My Skin Does Not Fit: A Memoir Of Growth, Acceptance and Validation

by

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ABSTRACT

MY SKIN DOES NOT FIT: A MEMOIR OF GROWTH, ACCEPTANCE AND VALIDATION

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My Skin Does Not Fit: A Memoir Of Growth, Acceptance and Validation reads like an eleven chapter therapy session, rooted in self-reflection and personal development. The writing unites academic and anecdotal writing to confront long ignored traumatic memories to redefine narratives that governed my experience of the world. Every section offers raw realizations and reflections of womanhood, mental health and identity. The stories range from early childhood through to adulthood, and shift between chronological storytelling and chapters anchored in a specific theme. Narratology and Trauma Theory provided the framework to negotiate structure and narrative for the most effective path through the stories. My Skin Does Not Fit: A Memoir Of Growth, Acceptance and Validation is a meditation on the interconnected themes of gender, womanhood, class, intergenerational trauma and identity. The memoir describes different events in my life that shaped my mentality and sense of self.
DEDICATION

To the compassion I showed myself through this process. May I always hold it close.
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I must thank my partner Peter, without whom none of this would have been possible. He inspires me, believes in me and challenges me. He encouraged me to share parts of our story. He remained on standby with hugs, pints of peanut-butter-chocolate Häagen Dazs and inappropriate jokes. He curated the perfect playlists for long drives to help me think. He listened as I read aloud and cheered me on. He never rolled his eyes when I stuck my arms above my head and shouted, “I think I wrote a good line!”

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To this project, my mother offered her time, patience and love. To my life, she contributed her weird sense of humour, appreciation for niche television shows and an uncontrollable creative drive.

Thanks dad, for being a part of my story.

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I listened to every episode of Armchair Expert with Dax Shepard while writing. He and Monica encouraged vulnerability. Author Nora McInerny said, “fuck resilience.” She took the pressure off returning to my original shape. Every episode of Terrible, Thanks For Asking stoked my empathy and helped me stop comparing. Anne Donahue liberated me with the reminder, Nobody Cares.
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Introduction

I grew up poor in an affluent area of Hamilton. My family moved a lot. A revolving door of father-figures and internalized misogyny poisoned any chance of a positive relationship to my femininity. I was a goof-ball tomboy, but the process of female socialization filed down my edges. I had no sense of worth and lost myself. I learned a million ways a woman can use her body and be shamed for it. I was raised by culture and experiences to distrust girls and women, especially myself.

Most of my life, I considered vulnerability a giant, red self-destruct button. I walked through the world with nerves exposed and every sense amplified. My emotions and sensitivity felt like my greatest liabilities. I yearned to make myself palatable. I used to schedule emotional breakdowns in my agenda. I checked the calendar for assignments due and other responsibilities. I found the most convenient day or window where I could allow myself to cry and mark the date. I used a scarlet felt-tip pen to set emotional deadlines. After that time, I expected myself to put the feelings in a box, make them disappear and move on. I didn’t know how to move forward. I hid my delicate, fleshy underbelly beneath misleading amour. I didn’t want to be a victim. I wanted to exist outside of that designation.

I worried if I acknowledged or named my trauma, it’d turn into another thing wrong with me. I imagined safety in tucking away my experiences, rather than face the risk the possibility to shame or failure. I also craved praise, recognition and approval. A lethal combination. Every time I lied and told someone I was fine, I channeled Atlas. I took on more weight. I held up the sky,
and crumbled under the weight of my world. For years, I grew weaker until I broke under the pressure.

This thesis explores my life’s big “before and after” moments. The defining experiences of my self-conception. Up to the point that I began to write this thesis, I had tried to downplay many of the most painful aspects of my life. I had skirted around awkward or shameful details, so not to provoke discomfort in others, or worse, draw attention to my differences. Now, as I began to examine my life and tried to write this thesis, I confronted the personal narratives that I had shoved for so long under the rug. I rediscovered all the anxieties that I had stowed away for so long. I internalized and tucked away every fear. I tended them until they knit together into their own kind of nervous system.

Still, I kept dismissing my work to professors and other graduate students. I downplayed the challenges and worth of my project, worried I’d sound obnoxious or be perceived as a narcissist for writing a memoir at twenty-five.

“It’s just creative non-fiction. I am using close reading techniques to inform writing. I know it’s not a real thesis.” I threw out self-deprecating responses as a defence. I feared people asking the dreaded question, “so, what’s it about?” The little voice in my head kept mouthing off, it’s about nothing. Who gave me permission to write a memoir?

Would writing individual scenes and then taking steps back to find the through-line be enough? Was what I was creating enough? Was I enough? I channeled every lesson about writing stories and creative non-fiction. I started to tease through the scenes. I moved through
conceptualizing this project and the leading question became: How do I perceive relationships, myself and culture, based on my experience?

The act of excavating memories triggered trauma I didn’t know my body held. For every moment of pain or discomfort, I found validation. I may not have had control of my environment growing up but researching and writing this thesis demonstrated how I yearned to untangle the narratives of failure I wove into the fabric of my life. I dusted out the cobwebs in the recesses of my brain.

In the process of writing, I found my voice. The memoir became “about” uniting my narrative and experiential selves. The process wasn't a magic cure-all, but did help me shed the binary thinking of all or nothing. Either. Or. I found the validation I sought from others in my own accomplishments.

I listened to the women, feminists I idolized, like Roxane Gay or Nora McInerny, share how they overcame the voice inside, insisting they couldn’t. For the first time, I created space for my experiences. I praised myself for showing up, without further expectation. The result, a collection of essays musing on growing with your trauma. I learned to respect what I’ve overcome and mended your relationship to myself.

Every step of the way, I had to ease my inner demon, a raging inferiority complex that fought against the bars of its cage. I tried to push through and find ease with myself. The act of writing my life story became a means to understand how language and narrative constructed my perception and experience in the world. I deconstructed the narratives I’d built about my life.
In Chapter 1, I examine how my mother and I gravitated to different art forms based on our complicated relationships with our bodies. I think about different ways women observe and surveil each other’s bodies. In Chapter 2, I discuss a trip with my mother’s mother that had a lasting effect on my relationship with my maternal family and intensified my disdain toward being a girl. In Chapter 3, since paternity and father-figures have been a recurring challenge in my life, I dig into my relationship with my dad, Paul, all he represents in my life and the lessons I learned from his love. In Chapter 4, I talk about class dynamics present in French Immersion, from my perspective, as one of the few kids from a single-parent family without disposable income. In Chapter 5, I meditate on the social constructions of family and how people use hierarchies and language to qualify relationships. In Chapter 6, I extend discussions on paternity by revealing how I found out about my biological father at the age of twelve and the lasting impact on my identity. In Chapter 7, I cover my less-than-flawless entrance into university and a trip to Portugal gone awry that changed my relationship to my mother. In Chapter 8, I reveal the challenges of letting myself fall in love while navigating subterranean trust issues. I consider how the experience changed me. In Chapter 9, I dig into my relationship with men. I reveal two incidents from grade ten and consider how long it took to deprogram internalized misogyny and recognize a sexual assault. In Chapter 10, I map out the years of untreated depression and my slow path to recovery. In Chapter 11, the final of the creative section, I think through a defining moment from the South shore of Iceland.

The last chapter is an academic appendix where I reflect on the inclusion of literary criticism and critical theory in my writing process. I focus specifically how narratology provided a framework to write through my experiences with clarity. I concluded that my project has been
an extended exercise in discourse analysis: I examined how power relationships are expressed through language and behaviour to enforce the relationship between language and power. In some way, each story analyzes how my personal narrative and social experience were affected by various forms of power.

I have written a small book as a way for all my multitudes to exist in my skin. I have sketched a hypersensitive girl and a fierce, resilient woman. I have tried to show the ways I used a sharp wit as a cover for my desperate insecurity and damaged sense of worth. I have written the truth. I have not shamed myself over moments of vanity and vulnerability. I have shared tough times, traumas and triumphs. Themes overlap and interconnect. There are countless stories to tell, but there’s time for that later. These are the ones that matter for now. The hurdles and strides that defined me.
1. My Skin Does Not Fit

I woke up face down, smothered by the flannel pillowcase. My left hand rested on the open pages of my leather notebook. Dried black ink smeared across my forearm. My body felt like lead, and the drawn curtains and winter morning made it hard to stir. Groggy, I blinked a few times and reached to check my phone for the time. I hit something, and the camera took over the blinding screen. Through puffy, swollen eyes, I saw red lines worked into my flesh from hours of deep sleep. My teased, knotted hair stood on end. Though I tried to tolerate my appearance, be kind to myself, I disliked my reflection.

The notebook lay open, and I pulled it close to me. I recognized my loopy half handwriting, half cursive hybrid, but I had no memory of waking in the night, frantically groping for a pen and paper in the dark.

My skin does not fit.

I’ve scrawled this line at so many different times in my life. I find it in old journals, in the margins of readings, on Post-It notes... I put ink to paper and tried to pinpoint the defective feeling crawling under layers of flesh. One morning, while my partner Peter slept, I scrawled the words in the journal I kept on my bedside table. A big part of my disdain for womanhood, mine and the concept in general, grew from my relationship to my body. I never felt at peace in my body. It felt like a rental I tried to take care of but wasn’t entirely mine.

From a young age, I associated body image issues as distinctly female. Women had babies, which impacted their lives. Intense beauty standards were a bitch. Life just seemed harder for girls and I resented being born a one. I hated the things I noticed and the judgment I
passed on my flesh. I took on these feelings as my failure. It ached most when others commented on my body’s inability to conform. The lines from my mother hurt most, seared into my mind. I felt marked by the experience, like I was branded cattle.

_You don’t want to look like an over-stuffed sausage._

_Callulite. It looks like someone squishing cottage cheese in a garbage bag._

_Bagels give you cellulite._

_You ruined me._

_You destroyed my body._

_You’re why I can’t wear a bathing suit._

My mother issued a million little lessons as she struggled with her body. She guided me through my development, something she’d not seen modelled by her mother. At a young age, I couldn’t understand my mother was a woman in her twenties, fighting the pressures of society and waging war on her own body. She fell in line with the barking orders. My mother disparaged any mole or ounce of fat on her body. I learned from these lessons that my value was linked to my body. My mom liked taking photos to capture moments. Controlled the scene without having to see herself.

My mom took pictures. Her use of a camera symbolized her relationship with her body. She hated having her photo taken, but I could not escape her lens. I learned from the cues when she’d tell me the most flattering ways to move and pose. I wanted her to be proud, and somewhere along the way, I conflated that with controlling my body, keeping it small and manageable. I liked to write. Observe and pour my thoughts onto light blue lines, I aimed to
capture the things that can’t be seen looking at a person or a picture. The hopes. The dreams. The fears.

For my eighth birthday, I had been given a small pink diary. A family member was obviously ignorant of my style preferences. Usually, I hated the colour and its blatant association with my gender, but I liked the small silver lock. I wanted something protected in a way my flesh wasn’t. I felt that I had so little that was mine. By four, I was abandoned by the man I thought was my biological father. By that point, we had already moved at least five or six times. I changed schools. I watched my mother fall in love and produce a new family that I always felt I needed to prove I deserved. I had a lot of feelings to put down.

In grade three, at my new school, Earl Kitchener, my best friend was a girl named Kate. She kept her hair sheared short, so her hockey helmet fit. She and I were two devout tomboys that wrestled our way to and from school together every day. I bid farewell to Kate and climbed the steep steps to our rental home. I opened the door and saw mom at the table. My small diary sat open on the table, and mom stared at me, features set in firm disapproval.

She went into my room when I went into school. She was a firm believer in her house, her rules as well as the phrases Because I said so, and I’m the mom, you do what I say. I felt torn between her messages: think independently, but not when mom is talking. My eyes darted like a fearful animal; I knew some things I wrote would get me into trouble.

“Ann is fat, but she is still my friend.” The enunciation of each syllable, shame fell like a hammer to a nail. I shook, unsure how I would be punished. “Why would you write such a horrible thing?” My gaping mouth twitched. I failed to find words. Why had I written it? It was a terrible thing to say.
My mother called herself fat all the time. Warned me what foods would make me fat. She fed me her body insecurities, worked to maintain her weight of 107 until her pregnancy with my brother, James. She complained that rum-babas and cannolis made her fat. Ann fit into the mould my mother had cast as undesirable, and I thought I was learning. I hung on every word as mom explained undesirable qualities in her family genetics. She pointed to my “big” bones, and assured I’d be alright if I stayed in “shape.” I thought it meant there was only one viable shape. Even at that age, I think I knew it was better to listen and save my retorts.

I was grounded for a week. No television, no playdates and straight to my room after school. Only eight, I was already growing uncomfortable in my skin. I learned girls should be pretty and nice. I was insecure about my looks. I felt faulty. I didn’t want to be shallow, but I wanted to be loved, and I was getting messages from all kinds of sources, telling me the key to love was beauty. I was a ball of feelings and I wanted my mom to take away all the mean I had inside me.

The little pink diary was the first home of the five words that would come to define my relationship with my body: my skin does not fit. The first time I disparaged my body. The first time I criticized someone else’s as if it created validation. The horrifying contents of that ugly pink diary and its hurtful little words were the cornerstones of me starting to process what being a woman meant. The fact that my mom read my diary reminded me that I was being perpetually watched, evaluated and criticized. I was filled with confusion, nauseous and dizzy when I thought too hard about being a girl. I knew my body was being watched in more ways than I could count, opinions flying from all directions. My mother’s ideal mould was predicated value
on shape, size and sex-appeal. It became my responsibility to achieve and maintain my body. Intentional or not, she taught me the performative expectations of our flesh.

I visited my mother recently, in Nova Scotia, her new home. I sat in her kitchen, I stared out at sea, only meters away. She put a plate before me, poached eggs on rye bread, my favourite. I pulled the steaming mug of tea closer and thanked her. My sweater felt tight, I tugged at my collar, shifting from side to side.

“What’s wrong?” mom asked. She sat back at the table and painted her wood canvas a brilliant turquoise.

“I’m having a fat day.” I tugged up my pants and pulled down my shirt to hide my stomach.

“Why would you say something like that? If that’s what you’re thinking, I’ve failed you as a mother.” I didn’t know what to say to her, so I continued to type.

A few hours later, we left the house. She walked beside me on the beach, quiet, she listened as I talked through the hatred I harboured toward my body. The years of weighing myself before and after meals. The meals I skipped altogether. How I stood before mirrors, sucking my stomach in, turning back and forth, wondering how I could be smaller.

For most of my life, I fixated on my body. Its failures. I thought the matter of hating my body was absolute. I am a female and believed part of my socialization involved valuing beauty as a commodity. This way of thinking was passed on from my mother, ingrained by her parents and life experiences. I work every day to mend my relationship with my body.
2. Bruised And Battered

Even as a kid, I knew my mom was different from the rest of our family. Most of the time, growing up, my life felt like mom and me against the world. Her family didn’t have our backs. She had an earnestness that most of the women in my family lack. Nana Barb had my mom at nineteen. Nana did not want to be a mother, something she didn’t hide. In my family, motherhood is marred by youth, heartbreak and resentment, trickling down through the generations.1 Inexperience shaped how each gave and received love.

My Nana and Grandpa Denis kicked mom out when she was sixteen. At nineteen, mom got pregnant and had me. Her approach to motherhood was dramatically different than her mother’s. At every cross country and track meet, my mother stood and cheered me on while I huffed across the finish line. Mom’s family sent cards on my birthday but didn’t usually visit. It never mattered because Mom hosted elaborate parties, like when she booked the Reptile Man for my seventh birthday or planned a black-tie murder mystery for my twelfth. She tried her best to encourage me. She never said outright that she hadn’t wanted to be a mom like her mother.

My mom’s family didn’t visit me for my birthday. No one really visited us in Hamilton. I felt alone, like a pariah. Nana Barb took me to do things when I was little. Mom didn’t come along. She and Nana interacted like they each spoke a language neither could understand. I grew up speaking neither quite right.

Outings with Nana felt like an evaluation, and I was measured against a detailed rubric I couldn’t decipher. She took me to the petting zoo when I was five. I held a carrot out for the donkey. It poked its head through the fence and bit my side. I told my Nana, she yelled and asked what I did to upset the poor animal. Another time, she took me across the border to Martin’s
Fantasy Island in New York state. I trembled at the base of The Comet rollercoaster and begged to go on anything else. She asked why she wasted money on a ticket if I wouldn’t go on the rides. I cried as the car jerked up the track and screamed as it lurched over. The angle felt like ninety degrees, my skin pulled back in the harsh wind. I didn’t enjoy my first rollercoaster ride. Anytime I get anxious, I feel the same sensation through my body as when the cart teetered at the peak and dropped. Static radiated from the pit of my stomach down to my feet.

Once, she took me to the Best Western Hotel in Brantford for an overnight trip. She picked me up in her yellow Sunfire. Country music blared from the speakers. Despite my anxiety about time with Nana, I longed for the luxury of the ice machine and having a whole queen bed to myself, with its meticulously tucked sheet corners. She asked about who came to my birthday party.

“Tristan. Callum. Nathan. Garrison. Nathan got me a Poke-ball that opens!” She asked how many girls were there. I didn’t understand why she wanted to know what girls came. I always played rough. I was still reckless and unabashedly myself, even when she forced me into a dress. She was the first to make a big deal over my rough-and-tumble attitude, my male friends and my penchant for boys’ clothes.

The hours of swimming calmed my anxieties about being alone with Nana. Chlorine burned my eyes, blurred my vision. I plugged my nose, kicked my legs forward and sank to the bottom. When I resurfaced, Nana stood at the edge of the pool and told me to get out. I hoisted myself from the water, smashing my leg against the ceramic tiles. Nana scolded me as I flopped onto the deck like a graceless seal.
“How do you think you’re going to look with bruised and battered knees in your dress at dinner?” I knew the evaluation was underway. I think my distrust of girls was rooted in my experiences with Nana.

In the Best Western dining room, sun poured through the windows. Streams of light hit the glasses and sent crystal beams dancing. My Nana turned to her friend, lost in conversation. I was to entertain myself, but not draw attention. I stared at each ornate, gold chandelier. The white tablecloth skimmed my purpled knees and contrasted with the scrapes.

Eventually, I piped up and cut into the conversation. I couldn’t tell you what I said, but it was met with a direct kick to the shin. I sat in startled silence. I didn’t know what I’d done wrong, but I didn’t want to risk doing it again.

