J. pointed them out and handed me a pair of binoculars.

Since retiring from his career as a helicopter pilot, one of D.J.’s favorite pastimes is reading in the rocker, gazing at the view from the panoramic windows of his home. Another favorite is being asked by friends to captain their ship, sailing along the coast, watching whales breach. He has his own boat and loves disappearing in it for weeks on end.

Eventually I disappear back up the staircase into the turret. I open my laptop and begin the book I’ve wanted to write since my twenties, opening with a favorite quote by Toni Morrison:

“Her story was bearable because it was his as well—to tell, to refine and tell again.”
Chapter 1
Headless Woman

In her earliest memory, she stood in her crib and coughed continuously. This drew her mother to come open the door and peer into the room at her, retreat, and close the door behind her. She hid her pregnancy for as long as she could to prevent being fired from her job. When Eleanor went into labor, it was a month too soon, but Melanie was born anyway, confined to an oxygen tent for a week until her lungs developed.

Her unwed mother lived with her parents and returned to work soon after giving birth. Melanie remembered following in Grandma’s footsteps from one paver stone to the next in the garden, and Grandpa chuckling when Melanie hugged a doll they’d just given her. When Grandma had a stroke and could no longer care for Melanie, another aging couple, unable to have their own children, cared for her while her mother worked. The man watered the garden and said, “Can you hear the plants saying ‘Thank you’?” In answer, Melanie strained her ears then nodded yes. This couple offered to adopt her, as did her biological father and paternal grandmother—with whom Melanie’s father still lived—but Melanie’s mother accepted no one’s offer. And so their fates were sealed.

When Melanie was three, her grandpa retired from painting houses, and her grandparents moved to Prescott, Arizona. Eleanor rented her own apartment and
began a new waitressing job at a Palm Springs golf club, where she met Willard, a
golf caddy. Willard’s job required migratory shift between Palm Springs in the
winter and Chicago in the summer. They married and Eleanor accompanied him,
waitressing where Will caddied. Melanie’s luck with babysitters expired: new to the
daycare in Chicago, not knowing where to find the bathroom, she wet her pants, and
stood outside, frozen in her shame. A woman marched her to the outdoor latrine stall
and shook Melanie backward and forward, frightening her, making her cry.

She obeyed every rule, coming when the woman called, “Lunch is ready!”
although the other children continued to play on the swings and jungle gym outside.
She perceived her own obedience and inquired, “Am I a good girl?” and received no
reply. This conditioning to not expect acknowledgement compounded her inclination
not to talk about the nightmare that woke her, heart pounding, etching her mind
with a memory that not even fifty years could erase. In the dream, she stood on the
front porch of a neighbor’s house, ready to knock at the door, but a hollow ceramic
statue arrested her attention. She stretched up onto her tiptoes so she could peer
down into the opening at the top, and saw her mother’s decapitated head lying
lifeless at the bottom.

Chicago overlooks Lake Michigan, formed by a glacier and filled with the
glacial melt-water. On a day off, Eleanor and Will walked along the shore with
Melanie trailing behind them like a tentative cloud. She learned the hard way to watch where she walked, by stepping into a deep water hole. She couldn’t swim, and floundered, head under water, for what felt like too long, then was plucked out as suddenly as she’d fallen in. Sputtering water from her mouth and nose, she wondered to herself what was so funny about nearly drowning; why did Willard laugh so long and loud?

On their trip back to California, Melanie awoke at dawn in the motel room. Her parents were gone. She searched for them from the stairs leading down to the parking lot. Certain they’d abandoned her, she sat down on the steps and cried, feeling the certainty of her parents’ rejection. Returning from a nearby coffee shop, Eleanor and Will chortled at Melanie’s misreading of where they’d been.

Due to their migratory lives, Eleanor kept Melanie out of Kindergarten, which was legal to do. She turned five in December just before her sister’s birth in January. She started first grade the following September when the family decided to put down roots in Venice. Nearly three months into first grade, Miss Brooks announced to the class, just before flag salute, “President John F. Kennedy was just shot and killed.” Melanie sensed profound loss of a beloved man. Reciting the pledge, tears traveled down her cheeks.

Two more babies were born: another girl and at last, a boy. Will’s tone of
voice exuded confidence when he announced his new position, foreman, at a manufacturing plant. Then he injured his back on the job. The rumor was that his back injury was an old one, but he received disability payments for a ruptured disc. He stayed home while Eleanor worked to support a family of six on a waitress’s income. Eleanor cooked an appetizing meal every night, spaghetti or lasagna or tacos or pot roast, and she did all of the housework herself.

It’s a mystery, why people remember some things and forget others. Bad memories reside in the frontal lobe, where they stand guard, ready to protect. Were there good memories, merely forgotten, or do bad memories predominate because that’s all there was?
Chapter Three
Our Fathers

Life is filled with miracles that we can miss if we ignore them. I would rather warm my cupped hands with one and press it to my cheek. I celebrated the fact that my daughter lived to see her twenty-second birthday after she’d walked away without a scratch on her from having her car totaled by a jack-knifing semi-truck on Highway 76. I meticulously planned her birthday party, an Indian meal for seventeen of her closest friends and family members. The meal consisted of nine courses, spiced with freshly ground and combined garam masala spices particular to Indian foods, a feast to express gratitude that Carrie’s life was spared.

For some inexplicable reason I laid awake the whole night before the jack-knifing truck, saying “Our Fathers,” something I’d never done before. I’d say an occasional prayer, but never all night long. So closely are my daughter and I connected, I felt something brewing but didn’t know what. An invisible crouching beast permeated the air, gnawing at the corners of the room where I tossed in my flannel sheets. Prayer was the only relief that night for what I sensed in the dark. The following day she called me at work, “Mom, I’m okay but the car is a total loss.”

So I pulled out all the stops, preparing a feast celebrating that she still
lives with me here on this earth. That entire week preceding the party I had come home after work—teaching fourth graders all day—then I stood in the kitchen until nine or ten at night cooking and freezing to minimize the work I would have to do on Saturday. The party started at five in the afternoon. I made her favorite birthday cake from scratch, Black Magic Cake, with coffee and buttermilk in the batter, frosted with dark chocolate and cream cheese.

Saturday morning I spent hours in the kitchen. In the early afternoon I showered, and dripping wet, deciding what to put on as I dried off, the phone rang. It was my mother. "I'm in the hospital. I broke my hip. I fell down. I'm clumsy. It was an accident."

One of those just-knowing moments possessed me and I blurted, "Bullshit, mom. Howard did this to you."

Mother's hackles rose, "How dare you talk to me like that? I'm having hip replacement surgery tomorrow morning." In denial about how this happened to her, always shielding the monster, she allowed him to continue committing monstrous acts. U2 sings, "You become the monster so the monster will not break you." Guilt sent needles into my conscience for not rushing to the hospital; it nagged, You're a bad daughter.

In self-defense I pushed guilt off, "Mom, I'm having a birthday party
for Carrie. I can't come see you until tomorrow. I'm sorry. Seventeen people arrive in an hour, nine courses to serve. I can't come to the hospital right now. I'll save you a plate." What I didn't say to her is, you choose this crazy life with a crazy man. We had no choice but to put up with your choices as children, but as adults we choose not to be part of the craziness of your life. You chose a violent, volatile alcoholic husband who abuses you. We do not.

Every time my sisters or I planned to celebrate one of our children's achievements or milestones—my nephew Jonathan's graduation from police academy, or my daughter being alive to celebrate her twenty-second birthday—whatever it was, our mother could never participate in our celebrations. Some crisis always interfered, tried to wrap us in its sticky web, prevent celebration of our children. So no, Mom, I can't come until tomorrow. Our own childhood lost, we choose to protect our children.

The party was a success: my niece’s Fijian husband couldn’t eat enough of flavors he’d formerly grown to love. Even my meat-and-potatoes nephew ate till he could burst. Only my friend Hank, who helped me in the kitchen that day, was suspicious of the pink color of the basmati rice with raisins. No man from Texas ever ate pink rice.

No one knew, because I didn't say; I shouldered the burden of
knowing my broken mom was in the hospital awaiting surgery. I wanted the night to be about my daughter, wanted not to let my mom’s hundredth tragedy trump my daughter’s party. My sister also held her tongue at her son’s police academy graduation the following week. His night should not be trumped by mom’s broken hip. On Sunday my feet refused to stand without bitter protest. I conspired to meet my sisters after work Monday so we could all go to the hospital together for moral support. They reached the hospital a half hour before me, and tipped off the nurse that the broken hip was no accident.

Mom, a lioness caged by her bed, expressed anger and frustration at everyone but the one to whom it should rightfully be directed. A social worker possessing the persuasive powers of Delilah enticed mom to give up her secret, admit the truth. The heavy wheels of justice screeched-scraped into motion and Howard was tried and jailed, restrained from coming near her again, divorced by mom who we pushed in a wheelchair through the halls of justice.

From wheelchair to walker to cane she progressed until Howard was released after eighteen months. My sisters and I remained blissfully unaware that mom began inviting Howard for coffee and meals. Back into her life,
Mom actually believing and saying, "He's different now, he's not drinking anymore. This is different than the past twenty years. It was stupid of me to turn the radio off and turn the television down when he was drinking." So the cycle of abuse continued. She hid her secret from us until, fortuitously, he accidentally dialed me from mom’s cell phone. I sat at my desk after work, and when I heard his fumbling voice, unaware he’d even dialed my cell, I hung up and ran to the restroom, shocked at how my body revolted.

My sisters and I gave Mom money each month to help her supplement her meager Social Security checks, and maybe she knew we’d stop helping her financially if we found out Howard was back in the picture, benefitting from the truck we helped to insure. He didn’t work, never held a job. He used Mom as a meal ticket when he wasn’t in jail for more than a dozen DUIs or spousal abuse. I would have walked away and let mom make her choice, swearing up a storm at the insanity of it, but I called my brother, who suggested that since she’s too out of her mind to protect herself, it's up to us to call the police and report Howard’s violation of restraining order.

I called my nephew police officer, and Howard returned to jail for ten months. Howard’s parole officer forbade mom to visit Howard. Mom blamed us for telling the nurse that her broken hip was no accident. Mom felt
deprived of Howard and I wonder if a miracle will ever come for her, a miracle we can cup in our hands. Miracles come unless we ignore them.

I spend another morning back in my kitchen; split yellow peas and tomatoes boiling, cumin and mustard seeds sautéing for Rasam soup; an egg in its shell blanching for Caesar dressing; sliced bread cubes sautéing in garlic and olive oil for croutons. My powers of procrastination are amazing, but now I must return to my computer and continue my book.
Chapter 2

Her Favorite Color was Blue

The tree reached toward the sky in the front yard of the house where she lived at the cul-de-sac’s end on High Place, overlooking the new Interstate Ten that cut through Santa Monica, California. From its high branches, she could perch and count the blue ’65 Chevy Impalas that passed below her on the Santa Monica Freeway. Her favorite color was blue. She had an eye for car body styles, and she favored the lines of the Impala. Satisfaction filled her when her count of blue Impalas reached into the seventies and eighties, her eagle eye scanning for them as she swayed from the highest, lightest branches that would hold her. Her bicycle was blue, too. Clipping playing cards to the spokes with clothespins for the sound effect of riding a motorcycle, she would speed along the sidewalks and streets of High Place and Virginia Avenue, the wind whipping her curly, strawberry-blonde hair, filling her with the sensation that she might lift off and sail up into the bright blue sky. Some days the sky glowed like a clear aquamarine stone.

At eight years of age, Melanie experienced the first stirrings of interest in boys. Jeff, her third grade classmate, sparked her attention, and she hugged her pillow close at night, imagining it might be him. Another boy, Daniel, a shy fifth grader, suddenly moved away from the neighborhood, leaving her his prized shell collection in a blue, decorative tin twice the size of a shoe box. Melanie found his
generous gesture touching. One of her aunts took a shine to the largest, creamiest conch shell, and asked Melanie if she could have it. Melanie didn’t have the vocabulary or the skills to say no, but later she rescued the shell from the top of her aunt’s toilet tank, sneaking it back home where Daniel intended the shell to rest with her in its flowery tin.

She loved it when her mother baked cookies. Melanie emulated this activity in her back yard, stirring up mud with a little water, pouring thick batter onto the fence rail where they baked in the sun, and carefully lifting the dried cookies off the fence. She inspected them with a sense of accomplishment.

The swing set in the back yard was not blue, but a rusted gray. One night she dreamt that a man snuck up behind her as she sat on one of the two swings, and plunged a knife deep into her back. Awaking terrified, the wound in her back still aching, she would not play in the back yard for weeks afterward.

Her play temporarily limited to the front yard, she tied some extra clothesline to a sturdy branch from the mid-section of the tree, then climbed up into the tree, gripped the nylon rope and slid down, Bat-Man style. She became aware, too late, of a burning sensation in her hands. She landed on the grass and fled to the bathroom and quelled her raw, burned palms beneath the stream of cold tap water.

Her pet rabbit, Timmy, lived in a hutch in the back yard, and her
responsibility for feeding Timmy forced her to overcome her trepidation about going near the swing set. When Timmy escaped the hutch one day, Melanie resorted to praying to St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost articles, for Timmy’s safe return. She could imagine the life of freedom Timmy lived with other rabbits under a raised shed in a neighboring yard, but her attachment to her pet overcame altruism, and she prayed. Her prayers were rewarded one afternoon by Timmy’s black form awaiting her in the back yard. Timmy even sat still long enough for Melanie to approach him and lift him into her arms, returning him to his cage. In honor of his return, she cleaned his hutch, scraping out the pungent droppings that were coagulated into one corner. She poured alfalfa pellets and fresh water into the bowls of his clean cage and thanked St. Anthony.

Melanie’s grandma sent word that Eleanor’s father lay gravely ill with cirrhosis of the liver. Eleanor left Willard in charge of the children, and flew to Prescott to see her father for the last time.

The conundrum was why Eleanor returned to Santa Monica at all. Her husband had beaten her one evening for carrying a large rag-rug back into the house after airing it on the wide front porch. After whacking the rug with the flat side of the broom, she asked if he would carry it in for her, but she gave up waiting for him to haul it indoors. He’d begun drinking that evening, so she lugged it in herself and
placed it on the wood floor. Melanie and her younger sisters witnessed Willard
beating their mother because she’d undercut his masculinity by carrying in the rug
herself while Willard entertained his brother Andy, who lived next door. After Andy
left, the children huddled behind the couch and cringed as Willard punched their
mother and slammed her into the corner of the wooden dresser. Her mother’s body
made a thudding sound that lingered in Melanie’s memory.

Their mother, on another occasion, ran out of the house and hid in the damp,
uninviting night. She wore nothing but her nightgown, and took cover in the
neighbors’ shrubbery to avoid another beating for an unknown offense.

Will took his violence show on the road on yet another occasion. He began
drinking early in the day after taking leave from his job as foreman. His disability
payments enabled him to stay home, to his family’s detriment. His wife took refuge
from another beating by him, running down the street to the Thurleby’s home.
Willard followed her. Mrs. Thurleby’s brother sat in an upholstered chair nearby,
concealed behind his newspaper, as Willard knocked Eleanor to the floor and kicked
her in the stomach and ribs. Melanie happened to already be there playing with the
Thurleby’s children, who vanished. Melanie felt helpless to intervene on her mother’s
behalf, but approached the man hidden behind his newspaper. Adrenaline pumping
through her small body, she pulled the newspaper downward, revealing his receding
face. She begged, “Why don’t you do something?” He did his best to ignore all that went on around him. He pulled his newspaper upward again, concealing his face. Melanie stood helplessly by, wishing she could do something to aid her mother who groaned on the floor. The reality of her mother’s world is that others looked on with apathy, or failed to look at all.

While her mother was gone to Prescott, her stepfather came to the bedroom cramped with three twin beds, each holding a sleeping girl. He woke Melanie and summoned her. Dread coursed through her, but she obeyed. He corralled her into his bedroom, where he lifted her into a cavernous bed that swallowed her with grasping sheets. Devoid of all help, she felt the sheets digest her as Willard probed between her legs with his fingers. Like a rabbit frozen with fear, she made no sound, but endured until he dismissed her to return to her own bed.

