

MANY VOICES IN MY HEAD:
SURVIVING A MINEFIELD OF MEMORIES, A MEMOIR

by

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A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts-English

at

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Oshkosh WI 54901-8621

May 2009

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To my husband Kent and my children Kathleen, Nicole, Kyle, and Jonathen for putting up with months of late nights, tears, mood swings, and nightmares that went with the writing of this thesis.

To my friends, especially Gene and Bob who have their own issues with PTSD and love me enough to take on some of mine now and again.

To my parents, Cheryl and Robert Kruschke; my brother, Joseph; and my Aunt, Debbie Leon; who were there for many of the events in these essays and gave me their support to write about some very personal family issues.

To my late grandparents, Vivian and James Otto, Sr who helped raise me and always encouraged me to do whatever I wanted with my life.

To my late brother Jeffery, I miss you every day.

I love you all.

This is also dedicated to everyone anywhere who feels their life is a battlefield raging inside their heads. To those with PTSD and especially survivors of Military Sexual Trauma that we all find some peace within ourselves even if only for a moment at a time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began Graduate School with an idea of what I wanted to study. During the course of my years at UWO, I lost my initial desire and found myself floating in limbo not knowing which direction to go. If it had not been for one professor who took the time to talk to me when I thought I'd never have a thesis or graduate, I would not have made it this far. Pam Gemin encouraged me to try something new and take her Memoir Writing class. In class, I found my niche. I found my voice. I am grateful for Pam's encouragement and the sometimes brutal workshops with my classmates.

In writing, editing, and finding the strength to complete this body of work, I am eternally indebted to Laura Jean Baker. She encouraged me to take my memoir writing to the next level, putting me in it and not just relaying events from my life. She trudged through the mess in my head that sometimes came out on paper just as jumbled. Her editing, focused questions, and suggestions helped me to stay on message.

I would also like to thank every professor and classmate who has read my writing and workshopped with me. Most of your suggestions helped my writing to evolve into the body of work here. Many of you gave me the moral support I needed to have the courage to continue writing. A few of you...well, I appreciate your criticisms but you were wrong.

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INTRODUCTION: MY LIFE ON PAPER

I fell in love with paper very early in life. I learned quickly that drawings, no matter how rushed, were cause for attention. Crayon and marker renditions of my imagination garnered big grins and tight squeezes from my mother and grandparents. Later learning to write my name and words and sentences would earn me yet more accolades. One sentence stories and three line poems from first grade were put on the fridge. I remember creating with the intention of getting noticed by my mother and grandparents especially. I also tried to get noticed by my teachers. I brought bunches of dandelions to impress my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Deebles. In later years, I would write poems to some of my other teachers. By high school, I worked hard on my narrative stories in the hopes of impressing my teachers with my writing and imagination.

I grew up living in poverty. Being invisible was easy, poor kids are easy to not see because noticing them means there is something that has to be done about poverty. Who thinks about the child with two-day-old clothes sitting in the cafeteria reading a book while all the other children eat their sandwiches and swap desserts? Being the one invisible, I struggled between wanting to stay invisible because I felt different from everyone else and didn't want to draw attention to myself and wanting to be visible, noticed, and a part of something.

When I was old enough to write complete thoughts, I kept a diary and still do to this day though not consistently. As a matter of fact, I haven't touched it in three years. When I started around age thirteen, my diary housed the dramas of boys and friends, school and family. I wrote about the first boy I kissed and how wet and squishy his lips were. I wrote about dreams of marrying my boyfriend and wrote my first name with his

last name in a variety of ways to see how it looked. The little book spans years, a month or week at a time, because there were times I didn't have anything worth recording. Paging through my diaries and journals, I see an invisible little girl watching everyone else's emotions and keeping secret her own. I am the unbefriended school girl shrinking away from the new kid taunts or the one never asked to Homecoming because she wasn't popular enough or from the right family. I am the adolescent crying out to be loved yet unknown to unconditional love from everyone around her. I am the soldier camouflaged, an Army of One, fighting memory battles in her head. I am all of these things; they made me.

Reading through the pages and comparing what I wrote to what I remember, I wasn't completely honest with my own diary. Thomas Larson in *The Memoir and The Memorist* states that "our present situation means everything to how and what we remember" (35). A diary is supposed to be a place where all thoughts and feelings can be put to paper with no fear of recriminations. I was always paranoid that someone might find my diary, perhaps my mother, and read it. When I lived at home, I feared getting into trouble for things I had done or thought about family members. When I was married, I feared being made fun of by my husband for thinking things he disagreed with. Because of fears at the time I was writing, some incidences and thoughts I hid from even my diary. Presently, I am afraid to completely commit my emotions to paper because I am unsure of what I am feeling from one day to the next due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. At my worst, I cannot write at all because of anxiety over what might come out of me. At my best, I am able to write but leave much of myself from the lines of prose or poetry. I replay my life as a "Watcher" and not an "Experiencer" because it is safer.

I have another journal whose cover is a sky scene with deep turquoise blue and wispy and puffy clouds floating from front to back. Inside I have written so much anger and frustration. I had nowhere else to go with it. Most of the entries are about the fights I would get into with my third husband, Kent. When we married, we brought a lot of baggage. Kent's ex baited him into fights and then poured on the guilt. When we would get into a discussion that got heated, Kent immediately got defensive, still does to some degree. He would fight with me like I was his ex. My ex would ignore me. I need to talk things out, so Joe would ignore me completely for hours. Sometimes I knew what I had done to get him angry, more often I didn't. I spent four hours at a Laundromat with Joe and our kids never hearing a word come from Joe's mouth unless directed at one of the children. When we got home, I stomped around the house slamming things. Joe acted all innocent like I had no reason to be angry. It turned out that I had said something that he took offense by and instead of telling me he was bothered, he ignored me for four hours. When Kent and I would get into discussions, I tried to force him to talk and got angry if he wouldn't, or I perceived he was ignoring me.

I committed those things to my journal thinking that if I got them out onto the paper, I would be able to excise them from my mind and body. In using memoir to examine incidences in one's life Larson says that "what comes back in memory may no longer dominate our lives; however, the recollection may require us to re-evaluate it" (35). In looking back through those journals and diaries and sorting through memories not written anywhere for the purposes of this thesis, I had to re-evaluate the effect those memories had on me at the time they were created and so many years later in the recollection. I discovered in writing and compiling these essays that I had survived many

different traumatic events in my life mostly through the ability to become invisible. Not literally, of course, but figuratively invisible in that I was lost to myself or had camouflaged myself to blend into the background so as not to stand out. Either I put someone else ahead of myself and abandoned my own thoughts and feelings or I minimized my presence in the hopes of reducing my pain. Though I do not consider my childhood to be fraught with abuse and trauma like Jeanette Walls's, I do see similarities in her writing about traumatic events and mine. We both were something of chameleon's blending in to survive or hiding from the truth of our lives when faced with the evidence. Walls walking going home instead of to a social event because she saw her homeless-by-choice parents sifting through dumpsters and someone might connect them reminds me of choosing not to leave my house because of my irrational fear that people could look at me and see that I was a rape victim years after the fact.

I also feel my writing is shares some style and attitude with Nora Ephron. Her writing is powerful in that she is a woman who seems to have accepted herself as an intelligent woman and the responsibility that goes with that kind of power. She knows how she feels and what she wants and can look upon life with a sense of humor. While things have not always gone her way, she is able to deal with situations and conflicts and move on to the next task. I especially like the hint, and sometimes more blatant stabs, of sarcasm. She uses sarcasm humorously and not vindictively as if she were pointing at each person who has ever wronged her. She writes in a way that makes the reader nod and smile because they have bobbed back and forth trying to decide between dying or not dying their hair in an effort to look younger, thinner, more beautiful, whatever their hang-up. I feel I have that same voice though at times mine is more angry sarcasm than

humorous and there are occasions where I do want to point my finger and do. In this class with these ladies is where I find my writing now

My eleventh grade teacher had assigned a short and simple essay. We each had to choose one inanimate object and give it life. We were to write as if we were the object and not ourselves. We were to describe the life of that object without revealing a brand name or other obvious descriptive. The point of the assignment was to develop a voice that could express itself without being named. The last part of the assignment involved reading them aloud. We didn't read our own, though. Our names were removed from our papers, shuffled, and redistributed.

I did not pick a unique object but I gave it a life no one else had. My goal for the essay was to make my object caring and supportive and as human as possible. I intentionally left out details that were too obvious. I was a carpet. I did not include the name brand as some of my classmates did, giving away what their choices were. I was the family friend that supported a toddler when his diapered bottom fell. I was the family friend that suffered the insult of being stained and not cleaned properly. I was the family friend that bore the tread of muddy feet and enjoyed the soft communion with winter socks.

When all the papers were read, we did a class critique without knowing whose paper was whose. The best in the class was the last cigarette in the pack who had watched his brethren taken one by one. He then described his last moments from being lit to being stubbed out. I thought the story was incredible and envied the writing. The next paper chosen to be in the top of the class was mine. I was so excited when my teacher and classmates pulled quotes and images that they particularly liked. I enjoyed

hearing how other essays about carpets didn't make them feel like a member of a family was being described, all bight a taken advantage and forgotten about family member. I had triumphed with my peers through writing. For a moment, I was visible and admired.

I have a large book collection for someone who doesn't have a personal library in her home. Many of my books are from when I was in the education program at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay. I studied English to be a teacher. Those books are mostly adolescent and young adult novels and nonfiction books. All of that reading and having children of my own inspired me to write children's stories. What I could imagine never quite materialized on paper the way I visualized it in my mind. The plots were thin and descriptions weak and vague. The characters were one-dimensional. I enjoyed trying to write, but I didn't feel connected to children's literature. Despite having read many children's books with my own kids and young adult novels for Secondary Education classes, I wasn't able to translate ideas I had into viable stories. While I enjoyed reading many children and young adult books, I was not able to create a story or characters as entertaining as what was already in book stores. I did, however, continue to make up stories with my children. Each of us took turns adding to the story that starred them as princes and princesses in their cloud castles driving cloud cars and trains that flitted and floated around their universe. I was the unseen narrator and my children the stars of the story.

I spent my children's first years hiding inside myself. I had not married well for either of my first two marriages. My first husband was obsessive about who I was with and what I was doing. The marriage had been forced to begin with. I had been raped prior to my marriage by another soldier and felt desperate to make my dreams of family

come true at any cost. Steven was desperate to not be alone. We thought we had a win-win situation. That marriage was supposed to be my way of surviving having my life and identity ripped from me in the woods behind a hotel. The marriage fell apart before it had a chance to begin. I got into another failed relationship, sure to make any woman cringe, with a married man and got pregnant. The relationship failed, of course, but I survived the experience and had a daughter to show for it. I married again in an attempt to make my dreams of family come to fruition. Again the big, bad wolf knocked on the door and I let him in to be devoured. I lived life from inside his belly, both invisible and struggling to survive and fighting for the survival of my children.

After the birth of my last child, I started a fantasy novel based on the Arthurian legend with a twist. I had read about an archeological find in Glastonbury, England. Supposedly some archeologists thought they had found the grave of Arthur and his queen. The discrepancy over the engraving on a lead plate found in the grave gave me the idea for a twist on the legend. I decided that Arthur had two wives and wanted to write from the perspective of Guinevere's successor. I began writing but could not get what was in my head onto the paper and soon gave up. I was so focused on my mentally ill and frustrated husband and keeping my children from his temper that I gave up writing for two years.

Over a summer term in graduate school several years later, I gave poetry another try and found a voice. It wasn't a strong one, but it certainly was an expressive one. I found that I could write, if what I was writing about was myself. My biggest success in that class was also a breakthrough in writing. I wrote about my grandfather's farm in Sturgeon Bay, a place I love more than any other, and the people that made it wonderful

for me. I workshopped the poem with a classmate and my professor. I couldn't believe it was as good as they said. I made a couple of changes they suggested. I thought about but did not make other changes they suggested. I wanted to stay true to how I felt and images I carried in my memory. I did love the final product, but certainly was not going to admit to myself that I had written something good. To admit success would be to acknowledge my presence in the world as someone significant to it.

I wanted to submit my work, poetry or fiction, to be a professional writer. I felt drawn to the life of an invisible narrator. I found a contest in the journal *Free Verse*. It was a call for submissions for place poems. I submitted my favorite place poem, "The Home That I Love." I'm not a patient person, so when I didn't hear anything after two weeks, I was sure I was a loser. Shortly after giving up, I received a letter that congratulated me on winning first place. The letter included a check for \$25. A notice of the winners and runners up was in the next issue of the journal though the poems were not published. I became confident in that piece so much so that I included it in a final project for a nature writing class I took in the spring of 2008 at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. I also read it at my grandmother's funeral. The text was still in the scrapbook from class. It was the last thing I saw my grandmother read herself before she died. She smiled and laughed and asked how I could remember all those things from the childhood she and Grandpa gave me.

Despite that success, poetry is not my strong area, nor is nature writing. While I could write about things I saw around me, the tone was still reserved. In nature writing, there is a communing between the author and the nature in front of him/her. I tried to commune. I could write what I saw. I could not put myself into that world in my writing.

I left out the communing. I could sit in the midst of nature. I could sketch the birds and plants. I could describe the songs and smells, I could run down the entire list of senses and create a picture in words of what I was seeing. I could not feel it and when I felt something of an emotion sitting outside watching nature, I could not give myself permission to write the emotions down and risk vulnerability. I was not actually there in the moment. I was sitting so still and observant, birds would alight on the deck rail near me and not fear my human form. I did not feel in awe of the gift of a wild creature being so close to me. Rather, I felt like that creature was yet another that did not see me.

I took a memoir writing class to try and figure out where I was in the world of creative writing and literature. The memoir class started with several examples from a variety of authors. We read Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Jeannette Walls's *Glass Castle*. I started to read other authors on my own that I admired: bell hooks, Nora Ephron, and Dave Pelzer. bell hooks's work strikes me as memoir in verse. Dave Pelzer wrote of his extremely abusive childhood in a trilogy of books. Nora Ephron is an essayist who wrote a memoir about aging as a woman. Jeannette Walls wrote about her dysfunctional upbringing in a fresh matter-of-fact voice. "The memoirist is doing all the talking...[he/she should] be inclusive, be not merely chronological and novelistic, be disruptive, be yourself" (Larson 77). I see that disruption and sense of self in these authors and wanted to find it for myself in my memoir essays.

My first essay in class was "Just the Way I Am," about learning to accept my body and even like it at times. It was the first time I had let go of myself, even if only a little. When contemplating the essay, I found that I could brainstorm a plethora of ideas, but I struggled to write them down. I considered writing about my ex-husband, Joe;

about when three of my children got chicken pox, one after the other; tales of my high school boyfriends; and touring a castle in Germany when I was in the Army. Each idea uncovered some part of my life that left me feeling exposed and vulnerable. In *Writing the Memoir*, Judith Barrington described the actions of a memoirist as “both simply telling the story and [musing] upon it, trying to unravel what it means in light of [the author’s] current knowledge” (20). I spent hours over the course of a week doing the prewriting in my head. Each idea was either too emotional, or I could not find the right angle to write about a subject. Many events in my life could easily be recounted, but I could not figure out what they meant. Without meaning, they were not worthy of putting to paper. To determine meaning, I had to expose myself to the emotions I was actively trying to avoid. I weighed how much I was willing to expose of my past and my emotions in favor of hiding behind a façade of a strong, bitchy persona just to get the idea and experience out onto paper.

It was frustrating trying to force words and ideas out of my head so I focused on the voice. Judith Barrington wrote in her book *Writing the Memoir* that “Memoir, like column writing, requires that the reader feel *spoken to*” (21). How would I find a voice through which to talk about my childhood without sounding childish or through which to lament something sad without sounding sentimental? I admired the edginess of Nora Ephron’s voice when she wrote about cosmetic surgery. She decided that she can’t have a facelift because her neck would give her age away. I also liked the straight-forward writing of Jeannette Walls who doesn’t fall into a “pity me” style of writing. And then I thought about what kind of person I am as a speaker. What do I want people to think of me despite what I believe of myself?

I am blunt, honest, with bright hints of both humor and sarcasm. I began to imagine I was sitting at a table with a friend. We each had a cup of coffee and were talking about our lives. In my head, the chair across from me was empty. I didn't want to skew my writing with an imagined friend that could illicit stereotyping. I thought that if I imagined a male friend, I would say things a different way than if I was talking to a female friend. I might be too gruff and profane or too sentimental and romantic. If my friend were older, the conversation would be very different than if my friend were younger. I even considered the education of my friend. I have some in real life that are high school drop outs and some that are PhDs. I have found that I adapt my speech to match my company. I did not want to do that with my memoir essays. I wanted a fresh voice that was more about the content and message I wanted to communicate. I decided not to think about who my listener/reader was in specifics. They only needed to be a set of eyes anyway.

My next challenge was to actually write. What did I want to say and how did I want to approach a personal subject? I thought about a topic I was very familiar with and had told people about: my ex-husband. Joe was a topic I could discuss without getting sentimental or angry because I felt that I had dealt with most of the emotional issues related to our marriage and divorce. It was a safe topic. It was also one that I talked about in real life with a sense of humor and a touch of sarcasm. If I was sitting around a table of ex-wives and we were "competing" to see who had the weirdest marriage and ex-husband, I would win. With this in mind, I started writing about my bi-polar, bi-sexual, abusive, cross dressing ex-husband. I wrote for the laughs, for the express purpose of taking a sad marriage, I had little to celebrate aside from my children, and turning it into

a shocking experience that I survived. I wanted a strong voice that I still doubted I actually possessed. I wrote on the premise of the cliché, “Fake it until you make it.”

My essays were relatively simple ones. I wrote about my ex-boyfriends and ex-husbands. Since I looked on much of those relationships with a sense of humor, it was easy to write them with that in mind. At the end of the semester of memoir writing class, I challenged myself to write about more difficult subject matter. I wrote about my family based on photos. It wasn’t that my family was hard to write about, it was the idea of putting my emotions on paper and sharing them with the world. I had to examine how much I was willing to display for public scrutiny and judgment. How much did I want people to see of me?