Fragments. Slivers of words and images burned into my memory. In the cold confines of the room, I climbed onto the giant bed I’d been excited about, wishing for my mom. My stomach ached like it so often did at sleepovers. The sheets clawed at my legs. I longed for comfort.

Nana lowered herself onto my bed and asked if I knew why I had been kicked. I squeezed my eyes shut, begging for invisibility. She stroked my leg over the blanket and told me I was ungrateful. My gnawing stomach insisted hiding would make everything worse and coaxed me from under the sheets. Nana’s wiry bangs stuck to her flushed forehead. Her lips downturned, frown lines prominent pulling either corner.

“That is not how you are to behave, young-lady. You were an embarrassment in front of my friend. You don’t deserve all the nice things I do for you.” The remark worked its way into
my identity, defined how I saw myself. She spat each word. It was my first instance of feeling insecurity and doubt in my bones. The first time I received confirmation that I wasn’t worthy.

I shook my head and disappointment enveloped me. I felt vulnerable and exposed in the dress I didn’t want to wear. I see photos of myself wearing dresses occasionally before this incident, but rarely after until I was almost fifteen. I sought to be covered in amour, clothes where I could run, jump and resist performing femininity.

When the trips stopped, I was relieved that I wouldn’t be alone with Nana, but I couldn’t overcome the rejection. Had I been so misbehaved that she was no longer willing to take me out? Is this how relationships and love worked? Could they be snatched away in an instant if I made a mistake?

I thought I had failed a test. I thought that I deserved an elusive and unsatisfying relationship with my grandmother. Fear wove itself into how I related to people, especially other girls. I worried they could sense that I was unruly and didn’t know how to behave. Had I missed some essential training that would make growing up a girl manageable?

When I got home the next day, I told my mom about Nana kicking me. The visits with Nana stopped. Only recently, during a visit with my mother, I learned what happened. My mother confronted her mother and accused her of exposing me to the same abuse mom had experienced as a child. Pinches, swats, hair pulling. My Nana denied the shin kick and called me a liar. My mom knew better. I feel grateful that she spared me more of my Nana’s cruelty. I didn’t realize my mom had protected me until I asked for clarification about this story.

For as long as I can remember, the incessant need to please people dominated my social interactions and defined my sense of worth. I assumed the weight was something all
women bore. I genuinely felt I deserved rejection from my Nana. After the trip to Best Western, I only saw my Nana a half-dozen times over the next twenty years. In December 2019, after a decade of silence, my great-grandmother’s 90th birthday forced a reunion. My Nana cornered me in the kitchen after she ignored me during the first hour of the party. She wiped away tears and assured me how difficult it had been for her not to know me but said a few kind things. I sat at the round table and listened. My Nana blamed her mother for the strained relationship with my mom. She called my mom spoiled. She claimed my great-grandmother ruined their relationship and undermined her parental authority. The conversation set me free.

For the first time, I approached the little six-year-old girl, hiding under the blankets with kindness, rather than blame. I assured her it isn’t supposed to be that way. That she deserved love without working her ass off to earn it. Being a girl didn’t mean she was less than. She will learn with or without those who are supposed to teach you.
3. You Can Call Me Dad

Paul worked at the local bike shop in Westdale. Every morning, he stopped for a cappuccino at the Second Cup, where mom worked. When she spotted the black polo in line, embroidered with a Pierik’s Cycle logo, she flicked the lever on the espresso grinder, tamped the powder and got his drink started. He lingered in the leather armchairs and the occasional glance toward mom. He’d crane his neck to maintain the illusion of checking on his bike. She’d tell me these stories after she introduced us.

My mom had a lot of male friends, but I sensed something different about Paul from the beginning. He was in her little green address book as “Hot Rod.” It was impossible for my mother to keep her dating life private from the four-year-old to whom she was sole parent. I’m not sure how long they dated before I met Paul. He had deep navy eyes, with a mischievous glint.

A few weeks after I met Paul, he brought me to the shop to put air in my tires. The place smelled like the rubber air freshener. He walked me along the rows of bikes, pointed to wheels and frames, and explained the differences. Road bikes had thin, smooth wheels for speed and racing. The tires on mountain bikes were ridged for grip, and my fingers bumped along as I touched the little bristles. Paul joined my laughter and pointed out the BMXs.

“Those are the cool bikes.” My eyes widened, and I pranced over to a bike that looked my size. I glared at the small cylinders jutting out from the hub of each back wheel.

“What are those?” I walked over and touched the gleaming pipe.

“Pegs. They’re for doing tricks. Want to see one?” I nodded furiously, in case he failed to see my excitement. Paul peddled down the aisle. He stopped a few feet from me, leaned far
forward, pulled the bike onto the front wheel and spun the handlebars. Tires slid across the carpet. He rolled off, roaring with laughter. He stood up and straightened the bike.

“Hop on!” He gestured at the pegs. “Put one foot on each and hold my waist tight!” I did as I was told, cautious as I lifted one foot and secured it on the metal before taking my full weight to the other. I hugged as hard as I could, and buried my face into his back as we teetered from side to side. I wasn’t used to this kind of closeness and proximity to a man. Or anyone other than mom. It felt nice getting attention from someone whom it wasn’t required.

Despite having little experience with kids, Paul knew exactly what a four-year-old kid looked for in a bonding day.

One. Two. Three. Each round of the pedals lurched us along until the bike hit its stride. The shop was a large rectangular building, with a smaller square at the center. Bikes fanned out on either side of the makeshift aisle. By the second lap, I laughed, near hysterics. I removed my small hands from his waist, stuck my arms to each side and cheered, “weeeeee!”

After a few more rounds, my stomach started to flip. I tugged on his polo. Paul rode us into the back of the shop to his workbench. He took his feet off the pedals and propelled us toward a tall metal post with arm clamps coming off each side. He moved some screwdrivers and other tools, put his large hands under my arms and lifted me onto the workbench.

I ended up spending a lot of time in the shop. From the first time, I went there at age four, until age twenty, when he quit after almost twenty-five years. He took pride in his work and providing for his family. Some of our most profound chats happened at his workstation. I sat on the bench and handed him tools as he worked on bikes, his hands smeared in shining black chain-grease. Sometimes, he reached out, smudged a glob of dark paste across my forehead, and
made a quippy reference to Rafiki from *The Lion King*. Even though he wasn’t there for the first few years of life I’d force mom to rewind the VHS multiple times a day and sing along to “I Just Can’t Wait to be King,” he knew how to keep the traditions alive and strengthen my foundation. Without being aggressive or demanding, Paul worked his way into my life, on my terms.

***

One night, Paul draped one arm across the couch’s back. He was transfixed by the Toronto Maple Leafs highlight-reel. The other arm rested on my head. I nestled into his side; knees tucked into my chest. I was seven years old. Paul and my mom had been together for two or three years; he and I had settled into our own routine. I’d walk home and do my homework before he got back from work. Neither parent could assist with grade two French grammar. Paul had been expelled in grade six and sent to the vocational school. He’d come home from the bike shop and washed the grease off his hands. He scrubbed his skin raw but black stains lingered under his fingernails. I looked forward to when we settled into the tan couch cushions and turned on the television.

The muffled shout came from above: “Maaakkkkkki. Come here.” I snuggled deeper into his side. Paul laughed, shifted, and pulled me onto his lap. He poked my side encourageingly and nudged me off his bobbing knees.

“Go on up and see your mom. She’s in the tub getting ready. The babysitter’ll be here soon.” I bolted up the spiral stairs. The pipes screeched as the water shut off. My fist met the door twice: “Mom. Can I come in?”

“Yep! I’m just washing the shampoo out. Sit on the toilet seat.”
I opened the door and disappeared into the steam. The blush-pink curtain was drawn, a temporary wall between my mother and me. It had been years since we shared a bath. I moved across the slick tile floor, waded through patches of condensation, and lowered myself onto the plush toilet seat cover. Splayed across the chipped countertop were tubes of peach paste, red gloss, and open palettes of colour. I reached out, grabbed the a small, container with face powder. Only, when I opened the circular compact, there was no mirror in it. In my palm sat a small dial, marked with black notches, and a ring of blue pills individually sealed in a bubble package.

The plastic rings rattled across the shower bar. I jumped and flung the packet onto the counter. Mom sat in the cooling water, bubbles fading into a light foam, with two strategically placed washcloths. She beckoned me forward, beaming, and patted the ceramic ledge of the tub. I lowered, careful not to sit in any water. I nibbled my nail-bed, worked the cuticle skin between my teeth, each nail chewed down past the quick. The thick steam smelled like floral perfume. The special bubble bath. It was saved for special occasions. I had only used it once, when I was a flower girl at a family friend’s wedding.

There were a few thuds at the door. The vibration rattled the wire hanger with Mom’s black dress with white lilies swaying on its hook. Paul stepped in, no longer in his work shirt. He wore a collared shirt, ironed, and buttoned to the neck, tattoo sleeves covered.

“The babysitter’s here. You almost ready?”

“I’ll be down in five.” He smiled at me and squeaked the door closed. Mom looked back to me, shoulders rising with a deep inhale.
“I have some big news, but you have to keep it a secret, ok? Just for a little while.”

I nodded, and mom slid a few inches down the lip of the tub. Mom adjusted her soaked cloths, then took my right hand in her left.

“Paul and I are going out to a special dinner tonight.” Her tone changed on “special.” That explained the fancy clothes. The bubble bath.

I was going to watch my worn Stuart Little VHS tape and eat snacks well past my usual bedtime. The film featured an only child, like me, around my age, who adopted a little brother.

“I have important news to tell Paul, but it’s more important for you to know first. It was you and me for a long time. Paul’s been around a while now. You like that Paul lives with us, right?” I smiled and nodded fiercely. Of course, I liked life with Paul.

“How come, mom?” Butterflies flit about in my stomach.

Before life with Paul, mom woke me up most days before the sun rose. Her shifts at Second Cup started at 5:30am. She walked me down to the block to her friend Celeste’s house with a box of cherry Toaster Strudels for a few more hours of sleep on her futon. Celeste got me up for school; I got myself dressed and shuffled downstairs for the hot flakey pastry fresh from the toaster oven. My teeth tore into the small packet of icing, and I licked away the sugary goop from my lips and fingers, and Celeste dropped me off at school.

Now, on the weekends, Paul made fluffy pancakes, the size of my face, and dipped his sausages in maple syrup. Mom would kiss him on the cheek. He always bought Aunt Jemima, even though the corn syrup coated our tongues for the rest of the day. He, mom and I rode bikes
around the quiet tree-lined streets of the neighbourhood, visited Churchill Park and Weil’s Bakery. During the week, they took turns walking me to school.

“I wanted to make sure you liked how things were before they changed and became more permanent.”

“Change?” She shifted, sending the water thrashing in all directions. She reached her arms around her folded legs, and inched closer.

“You’re going to have a sibling. I’m telling Paul tonight. I’m pregnant!” She pointed at her flat stomach. An extra clue, in case I hadn’t caught on.

I repeatedly shrieked; Mom laughed and tugged the curtain closed. Unable to contain my excitement, I wiggled about, and did a jig.

As a toddler, my mom told me babies came from eggs. One night, she found me on the kitchen floor with flour and eggs, which smushed together into a rough batter with my tiny fingers. When asked what I thought I was doing, I replied, “making a little brother.”

She stepped out covered, and I flew at her, arms extended for a hug. Her dewy skin dampened my shirt, but I kept squeezing. My smile never faltered, even after we broke apart. She flipped the switch, and the fan let out a delicate hum.

“We’re going to miss the reservation,” Paul called up to mom. We giggled and basked in our shared secret that would be out soon enough.

“I’ve got to get dressed, but you go get changed into your ‘jammies and give Paul a hug.” She leaned in for one last embrace. We were leaving the bathroom a whole different family.
I watched my mother swell. She compared herself to photos she had from my turn in the tummy. I felt closest to my brother when I think back on my mom pregnant with him, and how we were grown in the same womb. He was born at the end of April 2001, a few months before I turned eight. His arrival marked the first time I felt secure in our family unit, but we didn’t live in a bubble, and the opinions of others had power.

“Do you have different dads?” It’s incredible how easily tone conveys judgement. “So, he’s your half-brother.” The first time I heard the term was at school, shortly after my brother James was born.

I was one of the only kids to come from a “broken” home and the only one to have a “half” sibling. Third graders had no tact, and so they would always ask questions, ensuring they included the prefix. They made me feel naked and exposed.

My disdain for the term, or even idea, of half-siblings, is attributable to my relationship with my brother, James. There were few things in the world I wanted more than a brother. I am in an uncommon position of having been an only child for almost the full first eight years of my life. I have the paradoxical tendencies of a solo-kid, oldest sibling and caretaker. My relationship with James, alternated between partner-in-crime sister and over-bearing maternal figure. The age gap was surprisingly easy to navigate. I defined myself by the questions others threw me.

“How old is your half-brother?” The statement is equal parts real and hurtful. By social and biological accounts, he was my half-brother. Through my mother’s whole pregnancy, the thought never occurred.

\[1\] I used quotation marks to indicate these are still terms I struggle to accept and validate
A few months after James was born, Paul took me to a special lunch at Valentino’s and we shared a panzerotti. I liked ripping the cheesy baked dough apart and dipping it into the tomato sauce. I chewed and Paul took advantage of the silence.

“I love you, kiddo. I see you as my daughter. You can call me Dad, if you want.” It’s all I ever wanted. I felt loved and noticed. He made me feel safe, something friends said they got from their dads. I beamed, thanked him and told my dad I loved him too.

I hated making people feel uncomfortable, which often happens when you don’t have a traditional family experience or structure. When people asked about my dad, my “real” dad, it was easier to say, *he wasn’t around or in the picture*; people can interpret the code for “deadbeat.” I’d tell a story about Paul, my dad and concern would knit the brows of classmates or their parents. “That’s your *stepdad*, right, not your *real* dad?” The inflection was always the same. A small uptick of curiosity, like I was an animal in a zoo. I would ensure to sound as disgruntled as possible when assuring, “No, he’s just my dad.” People almost always corrected me.

***

Ten years old, headed to the dirt jumps. I sat up front, our BMXs in the back seat, pegs rattling together. Baggy jeans, a black t-shirt with Johnny Cash flippin’ the bird, and skate shoes, he could be mistaken for a hardened teenager. I reached knowingly into the glove-compartment and grabbed the Reese’s peanut butter cups. I broke open the package, and the sweet, sugary smell covered the rusted-out Aerostar’s odour. Eyebrow raised expectantly, I broke one of the chocolate pucks in half and tossed it to Paul, *my Dad*. 
Open windows sent my long hair flying. Eminem rapped over the whirling chaos. Out of the car, we unloaded the bikes, fresh pine and turned earth welcoming. The smell of rain lingered on the mounds and grass. Dad’s silver band glimmered in the late-August sun. He hugged me, the squeeze assuring. I needed those days of dad and me. When he took me out to do things, without mom or James. It communicated the unconditional love I craved.

We’d come to these woods’ countless times before, but it was the first time since he and mom got married. The dirt jumps were our place. He promised that he would always be there to love and protect me.

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One Saturday night, when I was twelve, mom and dad threw a party. I tolerated him making me speak French to his friends at a party. He cried, slid down the couch, and spewed his pride between sips of Budweiser. Dad told me I was special and I reddened, embarrassed. That night should have been the first indicator that Dad was drinking heavily.

Dad moved out when I was fourteen. October 2007. Dad didn’t leave because he and mom stopped loving each other, which made things even harder. He couldn’t stop drinking. He was the first sense of family and stability. We moved less, got a car, our phone was never off. James was his blood; would I find out Paul only tolerated me to get mom? In his new apartment, James and I stayed over together. Never one or the other. Their separation didn’t change anything about mine and dad’s relationship. I felt warm and reassured.

A few months later, he showed up late at night, covered in snow. He walked from his apartment up the street, underdressed for the brutal January weather. He wobbled in the entryway. Beer encased every slurred word. He guzzled two-thirds of the forty-ounce bottle of
vodka, sipping straight from the deep indigo glass neck. He sobbed, and asked my mom to give her rings back if she didn’t love him. For the first time, I had a better understanding of what alcoholism meant. There was no sense or reason in his being there. He confirmed everything mom said about his departure. I loved my dad and needed him to fight for me. For James. For our sense of security.

I was relieved and resentful when dad got sober after the January incident. Dad started to attend regular AA meetings. But our lives never returned to normal. Long after their separation and divorce, Dad showed up when it counted. Westdale High School’s 2008 fall production was Cabaret. A cast of nearly thirty, aged fourteen to eighteen, galloped across the stage in varying stages of undress. Sally and the Kit Kat girls wore elegant lingerie, with us chorus girls in slightly-less-revealing negligees. I kept pulling at the loose skin concealing my bicep, stomach in knots, wishing we weren’t in low-cut tank tops.

From the front of house, a steady stream of mumbles from excited parents and family members broke through the drawn velvet curtains. I peeked between them, and spotted Dad in the fourth row, settling into the ageing upholstery of his own high school auditorium.

I shuffled to the stage and hit my mark. Smile fixed, right hand on my waist, left arm raised, and hand tilted in the air, the curtain rose, and the opening notes of “Wilkommen” carried to the balcony. Step left, toe right, hip, hip, turn, plier. My skin vibrated, I grew uncomfortable with my sudden visibility. Goosebumps crawled over my skin, despite the scorching lights of the stage lights. I shook through the steps, the adrenaline kicked in. I was grateful to have someone cheering.
Dad taught me to drive a with his mom’s, my grandma’s, cobalt Honda Civic. He braved the shrieks as I merged onto the highway for the first time. He lathered on the sunscreen for Regattas at the Hamilton Harbour. Through Dad’s ups and downs, I found consistent solace in the time at Dad’s workbench, the one where I first felt closest to him that day all those years ago. Before shifts when I started to work in high school at Valentino’s, I’d sit on the foot ladder as he took apart a bike, suspended from his mounting station.

About a year and a half after he and mom split, he started to date a woman named Shannon. A Westdale-mom, like all those I’d grown up around. He moved in with her within months. Shannon tolerated me, but often found ways to make me feel that I was an unwanted carry-on she yearned to tuck away in overhead storage. Rather than offering comfort or solace from my increasingly complicated life at mom’s, she’d chuckle and ask if Jerry Springer had come to film there yet. She intensified my fear of women. She referred to me as dad’s “step-daughter from a previous marriage.” Technically, it’s the truth, but it felt like a disrespectful and dismissive way to refer to my relationship with my dad.