The wrongness of what Willard did propelled her to approach her mother when she returned from visiting her parents. When Melanie relayed the events of that night, Eleanor asked Will about it. He denied it, claiming, “Melanie is a liar; I’m going to whip her to teach her a lesson.” He took Melanie into her bedroom, closed the door, pulled her pants down, had her lay over the edge of her bed, and whipped her with his belt. She wailed not only from the pain the belt inflicted, hard lash upon hard lash, but from the injustice of punishment for telling the truth about
a wrong done to her. One subsequent evening Melanie bathed in the ball and claw-footed porcelain tub. She shampooed her hair with Breck, then noticed her mother’s razor, seized it, and in long strokes, gingerly shaved the hair off her arms.

Her mother’s smile vanished. She seemed devoid of emotion except for an angry apathy her face failed to conceal. Will was absent from the dinner table, out drinking at a bar, and Eleanor sat eating the evening meal with her children. She turned her attention to Melanie’s hairless arms and questioned her about it. When Melanie admitted she’d shaved them, her mother excused them both from the table, took Melanie into the bedroom, and whipped her with a belt.

That night Melanie had her first tidal wave nightmare. She dreamed she swam in the ocean near the shore, and noticed an enormous tidal wave in the distance, sweeping toward her. The wave overtook her, its power sweeping her far out into the ocean where she lacked the strength to swim back to shore. She awoke, terrorized by the sensation of drowning.

Melanie attended a series of Saturday catechism classes which culminated in her first holy communion. Her mother found a white dress for Melanie to wear for the occasion. White shoes were unaffordable, so Melanie felt the shame of having to wear her old black school shoes, while every other girl wore new, white shoes. Only the boys wore black shoes. In a photograph which Willard took after the family
returned home from her first communion, Melanie sat in a dinette chair, white veil draping over her shoulders, her ankles entwined around behind the chair’s front legs in an attempt to conceal the black shoes. Her mother stood behind her with a smoldering, angry, resigned expression in her eyes. In the old black and white photograph, you couldn’t tell, but Melanie’s eyes were blue.
Chapter Four

Easter Sundays and Boundaries

Easter Sunday makes you reflect back on the men who have been in your life on this day. One year, you roasted leg-of-lamb for dinner and invited Danny, who you’d worked with for years before you left the store to begin your teaching career. You always thought he was gentle and handsome, tall and rather slow-moving like a slender, giant Panda. So you gather your courage and invite him to join you and your extended family at your home for Easter dinner, and you’re surprised that he doesn’t mind being around your family. Some men prefer only solitude and the dark of night to being seen with a woman supposedly important to them.

The day comes and you wear your sleeveless leopard print top with black capris, feeling good at the time in a size eight, and Danny stays until everyone else has feasted and left. He stays to talk a little while, and asks if he can see you again. Just what you’d hoped for! You set plans, he picks you up for dinner, and a new relationship blossoms. Both of you are drama free, but sometimes you wonder if he’s all that attracted to you, and once you may have even asked him that question. He replied affirmatively, but you don’t think he feels the passion so much, because every man is measured by how it used to be with Norman.
With Norman it was like the Kern River, not like Niagara Falls, where you thought you might drown, but like the Kern, that swept you away in itself, in a strong current, drawing you like a magnet, like intense thirst, always leaving you satisfied. You had to swim with all your strength against the current to get back to shore, but it was possible. With Danny, it’s comfortable, but it’s a little bit like floating aimlessly on a placid pond in a big inner-tube, a little bit like work, but you love having coffee on the patio with him in the morning, and gardening together in the back yard, so you grow attached. You love that steady feeling, but sometimes you wonder if he still has a thing for the ex. A year and a half goes by. You go to Tahoe and Garden Valley to spend time together and visit with his dad and stepmom and brother. You stay in a honeymoon suite above a casino that has a Jacuzzi tub. You light candles and sip champagne.

Another time, you fly to Boise to meet his mom and stepdad. They have a settled, peaceful life like you think you’d have with Danny, who is now talking about rings. You meet his son, Craig, and Craig’s wife and two children. You love them all, and vice versa. Everybody’s on board. You haven’t met Danny’s son Greg yet, but you hear stories about his troubled life. After dating Danny eighteen months, Greg comes out of the woodwork
and into your lives. His ex-girlfriend, Grace, dies in a car accident and leaves behind a two year old son for her parents to raise, since Greg isn’t equipped emotionally or financially. On the day of Grace’s memorial service at the chapel on USD’s campus, you and Danny pick up Greg, who has been drinking. As you leave the room he rents, you spy an enormous unsheathed knife by the door. You take him with you to the service, because not to take him would create a scene, in Danny’s thinking. As you enter the sanctuary, Greg literally does two cartwheels down the aisle between the rows of great, wooden pews, and you trail in his wake, unable to believe what you see. Greg staggers up to Grace’s grief-stricken parents in the front row and they greet him graciously, warmly, and then return to listening to the minister who speaks on stage. The bitter odor of cheap bourbon wafts around Greg, who finds it difficult to contain himself. He bellows out, “Fuuuck!” loud enough for the entire congregation to hear, you’re not sure why. Is it grief? Is it disrespect? You ask your mother about it later, because she’s married to a bipolar alcoholic, and she suggests, “Maybe it’s bad manners.” Burly ushers approach your entourage as you walk Greg toward the exit doors, which weigh hundreds of pounds each, but are well-hinged, so when Greg pushes against them with all his might, they slam back with a lightness as if they are
toothpicks, making a thunderous crash. You’re surprised they don’t splinter. Greg is much shorter than his six feet, one inch father, but his strength is surprising. As you leave the building and head toward the parking lot, the ushers trail behind you, murmuring into short-wave radios. Crazy scenes involving overturned Christmas trees flood back to you from childhood. After dropping off Greg, you suggest to Danny that Greg needs professional help.

Weeks pass. After Greg side-swipes a car while driving under the influence, loses his job, and is evicted from his rental, he moves temporarily in with Danny, where he tears his dad’s phone off the wall and hurls it across the room, for instance. You wonder why he hasn’t pulled down—from the wall over Danny’s bed where it hangs—and smashed the giant framed picture of you and Danny hugging each other in Tahoe. You picture Greg staying in your house after potential marriage to Danny, and you cringe. Your house is your sanctuary. The upside of Greg’s stay with Danny is that Danny ceases to buy peanut butter and chocolate chunk ice cream, which he’s accustomed to eating each evening. To your dismay, he’s put on a belly the size of a six-month pregnant woman, but since Greg binges on ice cream, Danny ceases to buy it, and looks sleek again. The ice cream
moratorium suits you just fine, because you’ve put on ten pounds yourself since Danny began bringing ice cream to your house.

You attend an AL-anon meeting with Danny, and he unloads for a solid half hour to the support group. You can see the listeners grow weary; they want to do some venting themselves. You make a mental note that the codependents look like ten miles of bad road, much worse off by comparison than the alcoholics you know.

Your supplications—that Greg seeks professional help—yield no results. Instead, Greg’s situation creates many opportunities for Danny and his ex to get together and pow-wow about him. All pow-wow, no action. Danny begins to remind you of your codependent mother. You tell Danny that you didn’t have a choice about your life when you were a child, but now you get to make choices, and you can’t live with the dread that his violent, volatile son may come squat in your home someday, so you think it’s best if you forget your plans to marry, and stay friends. You say your boundaries are not the same as his boundaries. Danny lurches out the door, sullen, and never calls again. What he wants is someone to support him, be there for him, through his travails over Greg.

It takes many weeks before you can step foot into the back yard, a few
months until you can go out into the back yard without feeling the emptiness where Danny used to be. You wonder if you blundered, or if you’re learning from the past and doing what grown-ups do.
Chapter 3

Birthday Parade and Chocolate Bars

Their mother’s first addiction was to the drug Denial. It dulls the voices of common sense and reason. It blurs clear vision, muffles sharp hearing. From the tree where she perched, Melanie could see her sister lying with her cheek against the cool sidewalk. They overlooked the parade on the I-10, celebrating the opening day of the freeway. In attendance was the mayor to do the ribbon cutting. It fell on Sarah’s birthday, so Eleanor told her the parade was for her birthday. Sarah believed her, and getting up from her prone position, she walked like a baby duck over to the chain-link fence, heard the band play, and saw the fan-fare. She just turned four. Her light blonde hair framed her parted rose-bud lips and sky-blue eyes. You couldn’t tell yet that her limbs would later become long and lean. For the time being, she had trouble going number two because of intestinal impaction. Even breathing was a struggle. She always empathized with another’s pain, cried when her older sister cried. Sarah’s tender heart would need to develop a tough outer shell to survive.

When Eleanor gave birth to a Shane, she took some time off work from her nurse’s aide job. One day while Eleanor went out for groceries, Sarah’s father bathed her in the bathtub, introducing her to the ‘Wanna Eat the Pickle?’ game. He told her to let him put his dick in her mouth. Sarah refused, so he dunked and held her head under the water. She came up sputtering, and he insisted again what she must do.
Instead, she threw up in the tub. Disgusted, Willard left the bathroom.

Sarah told her mother what happened in the tub. This led to questions and answers between wife and husband. Sarah later went to her mother, not so much for a verdict, but more from her wish to comfort her mother, who lay crying on the bed. Sarah reached out to touch her. Eleanor grabbed Sarah by the arm, slung her, air borne, across the bedroom, and screamed at her, “It was a dill pickle!” Nowhere inside the house felt safe, so Sarah’s haven was the front sidewalk, outside of the white picket fence, under the shade of the tree where Melanie often perched, overlooking the Santa Monica Freeway where a parade celebrated Sarah’s birthday.

Being proactive was not Eleanor’s strong suit, and money was tight. Once, Melanie had a fungus on the bottom of her right toe. It progressed to the point where it consumed so much skin that the bone was visible. Grandma and Uncle Al came to visit. Walking to catechism, Melanie wanted so much to ask her favorite uncle to give her a piggy back ride, because walking hurt her toe. She couldn’t bring herself to ask him, didn’t want to inconvenience him, so she walked to church with her toe stinging and burning. Grandma cajoled her daughter into taking Melanie to a doctor. With medicine from the doctor, the fungus soon cleared up.

Melanie’s favorite days were when her Uncle Al took her to see a movie or to Pacific Ocean Park for her birthday. They’d ride every ride, and Al commented,
“She’s fearless.” He was like her older brother.

Melanie’s love flourished for music and The Monkees. She memorized every word to the song, “I’m a Believer.” Beatles’ songs blared on the radio, and when Willard was absent, Melanie sang to the lyrics, danced to the music, swung her nine-year-old hips side to side as she stepped down the porch stairs to the front yard, in perfect time with the music. Her mother loomed up behind her so rapidly, it was as if she travelled on a zip line, pulled her arm back, and swung it forward with all her strength, slapping Melanie on the back end. No words were spoken, but the implication was that it was wrong to dance to music at their house. Melanie didn’t do it again. Instead, she danced vicariously through the Wonderama Dance-a-Thons. She watched every episode of the Monkees. Mickey Dolenz was her favorite, and Sarah’s favorite was Davey Jones, so there was no competition.

Saturday morning cartoons, especially Johnny Quest, became another fine escape. Books were the best escape: Pippi Longstocking was Melanie’s favorite female character because of her fearlessness and super-human strength. She lived alone, except for her pet horse and monkey. When bad guys came around, Pippi dispensed with them, without ever really hurting anyone, with help from no one. Melanie loved reading the Bobbsey Twins because they had normal lives.

The time came for the family to move to yet another house, surrounded by
some land, so a mini-farm broke out. The walk-in pen in the back yard housed the rabbits. Timmy, it turned out, was a female, and Sarah’s white rabbit, Harry, turned out to be Harriett. When a neighbor’s male rabbit spent an afternoon with Timmy and Harry, the result was baby bunnies, to the delight of all four children. A dilapidated chicken coop held a couple of chickens, and provided eggs for breakfast. Max, Melanie’s black and white mutt, kept guard, with the help of Curly, Sarah’s white toy poodle and cocker-spaniel mix.

Willard grew up on a farm in Oklahoma with twelve siblings, and as a boy, he did the honors of drowning the excess puppies. This was not an unheard of remedy in the country, far away from Humane Shelters, but according to Will’s brothers and sisters, the weird thing was that he apparently enjoyed doing it. His sister watched Willard giggle until the puppies in the sack stopped moving. For a while, he seemed content to limit acts of terror to demonstrating to Melanie and Sarah, how to use a hammer to put a baby bunny permanently out of its misery if it had an illness like scales (diarrhea.) The implication here was that Willard had the power to kill with a hammer applied to skull. There was nothing more precious to the girls than a baby bunny. They would smuggle one into their bed at night as a comfort. Within a year, this rural house was exchanged with another more suburban home in Canoga Park.
At a family picnic on Easter weekend, Melanie rode on the back of Uncle Andrew's motorcycle. It had rained recently, so the ground was muddy and slick. The motorcycle slid down the hillside out from beneath them, breaking Melanie's right femur. This presented a new opportunity for Willard: if her three younger siblings so much as forgot to wear sweaters to play outside in the back yard, Willard held Melanie accountable. He threatened to knock her crutches out from under her to keep her on edge. She noticed, while sitting in the bathtub one evening, he lay on the floor outside the bathroom door with a hand-held mirror, angling it under the door so he could get a view inside. She told her mother about it and his version of the truth varied: “I was relighting the pilot light on the furnace.” It happened to be on the hallway wall across from the bathroom. Eleanor, of course, believed him.

He rough-housed with his children, and after Melanie’s cast was off, he picked her up over his shoulders, managing to slide his fingers inside her panties and between her legs. She told her mother about this; Willard denied it happened: “Melanie’s making it up.” Eleanor believed him again. He sent his three children out to play in the back yard and made Melanie stay in the kitchen with him, forcing her to touch his penis. He’d placed the hutch so that its glass front reflected down the hallway, revealing if anyone approached through the back door. To add insult to injury, he looked down at her repulsed face, and said, “You’re going to be pretty
when you grow up; your body, anyway.” Melanie pleaded with Sarah to sneak in and spy from around the corner to see what he did to her in the kitchen. Sarah saw them in the reflection of the hutch and told Eleanor what she’d seen, but Eleanor chalked it up to children’s imagination.

The day for which he’d been grooming Melanie finally arrived. At ten years old, she heard, “I’m going to have sex with you. Don’t tell your mother, because she won’t believe you, and she’ll just let me whip you again.” The impending fear could not have been worse if he had told her he was going to kill her. She escaped out the kitchen side door, ran to a neighbor’s house, and asked the couple if she could hide in their closet. They allowed her to seek shelter in their closet, and at Melanie’s bidding, they called her mother at work. Eleanor came and retrieved her from the closet. She emerged, shaking, but could not bring herself to speak, feeling it was hopeless. Her mother shrugged the incident off, acting as if nothing was amiss.

The following day, he sent Melanie’s siblings out to play, took her into the bedroom she shared with Sarah, and on the hard linoleum floor, he shattered her virginity, took her safety, destroyed her trust.

That night she lay awake for hours, unable to sleep, due to the loud, persistent ringing in her ears. She hugged her purple stuffed bunny to her chest, and prayed to God and to holy Mary, mother of God to make the ringing stop. It did. It
was a small but definite sign that someone did care. She hugged this knowledge close.

Willard continued his reign of terror, giving whippings to his son often, whipping Sarah for anything as minor as petting a kitten that wandered into the front yard. His youngest daughter escaped the brunt of his viciousness by reading in a quiet corner in her room whenever she could, but sometimes even Christine got a whipping for something as minor as Shane throwing a box over the fence into the neighbor’s yard while Christine was supposed to be keeping an eye on him.

Eleanor’s mother relocated from Prescott to San Bernardino, so Eleanor planned a trip, with her children, to visit their grandma. With the hope of possible freedom to fortify her, Melanie talked again to her mother one day while they cleaned out the refrigerator. “When we go to Grandma’s can I stay with her and not come back with you? Dad is forcing me to let him put his penis inside me. Please don’t tell him I told you. He said you wouldn’t believe me, and he’d whip me again.” Eleanor seemed incredulous that Willard had been raping her, but considered what Melanie said, and pondered the idea of leaving her at Grandma’s. When they arrived in San Bernardino, Grandma and her newlywed son, Al, heard and believed what Melanie said, and it even seemed for a time that Eleanor might also believe Melanie.