Since the memoir class, I have undertaken a greater challenge. I have written several more essays about very challenging and traumatic incidences in my life. I have explored what those events did to me physically and emotionally and how I survived them. This time, I have made myself observable to readers as a person trying to find a balance between being visible and invisible. My greatest challenge in writing is allowing myself to express the emotions I felt at the time of the events and some I still feel as honestly as possible. Barrington writes that “not everything in a memoir is factually accurate” (26). To be able to honestly express my emotions, I had to get past the fact that I could not remember exact conversations or every detail of an event or scene. I had to allow myself to create, or recreate, a situation with what I could remember.

In reading autobiographies and memoirs written by women, authors like Carolyn G. Heilbrun note that women tend to avoid certain emotions because of the social stigma attached to them. If a woman feels love and sadness, she is normal. If a woman feels

anger or rage, she is somehow wrong. In *Writing A Woman's Life*, Heilbrun states that “what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life (which inevitably means accepting some degree of power and control over other lives)” (13). A similar binary holds true in the business and political spheres. If a woman is quiet and polite, she is acceptable. If a woman is opinionated, bold, and forward, she is a bitch and is often vilified. Heilbrun argues that “women who acquire power are more likely to be criticized for it than are the men who have always had it” (16). Having read that assessment, I felt I needed to make a choice with my writing. It wasn't a matter of being a bitch or being meek. Heilbrun goes on to say that a woman, “in ignoring her rage and pain, [becomes] unintentionally ... less than honest” in her writing (12). I felt the choice was between being whole and empowered with a full range of emotions, or holding back and risk losing all that I accomplished becoming a survivor over living as a victim, and being visible as opposed to fading into the page.

Writing memoir is a journey through memories and emotions. It is not fact checked, though memoir is fact-based. Memoir is not the word-for-word replay of witnessed events. Little is researched. Memoir includes pop culture symbols to set time, tone, mood, and place. It is the recall of a series of life events that are strung together by a common theme or themes. According to Barrington, “memoir...is a story *from a life*. It makes no pretense of replicating a whole life. One of the important skills of memoir writing is the selection of the theme or themes that will bind the work together” (22-23). This group of essays explores survival as its overlying theme. These essays are joined together with the additional exploration of being visible versus invisibility.

Until recently, I did not comprehend either theme beyond acknowledging their presence in my life. I wanted to see myself as a survivor. I wanted to be seen by others as a survivor. I also wanted to be seen. Period. I no longer wanted to be identified with my traumas. I wanted my own identity. At the same time, I wanted to be able to step back and let others, my husband, children, and family, be seen in their turn. How to strike this balance when I was still dealing with trauma that made me want to hide from the world is where I started psychiatric therapy. That point is also where I discovered that I not only had a voice, I had many voices.

LITTLE BROTHER

The turn of the decade in 1980 brought big changes for our family. Besides bringing in a new decade and new president, my mother, two brothers, and I brought a new dad into our family. Bob was a bit older than my mother though no less impressionable. Though eleven years older than my mother, he had little experience with children, and we took advantage of that as much as possible.

Early on, I figured out that I could easily extort money from Bob, as we called him back then. He was neighbor to a friend of my mother's and her children. Not far away was a Dairy Queen. To get rid of the older kids, at least while the younger ones napped, our moms would give us enough money for a cone. Our gang of kids, led by the eldest, would trudge the few blocks to frozen dessert heaven. On a particularly hot summer day, Bob offered to pay for our dairy treats. Of course I was not satisfied with a mere cone and mentioned that a shake, my favorite frozen treat of the moment, and probably one of the most expensive items on the menu, was a few dollars more. Bob dug deeper and handed over the money without so much as a glance. Looking back, I suspect the extra cash was more a bribe for alone time with my mother than it was his succumbing to my superior six-year-old intellect.

Not long after Bob moved in with us, my younger brother Jeffery renamed him Daddy Bob. Jeffery was three years old and still remembered his real father, who promised to visit. And time and again, Jeffery was left standing at the window waiting, his skinny boy body shaking with excitement and then growing disappointment. Daddy Bob, on the other hand, was there. He was there for the tantrums and nightmares. He was there for the parties and punishments. Jeffery, in his toddler wisdom, bestowed on

our pending step-father a new title in honor of his being there for us. I suspect it helped that Bob had recently bought a brand new “Smokey and the Bandit” Trans Am. Jeffery also bestowed upon the car the title “Trick Truck Tranny.” After Jeffery granted his approval, Joey, our younger brother, and I were free to call this man in our lives Daddy or Daddy Bob as it suited us. While it was exciting to have a new dad, I’m not sure I really knew what to make of him. He could be quite playful at times and wrestled around with us. Other times, he was very strict and his temper was one that scared me after dealing with Danny’s violent outbursts but Daddy Bob never hit my mother.

On June 26, my brothers’ Godmother, Janice, took us, minus Dad who was at work, to McDonald’s for Happy Meals to celebrate my brother Jeffery’s fourth birthday ten days late. After lunch, we came home and Joey, then almost three, was put down for his nap. Mom and Janice, friends since high school, chatted and did laundry. While they were hanging sheets, I was forced to play with my little brother out front. I wanted nothing more than to play with my friend, Annie, from across the street alone without my little brother hanging around. After all, I was a big kid at six years of age with a two-wheeler and he was only a little kid with a red plastic toy truck to ride. I had serious kid business to attend to and all he wanted to do was follow me around everywhere.

My family lived on North 12th Street in Sheboygan, WI, in a two-story, red and white clapboard house with a red brick foundation. It had originally been a single-family home that had been converted to a two-family rental. We lived in the lower unit. I loved the house because I had a bigger room than I had ever lived in before and a huge back yard fenced with tall cedar trees.

South 12th Street ran north and south quite a distance. I would lose sight of the horizon before I would see an end to the street in either direction. My side of the street, the east side, was a very long block. It was so long, I wasn't allowed to ride my bike from corner to corner because I would be too far from my house for my mother's comfort. Annie's side of the street was cut in half compared to mine. The west block had a small street cut into it called a court. That little street led to a very small public park and a softball diamond that local leagues played in during the summer. Because of that park, there was a crosswalk in the middle of our street that led from the corner where Annie's big, blue house was to the middle of our block where my house was. My mother always parked her little red Mustang sedan with its white vinyl seats right in front of our house so my dad could have the garage and driveway for his Tranny. That day, my mom's car was there as usual. It is also important to know that the speed limit through our neighborhood was 25 mph, though few followed it as the block was long enough to get up some serious speed.

I tried to be patient with my brother. I walked him across the street with me, him on his red, plastic truck and me walking my bike. I tried to include him. Annie thought Jeff was a pest and a baby though they were almost the same age. We big girls rode our bikes up and down the block with Jeff struggling to keep up only to be left behind in our dust. When his cries to come back got loud enough I thought my mom might hear, I turned around and Annie grudgingly followed me back.

It was getting too difficult to ride our bikes with Jeffery complaining he couldn't keep up, so I decided to abandon my bike. Annie wanted to play in her house and she agreed to let my brother come along for a little while. Her teenage brother was home and

he wouldn't care as long as we all stayed out of his way. The rule about bikes in my family was that they had to always be left on their kickstands, never left lying on the ground. It also had to be brought home, not left on the sidewalk to be taken.

In order to bring my bike home, I had to either leave my brother in the care of my friend, who was nearly five, and her brother; or bring Jeffrey with me across the street and back again to Annie's house. After careful consideration overridden by extreme impatience with my brother and a strong desire not to get in trouble with my mother, I asked Annie's brother, Junior, to watch Jeffery for a minute. He didn't even have to get up from the TV. I needed to put my bike away and would be right back, okay? Junior made some kind of sound I took to mean, "Sure, I would be happy to."

I don't remember Annie coming back outside with me. She might have. Or she might have stayed in the house to get her toys ready for my return. I told Jeffery to stay on Annie's side of the street and that I would be right back. I repeated my directive several times as I and my bike got closer to the corner and the crosswalk. The first few times, Jeffery started towards me, then he stopped and I assumed he had decided to listen and stay put.

Our house had a large porch with about a three or four steps to a narrow cement path that cut through the front yard to the sidewalk. The grassy section to the north was where my grandmother stacked sticks to try to teach me to build a proper Girl Scout camp fire on a small dirt patch left by moles or squirrels. Neither of us had ever been Girl Scouts and despite her smoking habit, she would not light the sticks for any amount of begging.

I stopped at the corner to walk my bike across the street to my house. I carefully looked as far down the street as I could see to the right. Then I looked as far down the street as I could see to the left. And then I looked as far down the street as I could look to the right again just like they taught on Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers. I walked my bike across the street as fast as I could without the big banana seat thing falling sideways on me. I did not run or ride in case my mom was watching from the window. I walked my bike the ten feet or so from the crosswalk, on the sidewalk, to the path to our porch. I walked my bike up the path and stopped, thinking only that my bike was where it belonged so I wouldn't get in trouble. And thinking of playing with my friend. And thinking of getting across the street as fast as I could go. And thinking of playing with my friend. And thinking of getting back to Annie's as soon as I could, so I was watching my brother like I was supposed to be and not expecting Junior to do it. And thinking of playing with my friend.

I put the kickstand down on my bike and turned in a circle to head back to the sidewalk. When I stopped with my bike, my bike was facing front tire to the east and back tire to the west. I faced north standing along side it. I should have turned west to my left, headed down the path to the sidewalk and off to Annie's house. That was the shorter distance. Instead I turned east toward the house and all the way around to face the street. I don't remember if I turned because I heard the screech of tires behind me as I faced north or if I turned and then heard the screech. I must have turned in response to the shrill squeal of four radials trying to come to a sudden stop on asphalt. Fear made my skin tingle and my heart jumped at the sound.

As I spun, I saw a streak of olive green pass my line of sight. I followed the streak with my eyes as my body came to a sudden terrified stop back in front of my bike. As my body stopped moving, the streak continued and turned into a car. The car swerved across the crosswalk and up into the grassy terrace of the corner across the court from Annie's house, diagonal from where I stood. In its last few feet of motion, my six-year-old self watched as my brother's little four-year-and-ten-day-old body was tore from his toy truck, rolled up onto the hood, and down under the vehicle as the car continued its path leaving long black streaks behind it. The car came to a complete stop propped up on the curb the same time Jeffery's body came to a rolling stop in the fetal position about 12 feet north of the crosswalk. He had been riding his toy from Annie's house on the west side of the street to ours on the east side. Jeffery had tried to followed me.

For a split second the earth came to a screeching halt along with the tires. I don't remember birds, people, or even my own breath. If there ever was a void in the universe, it was the split second before I screamed a sound no human should ever make or ever hear. I screamed for my mother over and over and over. The first movement I saw was my brother's Godmother, Janice. She came running from the back yard where she and my mother had been hanging sheets and gossiping. She saw me standing by my bike. I felt the tears pouring down my face and my body shook. All I could do was point to my brother's body lying in the street. Janice turned, her jaw dropped, and her face went white as the sheets she was hanging. She screamed my mother's name and ran to the back yard.

A man from the neighborhood came running down the sidewalk on our side of the street in his white undershirt and jeans. I think he was barefoot. I remember he was

nearly bald, with short dark hair around the sides and back of his head. His face was framed with the longer sideburns of the late seventies/early eighties. His mustache was big and bushy-looking and his beer belly shook when he ran to my brother. He tore off his T-shirt and covered Jeffery's still, little body. My mother, with Janice in tow, came tearing from the back yard and ran to my brother. I know I was rooted to the spot I was in. I know I was crying. My mother and Janice were too. Others from the neighborhood came running and crowding around Jeffery.

I did not see my friend Annie at any point during or after. I don't remember seeing the driver or his brother leave their car or approach my brother lying on the hard pavement with my mother wailing and crying over him. I remember the ambulance. I remember Jeffery on the stretcher lost in sheets and equipment being loaded into the back of the ambulance and my mother being helped inside by the paramedic. I remember feeling scared, forgotten, and alone. Everyone was crowding around for my brother and my mother, as it should have been. I was there frozen next to my bike not knowing what to do or where to go. Should I go to where Jeffery was? Should I run to my mother? I was cold and shivering on a tank top and shorts kind of day.

The rest is a blur of disjointed images and conversations that do not seem to have an order. Janice stayed with me and my sleeping brother Joey, who would go to sleep with his best friend in the world alive and happy and who would wake up to an empty bed. Janice asked if I knew my grandparents' phone number: 452-4046. It has been 28 years and I still remember it. That was the first time I would have to tell a family member something bad had happened to someone we loved. I was six.

Someone, I thought it was Janice, told me to pick Jeffery's truck out of the road and leave it on the porch, so I did. By that time, the police had arrived. I walked back for the shoes Jeffery had been knocked out of. Those were his and they did not belong in the road. I picked up the first little denim-colored, canvas sneaker with the white rubber soles and a police officer stopped me and yelled at me to put it back. I dropped it almost where I found it. No one told me to put the truck back. At some point my grandparents arrived and my grandmother kept me on our porch watching.

People were everywhere in little groups, big groups, across the street, down the block, in the street. Everyone was talking to everyone else and some were wandering around from group to group. I imagine if this were today, all of them would have had their cell phones up to their ears or held out in front of them taking pictures to send somewhere.

"Did you see what happened?"

"No, but it looks bad."

"I heard the tires and ran outside, but it was already over."

"I think the kid ran out in front of the car."

"Was the driver drunk?"

"Whose kids is it?"

"I dunno."

No one noticed the little girl whose brother had been hit by a car right in front of her and whose brother and mother had just been taken away in an ambulance.

What happened next took years to come to its conclusion. Some details I know personally and still remember clearly. Some I overheard as no one seems to notice a little girl with big ears who is very good at being invisible in plain sight.

Janice said that the driver, Michael, walked up to her and started talking to her. Apparently he had no idea that Janice was the woman who ran back to get the little boy's mother. The little boy he ran over with his car. Apparently Michael recognized Janice from high school. Likely he would have recognized my mother, too, as she and Janice were best friends in high school and could have passed for twins, sisters at the very least. Janice told my mother, and I am sure others, that Michael smelled of beer from a few feet away. Back then breathalyzers didn't exist and field sobriety tests were not commonly used unless the driver was falling down drunk. The police report did not include this information. I don't remember the police talking to me that day.

My grandparents stayed with me and my baby brother, Joey, and waited for my mother to call. Daddy Bob had gone straight to the hospital from work. The first call came several hours later. Jeffery had been treated as best that could be at Sheboygan Memorial Hospital. His injuries were too severe and he had to be taken by ambulance to Milwaukee Children's Hospital more than 50 miles away. There was no Flight-For-Life back then, not in small-town Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The next call was from Milwaukee. Jeffery had head and chest injuries and was on life support. He was a vegetable. I remember that because someone had to explain it to me. I remember thinking that he would be okay because he was still breathing. What six-year-old knows the difference between breathing and being on a ventilator? Breathing was breathing, and breathing was alive.

While at the hospital, my mother gave my brother a blood transfusion in an attempt to save his life. Later, doctors approached my mother to give her a choice. Jeffery's injuries were too severe. He had tubes and lines running into his body from everywhere, my mother told the family later. There was a bumper-sized dent in the right side of his skull and his chest was virtually crushed. My mother could keep Jeffery on life support. His heart was still beating but only because of the machines; his brain was dead. He would be a vegetable his entire life and would probably die of an infection. There was no hope of recovery and Jeffery would never be able to breathe on his own. Or my mother could let them unplug her baby and let him go. The doctors encouraged her to consider donating his organs to save other children. They left her to talk with family members who were with her and make her decision.

My mother's first husband Danny was there, as were his two sisters, who had recently found God through the Jehovah's Witnesses. One of the sisters had brought them to the hospital to offer religious guidance and support. Their support amounted to telling my mother to pull the plug. She had already condemned her little boy's soul to Hell for giving him a blood transfusion. I imagine the Witnesses passing their judgment as compassionately as they thought they could be.

"We know this is a difficult time for you," one of the Witnesses would say maybe patting my mother's hand. My mother didn't raise her eyes to meet theirs.

"It is better to let go. Know that it won't be like killing him. Your son has already been contaminated and is lost." All jaws of the rational observers would drop and my mother, in her grief would get up, push past them, and go to her son.

If ever there was a single moment that set my opinion of Danny's sisters permanently in my heart that would be it. I hated those two harpies. Misguided or not by their new-found devotion, they should rot in Hell. To this day Jehovah's witnesses are not welcome on my property. There was a time in my life that I was studying a variety of religions to understand them better and to find my own faith. I listened to a woman talk about the great wonders the Jehovah's Witnesses believed. She loaned me their version of a children's bible. I read one story about Sodom and Gomorrah where the daughter of Lot was raped. In that children's bible, it was written that she deserved what she got because she disobeyed her father and left the house when he asked her not to. I brought it up to the woman who had given me the book. She defended the story and the way it was written. That was the end of understanding that religion. That was further proof that I do not need that in my life.

My mother made the most difficult decision any woman could make regarding her child. She let the doctors turn off the machines, and she sat with Jeffery holding his hand until his heart finally figured out it wasn't attached to anything that would keep it beating. When she was ready to let go, the doctors took my brother to the operating room and removed his kidneys. They were given to twin girls, I think in Ohio. The corneas from Jeffery's green eyes were given to a little boy so that he could see again. I don't remember if anything else was taken to save other lives. A couple of years later my mother tried to find out who received Jeffery's organs. The doctors that performed the transplant said that they could not reveal confidential information but that all of the children were doing fine. I have two sons of my own now. One looks very much like

Jeffery, though with brown-green eyes. The other has true green eyes exactly like Jeffery's.

I was not allowed to go to the hospital or the funeral. This was especially hard because Jeffery was my first baby, as well. He was born when I was only three, but I was allowed to hold him and change him. In my mind I was already trying to take care of my mother when she was beaten by Danny. After Jeffery was born I had a baby to take care of, too. After the funeral and burial we gathered around my grandparent's diningroom table to sort through the plastic bags of Jeffery's belongings. My mother had stuffed everything into black, plastic garbage bags with the intention of throwing everything away so no other little boy could wear his clothes or play with his toys. Inside one black bag was a hospital bag that included the clothes he wore the day of the accident that were cut from his body at the hospital. My mother pulled out his white tank top with black trim around the arm and neck holes and his black shorts with an elastic waist band. He also wore white socks and his favorite canvas shoes. He was buried in his favorite shoes much to the consternation of the funeral director. Apparently the dead are not customarily buried with footwear. Jeffery was also buried with his pillow. He had to be; it was his pillow. When my mother washed all the pillows and they were in a pile waiting for pillow cases, Jeffery knew his by smell and cried if Mom put the wrong one on his bed. When we went to Grandma's overnight, his pillow had to go too.