One evening, he locked up the bike shop, and we walked across the empty Metro parking lot. For a week, I’d contemplated whether to tell Dad about how Shannon introduced me. I walked a few paces behind as he pulled romaine lettuce from the produce display and stuffed it in the thin plastic bag. I stood next to the potent dill and mint, looking at him.

“Hey Dad... How do you see our relationship?”

“What do you mean?” Nose scrunched, and forehead wrinkled, he looked lost.

“How would you introduce me to someone new?” I needed to know but feared the answer. What if Shannon called me that because that is what he says.
“Hi, this is my daughter, Maki. Why?” Relief. Sweet relief. There was no modifier, add on or explanation. *Daughter:* I wasn’t crazy. He was my dad, and he felt it too. I wanted the moment to stay warm and kind. I didn’t want Shannon to invade.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, weirdo.”

On the first day of university, Dad drove me to the residence, James in tow. He let me flash my student card to pay for the pizza downstairs. The three of us sat on the floor of my dorm room, sipping cold pop from cans and chewing the hot, stringy cheese. I cried for hours after they left. It didn’t feel as simple as knowing I’d go home to my family in a few weeks. Family felt unstable.

As I moved through my twenties, ages and events took on new meaning. Usually, while I did something mundane like folded laundry or choked down a boring book, moments of clarity struck. At twenty-three, my partner, Peter, had brain surgery. The days in recovery, bandages wrapped around his head, I felt so young. I had a lot of time to think while he slept, and his body healed. I’d think *I’m only twenty-three.* The counter: *When dad was twenty-three, he took on a four-year-old.* The jarring perspective always left me feeling like I straddled worlds, not entirely belonging anywhere. My emotions felt greedy, compared to the experiences of those around me. I realized that by twenty-six, my age while I wrote this thesis, my dad welcomed his second child, first biological. His son. My brother, James.

As a child, I always wished there was more time to note our relationship. As if marking off months and years somehow translated to the strength of a bond. I worried about optics. If he’s only been my dad for nine years, do I get to be as sad when they split? I used time and blood to
qualify grief, which I now realized is flawed. Dad taught me endless lessons. He emphasized the importance of work. Encouraged me to be proud of myself. Take risks. Have fun.

Dad and Shannon broke up. He went on to meet and marry a wonderful woman, also by some karmic coincidence, named Shannon. She’s reclaiming the name. Never have I felt more included than when she handed me a custom mug with the question, “Maki, will you be my bridesmaid?”

Like life in general, these moments were complicated and confusing. A million feelings intersected. There was no one emotion at any given moment. The loyalty to my mother conflicted with the love for my dad. Their marriage didn’t last, but I learned, someone doesn’t just stop being your parent. I felt a familiar pull between love, insecurity, anxiety and trust. I learned enough to trust my gut. What mattered was little by little, step by step and experience by experience, I rebuilt my sense of family. I accepted and gave love more readily.
4. Little Lump Sums Of Resentment

Sometimes, I wonder what life would be like without my suffocating inferiority complex. French Immersion really kicked my ass. When I was growing up, the school with French Immersion was the best funded in the board. It was one class a grade, usually hovering above 30 students; the children of doctors, lawyers and other high-status professions itching to assure their children’s futures with all the advantages. My mom had the same idea with none of the resources.

One of the more powerful adverse contributors to the narrative I built about my life and worth was the social culture inspired by French Immersion. The attitudes matched those of the private school on the mountain. The school parking lot filled each morning with BMWs, Lexuses and Audis. At school I was the antelope among lions. The class was full of eleven-year-olds predators, utterly ignorant to their privilege.2

I saw money as an ambiguous force. It held real power at school, where the fastest way to gaining status was wearing a new Paul Frank t-shirt that retailed for sixty dollars. I remember I asked my mom if I could use my babysitting money to buy one, and she insisted that it was a waste of my money.

I am as willing to talk about money as I am to submit to torture. In her early twenties, my mother made strategic moves to end the cycle of poverty. I didn’t know this. I just understood what I didn’t have in an environment full of kids who had more than they could want. None of my peers’ lives mirrored my own. I had no friends or people to confide in who had similar experiences, and it broke me down little by little.
In class, I learned about the verbs *avoir* and *être* (*to have* and *to be*) without working through the complexity of the ideas. I internalized that there were two states of action in the world: being and having, and either existed at odds with the other. When friends had trouble conjugating verbs, they were sent to tutors. I was told to work harder and grapple with the existential dread I faced with each damn verb chart.

When I remember the visceral insecurity that I experienced throughout my childhood, adolescence and into adulthood, I feel searing discomfort. I was hot-headed and desperate for affection. The kids at school thought I was weird. Some poked fun at my hand-me-downs and the bright blue streaks in my hair. Others dug deeper.

The dusty corner of the library had been hastily converted to a computer room sometime in the late 90s, during technology’s rapid rise. Our class assembled around glowing monitors, voices echoing through the thinning stacks. Keenan, my friend’s brother, came over. He wore Adidas tear-away pants and a Quiksilver t-shirt and a vicious sneer with his. Only a few weeks prior, Keenan had told me that my arms were ugly and hairier than Sasquatch’s. I went home and shaved them that night, and he made fun of the scattered bandages and bald spots the next day. Hands to his hips, he looked down over me and my computer. I noticed him but was reluctant to turn.

“My mom says we have to drive you tonight.” I had joined the golf team. It was not my love of wandering immaculate greens or sporting pristine white outfits, but that golf had undeniable respect. *Status.* Most of my friend’s dads golfed. My dad and I watched *Happy Gilmore* repeatedly to help me prepare. He laughed from his belly at any of Adam’s Sandler’s childish antics. On the night of our first trip to the course, my dad had to work late, and my mom
had no license. She called my friend Bryanna’s mom, because her brother, Keenan, was also on the team. Over the landline, his mom assured mine that carpooling made sense.

“Yeah... She said it was ok.” I wanted to disappear. Keenan was the tallest boy in class, and his towering stance drew instant attention.

“She shouldn’t have.” Keenan raised his voice on the last word. Kids started to whisper and stare.

“What do you mean?” I wanted the conversation to end.

“She said we’re carpooling. Carpooling means I’d have to ride around in your ghetto-mobile! There’s rust on your piece of crap van! You’re poor! I’d be embarrassed to bring that to a golf course too. Your dad would look like the groundskeeper.”

In an instant, Keenan took away the padding my mother provided. It was the first time I had someone at school directly bring up my status. Call me poor. The kids in earshot either jeered or looked away uncomfortably. I was the anomaly in our class of prosperous nuclear families. I grew up in a house running short on time, patience and money. My mom scraped together rent, disguised our lack of resources with reasonable excuses: “No, you can’t play hockey; you are accident-prone enough without adding ice and contact.” I recognized my mother’s words for what they were, lies, designed to protect me. No cable was not my mother protesting television consumption; the phone being off wasn’t a mistake, and our constant moving was probably related to cash-flow issues.

It hurt most coming from Keenan since his sister and I were close friends. I worried I embarrassed her, that his jeers were her words. Our friendship began to fade at this point, caught
in the turbulence of puberty. The social world around French Immersion made my friendships complicated. I was different. I felt worthless and it made me the easiest target.

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Ruby was a girl in my class. Part-time friend, full-time tormenter. Our relationship was fraught. She wielded a lot of power because I desperately wanted her to like me. Her control over the class was immense and she could make life a lot easier if you were “in.” Wounds from the isolation of my experience pushed me further into myself. I developed a hardened shell from insecurity. The wound scarred over. One of these scars was literal. A pale mark, about half an inch, over my eyebrow.

One evening in grade eight, the landline rang and my mom picked up.

“Come get the phone. It’s for you.”

I hurried over, stumbling over my feet, a toe cracking against the hard wood floor. My friend Sarah was on the line. Beth, Bryanna and Ruby were over, and she asked if I could join. The sun was already setting in the winter sky. Ice reflected on the ground as I looked out the window.

“Mom! Can I go over to Sarah’s?”

“Only if you call me when you get there.” I assured Sarah I could come; in case she had failed to hear my mother shouting in the background. I promised I’d be right there, more to myself. I wanted in on all the group fun and jokes.

Sarah whipped the door open to her old Victorian home and pulled me upstairs. Ruby jumped up and gave me a hug. I froze in her grasp, distrustful. She rarely touched me. I looked to Sarah, who seemed to nod in encouragement, though the corners of her mouth frowned. Ruby
grabbed my wrist and pulled me over to the coffee table, where she gestured at the platter. There was a purple and brown paste in a white ramequin surrounded by some crackers. The contrast only highlighted the moldy colour. “Sarah’s grandmother made Baba Ganouche! You must try some! We’ve been eating it since after school!” She pushed the platter toward me.

Uneasy from the attention, my palms began to sweat. There were continued reassurances that it was delicious, but the sour smell wafting into my nostrils said otherwise. After a few more choruses of pleading and pressure, I caved. I didn’t want to seem uncultured. I scooped a heaping serving of the dip onto a dry square, lifted it directly to my mouth and chewed. The laughing began before I swallowed.

Within seconds I knew the curdled goop was about to reappear. I sprinted to the washroom. My gags drowned out the roaring laughter chasing me down the hall. I wretched into the toilet until my stomach was empty and throat burned. I washed my face, wiped the stinging tears away and mustered all the bravery I had.

“What was that!” I demanded. The laughter quieted, and Ruby turned, smug. I asked again, my tone cut through the like a razor’s edge.

“Calm down. You’re being dramatic. It’s just a few things mixed together.” Ruby rolled her eyes and huffed. I looked to Bryanna and Sarah, pleaded with my eyes. I figured they were my best hope, until each looked away.

“Fine. Be a downer. It’s mustard, ketchup, salt, anchovies... apple sauce... and... a can of dog food.” It began to fit together. They didn’t want to hang out with me. I was the entertainment, and I stomped along to their choreographed routine. I turned on my heel and ran downstairs.
I shoved my boots onto the wrong feet and slammed the door behind me. I hit a patch of ice on the porch and soared over the five wooden steps. I landed face first on the pavement in the driveway, lit by the headlights of an idling car. I stood, and held my hand to the already-forming lump, squinting at the driver. Bryanna’s mom got out of her beige Mercedes. She stood in a mauve peacoat, her stiletto boots out of place against the snow. She insisted I let her drive me home. I didn’t want to talk. I was scared it had been my fault, so I ran.

My mother obviously noticed the bruised forehead and tears frozen against my flushed cheeks. She asked what happened and I tried to shrug her off. The phone rang, which bought me some time. A few moments of the receiver against her face, her expression sank and shoulders slumped. She sat on the edge of her bed and gestured me over. I did as I was asked, and lowered myself down. I sat perfectly still until she handed me the cordless phone. Sarah sobbed on the phone, and apologized for letting herself be talked into something like that. I wished she would stop blubbering. It only affirmed that I was invited to be pranked.

Bryanna called soon after, and prattled on awkwardly. Bryanna had been a close friend, but she fell victim to herd-mentality. Her brother was Keenan, the boy who called me poor. I could hear her mother in the background, who reminded her of the points to hit.

Ruby went to a different high school and some things changed, while others did not. The girls often went to the mall together, but they stopped inviting me because they felt uncomfortable: I was uncool and I couldn’t even take a credit card from my parents’ and buy stuff to my heart’s content. I wanted so badly to be in the club. I wasn’t some rebel, blowing off the party. I didn’t get an invite. I sought solace in the in-between spaces.

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I understood young that I needed to minimize, not contribute to chaos. This set a tense
dynamic when I started to earn my own money. Back in 2007, Westdale was the only high school
in Hamilton with French Immersion, with ample choice between sports, teams, trips and
intramural activities. I was on the rowing team with Beth, one of the girls from
the babaganoush incident. I thought of it every morning at practice. I thought about it that day
when I walked to get a job.

I walked along Paradise Avenue. Apple blossoms dangled from the tree branches. Dad
moved out a month after I started high school, so I put James to bed most nights. Mom worked at
an upscale restaurant in Hess Village. I paid for my indoor and outdoor rowing season fees with
babysitting money. The unflattering green and gold spandex uni-suit, embroidered
with Westdale Secondary School, cost $300. Other teenage indulgences were out of the question
without a job.

I waited out the cars whipping around the bend then stepped over the solid yellow line,
anxious the wind would wrinkle my single page resume. I darted across and into Valentino’s
Restaurant to apply. A week later, I started in the dish pit.

The first day I arrived fifteen minutes early, dressed in all black, as instructed.
Scrunched up in my palm, a yellow sticky-note with my social insurance number. I transferred
each digit carefully onto the form and signed on the line with a blue ballpoint pen. Tony, my
boss, wiped his hand on his floured apron and shook mine as I beamed.

My shifts started at four, five on weekends, if I worked the closing shift. Phil, the
manager, walked me through the back channels of the restaurant. He pointed out the closet with
translucent barrels of dish soap and industrial-sized garbage bags before marching me to the
backroom. Rows of recycling bins overflowed with empty two-litre cans of whole tomatoes, plastic tubs and pop cans, and the air soured.

“First job of the night: break down the boxes, rinse tins and bring everything to the dumpsters.” Phil picked up a box, cracked the packing tape seal and separated the bottom cardboard flaps. The cube caved in, and Phil tossed it to the ground and picked up another box in one movement.

“You pick up the job quick. Take this stuff out and then round the restaurant and clear tables.” I joined in, dismantled a dozen boxes, gathered the pile of damp cardboard in my arms and head outside.

Phil guided me back to the kitchen and gestured to my station in the corner. A daunting metal chamber, arms jut from either side to guide its walls up and down, sat in the corner, ferocious steam pouring through the cracks. The dishwasher.

I scraped large pieces of food into the garbage. I separated plates: appetizer from dinner, pizza from panzerotti. The threatening spray nozzle, wrapped in thick grey rubber and an aluminum coil, looked like it belonged at the end of a garden hose. Bad aim created a shower of boiling water. Those were always the worst trips home, when I’d walk to the bus stop in cold, damp clothes. Stars glimmered and freezing wind blew through my wet black jeans.

After two weeks of work, I settled into a routine; balanced homework, sports, shifts at Valentino’s and watching James. The punch machine recorded our shifts over each pay period. I inserted my timecard into the mechanism mounted on the wall, pulled down the lever then returned the stamped panel to its pocket. Tony emerged from the office. He grinned, an envelope in his hand.
“Here you go, kid! You’re doing good work.” His smooth Sicilian accent hugged every syllable. I waited until he turned the corner to rip the seal. My first paycheque. I inspected the crisp paper. One hundred eighty-four dollars and ninety-six cents. It felt like a fortune to a fourteen-year-old. I treasured the official metallic seal. In the coatroom, I tucked the cheque in my backpack, between the cover and table of contents in my Science binder, to keep it crisp.

I paraded my first cheque home. I teemed with pride and hoped for my mother’s praise. The cheque represented more than money; it symbolized my first actual moment of independence. I viewed the idea of reliable income as security. I shed my backpack and removed my treasure.

Despite my new job, I didn’t have a bank account. As a minor, I needed a parent’s signature to open one. Neither had time to make the trip with me, but Mom offered to deposit my cheque.

“Can you ask them to keep the paper. I want to put it in a frame!” Mom chortled at my over-sentimentality and reached for the small rectangle marking the fruits of my previous two weeks’ labour.

“Whatever. It’s in your name. Sign the back, or I can’t cash the thing.” I drew my practiced bubbly signature over the endorsement line. Over the next few days, I asked if she had the cash. She insisted she’d cashed my cheque but forgot to withdraw money. It felt right for a fourteen-year-old to need the amount, but not for their mom. I felt hollow that I couldn’t trust my mother to provide without my help. The fourth or fifth time I ask, she snapped and told me not to bother her. I tried once more to ask for the money, and I walked away as soon as she called me ungrateful.
My mom never returned the money. It marked the first of unreturned “loans.” Little lumps sums of resentment. Anytime I tried to mention the funds or resisted when she asked for more, I heard on end about how little I cared for my family. I had no perspective. I couldn’t see what my mom really felt about having to ask her teenager for money.

Two weeks later, I got my second paycheck and hid the slip in my room. The following day, Dad took me to CIBC on his lunch break. I offered to take him to TCBY for frozen yogurt. My treat. He laughed me off and assured it was on him. He put his muddled signature alongside my pristine cursive lettering. The teller offered a sincere smile, my receipt, stamped with the date. The surge of control cashing the cheque was electric.
5. Marks Of Differentiation

My mom and Mark got together when I was in grade 10, a year after dad moved out. He was an intense person, proud of his Irish-Catholic heritage. He had three kids and a tumultuous relationship with his ex-wife, who liked to call repeatedly at 3am. Things were fine until Halloween of 2010, when Mark was attacked in an alley while working in Alberta. A man struck him in the face with a crowbar and shattered his orbital bone. His behaviour became more and more erratic.

A few days before the start of twelfth grade, my friends and I spent the day at Wild Water Works. Our skin sizzled and stung under the late August sun. My friends would flip every few minutes. I laid face down on the pineapple towel to hide my fleshy stomach. I held my body tense, in a slight plank, to try to keep from taking up too much space. The other girls seemed so comfortable in their bikinis. I was under my dress before I was fully dried off, anxious to leave the park and veil myself in clothes. My friends wanted to get dinner at a restaurant down the block from my family’s apartment. I needed to get a cardigan to hide my arms, which I called “Bingo-wings,” a nod to how the muscle turned to fat after a shoulder injury.

I insisted my three friends remain on the back deck and enjoy the final hours of cloudless blue skies. They all lived in houses their parents owned and their mothers meticulously maintained. I refused most friends any glimpses into my life. My house had no predictability. I could be opening the door to screaming children piled in the back room, or mom and Mark fighting.

We lived in a second-story apartment above a real estate office, where my mother shushed us all day long. The towering windows let in the late August sun, baking the rooms. The
apartment capacity was four, maximum. On days Mark’s kids were with their mom, it was squishy but manageable. With the whole blended family in attendance, we hit seven. Three bedrooms, one bathroom. Once inside, I tried to rush past my mom, but she grabbed my arm before I left the threshold of the kitchen.

“Do you like my flowers?” Her pale arm extended, index finger pointed at the table. There was a hand-painted vase holding pale pink and cream flowers.