Whether it was the pressure or embarrassment of knowing her relatives knew about it, or simply the desire to do the right thing, she told Will to move out when
they returned home. Within a week, he visited with chocolate bars for his three biological children, but none for Melanie. She remembered his words two years earlier. “I’m not your father,” he told her with a nasty sneer, after the first time she told her mother he’d touched her inappropriately. When Melanie questioned her mother about it later, and Eleanor confirmed that Will was her stepfather, Melanie felt relieved to know such a cruel man was not indeed her father. A wish to meet her real father welled in her.

After a couple of weeks in cheap hotels, Willard visited again, with chocolate bars for his three children. He persuaded Eleanor to let him move back in. Eleanor let him move back in that night. He swore Melanie was a liar. In her wish to believe that her husband, the father of her children, could never rape one of her children, she allowed Willard to stay. Without one word to Melanie about it, her mother let Willard stay.

In the years that followed, Grandma would talk to Eleanor, tell her that Melanie told the truth and she should leave Willard, but Eleanor’s denial outweighed any desire for truth. Mrs. Rice, Melanie’s fifth grade teacher, met with Eleanor for a conference. “Your daughter is extremely quiet in class.” There was simply no point in talking to anyone; Melanie felt she’d lost her voice and been sold down the river. If her own mother wouldn’t protect her, no one else would. The rapes continued, and
by twelve years of age, she developed a goiter on her overtaxed thyroid gland. By
thirteen, her hands were covered with eczema, blisters oozing, crusting, peeling, and
forming new blisters as soon as the skin peeled.

Her mother took her to the dermatologist, who asked, with Eleanor standing
nearby, “Are you going through anything stressful?” Melanie shook her head no,
convinced that if her own mother didn’t believe her, no one else would. She couldn’t
say, “Every time Willard’s car pulls into the driveway, I feel terrified.” She couldn’t
say, “I live in fear of him waking me to summon me out of my bedroom, to the living
room floor.” With the onset of her periods at thirteen, she also began having lower
back muscle spasms that were so debilitating she would have to stop in her tracks on
the way to class, waiting for the waves of pain to pass, and then proceed on her way.
I have learned through the years that it is better not to rely on someone else for making my dreams materialize. For instance, companionship and protection from harm are something I accomplished on my own when I adopted Olivia, an Airedale Terrier, when she was a mere six weeks old. The last time I brought home a puppy I was in high school, where Olga showed up as a stray. I brought her home and we became inseparable, except while I was in class at high school. As soon as I walked home from school, she and I headed to the condo communal pool for a dip.

Olga got bigger, and since she didn’t have her own fenced-in yard, she waited for me inside the condo. We were clueless about the needs of dogs for chew toys back in those days, so, teething like any other puppy, she chewed a hole in the mattress of the round bed in my upstairs bedroom, and even gnawed a small hole in the drywall. When I bought a new, leather-bound Thompson’s Chain Reference Bible, she chewed a large corner off of a dozen onion-skin pages while I was at school. I still have the Bible, pages taped back together, a few dents in the back cover. My puppy accompanied me everywhere, her medium-length white coat always clean. She never smelled like a dog, I took her with me to public places. She drank out of the
water fountain, no worries about bringing a dog bowl. I didn’t even need a leash for her, she was so civilized.

One day I came home from school and my mother surprised me with the news that I would accompany her to drive Olga, now eighteen months old, to the pound. My trail of tears lasted forty-five minutes going, forty-five minutes returning, and forty years elapsed before I risked getting attached to another dog. The week my daughter and grandson moved 1,700 miles away, I sought like a madwoman for a grand-puppy. From a litter of eight puppies, Olivia was the only one who threw her head back and laughed when I laughed. Knowing she shared my sense of humor, I picked her.

On the day of Olivia’s homecoming, I swaddled her in a towel and had a friend hold her so the engine noise wouldn’t frighten her while I drove the forty-five minute car ride home. I’d done my research, read about eight books, on what puppies need. I call her my $10,000 dog, because that’s how much I’ve spent remodeling the house with laminate faux-wood floors rather than carpet, dry-walling the garage and finishing the garage floor, not to mention her abundance of chew toys and doggie paraphernalia. My accommodations have paid off, though: she has never chewed up a book or a shoe or anything she should not chew. She knows her own toys, and sticks
with them.

The day I retire from teaching, Olivia and I will head out for Glacier National Park and the Grand Tetons of Montana in a Roadtrek, a van-sized recreational vehicle. I’ve begun saving $400 a month toward my purchase. Oh, sure, I could wait around for the man I’ve envisioned for decades, to drive up in a sparkling diesel-pusher motor home, but since I only plan to live to be ninety-six, I may never make the trip if I wait for the man-behind-the-wheel. Besides, I recently discovered GPS. A woman must have invented GPS. I’m willing to bet ninety-nine percent of GPS sales are to women looking for that voice of assurance: “Turn right in 100 feet. Travel four miles, then merge right onto westbound 60.”

No one dares approach Olivia unless she deems them trustworthy. Even the gophers have vacated the yard since her appearance almost three years ago. Between Olivia and GPS, my travels will be worry-free adventures in a highly-maneuverable Roadtrek. The books we’ll read! The jokes we’ll tell! The sunsets we’ll watch until darkness obscures the light; and then we’ll turn in for the night, watch a little news on the flat-screen before showering, maybe review some of the incredible time-lapse footage collected that day, using my GoPro Hero3 Black Edition camera. Then I’ll sleep cozily under
down comforters, Olivia nearby on her orthopedic foam. I learned long ago that I’m able to accomplish visions and goals; and oftentimes, if I rely on someone else, disappointment awaits. One thing I can claim is that I learn from my numerous mistakes. There are always new varieties of mistakes lurking, but I do try earnestly not to repeat the same types.

The Roadtrek is perfect for one or two people and a dog. It can even accommodate up to seven people. The important thing is that one woman can easily drive a Roadtrek. No worries, when in new territory, about finding a motel that accepts dogs, or about getting flea-bitten in flea-infested rooms.
Chapter 4

Concentration Camp

Being born under a cloud does not mean you evade the watchful eye of God.

This even holds true if you’re in a concentration camp. I remember at the age of fourteen noticing that Willard began to read a book for the first time. I read books all the time: Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, Richard Wright’s *The Outsiders*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Heidi*, you name it. But for the first time I noticed him reading a book: *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler. Oh no, I thought, we’re in for it now. Bolstered by his complete domination of my mother, I suppose he believed he could take it up a notch, get some ideas from Hitler.

Willard always took what he wanted from us without repercussion. Mother was no protectress: “You are a hindrance to this family,” she told me years before, when I appealed to her for protection from him. Asking her to protect me made me a hindrance. I suppose because I was not "his own blood," he targeted me in ways that he did not target his biological children. I have survived the worst he could do to me, and, in exchange, I do not have the albatross of claiming him as my kin.

How archetypical—it was while he read *Mein Kampf*, our gas heater ‘malfunconed.’ The heater was closest to my bedroom door, and it happened on a weekend because Sarah, who shared a bedroom with me, spent the night at a friend’s, so I was the sole person to be ‘gassed.’ The other bedroom doors must have been
closed that night. When I awoke in the morning, I was able to stumble, retching, out
to our back yard in Santee. I lay with my head aching against the cool grass, letting
the sun and fresh air revive me. As I lay connecting with the earth’s energy field for
strength, I was unaware that this would be my final year of subjugation to my step-
father. Our liberation would come the following summer.

Since our mother chose to bury her head in the sand like an ostrich, it was
only Sarah and I who knew the depths of each other’s suffering at the hands, the
digits, of Will. For this reason, she and I began to contemplate, while drying dishes
(especially the long, sturdy blade of the chef’s knife) the idea of killing him as he
slept. Although justified in self-defense, many things stopped me: thoughts of a trial
and possible detainment in a girls’ reform school or even incarceration while the
whole truth came to the surface; fear—wondering about my own physical strength
and whether, at the age of fourteen, I was even capable of such a feat; but most of all,
I was stopped by the stain of something that horrific and permanent on my
reputation for the remainder of my life.

Perhaps he contemplated my death as well, to ensure I never told of his crime.
One evening after dinner he made me come with him in the station wagon on a drive
in Santee. Mom had recently walked into the living room in the middle of the night
and saw him lying on top of me. While she refused even to believe her own eyes,
denied even what she saw with her own eyes, I guess it made him nervous. So he
drove me out to a remote field and raped me. I cried without control on the way back
home. Perhaps I’d read his evil mind and sensed his bad intent, which extended even
beyond rape that night. Perhaps I broke my silence because I could cry, away from
the rest of the family. He stopped for gas, and my eyes met the gas station
attendant’s. Through the glass, he studied my pitiful face in the passenger’s seat. I
did get back home that night. I guess I’m lucky I wasn’t left in a ditch, a shallow
grave, in that field. It amazes me that the Holocaust happened as recently as a
quarter of a century ago, but don’t think men like Hitler aren’t still around. One
might live under your own roof.

As sadistic as Willard was, I still believed in gentleness, in doing no harm. So
when the wheel of fortune turned the following summer, delivering us from his
tyrranny, Sarah and I were relieved that we had chosen not to retaliate.

Mom’s well-to-do Aunt Olga left her $5,000 when she passed, so mom
lobbied to transplant the family in Oroville in Northern California. She bought some
furniture and saved some of the money for a down payment on a house, packed the
trailer, and the family headed north. Settled into an old, two-story rental in Oroville,
I watched Willard attain new levels of fury. Did this house with hard wood floors not
give him the privacy the carpeted house in Santee had? The friends I left behind in Santee meant everything to me, so I planned my escape.
Chapter 5

Escape

She must escape this hell. Hell hole. Violence cacophony. Torn garment of the soul. He is greeting the day, bearing down on their day, with bottle of Jim Beam or Jack Daniels. Lie liquefier. Imbibing the Beam. Damning the Daniels. Beam her up, Scotty, please. Every girl has to fend for herself. Escape at midnight with important belongings in one cardboard box. Boxed beliefs that every girl deserves safety.

Separation from her sister was the hardest to face, leaving her behind in the anger-storm. Lie lassitude. Reciting her favorite Langston Hughes poem, "Dreams," for courage: "Without dreams, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly." She will Orange Sunshine fly. Fugue in poetic style. Befuddle, muddle, confuse you. She hates the icy talons of winter, dreads the pincer-like grip of the cold, so she escapes in the fleece of summer. Janice Holt Giles: within the exegesis of her books is rendered the unexpected by-product of a newly constructed sense of family. Wishing to be incognito, disappearing into the night, desiring least of all to be a cynosure, she avoids the bus depot in Oroville. Instead she hitchhikes along a route frequented by truckers. Her biological father is a trucker, it occurs to her. Hidden from her knowledge, he is dying that same summer, of a virus he contracts in Mexico while travelling with friends and his mother. He can never be the one to save her now. Exit cadenza. At the trucker’s mercy, you query, “You are not a rapist, are you?” to
which he answers negatively, honestly, surmising what it is you are running from.

One truck whisks her away safely to a miniscule town in the Central Valley where a bus station is not a beacon announcing a girl’s whereabouts. Incunabulum. The money saved from babysitting stints purchases the bus ticket taking her all the way to Southern California, her destination.

Meanwhile, back at the homestead, information is being backhanded out of her nine year old sister. “She went to Canada.”

He snarls, “No way she’d go to Canada.” No information forthcoming, his eyes go two different directions with rage and loss of control. Rage stage. His backhand sends her flying, nearly over the front porch banister to drop ten feet, but he catches her before she flies over the edge. She keeps her pledge of silence. Sitting on the front porch, he reads Playboy magazine while Social Services pays a visit. One eye goes this way, the other eye that way, leering at girls as they walk past on the sidewalk.

Police arrive and ban him from the house and his kids. They take him to jail, then call his wife after a day, “Come pick him up.” She refuses. He finds a way home. She thinks of the gun in the closet and shooting him, but doesn’t, and tells him to leave. He does. The grind. Thus she affects a voice. Or does she? His wife has no recollection of him slamming her head repeatedly against the bathroom wall, while
the seven year old sits in the tub, absorbing a vision that haunts her memory. On the
day of freedom, the nine year old skips down the sidewalk, “We’re free! Free!”
Chapter Six

Sarah’s Voice

The summer my older sister ran away, the police gave my mother an ultimatum: choose your daughter or your husband. Both cannot live in the same house. My sister lived with an American Indian receiving family while our mother thought about her choice. To our surprise, our mother divorced Will and she moved with all four of her children from Northern California to Erie, Pennsylvania, where her mother and extended family lived. Mom’s uncle, a monsignor in the Catholic Church, pulled some strings and not only got my younger sister and brother and me enrolled in the Catholic elementary school, but he also got us put at the top of the list to get a new house in the projects, where we lived on the outskirts, next to forest.

Most of the kids in the housing project went to the nearby public school, and a group of these girls took an immediate dislike to me without knowing me. We witnessed racism in Erie, and remnants of racism from the past, such as two food counters, two drinking fountains in the department store, and when we asked why, it floored us to hear that those stores designated facilities unshared by the two colors, when black and white were segregated. Slavery ended long ago; how could this racism exist so recently?

Maybe the five girls hated me because I was white, blonde, and blue
eyed. Maybe they hated me because I wore a uniform to school. Since I grew up in California, I didn't have a racist bone in my body, and would have preferred to be friends with them. They didn't know that, and decided to hate me. When the school bus dropped me off at my stop a couple of blocks from my house, the five girls stood waiting for me, jeering insults and threatening to do me bodily harm with rose bush branches, stripped of leaves. My mother planted those bushes recently in our un-landscaped yard, so they were easy for the girls to pull out of the ground. They brandished the branches menacingly, screeching, "Ostrich!" at me because I was all legs. Skinny and able to outrun them due to their bulk, I managed to escape into my front door with a few bloody welts on my legs, and ripped skin on my arms, from their bouquets. Blood stained my Catholic uniform. I was grateful this was not a day my brother Shane locked me out of the house for fun.

Ranging in ages and heights, their unifying glue was fat. I had learned not to ask for help from anyone for anything.

The neighborhood was rough. Some days, walking to the bus stop, I'd see radical fights, drug deals gone bad, and once I saw two teenage girls fighting, ripping each other's clothes off. One hung the other chick up by the back of her bra, onto the lowest rung of a telephone pole. There were houses
still under construction, one with a hole dug for a basement. The hole filled up with storm water that froze over, and standing too close to the edge to look, I slipped into the pond, breaking through the frozen surface of the water. Christine lay down on her belly, extended a stick, and yelled, “Grab hold!” pulling me to safety.

On Halloween I trick-or-treated endlessly in the neighborhood with Shane. When we rang one doorbell, a couple of the girls from the gang who hated me answered the door, and grabbed our candy bags away from us. They slammed the door on us. Shane and I said in unison, “Bullshit!” We ran home for a carton of eggs, returning to their house to egg it. They came out shouting, “What the fuck you think you doin’? We gon’ kick yo’ ass! You idiots, you gon’ die!” Shane and I ran like the wind. Our house got return egg fire.

I made friends with Kathy, a year ahead of me at our school. Kathy and I were rebels. Kneeling, the rule was, the edge of our skirt should touch the ground. We’d hem them shorter, and get expelled for a day as a consequence. Kathy, a fourth grader, was a molestation victim and was already having sex with boys. Older teenage white boys would knock on her door, and when she answered, they’d say things like, “Hey Kathy, you ever
kiss a rabbit between the ears?” pulling out their pants pockets. Kathy’s little brother Paul was nick-named “Pig Pen.” At six years old he regularly peed and pooped his pants. They had no parental supervision, except during the dark hours. She’d say, “Go take a bath, you stink. Put on clean clothes, then I’ll feed you,” which meant she’d open a can of creamed corn for dinner.

An older neighbor invited us into his house to see the latest toy he invented. Once time, he showed us a back scratcher he’d attached a motor to, which caused the little plastic hand to vibrate. He scratched Shane and Christine and me on the back, then somehow he maneuvered it to my crotch. I said, “We’re out of here,” and we left that minute.

Shane, who was clueless, would plead, “Let’s go see that man again.”

I told him, “We’re never going back there again, got it?”

From our house, I spotted a white dog on the edge of the forest, watching me. I went inside, dug around in the refrigerator for some cheese or lunch meat to put out for him, and left it at the edge of our yard for him. He wouldn’t approach unless I was inside the house peeking out the window. He’d gulp the food and vanish. I kept up this feeding routine; I left a water bowl out for him, like he was my pet.