Jeffery's truck was put into my grandparents' attic just in case it was needed. Despite a family tradition of hand-me-downs, my grandfather vowed that this one item would never be ridden by any child ever again. We took Jeffery's clothes out of the bag from the hospital and put them on Grandma's dining room table. My mother fitted the

pieces together with tears running down her face so they looked like Jeffery had just taken them off for a bath. As far as I know, all of Jeffery's clothes were thrown away and possibly that last outfit was burned.

Every year for the next five years, my mother locked herself in her bedroom on Jeffery's birthday, June 16, with a bulging portfolio pouch of all that was left of my brother. Numerous sympathy cards, letters, medical documents, and his death certificate packed the brown vinyl until the seams strained. I remember sneaking it out of its hiding place to look through it myself a few times. I found a sympathy card for me from my first grade teacher at Wilson Elementary School, Mrs. Langman. The first few times I took the pouch from the back of a bookcase or the shelf of a closet, I read the card and put it back. Though we had moved across town and I had changed schools, she remembered me in her prayers. I remember going through the documents and cards no more than a dozen times. The last time I took the pouch into my room and pulled everything out. I tried to keep it in the same order in case my mother went through it and could tell someone had been in it. When I got to the card for me, I set it aside and carefully placed everything back in the pouch. I snuck through the house with the pouch unseen behind me and replaced it in the back of my parents' closet. When I returned to my room, I tucked it away in my Communion Bible. I come across it every now and again, read it, and return it to the box or book I now have it hidden in.

In the fifth year after Jeffery's death, when we were still grieving, my mother locked in her room and me locked inside my head, my parents decided to sue the driver who killed Jeffery. The police report ruled Jeffery's death accidental and did not press charges. I'm sure it helped that Michael's family had a bit of money and knew people.

We sued in civil court asking that he pay for the funeral we were still struggling to pay off.

My mother believed for years that we lost because God was punishing her for seeking revenge on the driver. “Revenge is mine, sayeth the Lord.” At the time of the trial, the girlfriend of the defendant’s brother was pregnant. Shortly after the trial, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy. He died four days later of, I heard, unknown causes, possibly SIDS. We all believed for a long time that God had his own revenge for liars who kill little boys. There is no logic in grief. And apparently no time limit for grieving.

When I was fourteen, I ended up in the hospital diagnosed with Clinical Adolescent Depression. I didn’t want to kill myself, but I thought about death a lot. I blamed myself for eight years for not watching my brother better. I blamed myself for not taking care of my brother. I should have stayed with him. I should have brought him with me. I should have done something other than what I did do. The hospital was the first place I was allowed to grieve at least a little, but no one could convince me of my innocence in Jeffery’s death. Guilt and sadness were the two emotions I felt the strongest.

While being in the hospital gave me a chance to grieve and validated my feelings, I still had to figure out how to live outside its walls. I hated the hospital and didn’t want to be there. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to be in school. I didn’t want to be watched every second of every minute. I wanted to be invisible and forget all the sadness. The doctors and nurses wanted me to learn to cope. Add to that the fact that my parents seemed embarrassed that this had happened to them.

“Families take care of their own at home,” my dad would say. “This is private. We don’t need strangers digging around.”

“My mother spent so many weeks and months here while us kids were left at home,” my mother would muse. “Everything was about Mother’s nerves. I hope this doesn’t end up like that. But just know, Shelley, that we love you and we will get through this. I just wish you would have talked to me first.”

How frustrating and embarrassing for my mother to have a daughter like me. I wanted to please everyone because that was easier than asking them to help me deal with my emotions, thoughts, and memories. I tucked what I could back inside myself and smiled. I agreed to therapy for a while. I said all the right happy affirmations and answered each question with the correct lie. I was cured. I got to go home. I got to disappear again. I learned to cope by taking care of myself alone.

When I was twenty-one, I gave birth to my first child, a girl. She was born at 6:16am on June 3. Jeffery had been born on June 16, 6/16. Since her birth, I have been able to slowly think about Jeffery’s death differently. I have grieved his absence in my life. I have forgiven myself for a crime I did not commit and no one accused me of. I don’t feel obligated to tend his grave as I don’t believe he is there. I do go once in a great while to make sure the bushes haven’t obliterated his headstone and just to remember him, not the accident.

My family tells stories of his four short years without tears and has been able to for many years. We talk about when I got punished because Daddy Bob’s Twinkies that were hidden on the top shelf in the kitchen cabinet were all eaten, the box stuffed with the empty wrappers, and left in the hiding place. Turns out Jeffery, with his sidekick Joey,

dragged a kitchen chair to the counter, crawled up onto the counter, reached up into the cabinet, and pulled down the box of Twinkies. They ate every last one saving none for me and put the box back without anyone being able to tell the box was moved. My parents assumed the boys weren't big enough to manage such a feat. I got spanked for their crime.

When Joey was only a baby, we moved away from my mom's first husband and started a life for ourselves. Joey's crib was an old, heavy, metal one whose bolts were so rusted even my big strapping farmer and factory worker grandfather couldn't crack them. It was moved into the boys' bedroom fully assembled with great struggle. Not long after that my mother went in and leaned against the crib. The damn thing fell apart. Jeffery had patiently worked the screws loose with his fingers until my mother's weight leaning on it brought it to the floor. Jeffery was very good at taking almost anything apart. Not so good at putting it back together.

Jeffery was also a budding chef and nudist, not at the same time. One of his favorite pastimes was to strip naked and climb on top of his dresser in front of the window. Usually one of the neighbors would call, "Cheryl, Jeffery's in the window again." At least a few times, I saw him up there laughing and jiggling while I was playing outside with friends.

One morning we got to enjoy Jeffery's culinary talents. Daddy Bob, recent addition to the family, awoke to a foul stench. He went downstairs to see if something was burning. My mother lay in bed waiting for the verdict. Suddenly she heard "What the Hell!" This was shortly followed by the patter of toddler legs running up the stairs and the shuffling of baby knees trying to catch up. My mother got up and went

downstairs to find Daddy Bob chuffing away on a cigar with every door and window in the house open wide trying to get rid of or replace the odor of Jeffery's culinary masterpiece. It seems Jeffery had gone into the basement and dragged a bottle of bleach upstairs. He dragged a chair over to the stove. He got a saucepan out and filled it partially with bleach. Jeffery then added garlic and proceeded to simmer his concoction over a low gas flame. Prior to doing this he had filled a pan of water and took every Tupperware container of dry stuff into the living room for his partner in crime, Joey. While Jeffery simmered his unique recipe, Joey made pies with the flour, sugar, brown sugar, and water and tucked the pies into bed between the couch cushions.

This is my brother's legacy. I no longer look for him in the cemetery. I see him in the face of my son, Kyle. I see Jeffery in the green eyes of my son, Jonathen. I heard him in the first real belly laugh of each of my children when they were new to this world. I see Jeffery in dreams and daydreams and he is always smiling and hugging me with his scrawny arms tightly around my neck and his cheek pressed to mine.

I still cringe and my heart jumps to my throat at the screech of tires. I still sigh when I see the obituary for a child. I shudder when a child is too near the street and cars are coming. I had my own scare when my son ran into the road as a car was coming. He was following his big sister to a neighbor's house. Kent and I both saw Kyle heading for the street from the living room window. We both ran down the steps and out the front door, Kent lengths ahead of me. I stopped and watched the car coming down the blind curve of our street knowing that the driver would never see Kyle in time. My husband raced across the street, bare-footed and snatched Kyle up on his way. We were terrified and angry and scared and relieved all at once. Most of all we were all okay.

I wonder about Michael, the driver, and his brother who lied for him. At times, I hope that he suffered in some way for the years I suffered. I want him to feel sustained and mind-numbing emotional pain. And I don't feel guilty about these thoughts. I have the right to feel anything I want and sometimes, I want to think that Michael suffered. Sometimes I think I have forgiven Michael. The problem for me is that I'm not sure what that means entirely. Recently I learned that some things need to be forgiven over and over, a kind of fake it until you make it philosophy I have adopted elsewhere in my life.

I still miss Jeffery and wonder what he would be like today. What would he look like at 20, 30. I wonder if he would still have green eyes. Kyle's eyes have started turning more brown than green. I wonder if Jeffery's would have done the same. Perhaps they have for the little boy who got Jeffery's corneas. Would Jeffery be married? I bet he would have been popular with the girls like my son Kyle is. Jeffery probably would have had a few children, too. Would Jeffery have experienced divorce like most of our family? Maybe he would have escaped it like our brother Joe, married for nine years now. Or maybe he would have kept trying to find happiness like I have. I still cry for him sometimes.

I used to feel guilty, that Jeffery's death was my fault. I should have been watching him better, more closely. I had survived. I could walk and talk and breathe and Jeffery could not. I was here and alive and I believed that my mother secretly wished it had been me and not him. None of those thoughts were rational. I had them anyway. It wasn't until I reach adulthood that I could accept my mother's promises that she didn't wish one child over the other. When I had my own children I realized that nothing in life forces a choice of one child over the other. Grief creates a longing for what was lost but

never a wish to trade one child for the other. Experience has helped me accept Jeffery's death without guilt or a longing to sacrifice myself. I could go on with my life. I could live.

ROMANTIC LEADING MEN

I have always been a sucker for romantic movies. The kind where boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, and boy surprises girl with an engagement ring. I think the biggest reason I fell in love with those movies is because of the small hope that someday I would be surprised with a ring from someone who loved me. Someone who would gently hold me and look into my eyes the way Tom Hanks did into Meg Ryan's on the bridge at the end of *You've Got Mail*.

My boyfriends were not much to brag about back then. I'm not referring to the age nine "you show me yours, I'll show you mine" boyfriend. I'm talking about the Achy-Breaky mullet boyfriend. I'm talking about the tight, acid washed jeans, Bon Jovi head-slamming boyfriend. I'm talking about gifts of sparkly jewelry that turned skin gangrenous from Mr. Stage Crew Geek boyfriend, the one that turns out pretty great ten years later- the geek, not the jewelry. Then there was the string of knuckle-dragging, club wielding, "YOU MINE" Don Juans. The ones who conveniently forget to tell you about the other girls they'd asked out the same day and didn't expect to say yes. Apparently that guy was going for volume.

Where was Sean Connery in *First Knight* or *Medicine Man*? Where were the intelligent, gentle, tortured souls in the manly bodies with lips that could kiss forever? Yeah, Connery is older, but I won't kick him out of my bed. And that accent. Where was my Tom Hanks in *Sleepless in Seattle* pining for the lost love of his life and finding love at first sight twice in ninety minutes? Eventually, I thought I'd found Patrick Swayze from *Dirty Dancing*: dark and dangerous looking but really a soft-at-heart kind of guy that wasn't afraid to cry. I snatched him up before someone else could take him.

Joe was six-foot-two and looked hot in his Battle Dress Uniform. I still remember being introduced to him after reporting to my Reserve Army duty station in 1993. He didn't smile. He didn't shake my hand. He barely made eye contact. He was shy, tall and built, with a tight ass and jade green eyes. Check, check, check, and check. The preliminary inspection was a resounding success. Over the course of the next three years, we sought each other out whenever we were on duty together.

I liked that Joe and I could talk and never ran out of topics of conversation. The only thing not discussed was his love life. I assumed he had to have a girlfriend with that Speedo friendly body. I, on the other hand, was still working through some anthropological studies of lower male life forms. Looking back at all of our lengthy conversations, I've since realized that he was like the girlfriend I never had.

Joe listened to my complaints about my first husband, Steven, whom I'd met in Aberdeen during Advanced Individualized Training. He seemed sweet, if a little dim. Steven was from Lakewood, California, outside of LA, the type of exotic "big city" I dreamed of escaping to after high school. I had lived in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, population 50,000, land of cow-tippers and pissed off Holsteins. After a series of horrific relationships and non-relationships, I felt as if I'd never find love, and I'd simply need to lower my bargain basement standards if I had any hopes of marriage and children. Then there were the feelings of unworthiness for unconditional love that lingered after I was raped in Aberdeen. Steven seemed equally damaged, sad, and lonely. He fawned over me and gave me a Pepsi on my birthday when everyone in my family forgot me. *Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a winner!* I thought.

Steven and I got married after knowing each other for a few short months on an active duty base away from both of our homes. He went to Korea, and I went back to Wisconsin to report to my Army Reserve unit. Due to recurrent stress fractures of the legs, I was no longer fit for active duty, so couldn't join Steven in Korea. The real reason I couldn't remain on active duty was because I was labeled a trouble-maker for reporting the rape. All I wanted was to go back to my Reserve unit and try to pick up my life where it left off before Aberdeen.

Joe was in the Reserve unit I was assigned to while awaiting training. He was still in that unit when I returned from active duty. Joe listened while I complained about Steven calling the answering machine, wondering where I was and who I was talking to while I was working 3rd shift. On those nights, Steven would leave four or five phone messages that sounded increasingly neurotic.

You have seven messages, my machine reported.

Beep. "Hey, it's Steve. Where are you? I won't get much time to call, so I'll try back later."

Beep. "Hey, it's Steve. When are you going to be around so I can call back? I'll try back in an hour."

Beep. "Hey, it's Steve. Where are you? I'd like to talk to my wife at some point. Are you out with someone?"

Beep. "Hey. What the hell is going on? I'm on the other side of the world worried about my wife who doesn't answer the phone and is probably out with some guy. Answer the fucking phone."

Beep. “It’s Steve. I’m done trying to call you. Maybe I’ll stay up and call when it is three in the morning here so that I’m too tired to work in the morning. Maybe then you will be home to answer the phone.”

Beep. Click!

Beep. Click!

What Steven never kept in mind was that I worked in a plastic extrusion factory from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. Add drive time and I was gone from 10:30 p.m. to at least 7:30 a.m., if there was no overtime. When Steven would finally connect with me, he accused of avoiding him and cheating on him. He not only wanted to know where I was and who I talked to, he wanted to know about every guy I worked with.

We’d been married in October of 1993, and by May of 1994, the neurosis reached an all time high. Steven came home on leave and we went to California so I could meet his family. Before we left, he made me quit my job. He didn’t like that I worked nights. He especially didn’t like that I worked with mostly men. If he was the one making all the money, he had more control over me. After the trip to California, I flew back to Wisconsin to no job, no friends, an \$800 phone bill, and two cats. He returned to Korea for another six months.

Though I was no longer working, Steven called to either accuse me of cheating or because he was depressed in Korea. After a few months, the bills piled up and I took a job as a desk clerk at a hotel. The marriage was falling apart in record time. Steven accused me of cheating while he made payments on a little rent-to-own mama-san in Korea. She was a wonderful seamstress, though. She made me a lovely royal blue robe for my birthday. He also bragged about being able to get any drug he wanted outside the

gates of post. That is when his drug history slipped out, along with stories of his molesting his sister when they were children.

In one telephone conversation near the end of the summer of 1994, and the end of our marriage, I asked him about his sister. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t marry me if I told you,” he said.

“But your sister? Are you serious?”

“Ask my dad. He’ll tell you,” Steven replied.

So what does a naïve sap do? I called his dad to verify one of my worst nightmares. Steven’s father was surprised by my questions. “That was true?” he asked me, like I would know. “He denied that all through therapy.”

I have no idea why he told me this, I only know why he waited until after we were married. Not only did I feel like the biggest idiot for marrying the crack-ho renting pervert, I’d also been suckered into being the one to break it to a very nice man that his son had molested his daughter. I felt used and pissed off. At that point I knew why some people jumped in front of subways in New York.

Where does a marriage go from there? I wanted children. In my mind, I couldn’t trust Steven around children. I couldn’t have children with Steven because I didn’t know what the drugs had done to his system or if he would stay off of drugs. Steven seemed obsessed about the drugs he could easily get off post but insisted he never touched. I felt trapped not being in Korea to know what was or was not going on and having to reconcile the very serious secrets he had revealed to me. I was pissed off, disappointed, and alone. Looking back on the situation, I still get angry at being duped. I thought I had found someone who would not see me as damaged after the rape and would love me, or

at least grow to. Instead, I found a man who didn't tell me about his drug history or of molesting his sister out of his own fears that I would leave. That choice of whether to leave or marry him was taken from me.

I was stuck married to this "person" until Steven got back to the US. The Soldiers and Sailors Act protects overseas servicemen from "Dear John" letters while they are out of country. I sought solace in my Army Reserve friends, including Joseph. Once per month, we got together for drill. After Saturday's day of duty was done, we partook of frothy beverages at the bar down the street. Luckily for me, I looked damn good in uniform and never had to buy a drink or pitcher. I hung out with the guys. I was convinced I would never have a real relationship and that no normal man would want me. Thank God for Jose shooters and Bud Light chasers.

I wanted a man who was single, non drug using (over the counters are ok within recommended doses), non-child-molesting, gainfully employed, goal-oriented, children wanting, affectionate, good communicating, compassionate, and outgoing. I'm sure there are other qualities I want that I am leaving out at the moment. I'd like to keep some flexibility in my description. Green eyes are a plus.

One drill weekend in August, I was drinking after drill with my buddies and drank at least a pitcher by myself. One of the Sergeants I knew was flirting with me and I was feeling pretty good. He was married. I was married, if you could call what I existed in a marriage. We broke at least one commandment, adultery, and a couple of municipal codes, sex acts in a car in a bar parking lot. I really didn't want to be there with him and had no idea how to get out of it, so I did what he seemed to want. That was about what I was worth at that point. I hoped he would stay with his wife and leave me alone

afterwards. After a few of his pity-visits to my apartment for more sex I couldn't seem to avoid, I discovered I was pregnant. It wouldn't be until I started therapy that I would realized that my inability to say "No" was connected to PTSD cause by Military Sexual Trauma from when I was in Aberdeen for AIT about a year before. Though I did not want to have sex with this man, I felt like I could not say "No." I had said "No" in the past and that guy did not accept my answer and took what he wanted regardless. I felt like not saying anything would be less painful than trying to stand up for myself and what I wanted.