“They’re pretty.”

“Do you know what kind they are?” I glanced beyond her and hoped that she’d notice I was impatient and in a rush. I could get what I wanted from my room and leave the house in twenty steps if she stopped staring at me expectantly. I worried if I stayed too long, Mark would walk through the door and declare he and mom could go out, as I was there to babysit. His son, six months my senior, somehow always escaped this duty.

“Um, no. I don’t know flower names, mom.” My harsh tone broke through a non-committal laugh. The high-pitched squeaks of cartoon animals entertaining Mark’s two young daughters and James interrupted the silence. The cupboard to the left of the sink hung crooked on its frame, from some drunken accident.

“It’s cute. Mark got them for me. They’re Mums.” Her favourite flowers were Gerbera daisies. Especially those with sunshine yellow petals and dark florets. Was I supposed to be impressed? Weren’t flowers something your partner was supposed to get you? Fist to my chin, I made a show of squinting my eyes and taking another glance. I pulled my lips stiff, showing some teeth as my head bobbed approvingly. The arms on the wall clock twitched in place; I was a hostage to this exchange.
“That’s sweet.” I nodded a few times for assurance. My mom stepped forward, closed in and continued to stare at me. Did she need something? Was I about to get into trouble? Should I know what I had done? The temperature of my body rose by the question.

“Yeah, it is.” She turned her head to check on the other kids and blonde hair swept across her shoulders. She took another step forward, leaving inches between us. She cleared her throat, inhaled and spoke in a whisper: “They’re Muuuums, Maki. Don’t you get it?” Eyes vacant, I scanned my brain. It’s August. Mother’s Day was May. Her birthday in November... I had nothing.

“I’m pregnant!” I blinked. The room went out of focus. I smiled at my blurred mother, jumped up and down. I pulled her into a hug to convey the excitement I knew she expected. I squeezed tight, and tried to keep the charging questions at bay. How would a kid fit in this tiny apartment? Forget space; how would we afford another person? What doors did this close? How did I figure into this? What were my responsibilities?

I was starting the twelfth grade. This baby would be born in the dark of winter. A childhood was starting as mine ended. I was planning a new life and counting down the days. I drowned in nausea and bile stung my mouth. The news, a knife to any uncomplicated freedom that had been on my horizon. As soon as freedom came to mind, I searched the eyes of my mother. If I felt trapped by this news, what was she feeling?

Pregnant at eighteen, my mother was launched head-first into adulthood as soon as she missed her period. She had been a mom since she was a kid herself. Eighteen. Only a year away for me. I put my hand on my stomach, and ran my fingers along my body. I ran my palms along my waist and tried to dry them off. Her cheekbones were still sharp, but small wrinkles revealed
she was no longer a teen, in her twenties, or even early thirties. Eyes wide, she couldn’t hide the childlike fear, there in the depths of her pupils.

“Congratulations, Mom! This news is so great for you guys!” You guys. I tasted the insincerity of the words. I didn’t mean it how it came out. I didn’t intend to draw a line. I felt lost in the chasm between the two worlds. When I found out mom was pregnant with my little brother Wyatt, I felt deep ambivalence. Not toward my new brother. Toward the situation.

I felt a great deal of resentment toward my mother by the end of high school. My mom and Mark’s relationship was in rapid decline and became more volatile, with each accumulating stress. I desperately needed my mom. She grew frustrated that I wasn’t figuring out adulthood alone like she had. The greatest threat to our relationship was Mark. She loved him. All I saw was a belligerent alcoholic, like her father. The fighting in the house got louder. His alcohol consumption increased, and money disappeared fast. I knew I needed to get out but couldn’t answer how I would do so without abandoning James.

One night, a few months after Wyatt was born, I stupidly tried to intervene while Mark berated my mother, as he spat every degrading term he knew. It was the first time I felt fearful, worried he’d lunge at me. He came close to my face, alcohol seeped from his pores, and spittle flew with each slur: “you fucking know-it-all, bitch. You think you can talk like that to me at my house? Huh?” He screamed and stepped forward. I must have flinched visibly because he laughed like the devil before turning back to my mother.

“Look what you raised. How could you be stupid enough to have two more? Why the fuck do I put up with you?”
My mom yelled at me, told me to leave the room, and my heart sank. I perceived this moment as her making a choice. I registered rejection in place of protection.

A few nights later, I could hear Mark gearing up again. I had watched him drink a two-four before the sun set and he moved onto whiskey. I knew we were in for a bad night. I invited my brother for a slumber party in my room so that he could escape the wall he shared with Mom and Mark. His chest rose and fell softly when the first yells came. He didn’t budge, even when the thud echoed through the hall. I sat, rigid and heard a few more slams and screams. I waited a few moments before leaving the bed without waking James.

My mother lay in a heap on the floor, wailing. Her blond hair stood on end, knotted and clumps ripped out on the floor. A bruise formed on her forehead, between sobs, my mother checked her arms for red marks and scrapes. Any movement seemed to cause her pain. I was split between the anxiety of seeing my mother come apart and the fear Mark would come back at any moment. He had grabbed her by the hair and thrown her to the ground. That was the first bang. The subsequent was from her head, repeatedly hitting the linoleum floor as he called her a cunt.

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Wyatt, James and I all have different experiences growing up. Three kids, across three decades: 1993, 2001, 2011. A child at 19, 27 and 37. Mom has and will always do everything to make Wyatt feel loved. She did the same for me. He and I share the experience of growing up with a mom as both parents. It makes for a special kind of kid. It also made me feel like I couldn't always ask mom questions. She did so much, and I didn't want to hurt her.
Before mom and Wyatt moved away from Hamilton in April 2018, I visited. I took him to Hutch’s on the beach for ice cream. He asked for two scoops to try different flavours: birthday cake and bubble gum. At the worn-down picnic table, his little legs swung. He flung his sandalled feet back and forth and smiled big. A blue ring around his mouth, he dug the plastic spoon into the colourful mounds and shovelled ice cream into his mouth. Children’s screams carried from Pier Four across Bayfront Park. He turned his head, he spotted a boy about his age, eating ice cream with his dad.

“Maki, where’s my dad? Does my dad love me?” He smiled, never looking away from his treat. He was at the age where I had started to ask that question, but he was also the age mom started to date my dad. As soon as he began to talk, he’d wail when James and I went to our dad’s house, asking why he didn’t get to come. The guilt sat in my stomach the entire night, understanding the abandonment he might one day feel from the absence of his father.

“Of course, he loves you, booger! Your daddy is sick, and that’s why you have a super mom to take care of you.” He smiled, took a few licks from his spoon and started to sing *The Octonauts* theme song.

Anytime his dad comes up, I felt a deep sense of shame. The night he and mom had a big fight, I took James and I left. I don’t know what happened in the house, where I’d left mom crying on the floor and his father screaming, drunk in the hall. Wyatt had enough obstacles without me being one of them. If mom, James and I all tried hard enough, we could pick up the pieces and fill the dad-shaped-hole in his little world.

When he calls me on the phone, he sings both David Bowie and Freddie Mercury’s parts to “Under Pressure,” and I miss him. I miss him when I see the pictures mom posts
on Instagram of him dressed as Ziggy Stardust from his first Halloween in Nova Scotia. Mom called me from Bobby’s cab and asked if I knew how hard it was to find red hair spray in a coastal town of two thousand. I miss Wyatt. The profound kind, felt through the whole body. I worry if I’m failing him.

I didn’t experience family in the traditional sense and Wyatt won’t either. I hate the terms “half” and “step,” about family. They are marks of differentiation, teaching coded and corrosive ideologies. The seemingly harmless prefixes teach children and adults alike to love by degree. Wyatt only knows James and me as his brother and sister.
6. So, I’m The ByProduct Of A One-Night Stand

One morning in the seventh grade, I was halfway out the door for school when my Mom shouted after me: “I need you to come home for lunch!” It was an unusual request, but I didn’t give it much thought. A few hours later, I came out of the alley three doors down from our house. Mom sat in the front seat of an unfamiliar beige Honda Civic, idling across the street. I clutched the wooden porch rail, squinted, and tried to see into the car. Mom nodded, took a few folded sheets of paper, slipped out of the car and crossed the street. On the porch, she pulled me close and kissed the top of my head as the car pulled away.

“What’s going on, Mom? Who was that guy driving?” Moments from the weeks prior fell into place, ran through my mind like video on a reel. I had all the puzzle pieces, but no box cover. No bigger picture.

“Head up to your room, I’ll be right there.” I rushed up Mom’s tread, not far behind. I was woefully unprepared.

“Honey, the only reason you don’t already know what I’m going to tell you is that it was all put together quite recently.” Sweat trickled down my spine and seeped through the fabric of my shirt. In her hands, the pages from her pocket. Pictures from a colour printer. I searched the frozen features for hints of familiarity.

“They’re your sisters.” Her tone, heavy with remorse, did little to ease my short breaths. The silence sat. Uneasy, she inched closer. Her sombre expression and curled shoulders promised that this was no joke.
“Am... am I adopted, mom?” Arms open, she pulled me close, a hint of a laugh in her voice. I felt extended in a void, some foreign in-between space. Everything I knew about myself shattered.

“No, of course not.” I found no warmth or comfort in the hug. Her laughter made me feel stupid, and her reassurances meant nothing. I thought about all the photos of her holding me in the hospital. The more confused I felt, the less I trusted her.

“Jason isn’t your dad.” I didn’t know Jason, her high school boyfriend. He was in jail most of my life, but I loved his mother, my grandma Jo. She took me to Nova Scotia and Disney World. Her son, Jason, abused my mom. She left him before I was a year old.

“Jason and I broke up. I was eighteen and... With... a friend. A few weeks later, Jason and I got back together, and well, here you are.” Mom was no more equipped to share the information than I was to receive it. She wanted me to ask questions. I balled my fists and dug into the quilt beneath me. I wanted to talk to dad. I ached for a hug and wallowed in the silence.

“It was complicated, and we were young. I never told Serge. He saw a photo I shared of you on Facebook and well... Look at the one on the left. Her name is Sydney. Isn’t she like your clone?” She hesitated, crafting each sentence with care. Her trembling finger pointed to the face of a girl about eight: I didn’t want a clone, I wanted to be discussing The Outsiders with the rest of my class. I already felt like enough of a freak without this new development.

“So, I’m the by-product of a one-night-stand.” The seething words, lifted from an episode Desperate Housewives or Sex in the City I’d been sneaking while babysitting James, hurt her. I boiled my existence, her sacrifices, down to a blind, childish mistake. My tone, frank
and distant, became the first brick of an eventual wall between us. Before her eyes, I marked the first transition from child to jaded adult.

“Does dad know?” I had no idea what answer I wanted. My family felt threatened.

“He does. I told him a few nights ago.” The words did nothing to stave the pulsing I felt through my body. Dad didn’t tell me. Had he been treating me differently? What did he think? I stayed silent.

“I thought we could have lunch with Serge…” I had to get the news and meet him? All in one day? Twelve is an emotional cesspool of identity crises without the added stress of finding out everything you thought you knew was a lie. Would he hate me if I rejected him the first day? I wanted to please so much it stung.

An hour later, I sat in the back seat of Serge’s car. Mom sat in the front, and they chatted back and forth. I stayed quiet. He looked at me in the rear-view mirror, scanned my reflection like an x-ray. He drove us to a restaurant. I’d said little since hearing the news. I counted the number of squares between us on the checkered tablecloth. I didn’t want to be rude, but I didn’t know what to say.

“Maki, turn your head. I want to see your profile. Yep, she has your eyes. Her nose has the same little slope as you, Serge.” Mom fawned over the similarities. I felt exposed and vulnerable. His attention made my skin flush.

He and mom sat on one side of the table and reminisced. Serge asked me a lot of questions. When he opened his mouth, I noticed two rows of straight teeth. I bit my lips to hide the gap I’d begged mom to correct. Both she and Serge had braces as teenagers. Would he be embarrassed I could fit a dime between my two front teeth? He scanned me, tried to claim bits
and pieces. His left eye squinted a little like mine did when I smiled. Discomfort coursed through my body, and I flashed back to visits with Nana. I became an object. My purpose, performing.

Within a week of meeting Serge, a package arrived on the doorstep, the size of a tissue box, wrapped in brown parcel paper. Reaching down to the stoop, I picked up the box, entered the house.

“Mooooooooom. There’s something here for you.” I raised the package, rattled its contents and the paper crinkled. I checked the mailing address:

Genex Diagnostics, Inc.

#101-1001 W Broadway, Dept 600

Vancouver BC V6H 4E4

Canada

“I’m in the kitchen!” I shed my backpack and sweater, fumbling the box. Onions and garlic seared and wafted through the hallway, burning my eyes. The watering intensified the closer I got to mom. She stood, hunched over a cast-iron Dutch oven, oil splattering in all directions. Impatient, I prodded her with the package.

“Oh, it’s here. I’ve meant to talk to you.” She trailed off, thumbing the label at the center of the package. My throat tightened. I wished I had left the box, gone into the living room and curled up on the couch with James while he watched *Monsters Inc.*

“Well, it’s a unique situation with Serge. He’s been married to Robin for almost ten years. They both have good jobs. Four daughters. It’s important for everyone that we have the correct information before moving forward.” I nodded, but my stomach churned. I’d learned
about how to collect DNA in science class. I wished she’d taken some hair or spit in my sleep, so I could avoid feeling like a discarded item that needed to be looked over before it’s claimed.

The rough, bristled swab scraped inside my cheek. It irritated the skin and left my mouth sore, tasting like bloody spearmint. The package stank like the inside of a hospital. In the pit of my stomach sat deep shame at needing to be identified. My mother placed the white stick into a tube and stuffed it into the manila envelope to send off. In one stroke, my understanding of family shattered. Among the pieces were my sense of self. A few inches of plastic would go off to some sterile lab would determine whether I was his. One day, I got home and found a paper on the table. *Genex Diagnostics.*

Most of the words and graphs on the pages were indecipherable, but the necessary information was clear:

Child: “Makenzie”

Alleged Father: “Serge”

**CONCLUSIONS OF DNA PARENTAGE TEST: PROBABILITY OF PATERNITY:** >99%

It was off-putting reading the words “alleged father,” even when it was confirmed. It seemed like the quintessential moniker for our relationship. He would always be my alleged father. Another barrier. From that day, Serge requested I call him Dad. I didn’t want to and doing so felt like a betrayal to Paul. My dad. So, I didn’t. A tube of spit and cheek cells did not earn Serge a title change. He told me he loved me. I shrivelled and responded, but I didn’t mean it. It felt like saying it to Nana after she kicked me, hollow. I worried that my insincerity
would taint the word and my ability to feel love. I hardened. I was a child, expected to process emotion in step with the adults.

A few weekends after getting the test results, Serge insisted I join him at a gymnastics event to watch his eldest daughter, Sydney, compete. Mom suggested it would be good for me. On the silent drive, I fidgeted. My skin didn’t fit. Pride engulfed his tone as he relayed her stats and scheduled event times. My life and identity in flux, my vulnerability went unacknowledged, repeatedly shoehorned into challenging situations.

In the cold gymnasium, he introduced me to his confused friends and acquaintances as his daughter. They were saved the “illegitimate love child” story and simply left to wonder about my possible connection. Besides, that title brought on a bounty of problematic connotations. The look on the faces of people who’d known Serge for years asserted I didn’t belong. Resentment felt like an anvil in my gut.

For about two years, Serge took me out for lunch once a week. I think I saw a handful of movies with him. I slept over on the leather couch of his home in the suburbs on the Hamilton mountain. His daughters slept upstairs, I read the subliminal messaging. I felt like a peg, jammed into a space it didn’t fit for the sake of finishing the project.

Mom invited Serge to my eighth-grade graduation. My classmates asked questions. She made me go to Serge’s house the night that Dad moved out. Eventually, Serge got bored. My shine wore off. I experienced radical mood swings and struggled to control my emotions. Everything inside felt intense enough that I’d be ripped to shreds. He hadn’t asked for a surly teenager.
I plucked up the courage to ask Serge for the fifty dollars to cover my grade nine yearbook. I couldn’t afford it; my mom assured me that morning that asking Serge would be fine. He riffled through his leather wallet and ran his fingers through the rainbow of bills. My palms slicked.

He explained that I had to repay the money, or his wife would be upset. I thought since he lived in a big house on the mountain and all his daughters played sports, it wasn’t a big deal. I hadn’t asked him for anything before. All my friend’s dads bought them things and took them places, and he wanted to act like my dad. I felt so ashamed and regretted accepting or even asking for help. I felt rejected in a moment of vulnerability. That was the last time I spoke to Serge.

At school that afternoon, I stood in the pale pink bathroom stall. My chest ached, and lungs heaved. I could not catch my breath, and the panicky huffs echoed. In the mirror, mascara turned my tears into charcoal streaks. I talked myself down and forced myself to move on. I didn’t process anything. I felt like a failure, which defined all my choices, contributed to the person I became. I did not like who I was.

Mom and dad separated within eighteen months of Serge’s arrival. Serge and his wife Robin broke up a few years later. She said the events had no connection. I took on responsibility like Atlas under the sky. Robin felt like an addition to the growing list of women I couldn’t trust. I adopted a certain nihilistic point of view towards love and relationships. My existence, from my teenage perspective, caused the implosion of families. I was scarred by the experience.

The introduction of Serge complicated my life. I didn’t know how to make others comfortable with my complicated paternity. He became the first in a line of men who hurt me
before I turned eighteen. Even long after he was out of my life, he took up valuable real estate in my brain. I kept him a secret, but he felt like this barrier between myself and other people.

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I ticked off the calendar boxes in black Sharpie and marked down the days until I moved to university. I fantasized about a fresh start. I bought into the idea that turning eighteen bestowed magical adulthood wisdom and properties. I could forget some of the more painful parts of my life and childhood.

The first day in my new life, I met Corinne, referred to from here as Co, my roommate in residence. She and I bonded, stopped each night at the ice cream bar for scoops of mint chocolate chip and cookie dough. In the final three weeks of school, we stitched our sheets and light bedding together into a magnificent blanket fort, with the mattresses pushed together into permanent slumber-party-mode. At our current address, 35 Moss Place, the carpets matched the street name.