When I walked in the forest alone, I caught glimpses of him at a near
but safe distance of about twenty feet, rustling through the brush. When he edged close enough for our eyes to meet, I was astonished by yellowish whites surrounding icy gray-blue, glimmering at me. His silver-tinged white coat belonged to a wolf, not a dog. The creek narrowed and widened at points, and cascaded into a waterfall. I would sit at the edge, dangling my feet in the cold water, comforted by knowing he watched nearby.

One afternoon I traveled farther than usual, reaching the far edge of the forest, where I saw a school with a playground. Pumping my legs to swing higher on the swings, I froze when I saw the five dreaded girls emerge from the forest. I slowed the swing, dragging my feet in the sand.

“We gon’ kill you, bitch!” they threatened, while yanking and wrenching the swing I sat on. Time froze, I froze, not knowing what to do, then they froze in shock when the wolf vaulted out of the forest and lunged at them. Viciously snapping and snarling, encircling and running at them, his teeth and eyes flashing, he drove the girls away. They fled for home. I melted in relief and disbelief at what just happened. He vanished, his job done. I sat in stunned silence, then walked home undisturbed.
Chapter 6

God and the Birds

God and the birds heard and saw her. Finding comfort in surrounding herself with nature, Melanie walked in the forest one day in her blue flannel shirt, patched Levis, and Wallaby shoes for miles and hours with her harmonica. As she retreated from the forest to return home, she noticed that her harmonica had fallen out of her pocket. It was lost, and there was no point in trying to retrace her footsteps, as the area she had covered was vast. She said a prayer to Saint Anthony, or whoever it was that God had put in charge of finding lost articles, that she find her harmonica.

She cast her eyes out over an expanse of grassy meadow as tall as her legs, and noticed a blackbird circling over a particular area a good distance away. She felt urged to go look there. Having nothing to lose by doing so, she headed in that direction. When she reached the spot where the bird was circling and looked down into the sandy soil, she noticed a shiny silver object. “My harmonica!” she cried, “Thank you, St. Anthony,” so thrilled that God and the birds saw and heard her.
Chapter Seven

Christine’s Voice

When you’re sixteen, you’re invincible. When you’re forty-five and looking back, you’re amazed. What was I thinking? Yes, I had fun. Yes, I survived. But what was I thinking? Both could have gone right out the window in a flash, and my life could have turned out very differently. I guess that’s the gift of youth. Having the spirit to jump in with both feet, hell or high water, and experience life. I guess that’s the gift of maturity. Looking back and knowing that if you hadn’t, you never would have become the person you are today.

Sunny days were meant for the beach. In July, school is out, the sun is shining and God forbid, your California tan is beginning to fade. Time for the beach.

Vickie, my best friend, and I decided to make a day of it. We grabbed our towels and suntan lotion. Grabbed two Tabs, in case we got thirsty and headed out for the beach. No matter that we didn’t have a car, and that the beach was thirty miles from the town that we lived in. We had thumbs. We were wearing shorts, had nice legs and Vickie came with a natural set of double D man attracters. We would make it to the beach.

I’ve always liked the number three. When my kids were young, I
could count to three, and poof! My will be done. When convincing myself to be brave, I would count to three and poof! I would take the plunge. Three has some mystical power over me. Heading for the beach on that July morning was no different. Three rides. Three stories. Poof! I’m a different girl.

I don’t know about you, but I grew up in Escondido, California. It’s hot in July. It’s damn hot. It’s hot enough outside to take the first ride that pulls over when you’re hitchhiking. That is, if the person doesn’t look too much like a homicidal maniac, and of course, if there is air-conditioning involved. After walking half a mile west in the hot sun, we were willing to forgo the first requirement all together and settle for rolling down the windows to catch a breeze. And sure enough….here he came, pulling off the road into a cloud of sun baked California dust. Mid-sized four door car, single guy in his mid-thirties…and his windows were up. Score! Air-conditioning!

It took all of five minutes to figure out that the windows were not only rolled up to keep the cool air in, but also to keep the mafia, CIA, and mind warping aliens from getting in. Apparently we looked harmless enough, or he was looking for back-up and thought a larger crowd would
protect him from the mean greenies that were out to get him.

Now remember, this was the seventies. Pre-Prozac. Post Timothy Leary. A time when you could look at a person and say, “You’re crazy,” not as a euphemism, but as a statement, and odds were pretty good that you were right. Crazy, stoned or brain damaged. Ah, the seventies.

Captain Paranoia took us as far as the Del Dios Hwy, the west end of Escondido. Ten miles down, twenty miles to go. Breathe in, breathe out, shake our heads, laugh it off, and our thumbs were back out.

Thank God this time a car load of teen-agers pulled over for us! Finally, rational people! No more weird OLD guys. And off we went. Del Dios Highway for those of you who live farther east than the Pacific Ocean, is a windy, hilly road that takes you from Escondido down to Del Mar. Del Mar being a beautiful beach, full of cool breezes, hot sand and hotter surfers. We were once again on our way.

Our driver, let’s call him Chad, why you ask? Why not? I couldn’t possibly remember his name after all this time. I wouldn’t have been able to tell you his name on that day. Chad was so high on acid, that Chad probably couldn’t remember his own name. He knew there were curves on the road, and, “Oh my God, the pretty flowers along the hillside of the road!” Those
he noticed too. Holy shit. We were all going to die. Vickie and I, being the only ones in the car that weren’t mid-flight on LSD or reeking of Jack Daniels thought that this was NOT very cool. Chad, he thought it was hilarious. Christ! If you can’t trust a teen-ager to give you a ride and get you there safely, who can you trust!

We got to flat land; Chad spotted a Del Taco and decided to pull in, or actually pull *over* a curb and stop. Jane and I gave each other the ‘let’s get the hell out of this car’ sign…this being the raised eyebrows, bugged out eyes and grabbing of the door handle move. Thanks for the ride. Enjoy the rest of it…I guess.

No more teen-agers on acid. Good one. One to keep in my mind and never forget, and trust me, even to this day, when I get in a car with a teen-ager, I get nervous. Okay, that would be with or without hallucinogens, but all the same.

Twenty-five miles down, five to go. Next car had to be better. Maybe this time we’d get lucky and not get into a car with a driver that a.) Should be medicated, but isn’t, or b.) Is medicated, and shouldn’t be driving around in a friggin car! Breathe in, breathe out, shake our heads, laugh it off, and our thumbs were back out.
After a few minutes a Cadillac the size of Vickie’s parents old Buick convertible pulled over. We took this as a good sign. Vickie’s parents weren’t crazy. To the best of my knowledge, they had never dropped acid, were respectable folk who always followed the rules of the road, and were never seen drinking Jack Daniels from an old Coke can while driving. We were feeling better about this. Let’s check out the driver. One guy, maybe late twenties, kind of cute. This time our eyebrows went up, but it was a natural reaction to the smiles she and I were giving each other. Vickie slid into the front seat and I climbed into the back. Yes, things were definitely looking up. So much so, that after a few minutes of driving, we had invited our driver to go to the beach with us and enjoy the day. Somehow, he interpreted this to mean, “Please pull over and tear all or our clothes off.” The automatic locks went down, he pulled off the road and onto a dirt path and sped up. You have got to be kidding me! What happened to our good sign! This guy was not nice! He’s not even cute anymore!

He grabbed Vickie away from the passenger door by her hair, and when she cried out, my blood froze. I knew this guy wasn’t playing. He wasn’t some poor delusional sap, he wasn’t some kid high on drugs, he was dangerous and he was going to hurt us. Maybe more than hurt us. I knew I
had to do something before the car stopped. I knew that if the car stopped, then all of this became real and I didn’t know if I could change it. I was sitting in this Cadillac in a back seat full of fast food wrappers, Dr. Pepper bottles and fear. I had to help Vickie. She was starting to lose it and I wasn’t far behind. I reached for the Dr. Pepper bottle rolling around the car floor by my feet. With all of my strength, I started hitting the driver with it, which did absolutely nothing to him but make him angrier. Then I looked down and saw the metal hinge for the front seat. I slammed the bottle down on the metal, shattering the bottom of the bottle away, and captured him, one arm around the head rest and his neck and the other hand with the broken glass to his throat.

“Let go of her.” I can’t believe that I sounded calm when I said it. I wasn’t. There have been few times in my life that I have been so scared. The car slowed to a stop and the driver slowly released Vickie. “Now open the fucking doors.” Pop, the doors unlocked. Vickie pulled away and as soon as I saw she was safe, I jumped from the car. The driver pulled away in a cloud of sun baked California dust. The same way our day started.

We never made it to the beach that day. We ironically ended up back at the Del Taco eating French fries and spent time just staring at each other.
Then we walked to a bus stop and took the bus home, sitting side by side, having survived the day, hell or high water.
Chapter 7

Melanie’s Voice

After a year in Erie, we persuaded Mom to return to California. It stunned me that when given an ultimatum, Mom chose to keep me and divorce Willard, rather than give me up. My brother may be eight years younger than me, but he has the best analysis I’ve heard yet: “I think she couldn’t face up to who she is, and she just had to walk away from it for a while; that’s why she divorced Willard and had you come home.”

Grandma relocated to Erie a couple of years before we did; it meant a lot to be able to visit with her. She was my lifeline. She played Scrabble with me, believed me, loved me.

Mom sticks to her story that she didn’t believe me, but she finally had to believe it when the police in Oroville confronted her with the truth. Grandma once confided in me that my mom blames me for the incest that went on. My grandmother knew the truth, and knew how I told the truth so many times, but I just gave up in time, until I was old enough to take matters into my own hands and run away.

I made it all the way to El Cajon, with my cardboard box, when I ran away. I saved up quite a bit of money babysitting for my eighth grade math teacher, so I made it all the way from Oroville down to San Diego, then to El Cajon on another bus early in the morning. The only ride I had to hitch was with the trucker in
Oroville, because I knew if I went to the bus depot in Oroville, I’d be caught. Once I got to El Cajon, I thought of walking a few miles to Santee, which I’d done before, but I decided hitchhiking would get me there quicker.

An old blue truck was the first vehicle rolling down the road in the wee hours, but something made me say, I’ll stick my thumb out for the next car that comes along. The next car was the El Cajon Police. My heart sank. I tried to lie my way out of it, said I was my best girlfriend, Rita, but he called her mom’s house, and her mom said her daughter was home in bed. I think my cardboard box of belongings was a dead giveaway. He looked through my purse and found a prescription pill bottle with my name on it, an antihistamine to dry up the eczema on my hands. My parents had reported me missing. When it looked like I was caught, I began to plead, “Send me to Juvenile Hall, send me to a foster home, send me anywhere you want to send me, but please don’t send me back home!” It was unfathomable to me that after all my effort to escape, that I came so close to freedom, only to fail. It never occurred to me that the police might help me. In my mind, they merely thwarted my effort to be free. Hindsight teaches me that teachers, doctors, principals, police officers will all help you if your mother will not. But no one ever told me that. I believed the opposite, that if my mother won’t help me, no one on Earth will.

The policeman took me down to the station to an acoustically private room,
and asked why I didn’t want to go home. I had nothing to lose, and told him my stepfather had raped me for four years, since I was ten. To my shock, he didn’t ignore me. He listened. The police arranged a flight for me, back up to Northern California, where they placed me temporarily with a receiving home. Meanwhile, they conducted an investigation. Lie detector tests, some forensic investigation. Although Willard failed and I passed the lie detector test, it was inadmissible in court, and the evidence was all circumstantial. His word against mine. Willard spent one or more nights in jail; I’m uncertain because I was not at home. I still can’t believe that all he got was a night in jail, a slap on the wrist, akin to, “Don’t do that again mister!”

It amazes me that if my mom chose to have me remain in foster care, and if she allowed Willard to remain in the home, he would not have been prosecuted or convicted for incest or rape, and he would have been free to continue to prey upon his own children. Perhaps Social Services would have periodically checked in on my siblings. This may have prevented him from raping any of them. To my knowledge, he never did. Not that they were unscathed. Growing up in that home took survival skills. I know I’ll always be affected by it emotionally.

To this day, if someone does or says something to me that is rude or uncalled for, I freeze up and don’t even process it until I’m alone and away from the situation. Sometimes my emotional reaction doesn’t occur until hours or days later.
A court official asked me about my state of mind, and at fourteen, I answered, “I’m just glad it’s over.” Based on that, they said, “She’s strong and resilient,” and they didn’t even mandate counseling for me. Amazing, or cheap? Thank goodness I eventually got a good education, a good job, and good medical insurance so I can afford to pay for my own damn counseling. It’s a no-brainer that anyone who goes through an ordeal like incest or rape, needs someone to talk to. I heard once that if every man had just one good friend, there would be no need for psychologists. Profound; and I have always been blessed to have at least one good friend that I could talk to. Other than immediate family, I never confided in a friend about my past until I was twenty-six, after the birth of my daughter.

Becoming a mother unleashed emotion, caused me to question my own mother, and I needed to process it with one good friend. When I held my baby girl in my arms, the fuel of protective mother-instinct flowed through me, and I knew that if my daughter ever told me someone had hurt her, I would tear the world apart to find the truth. I would kill or maim, if necessary, to protect her. My mom’s excuses have always felt flimsy to me. But when I held my daughter in my arms, I no longer accepted the validity of taking your husband’s word without exercising the precaution of—at the very least—having a medical doctor examine your daughter.
Chapter Eight

Shane’s Voice

In Oroville, I remember Mom saying, “Dad’s going away for a while.” Being home alone with him was really scary before that. I was so relieved whenever Mom came home. I’d feel safe. I played with my toy trucks under the coffee table and heard Mom and Dad talking about the lie detector test before he went to take it. They acted like it was stupid and it didn’t matter.

Dad was an asshole, always raising his hand to hit me, or acting like he was going to hit me. The front porch of the house was up high and I would sit up on the rail. Dad told me to get off the rail. One day I fell off the rail and landed one story below onto a bicycle laying in the front yard. It knocked the wind out of me and I couldn’t move. Dad said, “See, I told you, you idiot.” He made no move to help me up. I still have a dent in my butt—perpendicular to my butt crack on my right cheek—from that fall. I was six.

We moved to Erie that summer. In California we didn’t see racism, so in Erie we didn’t understand why the black kids hated us. We went to public school at first, but because we got beat up by the black kids every day, we switched to Catholic school. Melanie stayed in public school, Academy High.

Melanie came home from school one day. Mom was already home from work. It was raining outside, so Melanie’s hair was wet. Mom didn’t
want her to catch cold, and told her to take her hair out of the bun so she
could dry her hair. Melanie resisted, but Mom insisted, and pulled out the
bobby-pins. As Melanie’s hair unrolled from the bun, a couple of joints fell
out of her hair. Melanie thought that was a pretty nifty way to hide them.

I fished Mom’s pack of Pall Mall Gold 100s out of her purse when she
wasn’t looking, and went for a smoke in the forest. When I came home, Mom
was hand-washing a couple of things in the sink, and said, “Bring me your
windbreaker so I can wash it.” I’d hidden the pack of cigarettes in my jacket
pocket and didn’t want her to know I took them, so I told her my jacket was
clean enough. She insisted I take it off, so I said, “I’ll go take it off in my
room.” That way I could try to hide the cigarettes before she saw them. “No,
take it off here and bring it to me.” I did. She plunged it into the sink, and
Pall Mall 100s came floating to the surface of the sudsy water.

I thought I was in a ton of trouble, but all Mom said was, “Why didn’t
you tell me?! You ruined perfectly good cigarettes!” I was afraid I’d get a
whipping for stealing her cigarettes and smoking, but all she cared about
was wasted cigarettes.

The only time I had recurring nightmares was the year in Erie. We
had a basement with a water heater in it. We’d roller skate down there. In
my dream, I’m standing up on the water heater, and fall backward off of it, going down in slow motion, and just before I hit the concrete, I wake up.

The following year we moved back to California. Melanie finished high school, and moved out when she turned eighteen. Mom let dad move back in because she said I needed a father around. She thought it would be easier to rent a house, instead of the apartments we’d been living in.

We moved to Escondido, and rented a house. I’d been smoking cigarettes for a long time by then. I walked to Laviccio’s on the corner of Ash and Washington and said, “I’m here to buy a pack of Marlboros for my mother.” I walked across the street and lit one up.

Two Mexican kids and an Indian kid came up and pushed me and said, “You think you’re bad ass ‘cause you smoke cigarettes?”