Steven wanted me to have an abortion and then he would "consider" taking me back. I admit that I didn't want to be alone, but I never said I wanted to be with him either. Abortion was not a choice for me, but my head was spinning with whether to try to stay in a marriage I didn't want just to be with someone. I admit I thought about abortion. I believe that I do not have the right to tell a woman she cannot have an abortion. What she chooses to live with for the rest of her life is between her and her God. Terminating a life that was growing inside me was not an option for me. I had lost two babies to miscarriages and could not willingly terminate a pregnancy no matter the circumstances. I also wondered if I could or should raise my baby alone. I never considered adoption because I wanted this baby no matter how she or he was conceived. I thought that staying married to Steven might be an option so my baby would have a father. Then I thought of the kind of father he might be. I sent divorce papers to Steven and waited for his signature. It wouldn't be until November of 1995 that Steven would retaliate by filing for divorce in another state. I didn't fight it.

I was a failure at marriage, something I had wanted so much since I was a little girl. Since I couldn't have that, I decided to have the other half of my dream, a baby. When I announced my pregnancy, the "sperm-donor" ran back to his wife, who showed up on my doorstep with an announcement of her own. I was the fourth slut, as she put it, who had seduced her beloved husband, so I shouldn't get any ideas about him leaving her. I should leave him alone so they could rebuild their family. The friend she brought for moral support made a few other accusations and called me a couple of choice names before they left. In short order, they were all out of my life and I had the baby I wanted. No, my parents were not proud.

In February of 1995, I was six months pregnant and moving from one apartment to the next. I couldn't afford Two Men and a Truck or even a U-Haul. It was just me and my 1994 Geo Metro Hatchback with no radio and no rear window defroster. I asked everyone I knew for help, including Joe. He lived in Manitowoc but drove his white Mustang Sedan down to help. Only two others responded to my generous invitation of beer and pizza in exchange for hours of hard labor. If you ever want to know who your friends are, ask them to help you move. Apparently I only had three.

Joe helped me move from my second-story, one bedroom apartment into a two-bedroom subterranean apartment we soon began calling "the cave." Joe stayed with me that first night. It was a sweet offer that I simply could not refuse. I hated the first night in a new place, and he wasn't doing anything the next morning. We fell asleep talking, me on the cat-clawed, overstuffed couch and him in the hand-me-down shit brown recliner. Within a month we were moving Joe's boxes in with mine. We both wanted a family and he was willing to take my child as his own.

I tried to impress him with my domesticity. After finding out I was pregnant with our first child together when my oldest was a mere five-months-old, I made a roast beef dinner with mashed potatoes (real, not dried out flakes) and corn, to be ready upon his arrival home from work. I had never lived with anyone but my parents, so I was out to be Betty Homemaker. I remember thinking that I was going to have a home-cooked dinner on the table every night and the house clean even if we had twelve kids, three dogs, four cats, and at least one of Joe's twelve itinerant siblings. The American Dream.

After dinner one night, Joe offered to give me a back massage. Katie was sleeping. We spread a tropical beach towel on the floor. Joe got the chamomile scented almond oil from the bathroom. He turned on the CD player with Handel's *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik*, my favorite.

"Warm the oil in your hands before you touch me," I said.

"Don't worry. I'm not an idiot," he said.

"That feels wonderful." My body felt good under Joe's hands. His palms started on my lower back and worked each side muscle. His fingertips worked their way up to my shoulders in circles around my blades and on up to my neck. Then his hands slid back down to the base of my spine. "You must have had a lot of practice with your last girlfriend," I said.

One should never ask questions in a relationship that one does not already know the answers to. One should also never ask about exes unless one is ready to know the answers, no matter what they are.

"Not really. She bought a *Joy of Sex* book and there was some stuff in it about massage being erotic. I read the book and she didn't," Joe explained.

“Why spend money on a book and not read it?”

“After giving notice on my apartment and spending a lot of money on a king-sized, heated and waveless waterbed, she told me she was a lesbian,” he said

“Shut up! Why was she with you?” I asked.

“She told me that she wanted to make sure she was gay, so she dated me to find out. When I wanted to get married, she decided it was a good time to tell me she was sure she was gay,” Joe said.

“Hey, I’m a pretty open-minded person, but that is just wrong. I’ve got gay friends and grew up with a lesbian neighbor. None of them were sneaky like that with their relationships. The least she could have done was warn you ahead of time. Secrets do not belong in relationships,” I said.

“Speaking of not keeping secrets, I have a surprise for you,” Joe said. “Stay here and close your eyes.”

I lay there, all relaxed, thinking, *This is it. This is where he picks me up in his arms and asks me to marry him. He’ll get down on one knee and open a little black box that he is now getting from where he hid it in the bedroom.* I heard the door open and his soft footsteps on the carpet.

His words stumbled out. “I’ve wanted to tell you this for a while. I was afraid of what you might say.”

When I opened my eyes I expected a scene from a romantic movie. Instead, my buff masculine boyfriend was standing in the doorway wearing my silver nightgown. I had bought it because it looked like one of those liquid silver evening dresses women

wore in old movies. Something Greta Garbo or Marilyn Monroe would have worn to woo her man. Instead, my man was wearing it to woo me.

In a matter of seconds, I went from *No! No! No!* to rationalizing that I was an open-minded person. I could handle this. I could make this work. Maybe he cross-dressed because he was alone for three years. Maybe all he needed was a woman around so that he didn't have to *be* the woman. He'd grow out of it. *I could fix this.* I swallowed my pride and the knot of spiked snakes in my stomach and smiled weakly. Joe flounced over to me and knelt on the floor with a bazaar look of anticipation, like a stray awaiting approval and affection. This was not exactly the Hollywood love story I'd dreamt about. It was more like a sick comedy. Instead of Swayze from *Dirty Dancing*, I'd landed Patrick Swayze from *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, evening gown and all.

I didn't know what to do. I loved Joe but I was in shock over what he was. I wanted to understand at the same time wanting to run. I had a baby and one on the way and no job. My friend, turned lover also wanted to be my girlfriend. I did what I had always done; I disappeared into Joe's life and happiness. Everything I did was for him. I lost myself in his needs and buried my own until I couldn't even see myself in a mirror. This proved to be a good thing for me as I had put on considerable weight with my kids, especially Nikki. When I got pregnant with Katie, I weighed 125 pounds. At one point, I reached 189 with Nikki and stopped weighing myself.

I berated myself and used my body as another way to punish myself for imagined wrongs. I ate until I was sick. I ate ice cream and chips knowing I shouldn't and knowing what it was doing to my body. Then I would skip meals as punishment for eating. I would

starve myself trying to lose the weight. When the scale didn't change in my favor, I ate until I was stuffed all over again. My weight was also an escape because no one sees a fat woman. I needed that invisibility to get through a marriage where I was largely ignored and unhappy. Life, and all the crap that comes with it, is not always the easiest thing to live with.

ANGEL OF DEATH

I am the Angel of Death in my family. I am the one, it seems, who rings the death toll. I was the one who told my grandparents of my brother's accident. Years later I explained to my mother that her father was dying. I also called my aunt, uncles, and cousins to tell them and to make sure they went to see Grandpa before he got too sick, per his request. Recently I told my grandmother that she was sick and dying. My duty was to get her to understand that she wasn't going to get better and that she didn't have much time left.

In 1996, my grandfather got sick. He wasn't cold or flu sick, puke-a-little-and-get-better sick. He was yellow with jaundice, blood-in-the-stool sick. We all saw something was wrong. He was the color of a highlighter. He lost so much weight, his skin hung from his body in ripples. His once six feet, four inch frame was stooped, weak, and small. His quiet observance became simply silence.

I lived 30 miles from my grandparents. That made me the closest in times of need. My mother lived in central Wisconsin in Montello and her brother and sister lived in Colorado with their families. I don't remember where my other two uncles were. At the time, I didn't think anything of my mother's request for me to go with my grandparents to a doctor's appointment. They were notorious for "interpreting" what doctors told them and disseminating their minimized version to the family. I went to the appointment to gather and relay whatever information the doctor gave me to my mother and her siblings.

I remember being in shock at the answers the doctor had for us after only a short physical. My grandfather, who helped raise me and was a second father to me, had less

than a few weeks left to live. That was not how it was supposed to be in my mind. He was supposed to live forever and always be strong. He was supposed to be there for my children. He was the man I admired most in the world and I wanted my toddler daughter and unborn child to know him and admire him the way I did.

The doctor went into some details and I absorbed everything so I could call my mother and tell her. I numbed my thoughts and feelings. It was time to focus on the doctor, my grandparents, my mother, her siblings. I needed to find all of my cousins strewn to the four winds. Then there was my family to consider, my husband, daughter, and unborn child. I was too busy with an eight-month-old crawling everywhere while I had housework and errands to do. I had no time for my own grief. I needed to get things done because that is what my grandfather needed from me.

I saw Grandpa in the hospital. He was in good spirits though tired and not hungry. We all tried to get him to at least drink the Ensure shakes. "Please Grandpa." Nothing tasted good to him. "You need to drink this so you can get better." He would know; he was an extraordinary cook. "Can I bring you something from home?" Within days, his mind started to diminish. No more quick wit. No more political debates. The few times he spoke were riddled with indecision and confusion. I saw him at the nursing home. He was tired and slept a lot. He didn't speak. I paced his room while he was asleep not knowing what to say to make him stay. I didn't say good-bye because I believed he could get better enough to stay with me a few more months, certainly more than two weeks.

I thought about the summers I had spent with him and Grandma on the Farm in Sturgeon Bay. I thought about how big and strong he was while I was growing up. I

thought about how I was the first grandchild he was sober for and my daughter was the first great-grandchild he wasn't completely sober for. I thought that if I had visited more, he wouldn't have started drinking again. This wasn't my fault. This was totally beyond my control, and I thought it anyway to try to rationalize what I didn't want to happen.

I kissed him and told him I would be back the next morning. I think I told him I loved him. I must have, I never forgot to tell him that. I drove home thinking about visiting the next day and what I could bring him to make him happy. What could make him sit up and talk to me about all the things the Republicans did wrong? What could make him stand up and say, "Enough of this shit, Shelley, take me home I've got things to do."

The next morning I got myself and my baby ready to go. We were later than I wanted to be. I remember being frustrated and anxious to get down to Sheboygan. I couldn't seem to move fast enough. The drive was going to take forever. Just before we walked out the door the phone rang. A phone can ring a million times and sound exactly the same. Then there are certain calls. The receiver could not possibly know who is on the other end. It is only a machine. The caller could not possibly change how the phone rings. Yet somehow the one in a million, worst nightmare call is the one that rings just slightly different. Just a bit louder, a bit longer, a bit more urgently. The kind of ring that says, "Whatever you do, don't answer. You don't want to know what's on the other end."

I try to think about what I was thinking at that moment. I'm sure there was dread about who could be calling and what they had to say. I'm positive I was hoping that it was someone from the family just checking to see when we would be down to see

Grandpa. There had been a bit of coordinating so he wouldn't be overwhelmed with crowds of visitors. When I think of the moment before I answered the phone, I think about the years he protected my mother and two brothers from Danny. I remember the visits to Grandpa's house and his special treats of grapes, raspberries, and especially strawberries, my favorites. I remember dinners of pot roast and potatoes covered with his scratch gravy, corn, and his chocolate cherry cake. I remember him as something of an icon, almost mythically handsome and rugged, commanding and compassionate. He was the proverbial rock our family had anchored to, clung to in times of strife when we were buried by mostly our own bad decisions. I felt like I had lost my father, not my grandfather.

I picked up the phone. I didn't have to hurry anymore. My Grandpa was gone. The man who was supposed to live forever and take care of me always and be there for my babies just like he was for me left me. The man who stood as tall as a full grown plow horse and was just as strong, weakened and died. I drove to where Grandma now lived alone. My uncle thanked me for helping take care of Grandpa. Steven also gave me one of Grandpa's guns, a starter pistol. Grandpa's guns were his greatest pride. He enjoyed hunting on the Farm, whether for deer or gophers. Getting one of Grandpa's guns was like getting a treasure. I would much rather have him.

A few weeks into my last semester of Graduate School, thirteen years after Grandpa died, I got a call from my mother that my grandmother was sick. While I wanted to think that this was Grandma's normal get-sick-get-attention, the brick in the bottom of my stomach already there from unusually vivid dream visits from my Grandfather hinted at something more this time. Grandma's doctor had spent a weekend

studying Grandma's file trying to figure out how she missed the cancer. All we knew so far was that Grandma's blood work showed cancer and she was having pain in her right side along with several other symptoms originally attributed to diabetes and Celiac disease.

After all the tests were done, Grandma was diagnosed with Stage IV, Extensive, Small-Cell Carcinoma of the Lungs. It had spread to her liver and likely her lymphatic system. Small-cell Carcinoma has a five percent, five-year cure rate for someone who is young and healthy. Sixty percent of all patients, regardless of their stage at diagnosis, die in the first year. Once a lung cancer patient reaches Stage IV, Extensive, they have four to six weeks to live, twelve at the outside. No one could know for certain when Grandma reached Stage IV. On the anniversary of Grandpa's death, February 23, Grandma was three to four weeks into her final days.

When my mother told me that Grandma didn't get it, I knew that it would be up to me to talk to her. I felt like my Grandfather was pushing me to go. It was important for her to understand what was happening. I spent the 2 ½ hour drive trying to figure out what to say. Grandma was going to die. I had to believe it, too. I couldn't find the words so that I could rehearse them and be able to tell her what was happening. I had not visited her in months, and never at the nursing home where she was living though it was a short drive from my mother-in-law's house. I would visit Judy without visiting my grandmother.

I tried to chase the guilt away with a litany of reasons why I didn't visit. Grandma was a psychological trial and emotional drain. She thrived on drama and would create it when she could not find any. Every visit or phone call started with a list of

ailments. This was followed by a longer list of wrongs perpetrated by various staff members and residents in whatever facility she was living in at the time. Then the angry guilt and occasional tears came for my not visiting enough. She had little to do in her day having no hobbies but TV, smoking, and eating and felt that was all the rest of us did too. While I was always able to wade past her grievances, it was physically and emotionally exhausting and I limited my visits to the rare times when another relative would be there. Sometimes more than a year would pass without a visit or phone call from me. Now she was dying and I could not think of what to say to her to make up for all I had not done.

Grandma was fickle, complained, pitted one person against the other, and absolutely loved drama. I was at a point in my life where I didn't need anymore drama. I had gone through my second divorce, was remarried, had four children, one child was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and one more had some signs of it, two kids needed special schooling I had to provide, I was in graduate school and worked part time on campus and was trying to start a Pampered Chef business, my husband worked full time, and my ex-husband was being his normal dramatic self. Add to that mix the phone calls from my mother venting to me about Grandma's latest dramas.

"Shelley, I don't know how much more I can take of her. She wants to move again. She says the nurses never help her and her roommate hates her."

"Mom, she says that every time to get a rise out of you. She likes the attention. I bet if I went up there she'd be chatting away with her roommate and have every nurse at her beck and call. You have to let it go."

"She is so frustrating. It's not like I can do anything from Colorado. She calls and when I don't immediately answer she starts telling me no one loves her or cares."

“Why are you surprised? She has always been this way and always be. That doesn’t mean you have to answer or feed into her. Let it go. I’ll call her and see what is going on.”

I am the kind of person who immediately fixes things. When I cannot, I feel anxiety and guilt on top of my normal level of stress. At the end of the day, I had nothing left for Grandma. Instead of risking taking my life out on her or being less than understanding and patient, I opted to keep my distance with intermittent phone calls and rare holiday and family functions. When the family dramas got too bad, I called Grandma or visited to check on her.

I walked into Grandma’s shared room. She was sitting in a padded chair with wooden arms talking to her roommate whom she had sworn hated her a few weeks before prompting a call to me to get her out of that nursing home. They were hitting things off very well. Apparently the crisis was settled without my intervention. Grandma saw me and her face lit up.

“Shelley, I didn’t know you were coming. Your mom and Debbie are coming too. They called from the Minnesota border.”

“I know. I talked to them a half hour ago. They’re going to stop at the hotel in Crandon and then come here. They should be here in about an hour. I need to talk to you.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Grandpa sent me to talk to you about the doctor’s visit.”

“Grandpa?”

“He talked to Lynn too. He’s afraid that you don’t understand what is happening here.”

She thought about that for a second. “The doctor said I was sick but she didn’t say what it was.”

“Yes, she did, Grandma. Dr. P. told you it was small cell carcinoma of the lung that spread to your liver.” I used the exact diagnosis knowing she wouldn’t understand. With Grandma, if you start out complicated, it gets and holds her attention, so you can tell her the important parts she really needs to know.

“But what does that mean, Shelley?” She was getting frustrated now. Her brow was furrowed and she was talking louder like raising the volume would raise her grasp of the information.

“It means you have four to six weeks to live, maybe twelve depending on the other tests.

“Really?”

“Grandma, you have lung cancer and it spread. There is no cure and no treatment.” She sighed and seemed to think about it.

Within minutes one of the nurses came in to take Grandma’s vitals. “Shelley, tell her what you just said.”

I repeated my cold, memorized diagnosis to the nurse.

“Really? We didn’t get anything from her doctor and she hasn’t seen the oncologist yet.”

She looked at me like I had a second head growing off one of my ears. As if I couldn’t possibly know more than she. If the doctor hadn’t felt the information was

important enough to bestow on her, the “Head Nurse,” then it couldn’t possibly be true.

“You’re Cheryl’s daughter? Are you a nurse too?”

I felt like if I was not a nurse, then I was not a valid source of information. I also felt like Nurse Ratchet would have also blown me off if I was a nurse like my mother. If I was a nurse, it still isn’t as important as being “Head Nurse.” So my information was tainted either way. Since I felt Nurse Ratchet was about as important in my life as she seemed to feel I was in hers, I just nodded and smiled when she held my grandmother’s hand and said “Well, we’ll just wait and see what the Oncologist says and then go from there.” *Nod and smile. Nod and smile.*

Every CNA, Medical Assistant, and nurse that came into the room, got to hear me recite the terminal diagnosis per Grandma’s request. Even a Housekeeping Aide vacuuming in the hall, was pulled into the room by Grandma. “Shelley, tell Sue. Sue, listen to what the doctor said.” And I told the entire diagnosis again. Each time I told someone Grandma had only weeks left, I never said “die,” she seemed to get a little more introspective and I got the impression she was beginning to understand. By the time my mother and entourage arrived, Grandma had gotten all the mileage out of the news and firmly grasped of the situation. By mileage, I mean all the attention she needed.