We’d now lived together a year and a half. Co came home with me for a few days before she took the train back to her hometown for the holidays. She wanted to see my old haunts. We started at the Starbucks, down the street from two of the cramped apartments I lived in with my big, complicated blended family. Slumped down in the wing-backed chair, I tilted my boots to the electric fireplace, warming the soles. The synthetic flames flickered. Artificial pine heightened the festive atmosphere. Co adjusted in the seat across from me. I sipped my drink, molten chocolate powder coating my tongue. I wriggled in my chair, and my eyes scanned the bustling cafe. The roots of my hair dampened with sweat. I worried I’d run into someone I knew.
The sleigh bells on the door clattered. Pinpricks numbed my fingers; adrenaline rocked my body. *Jingle.* Two figures passed through the fogged glass entrance. Despite sitting next to the radiating orange flames, my body froze. Solid. Serge and Sydney. My estranged biological father and his daughter. My half-sister. A term I hated, but I had no idea what to call her. Each ridge on my spine tightened. My tongue felt swollen, out of place in my mouth, battling the saliva. When had I last seen him? Chin tilted away, I made every attempt to veil myself and blend into the fixtures. How could I get away? I ground my molars hard against one another. My glands pulsed and teeth ached.

“My precious.” Co stroked her cup and took a long sip, licking away the creamy chocolate from her lips. Completely oblivious, she continued spouting quotes from our *Lord of the Rings* marathon. She knew nothing of Serge. I chortled despite the internal chaos. Neck tucked into curled shoulders, I tried to occupy as little space as possible. I tracked Serge. He left Sydney at a table near the door, stepped into line, and inched closer to the register.

“Co. My stuff. Watch. Bathroom. Be back.” The last sounds faint, my back already to her. I gasped and choked. Fingers pressed to my sternum, I fought to catch my breath. A panic attack. My third that week. No one knew about them, but Co. I hoarded information, fearful sharing pieces of myself would backfire.

I paced the single-occupant washroom. Footsteps and short breaths looped between tile walls. Co did not know about Serge. I hadn’t spoken to Serge since I was fourteen. In my new life, away from Hamilton, Serge didn’t exist. Paul was my dad, and that’s all anyone needed to know.
I think that’s why despite her being my best friend, I hadn’t told Co, or anyone else I’d met in Guelph about Serge and my paternity secret. It bubbled together, past spilled into present. I emerged from the bathroom, Co outside the door, one hand on the metal doorframe, the other offered a cup of water.

“Do you want to talk in our seats or stay in the bathroom?” I grabbed the arm of her sweater and tugged her into the small room where I’d fought to catch my breath moments before. She stood and hugged me for a long time. She rocked gently and stroked my hair. Her silence loosened my chest, long inhales guided mine.

“So, my Dad. Paul. Paul is my dad. He raised me. He started dating my mom when I was four. They had James when I was almost eight. I wrote a toast for their wedding. During that time, I thought my dad was my mom’s high school boyfriend, Jason. All I knew is that he wasn’t a good guy, which always made me worry that I wasn’t a good person. He was incarcerated for attempted murder. I don’t remember ever being with him. I only know him from a couple photos and grainy VHS tapes. I had a relationship with his mother, but that disintegrated by the time I was eleven.”

“Wow, ok. That’s a lot. I understand why you don’t talk about it.” Her eyes searched mine, pupils scanning for answers. She let me set the pace, control the information.

“There’s more. It’s embarrassing, which is why I don’t talk about it…” I knew I could trust Co, but I didn’t want the way she looked at me to change.

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.” I flinched, tried to find a catch to her kindness. She traced her index finger along the lines in my palm. I squeezed my fingers tight around hers and held as I pressed on.
“At twelve, I came home to my mom, telling me Jason wasn’t my dad; it was a man named Serge. As the details come together, I think they knew longer than they said, but no one knew what to do. So, grades seven, eight and nine, I would have meals with Serge, spend time with his wife and daughters. His mounting marital tensions strained our relationship.” The words tumbled out, garbled between gasps. I pressed on, fearing if I stopped, I’d crumble under the emotion.

“I stopped visiting Serge as much. We got in an argument over lunch one day, I left, and he didn’t call to work it out. The rejection stung, I resisted reaching out. Life carried on. I resented being a kid in that situation and always being expected to handle things like an adult. His swift exit reinforced my belief I didn’t deserve love. I don’t like talking about him for so many reasons. The shame. The guilt. I feel like people would judge knowing that I could have a relationship with Serge but choose not to. I don’t want to hurt my dad.” Despite having seen me through depressive episodes and anxiety attacks, she saw me as a resilient person. Capable.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to anyone. Especially me. Whatever you need.” Co’s grip never loosened until I broke away. Whenever I talked about Serge, pity creeps into the observer’s expression. Everything changed. I ceased being a person and morphed into an intricate puzzle, almost inconsequential until able to process my obscene family tree.

I emerged from the washroom and returned to my seat. Serge disappeared into the crowd. Like a prey animal, I avoided sudden movements, kept my arms at my side. I didn’t want to draw attention. In my peripheral vision, I saw Sydney barreling my way. I did the math with our four-year age gap; she’d be fifteen. A little older than I was when Serge and I last spoke. Her baby-fat face resembled mine. I glanced over her shoulder to ensure she was alone. I
reminded myself it wasn’t her fault that her dad and I were on the outs. I staggered when Sydney made contact. I sported my best picture day smile.

“Hi, Syd! It’s been a long time. How are you doing?” She smiled, and her silver braces beamed with their festive red and green elastics. I always envied when kids at school visited the orthodontist over lunch and returned with mouths full of their favourite colour. I wanted to give her the comfort I craved from the adults surrounding me.

“I’m good! Dad said I could come, say hi!” Dad. She didn’t say, my dad. Just dad, inferring he served the same role to us both. He was her dad. She gestured over, and he scrunched down in his chair, ignoring her. He had more sense than to come over. I was rarely petulant, but I refused to acknowledge Serge. The pause lengthened, and I worried she’d ask why I kept the length of the Starbucks between her father and me.

“Sydney, this is my roommate, Corinne. Co. We met at our university dorms last year, and now she’s my best friend!” Co extended her arm to Sydney, shook hands. Sydney beamed at Co.

“Roommate! That is so cool and grownup! I’d rather live with my friends than three sisters!” She’d used the s-word. I brushed aside my blunt cut bangs and stuffed my hands into my pockets. The conversation veered into the uncomfortable, and I wanted to avoid making her feel bad. I tucked a stray hair behind her ear, and she chuckled.

“Don’t worry, kid. You’re the oldest. You’re their boss! A few years, and you’ll be off to university yourself.”
“I can’t wait!” She teetered back and forth, then checked over her shoulder. “Well, I have a hockey game, so I should probably get back to Dad.” She squeezed tight around my waist, and I hugged back and gulped down the throbbing pit in my throat.

“Good to see you, kiddo. I hope you win your game!” What else was there to say? She’d grown more than a foot in the five years of radio silence. A teenager, developing her own agency and life. I wanted to know Sydney, but I felt too fragile to face all that came with her.

She skipped off, and I waved and turned away quickly to avoid Serge. This was already too much. Co stepped forward, hugged me tight and thanked me for being her family.

Serge didn’t hold me as a child. I have no photos. No mementos. There was no footage of him teaching me to ride a bike. The moments didn’t exist. They belonged to dad. My perception that Serge left me easily felt like coming from him meant I came from nothing. It doesn’t get easier carrying Serge around. I could forgive him, but never really forget the truth. It bubbles to the surface. Serge became my failure, and that wove into my identity. As I left Starbucks, my skin morphed into a prison, maimed by experience. Goosebumps formed when I was touched, hairs stood on end. Skin blazed, and anxiety surged. I felt broken and alone. I learned better in the coming years.
7. I’m On Fire

August 2012, I returned from a life-changing six-week trip backpacking through Europe. In September, I returned to school, lost my virginity and something snapped. I self-medicated with alcohol, one-night stands and self-harm. I worked a job I hated, where my supervisor dealt weed to most of the staff. My performance in school suffered. I spent the entire winter semester of 2013 with a duvet pinned over my window, kept out the sunlight and hid from the world. I’d had episodes of deep depression before, but this was different. The emptiness felt endless.

In the summer of 2013, I wallowed in all the ways I was a failure. Erratic moods and insomnia ruled my life. I spent semester after semester on academic probation. By all my definitions, I was, so I wasn’t shocked when I opened an email marked URGENT, stating I was to take a year off. However, I was distraught. I wailed over the written confirmation I wasn’t up to scratch.

I responded by sending a thick, manila envelope of documentation outlining my mental decline over the previous three years. The university repealed the decision, but the process shook my increasingly fragile foundation. Permanent dark circles took up residence under my eyes. In the following months, I’d get lost, rereading the pages from my case, confirming the physical and mental health challenges I ignored in my determination to assert independence at all costs. I never fully recovered from my shoulder reconstruction surgery in February 2011. Emotionally, I was losing myself to long depressive episodes that I ignored which meant sleeping too much, or not at all.
I said I wanted direction, but I wanted control, the most elusive thing in a depression spiral. My conception of control was a mirage that disappeared into the distance anytime I got close. Anger wore down my body and mind. I ground and clenched, flattened my teeth, held my muscles tight to the point of spasms and rubbed patches of my skin raw. Fiery rage charred my insides.

The intense need to prove myself beat out the mountains of evidence that I needed time to stop and evaluate. I went back to school in September 2013, took five courses and held a job, working the 3-11 shift at a coffee shop four to five nights a week. Everything felt empty, void of meaning. My edges started to fray, but what twenty-year-old wants to face their demons. I saved a chunk of money. I maintained the illusion of semi-functionality.

I told everyone I wanted adventure, but the truth lingered below the surface, along with the anger. I sought, craved, even fetishized distance as some cure-all. Distance from my life, from the months-long period of depression that devoured friendships, relationships and most everything else. Jumping on a plane with a one-way ticket doesn’t magically make those aspects of yourself disappear. Instead, the most sinister demons tuck themselves into your luggage, manifesting and festering into something worse: baggage.

I knew by October I needed a break. I decided to take the next two semesters off. Fuelled by a toxic combination of spite and self-doubt, I fled February 2014, best friend in tow. Co and I held hands in our seats, rumbling on the tarmac. The whirling propellers rattled the plane, making my teeth chatter. The budget AirPortugal craft jolted forward, take off was choppy, and the ride never settled.
Seven hours later, stepping out of Aeroporto de Lisboa, the balmy fifteen-degree weather felt tropical compared to the deep negatives back in Canada. The flight-induced adrenaline wore off. My nerves felt exposed, sizzling under the sun. Co and I wore long-sleeved shirts rolled up to our elbows and stood out against the bundled locals sporting scarves and thick coats. On the subway, a man in tattered overalls wandering the train cars, playing the accordion. Perched on his shoulder, a chihuahua with a small pail in its mouth, marked with a euro symbol, collecting tips. Portuguese filled the compartments, rolling Rs and other familiar sounds. Co and I, both fluent in French, later gushed over glasses of deep red wine the uncanniness of picking up every sixth word or so, thanks to the interconnectivity of Western romance languages.

Atop a flight of steep concrete stairs, a glowing exit sign guided us to the surface. Up the last few steps, the mouth of the stone archway spat us onto cobblestone streets of the old city. The first order of business: finding a place to sleep. After a few blocks, through a pedestrian area, I spotted a travel office. Co offered to sit on the lip of the fountain with our things and give me a little more mobility. I shed my twenty-pound pack and ukulele case and walked to the small storefront.

“Ola. I’m looking for a hostel for a few days.”

“Of course. Somewhere close?” Each syllable rolled into the next of her heavily accented English. She spoke slow and precise, eyes searching mine to ensure I understood each word.

“Please!” She pushed back from the desk, stood up and walked me over to a table covered in pamphlets. Her earnest almond eyes sparkled. I smiled, and she grabbed a map the size of a placemat. In a red pen, she drew an X.
“Us, here.” She tapped the $X$ a few times and drew a line left with her pen, curved right and the upwards. The route wasn’t complicated; four turns total. I took the bright glossy page, scanning the path a few more times, reading each of the street names over.

“Obrigada.” I waved and exited the store. The woman’s kind air and the straightforward route didn’t prepare us for the final leg of the journey, which required scaling a nearly a 90-degree-angle hill, all our possessions strapped to our backs. It stung every time the canary yellow trolley creaked up the line and passed us, mocking our frugality.

The clay building stood four stories and each set of shutters was painted a different vibrant colour. The plan was to spend three months abroad, travelling. In the tourist-heavy areas of most major European cities, hostels hire help a few hours a day with phones and laundry, in exchange for room and board. The goal was to find this set up in as many cities as possible, cut down on living costs and splurge on experiences. The woman behind the desk assured that positions would free up in a week when the group of eight Australian exchange students moved into their dorms at the local university. I booked two bunks in a room of eighteen for a week. 140€. Each. I handed over my passport and counted the crisp blue, yellow and red euro notes into her hand. She turned to the computer and resurfaced after a few taps on her keyboard with a keycard and a slip of paper, indicating the WIFI password, curfew and other “house rules.”

Co called top bunk. I was grateful, worrying it’d wake the room of strangers clambering down the ladder if I couldn’t sleep.

I settled in and then walked out to the balcony, gobsmacked by the beauty expanding in all directions. Straight ahead, the city sprawled, a collage of buildings, all colours and heights.
The ocean hugged the south shore of the capital. The red steel of the Ponte 25 de Abril glistened, connecting Lisbon to Almada. The fortified ruins of Castelo de S. Jorge perched on a hilltop to the north, the perfect vantage point to take in the scene. The patchwork of gorgeous apartments and rolling hills was intoxicating.

Each bunk, assigned a number, had a corresponding locker at the foot of the beds. I stowed essential documents in the cabinet and tucked its small brass key in one of my wallet’s card slots. *Mental note:* take out cash in the next few days to disperse among bags, in case our cards were taken by pickpockets. The trick, learned from my grade nine geography teacher, always stuck. I heard horror stories from the yearly Westdale trip to France for grade eleven French Immersion students that I couldn’t afford to take.

Through the cobblestone streets, I beamed, enamoured by the bright ceramic tiles, and mosaic streets. Buttercup walls brought the sun to the earth. Through the Arco de Rua Augusta, I faced the ocean. The calm water glistened beneath the cloudless cyan sky. All the weight in my heart eased. I left the arch’s shade, removed my flats and stepped onto the cold grains of sand.

The next day, we returned with our instruments. My stomach felt full of purpose. Co tuned the eight strings of her mandolin, vibrating each pair into harmony. The velvet-lined ukulele case lay open at our feet, I stepped forward, fingers on the ukulele’s first three frets and strummed a G-chord. Down, down, up, up, down, up. Co jumped in on the mandolin, she offered an encouraging smile as I repeated the opening lick, trying to swallow my fear. I opened my mouth and let the words ring through the narrow street.

“Hey, little girl, is your daddy home, or did he go away and leave you all alone? I got a bad desire. Oh, oh, oh, I’m on fire.” I stumbled through the first few words but fell into a rhythm
and the city’s natural acoustics. Co started the second verse, I harmonized and dipped into my lower register. I began to enjoy myself.

A couple in their fifties walking by stopped. Hands clasped, they pulled each other close and swayed until after the end of the song, radiating love. The man kissed the woman’s forehead, thanking us over and over.

“You’ve given us the sign we needed. Thank you.” His British accent like a lullaby, his darling giggled. “We’ve only known each other for a few months, and we’re moving in together. At our age, if you know, why wait. Our friends think we’re nuts, so we decided to take a five-day trip to prove we won’t kill each other. We move into our flat in three weeks.” The woman nodded enthusiastically, assured every word he spoke was the truth.

“I’m On Fire’ is our song. It played the night we met. We just stepped out of our hotel to get lunch; you’re playing our song. That’s fate. Thank you. Can I take a photo, just us, girls?” Her partner held the camera, offering a bemused smile as Co and I arranged ourselves around his love. I heard the click, she turned to each of us, a quick hug, and passed me a twenty euro note as a final thank you.

While we were making anywhere from ten to twenty-five euro a day playing in the streets, after a week in the hostel, I thought about the expense. It took so many sacrifices to get the two of us abroad. The receptionist assured me there’d be work in eight days. I proposed a site I’d heard of last time I travelled, that friends swore by called CouchSurf. Co agreed, seeing no problem with my suggestion of crashing with a stranger before coming back and working the hostel for two weeks. We’d save money, earn more busking and head off to Spain or the South of France in a few weeks.
On the public computers in the communal room, I typed out a bio for the site, offering a witty write-up about mine and Co’s adventures: we’re super neat and will stay out of your hair, or socialize, depending on what you want. I messaged a couple people in the area, and Brigitte answered within the hour. A German woman in her mid-twenties, occupation listed as a Ph.D. candidate in Portuguese Literature. That night, she led us up the fourth flight of stairs to her attic apartment, sharing how she’d fallen in love with a bartender, native to Lisbon, and they planned to move to Brazil when she completed school.

On our third night in her tiny apartment, she suggested dinner at an Indian restaurant, about four kilometres away. A beautiful star-splattered night, I suggested the three of us walk. Co maintains to this day that the best curry she’s ever eaten came out of that restaurant’s kitchen.

On the walk home, I mentioned I needed to find an ATM. Brigitte suggested one in the nearby metro station. She waited outside while Co and I walked to the machine and each took out a large assortment of hundred, fifty and twenty euro notes to distribute in our luggage later. I preferred not to carry credit or debit cards from day-to-day. Brigitte stood in the street; she slipped her phone in her pocket. Co and I followed her and walked along the dark, winding roads. No people crossed our path in the first ten minutes. The brisk evening wind blew the nape of my neck, goosebumps rose. Each breath felt like taking a long gulp of ice water. I looked around, aware of the crushing darkness in the narrow side street, void of streetlights. A rock skittered across the ground and a few shuffling footsteps. I’m not sure what I expected to happen.

Two men emerged from a doorway, stepping into our path. One had a matted beard and a burning cigarette drooping from his mouth. The light of the moon caught off the blade in his
hand. Eyes down to his fist, his knuckles wrapped around the hilt. The other man clutched a slightly larger knife and spoke. I could not understand them, the situation’s intensity was crystal-clear. I froze, recognizing our delicate position. Brigitte spoke in rapid-fire Portuguese, pointing between herself to us a few times.

My pulse pounded in my jaw and throat. Blood rushed to my ears, and I heard a harsh buzzing. This was my fault. I suggested leaving the hostel and proposed the three of us walked. I thought of the arch and busking in the street. The warm sun and cool breeze, standing on the sand, only inches from the ocean.