I answered, “No. I’ve been smoking for years.” The thinner Mexican kid punched me in the jaw. I was outnumbered, caught like a deer caught in the headlights. They punched me again and took my cigarettes and ran away. I had a black eye, a split lip, and a bloody nose. I ran home. Dad was just back in our lives, and I thought, Dad is gonna protect me, put on his magic cape and go kick their asses.

Dad said, “Quit your goddamned crying, you fucking pussy.”
A couple of years later, I wound up partying with the Indian kid on the reservation. One of the Mexican kids, Mario, and I became really tight. When they beat me up and took my pack, it was my initiation to the neighborhood.

Dad never would throw a ball back and forth with me. I asked him over and over to kick the soccer ball with me, but he never would. Finally, Mom said, “Come on, Shane. I’ll do it.” We kicked the ball up and down the street. Dad hollers out the door at me, “You’re a faggot for playing ball with a woman!” All the other kids playing outside heard it, and I was embarrassed. It was humiliating.

Mom had to work on Easter, but she still cooked a ham for us, with potatoes, corn, a green vegetable. When she got home from work, she told us to start eating without her because she needed to shower off. Sarah was at her boyfriend’s house, so it was just Christine and me eating dinner with Dad. I took a piece of ham and chewed on a bite. With piercing eyes, Dad said, “You better eat some vegetables before you eat any more ham.” I spooned some vegetables onto my plate, and ate two more bites of ham. Dad backhanded me so hard, I flew out of my chair and had a bloody mouth.

I yelled through the bathroom door, “Mom, Dad hit me!”
Mom yelled back, “Go sit down and eat!” Her tone said to leave her alone. It let me down.

Dad left again and went to live with a woman in Palm Desert who loved to drink as much as he did. Mom sent me to spend my school vacation with Dad when I was eleven. He already taught me how to drive when I was nine. Dad handed me the keys to his Buick Regal, and a six-pack of Coors Tall. He said, “Go have a good time.” He was getting me out of his hair. In my mind, I’m thinkin’, Hell yeah. Dad rocks! Dad’s cool! So I drove this tuna boat down these desert roads. I was on my third beer. I was a good driver. I wanted to find a friend. I came into this little town. There was a BMX event going on. I planned to get out of the car. Everyone was staring at me, thinking what’s that little kid doing driving that big-ass car through the parking lot? So I kept driving. I found Dad’s house again, because I knew to look for his house between two palm trees.

At the middle school, I ditched and got into fights, and constantly got called to the principal’s office. When the principal called Mom in to conference about my behavior, all Mom said was, “Boys will be boys.” She waitressed at a club where he was a member. She hated him because he called her so often about the trouble I got into. One night she came home
from work, and with a big giggle, told me she’d spilled a drink on his lap. I assumed it was on purpose.

We had year-round school, so we had four vacations a year. One December, it was about eighty-five degrees in Escondido, and there was snow up on Palomar Mountain, so my friend Jason and I decided to hitchhike to Palomar and spend the day playing in the snow. We dressed in shorts and tee-shirts because it was hot outside. The third ride we hitched, from the base of Palomar Mountain, was in this beater, brown station wagon. A man in his mid-thirties had a wife and two little kids with him, maybe six and seven years old, and they planned to play in the snow, too.

We parted ways once we got up to the snow. Jason and I had some snowball fights. By the end of the day we were shivering, freezing our butts off. The man who gave us the ride noticed how cold we were and took us under his wing, looked out for us. He said, “I’m not being weird, but stick your hands down your groin area, it’s the warmest place on your body.” It worked. He let us ride back down the hill with his family.

One Halloween night, Mom had to work the graveyard shift, so I invited ten people over to the house for a party. We got hold of some bottles of whiskey, and word spread. About a hundred people showed up at the
party and trashed the house. I got hammered, and could barely move, so Jason and Mario each held me up on one side, and walked me around to meet everyone.

Finally, everyone left. I picked up one beer bottle to start to clean up, but I dropped it. It smashed onto the kitchen floor. I gave up and went to bed, and didn’t wake up the next day until noon. I thought I’d be in the biggest trouble of my life.

Mom didn’t say a single word to me about any of it. The house was spotless. She got home from work and cleaned up the entire mess. Mom always worked real hard, taking care of us.

Not long after that, Dad showed up at our house and wanted to move back in. I wanted a Dad, so I had selective memory. I had a wall up about what an asshole he was. Mom got home from work, and I said, “Mom, let him move back in.” He pulled out a mini-stereo from his car, and gave it to me. I put it in my room. I just wanted a fucking dad.

Christine showed up and went ballistic, told Dad, “You didn’t contribute a thing to this family. You should just get out! All you ever did is call me stupid, and call Sarah a whore. We don’t want you here.” Christine told me how stupid it was that I didn’t remember what he was like. Then
Sarah showed up, and repeated everything Christine just said to him. They teamed up and said that if he moved back in, then they were moving out. Mom was going to let him back in because I was all for it. Christine and Sarah kept screaming at him to get out, and called him an asshole.

Dad said to Christine, “Well you’ve obviously turned out to be quite a lady, with your language.”

She replied, “I’ve learned how to stick up for myself.” I was amazed that he left. He said, “I don’t need this.” He asked for the radio he’d just given me. I gave it back to him and realized it was a bribe.

Dad is the only person that I knew well, who, when he died, I didn’t shed a fucking tear. I had six good girlfriends when Dad died; not make-out girlfriends, but friends who cared and wanted to comfort me when they heard my father died. I said, “I don’t care. I’d have killed him myself if I could have.” I couldn’t hide my feelings or lie. I wasn’t sad. I lost six good friends because they thought something was wrong with me. Years later, when good friends I cared about died, I cried; so I knew I was normal.

My dog Nakima didn’t like Mom’s next boyfriend, Evan, who brought a trash bag full of cocaine into the house, and hid it in Mom’s closet. I took off with it on my bicycle and got rid of it so Mom wouldn’t go to jail and my
sisters and I wouldn’t wind up in foster care. Evan accused Christine of stealing it. He was in her face about it, and Nakima almost came through the window screen at Evan. Later, Evan said, “There’s something wrong with that dog.” I’d raised Nakima since he was a puppy. He weighed about eighty pounds. I told Evan there wasn’t anything wrong with Nakima, but Nakima just didn’t like him.

Evan told me to quit hanging around with Mario. I basically told him he was nobody in this house to be telling me what to do. I brought back his bag of cocaine and he never kept it in our house again. Mom has a thing about abusive men. She didn’t like that Nakima didn’t like Evan. I came home a couple of days later, and found out Mom had taken Nakima to the pound and had him euthanized. Evan found another woman.

After my dad died—young, of cirrhosis of the liver—mom found another man to abuse her. I’ve seen her purposely antagonize Howard. It’s like she wanted to get beat up. Somewhere, she got some sick idea that being beat up equals love.

One reason I love Susie so much, is she’d never let anyone treat her badly. She respects herself, and won’t let anyone treat her like a doormat. There are a million stories, but I don’t like to tell them all at once. It stirs up
too many emotions and I wind up pissed off. Back then, people closed their
eyes to that stuff: molestation, spousal abuse. The women were kept barefoot
in the kitchen. If you actually did leave your husband, you were an outcast.
It’s like you were a failure. A woman’s choices for work were waitress or
secretary. Today, women can be corporate raiders. I think that’s why things
have changed. Women are much more independent now. I think that’s a big
part of it. They don’t have to put up with abuse because they get a say.

I have a good life. I’m happy, just like my sister. She did really well,
the best with what she was given, even though she was dealt a bad hand and
wasn’t given any opportunities. I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished, and
I’m proud of her, too.

During a phone call to her that lasts late into the night, I tell Melanie,
“I support this journey you’re on. It’s healing, to share our stories.”

That night Melanie gets to sleep at about 1a.m. She has a dream that
she calls to tell me about the following night. She tells me, “I dreamt you and
I were travelling in my Audi. I’m driving, and you’re in the passenger seat.”

In the dream, we’re in Tennessee, now my home state. The road we
cross is flooding. As she drives through the water, she doesn’t slow down.
We’re talking, so she’s distracted, but we become aware that it’s a mini river
overflowing the road. It’s close to sweeping us away. We can feel the water lift the car. For a tense moment, the car is buoyant in the water. She keeps accelerating, forging ahead, and the momentum carries us across. Melanie tells me perhaps it’s my added weight in the car that makes the difference.
Chapter 8

Darkroom

During the 1970s, experimentation, good rock and roll, and spirituality exploded. An acquaintance at high school turned Melanie on to her first copy of the Hollywood Free Paper. Back in Santee, she continued to scoop them up when she ran across them, enjoying the trendy pictorial representations of a cartoon-style Jesus who said all of the same profound things he said in the Bible: “I am the light of the world. He who walks in me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life;” or the words written by his disciple John, “God is love.” Emptiness in Melanie, a lack of family connection, a thirst for truth and meaning, sent her searching for fulfillment. She attended Neil Young and Santana concerts, and found mirth and barely-controllable laughter in a baggie of pot.

Photography class was her favorite. The first creative outlet she ever had—with the exception of gluing tiny colored rocks onto wood in a paint-by-number fashion, or sewing class—she came alive within this venue. The teacher, a retired Marine with the surviving military haircut to prove it, would silently study Melanie’s giggly demeanor as she entered the darkroom after lunch, reeking of cannabis. Probably a Vietnam veteran, he undoubtedly read the signs of what she was up to, but he never ratted her out. He watched the prints she cured in the pans of solution transform over the course of her junior year, from expressionless photos of
her dressed in the beloved long black dress she made herself, wearing tall black boots, to photos of her smiling face, one index finger pointing up to the sky, the “One Way” sign. His patience with her paid off. She found her one way out of the void.

Her photos also captured little Olga, a stray, fluffy white puppy who found Melanie at the high school and bonded with her as if their lives had never existed separately. Olga was the sole reason Melanie stayed in school rather than dropping out to leave her mother’s condo in Santee, to return to her friend from Erie who’d rented her own apartment in Emporium. Pam dropped out of high school and got a job waitressing. Melanie’s family roots were so weak that Pam’s invitation to move to Emporium had influence.

Melanie saved babysitting money for the ticket to Pennsylvania, but one phone call intercepted her departure. Pam informed her, “I already have two dogs living in the apartment. There isn’t room for one more dog.” That cinched it for Melanie. She wouldn’t go without Olga, who was nearly six months old by this time, but when they found each other, she was about two months old, a long-furred, Australian Shepherd-Samoyed mix. Dropping out of school was not in the cards.

Used to walking everywhere, she and Olga discovered a Christian coffeehouse that recently opened and drew Melanie, who lived a few blocks away. She listened to Pastor Ben’s words at the Friday night service, and pondered them the next morning
as she walked for miles, inhaling on a joint she’d rolled herself. Hours after the high wore off, she considered the possibilities, and said aloud, “God, if you’re really there, please show me your beauty today.”

It was as if scales fell away from her eyes, scales that previously obscured her vision, so dramatic and impactful was the sudden change in view. The colors, the trees and sky, even the air, somehow communicated beauty and love in a way that left her with no doubt that not only was God there, but she was loved by God. It touched her in such an enduring way, that she never smoked another joint, never experimented with any harder drug. That empty space she’d tried to fill with narcotic substance was now occupied permanently with knowledge of, a memory of something dear, yet indescribable. Her heart and life were changed. It healed her.

Beauty, God’s beauty, healed her. She began smiling like never before.

Out of school by noon her junior year, she typically had time to sunbathe with Olga at her condominium pool. She also had time to spare for babysitting jobs, homework, and volunteering at the Christian coffeehouse. She learned a few guitar chords and began to sing and play a bit, wrote and directed the skits for the Friday night “drama ministry,” and taught Bible stories to a dozen neighborhood children in the “Good News Club,” one afternoon each week.

She thought of Pastor Ben as more of a good father figure, even though she
wondered about some of the advice he gave. She was assigned to read *The Grapes of Wrath* in English class, and Pastor Ben forbade it. At seventeen, she managed to graduate on the honor roll, in spite of not reading John Steinbeck’s novel.

Assistant pastor Russ was eleven years her senior. Melanie developed a huge crush on him. So much so, that when he left Santee to join communal life at Church of the Redeemer in Houston, Texas, Melanie wrote him a letter declaring her feelings. This led to his marriage proposal, so she moved to Houston and joined another household in the communal church. Soon after, they returned to California, got married, and lived on the communal ranch in Lakeside. The nine acre ranch was purchased with proceeds raised by generous donations from members of the Christian coffeehouse.

Up to the point of their honeymoon, Melanie found refuge in Russ and sought him out for willing and meaningful conversation. As they left Lakeside on honeymoon in his oxidized blue Volkswagen Bug, a change occurred in him. Headed for his hometown in Connecticut, Melanie felt as if a black magic wand had waved over Russ, instantly ending their communion of souls, crippling their conversation. Their cross-country trip left her feeling bewildered. She wondered what could have changed him so radically and suddenly, but she continued to go with the flow, live the life of a wife.
The cross country trip in a Bug proved hard on the derriere, but relief came with regular stops for meals. During one stop at MacDonald’s, Russ and Melanie got out of the Bug and stretched, then stepped up over the curb onto the grassy knoll, heading toward the golden arches. Materializing out of nowhere, several cop cars pulled in to the parking lot, blocking the VW in its parking space. Cops sprang out of their cars, drew their guns, surrounded Russ and Melanie, and told them to put their hands in the air.

“What is going on?” Melanie asked no one in particular as she raised her hands. Her long, blonde, sun-streaked hair blew in the breeze, down to the middle of her back, and all 118 pounds of her quaked. Russ wore his dark hair to his shoulders. He looked a little like Al Pacino, but he had a full beard.

“We need to see your identification,” one cop demanded. Russ and Melanie produced their California driver’s licenses, which the cops ran for information. Then a policeman told them, “We apologize for any upset to you. You matched the description of Patty Hearst and her SLA captor.” That shake-up gave them a story to share when they reached Torrington!

Russ’s mother and grandmother loved and constantly fed their new daughter-in-law, but they couldn’t understand why Russ married a mere eighteen year old. Every time they served a meal, Melanie would eat until she felt full, and
stop eating, despite Marie pulling out every dish of leftovers from the refrigerator, reheating it, urging, “Eat! You’re too skinny!” As if the meal just prepared was not enough, all the leftovers might entice her to eat more.

Upon their return to the ranch, Melanie moved into the small bedroom off the dining room where Russ had already taken up residence. She unpacked the wedding gifts given to them by their many friends and well-wishers, storing them in the cupboard above their clothes closet. How she admired having her own new Corning bake-ware, stainless silverware, little treasures that she cherished because they represented gestures of care from people she cared about. Russ felt differently. He thought treasures should not be laid up on earth. He looked dubiously at the boxes crowding the top cupboard, and decreed, “Donate those. Give them away.” It saddened Melanie to give up their wedding gifts.

She countered, “What if we have our own apartment someday?” The ranch kitchen was already well-stocked, and not in need of her cookware. Russ didn’t seem to want the gifts under any circumstance.

“If we ever have our own place, God will provide for us then,” he said with conviction. Melanie didn’t understand his asceticism, but she gave the gifts away to the thrift store, a business newly opened in El Cajon and operated by the residents of the ranch. Melanie put in many a fourteen hour workday at the thrift store, and lost
weight. Her clothes began to hang on her. As more members—mostly young men just out of the Navy—joined the church and volunteered hours of work at the store, she was freed up to become sole cook at the ranch. She learned to cook for an army, usually serving a dozen people, mostly young men, dinner each night. Her clothes began to fit normally again. On the ranch, they raised hundreds of rabbits, a few pigs and two Nubian goats, which Melanie milked each morning. She was fond of the goats, but didn’t enjoy the milk, and hadn’t learned to make cheese.

She painted their bedroom a cheerful yellow and gratefully accepted a bedspread no longer needed by the cheerful and generous lady who lived in the bedroom across the hall from them. Doreen had lived in Japan as a missionary for a few years, after her young American husband was killed in the war. When Doreen first began attending the coffeehouse, she lived alone in a trailer park in an adorably decorated, cozy new mobile home. She became a member of the Christian commune by selling her mobile home, giving the proceeds to Pastor Ben, and joining the staff as the only single woman in residence. Pastor Ben’s wife, Paula, spent all of her time with her much-older husband, so Doreen made welcome company for Melanie, who felt increasingly alone.