Whenever Grandma got sick in the past, everyone with a pulse was privy to the minute details of her illness. When she got all the attention she could, she moved on to the next person and confided her illness to them. Whether relative, friend, or waitress at the Log House Restaurant didn’t matter to Grandma. The next step was to get her to agree to move to a Hospice in her home town, closer to other family, in Sheboygan. By

Wednesday Grandma was being moved to the Sharon S. Richardson Hospice in Sheboygan Falls.

I left knowing that Grandma was in a beautiful place with an extraordinary staff. I left Grandma with the promise that I would be back on Sunday with my kids. I knew from watching my grandfather die that it was better to see Grandma the way they remembered her than to see her in a worse condition they would never forget. So, Sunday I showed up with my kids. Grandma's face lit up. I brought her some bologna salad and rye bread like Grandpa used to make and a bottle of whiskey and a couple airplane bottles of brandy. Since Grandma's diagnosis, her doctors took her off of all her diets and told her to eat what she wanted and not to eat what made her sick. I made her Grandpa's Strawberry torte, her recipe it turned out, his Pistachio torte and Poppy seed torte. She requested her favorite drink, Whiskey Sours. I wanted to make her as happy as possible. When I would stay with her as a child and teenager, she would always ask me what I wanted to eat. She and Grandpa always made sure my favorites were around. One of my favorites was Grandma's fried potatoes. Grandpa would make a roast with all the fixings. Any leftover boiled potatoes would be refrigerated and grandma would slice them up the next day and fry them in butter.

When Grandma moved into the hospice, she could still walk. The next time I saw her, only a few days later, she had to be helped everywhere. Time was getting shorter. Within a little over a week, Grandma was asleep in bed her breathing had changed into a gravelly rattle with long periods of silence: Apnea. She sucked in a breath, exhaled, and didn't take the next breath right away. I started counting the empty space between breaths. Twelve seconds. Thirteen seconds. Twenty seconds. Twenty-five seconds.

You are supposed to forgive the dying for whatever guilt they might carry, even if you don't know what it is. You are supposed to tell them it is okay to go. I didn't want her to go. I wanted many more years of her drama and illnesses and complaining. You are supposed to give them your love and reassure them that you will be okay. I wasn't okay. I was miserable, empty, and alone. I was watching a woman I considered another mother die. Someone I had confided all my secrets to over the years when I had no one else was going to leave me and there was nothing I could do to stop her no matter how much I wanted to.

I had to go home on Friday. My kids had activities and my husband had coaching and bowling that night. I called my mom to check in and she told me the end was here. I raced the hour to Sheboygan Falls praying God or my grandfather would fold the road to make it shorter or stop time until I could get there. I missed her by just a few minutes. When I got to the room, the nurses had just finished cleaning her up. I took off my jacket. I sat on the chair next to her bed and touched her face. She barely looked like the woman I had left a few hours earlier. Then she started to look familiar. Her lips were parted in the same position they had been before to allow her to breath through her mouth. Her tongue, pink earlier when I had left, was now drained of color and looked pale like a washed out plum but rough and dry at the same time. Her fever had spiked to 106 not long before and her body was still very warm. I kissed her and held her hand and hung my head and cried and cried and cried.

The room felt empty and I felt empty right along with it. I stared at Grandma waiting for her to take a breath as though this was just a prolonged apnea and she would move at any second. My mother cried in my arms.

“She wasn’t much, but she was all I had,” my mother sobbed.

Grnadma’s funeral was on a Monday after a snowstorm. I brought my kids. My husband couldn’t get off of work. I brought a scrapbook I had made in a nature writing class. It was something I was very proud of. In it, I had written memories of my favorite place and gardening lessons my grandfather had taught me. In the front cover was the poem I had written about The Farm. That book was the last thing I saw my grandmother read herself. She was so proud my poem had won a contest. She laughed at different parts. She was amazed at my drawings and in awe that I could remember all those things to write about them. She was quiet when she read the poem on the back cover about my Grandfather, her husband. She handed it back to me with a smile and told me how much she loved it.

I took my book to the podium in the funeral home knowing I would read that poem but not knowing anything else I would say or if I would even be able to talk at all. My throat was constricted and dry. I cough-cleared my throat and spoke about her being my favorite old bat, something that made her laugh when she was alive. How she could get on people’s nerves and had all kinds of unusual quirks. I talked about how famous people die like the editorialist Paul Harvey and everyone talks about their legacies. Grandma had a different legacy. She taught me the patience I needed to be a teacher and the extra patience I needed to be the mother to an Autistic child. Without learning to communicate in a way that penetrated my Grandmother’s unique world, I would have never been able to penetrate my daughter’s. I would never understand either of them, but I would at least know that we could always find a way of meeting in the middle through trying different methods of communicating. That was her legacy to me.

She also gave me a gift. In my darkest hours, she and my grandfather had given me the gift of the Farm. Now it was my place to go to regroup and recover and come back to the world healthier and happier. It was a gift I shared with all the family and friends in that room. I read my poem. I read it to her one last time. Her gift to me became my gift to her. My last gift to her.

Through the experiences of watching my grandmother die, I realized the significant differences in how I dealt with death. With Jeffery, I knew of death but didn't really grasp it and make it part of my life. I reacted to his death instead of grieving for it. I set aside myself so that my mother could do what she needed to without my adding to her burden with my feelings, thoughts, and guilt.

With my grandfather, I was only a granddaughter. I was not his child, though I felt like he was a father to me. I had to step back into the shadows and let his five children stand at his side with their grief. My grief was buried in my life's duties of work, school, being a friend, mother and wife. I wondered if there was something I could have done differently to make him want to live and stay here for me. I also knew that what was going to happen had nothing to do with me. I regretted not saying good-bye most of all.

My grandmother's death is different. It is fresh and new and raw. I still feel the guilt of not having been a better granddaughter. I feel the emptiness of her not being in my life. In a small way that I hope will grow, is the relief that her pain is gone and she is in a better place. Unfortunately that is overshadowed by numbness, sadness, and rage; a new combination of emotions for me. I had begun therapy for PTSD in the months before my grandmother died and stopped therapy during her illness. Her death was the

final break in my protective shell that had allowed me to be a shadow figure only existing because other solid people around me existed. I don't have the regret of not being able to say good-bye. I don't even regret not having been with her in her final moments. I am secure in the knowing that I was there at the moments when she wanted me there and needed me at her side. Though I cannot explain how or why, her death gave me the inclination that I am in this world for a reason and I have a mission to accomplish while I am here. The first order of business is to heal myself. One of the last things Grandma told me was to get better when I told her about being in therapy. She didn't judge or even ask for details. She knew me and saw me as someone who loved her and whom she loved. When I can do that, get better, I will see myself and my world differently than I do now, for the better. Until I reach that point, I need to deal with my past experiences and choices and put them to rest.

In therapy, and just because, I look back on my life and how my family has grown and changed. Primarily I struggle to deal with my life after Aberdeen when so many wrong choices seem to have converged on a path I am trying to escape from. I have a cardboard box full of pictures. Most are of my children from the day they were born until I bought a digital camera and began storing the memories on computer. Many include my second husband who always felt an outsider in his own family. I tried to make sure there were many captured memories with him included. To do so meant I was excluded. I was the observer, not the participant in my own life.

Thinking of that box of pictures reminds me of the ones on computer that aren't as readily accessible. I can't reach in and grab a handful and sort through them. They are much like old memories I have to dig to find and then cannot put my hands around to

touch them and see them with my eyes. In those pictures are my present life, the one I try to celebrate when I am not busy living it. In this set of photos, I am present. In this set of photos I have gone from the passive to the active. I am the victor forging my path forward.

FAMILY PICTURES

For many reasons, I do not like to think about my second marriage to Joe/SherryLynn. I still find it hard to remember the good times as the bad are far more pervasive. My divorced friends tell me that eventually I will start to remember the good times. I think that advice is along the lines of someone saying, "It was for the best," when your dog dies after lingering for days with a mortal injury. Maybe the advice is easier to make work if there are no children involved. I had four caught up in my disaster of a marriage. I was pregnant with Katie when Joe and I got together. Nikki came soon after. Kyle was born in the middle and Jonny just a few years from the end of our marriage. Now I see my ex every other weekend when he picks up the kids and I put up with his digs and mood swings. Thinking about the eight years I was with him is like looking through a photo album I don't really want to see but cannot rip my eyes from.

Our First Family Moment Together:

The labor and delivery room is crowded with two nurses, Joe, and my mother. I have no idea why I gave in to that woman. My mother had undergone three C-sections and has always wanted to see a birth, so it is only logical that I let her watch the birth of her first grandchild. My water finally broke and Joe turned a pasty, olive green. His eyes looked like they were about to roll back in his head. We had not slept all night and it was six o'clock in the morning. All I wanted was drugs.

The nurses were watching carefully to see how far I was dilating so they could call my doctor. No woman, nurse or otherwise, should ever put her hand up there during a contraction... ever! I was in pain and here someone was reaching for the stars in a place

that was causing me pain. Not to mention, I felt humiliated having a stranger putting her hand in an intimate part of my body. The younger looking nurse with sandy, brown hair said they will call the doctor when I reached eight centimeters and it would be about an hour to delivery after that. Sixteen minutes later, my mother was clasping her hands white-knuckled in front of her mouth as that same nurse was guiding Katie's head out of the birth canal. Joe was watching with a pensive, disgusted look on his face. I didn't know if he would faint or puke. My mother poised with her camera ready for my least cinematic moment. The doctor walked into the room just in time to deliver the placenta. All I wanted was my baby. I felt like an overstuffed jellyfish with tentacles splayed for dissection. My abdomen was gelatinous and I was sweating through my "made for a man" antiperspirant. I wanted sleep, but I was more worried about missing my brother's graduation, if Joe would purge his stomach on the baby, why the doctor was mad that I couldn't wait ten more minutes to deliver, and if I could smash my mother's camera before she took any more hideous pictures of me after squeezing a melon-sized baby out of a place melons do not typically fit.

Child in the Hospital:

I'm sitting in a small, lonely hospital room with my three-year-old daughter, Katie, who is hooked up to miniature canulas and an oxygen meter that shrieks an alarm whenever her blood oxygen drops below 90%, which is every twenty minutes or so. I am pregnant with my third child and wondering if my first will survive the night. Her former pediatrician had prescribed dose after dose of antibiotics for ear infections, throat infections, sinus infections, another ear infection, another throat infection. Katie got

better for the length of her prescription and then began wheezing within 24 hours of going off the meds. I have asthma and know what it sounds like and what it looks like. I also know what it feels like when the bronchiole branches drown in thick, sticky mucus and narrow to the diameter of a swizzle stick while the neck striates until the skin looks like its getting pulled from the front of the neck to the other side of the cervical spine with each strangled suck of air. It is excruciating and terrifying to endure and like the twelfth level of hell to watch your child strangle through it.

Joe refused to go with me to the doctor. I asked him hoping that he would talk to the doctor, or yell at him, or do something to somehow make the doctor help Katie. Joe hated doctors, so he likewise hated going to them even under emergency circumstances. He claimed he needed to keep Nikki busy so that “she wasn’t disrupting the entire clinic” with terrible-two tantrums. I called another pediatrician for a second opinion.

“You know what she has, don’t you?” the new doctor asked.

I was not sure if he was serious or mocking me. “Yes, but I want to hear it from you.”

“Katie has asthma.”

Dr. Doogie prescribed a nebulizer with albuterol and a corticosteroid. He reassured me that because of her age, she might grow out of it. I sat with Katie on the couch holding her arms with one hand while holding the mask with the medicine to her face with my other hand. I had wasted too much time trying to convince an idiot waving a prescription tablet before getting Katie real help. One day later, I sat with Katie in the hospital hoping stronger medicine fed through IVs invading her veins, oxygen blown

through tubes in her button nose, and misting nebulizers held to her face would keep her pink in my arms.

Mom the Photographer:

I am absent from most pictures as I am relegated to taking the pictures. That is the way it goes when someone has to man the camera and we have no friends. Relatives gave up visiting after being inundated with excuses not to come over. Joe was in a gray T-shirt and navy blue shorts with newborn Jonny on his chest. Jonny, our last child was long and skinny and slightly jaundiced. Like his siblings, he had a full head of dark hair. He also had his father's profile, big head, and overbite. I hoped he would get Joe's green eyes but the blue he was born with hadn't changed yet. I love green eyes.

Joe gave the camera a brow-raised, sidelong look with our other three children piled around their new brother. Katie, the eldest of my children, was five and in Kindergarten. Nikki, Joe's eldest at four, was in a special preschool program for emotional and behavioral issues. Kyle, the proud big brother, was getting ready to turn two in December. This picture almost didn't happen. Jonny's cord was around his neck at birth. As he descended, his heart rate dropped. Each time it did the doctor tapped the top of Jonny's crowning head and the heart rate went back up again. The nurses set up a mirror so I could see him come out. He looked like a gray, slimy, wet doll. I probably would have had other thoughts about his entrance into the world, but I was lost in the irregular drumming of the heart monitor, my own heart jumping when the monitor didn't. Once his head was delivered, the cord could be slipped over his 36 centimeter cranium and I could celebrate his first breath of air.

The picture was a fleeting moment of happiness caught on film. Already Joe's punishments of the kids had started. One or two spanks on a diaper to stay away from the stove, to stop sticking things in outlets, or to stop sitting on your brother before he can even crawl. Such reasonable discipline had made way to several levels of fear as spankings gave way to smacks on the head and shoves out of the way. My punishment was Joe ignoring me completely for hours at a time. I needed to talk out problems and craved affection and reassurance of love like craving heroin. This was torture to me. More often than not, I had no idea what I did to deserve punishment. Joe's silence and glaring gave way to his throwing things and yelling. He never touched *me* though. If he had, I could have left.

I was convinced I could handle being hit better than being ignored. I understood beating one's wife. I was familiar with that. I had watched my mother chased under tables by her first husband's flying fists. As a three-year-old I retrieved her glasses from under a cabinet after they were slapped off her face by her husband who was just trying to "knock the attitude out of her." I knew that. That was something familiar and within my warped comfort zone. I didn't understand silent and cold withholding of love.

Hit me, I begged in my mind. Then I can leave. Then I can take my children somewhere we can be safe. Just once.

I provoke him by standing my ground and trying to find a life for myself. I told him that all six of us did not need to go to the store. I could shop by myself. I wanted friends. I wanted a relationship with my brother having lost the other so long before. I started carving driftwood. I carved until one in the morning, two in the morning. I was

too tired for his touch and didn't want to lie next to his nightgown. I didn't want to see "her." I didn't want to know about "her."

It made him angry. Silence and screeching alternated. He kicked a basket *he* had left in *his* way into my foot forever marking my toe with damage. He slapped the kids upside their heads when they walked across his path. He spanked, pushed, and yelled for every perceived wrong. I stopped doing laundry. I stop doing dishes. That was my rebellion. I went to the library. I hid with my carvings. He hated it and sulked at me instead of going after the kids. I found ways to amuse them so he could watch TV or be alone. I took them out so he could be SherryLynn. I played video after video for the kids so he could be with men on AOL and share his fantasies with them.

I turned away from him and let him have SherryLynn as long as I didn't see "her." Being her kept him calm. If I objected, I wasn't a good wife, I wasn't understanding, and I wasn't open-minded. If I told him to stop, I was trying to change him and that meant I didn't really love him. I couldn't figure out how to make him happy. I read books about crossdressing. I read books about sex. I read books about marital sex with a crossdresser. I felt as if I was the one with the problem. It was my fault I couldn't figure out how to change myself to make him happy.

The Last Holiday Together:

During our last Christmas, few pictures were taken. This one was just of the kids. They were playing around the tree with their new toys. They didn't know this was the last Christmas I would be married to Joe. As usual, I was not in the picture because I had to take the picture. Joe was upstairs doing something. I suspected he was wrapping a gift

for me. We agreed there would be no gifts for each other. We needed the money for our respective therapists.

AND SO IT BEGINS

I am not crazy. December 11, 2008, I got confirmation that I am not crazy. That day was a celebration of my son's birth ten years earlier. It became the day of my rebirth from the River Denial. It isn't as though I have a psychosis. I never had a Glenn Close moment with a butcher knife and a bloody rabbit. I simply lived my life making excuses in an effort to avoid what I didn't want to remember and dwelled on other things I didn't want to remember so that I could avoid what I really, really didn't want to think about. Is that crazy?

It was easy to blame my flinching at upraised hands on my mother's first husband. It was easy to blame my fear of losing one of my children on my brother's death. It was easy to blame recurrent nightmares or inability to sleep on every day stress. I could blame my aversion to some men on my cross-dressing ex-husband. But what about all the things I couldn't explain, blame away, or forget?

Five years. That is how long Kent and I have been married. Five years. I have been happier in these five years than I can remember being in my entire life. I have felt safe, but not always. I have felt loved, but not always. I have trust, but not always. I have felt real affection, but not always. Why not always? I want to feel like I was in my favorite novel, *The Notebook*, in which Allie and Noah find their love after losing it to outside forces. I want to hold onto my love for my husband, whom I had met and dated in high school only to have outsiders tear us apart. Kent found me again after over ten years and several marriages between us. I want to hold onto that feeling of renewed love all day long and then fall into bed with my husband; his arms wrapped around me, listening to him breathe in his sleep and feel peace. Instead I feel panic, fear, and an

intense desire to run for my life from an enemy I cannot see and cannot escape. That is where “not always” hides. In my safe moments when I feel the most loved and protected. That is where IT comes to get me like Stephen King’s psychotic, otherworldly clown come to get the children that have now grown to adults still fearing IT.

December 11, Dr. K. explained what is going on in my brain and has been for the last fifteen years. When a traumatic event takes place, the brain reacts in a variety of ways to protect the body. Adrenaline is released, natural survival instincts of fight or flight take over, blood flow to the extremities decreases, and blood is diverted to the heart, lungs, and brain. All of this takes place in the brain stem and hypothalamus. Near the hypothalamus is the amygdale, which is associated with emotions and fear, and particularly with emotional memories. When a traumatic event happens that triggers the fight-or-flight response, sometimes the memory of the event is stored in those primitive parts of the brain. When the memory is recalled, so is every sensory detail of the event. The body responds to the memory as though it is experiencing the event again.