“Be calm, girls. Slowly take your purse off your shoulder and hand it to him, and everything will be fine.” Brigitte kept a level tone. Too surreal to process, the only thought in my head, *I can cancel a credit card. Thank god they can’t get the passports*. I raised my hand to the purse strap, wondering if he’d take the purse then slit our throats anyway.

The leather strap ripped from my hand, the patter of disappearing footsteps and the men, gone, in an instant. Still, as a statue, it felt like hours before I could move. My mind ran the exchange on loop, and I experienced the scene over and over. Brigitte consoled us, guided us back to the apartment and made tea. She said this kind of thing was common, she’d file the police report, she assured. *Of course*, we were scared. She insisted she took no offence in our wanting to return to the hostel the next morning. It didn’t occur to me until months later that Brigitte could have been involved. Led us down specific streets. Perhaps no report was ever filed. Maybe I was paranoid.

Co and I felt drained, in every sense. The prospect of calling our parents felt as daunting as the theft; soon we would be listening to how we confirmed their greatest fears, how
they knew, *told us*, something would happen on the trip and had warned us. The worst part,
above the violation, losing money and the fear, was the shame. My strained relationship with my
mother meant I had no way to predict her reaction. I felt stupid and worried she’d blame me.

Co sacrificed everything to come on this trip. Her parents both worked well-paid
government jobs and threatened to stop funding her education if she took a break from school. A
year prior, Co sold her motorcycle, and her father put the thousand-dollar earnings in an account
for emergencies. We had one. When Co called home, uttered the words, *we were mugged*, her
father said, “poor planning doesn’t constitute an emergency.”

I contacted a friend I’d met while backpacking Europe two years prior, Kayleigh. She
lived in a flat in Churchdown, a town nestled in England’s Cotswolds. Her generosity turned into
a literal lifeline. An incredible offering from someone I’d only known through fourteen days of
shared travel and a transatlantic email relationship. Last-minute flights cost a small fortune, but I
felt unsafe in this city. I screamed in my sleep each night. I wanted to go to a country I’d already
visited. England sounded like comfort and familiarity, all the things I thought I wanted to flee.

Two days later, Co and I returned to Aeroporto de Lisboa, caught a plane to Gatwick
and from the airport, rode a shuttle 30 miles to central London. The final step, boarding a train to
Gloucestershire. Kayleigh waited in the station’s car park, leaned against a boxy grey Peugeot,
arms extended, summoning Co and me to safety. I sought to travel, have a few care-free months
to work on my relationship with myself and heal old wounds. It didn’t work like that, but the
time in England ended up being a gift. Co and I hunkered down in the UK for almost a month.
Kayleigh went off to work each day and left us tucked away in her tiny town. At first, I felt numb
at the plan’s shattered pieces, thinking how Co and I should be on a beach in Spain. I felt the familiar sting of failure.

The distance and escape I sought turned into facing all the things I feared from home, under worse circumstances. Every day, we discussed our options. Could we extend the trip? Could we risk trying to make our remaining money stretch and stay? Shaken to the core, I didn’t feel safe. Lost in a similar state as when the URGENT email arrived. The adventure lost its appeal. The trip didn’t fulfill its purpose, but it did serve another.

I saw J.R.R Tolkien’s grave. Strolled the grounds of Oxford. Wandered through idyllic towns alongside beautiful rivers flowing between crumbling stone rocks. The trip changed me. I found courage and peace. I faced a worst-case scenario, had to ask for help and spend time thinking through what mattered. Regardless of the experience and its trauma, I softened.

The day my phone rang, my mom’s face on the screen, I tucked myself into Kayleigh’s beige bedroom for privacy. Rain droplets gathered on the windowpane, but no more tumbled from the overcast sky. I snapped at every question, defensive and angry. My mother was patient and peeled back the layers. Once she knew I wanted to come home, she made the promise to make it happen. I had no idea how she would manage, having a thirteen and three-year-old at home and no job in the conventional sense. I forgave my mother for being human. I accepted her love.

My mom was the unexpected savior. She painted, sending acrylic colours stretched across the canvas. Over the years, she painted recreationally, but had started to garner interest from friends in Hamilton. She painted and sold two paintings in a few days to bring us home. It marked the first instance of a different, genuine kind of unconditional love I felt from my mother.
I felt no expectation. Her only real concern that I was stranded and needed my mom. It didn’t make me a failure.

I used to worry that she, like Nana, wanted me to perform for the blue ribbon, earn her love. I’d grown enough to accept her support. It set the basis for our relationship going forward. My anger blinded me to so much of my mother’s growth. Gone was the woman I knew as a small child, a heated temper, little patience. She harnessed her resourcefulness and could turn anything into money. Food, photos, blank canvases... It took getting stranded in a terrible scenario to cut my mom some slack and accept her help. To receive the love, she offered.

When I think back on the trip, I used to wince, fixating on the painful parts. For a long time, I felt I deserved what happened. The ignorance of gallivanting off to Europe with no plan. The world doesn’t work that way. I don’t remember details of the faces of the men who robbed us, or the colour of Brigitte’s eyes.

Seven years later, I think of Portugal, I see the trip that changed my life in all the ways I never expected. I don’t think of the two strangers wielding knives, stirring up all the anxiety and distrust I already associated with men. I think of busking in the streets. The British couple who stopped walking, grabbed each other and swayed, radiating love. I think of the love my mom showed me and what I accepted. I think of standing over the vines growing around Tolkien’s grave, grateful to be alive and participating in the world.
8. Le Grand Mal

Peter and I met almost six years ago. It was three months after the mugging in Lisbon. He was a high school friend of my roommate, Heather. I returned books to the titled IKEA shelf. I unpacked and wanted to nestle into my old room. The scattered tealights cast brittle shadows. Co laid on my fresh, washed bedding, and I joined her. After a few moments of silence, I reached for my banjo and started to strum the strings. I sang the opening lines of “Jolene,” and Co jumped in with the harmony.

During the chorus, I noticed Heather and her friend in the doorway. She gestured to the ground, asked to sit with her eyes. I nodded up and down, I kept singing and didn’t miss a beat. I barely acknowledged Peter. Uncomfortable, I played like there was no audience.

The four of us chatted for a while. Peter made me laugh a few times, which was not an easy feat. He raised his prominent eyebrows before he revealed a punchline. The window sat crooked in its frame, open, letting in the smell of fresh earth and rain. There was a witty, handsome guy, sitting on my bedroom floor, but I was numbed by the damage of recent months and depression. He went home that night, and I had a nervous breakdown a few weeks later. I returned to Hamilton and stayed with my oldest friend. Peter faded into the background until that October.

The leaves crunched under my toes as I set down the mismatched plates one by one. Cinnamon wafted through the air, mixed with roasting carrots, boiling potatoes and fall decay. Heather was over at Peter’s cooking the turkey; we had a tiny oven doing its best with the pies. She zipped between the houses all day, walked along the river. On her last outbound trip, she
turned and asked if I could keep an eye on Peter; she knew I did not drink, and it was his first event with friends since being diagnosed, and alcohol became a no-no.

“Diagnosed with what?” I wondered if I had the right friend in mind when she said, Peter.

“Epilepsy. He moved into his apartment, had some friends over and had a seizure. They called an ambulance. He’s seeing a neurologist. It’s pretty serious.”

That night, he sat next to me at dinner, near the end of three mismatched tables cobbled together along the driveway for the holiday. Three things drew me to Peter that night: first, his offbeat humour mirrored mine. Second, his eyes. I couldn’t tell if they were blue or green. Third, his inability to drink. There was a safety to it. I could avoid my mother’s repeated mistake. He joked that I touched his shoulder when I came down the stairs, and he knew I was coming onto him. The next week, he took me to the independent theatre downtown to see an Irish film, *Frank*. He kissed me on the walk home. I admired how Peter managed to be direct and soft. After a few dates, he asked: “if we were in a relationship.” I wanted to flee. I feared to invest in a person other than myself. I feared vulnerability and trust. Peter created a sense of safety. He made it hard to pull away and be skeptical. He worked to hear me and validate my feelings. I distrusted his unfamiliar softness and earnest effort to develop a partnership. I had nagging trust and abandonment issues from years of experience telling me people leave. He wanted to love me, and I resisted because, on most levels, I was convinced that I didn’t deserve his praise and adoration.

The first time I told Peter I loved him, I almost threw up. In a delirious state of panic, I showed up at his apartment. In the dead of winter, I wore only stockings and a bodysuit under
my coat because I forgot to put back on my wool tartan skirt. I had never romantically said I love you to anyone, and the phrase wasn’t volleyed between my family members with ease. When I say, “I love you” to my dad or brother, I got a hasty, “you too.”

A few months later, Peter slumped in his seat on the bus, shoulders rolled forward, glazed eyes fixed on the sparkling, sandpaper-like floor. The yellow chord resisted my first tug. I pulled again and was rewarded with a low ping and the bus lurched to a halt. He was not entirely with me. Panic ate my insides. I debated putting my arm around his waist or pulling at his Stay Golden Ponyboy shirt. Even without his saying, I knew he disliked my preventative measures. I thanked the driver and stepped onto the slick curb.

“How are you feeling?” I tried to keep my tone tentative, voice guarded against onlookers. The last thing I wanted was Peter thinking he was being fussied over.

“Good. Tired.” From the dark bags under his eyes, no one would guess he’d slept thirteen hours the night before. He spent more than half of them thrashing aggressively; it made sense he was drained. The only thing worse than a seizure during the day was their haunting his sleep. Was he okay to walk home? Worry was ice in my veins.

“Text me when you get home.” It came out as a question, aiming for nonchalant, but insistence surfaced. Twenty-one and so tentatively and frightfully in love, I feared anything construed as overbearing would send him in the opposite direction.

He yawned, tilted his head to each side before leaning in close, bringing his lips to mine. Coffee and mouthwash on his breath, his fingertips traced my jawline, and the icy anxiety melted. “Of course, I’ll text. I love you.” Those words were still new. I wanted to hold them close, climb between them and never come up for air.
“I love you too. Talk in a bit.” I turned and walked home, chewing over my worry until the inside of my lip bled. Reminders littered along the route home of the intimacy Peter and I were building, like the bridge, where we’d had our first kiss six months before. Where he’d now stop, bop my nose and whisper, I love you. Love, a weighty, complex word I wasn’t sure I’d experienced unconditionally as a kid.

I entered the house, shed my layers and rechecked my phone. I called out to check if any combination of my three roommates were home. Silence settled around me. After an hour of pacing the kitchen and a dozen unreturned calls, I bolted out the door, hitting the slippery concrete at a half-run. Cars shot past and the wind screamed. I scolded myself for leaving him. Someone leaving the building held the glass doors open as I ran the last hundred meters. I uttered heaving, breathless thank yous. Come on. I slammed the illuminated button over and over.

The doors parted, I shot out, passed the faux-wood panel doors until I reached Peter’s and entered, calling his name. In the living room, I peered over to the two couches: empty. I ran down the hall calling his name over and over, I checked his bedroom. The sheets as we’d left them days prior. The bathroom, the spare room, empty. My mind drowned itself in a sea of worst-case-scenarios.

There he was. On the floor, between the coffee table and the foot of the couch. I’d missed him on the previous check. His pupils were dilated and out of focus, fixed in opposite directions. I ran my fingers along his temples, feeling them throb beneath my fingertips. I held back his damp hair. I saw relief. I choked back an overwhelming mix of anger, sadness or paralyzing terror. His bloodied cracked lips moved, nothing. He tried again with little more
than a hoarse croak. It hurt to see his pale face, gnawed lips slack, and jaw agape, knowing all I
could do was wait. He let out the occasional croak or moan.

My head pounded, heart beating in my throat. I failed him somehow. The period after a
seizure left Peter unable to communicate. Anywhere from a few minutes to half-hour could pass
before I’d hear his voice. The effects lasted much longer. I noticed a bruise forming around his
eye, a small cut on the bridge of his nose from his glasses. Taking his hand in mine, I realized the
damage wasn’t limited to his eye socket. There were scrapes down his wrists and blood on his
knuckles. A grand mal seizure. A bad one. Possibly two, judging by the long recovery time, and
the rapidly swelling scrapes. He likely had one on the walk and another when he got home.

I ran the morning over in my head again and again. Had I brought him his meds? Had
the seizure already started by the time we got on the bus? How did I miss it? Well, I didn’t. Not
really. I told myself it would be okay, so I could avoid an uncomfortable conversation. I quieted
the constant track of “don’t leave me” running through my head with denial. He was fine. I was
fine. I kept telling myself that.

Small pebbles and grains of dirt marked up his cheeks. I wanted nothing more than to
run to the bathroom and check for a First Aid kit and some rubbing alcohol. I had to wait,
holding him until he really resurfaced. The quiet apartment was eerie and still. These
moments, nothing could quiet the burning isolation. I listened to Peter’s ragged breath, felt his
pulse race like sticks on a snare. I brushed his hair back from his forehead, but it made no
difference. Swept away in a fog, he was at his most vulnerable.

“Wuh. Wuuh. Waaahhhhter.” Peter needed a few tries to fight out the words. I looked
between him and the kitchen a few times.
“Can I lift you onto the couch.” His balance had not returned, limbs like sandbags. I asked again if I could lift him, to which he offered a laboured nod. I fumbled him onto the couch, lined the floor with throw pillows, in case another seizure started.

In the kitchen, I twisted the blue tap. Water gushed from the faucet, thunderous against the stainless-steel sink bottom. I hated that I couldn’t hear anything over the gushing spout. I brought Peter the water, helped him adjust on the couch, settling near his feet, resting them in my lap.

The day came back in pieces. Peter had walked two blocks from the bus station and collapsed on the sidewalk. In front of Wimpy’s Diner, a regular spot for breakfast dates. He seized on the ground long enough to bruise his calf, wrist and arm. As far as he could recall, a few people walked by, but no one stopped. There is nothing quiet about a seizure; aggressive flailing, guttural noises, the body relinquishes control and succumbs to the spasms. Peter later pointed out that someone likely, “thought I was tweaking on meth and didn’t want to deal with it.”

There was no pattern, which was more frustrating sometimes than the fact Peter’s brain continued to attack itself at an alarming rate. At the beginning of June, Peter moved back into his parents’ house. I was relieved. I worried when I went to school or work that he’d seize and hit his head, or it would last longer than five minutes. He wouldn’t wake up from Status Epilepticus. Its shadow lingered with every seizure and threatened to snatch away my partner. I moved in at the end of the month, escaping a bad landlord situation that had been intensifying my stress.
Peter moved on from the seizure outside Wimpy’s, but it’s the first time I fully understood the danger of his condition. He and I had such different experiences of his epilepsy. It took a lot of work to communicate our way to and accept this conclusion. For him, the worst thing was the embarrassment of falling to the floor in a restaurant he liked.

I was traumatized that summer when he had a seizure in the water at Sauble Beach. Two hours away from home. I had to fight the current, dragging his writhing body to shore. For a few seconds, I felt sure he was going to die. It’s a lot for a twenty-two-year-old to process. Everything about his condition challenged my trust issues and demanded that I face the unknown. I entered an unstable situation, something I vowed to shed along with childhood. Most people think epilepsy is only seizures, but like all things in life, it is far more nuanced. Through the worst parts of his epilepsy, Peter never complained or acknowledged the limitations. It made me feel like my worry was overdramatic.

As a teenager, my mom told me I was selfish and incapable of empathy, which describes most teenagers. Being the highly emotional person, I am, I took those words, probably spouted in a moment of passing anger and wove them into the fabric of my being. People tried to help me during Peter’s illness, but I was reluctant to accept. He was sick, not me. In our years together, I’ve known two people in my orbit who died in their early twenties from epilepsy. One drowned, taking a bath. The other, the same age as Peter, died, living alone in an apartment. I pretended everything was fine, wearing a mask of unaffectedness.

Peter got skinny, a side effect of his daily thirteen-pill-cocktail, paired with a general loss of appetite. His fragile body was most noticeable when he spent September of 2015 in Western University’s renowned Epilepsy Monitoring Unit. During his three weeks in London,
the medical team mapped his brain to develop a course of action. He lay in a single bed, a hundred kilometres away, trying to sleep in a room of beeping monitors and twelve strangers, a combination of patients and nurses. I had a full-time job and classes each day. At night, I yearned for Peter. I stared at the emptiness to my left and snuggled into his cold, stiff pillow.

Four days into 2016, Peter and I lay in an unfamiliar hotel room, hours from surgery. I pulled myself from the bed about as easily as I could have torn up a sidewalk. I tip-toed around the room, every sound magnified by the intense quiet of the winter morning. I collected my clothes and took in the reality of the day ahead. Shoulds and what-ifs bounced around my brain. Peter had been told he had the right kind of epilepsy, meaning it was operable. No medication would control the seizures. Alcohol and certain foods, anxiety... the triggers were innumerable. Lining up the surgery has been two years in the making, a year-and-a-half of which I’d been a part of, helping navigate the storm.

Snow fell outside the frosted panes. The curtains let in a small stream of light from the streetlamps. I moved next to Peter and shook his shoulder. “Honey, it’s time to wake up. Today is the day.” He rolled away, pulled the covers over his head. Everything from there is a blur until he lay in a stiff hospital gown with green loops plastered across his face. Peter had to be awake for three and a half of the seven-hour surgery. He needed to speak to the surgeon, his half-present voice directing their scalpels away from his language center.

“Mom, what if he doesn’t love me anymore. What if he doesn’t wake up? What if he seizes on the table? What if they hit the language center, and he can’t speak?” I sat on the floor of the fiction section of Indigo Books, sobbing quietly into the phone. If I was too loud, I know Paul, Peter’s dad, would wander over, concerned. Between heaves, I hurled questions at her,
hoping she’d rally and give me answers. My time doing research did little to ease my fear. Defeat, pity and comfort fought for victory in her voice; it was a challenge, as she’d never been in my shoes. My friends didn’t know what support to offer; most of them didn’t have grandparents who had undergone extensive brain surgery, let alone a youthful partner. One friend tried to be sensitive when asking if it was worth the trouble. By the time Peter’s dad found me, I had calmed into a quiet flow of tears, which I wiped between smiles and assurances I was okay. He pulled me into a long hug. He needed it just as much as I did.