Melanie made tea for Russ one day and took it into their bedroom where he sat working at the desk on the thrift store accounts. He looked at her and at the tea
and said, annoyed, “I don’t want you to serve me. I want you to serve the brethren.”

She recoiled from him, and withdrew with the cup in hand. He resented that she impinged upon his Bible study time, he admitted later.

Russ often oversaw her work there, and gave her tips, his idea of helpful suggestions delivered as orders, about how to be a more efficient worker, take fewer trips from one end of the kitchen to the other, carry more items at once, think ahead. She tolerated his managerial style, but didn’t appreciate it, and spent time alone in her room on her knees, praying to God to soften Russ’s heart, and heal their marriage. She admitted in her prayer, “I feel like I’m divorced.”

She stood in the kitchen doorway one afternoon, looking longingly outside at Russ. She wished for a connection that might bring mutual satisfaction. She couldn’t even remember the last time he’d kissed her. Under his direction, brevity and disconnection characterized all of their interactions. After two years of marriage, she faced the reality that they had no relationship beyond being coworkers.

Their struggling marriage caused her to question the validity of the ministry itself, if their marriage could not thrive there. Since Pastor Ben and Paula seemed happily married, Melanie sought her pastor’s counsel. Ben listened attentively, and suggested, “A second honeymoon might be what you need.”

The arrangements were made for a weekend on Catalina Island. They rode on
the glass-bottom boat, rented bicycles, and picked up a hot, cheesy pizza to bring back to their hotel room that night. Back in their room, Melanie, happy about the lovely day they’d shared, held her arms open and approached Russ to give him a hug. With no forewarning, no provocation, he drew his clenched fist back as if he was going to punch her. He stopped himself before he swung, but the emotional damage was done. Melanie gave him a wide berth after this. She felt farther from him than ever.

She made up her mind to leave him. One of the Navy men who took up residence at the ranch, Joel, became her closest friend during her final months there. He restored her dreams in what love, based on friendship, was like, although they didn’t kiss or even hold hands. Another of her friends, Kent, stirred up shortbread from scratch on many an evening. After he baked it in the commercial oven, he ladled bulging strawberries, grown in their garden, over the shortbread and topped it off with homemade whipped cream. He’d serve up the treat to all who gathered in front of the wood stove on the picnic bench in the dining room. They’d enjoy dessert, and afterward Kent and Barry pulled out their guitars. They’d all join in, singing the songs. In spite of these close family-like ties with her friends, after three years of marriage—a marriage that felt like a divorce from the onset—she planned to end it.

She had no car, no savings, only a few changes of clothes. The ranch paid each resident five dollars every two weeks as an allowance for their service, so saving was
impossible. The complete control Pastor Ben had over the residents bothered Melanie.

No one was allowed to use one of the dilapidated cars (typically donated to the ranch) to go on an errand into downtown Lakeside, without the Pastor’s permission. At twenty-one years old, Melanie desired more independence than this. At the Sunday service, Pastor Ben seemed to read her mind, and he preached, “You think you can leave here and live a life for the Lord, but Satan is a deceiver, my friend, and you will wind up backsliding into the pit of hell!”

His words did not change her mind. They confirmed her conclusion that leaving was the right thing. She would not be controlled by hellfire and damnation preaching! After church, she called her mother in Escondido. “I’m leaving Russ. Will you come get me?” Her mother barreled up the hill to the ranch house in her white Galaxy 500. Melanie was ready, with a few grocery sacks filled with her clothes. No wedding gifts, the easier to climb into the car and barrel away.

In the following weeks, Melanie found a sales job within walking distance from her mother’s house, at the Vineyard Mall. The job, especially colorizing racks of clothes, bored her nearly to tears.

Her boredom turned to horror after work as she watched the eleven o’clock news. She was unable to look away from the reports of Jim Jones. His cult followers in Guyana drank cyanide laced Kool-Aid. Disbelieving, she shook her head, thinking
about how people can be led astray by absolute control.

Once a week for months, Russ called to ask Melanie to come back. She refused, but suggested marriage counseling. In counseling, she wondered aloud, if they got their own apartment, whether they might be able to work on their marriage. He refused. After she divorced him, he continued to call for years, and sent her letters for decades, always wanting to know if God had spoken to her about reconciliation yet. Her answer was always no. Never, ever come between a woman and her bake-ware.

Pastor Ben, years later, told Russ to leave the ranch, because he said Russ was overbearing, downright mean to the residents. Decades later, Melanie visited Pastor Ben, after she’d secured a teaching career and bought a home. The Christian ministry had evolved into a successful rehabilitation center for drug addicts and alcoholics. Melanie noticed changes, like locks on the refrigerators and telephones, rigid controls seemingly necessary for the rehab of addicts; far more appropriate than for young, twenty-something, clean and sober adults.

When Pastor Ben told Melanie why he’d asked Russ to leave the ranch, Melanie concluded inwardly that he grew mean to others because he didn’t have her to be mean to anymore. She never regretted leaving the ranch or leaving Russ.
Chapter Nine

Tied Up in a Loony Bin

Nature’s tendency is to heal. Even the beaches of Normandy, after seven decades, no longer so much as hint at the blood that once stained the sand on D-Day. The tides renew the shore, but in Eleanor’s case, time and nature, assisted by abusive men, ravage her beyond recognition. Her broken hip, replaced with titanium years ago, never stops aching, so she still takes Percocet, six years later, five times a day, every four hours. I give her a copy of twenty stretches I do regularly, gentle stretches, and her body is so constricted that she can only do a couple of the movements. Dowager’s Hump bends her back so that she can nearly rest her chin on her chest.

Her right rotator cuff healed on its own, shattered when she “fell down.”

At seventy-four years old, she still drives a beat-up truck until one evening on January 29th. She goes out for a gallon of milk. Returning home, making a left turn into her parking lot, she is struck by an oncoming car, which may or may not have its headlights on. Mom’s truck is towed away. The expectant mother and her daughter are taken by ambulance to the hospital, where they learn they are all fine, but Mom refuses to go to the hospital. She wants to get her milk home, so she walks the rest of the way to her apartment, gallon of milk in hand, with one or two fractured vertebra.
She’s good at masking and drowning pain.

She pays $100 to pull her wrecked truck out of impound, rather than paying her rent in full. Christine gives Mom thirty dollars to help her cover rent, but I’m kind of pissed with the whole routine, Mom keeping the truck, the carrot for Howard, and when he is released from jail, he returns to Mom, drives drunk, and goes back to jail. I don’t call Mom for a week. I’m so tired of this cycle. I don’t want to give her more money. If the truck was totaled, I think she should have spent her money on rent, but rather than call her and tell her so, I avoid her till I cool off.

Two days after the accident, because Mom is in excruciating pain and thinks she may have broken some ribs, Christine takes time off work and drives her to the doctor, who does not, inexplicably, do an x-ray. He says, “You may need an x-ray. See me again in March.” Leaving the doctor’s office, Mom falls down in the parking lot on the way to Christine’s car. Christine, about five feet, two inches, 120 pounds, struggles to pick her up off the pavement.

A couple of days later, mom calls an ambulance for herself because her belly has blown up so large and hard, she thinks maybe a broken rib has impaled her intestine. Monday after work, I rush to the ER. Mom looks so
fragile and pale under the stark fluorescent light. She lives primarily on coffee, tea, Percocet, and unfiltered cigarettes, rolled herself to save money. She’s afraid to eat with a possible obstruction, so she’s grown weak. Mom is not happy about all the waiting in the E. R. She yells, “Can I get a drink of water?” The charge nurse comes in from the hallway and helps Mom sip water with a straw and asks, concerned “Do you have a Lazy-Boy chair at home?”

Mom retorts, “I don’t have shit.” Mom asks to use the restroom. The nurse helps Mom up, and she walks with her walker. While she’s in the restroom, I apologize to the nurse because Mom yelled at her.

She waves it off and says, “She’s a feisty one. She acts that way to keep herself strong. It’s how she survives.”

I’m in awe of her insight, and reply, “Mom acts angry like that to everyone but the one person she should be angry at.” The nurse nods, knowingly, and I’m convinced nurses are sages and saints.

An RN finally brings Mom the results of her x-ray and CT scan: “She has a compression fracture in one vertebra, but no broken ribs, no bowel obstructions, and there’s nothing that we can do except give it time. I’ll give her morphine for the pain, and a laxative.” He makes eye contact with me as
he speaks.

Mom queries, “Who are you talking to?” so he looks directly at her for the remaining conversation. We get Mom home at 9 o’clock. Christine has the next two days off work and spends them at Mom’s, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry. Mom seems stronger. She scoffs at Christine’s suggestion that she wear a Life-Line bracelet so she can push a button for help if she falls. Christine leaves late on Tuesday, thoroughly alienated by Mom’s rudeness.

Wednesday night, laxatives in full force, Mom gets out of bed, grabs onto her walker on the way to the toilet, and falls over. She can’t get up or scoot to the phone. She can reach the bedspread and pulls it over herself as the hours pass and the temperature drops. Unable to rise, she experiences the effect of the prescribed laxative and she thinks maybe she’s dying because she heard your body cleans itself out before you die. She doesn’t die, but lies all night in her own excrement. She pounds on the walls and calls for help for hours, and no one responds or realizes what the noise is. That night, my dog paces restlessly even though I’ve already taken her out to go potty; she won’t lie down, and I’m irritated that she keeps me awake.

It isn’t until three o’clock the next afternoon that Mom is able to maneuver and use her cane to pull the phone off the nightstand to dial 911.
The paramedics step over the soiled spot on the carpet as they lift her pain-wracked body onto the gurney and transport her to the hospital.

After work I stop by my house to pick up a couple of things I planned to drop off for Mom on the way to my 5:30 class: Valentine chocolate, a rose, and a get well Valentine card from me and my students. My cell phone rings. As I reach for the phone, Olivia uncharacteristically jumps, barks, and nips lightly at my side, as if to say, “I tried to tell you last night!” It’s Christine, saying she’s there with Mom in the hospital. She tells me the nurse says Mom is fine, just some scrapes on her elbows and hip from trying to scoot.

Christine and I both assume she’ll be sent home tonight. I decide to stay on schedule and deliver my presentation on Arthur Schopenhauer. Christine sends me a text message while I’m in class, saying they’ve decided to admit mom to the hospital, so with the blessing of my empathic professor, I duck out at break time, 7:00 p.m., and head to the hospital.

Mom is all cleaned up. Christine and I make plans to clean up Mom’s place. I’ll get the bulk of the mess cleaned up and take the bedding home to wash it. Christine will shampoo the carpet: She quips, “This is one time when it’s both a blessing and a curse to own a carpet shampooer.”

Since she’s fallen down twice, unable to get up without help, the ER
doctor decides Mom’s extreme pain necessitates a vertebralplasty, the
injection of cement into not one, but two vertebrae, T6 and T7, which are
fractured now. This is February 16th, and she waits not one or two days, but
she waits in the hospital for seven days for the procedure, in the
Intermediate Care Ward. Other emergency procedures keep bumping her
surgery off the calendar. She has been NPO (no food or drink) since Friday,
February 17th, so she is very cranky, understandably. Once she gets bumped
off the surgery calendar for the day, they let her eat and drink.

On Saturday the 18th, Christine and I rendezvous at Mom’s apartment
in the morning, make the bed and clean the carpet, then head to the hospital
at noon to visit until 7:00p.m. We talk her into an Alert One bracelet, which
she wears like a watch. It has a button she can push—in case she falls down
again in the future—to dispatch emergency assistance. Christine and I head
down to the cafeteria for dinner, where I call the order in for Mom’s alert
bracelet with my credit card, $85 for three months.

Back in Room 723 at 7:00p.m., Mom drinks her tea and asks for more
hot water and another tea bag. She doesn’t want her dinner. She yells at me
to turn her tray around so the side with more space on it faces her. As I turn
it, she screeches, “No, not that way, turn it the other way!” No matter which
direction I turn the tray, it still winds up turned 180 degrees, so I look at her with confusion and laugh for comic relief. She snaps at me for laughing, so I say it isn’t pleasant being yelled at for trying to help. I put the tea bag into the hot water so it can steep. I bob the bag up and down. Mom yells, “You don’t have to steep it!” The old tea bag (from her first cup of tea) sits off to the side of her tray, discarded, so I pick it up and reach toward the waste basket, and Mom screams, “Don’t throw it away! Put it in the cup of water!” I shake my head, sigh, roll my eyes, and say, “Mom, I’ve got my own shit to take care of, and I don’t need to be yelled at for trying to help. I’m leaving.”

I step out into the hallway, where I hear Christine tell Mom she also needs to go home to let her dog out, so I wait in the hall for her. I hear Mom say to her, “I love you best.” I think to myself, after scraping her shit up off the carpet, ordering her an Alert One bracelet, and sacrificing an entire day of homework time, this is the way she treats me. It’s especially insulting that she says it within earshot, but maybe she doesn’t know I’m in the hallway.

I tell Christine on the way to our cars, “You win the ‘DOY’ award, Daughter of the Year, for shampooing the carpet till it was almost good as new.” I don’t say I overheard what Mom said, so I don’t make Christine feel uncomfortable, since she’s not responsible for Mom’s toxic tongue. We hug
goodbye. As I drive home, I wonder how and why I still care. This mother-
daughter connection is so visceral. I say connection, not bond, because I
don’t consider our relationship close. I feel hurt over giving my time and
energy all day, only to be treated in a verbally abusive way.

The following day, I head to the hospital with a helium balloon and
chocolate, to sweeten her up, and give her something buoyant to deflate, to
stab with something sharp, such as her tongue. En route, I call Christine; she
plans to spend the weekend at home with Antonio and rest up from her
work week. We’re both grateful that Mom’s hospitalization buys us a few
days until the Alert One arrives. When I arrive, I hear Mom fussing at the
nurse’s aide, issuing invectives and commands, “Would you move that
waste basket over there? No! Not there, over there!” I decide that nurses just
moved up above teachers in my ranking of angelic patience. The aide
patiently repositions Mom’s accoutrements fractions of an inch one way or
the other until Mom is satisfied. Then the on-call nurse goes in and helps
scoot Mom up in her bed, commiserating that gravity sure can be a pain. She
excuses Mom graciously for spilling her water on the floor, and when she
exits the room, I thank her and tell her, “I’m convinced nurses are saints.”
We compare jobs, chatting pleasantly a couple of minutes.
She says, “I have one fifth grade boy, and I can’t help yelling at him. I don’t know how you teachers handle thirty-five of the little darlin’s without yelling.”

I enter Room 723 and present Mom with her chocolate and balloon, and then reposition them as Mom directs. After brushing her hair into a pony-tail, I tell her I have to leave soon because I have homework to do and the dog still needs to be walked. She asks, “Why don’t you stay longer? Why did you come all this distance to turn around and go home?”

I explain, “You hurt my feelings last night and I need some distance.” I ask her about telling Christine she loves her best, and Mom flat out denies saying it, acts indignant, says she’d never say such a thing, and in a disgusted tone, she says, “Well, I’m sorry.” I wonder if she’s lying, or simply drugged out of her mind.

When I insist she said it, Mom says, “Well, maybe I’m just off-my-rocker crazy, deranged, to have said something like that. I don’t remember saying any such thing.” I guess when all else fails, claim insanity. As I stand, poised to leave, she continues to talk for fifteen more minutes. I want relief from the stale air as I wait for a break in her monologue, bid her goodnight, and inhale deeply as I drive home.
On February 22nd, Christine and I take the day off work. We meet Mom in her room at 9:00. The nurse comes in to prep her for surgery, and wheels Mom out of the room. Christine and I both almost blow a gasket when nurses roll Mom back into the room forty minutes after they wheeled her out of the room. “What happened?” we ask in unison, “Isn’t she getting the vertebroplasty today?” The nurse assures us that although she is bumped for the first surgery of the day for another emergency—a gang member shot in the cheek—she’s on the schedule for the next surgery at 11:00. They say they’ll be back for her shortly. They do as promised. By 6p.m., our alarm grows because Mom’s been under anesthesia for so many hours. Mom still isn’t back in the room.

The nurse explains, “We waited for her to wake up, and when she didn’t, we gave her a reversing agent to bring her out of anesthesia. The vertebroplasty went well, and that should help her recover sooner.” Mom finally returns to the room at 7 p.m., so we go home and let her rest.