What is confusing is that other memories do not have the same effect. Most of the time, our higher brain functions are in charge and directing our body and mind from the frontal lobe. We see a sunset and think how pretty it is and take a deep breath to smell the calm, evening air. The next day we might tell a friend about what we saw and recall how the air smelled. We might even remember what we were thinking about or feeling at the time of the sunset and tell our friend about that, too. During the recall of the sunset our body is only experiencing the chair we are sitting in, the smell of our friend’s cologne, and the breeze from a window fan. Our rational mind has catalogued the event as a simple experience and encoded it in the logical, higher-thinking parts of the

brain. Normal memory recall does not cause the release of hormones like adrenaline, nor does it cause feelings of anxiety and panic. One may feel nervous and anxious when facing a speech or getting ready to take a test. Once the speech or test is over, the feeling passes. Days or weeks later, one might tell a friend about the speech or test. In the recall, there is awareness of there having been anxiety. One might get dramatic about the severity of the feelings of anxiety and dread when telling a friend. However, one does not *feel* the anxiety and dread as when it happened. The event is not re-experienced.

In addition to the way memory is recalled, PTSD memories are intrusive. Normal memories once encoded tend to stay in the brain unless and until intentionally recalled. The exception is spontaneous recall that comes from something familiar triggering a similar memory. For example, one could walk past a bakery and the smell of fresh bread could trigger memories of grandma baking bread. As previously mentioned, normal memory recalls the event only. PTSD memories come when the memories want to. When I am driving and smell the diesel engine from a bus, I remember Aberdeen where I was being trained as a Fuel and Electrical Systems Specialist surrounded by diesel trucks and tanks. When I remember Aberdeen, I remember the rape. The memories are spontaneous whether a trigger is present or not. With the memories come the adrenaline, fear and anxiety and the feeling that my skin is crawling with leeches. There is no control to make the memory go away or to prevent it from intruding in every day thoughts.

The difference in processing can lead to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. For me the demon memory of being raped left me with nightmares, fear, panic, anxiety, poor concentration, inability to make decisions, chronic physical pain, anger, flashbacks,

insomnia, depression, and an inability to get along or understand others. But I am not crazy, so I guess I have that reassurance.

The treatment I am currently undergoing is called EMDR, or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. It is a process of choosing one element of a traumatic event and changing how the brain stores the memory. The current traumatizing memory is recalled and my therapist directs me to follow her fingers with my eyes left and right 12 to 24 times. A deep breath later I reveal what came to mind during the eye movement process. Eye movements are repeated until the entire memory and associated feelings have been addressed. During the process, a self-statement is identified. Before the eye movements, the self-statement is usually negative - I am weak. After the session, the statement should not only be positive - I am strong - I should also have some level of belief in the statement. At the same time, the level of how disturbing the original memory was should be reduced if not eliminated. Ultimately, the traumatic event is reprogrammed one snapshot at a time. In addition, associated memories from the past and present are processed to reduce the autonomic stress responses associated with PTSD though not necessarily associated with other memories.

Before managing my worst demon memory, being raped, Dr. K felt that working through a childhood memory that brought out PTSD symptoms would be a less traumatic start as bringing up the details of my major trauma, the demon memory, causes me to relive it. In therapy, Dr. K and I discussed other memories that elicited physical responses. She was looking for simple responses like flinching or feelings of anxiety. We talked about my earliest memories of when my mother lived with her first husband. I remember my two- or three-year-old self picking up my mother's glasses from where her

husband knocked them when he hit her. I remember bringing them to her thinking that she needed them. I remember her hiding under a table crying.

I have a few more memories of the years we lived with Danny. He was five foot ten inches tall and lean, a redwood to a toddler. His thick black hair was swept to the side and framed by long sideburns. His green eyes could laugh or show fierce determination to illicit fear. There were times like when he waived a butter knife under my mother's chin threatening, "If you so much as think of leaving, I'll find you." When my mother grabbed up me and my baby brothers and ran once across the street to her sister's house, he pounded on their side door, shaking the whole structure. Another time, we tried to get away in his lime green Gremlin. He popped the hood and pulled the distributor wire. I have memories of having my toddler thumb held in the flame of a lighter I was not supposed to touch. I also remember being thrown against a couch and being shaken by the shoulders, though I question if it was Danny or my mother in a fit of frustration. Danny would grab my foot and tickle it until I cried and screamed, and not in a good way. He laughed at my panic. I grew up with stories of things Danny did that I don't remember. When I was learning to walk, he would trip me. When I fell and cried, he laughed. Staying out of his way and out of his sight was the safest course of action. I don't have these memories in any particular order and most are simply images clipped and mashed together. My mind moves from one to the other with few, if any reference points as to time or place. In a lighter moment, sorting through these images is like trying to keep up with my teenage daughter's boy-crushes. One day it is a singer, another day a boy in school, another day a movie star. There is no rhyme or reason; no order to it.

I take my experiences with Danny as my first lessons in surviving by being invisible. I feel like I have a unique gift of melting into the background. I can sit between two people arguing and change my personality, posture, and body language in such a way that they forget I am there. I can leave a room without going anywhere. It isn't that I am escaping. I listen and watch very carefully what is going on around me. The difference is that I am disassociating myself from people and/or a situation.

I felt myself disconnect from the people that came to see my grandmother in her final days. They were there for her not me. My grief was insignificant to theirs. My longing to keep her in this world was unimportant. My guilt that she would soon be gone and I would still be here was mine to live with. Standing in the room of the hospice, I felt myself fade into the background so those around me could come forward and express their love and vent their grief. At the same time, melting into the walls allowed me to disconnect from my sadness. To be an object without emotion was better than being a beating heart breaking.

I still use this as a protective device when I am trying to avoid conflicts. I don't know what it looks like when I am trying to be unseen. All I know is that I feel small and insignificant. My body feels as though I have pulled every ounce of my being into a ball though I have not moved a limb. When I am curled inside myself, I notice that people seem to be less aware of me. Perhaps it is wishful thinking on my part. Possibly, I have succeeded in being a human armadillo. For now, fading away is a defense mechanism I can keep until I am ready to rid myself of this crutch.

ABERDEEN

I joined the Army after I turned 18. Though I graduated at 17, my parents refused to sign the papers I needed to allow me to join the military right out of high school. To do so meant that they did not have control over me anymore. They also did not want me to go to Desert Storm. I went to college for a year and then went to Basic Training in Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri. I returned for another year of college and flew to Maryland for Advanced Individualized Training (AIT) at Aberdeen Proving Grounds (APG). Between Basic and AIT, I drilled with a reserve unit thirty minutes from my house. I thought I had found the one place where I fit in and a career that I excelled at. The rules were simple, “Do what you are told” and, for females especially, “Don’t go anywhere alone.” Nothing was worse in the world than to get in trouble with the Drill Sergeants or the Commander. I took those lessons to heart.

One night around Fourth of July in 1993, I was planning on going into Aberdeen from where my barracks were in Edgewood Area of APG to see a movie with a friend from my platoon. Greg was very nice and I really liked him. Before we could leave, Christine, another platoon member stopped me and invited me to a party off post. I said no initially, but she didn’t want to be the only female there, and I was the only female left planning on leaving post. I hesitated. I didn’t really want to go to a party. My head was in Army rules and I knew that Chris should not go alone. Our platoon leader was going to be there as were several friends. Because we were all in training for maintenance jobs, there were very few women. I talked to Greg about going to the party instead and suggested that we could see a movie another time. He agreed.

Our group stopped at the Post Exchange (PX), similar to a convenience store, and those that were over 21 collected money and requests from those that were not and went in to get supplies. We took a taxi to a hotel off post and began drinking. Our off post party amounted to two rooms. One we called “The Party Room.” The other was dubbed “The Quiet Room.” After considerable drinking, Greg and I went to the “Quiet Room” to talk and share his Peach Schnapps. After that night, I never drank Peach Schnapps again or spoke to Greg, for that matter. It wasn’t anything he did; it was because of something I couldn’t stop from happening.

An hour or so after we got to The Quiet Room, I took a shower to wake up and redressed in my T-shirt and shorts and nothing under because those were the clothes I was planning on sleeping in anyway. There was a knock at the door and a guy from my platoon, Molina, and a guy from another platoon were there claiming to be looking for Chris. I vaguely remember asking if she would be okay in The Party Room with all the guys we were training with. Verch, our platoon leader, wasn’t drinking much and was a trustworthy guy. He said he’d keep an eye on her and we were all supposed to be friends anyway.

Molina and his booblehead friend said that Chris got in a fight with someone else and stormed off all pissed off. They were looking for her and asked if she was in our room. I said no. They asked if I would help look for her.

“She’s fine. She’s probably already back at the room.”

“No, she was pretty pissed off. Even if we find her, we don’t think she’ll come back with us.”

“Guys, I just want to sleep. Go find her and bring her here to sleep.”

“She isn’t going to come with us. She’s pretty pissed off and really drunk. You should come with us. You’re a female, she’ll listen to you.”

“Just go find her. She’ll go back with you. She’s probably already in the other room.”

“No, she’s not. Come on. Come with us. We don’t want to get in trouble if she tried to get back on post all pissed up.”

They said the magic words in my drunken stupor. “Don’t want to get in trouble.” I was at a party I didn’t want to go to in the first place, under 21, and drunk off my ass. I told Greg I’d be back after we found Chris and asked if he wanted to help. He said he was too drunk and took another swig off his Schnapps bottle.

I didn’t know either guy I was with very well. The nameless one was from another platoon; I don’t think I ever knew his name. Molina was from my platoon. I didn’t know him and really didn’t like him all that much. He was not friendly or attractive. He was quiet in a sneaky sort of way always watching with an expression on his face that was a cross between arrogance and mean. I didn’t want to go anywhere with him but I didn’t like getting in trouble more than I didn’t like him. The guys were talking to me about looking outside the hotel because there was a pool and maybe Chris went outside looking for the pool. I didn’t really care. I just wanted to find Chris and go back to the room. I vaguely remember suggesting that one of us check the other room just in case. Both guys vehemently assured me that Chris was not there and too pissed off to return of her own accord. We got to a side door on the hotel and the guys decided to split up. I would go with Molina and walk in one direction. The other guy would go in the

other direction and presumably, we would find the pool and meet up on the other side of the building, ensuring Chris would be found.

I was drunk. The plan sounded reasonable to me, so I started walking with Molina. He carried a huge, big gulp type cup filled with what I think was Whiskey and Mountain Dew. He kept passing it to me and telling me to drink. I was drunk, so I drank more. He was being very nice and grabbed my arm when I stumbled and talked nicely to me coaxing me in this direction or that. He pointed to some trees on the other side of the parking lot and expressed concern that Chris might have started walking in that direction as post was that direction. I figured we could walk as far as the trees and come back, so I agreed. Once we got to the trees, I was too dizzy to continue walking.

“I need to sit down a minute.”

“Okay. Here, take a drink.” And I took the cup again.

“What happened with Chris at the party?”

“One of the guys made some comments and she got pissed and walked out. She didn’t come back so we checked your room and she wasn’t there either. We got worried and decided to look for her.”

I couldn’t really think too clearly and everything Molina said sounded reasonable. He asked if I was ready to walk yet and I said I needed another minute. He started asking me questions about different guys in our platoon and if I liked them and why.

“So, do you like tall guys? You seem to like Greg.”

“I like taller guys mostly.” I answered his questions thinking nothing of why he was asking except to make conversation.

“What do you think of shorter guys like me?” A dull bell went off in my head from somewhere a great distance off. Looking back, the anxiety I was starting to feel through the alcohol haze was a warning that something was not right. I was too drunk to fully grasp it and it was easy to blow it off. At the time, all I could think was “Don’t say anything to offend him. Be nice.”

“I don’t really know you, but you seem like a nice guy.”

“Is Greg the type of guy you like?”

“Yeah, I really like Greg.”

“Do you think you could like a guy like me?”

“I think we need to go back and find Chris.”

Molina took my hand. I thought it was to help me up. He stuck my hand down his pants.

“Is this enough for you?” The expression on his face was dead serious. The warning was louder now but I couldn’t put my thoughts together very well. I pulled my hand back.

“It’s fine, we really need to go.” I started to try and get to my feet. In my head I thought that if I said I didn’t like him or didn’t find him attractive, he would get mad and do something. I couldn’t think beyond “something” to have any ideas of what he could do. He laughed it off like it was a joke and reassured me that he didn’t want to make me do anything I didn’t want to do. He passed me the cup, still two-thirds full. I drank to keep him happy. I said we needed to go find Chris and I got up and started walking toward the hotel doors.

We got as far as the steps to the door with Molina shoving the cup at me the whole way saying, “Drink.” And I did, hoping it would keep him happy. When we got to the steps, he said that he thought the pool was around back and that we could get into

the hotel that way but should at least check to make sure Chris wasn't by the pool drunk where she could get caught and we'd all get in trouble. There was that word again. The last thing I wanted to do was get in trouble over a stupid party. I told him we could take a quick look and then I wanted to go back to the room. He handed me the cup again and said, "Here, take a drink."

We walked along the wall of the hotel. Straight ahead were some woods that were not very well lit. Around the corner was, supposedly, the pool, according to Molina. At some point, we should have run into the other guy that was supposed to be helping to find Chris. *Molina isn't going to do anything if the other guy could catch him.* My anxiety level was high, bordering on paranoia and fear. I could feel my pulse pounding in my head and I felt like running back into the hotel but knew I was too drunk for that. The best course of action was to continue following Molina, not to piss him off or say anything to give him ideas, and find Chris so we all wouldn't get in trouble.

We made it to the corner of the building and I started to turn to walk along the back assuming we would find the pool at some point very soon. Molina took my hand and started pulling me toward the woods. It was thick with bushes along the grass line and looked dark and dense with saplings and a few larger trees. Little light penetrated. I was panicked. I couldn't get my hand away from Molina and tried to talk him into looking for the pool. That was what he wanted. I tried to talk him into walking in the other direction towards the hotel door. I didn't want to check the woods. I didn't want to go into the woods. I didn't want to go anywhere with this guy. I didn't want him to hurt me. I didn't want to get in trouble. In my mind, in the Army, I would be the one in trouble.

I told him I thought I was going to be sick. I had a funny taste in my mouth like metal or blood. As I write this, I can still taste it in my saliva after fifteen years of brushing and rinsing and spitting it out. He handed me the cup now half full. I didn't want to drink and said "no." He still had my hand and pulled me into a small clearing between some bushes where the light in the parking lot could not quite reach. He went in first so I thought I was still okay. He couldn't shove me to the ground and do anything if I am standing at the only way out. I pulled against his grip, but he wouldn't let go. He kept talking to me, reassuring me that he wouldn't hurt me that everything was going to be okay. I said, "No." I tried to talk him out of whatever he had on his mind and I was trying desperately to find whatever words I could to get him to go back to the hotel. He jerked on my shorts. The button had not been buttoned from when I took the shower and the loose zipper dropped and my denim shorts followed. He grabbed my hands and sat back on the ground pulling me on top of him. I couldn't roll to the left or right because of the sharp branches and bushes that dug into my knees. I tried to straddle him so I could push backwards and roll away. I kept saying "No" and he continued to try to comfort me that he wouldn't hurt me.

I don't remember his words anymore but I remember the tone. The calm, gentle, "It'll be okay" tone mixed with insistence and "we don't want to get caught," as if we were lovers and I wanted to be there as much as he did. My knees were on either side of him and I leaned back to get some leverage to get on my feet. He grabbed my arm with one hand and tried shoving himself inside me with the other hand. I said "No" again. He kept pushing himself inside me and I tried to pull away and I tried to lean to the side but the bushes bit into my knees. He kept shoving and I couldn't make him stop. He wasn't

all the way hard and was getting frustrated. I thought if I made a joke about it, he would give up. He didn't. He tried to get all the way inside me and I did the last thing I could think to do to get him to let me go, I pretended to pass out.

I let my body go limp and didn't respond. He shook me and then started to push me off of him. I acted like I was waking up when I felt him trying to get out from under me. I got to my feet. He pulled up his shorts. Mine were wrapped around one ankle and I put my other foot in them and pulled them up. He was talking again with that reassuring tone that was making me nauseous. I was trying to think what just happened. What would people say? I didn't even like the guy. I walked with my arms crossed tightly across my chest. Halfway back to the building I asked him not to tell anyone, as if we had mutually decided to have a little tryst in the shrubbery. I felt humiliated and sick to my stomach. I had to pretend to be normal. No one could know. Especially no one back home and definitely not the Army.

Molina walked me back to The Quiet Room and disappeared. I wanted to crawl into bed and go to sleep. I was still drunk and still trying to choke back what happened in the woods. A little while later, another group of people from base showed up to join the party. One guy in particular had heard I was there with Greg. John and I had gotten along, flirted, and hung out together. He was possessive and didn't like Greg much. The feeling was mutual, if I remember right. I was already anxious, drunk, and running on adrenaline. I talked to John in the hall and swore nothing was going on with Greg hoping John would go to the party room and stay there.

He came to The Quiet Room instead. I thought I was keeping the peace by not sharing one of two beds with Greg. I wanted to be with Greg. He was sweet and nice,

attractive, and most of all harmless in my mind. I didn't want a fight between John and Greg. A fight meant drawing attention to our room and us and the risk of getting arrested. If I stayed close to John, there would be no fight and I could deal with the situation in the morning when I was sober. I opted to avoid conflict and stayed on the floor with John.

During the night John wanted to have sex. Saying "No" didn't work with Molina, so I kept my mouth shut and did what he wanted. I was an object like a book or brick with no feelings or thoughts. I was something to be possessed, used, and discarded. If I protested or fought, I risked pissing John off. I wanted to be asleep next to Greg who I believed liked me and would never hurt me. I didn't deserve good men like Greg anymore. Anyone who would keep me safe and protect me would not want me anymore.

The next morning, Chris was in the other bed with Molina. She was sleeping on her stomach in her bra and shorts. The back strap had been undone. She accused Molina of trying something while she was asleep. I thought I might have an ally in Chris.

It turned out that Chris had been in The Party Room the entire night until late when she came to The Quiet Room to sleep. Greg didn't believe what I said happened with Molina. He knew what happened with John and me and he just wanted to get as far away from me as he could. He never spoke to me again. I was right about being rejected by good guys.

The unanimous decision was for everyone to keep their mouths shut so no one would get in trouble. Molina was supposed to stay away from me and Chris. Not much consolation for me. No one knew what to say or how to act with this new information. I wanted to forget the whole night.