Each shift of the clock’s arm in the waiting room made time stop. I fell victim to the terrors and what-ifs. The tile floor screeched with every move and the plastic chairs wrinkled. It couldn’t have gone an hour more than what was predicted, but a week’s worth of thought and emotion tore through my unprepared body.

I had only met his surgeon once, at Peter’s pre-op appointment a month prior, but I recognized him instantly. The doors swung behind him as he approached us, and I was frozen. I barely heard what he said.

“Can’t see him yet... Anesthesia... Swelling....” I depended on his parent’s face to read the news. It was good, but I excused myself to the washroom and allowed myself thirty seconds. Half of a minute to let my body break.

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In the first year and a half of our relationship, I took care of Peter in one way, with the seizures occurring, his body in distress and the healing period. After surgery, it was a new learning curve. I had to relearn his body language.
My favourite photo of Peter is from our year in his parent’s basement. Our first shared home. He sports his old Scouting sash, teeming with hand-stitched badges, a navy velvet newsboys’ hat, 1960s-style tinted glassed and grey boxer briefs. The snap encapsulates his humour. His hip bones also jutted out of his waistband. Each rib hugged tight by his flesh, like saran wrap, revealing too much. Though the sense of humour behind the photo brings my heart joy, sadness makes its way in for the state of his body. Sad for the issues, it stirred up for me and my relationship to my body. One of the odd blessings of Peter’s epilepsy was the opportunity to fixate on someone else’s body.

I never preferred him skinny. I sent a constant flow of baked goods and fried foods from the kitchen. I tried to fattened him up, waving my arms like an Italian grandmother when he resisted. While I wanted my boyfriend back to the usual size, I envied his weight loss. Yearned for it. I knew something was wrong when I’d alternate between looking at my boyfriend’s ribs, protruding from his side, or count the notches of his spine, wishing my body was that for him. For me.

His mind, perpetually half absent, couldn’t notice my inconsistent eating habits, or how I’d cry when I looked in the mirror and dressed in the morning. Every time I ate, I thought of where on my body the calories would go. I spiralled. At least twice a day, I weighed myself, restricted food and skipped meals often. My thoughts were consumed by envy of his lithe body, a hundred pounds lighter than when we met or shame his thin body had to be with mine, trapped under a suit of rolls and cellulite.

As Peter healed, his attention turned to my relationship to my body. I saw it in his eyes; he wondered much time and care I dedicated to his body while I ignored my own. I wallowed in
the deep distrust I felt when Peter tried to care for me. What if I drove him away? Or worse, come to depend on him before he fled. I begged him to love me with my actions but tensed up every time he tried. I was unafraid to show love. I resisted giving myself over or receiving his love.

Life with Peter felt like learning everything over. I required multiple iterations of something before I begin to trust the experience. A million lessons learned through screaming matches and intimate snuggle talks. He showed up for me again and again and again. I assured the small voice that called from the depths of my brain to hush because I want to let him love me. Beyond that, I want us to have a reliable and honest kind of love. I want unconditional love. I knew none of this when he and I met. I finally stopped looking outward for someone to regulate all the noise inside.
9. Resist

My professor walked into the small seminar room and looked out at the twenty students taking her post-colonial literature class. She started to talk about how she tried to resist the “angry feminist” stereotype but wondered why. She was angry, and that was ok. I thought of her when my friend Claire Wilcox told me a story of how a friend accused her of becoming “one of those angry feminists who hate men.” Her retort is perfection: “I don’t hate men, but I’m really fucking skeptical.” I laughed, but the line stuck and made me think. I’d been let down by a lot of men, but I misdirected my anger.

*When is the first time a man made me uncomfortable?* In fourth grade, a boy a year ahead of me pushed me face-first into a rose bush on the walk home. I laughed him off and insisted that it hurt much less than what girls would say to me. I wiped the back of my hand against the cuts on my face. Droplets of blood smeared along my skin. I didn’t react, to show I was tough and lived up to whatever arbitrary definition I had for the word.

I envied men but also resented and feared girls. From early elementary school, I’d conditioned myself to keep my opinions guarded and held them inside alongside my emotions and other ticks that could expose my vulnerabilities. I sought to make myself smaller and more digestible, like many women.

From a young age, I stoked the deep internal burning shame associated with my gender. I took in the message, women were weak, or femininity was a detrimental quality. All I saw were the risks, from the mundane, like being called a bitch, to biology bestowed upon women. Men didn’t have the same physiological or social relationship with children, from
my experience. Despite two people conceiving me, my mother took on all the responsibility, and it defined our life. Even in their absence, men continued to shape our life.

I felt confused by all the mixed messages. Don’t be promiscuous, don’t be standoffish, don’t be too friendly. Different ages, generations and relations offered conflicting guidance. Being a woman felt like a sadistic contradiction and shame was the consequence of deviation. I always felt out of step of the choreographed dance of female social bonding. Identifying as a die-hard tomboy, I accepted a lot of crude jokes and inappropriate remarks about my body in hopes that I would be protected if surrounded by men.

I feared girls. The language of my female classmates felt foreign, despite my efforts to translate. I envied boys who could throw a punch, roll around on the ground and walk away friends, never considering how such a limited understanding of masculinity warped my perception of gender and identity. Always identifying as one of the guys, I saw nothing problematic in my aversion to girls. I only bonded with those who, too, resisted gender norms in some way. Until high school, I shopped in the boys’ section for army print shirts and camouflage cargo pants. I rode a BMX, sported DC and Etnies skate shoes my dad got for cheap from his friend’s shop. For years, I was a part of Scouts Canada. Boy Scouts, not Girl Guides, so I could build fires and learn to use knives.

*Can I think of when a man made me feel unsafe?* Grade ten. September. English class. Teenage body odour filled the room, overpowering the old dictionaries collecting dust and our teacher’s aftershave. Mr. Ashbaugh stood at the board, novel in his left hand, a fresh stick of chalk in the right. He drew a straight line, up diagonally to the climax, down, before plateauing.
“Plot Graph. I want you to chart the events, and we’ll take them up as a class in fifteen minutes. If you need help, I’ll be milling among the seats. Flag me down.” His crystal smile and glacial-blue eyes scanned the room, lingering on the girls a few seconds too long. Pulling the knot of his purple tie back and forth, he craned his neck and started on the left side of the room.

*To Kill A Mockingbird* sat at the corner of my desk as I worked away on the single piece of lined paper I pulled from my binder. I felt Mr. Ashbaugh over my shoulder, his presence sending a flush down my neck, heating its nape, burning from visibility. Tugging the collar of my magenta V-neck, I remember holding it in my hands that morning, running the fabric between my fingers, wondering if I should put a tank top underneath, whether it was too revealing. I decided that since I couldn’t even fill out an A-cup, I had limited ability to spill out of a shirt, thus no problem. But there he stood, unmoving, looking down my shirt.

Up, over my left shoulder, I locked eyes with my teacher, lingering a little too close. I dismissed my discomfort as my own problem. Stomach ablaze, knees trembling, I felt nauseous from the adrenaline. The deep sense of unease persisted from that first week of class. Vindication came two months into the semester. The third day a substitute covered our English class, one of the boys asked when Mr. Ashbaugh would return. His smile lines disappeared, jaw stiffened, and he stood upright, stone-faced.

“I will be your teacher until the end of the semester.” Chatter erupted; his hands flew up in immediate surrender. There were no questions and fewer explanations. By the end of the week, Mr. Ashbaugh’s firing became common knowledge. Students suddenly started hearing a
long line of allegations about his inappropriate conduct with students, harassment and outings with underage girls in the clubbing district, Hess Village.

In the first few days, Mr. Ashbaugh earned no sympathy from students. In the subsequent weeks the narrative shifted. Most whispers suggested the girls equally responsible, if not more, for wanting the attention and going along with him.

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It was the first night of Snow Moot, a Scouting camp for Ventures and Rovers over sixteen from all over Ontario. My group’s advisor was on the camp staff and promised to sneak me in since I was only fifteen. The open field tundra-like, I pulled my scarf tighter around my neck. My group had broken off over the last hour, heading to visit other fires and friends.

The fire pit only had a couple people, burning two feet high, sparks and crackles. A bearded stranger smiled at me, finishing his cigarette. I smiled, not wanting to be rude. He looked older, in his late teens, maybe early twenties. Ice-blue eyes, licked by the light of burning flames, stayed cool against the dancing orange hues.

After a few minutes, he walked around the fire, reached and put his arm around my waist. He tugged me close with enough force he showed his strength. I lingered a moment, caught in the curiosity of an unfamiliar situation. Confused and cold, one moment, my heart fluttered from the attention. No one stood that close to me before. Not in that way. I realized the other two people wandered off, and we were alone. My heart sank.

When I resisted, he smiled and pulled me closer. The night raced through my mind like a montage. If he felt he could reach out and touch me, there must have been a reason. Had smiling at him signalled I wanted something? Could I say something to make him stop? Was this
my fault? I felt conflicted by his attention, as if, somehow, I earned the gentle groping. The voices of my peers rang loud, saying how those girls did something wrong with Mr. Ashbaugh.

The first kiss, I tried to resist. Tight lips, unmoving, unsure what to do. I felt outside my body. My stomach sunk deeper than when Mr. Ashbaugh stood over my shoulder, looking down my shirt. The stranger’s lips pressed hard against mine; tongue aggressive, insistent on invading my mouth. He swallowed each objection. I tried to pull away from his fervent grasp.

Without telling me his name, he took my first kiss. I wanted it to end. I wondered if I kissed back for a minute if he’d let me go, realizing my inexperience and seek out a girl who wanted him. The snow crunched under my feet, I fought to claim a foot of space between us, hoping I was free. His greedy grin melted. I tried to call out, but he silenced me with his lips. His beard smothered across my face, like falling face-first into a rug.

His ashen mouth enveloped mine. Fingers tight around my jaw, he reeked of cigarettes. I worried if I tried to break away that I’d be harmed or lose control, delusional enough to think I had any handle of the situation. He unzipped my coat and pushed me to the hard, frozen ground. Pinpricks and pain, his demanding bite worked across my neck. I lay still, hoping to provide as little enjoyment as possible, only moving to swat his hands away when they tried to claim too much. One hand remained on my throat, the other worked up under my sweater.

“Oh, you don’t have much going on up there.” He laughed. Insult to assault. Would this be enough to make him lose interest? I felt like a slut.

His hands worked their way down my rigid body, never looking beyond my quivering lips. I allowed myself to weep, hoping he’d think the redness came from being pressed into the snowy ground. My entire body seized when he tried to work at the clasp on my jeans. Instinct
took over, my hand covered the metal button. I shook my head. Whimpered. Muttered no. Over and over. He tried again, shushing, smothering me under aggressive kisses.

I heard a rustling. Footsteps crunched closer. A stranger bellowed: “Hey Devon, do you need more wood for the fire?”

The man on top of me. Devon. I knew his name. The voice calling felt like the first moment of possibility, then soured by the panic. What if this man is worse? I heard my heartbeat and tasted my fear.

“Uh, yeah. Go get it! We’ll get this bitch flaming again!” Catching his breath, Devon looked at me and raised his finger to his lips. He shot up, straightened his coat, coughing.

“I’ll get the wood! I know where they keep it!” I jumped to my feet, putting the fire between Devon and me, numb fingertips fumbled the zipper to my coat. I ran off before getting out of the last word. Clouds of breath disappeared into the night. I moved my body as fast as possible, never looking back.

I found my way back to the tent, sobbing. My three friends, all two years my senior, pulled me in and held tight. My tongue throbbed, I tasted blood. Someone stroked my hair, and my face started to thaw. The cuts from the frozen ground seared.

Tucked into my sleeping bag a few hours later, I took comfort in the snores from the girls in my tent. I nuzzled into the fleece lining and thought of all the instances I’d resented being a girl. There were a million reasons, like the fixation on looks, social inequality and powerlessness, but never had I feared for my safety like on the frozen February ground.
I started the Friday night a fifteen-year-old in a field at Scout camp, a place I had always felt safe. The vague momentary thrill from the prospect of a boy’s attention filled me with self-loathing. He must have interpreted my hesitation as consent, how could he be blamed? The scrambled thoughts of a scared child in the eerie black of the winter’s night defined my perception of the experience, my choices. I felt ashamed that I’d let that happen to me. Responsible and accountable because I didn’t resist hard enough. I felt disgusted at the memory of his touch.

The next morning, Alexis, one of the girls in my group, helped cover up the purple and red bruises up my neck with makeup. She left, tracked Devon down and asked his age. Twenty. She snarled for him to stay away from me and threatened him. I hoped I’d forget Devon over time. Forget what he did. His smell. I ached to stop feeling his hands on my body. I didn’t. I carried it like a layer of clothing I wanted to shed.

The weekend became a turning point for how I moved through the world as a person, particularly as a woman. I became more withdrawn, fearful and skittish around strangers. Shame roared higher than the fire where I met Devon. Shame seared that I didn’t fight him off. I succumbed to fear and helplessness.

I wondered if I had been more vocal, adamant, or hadn’t yearned for male attention, whether I would feel the same accountability. The narrative I held shifted to it could have been worse, so you can’t complain about what happened. I felt intensely complicit. Mostly, it made being a girl feel like a “damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t” situation, at best. If I revealed my anger, wasn’t that unfeminine?
The day I finally got my period, I was sixteen. I thought of Devon, when he tried to feel up my shirt and commented on my flat chest. It’s not that I wanted the pain and discomfort of a period, but I wanted to feel a shared sense of womanhood. My friends bonded when they provided each other pads and tampons or complained about their cycles. When asked what I age I got my period, I’d look down and mumble I hadn’t and be told how lucky I was. Isolation didn’t feel lucky. After the first spots of blood appeared in grade eleven, I didn’t menstruate again for almost a year. The inconsistency increased my sense of failure.

My body felt blocked, unable to access womanhood. I didn’t feel close to girls. No boobs, no period and a lot of anger, I felt out of the club. I thought safety was pushing away all things “feminine.” My resisting femininity manifested as toxicity and resentment. When a boy I liked kissed me a year after the incident at camp, I said it was my first kiss. I rewrote history. Anytime I thought of Devon, I assured myself the weakness I displayed that night was a fluke. I refused to be a victim. I couldn’t accept being a woman that let things happen to her. Resentment emerged in different ways. One time, in the campus newsroom, I told a female friend, point-blank, that I was not a feminist. I think at the time, I meant that I didn’t want to be a woman. I resented that something happened to me because a man had a sexual urge.

I distanced myself from people who could help provide the language for my experience. I failed to live honestly and hid away the truth of myself, so deep even I could not recover the pieces. I actively sought out books that moved away from the female experience and wrote countless papers on Jack Kerouac and the Beat writers. I read a lot of the dead-white-men canon. There was an inescapable vulnerability reading about women and studying gender. I was
fearful of two potential scenarios. One, that I would see an idea that I could never access or embody. Two, that it would be emblematic of every stereotype and limitation.

The truth metastasized, and I existed in silence. The incident tainted my conception of intimacy, consent and boundaries. It was a long time before I understood consent and that saying no was enough, despite it not working. I did not fail, despite nearly a decade of silence from the shame of my wrongdoing.

All experiences aside, I wanted male attention to affirm my worth and desirability. As I got older, sex entered the picture. Intimacy became a minefield, exploding flashbacks of moments I thought I’d long locked away. Rather than hate the man that hurt me and made me feel unsafe, I used the experience to confirm my greatest fears about femininity. It took years to understand what happened and the implications for my relationship to myself as a woman.

I stayed silent about that cold February night for many reasons. Scout camp had always existed as a place of solace. Escape. If I told my mother about what happened, she’d likely forbid me from going, already resenting how many weekends I chose to spend with only the bottom of a tent keeping me from the rocky ground over at home. Or worse, she’d agree I was accountable. I felt complicit. Stained by the shame that I had not only allowed it to happen but that I didn’t attack him and run.

I felt fraudulent, claiming the title feminist when I lied every day about a critical aspect of my experience as a woman. I cringe from the ignorance and want to shake my younger self.

I told Peter about Devon on New Year’s Eve, 2019. I looked at Peter and told him there was something I needed to say to him, assured it was no big deal. I closed my eyes, and I could feel Devon again. I cried and told Peter the details. He asked if he could hug me. Peter, at that
moment, had a better understanding of consent that I ever knew. I pulled him close and collapsed into his body. I let Peter hold me, stroke my hair, and he alternated between soft utterances of “I love you” and “it’s not your fault.”

For the first time, I acknowledged what happened to me was sexual assault. I still struggle with the words and feel greedy claiming the label. I think it is something I will wrestle for the rest of my life as I reconcile myself with my femininity as a source of strength rather than a liability. The first time I ever made space for what happened and chose to work through it, and I was fortunate to be with someone who loved me and affirmed my power and femininity. When Peter and I first got together, I hadn’t yet accepted what happened. In my mind, I still asked for too much attention and let it get out of hand. The shame built, and I worried he’d see my withholding the information about Devon as an act of betrayal. I didn’t want to carry the weight of these experiences forward, alone, into a new decade. I needed to forgive myself for what happened to the fifteen-year-old at the fire and see that I had grown into a different person. A different woman, every time I choose to share and face myself. Every time I show up.
10. Deep In My Bones

I don’t remember a lot from the summer before eighth grade. I hid in my windowless room and watched through all seven seasons of *Gilmore Girls* on loop. I ate mint and toffee Cadbury Thins and drank tall cans of lemon Arizona Iced Tea. My mom shouted through the door, her anger like a battling ram. I lacked my usual motivation and athletic inclinations, and I had no interest in socializing. I withdrew, like a groundhog. I retreated and called for six more weeks of winter. Six more blessed weeks of hibernation. That was my first notable depressive episode.

I’d go a few months, start to seem “normal,” and then the depressive fog returned. I disappeared and lost myself in the all-consuming nothingness. Sometimes, there were explanations for my depression, like Serge’s arrival or dad falling off the wagon. A torn shoulder from rowing, or all the girls in class deciding not to talk to me. It was scarier when life was on an upswing, and I started to fantasize about slitting my wrists with a kitchen knife. The fits got worse and lasted longer in my early twenties. For two months in my second year, I kept a duvet pinned over my window and blocked the outside world. I wasn’t the easiest to be around.