The following night after work I visit her. She seems in better spirits. We calculate that she should be discharged from the hospital the next day, Friday. She isn’t breathing so well, and is uncooperative about keeping the uncomfortable oxygen mask on. Friday evening, I am stuck in my classroom
until 6:30, preparing for the following week, and all hell breaks loose at the hospital. Mom inhales bits of food into her lungs, which causes aspirative pneumonia; her oxygen level is too low even with the oxygen mask, so Dr. H. intubates Mom, an extremely difficult intubation with the curvature in her spine. I’m told she’s in the Critical Care Ward on a ventilator. By the time I leave my classroom, visiting hours have ended.

I go see her Saturday morning, and she can’t focus her eyes, she’s so heavily drugged. Her wrists are tethered to the side-rails on her bed. A machine breathes rhythmically for her. I stay with her all day, talking encouragingly to her, then Christine and Antonio arrive and sit with Mom for the evening. I leave, but return on Sunday. I see that Mom’s eyes are focusing better. She cannot talk with the tubes down her throat. She flails her restrained hands in circles, the only easy movement she’s capable of.

I take notes about the drugs dripping into her intravenous tube, and wonder what’s in the liquid food and the drugs, which necessitate insulin shots into Mom’s belly. She’s never been diabetic before. I mention Ativan, the drug helping her tolerate the tubes, to Louise, who takes after her medicine man father. She tells me that her mother had serious side effects from Ativan. It works for some, but not for others.
Christine’s boss tells her that her own mother was hospitalized recently in the Critical Care Unit. She intimates that her mother may still be there on a ventilator, had she not intervened on her mother’s behalf, and transferred her mother to a hospital more proactive in weaning its patients off life support. These two influences converge to guide Christine and me; we conspire, write letters, make phone calls, get a copy of Mom’s advance directive giving me authority to carry out Mom’s wishes. After five days of intubation, Mom still can’t pass the breathing trials. I discover through online research that Ativan suppresses respiration and can even cause respiratory failure.

I spend hours writing sub plans so I can take three days off work. I do a Google search while I’m at it, to locate the whereabouts of Mom’s only sibling, Al. His obituary pops up and I learn my favorite uncle died three months ago. He died at sixty-two; of what, it doesn’t say.

I wait in Mom’s room for Dr. H. during his Wednesday morning rounds at 9a.m.: “Here’s a copy of Eleanor’s advance directive. I’d like you to replace Ativan with another drug. I’ve read that Ativan’s possible side effects are respiratory suppression, and it can even cause respiratory failure.”

Dr. H. is a man of few words, “It caaan.” He elongates the word,
“can,” but says nothing more. He leaves Mom’s room. I’m unsure of the outcome of our meeting because of his reticence to speak, but within the hour, a nurse comes in, removes the Ativan drip, and replaces it with Propofol. I wait and watch, write and read.

Thursday morning, I hope to meet Dr. H. for rounds again, but pulling out of the garage, I hear a squealing sound. It worsens while I drive down the street, so I pull over and see one tire is flat. I call AAA to put on the spare. I get to the hospital at 10:00, missing rounds. There isn’t a single parking space in the entire multi-level parking structure, so I park on a side street. Joy, the respiratory specialist, begins the Risby breathing test with Mom. It takes three hours. If Mom can maintain twenty to thirty breaths per minute, with oxygen saturation levels in the nineties, she passes. Mom does a fantastic job, so the doctor has more blood drawn to be sure. Within the hour, he authorizes extubation, which means she’ll be off the ventilator and her wrist restraints can be removed and she can talk again! I leave an elated voicemail for Christine at work, announcing the great news. I can’t watch as they pull the two tubes out of Mom’s throat and lungs.

Her first hoarse croaks are, “Neck Break?” We aren’t sure what she means, so she repeats, more clearly this time, “Did my neck break?” She has
no dentures in her mouth, so her words are not as clear as usual. I’d noticed the previous day, because Mom bared her upper teeth at me, her dentures were stuck in her mouth, probably irritating the hell out of her, lips peeling sheets of skin where the tubes rub. They removed the dentures, and I put them in Efferdent. Today she can wear them again. They remove the restraints now, and Mom says, “I need a neck brace. I have one at home.” We look at her, puzzled. She says, “I need it. Go get it.” She’s confused by the drugs.

I say, “Your voice is really raspy, Mom.”

She banters, “I have a sexy voice.” Her next incoherent bellows are, “Nurse, get me out of this bed! Nurse!” To me she says, “Get my britches so I can leave. I want to sit up.”

I say, “One step at a time, Mom. You were intubated and they just removed the tubes.”

She bellows, “Chris-teeeen!” Then, “We can build a new house. With cherries. Where are you going to sleep tonight? I want to go home. I have a bed at home.” I mention to the nurse that Mom helped me grade grammar packets last month, and she gives Mom a reappraising glance. Nurse Eve brings Mom a cup of hot tea and Maalox at Mom’s request.
An hour later, Mom asks for Maalox again, and the nurse says, “It’s too soon.”

Mom asks, “Can’t I just have the Maalox? Is this our first fight?”

Eve answers, “I think so,” but she’s smiling.

I arrange a meeting for the following morning with Dr. H., the respiratory specialist, and the Medical Social Worker so that Christine and I can give them a copy of the advance directive and make sure we keep Mom on her current path to recovery. We worry that a nurse having a particularly difficult night with Mom might put her back on Ativan and cause another setback. The meeting happens casually in Mom’s room. She begins, “I thought I was tied up in a loony bin.” Mom had no idea that we were even there with her every day, she was so out of it. The meeting goes well. Mom is released from Critical Care Ward back to Intermediate Care, and within a few days, she’s discharged from the hospital and placed in an available bed at a rehabilitation home. Christine and I aren’t happy with the hard core psych meds they give her, such as 12.5 mg three times daily of Seroquel, so Christine contacts Mom’s regular orthopedic specialist, Dr. N., who is also surprised that the convalescent home would prescribe an anti-psychotic, psychotropic drug used for treatment of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.
I fret that Mom’s recovery will be complicated by messing with her brain chemistry. Dr. N. transfers Mom to the convalescent home he oversees to be sure her medications are appropriate.

Mom is so cantankerous, so argumentative when we visit her, that either Christine or I find it necessary to take a break for a few days to recover, but the other sister always steps in, visiting Mom, taking care of business until the offended sister recovers and steps in. This gives the other sister a break, who by then, has become the newly offended sister and needs a break.

A couple of weeks later, we have Mom home again, where she recovers slowly. We take turns with the new responsibilities that press Christine and me: taking Mom to grocery shop, to the pharmacy, the bank, the post office, and the doctor. But it beats the hell out of going to the hospital every day. Now Christine can spend the necessary time planning her wedding reception for the following June. I can spend more time on grading papers and homework.

By late July, Mom no longer wishes to wear the Alert One wrist band. She insists she was unsteady because her back was broken, but now that it’s healed, she has her balance back. I acquiesce, and pack it up and return it.
She reads the copy I brought for her of her brother’s obituary.

We go to the pharmacy to pick up her Percocet. While we wait, she looks for a phone card, hinting that I should buy her one so she can feel safe at all times. I reflect on the irony in those words. Why, I wonder, does she think we owe her anything she desires? She marries a man who contributes nothing monetarily, and it’s up to us to make up the difference? Perhaps the desire for a cell phone is a conversation she should take up with her husband when he gets out of jail. I stay silent, but feel needled. She has a land-line and no car; we transport her wherever she wants. So why press for a cell phone?

Next, I take her to the auto shop, where her truck lies in the truck graveyard. Losing her truck seems harder on her emotionally than losing her brother. Along with the truck, her independence wanes. She’s now seventy-five years old.
Chapter 9

The Last Tidal Wave

The beach retracts, less imposing than you’d expect, on a typical Southern California day. By sheer luck, rather than lying face down in the sand to get sun on my back, I stand erect upon the milk chocolate colored bluffs, gazing toward the sparkling horizon. This aquamarine swell does not obey nature. It rebels, does not draw all the surf away from the beach and into itself. Rather, it builds strength from the restless, bulging ocean upon which it travels. I spy the mammoth wave. Disconnected from any other living soul, I’m unaware of their terror or knowledge of the tidal wave, approaching at its chosen rate. History whispers to me that I’ll be swept out to sea like every other time.

My awareness turns to a tall brown pole and hope like a small trapped bird beats in my chest. Will it be like every other time? I wrap my arms around the tall telephone pole, with all my strength become one with it, and hold for dear-God-life. I continue to cling when the force of the water smashes against me, while it collects the cars and people and unsuspecting animals I cannot see because my eyes are squeezed closed. My breath is suspended. When the wave shifts direction and begins its cumbersome
return toward the horizon, I still grip my cylinder rooted into the ground so securely
it withstood what has washed me out to sea
every
other
time
and I know the tidal wave will never again return for me.
Chapter Ten

Enough for Now

My niece, Renee, picks me up at the Hayward train stop because she thinks it’s less scary than the Oakland Coliseum station where she used to work at Starbucks. She gives me a tour of the home she and her husband just bought in Castro Valley. Her dad sleeps on the couch and lets me take his room and bed for the night. Late the next morning, my niece drives me to the Hertz car rental after Leon teaches me how to use his GPS. GPS is my new traveler’s reassurance tool. It will navigate me to Berkeley, where my sister has, in her own words, camped out for the last nine months.

We speak by phone: “Meet me at Tully’s coffee shop. It’s raining outside and Tully’s is where I go to stay warm.” I’m on the I-580W, concentrating on what the GPS tells me to do, getting accustomed to the Camry, and my sister calls me on my cell, wailing, “I’m not at Tully’s, I’m at the bus stop on the corner of Ashby and Adeline; put that into the GPS.” I’m in an unfamiliar car, in unfamiliar territory, telling my sister that I can’t reach the windshield and reprogram the GPS without risking a wreck. Dark, cloudy insurance deductibles loom over me, and I grip the wheel tighter, shoulder muscles tensing.

I stay on speaker phone with my sister, risking a ticket, and from
Martin Luther King Blvd., I see Ashby, turn, and somehow, without GPS’s help, find Adeline, where I see my sister sitting with a large, bearded, dark-haired man who is bundled for the weather. My sister initiates me into her world of choices by asking if I want to have just her in the car, or if I would like to take one of her boyfriends with us. I say, “Just you,” the burden of choice on my shoulders. The first thing she says inside the car is, “If I rented a car and picked you up, I would not show up in a white Camry. I’d pick you up in a red convertible.” We laugh and I confess that I wanted a Camaro or, at least a Malibu, but the Camry was all they had.

She no longer has a car to drive since her impounded car was auctioned off for non-payment of impound fees. Her police officer son refused to rescue the car, saying, “You shouldn’t be driving drunk anyway.” Pungent aroma of hard alcohol wafts from her as we hug hello.

She says she needs to pee, so she jumps out of the car to go use a public restroom, and motions me into a parking garage; I realize too late that it’s inhabited only by construction trucks. A sign says, “Guests Only. All other vehicles will be towed.” I back out, wait at the mouth of the garage until she returns, then nose into her next choice, “Employees Only,” at the Civic Center. She’s talking rapidly, too intensely, and declares, “I need a
pack of cigarettes to be able to face seeing you. Do you have some money?” I double park and hand her a five. “Five isn’t enough.” I give her an extra dollar.

She tells me about the man with a big white van. For several nights, to avoid the danger of the streets, Sarah slept in the front section of the van, partitioned off from the back where he slept. A younger friend—who Sarah nicknames Lauren Bacall—said he was an okay guy.

Sarah gives me details, “Lauren is really beat up after living on the streets, and she’s even missing a tooth. I don’t want to wind up like her. Lots of people on the streets are missing teeth. They act like they want mine. I just tell them, if you want to fight, go at each other; leave me alone!

“The cops know my name from my ambulance rides, and they say hello when they see me. I’m famous. Taxi and bus drivers know me, and will pick me up and give me a courtesy ride when they see someone hassling me.” I exhale a grateful breath for taxi and bus drivers who look out for my younger sister.

She reveals that on April 4th she got injured on the right side of her face. I can still see the black hairline fracture lines under the surface of her cheek. She said the doctor at Emergency told her she needs corrective
surgery, but then changed his mind. She says whenever they take her into Emergency for an injury, they do an MRI, tell her how messed up her skull is, find out that she has no insurance, and release her.

I ask, “What can they really do, other than make sure any pressure is relieved?” She has me touch both cheeks to compare the normal left side with the bumpy, scarred tissue beneath the skin of her right cheek. “If you’d seen me a few days ago, it would have freaked you out.”

The man in the big white van let her hang out in the front of the van with him a few times because he said it wasn’t safe on the streets, then he told her it was time she came into the back of the van with him. She refused and got out. He persisted, “Would you like a ride anywhere?” She told him, “Just get away from me.” She is tall, blonde, and her beauty stubbornly lingers despite her weathered look.

What brings me to Berkeley to see her is that she’d gone off the radar over a year ago. I had no idea why I hadn’t heard from her, until she called three weeks ago and explained that on last Father’s Day—the irony of the day it happened sinks in to me as a heavy fog—her boyfriend at the time, Peter, tried to kill her, bashing her skull. He’d gone off his clandestine psych meds and went off on her in jealous rage. She had memory loss due to brain
injury. Having regained her memory and acquired another cell phone, she gave her new number to Leon, her ex-husband, and to Renee, so I left messages, informing Sarah when our mother was in the hospital on a ventilator, and asking her to call me.

The day I heard from her, I couldn’t concentrate on anything else until I booked the train ticket to see her during my spring break. I wanted to hold my sister, witness her injuries, and make sure she had a good meal and a bed to sleep in for at least one night. My mother, on the road to recovery from a car accident, told me that if Sarah wanted to come back with me, my mom’s door was always open to her. I asked with some disbelief whether she meant it. She answered, “Yes, if she wants to. What else can happen to us? She’ll steal my medicine?” I told Mom I’d extend her invitation. Mom is no piece of cake to live with, but surely it’s better than sleeping outdoors in the cold northern California weather?

Sarah’s fall on April 4th healed without surgery. Her blue eyes have been blackened several times. She doesn’t get specific about how these incidents all come to pass. Once after hospitalization, she went to an abused women’s shelter in Marin County. She became the proverbial dorm mom there, older than lots of the women, at forty-nine. The administrators and
other staff told her she was smart, and she could make something of her life. They gave her forty dollars to go get her ID card to help her get on her feet. Instead, she bolted, said she felt uncomfortable there, missed Berkeley where she felt more at home, and she returned to Berkeley’s streets.

We find a rare and coveted ninety minute free parking spot and walk to the Saturn Café for breakfast, but by now it’s after noon. I’ve needed to use the restroom for an hour, but Sarah leaves me with her purse on the table and disappears for a cigarette, so I hold down the table until she returns. I told her while we looked for parking that all I wanted to do was find a restaurant with a restroom, but it’s not registering with her. She’s focused like a flitting moth on her immediate needs: nicotine; alcohol; respect from condescending strangers. We order what she wants and split it, a veggie-chicken sandwich and Cobb salad. Her blonde hair is gnarled in back; she’s lost her belly and has the body of a teenager.

After lunch she takes me to her locker and introduces me to Roy, the second man of her morning. He says he’s her boyfriend, says he’s going to check himself into a treatment center to get clean. He explains to me that Sarah told him she is going to go home to San Diego with me when I leave. This is news to me. I hide my surprise with a subdued nod. Sarah later tells
me in confidence that Roy’s just saying what he thinks she wants to hear (about rehab) so she’ll stay with him. He ran Peter off to San Francisco after Peter got out of jail for cracking Sarah’s skull. “Roy used to be lead guitarist in a band, and he has talent, so I asked him to get a job and prove that I mean something to him.” She’d told him she didn’t want to keep living on the streets, that he’s holding her back because he wouldn’t pull himself up and work with her toward her goal of both getting off the streets.

The only thing even mildly alarming about him is the way his face randomly turns completely red as he’s talking, but later I reflect aloud that his flight story makes me doubt how safe he is; Sarah agrees with me that he’s capable of hurting other people. Roy divulges, “I went to college for four years with a 4.0.” I believe him. “I was also a pilot. I would let the plane fall into a nosedive with passengers on board, letting the engine die. After the passengers peed their pants, the free-fall’s force would turn the propeller and jump start the engine, and I’d pull the plane back up from the fall.”