Turning sexual was a way for me to survive and be anonymous to most, those guys didn't care who I was, but still find a way to get someone to give me attention/affection even if it wasn't real. I could be close to another human being while still feeling very alone. Being close to someone even for a little while though for all the wrong reasons made me feel like I was still normal though I really didn't think I was. If I could immerse myself in someone or something, I could forget. If I could get through the rest of AIT, I'd never have to see any of these people again.

Those that did know what happened stopped talking to me within days. I went back to class and sat across the room from Molina, who laughed and joked with his friends like nothing happened. Fewer people talked to me and when they did I snapped back. I fell further and further into a dark hole in my mind. I could pretend anything outside of class. I tried to be tough, mouthy, and aggressive so no one would fuck with me. I would be forceful and assertive even if I didn't feel either. In class I was totally different. I had nothing to think about, no act to put on. Just listening to lectures of motor pool safety and reading wiring diagrams. And I thought. I thought about every second of that one night. I thought about what could happen if anyone found out. More than thinking, I was so totally consumed with anger and disgust. He was right there, not more than ten feet from me and I could do nothing. I didn't want to go near him. I wanted him to disappear. I wanted to disappear. I wanted to be invisible and in class I was...at first.

Time weighed heavily. There were weeks left before his light-wheeled class split from my Fuel and Electrical class for MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) specific training. We were still in the basic classroom curriculum everyone had to take. I felt angry sometimes and sad much of the time. Most of all I felt numb. I discovered that if I

cut myself, I hardly felt it and mostly didn't feel anything. I had bought a camouflage watch with a compass that I wore with my uniform. It was a buckle style and the pin that fit through the holes in the band was quite sharp. One day in class, I was absent minded playing with my watch and started scratching my hand. I didn't feel a thing as the pin scratched away layers of flesh. It didn't bleed much, especially if I scraped the skin wider instead of deeper. When the first scratch on the back of my hand at the webbing of the thumb and first finger started bleeding, I moved on to another spot below the knuckle on my thumb. I was enthralled by cutting into my flesh without feeling more than a light sting.

When I looked across the room or the memory of that night came into my mind, I cut a new spot moving from my hand to my wrist. I cut several one inch slashes on the inside of my wrist. When one started to bleed more than the others, I pressed it to my uniform and started on my forearm. *This has got to hurt. This is sensitive skin*, I thought. I scraped two longer gashes into the inside of my forearm. It burned a little but for the most part was painless. I started to worry that I might cut too deep. *Who cares. No one sees me anyway*. When I bled I grew concerned someone might notice and I would get in trouble. I kept cutting anyway.

The person next to me was a Sergeant there to train for a new MOS. When I extended my arm to cut the inside, he noticed the cuts on my hand and wrists. He turned my arm and saw the other cuts. I smiled and said, "Doesn't hurt." At break, he reported me for cutting myself. I was called to the office of the training school. I had a choice, either tell them why I was cutting myself in class or get charged with destruction of government property. Ironic. I told about the rape and named the rapist. I didn't want to

get in trouble and wanted him to pay for what he did to me. I don't remember what happened the rest of that day. I do know that Molina was arrested in class and carted off in handcuffs in front of everyone. And then my life went to a deeper level of Hell, fast.

I had to tell the story to military police. When it was determined that the incident happened off post, I had to talk to civilian detectives. My chain of command decided to move me to another platoon so the rapist would not be removed from his support system and because they said it was easier to move a female. I was referred to alcohol assessment because drinking was involved. My rapist's name was on the attendance list, but he didn't show. I was sent to a military psychologist who wrote on the report that I had anger issues and should be in a rape victim support group and receive treatment for the trauma. I hand carried that report back to my company and never saw it again. The only support group I was sent to was a general support group and everyone there attacked me and said that I was lying. They defended him because he threatened to kill himself. I wished he had. They felt sorry for him and I was the evil one bucking the system we lived under.

My female drill sergeant called me into her office with several other people to include some who were at the party and some who were not. She wanted to hear what happened and why the incident wasn't reported. She told me, looking straight into my face, that because I had been drinking, I put myself in that position and asked for what I got. I deserved it. I was to stay away from Molina because he threatened to kill himself. As if anyone should feel sorry for an evil person using death as an escape when so many good people are taken from this world. I never went near the prick and someone should

have given him a loaded gun and been done with it. I was the one with no support system. I was the one being humiliated...again...in front of others.

The guy I gave the hand job to at the movie asked me to dinner. When I made the mistake of trying to be normal and going back to him to ask when he had in mind, I was called in the DI's office again. I was to leave him alone because he felt uncomfortable with me stalking him. She proceeded to tell me that I didn't act like a rape victim. She had a friend who was beaten and raped and she hid from the world, especially men. I told her that I had a boyfriend that had slapped me around and I shied away from men for a while. I don't know if I was trying to convince her that I was just acting different because I had already been afraid of men. Perhaps I was trying to show some kind of vulnerability to gain her sympathy. More likely I was trying to show her I was tough enough to "adapt and overcome" as the Army drilled into us. That didn't change that I was raped. She had no sympathy for me and wanted me to stay away from everyone. I was beyond angry. I was so pissed off, I was numb. Since I could not feel anything, I focused on not getting in trouble and losing my career. My tone with people was laced with rage. When I look back, I fall into that rage all over again and know I speak of the events with the same anger I took out on my arm. That rage comes back and I find myself still scratching at my arm. Now it isn't to explore why I feel nothing. I scratch at my arm because the only things I feel are rage, sadness, and numb. Cutting into my flesh over and over with a pin causes pain and at least that is something new to feel and stops the rage for a while like a reset button. It is not a desirable coping mechanism and is something I am working on in therapy as I deal with PTSD.

My class was moved to another company, further separating me from the rapist. I thought I had a chance to start over. My new first sergeant immediately made it known that he had heard from my previous command about what happened and none of that shit was going to happen in his company. From the lecture he gave me, he was told and had decided that I was full of shit and a trouble-maker and liar. He immediately jumped on everything I did and I avoided him as much as I could. I avoided many activities that meant I might see Molina or be put in a similar situation. I went on sick call so much that I almost got held back to the next cycle that was three weeks behind mine. I tried not to do or say anything that made me stand out from anyone else. I just wanted to blend into the background and be lost.

At the same time that I wanted to go unnoticed, I also wanted companionship. In the new company, I got along with my roommate. She already had made a few friends and tried to include me but it wasn't all that I was looking for. I did want friends and appreciated her being there and not judging me. I was sure no man would look at me or want me considering what happened. My only course of action, in my mind, to get the fairy tale happy ending of marriage and family that I had wanted since I was a child, was to take the dredges and rejects of male society that looked my way and pretend to like their ministrations. I pretended to want what they did just to not be alone for a few moments. I wanted someone to put their arms around me and tell me that everything I feared would not happen and the fears themselves would go away. I wanted someone to put their arms around me and tell me I was safe. I wanted too much, so much more than I felt I should expect or deserve. I even longed for the type of Neanderthal guys I knew in high school that were all about possessions and arm candy.

This state of mind is how I ended up with my first husband, Steven. I think he was as desperate as I was to be loved. He said he didn't care what happened. Looking back, I think he just didn't want to be alone. He had a bad childhood and dysfunctional family by his telling. I had nothing as far as I was concerned. My parents didn't want me to join the Army and this was their big "I told you so" moment. If I had only listened and not joined that damned Army, everything would have been fine. I wanted to be strong and brave and to serve my country. My mother never said those exact words, but I still can easily hear them in her voice in my head.

Now, fifteen years later, Aberdeen has come back to haunt me and I can't forget and I can't escape it. The way my therapist explained it to me, I had buried Aberdeen under a mountain of problems. Some of the problems were mine. More often I took on someone else's problems to keep myself busy and my mind occupied. When I remarried, I married someone I loved, not just friends. Kent was financially stable, lessening another worry. My kids were getting older and needed me far less. I had overwhelmed myself with work and volunteering but cut back because of the stress on myself and our family. With more time to myself and less of other people's garbage on my mind, I had uncovered the trauma I had never dealt with. I was now in a safe environment where I could deal with these issues and my mind decided I had to whether I wanted to or not. Add to that an overwhelming need to be validated in my present life that I was not getting from my husband and parents. This need to be validated was also present in Aberdeen after the rape. I needed someone to love me unconditionally, who believed me, who wanted to try and understand me. I didn't have it then and do not feel like I have it now.

Maybe I do and cannot see it because of PTSD. My therapist says I need to validate myself both, the me in Aberdeen and the me today. I don't know how to do that.

There had been signs something was amiss for a few years. I had a really great job as a Training Specialist for the same military trucks I drove and repaired in the Army. That job also meant I was around military men. Subconsciously, I resumed the defense mechanisms I needed in Aberdeen. I was antisocial, critical, cynical, and obnoxious. That was fine in the Army. It is not acceptable to civilians and not acceptable towards customers. I was fired from my civilian job working with military personnel after nine months. I fell into depression and blamed it on losing my job. I went to therapy for depression. The rape came up, but I blew it off. That couldn't possibly have anything to do with losing my job and it had been more than ten years before.

Four years ago, I fought invisibility and won a temporary reprieve. I was so angry about a school district issue, I ran for school board. I lost, but had the courage to continue to fight for changes I thought were right for our educational system in our community. At the same time, I went back to school to get my Master's degree. My coursework has made it possible for me to learn how to express myself, at least in writing. So now I have courage and the ability to express myself and am in a safe environment. That was when the infrequent nightmares became nightly. That was when singing along to the radio in the car became dwelling on every minute detail of my experiences in Aberdeen. That was when I started taking closer looks at people, first the men that resembled the rapist and then at everyone paranoid that they knew I was anxious and damaged. That was when my world shattered like a mirror into thousands of shards each showing a small piece of who I was and none of them fitting back together.

I did two things to fight this. First I fell back to trying to blend in to the shadows. Not easy when running for public office. I had to find a new invisible. I had to split myself into the public me that was the strong advocate for schools and education and could talk about anything to anyone, and into the private me that hid tears and anxiety and paranoia that people knew about the nightmares and insomnia and knew about my hyper vigilance and new about the rape and that I felt dirty and damaged. And then I tried to bury that second self and make the images in my head go away. It has been fifteen years. I should have forgotten. I should be fine and normal, healed and whole. And I couldn't feel farther from all of that.

In September of 2008, I attended a weekend conference for women veterans. I sat in on a session about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of Military Sexual Trauma. I spoke to the lecturer who is a woman in the military whose job it is to educate the military on sexual assault in its ranks. She encouraged me to file a VA claim to get help and called a couple of times after the conference to make sure I contacted a therapist. Finally I did overcome my fear that talking about what happened would make it real and I wouldn't be able to bury it and hide it anymore. I can't bury this anymore because it is digging its own way out. I can't hide it anymore because it isn't my shame to hide. I was raped. It happened. I couldn't stop it. I have to let myself believe that I am not weak. I did not ask to be raped. I did not deserve to be raped. I am not a whore. I am not worthless. I am not damaged. But right at this moment I don't really believe it yet.

When I am in that dark place inside my head, I call a friend of mine who has PTSD. Gene knows the place where I go because he has one too but for combat-related PTSD. We try to bring each other back from our personal Hells when we can. He, along

with another friend with PTSD, are my lifelines. Gene understands where I go and doesn't judge me. He is the support system I never had back in Aberdeen and do not have now. While my husband Kent wants to help, he can't fix me and doesn't understand what is happening. He hasn't been where I've been and gets frustrated. I can't talk to Kent about therapy, what I feel or even the rape because it frustrates him and adds stress to our already stressed life. Talking to Gene is like being in a support group without the humiliation of being in a support group. We were both Army and understand why we don't understand civilians and why they don't understand us. When I cannot talk to Gene, for whatever reason, I try to go to another place in my head where I am safe and the demons cannot cross into. Sometimes I can get there, sometimes not, but when I am there, I find some peace.

THE FARM

As part of my second therapy appointment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, I had to come up with a “Happy Place.” Before you get all giggly, let me explain that it has a solid basis in therapy. It is a safe place from memories and feelings that are often overwhelming. It can be real or imagined; though it should be somewhere the person has actually been to make it more real. Everyone should have a place they can go in their mind to center themselves when life gets nuts.

My “Happy Place” is a real place where I spent many summers. Most, if not all, people from Wisconsin know where Sturgeon Bay is in Door County. It is the home of the best cherries in the country. While Friday night fish fry is pretty good and a mainstay in Wisconsin, the Door County Fish Boil is heaven on a gas ignited bonfire.

The Fish Fry amounts to going to your favorite bar or restaurant and ordering off the menu a basket of deep-fried fish and French fries with coleslaw on the side. In Sheboygan, where I grew up, Perch is the fish of choice with Schwartz’s being the *crème de la crème* of breaded, greasy, succulence. In Oshkosh, where I live now, Walleye and Blue Gill are the delicacies of choice to share a paper-lined plastic basket with saturated fat potatoes. Other parts of Wisconsin boast about their fried Pike and Muskie. Occasionally you can find bass. Most establishments also have cod and whitefish as the cheap alternative.

Whatever the choice, the waitress will bring a tray piled with baskets containing the steaming fillets and crisp fries. The paper liner will quickly saturate with the oil the fish made its last swim in. Small dishes of potato salad, American or German,

accompany small plastic cups of coleslaw, creamy or vinegar, and a lemon wedge. Ketchup and tartar sauce grace every table.

The fish boil is not a meal, it is an experience. I went to one in Fish Creek, go figure, with my brother and parents on a trip through Door County when I was in high school. Outside the restaurant was a huge pile of wood and an enormous silver kettle. In the kettle were water, potatoes, whitefish, onions, corn cobs, lemons, and a fabric sack of the house seasoning the size of a small coffee can. To get this delicacy, you must stand in line and pay the price. Then everyone gathers around the pot and pyre. When the time is just right, a pyro-cook pours accelerant on the fire causing it to flame up taller than the restaurant building. The kettle bubbles furiously and boils over extinguishing the fire in an enormous cloud of steam. The crowd comes alive with cheers and stampedes the dining facility for each person's share from the scorched kettle.

The taste is indescribable. I remember I was not a big fan of fish in general. If it wasn't deep fried and shaped like an amputated finger bleeding with ketchup, it did not pass my lips. But the fish boil...succulent, firm, flaky goodness that melted in my mouth with a tang of salt and spices. Ketchup would have been a sacrilege. I have never tasted anything even close. I'm salivating as I write this thinking about that one day more than a decade ago and wishing for a trip to Door County.

I'm one of those people who travel by landmarks. My dad makes fun of people like me. If that car dealership ever closes, I'll be in Ellison Bay before I realize I forgot to turn. The same holds true with my "Happy Place." If the farmer who painted his barn and outbuildings red and hung the letters "EIEIO" ever sells his farm or tears down that building, I will surely drive right past my "Happy Place."

Over the years I met people from Sturgeon Bay of all ages.

“My grandfather has a farm up there,” I’d tell them.

“Oh, yeah? Whereabouts?”

“Next to EIEIO out on C.”

“Hey, I know where that is.”

Seems everyone does.

Just west of EIEIO beyond a small stand of pines and an old barbed wire topped fence is my “Happy Place.” It isn’t much to most people. It was even less when I was a kid. At the same time, it was so much more than anywhere else in my life. The Farm, as my whole family called it, is 40 acres of mostly open space. The barn was burned by vandals decades ago. The house in which my great-great grandfather lived, and maybe built, was razed when I was very young as it had been all but destroyed by kids and thieves who took advantage of the property being in probate over back taxes and fighting relatives.

I remember sitting on the square of bare ground with my grandmother watching from the dingy pink and white single-wide trailer to make sure I didn’t go too close to the two-lane highway. It was many years before the ground covered over with grass and the sunken area leveled out. When it was bare dirt, I sometimes found things creeping out of the ground. The greatest treasure I found was a tin. It was just a small container of pomade. It was black and silver and rusted. My grandmother thought it was filthy garbage. I thought it was an ancient treasure that had been touched by a great-grandfather I never knew. One who didn’t pay taxes on property he owned because you don’t pay the government for what is already yours. That attitude prevented the farm

from being inherited by my grandfather, the oldest son. Instead, the farm was bought by my great-uncle John who paid the back taxes. My grandfather had five children and a sick wife and could not afford the taxes. John was single his whole life, so got the land. They worked it together.

I have never walked the entire piece of property. There are woods lining the south and west borders. The forty acres is pretty much a square of earth in my mind. The highway passes by the north edge and EIEIO is to the east. Somewhere in the woods is supposed to be a swamp. I imagined it to be a place where one could easily hide the body of a cheating ex-boyfriend and no one would be the wiser. As I grew up and got older, I would often offer that service to friends who recently got dumped or were merely angry with their significant others. Of course I meant the offer facetiously, but you never know.

The only structures on the property are a concrete silo and a three-bedroom ranch Uncle John had built to replace the old single-wide trailer. The house is on a hill overlooking the garden I grew up “working” in. There’s a split fence that borders the garden, north of the silo where I could sit away from the view of the house and the road and pretend I was the only person on the entire forty acres.

My spot was behind the silo near the grayed fence. There was a patch of grassy ground that grew little white flowers shaped like bells. When I was little, around 9, 10, 11, maybe even older. I thought those flowers grew right out of the ground on little stems that were too short to make a bouquet. As an adult, I found that those flowers were actually on vines and they weren’t flowers by gardening standards, they were weeds. I wouldn’t have cared then and I don’t now. Should those flowers find their way into my

garden, they are welcome to stay and visit. I still have one of the blossoms. I pressed it in my children's bible from my First Communion decades ago and that is where it resided until I gave the bible to my daughter in 2007 for her First Communion. Now the flower is tucked under a porcelain bloom on a mirrored tray where I keep little bottles of perfume on my dresser.

I wrote a poem about the farm and the flowers for a graduate poetry class one summer. When writing the poem I found myself crying. Reading it sometimes brings back the tears. My professor and classmates thought it was good. I'm on the fence, no pun intended. In an effort to build confidence, I submitted it to a small poetry journal called *Free Verse*. I mentioned this earlier. Now the poem sits in the memory banks of my computer and my first place award letter on a shelf in my basement.

The Home That I Love

To my Prussian gross-gross-Grossvater it was,

Das Haus dieser Ich Liebe.

An old farmhouse, clapboard gray with empty eyes,
now vandalized,

eviscerated by strange hands.

Pieces razed into a pit. Nothing salvageable.