“Roy and his wife had a baby born with organs outside his body. His son is mildly autistic, but smart; he can communicate, but will never be quite right. Roy’s parents take care of their grandson. His wife couldn’t hang with the situation. She’s a musician herself. She split,” Sarah elaborates.
Across from the police station, the Civic Center bushes are where she usually sleeps with a boyfriend in his sleeping bag at night. She has more than one boyfriend now, out of necessity, to protect herself from the really scary men who hang out at Provo Park, which she has nicknamed Predator Park, where the Peace Wall stands decorated with tiles. Famous people have visited since the ‘60s and famous protests still take place. She tells me, “Civic Center is my house, and Provo Park is my yard.” She keeps her backpack, purse, and extra clothes in a locker at a men’s shelter, which houses men just released from prison. Women are also allowed to shower there and use the lockers for a five dollar fee. I see men sitting on benches outside the locker area, quietly talking to each other. I wonder how safe it is, wonder why they’d been in jail. I wonder about the wisdom of carrying my purse.

She gives me a glimpse into her world: “At 4:45 the noises begin on the street, the first busses of the day. My sleeping bag—a good down one—was stolen from the bushes, but I’d rather lose a sleeping bag than push a cart around like some people do, keeping their belongings close. The truck that cleans out the porta-potties wakes us up, and the street sweeper begins making a pass by every fifteen minutes at 5:00. Then the police change shifts. The noises let me know what time it is.”
She says she wants to come back to San Diego with me. “Really?” Is she ready? I tell her, “Mom’s door is always open to you.” She knows how cranky Mom gets, perhaps the beginnings of dementia, how agitated, never resting, constantly moving, making coffee, making tea, smoking cigarettes. I tell her, “Mom quit smoking now that she’s been on oxygen for a month. Christine and I take turns visiting Mom, doing things for her. When Mom alienates one of us when she’s rude or cantankerous, and one of us is too pissed off to see Mom, the other one steps in to cover for a while.” Sarah nods her head; she gets it. She took care of Mom once for five months after hip replacement surgery. Sarah hurt her back caring for Mom. After back surgery, Sarah’s Oxycodone habit undid her AA work. When her husband’s business went under in the flailing economy and she lost medical insurance, Sarah began self-medicating without oversight by a doctor.

She says she wants a beer, so after we check into the Durant, a block from U.C. Berkeley, we sit in the hotel bar, drinking two large on-tap beers. She wonders why I have no man in my life when she has a few, and offers, “Maybe they prefer down and out women?” I have no answer to that.

“The master’s program allows no time for a boyfriend; work and school are all-consuming. I haven’t even had time to wash my windows in
four years,” I explain.

Later at 5:30 in the hotel room, she says she has a headache and asks me for more money to go get another beer. I feel like I’m so well prepared because I brought Ibuprofen with me. I offer her some. She declines. I tell her, “I spent the last dollar tipping the waitress, and my last ten on our beers.”

“I know it’s expensive,” she replies. It costs me $16 to park my car in the hotel parking lot overnight, something we aren’t accustomed to in San Diego. Hotel internet, I discover, is free. She takes the dollar left from buying cigarettes today and goes out to meet up with some friends and drum up some cash for more beer. The guy she was with when I picked her up at the bus stop on Ashby and Adeline kept her newspapers so she can’t sell those for cash. I haven’t showered since before my thirteen hour train trip the previous day, so my plan is to get clean. It’s been raining all day, and it feels good to be inside, warm, after walking around town in the rain with her. Anxiety that she won’t return creeps into me.

She leaves me at about 6:00 p.m., and still has not returned at 8:15. I feel like a dunce for travelling twenty-seven hours round trip to see her, just to have her ditch me for another beer. I begin writing on my laptop for my
workshop piece. I promised her years ago, long before she was homeless, that if I ever publish my memoir and it yields any profit, I’ll take her on a trip across Europe with me. She loved to lavish others, spending large. She dressed well; we called her the QVC queen.

I write about the stories she’s told me since I arrived, about another man who let her have a room in a big house where other people crash and she became like their mom, the one the younger people all came to for advice. After a few weeks, the man that got her the room told her on a Wednesday that it was time for her to move into his room and his bed beginning Friday. She moved out on Thursday.

At the People’s Park, free meals are given away to the hungry, the homeless, every day, vegetarian meals from surplus or gently outdated grocery store produce. The church gives free breakfast and dinner each weekday. There’s a movement to shelter people, to keep people in their homes, rather than making war; Berkeley proactively promotes peace. The People’s Park is also where she says you find any drug you want. Sarah loves the pot in Berkeley, but says she won’t do other drugs.

It’s now 8:55 p.m., and I feel ditched, sitting in the hotel room while she’s out on the streets. I thought she’d like a shower and the luxury of a
bed. She has a room key to get back in. Who will walk in with her? Will she come back at all? Will she lose the room key, or try to access the room later? She wouldn’t do that. She’s my sister. I can put a safety latch on the door from the inside if I’m worried about who will get the key or accompany her into the room. She comes back at 9:00 p.m. and says she ran into Mark, her newest, a tall, blonde, well-educated man that she calls “Psych 101 man,” who she’d fallen out with recently because he seemed to get pleasure in her pain (she won’t elaborate) but she thinks they understand each other now. Her eyes are really red, and she falls asleep. I fall asleep, aware of a new distance between us. When I wake, having not eaten since Saturn Café’s one meal the day before, I’m hungry, and already clean, so I let her know that I have to turn in the car by 11:00, and I’d like to have breakfast first.

She acts annoyed with me, “You’re telling me I can’t lie in bed and just relax for a while?”

“No, I’m telling you I have to have the car back by 11:00, and I’d like to have breakfast with you first. You ditched me for three hours last night, when I only have twenty-four hours with you. Imagine how that makes me feel, when I haven’t seen you in over two years?”

“Well, do you know how it feels to be around someone who thinks
“What? You’re not going to put that on me!”

“I’m going out for a cigarette.” She exits our cozy room again. I turn on the television for the news.

She steps outside the hotel, meeting her save-the-crops environmental activist friend who happens to also be homeless. She neither smokes, nor drinks; she has no vice. She tells Sarah that the chef at Durant is health conscious and does wonderful things with mushrooms, and she should eat there. Sarah tells her about our discord. Megan confirms how hard it is to see family for the first time after being homeless, and asks Sarah if maybe she feels that she isn’t as good as her sister. When Sarah returns to our room, she admits, “I think I was feeling inferior. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings by disappearing last night.” Her voice scratches and strains like a permanent case of laryngitis.

I appreciate her admission and I admit, “I don’t look down on you. Jesus washed people’s feet. I think humility is one of the finest character traits.” Dante’s admiration for Beatrice’s humility flashes through my mind, but I hold that in because the reference might reopen a communication gap between us. “I didn’t want to push you away by starting an argument, but I
want to keep the channels open. I have to be honest with you to keep the air clear between us. I love you and I always will; I’ll always be here for you.”

We hug, she showers, and we head out to breakfast. The shower does great things for her hair. It’s blond and curly and probably looks better than mine.

We’re not disappointed by the food. The waiter disappoints us, though. He brings one coffee when we ask for two, and it takes him over ten minutes to bring the second cup. I feel angry on Sarah’s behalf. I wonder if he recognizes her as a homeless woman, and if he’s intentionally neglecting her. I offer her my cup. She declines. She walks over to him and reminds him again politely, when I’m unable to flag him.

We take pictures of each other, both wearing red sweaters. If she wants to get her life on track, all of the resources she needs are in Berkeley. I offer to get her a ticket, but she does not ask to come back to San Diego now.

“You’ll have to stop drinking to make it work. I’m worried about your liver, and about your safety. Shane quit drinking to save his pancreas. Our brother is a teetotaler now! He was hospitalized at the same time mom was, and he quit drinking to save his life.” She nods, but I know she isn’t ready. I take her back to her locker; we hug and kiss each other. I give her my umbrella and a new pair of Nike socks, and we part ways. I drive away, guided by the GPS,
feeling powerless to help her.

Back in Castro Valley, I meet Renee for Jamba Juice and a wheat grass shot. “So my mom is really homeless, then. How can she just bail on her family and on herself like that? I can never comprehend what she lived through as a child, but she hasn’t seen Lisa since her fourth birthday. She doesn’t even know her own granddaughter anymore.”

“She feels like you’re the best thing she can show for her efforts. She’s proud of you and your brother, and happy that you both met good people and married happily.”

On the train ride home, I read and type, glancing up to watch the spring landscape turn from verdant hillsides that remind me of Ireland, to dry, sparse sage and tumbleweed scenes. The train is way-sided for an hour by a north-bound train with right of way, but I’m occupied with writing.

In San Luis Obispo we board another train bound for Oceanside. A boisterous woman boards the train in Santa Barbara, shattering my concentration. She loudly converses with a young man about his girlfriend’s good taste in the clothes she gave him. She claims she’ll retire in four months to care for her special-needs daughter who daily cries about attending junior high with girls who treat her cruelly. She points out the tree house where
two young women live in tent encampments—makeshift shanty towns assembled by homeless people from castoff lumber and tarps—visible from the train tracks. Old bicycles lean nearby for easy transportation. She muses, “I wish people would leave them alone, instead of trying to run them off. They’re not hurting anyone. They have no place else to go.” The backs of the seats obscure us from each other’s view when I seek her reflection in the window.

Three days pass and I call my sister, who stops my lamenting—about wanting her to be safe—when she tells me that yesterday she used one of the movie tickets I delivered to her from Christine. She saw *Mirror, Mirror*, alone. That way she didn’t have to get into a boxing match—groping prevention—with whichever man might accompany her: the better to concentrate on the movie, which was a silly spin-off on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. She said it was funny to see Julia Roberts struggle with aging. My gloom over wanting her to take care of herself, make her well-being a priority, turns to something happier, knowing she had a good day at the movies. I think about her lifestyle now, and the way she laid on the sidewalk when she was four.

When I tell her about the shanty town, she considers moving south where it’s warmer and dryer. We arrange a time to talk each evening. She
says it’s good to be back on the map again. We agree to have a movie and lunch day with Christine next summer, just us three sisters, like we used to.

I upload the better of two pictures in her red sweater to Facebook, amazed at her smile, her blonde curls, and white teeth that resist the toll imposed by living on the streets. A message from Jonathan’s wife says, “Hope your trip went well and you had a good time visiting the Nor Cal family. Jonathan and I both saw the photo of Sarah on your page and found it a little disturbing. Would you consider removing it?”

“Sure, Beth. I thought she looked pretty good, considering. She’s my sister, and I love her, but I absolutely did not intend to disturb anyone. She called and said she’s thinking of going back to Marin Co. Women’s Shelter. It would make me so happy to know she’s in a safe bed at night.” I make the photo invisible to them.

Beth replies, “I can't see her picture anymore. Thanks for understanding. I'm glad to know she is safe.”

I have a great deal of respect for my nephew and his wife, and have learned not to shoot from the hip with anger-responses, but I feel that their reaction to the photo is cold. I write, “No one asked, but she is not safe. She called me this afternoon to say she's thinking about going back to the
Women’s Shelter in Marin County. What is it that you find so disturbing about her picture?” I feel angry that they don’t ask how she is.

Her answer, a couple of days later, is, “She just looks like she’s been through a lot. Jonathan runs into people at work that have been in similar situations. I think he had an idea of the toll living on the streets has taken on her, and the photo confirmed it.” My New Year’s resolution reminds me not to judge; to keep an open mind. I remind myself that they are well-educated, up-and-coming professionals, early in their careers. Empathy subdues me.

In Creative Writing class that week, classmates workshop my piece about a woman visiting her homeless sister in Berkeley. When the professor, who knows it isn’t fiction, comments privately (in writing) upon the part where I uphold the merits of humility, and Jesus washing people’s feet, she queries, “Are you comparing yourself to Jesus?”

I write back, “If you ever saw me behind the wheel of my car, you’d know I’d never compare myself to Jesus.”

I talk to Sarah while driving to work and she gives me great news: “A man from the church gave Lauren and me our own sleeping bags. It feels almost like having our own apartment. Now we don’t have to share sleeping bags with boyfriends. I’m on a waiting list for an apartment through
Affordable Housing. A charitable group that donates art supplies to the handicapped and homeless is having a party this weekend to present us with canvas and oils. The church next door is serving coffee and breakfast. I have to go.” I let her go, and hope for the best.

Carrie attempts to commandeer my master’s thesis. She tells me over the phone: "Mom, be sure not to discourage people from going to church. End your memoir with Ephesians 2:10 and Romans 8:28; be sure to encourage people to go to church. I think you should end with Steinbeck’s ‘thou mayest’ idea."

My response: "You are crossing a line. Are you trying to tell me what to say and not to say in my story? The story is what it is. You can’t micromanage my story with your own agenda. Do you really think that discouraging people from going to church is my message? You have no idea of the answered prayers and little miracles I wrote about; I haven’t let you read most of what I’ve written, because I don’t want to burden you with the details of my story. The next time you’re tempted to tell me what to write or not write, and how to write it, say a prayer for me, instead; or consider writing your own story."

She leaves another message: “I love you. I’m your number one fan.”
I’ve had to learn to stick up for myself with her. A few days later, she calls and asks how it’s going. I reply, “Fine, but I’ve written 120 pages of memoir, which means I’ll need to pare it down quite a bit, cut some parts.”

Carrie directs, “When you get ready to cut parts, call me up and we’ll pray together about it. Wherever two or more agree on earth, you know?”

I say, “Well, my thesis committee chair may have some say in what stays or goes. After all, it’s the committee that awards my master’s degree.”

She’s unrelenting, “Well, God knows who your thesis chair will be, so call and we’ll pray about it.” She does her best to be helpful.

“Carrie, you aren’t listening to me. Can’t we just have a normal conversation where you don’t apply a Religion 101 answer, such as, ‘Pray about this,’ or ‘I have a Bible verse for that’? I love you, but I’m annoyed. Let me tell you how annoying I was at sixteen....” She doesn’t want to listen at the moment, but I’m sure she’ll find balance. Immersion in church is her temporary coping mechanism for living so far from extended family. I’m glad she hasn’t embraced a habit like recreational drugs.

The story (that Carrie refuses to hear) is one that my brother related to me the other night. Recalling it makes me laugh: I was sixteen, he was eight. I stepped in front of the television as he watched cartoons. I emphatically
stated, “Shane, this is the work of the devil.”

He pleaded, “Leave me alone. I’m trying to watch Mr. Magoo!”

Months pass. Sarah’s birthday comes and goes, and I have no way to wish her happy birthday because she no longer has cell phone service. An ambassador for the homeless—also serving as a liaison to concerned family members of the homeless—keeps my niece informed, letting her know when she has seen Sarah, reassuring Renee that her mother is alive. Renee, in turn, passes the news on to me. That will have to be enough for now.

My New Year’s Eve resolution is a repeat of one I made—then abandoned when an old flame began to call me nightly from Colorado Springs—years ago. The resolution didn’t stick, so I will attempt again this year to meditate for five minutes each night before bed. It’s supposed to increase my chances of living—or decrease mortality rate by such maladies as heart attack, stroke, etc.—by twenty-eight percent. Those odds are too dramatic to ignore. Combined with bi-weekly deliveries of organic produce from a local farm, and the prospect of actual graduation soon from the master’s program, I am hopeful.

Retirement is now just three years away, but who’s counting? From my elementary school days, the only lasting memories are of art and song.
Current trends in education mandate teaching to the test, squeezing almost all of the joy and art out of education, and that pains me. A subsequent career and lifestyle in sustainable living beckon to me to endure, and hope—for my sister, for me, for our children and grandchildren, the loveliest of all.

I Skype with my daughter to celebrate my granddaughter’s second birthday. From her father’s side of the family, she inherits Inupiat blood from her grandma and Welsh blood from her grandpa, so her bone structure is exquisite, her facial expressions stoic, her eyes blue, her hair blonde. She is into Tinkerbell and mixing and matching the clothes I mailed as she sees fit. She lets no one dictate to her that the purple yoga pants and top must be worn together; and the Tinkerbell-colored lime green top need not be worn with the skinny-jeans. She selects the purple pants and green top to wear. My daughter dubs it the trying twos, but I say she’s just like her Mommy was at that age, and she’s off to a good start.