Replaced by a dusty pink and white trailer

with a rusty gopher-hiding skirt

that looked like a hillbilly's twin-toothed smile.

Three bedrooms; really two and a closet with bunk beds.

Uncle John's room was off limits and smelled of Old Spice and Mitchem.

My grandparents' room was small, cramped,

and smelled of pungent Vicks Vapor Rub and Pomade

till Grandpa's bacon, sunny-side up eggs
and sourdough toast filled the air.

Out back, corn tassels waved over the heads of buffalo grass.
Watermelon, zucchini, and pumpkin vines tendriled around potatoes, beans, and carrots.
Tomatoes grew tall like soldiers loaded with grenades.
One year, when asparagus and rhubarb overran the beets and radishes,
rotting tubers and roots left a wretched stench.

Behind the silo, along the split log fence,
grew little white bells on vines choking the stubble grandpa mowed with a tractor.
I couldn't remember their name. I don't want to now.
I picked them and pressed them into my Communion Bible.
A church should have bells, even for pretend.
The bells still ring in late summer when the grass is scorched
and the corn stands nearly naked.
If you are really quiet, you can hear the bells ring
for the overdressed lace of Queen Anne.

The fields were rented out to the EIEIO neighbor.
Who would paint that on a barn? He would, I guess
so that everyone from here knew where they were.
"Don't go too close to the road," Grandma said.
But I had no choice to sit on the grave
that entombed the gray, clapboard house.

I found a tin of Pomade once,
maybe Grossvater Otto's.
Maybe he touched it before I was born,
back when he raised cows,
back when forty acres was meant for more than subdividing

and selling to noisy, city tourists for vacation homes.

Grandma took it away: filthy germs.

“You don’t know where that came from,” she scolded.

But I do.

If I have identified the flower correctly, it is common field bindweed, or *Convolvulus arvensis*, also called wild morningglory. It grows all over the United States (except Alaska) and southern parts of Canada. In Wisconsin, it is also called creeping Jenny and is considered a noxious weed. Leave it to me to fall in love with a noxious weed. That kind of goes along with all the noxious boyfriends I would fall in love with as a teenager and young adult. I still consider it in my top five favorite flowers, though the old boyfriends will forever remain noxious and swamp fodder.

When I could get away from my grandmother long enough to explore, I would sit between the silo and the fence and play with the flowers. I could fit my fingers inside the bell-shaped blooms. I tried to pick mini-bouquets of the little flowers, or at least lap fulls. I especially liked to just feel the petals of the flowers between my fingers. The flowers felt like velvet if rubbed gently. If I pinched my fingers closed too hard, it would leave a yellowish fingerprint impression on the petals.

It’s hard to explain why that spot was so important to me. First and foremost, regardless of whose name was on the deed, this was Grandpa’s farm. I still worship him. He was larger than life even when I grew up and he seemed to shrink with old age, arthritis and later the cirrhosis that took him from me. Just thinking of him floods my mind with memories. Grandpa made everything okay. The best place in the world was Grandpa’s farm, second best was his house. That spot on Grandpa’s farm was next to the

garden, where Grandpa taught me about vegetables and weeds, except bindweed. My spot was exactly next to where grandpa grew potatoes, the single greatest food on the planet.

The silo blocked the world that wasn't always what I wanted it to be. Sometimes I wished I could cut windows into the concrete walls of the silo and evict the pigeons. I would build a staircase to the top and small rooms spiraling down and turn that silo into my tower. There I could hide from the world, look out onto the land I loved, maybe paint or write inspired by the farm. But the silo was just a silo. It was home to pigeons, and a skunk once before the entry to the silo was blocked and turned into a shed. It just stood there reminding everyone of what the land once was.

If I sat against the rough wall of the silo and there were no potato plants to block my view, I could see the back field that was rented out to a local farmer for hay or corn. To the southwest in my line of sight, there was a stand of willowy trees and bushes. I always wanted to walk out there but Grandma wouldn't have it. There were blue jays that lived in those bushes. I saw them once and fell in love with the blue feathers, my favorite color. I told Grandma about the jays once. She burst my bubble telling me that those beautiful birds, in her opinion, were mean and would chase animals and people and peck at them. Maybe that is what kept me from sneaking over to those trees.

Since I was a child, my greatest dream was to live on that farm all year round. I was one of more than a dozen grandchildren but the only one who spent so much time there. Now the memory of that place is what is helping me maintain my sanity while dealing with a trauma I have only recently been able to describe out loud and have yet to put into writing. That thought is terrifying and I travel frequently to the Farm and the

waves of buffalo grass and the carpet of creeping Jenny. Where the sun always shines with a few wispy clouds for company. The corn is tall and the jays sit squawklessly pretty on the branches of the willows and sumac. Where deer eat from the triplet apple trees far older than I am. And where I imagine my grandfather sometimes stands on the porch with his arms out to give me a hug and tell me it'll be alright and I can handle anything because I am his granddaughter.

The Farm is the one place I don't have to be seen. In real life, I pretend to retreat from the world to avoid conflict and to deal with stress amongst other things. On The Farm, none of that matters because I am the only one there. I retreat to The Farm to recharge when I am feeling more like a weakened victim and less like the strong and courageous survivor I want to be. It is the place I went to most when the grandmother who watched over me on The Farm got sick and died. It is where I want to be now because I don't feel strong like I used to. I go there now to remember times when I was all sass and vinegar, as Grandma used to say. I go there now because I am having a hard time understanding who I am now. I am having a hard time getting to where I want to be and who I want to be.

JUST THE WAY I AM

When I was just out of high school, I could wear about anything. Friday nights were spent poured into a tiny turquoise mini-dress on a dance floor shaking it to “Baby Got Back.” My mother complained that I didn’t eat enough and was too thin. She threatened to have me committed for anorexia and took me to the doctor. He diagnosed a high metabolism and prescribed high carb and high calorie foods before bed. What more could a girl ask for than Hagen Daz nightcaps all week with hours of Sir Mix-A-Lot and B-52s “Love Shack” on the weekend. At 105 pounds, I still thought I was a little fat.

Two years later and five-foot-three and 110 pounds of sheer sarcasm was the body Joe fell in love with. Even after my daughter was born and I gained some baby-weight, he said he loved my body. I, on the other hand, feared turning into my obesely rotund family. I trembled at the thought of daily insulin shots from diabetes, arthritis from overstressed joints, wheezing from lungs squashed by pounds of nightly ice cream and pasta. I rationalized that my high metabolism and chasing kids would help me burn off the extra weight. I was *only* 135 pounds. I scoffed at my habit of eating before bed. Before I had the chance to burn off the extra weight, I got pregnant again.

My second pregnancy was not as enjoyable as the first. I had a baby to take care of and I was sick all the time. Morning sickness extended to afternoon and evening sickness. Then there was the nighttime and oh-stupid-thirty in the morning sickness. Even pills to stop nausea didn’t. My weight grew and so did my clothes and blood pressure. Joe reassured me that he still found me attractive.

In my third trimester, I gained seven to twelve pounds per week even though I could hardly eat. My doctor grew concerned over my weight gain and recommended I

stop eating so much. Apparently a couple of soda crackers are far more fattening than anyone thinks. I wonder if the Surgeon General should demand a disclaimer on bags of oyster crackers.

WARNING:

The Surgeon General has determined that saltines and water consumed sporadically between bouts of power vomiting, can lead to monstrous weight gain in some pregnant women.

Needless to say, I stopped weighing myself when the scale hit 189. Food wasn't my problem, Preeclampsia and an idiot doctor was. Childbirth cured both.

Joe remained supportive. I discovered later it was more for his newly expanded wardrobe than love for me. As it turns out a woman who is five feet three inches and weighs over 180 pounds wears the same size in women's clothes as a man who is six foot two inches and weighs 190 pounds. What I thought was a phase from his single years turned out to be a lifestyle. The night I came home from work to find my children asleep and my now ex-husband in my favorite silver dress washing the dishes, I thanked God I never had a sister. I hated sharing my clothes. His tramping around the kitchen reminded me of a song from West Side Story. Picture a guy that is six-foot two, sporting a burgundy shag wig and Tammy Faye makeup admiring his reflection in a stainless steel mixing bowl singing "I feel pretty, oh so pretty. I feel pretty and witty and gay" emphasis on "gay." I on the other hand was filled with the En Vogue song "Never Gonna Get It." In the end, I took the kids, he took my fat clothes. I think the trade was fair.

Now, I accept that I have one of those bodies that fits absolutely nothing the way fashion designers intended. I rely on lined bras to hide overtly perky nipples that, after four suction-faced babies, no longer need weather changes to detect arctic blasts. I prefer

the shapely demi-cup, not because I lack. As a matter of fact, I am quite proud of the girls and tend to stand a little straighter when passed by Silicone Sally with her \$20,000 ta-tas. My twins are a gift from God that will stand the test of gravity without tuning into the true source of the word “knockers.” Of course the girls are not without their flaws. They are not identical twins. Neither is fond of jogging and I am not fond of black eyes. While full and sensuous, my breasts will never be displayed under a bikini canvas, more due to the nonidentical thing with a touch of gravity. Not to mention, the fashion industry seems to think there is a swimsuit fabric shortage and I have enough dental floss in the medicine cabinet.

South of my lovely Aphrodites is the bane of my silhouette. Though the ex appreciated what the muffin top could do for his wardrobe, I do not appreciate the belly pouch and equally fleshy hips. My ass isn't bad in the right pants but Jacque Penney and Target are not overflowing with “suck it in, tuck it back, slight lift, streamlined, faux height enhancing, miracle jeans.” To solve for this fashion industry oversight, I turn to the science of lycra. Lycra, also known as spandex, does wonderful things to the excesses of the female form. In addition to squeezing every last atom of oxygen from the lungs while squeezing each microbe of fluff and stuff into too small jeans, lycra creates a slightly more tolerable shape.

In the last five years, I have remarried to a man that does not need the comfort of my nightgowns to sleep at night. It isn't that I have anything against crossdressing. I'm simply old fashioned and think that when a man and woman marry, only one gets to wear the nightie. Kent agrees. He understands that I have my issues. We dated in high school, so he knew me when I was really thin. He has seen pictures of when I was really

fat. He never tells me I'm crazy for wanting to lose more weight. Nor does he laugh when I buy an exercise video that never gets played. He never asks me if I should be eating ice cream before bed and, unlike my mother who is still on the anorexia kick, he never tells me I need to eat more or that I shouldn't lose too much weight.

Kent has expressed his fondness for my form so much that I can't help but feel a little more secure. I still have days when I think I am fat like I was. Ironically, when I was fat, in my head, I was still the thin of my high school years. Now I have days where I'm tempted to cover up with the loosest outfits I own because in my head I am still 189 pounds. When in that mood, I rely on Faith Hill and Trace Adkins to pull me through instead of Ben and Jerry.

My cell phone has Faith Hill's "My Baby Loves Me" as a ring tone. The song is about a woman whose husband loves her and thinks she is beautiful just the way she is. Most days I feel like the wife in the Trace Adkins video. She has kids, a job, and housework. She spends her time worried about her body and if she is still attractive to her husband. Her husband has fantasies about her and can't wait to be with her in the rolling around, hot and sweaty sense. He sees her as the most desirable woman on earth *because* of the kids and years that have passed that made her "One Hot Momma." That's me. Five foot three, one hundred and *muffle muffle* pounds of one hot momma.

Going back to the box of pictures, there is one of me and my months old daughter, Katie. She is standing in her Easter dress and we are getting ready to go to my parent's house for dinner. Katie looks adorable in her white lace dress. There is a pink bow barrette in her wispy hair. She clings to the bed because she had only begun learning to walk. I sat behind her on the edge of my bed sunk quite low to the floor. I was four

months pregnant and looked about thirteen months along. I felt miserable and that seems to reflect too well in this picture. I am wearing a tan maternity suit that made me look like an overly stuffed potato. Sometimes when I look in the mirror or think about how I would look in a certain outfit while shopping, that is the image I see instead of my true form.

The family picture on my wall is two years old. The woman I see in that picture is one I'd like to be some day. She looks confident and healthy with salon hair and lipstick smile. PTSD was something she had heard about on the news and not something she acknowledged in her life. That portrait was taken when she was the feisty woman writing about accepting her boobs and kicking the cross dresser to the curb. She wanted to be noticed for her accomplishments and was willing to fight back.

ANOTHER FAMILY PICTURE

A New Family:

The pictures now include me. There are friends and family to take them. My children have two dads, my husband Kent, Mr. Stage Crew, and my ex. One doesn't talk much every other weekend. The other makes me cry (in a good way), shiver (in a really good way), and feel safe. I laugh now, did I mention that? I flinch less when someone raises an arm to scratch their head. I speak up with my blunt opinions, political views, bad jokes, and creative insults. I stand straighter. I've found my figure and have embraced it. I've found my soul and it sings. I've found my courage and it is ferocious. I've found humor in the chipped paint on my garage door, beauty in planting a tree in my yard, tripping over my dog in my house, and looking at our family picture in our home.

We sit outside my sister-in-law's barn in three rows. The top row is the head of our family. Kent is smiling and leaning in towards the rest of us in his blue polo shirt. Katie, the oldest and recently adopted by Kent, is in the middle row looking far older than a twelve-year-old should in a blue and white strappy blouse. Maybe it is just me that thinks that because she is my first and soon will be dating, going off to college, and leaving us for her own life. Her wavy, light brown hair took her forever to get just right and she is trying on a new smile today to look sophisticated.

The bottom row of our family pyramid consists of the three youngest children. Nikki is on the left and below Katie. Nikki's smile is the first real smile I have ever seen on her face. Asperger's makes it difficult for her to pose for pictures. When a photographer says smile, we think "happy" and our faces do what they are supposed to when we are happy. When a photographer tells Nikki to smile, she thinks, "What does

happy look like in pictures?” and puts on a smile mask. Her lips turn up and she shows as many teeth as she can in as big a grimace as she can muster. Her eyes are dead with thinking about making a smile picture. This year Nikki smiles like the rest of us. It is relaxed and real. I don’t know where it comes from but I hope it stays for a while.

Jonny is in the middle of the row, the baby. He has his new big kid haircut having grown out of the bowl cut of his younger years. Tracy, the photographer sister-in-law loves Jonny’s one missing front tooth. Tracy thinks it is cute and needs to be in the picture so Jonny smiles big. His chin is slightly down and his cheeks almost dimple. He has gorgeous green eyes like I had hoped. He looks older than his six years in his jeans and black polo shirt. He certainly is smarter. Less than a year from when that picture was taken, Jonny would be in first grade doing second grade work and getting ready for third grade math. He often tutors his older brother in reading.

The final corner of our family picture is Kyle. He is the cutest kid. He has had girlfriends since preschool. That isn’t even counting the adult ladies who fawn over him. Always polite and wanting to help, he easily becomes his teachers’ favorite assistant. His eyes were green and have changed in the last few years to brown with a little green around the irises. His smile is one of those described in cheesy novels that “lights up a room.” His head is slightly cocked to the right. He strongly resembles my side of the family. In his blue polo shirt, he also resembles his second dad, Kent.

I am above Kyle and next to Katie. I wear a red top that makes me look hot for a mom of four. My back is straight to hide the baby belly that remains and probably always will. I’m trying to smile naturally and keep my eyes open in the bright sun. The smile comes out interesting. Some days I look at the picture and perceive mild

constipation. Other times I see worldly intelligence. Often people assume we are one family and comment on how much one or the other child looks like Kent. The picture is complete.

This year we are planning another family picture. It is meant to be a simple update on the old one as the kids have gotten older and bigger since the last portrait. I don't know who I will see sitting in my spot when the picture is hung on the wall. I'm not entirely sure who I am right now. I imagine I will see six happy and smiling faces looking at the camera. We will look like a family, but I wonder. I wonder if the rift between Nikki and Kent will ever get better or if she will really come to hate him instead of throwing that word at him to push his buttons. I wonder if Katie will be strong enough to stand up to the pressures of high school in September. I wonder if Kyle will get control of his anger and stop hitting, pushing, and crying when he has reach his tipping point. I wonder if Jonny will be okay going from a virtual charter school at home where he did three grades in two years to public school where he will likely be the youngest in his class. I wonder if Kent and I are going to make it to our sixth anniversary or if PTSD will prevail in putting a permanent wall between us. And then I remind myself that we will get through this.

While I want to be a strong and courageous woman about everything I have experienced in my life, my brain rebels and throws paranoia and panic attacks at me when I'm not prepared for them. I recall memories that make me anxious and physically ill when I least expect them. I fly into rages I take out on myself. I have moments when I am in the "Normal Zone" when I can get everything done and everyone around me has no idea the battles going on in my head and body. I also have minutes, hours, and days

where I am in the “Sad Place” or “Crazy Zone” when my body is racked with jittery anxiety and adrenaline fed paranoia and my mind is in a dark cavern of misery, guilt, blame, and self-deprecation. All are part of PTSD and all are part of trying to survive.

For me survival is a funny thing. To do so meant hiding within myself and becoming the invisible child and woman. Disappearing in plain sight was an effective defense mechanism during those traumatic events in my life. In my head being seen meant acknowledging I had problems. Since my grandmother died, I feel I am back to hiding in plain sight. Mentally I feel like Sally Fields in *Sybil*. Her mind developed a different personality for each trauma. Each personality dealt with stressors in very specific ways. In my case, each traumatic event created a different voice to tell about it. One is childlike, one mature and sophisticated. One is angry and bitter, while another is happy in the moment. I have a biting sarcastic voice sometimes tempered by a more rational tone that uses facts instead of jibes to get a point across. I see the different voices more on paper where they cannot hide. I am learning to accept each and integrate them into my one self. Some go more easily than others; that’s another reason why I’m in therapy.

My goals for therapy are to reduce my physical responses to memories of the rape. I cannot live wired on paranoia and anxiety. I want to sleep more than two hours at a time and more than four in a night. I want to allow another human to touch me without questioning motive or wanting to crawl out of my skin. I want to trust and believe the people around me who say they care and love me. I want to feel more than rage and sadness in alternating strokes interrupted by numbed emotions when something good happens. I want to find my niche and be happy. To begin toward my journey of getting

better, as my grandmother told me to do, I have to accept that surviving does not mean everything bad goes away. Because I remember death, rape, and abuse does not make me a victim. I continue to fight back and win little battles in the war within myself. That is surviving, and to survive is to exist as a solid figure emerging from the shadows.

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