One night, Co found me lying on the floor of my closet, raw razor-blade cuts all over my thighs. I held a sealed bottle of sleeping pills and asked over and over why I bothered trying. She and our other roommate took me to the emergency room. I remember little from the horrible visit beyond my scared roommates leaving me, catatonic. An antagonistic social worker assured me I was in no real danger, and the marks were superficial. She led me to a stark white room. Alone, I laid on my side and listened to a woman’s piercing wail through the bare wall.
Discharged the next morning, I sat in my flannel pyjamas Co brought me. I sat in the backseat of the Chevy Cobalt and stared out at the impossibly beautiful day.

The doctor gave me a prescription for Cipralex that I filled for less than six months before I stopped, cold turkey. I resisted support for years. Medication, communication, healthy relationships? Why would anyone in their right, underdeveloped and over-alcohol-soaked mind choose the responsible path?

I continued with my life, rode the ups and downs, until one day, I laid facedown and sobbed into the carpet. For hours. Solace seemed unimaginable. I shook uncontrollably. From the floor of our basement apartment to the car to the curtained cubicle hiding us away from the other patients, Peter stayed at my side.

A male doctor in the Guelph General Emergency room split the hours for his residency between emergency and Student Health Services on campus. Sandy blonde hair tucked behind his ears, the doctor looked more like a surfer in a lab coat as he inquired about my record, why I’d been admitted overnight for psychiatric observation in October of 2013. What follow-up treatment had I received, was I on any medication?

Peter rubbed my back and bobbed his head to the doctor’s instructions. The crudely placed tape holding down my IV itched. My hand jerked a few times, but my arm felt too heavy to move, like cement coursed into my veins. Peter pushed back my bangs from my damp forehead. A large black label across the bag connected to the tube in my hand explained my daze: Clonazepam. The sedative worked its way through my body, easing pieces until I felt little but Peter’s hand around mine, offering encouraging squeezes.
The doctor stated my symptoms aligned with bipolar disorder but said he needed a second opinion. He wrote a prescription and ripped the page from his pad. Two lines: Zoloft, to manage my depression, Ativan, for the panic attacks. He assured me that he’d make an urgent referral to the university clinic.

A few weeks later, I got a call with my referral to a woman named Dr. Long. In the first meeting, I sat, guarded, unsure what to share. Where to start. Tucked away in the small grey office, at the back of the Student Health Services, I picked the skin around my thumb, drawing blood. My nails were all chewed down to the quick. I’d grown so used to compartmentalizing my story, doling out information in nuggets.

I was quiet. Offered as little as possible. The office felt like an interrogation room; I was an unwilling subject in for questioning. Personal information was stock, and I didn’t want to over-invest. Trust could so easily be weaponized. She started slow and asked guided questions.

Dr. Long’s velvet drawl softened every purposeful word from her thin, pink lips. Her sentences, devoid of inflammatory or judgmental language, came just above a whisper. Her level tone coaxed out revelations. Despite myself, I liked Dr. Long immediately. I found her intriguing. She sat atop a piece of white fur, draped over her computer chair. She sported all black, bringing out her sage green eyes. Her grey pixie cut put her earrings on display: pewter sewing machines the size of my thumbnail dangled from either lobe, that bounced when she nodded and took notes. Reluctant, I passed over the two screens given at reception. She copied numbers from the page to the sheet she’d been jotting on as I spoke. Sitting in the armless chair, I rubbed my hands together in my best Lady Macbeth impression. The anxiety of every
doctor’s appointment washed over my exhausted body. As uncomfortable as I felt, there was a
deep sense of relief. She put me at ease.

“So, when was your first depressive episode?” I’d never considered it. I flitted through
the memories in my head, scanned for periods where the depression ate away at who I was. I
remembered the summer before eighth grade and a distant January morning. It was around 6:30
in the morning, room dark, except for the screensaver that bounced across the computer. Mom
sobbed in her home office, and I tiptoed toward her. In the glow, I could see her face, puffy and
blotched. I asked what was wrong, and she replied that her friend Tim was dead. Tim had
committed suicide. Left a note on the stairs for his wife and drove the family station wagon off
the Hamilton Escarpment. I closed my eyes and conjured the Dundurn Stairs. I regularly ran up
all three-hundred and twenty-six and back down for endurance training. The familiarity
sharpened the scene of my mom’s friend dying.

Mom explained how long we had known Tim, how he had two children under two with
Cystic Fibrosis which sent the family into crippling debt. Tim was a good dad, but now his kids
did not have one. He was a good husband, and now his wife was a young widow. My mom took
the last photo of Tim alive a few weeks earlier, at his sister’s wedding. It loomed on the computer
screen, his grin haunting a previously joyful image.

I almost asked why, why he did it, but deep in my bones, I knew. In silence, I could
hear the answer that the world was too much for him to bear. I’d felt something similar but
couldn’t turn off the obligation to my family. No matter how much I hurt, that was something I
couldn’t do to others, but Tim’s death gave me the words for what I felt in the worst throes of
depression. Sometimes it was all too much.
“Umm, I would have been thirteen.”

Dr. Long nodded, clipboard balanced on her crossed knee, she scrawled in cursive and occasionally glanced back at the two tests I filled out. “Can you explain it to me?”

“I saw myself as overly emotional, selfish and a burden. I withdrew, my windowless room was perfect for self-imposed exile. It kept happening through high school.”

“Did you have support?”

“No. No one really said anything. I just got yelled at a lot.” She reached for a new piece of paper. I appreciated her kindness and small displays of eccentricity, like the Star Trek wall calendar. She taught me to believe in myself. I value her input.

“So, tell me about your family.”

I knew the question was coming. I seriously considered drawing a family tree that morning. A visual aid, as I’d once done for Peter’s mom, to point at and make explaining my familial history more comfortable to all involved. Dr. Long sat patiently and marked down each name. She asked for clarification from time to time and referred to the diagram in later sessions. The first session lasted three hours. She instructed me to book another one for the following week with Monica at reception. I returned the next week, and the following three weeks.

Finally, Dr. Long offered a diagnosis.

She threw so many letters at me, I felt like I was staring into a bowl of Alphagetti: GAD (Generalized Anxiety Disorder) MDMD (Major Depressive Mood Disorder) and BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder). After deciding on a diagnosis, Dr. Long developed a course of treatment, like a recipe to follow:
Maki’s Madness Management

- Therapy Sessions, twice monthly
- DBT (Dialect Behavioural Therapy) Workbook and Group Sessions
- 90mg Zoloft, take orally once daily (stopped because it heightened my anxiety and I lost all appetite)
- Ativan, take when symptoms of anxiety attack present (ceased medication when I turned into a drooling, drugged-out zombie.)
- 60mg Prozac, take orally, once daily
- Exercise (No, sitting up for the Dorito bag does not count.)

Dr. Long warned not to let the medical literature define me or my narrative: “If you start to read about Borderline Personality Disorder and it says or implies that you are fucked, stop reading and move on. Research on treatment for BPD has come a long way in the last twenty years, but there are still some misconceptions.” She offered guidance and didn’t sugar coat her observations. I saw what she meant as I scrolled through the different webpages. The first read, “Relationships for patients with Borderline Personality Disorder are tumultuous, marked by extreme highs and lows.” I felt insecure and doubted everything I felt. A recent article said that those with BPD feel emotions like someone with severe burns on their body, exposed and hypersensitive, but not without reason.

Dr. Long took the time to learn my language, sometimes having to translate and catch me up to speed. Steadfast with the truth, Dr. Long didn’t give answers. She coached through questions. That would be too easy and did nothing to build a process I could replicate at home. She provided an emotion chart that sits on my fridge, like a road map, to guide me back from the
brink of my feelings. I take the time to recognize behaviours. I could measure and control the value I give to things and the time and energy I offered people.
11. Room To Grow

By the end of July 2019, I was worn down. Physically and emotionally, I needed a break. Monday to Friday, I worked from 8:30-4:00 in the university library. In the evenings, I sat at my desktop and spent hours on end writing my thesis, often late into the night. I excavated my family history, sifted through photos and letters, all potential pieces of the puzzle. I felt like I didn’t have a picture of what I aimed to assemble. Birthday cards, class pictures from kindergarten through eighth grade and a newborn diaper that still smelled like baby powder. I had so many keepsakes but felt like more gaps existed than anything.

Peter knew it was a struggle. I barely slept, and my mind always raced. I teased through details and debunked myths. I thought my whole life my mom jumped on a Greyhound at one in the morning with a child under one, alone, but she moved with her abusive boyfriend I grew up thinking was my father. I faced the fragments of my life and tried to make something of the pieces. I ached to make sense of my past and forge a path ahead. Hammer through truths and smooth down my edges. I put all my emotional energy on the page. After nearly five years been together, Peter saw my patterns. He offered the gentle encouragement I craved and waited for me to get there in my own time.

Like a tornado, the identity crisis tore through my life in full force. Who was I? Why did I feel constantly unworthy? What was my motivation? I continued my bi-monthly appointments with Dr. Long. I sat in the small room that had become a retreat, explained how unstable I felt despite nothing absurd happening in my life.
“Have you stopped to consider that all the emotional baggage you’re sorting through has an effect?” Had I stopped to validate my feelings or recognized the weight of writing a thesis under normal circumstances, much less when you choose to weave together a lot of tough experiences?

I stayed silent and reached for the tissue box. Dr. Long smiled and provided strategies to balance the emotional and narrative experience of writing. Ferocious winds blew down the structures of my life and left destruction in its wake, I needed the trip for distance from bad habits and to rebuild. I spent each night pacing the apartment, sleep evasive. I’d taken to weighing myself daily. Sometimes, multiple times. I looked at the numbers after the decimal, my chest tightened. I scolded my weakness and lack of self-discipline. I grew tired of carrying around my history.

Peter and I volleyed the idea of a trip back and forth, with little seriousness. One night, I looked across the living room, and asked if he was still up for Iceland. Within two days, the tickets were booked for the final week of August.

I planned the first day of the trip based on taking a night flight, based on the assumption I’d sleep on the plane. Two Gravol tablets couldn’t take me down, so I listened to hours of podcasts. After landing, Peter wandered off to the washroom. I guarded the luggage, throat achingly parched, careening my neck around to find a fountain. Dozens of languages hung over the crowd like a soothing hum. From the computer bag, I pulled out the custard yellow file folder with a forget-me-not pattern. All our trip documents. I found it soothing to read the pages over.
After circling the airport for fifteen minutes, searching for our car rental company, panic set in. I walked up to the Enterprise desk, wishing I’d splurged the extra 43 dollars and rented from there. The tall ginger man in a traditional Icelandic wool sweater stood behind the counter. He spoke through a thick, bulbous beard, explaining how twelve rental companies fanned out across the airport grounds, only accessible by shuttle. Tired, it took a genuine effort to process his words.

“You’re the final stop, number six. It’s about a fifteen-minute ride.” He circled it twice on the airport map with a smile.

Þakka þér fyrir.” I uttered the one Icelandic word I memorized before the trip, thank you. Crestfallen, I wondered, would the whole trip be hiccups and high stress? Peter and I took frustrated jabs at one another, neither at our best selves after over twenty-four straight waking hours. The laptop bag swung over his chest and my carryon in hand. He insisted I only take the backpack. I fought my way through the crowds of the Reykjavik airport. Outside the main entrance, Peter and I followed the unpaved walkway. Gravel rattled beneath the wheels of the large suitcase behind us.

My lungs filled with fresh ocean air. There were few formal plans for this trip, beyond my spending the mornings writing in the cafes I found inspiring. My lungs ached, anxiety heightened as the accordion bus rolled to a jerking halt, and the front doors opened. Peter had to get on the back door, both of us crammed between strangers, dozens squished in the few meters between us. The petty squabbling seemed silly. I wanted him next to me.

This was our third major trip together, after six days in San Francisco and a sixteen-day-road-trip around Ireland. Peter found it cute I carried booking confirmations, in addition to
the electronic editions saved on my phone and computer. I kept a file folder of all the reservations, must-see sights and booking details. Organization and overcompensation with plans are some of the ways my anxiety manifests.

I had no control of my environment growing up. I resented the chaos I often faced at home. Chaos is draining; the body cannot tell the difference between the adrenaline fleeing from a raving lunatic and emotional distress, so I clung to whatever structure and assurances I could produce myself. Trips bring to light my contradictions: a homebody with intense wanderlust and an emotionally guarded wild child. Iceland became one of the first places I recognized and embraced the contradictions. Rather than pre-book a rigorous itinerary, I rented a car, an apartment and left the rest up to how I felt in each moment. It was the first time I didn’t hold myself to some standard of what I should be doing and feeling. It was freeing. Could I live all of life this way? Balanced?

I didn’t do well with sleepovers as a kid, and usually burst into tears around bedtime. Even dropping me at school was an apparent nightmare, I shrieked and clawed, fearing the separation. What if something happens during the day? Could a break from me make mom stop loving me? What if she doesn’t come back for me? By kindergarten, I had an abstract understanding that my father left me, and my little brain assumed it meant I was unlovable.

I wondered if my bodily reaction to travel existed as some unresolved connection to that childhood insecurity. My throat swells, glands touch. I feel deep aches in my joints and vomit. I’m unsure if it’s from the pressure of interrupting routine or a crappy immune system. After the fifth stop, the bus emptied enough for Peter to shuffle over. He smiled and stroked my back. Of course, he could sense I was getting worked up.
The bus hugged the bends in the single-lane pebble-laden roads, until it arrived at a squat stucco building, surrounded by a hundred cars, SUVs and hatchbacks. Grey mountains shrouded in fog rolled into the distance. I thanked the driver and entered the building. A man and a woman screamed at each other over who arrived first. Those behind the counter seemed disinterested, and let the pair scream it out while setting up other wickets for customers. Soon enough, we were on the road, windows down, the cool ten degrees a welcome change from the hot Southern Ontario summer we escaped. Hands wrapped around the soft netted fabric covering the steering wheel, I thought of how to fill the six-hours before getting into the rental apartment.

After an hour riding the juniper hills, I stopped the car at a black rock beach on the south shore of Iceland. I looked out at the folding whitecaps, clouds overhead knitted together, occasionally stealing the warm golden beams away. Water stormed the rocks, conquering its walls. I removed my tattered black flats slowly and let the soles of my feet sink into the frigid Atlantic. At that moment, all was quiet. Slow breathes, I raised my arms, pushed back by the wind and swallowed the cold air. I persisted until the ocean numbed my pale feet. I walked back up the rocks on the beach. Through the rolling hills of tall grass, I laughed, especially when I fell into a hole, hidden by a patch of flattened green. The tall grasses thinned and transitioned into long, jagged black rocks, creating a path out into the ocean.

I shifted my weight from rock to rock, my eyes took in everything I missed in the sprint to the ocean. I extended my leg, and froze mid-air, hovering over a small patch of green and blush hues. I crouched down and stared at the little plants fighting the pile of stones that hid where their roots took hold. I stared until the small leaves from each fortuitous plant
blurred into one chartreuse patch. My fingers trembled, as I tried to pull the thread-like vines aside enough to see if there was soil beneath. The plants were coming from the stone. Under the weight of the rock, these gems flourished. I crossed my legs, sat next to the plants and looked back out at the ocean.

I recognized their struggle to grow somewhere unviable, accepted the magic. If I could appreciate or celebrate the existence of these leafy miracles, could I possibly find a way to hold myself to this regard? They struck out from the landscape in which they were raised. I didn’t judge their quality or worth. Judge their validity.

I stoked each tiny, fuzzy leaf in appreciation. It was enough. My presence in the master’s program, this thesis, and my self-development were all born from circumstances that did not lend themselves to nurturing self-love. Could I stop grieving my experiences? Was that ok? If I accepted my past as valid, could I still recognize their effect without drowning? Could I use my circumstances to appreciate my accomplishments in the world even more, rather than comparing the plant growing from the rocks to the towering grasses on the mainland? See the difference and find balance. Lean into flexibility. I thought again to my skin does not fit. Maybe that was a good thing? It meant room to grow.

That night, lying in the bed of our AirBnB apartment in downtown Reykjavik, Peter held my hand, ran his fingers along my skin as I told him about the moment on the cliff and the clarity I felt. I appreciated being in another country, recognized the power in the life I’d built that afforded the trip. I embraced being in a good relationship and that I did something I love. I told him how I knew it sounded corny, but the moments alongside the ocean was the closest thing I’ve ever had to a moment of existential peace. In my cells, I felt satisfaction in who I was and
how I came to be, as a whole person. I wanted to gravitate away from the extremes. I told Peter how I connected to little plants sprouting from the rocks and accepted my life with all the highs and lows. I stopped seeing all the ways I was a failure.

The next morning, I rose. No sickness. Energy crackled through my body, so I packed my bag and hit the steep streets of the city core. I sought a place to sit and write. In Iceland, I gave myself the space to feel emotions without judgement. One morning, I woke up anxious, the kind that rattled my bones. The room spun and my sternum felt like it was crushing my lungs. Peter woke up, I started to lie, insisted I was fine, that I still wanted to take a two-hour trail ride on Icelandic ponies. In his eyes, downcast, I saw the disappointment. That I didn’t trust him enough to say, “I’m sorry, I can’t do that today.”

I shook my head and started over. I asked if we could find a different adventure that day. I admitted that it felt like I’d woken up with my wiring wrong. He kissed my forehead, smiled and assured me that we’d have fun no matter what we did.

It rained all day. We drove for a few hours, and turned on the map occasionally to see how long it would take to drive back to the apartment before deciding which way to proceed and wander aimlessly. I found a field of ponies. Dusty grey. Brown and white speckled. I hit my shin against a single wire outlining the paddock and experienced an instant jolt. Electric. I raised my leg, and stepped over, minded my foot over the fence. The ponies stepped forward, nuzzling me. One let me stroke his face. I laid mine against him, and nuzzled. The rain fell in droves. I smiled.
Academic Self-Reflection

Introduction:

Nothing could have prepared me for the challenges and rewards of writing this thesis. The act of excavating memories triggered some trauma I didn’t know my body held. Pain that I denied existed. I defined trauma as bodily harm, suffered by others. A wound. I researched and wrote about the scope and forms of trauma: Quiet, Family, Direct, Vicarious, and Individual vs. Collective. It felt like a marathon therapy session, extended over eighteen months of self-discovery and evolution. The act of writing felt like I voluntarily tore into my flesh, so stories could pour out of my body like blood.

In a recent phone session, my therapist Dr. Long and I had a breakthrough moment. She asked if I’d heard of the Hyper Sensory Person. The qualities include heightened observation, empathetic, highly tuned nervous system, caring about everyone and everything, strong emotional reactions, and all of the feelings all of the time. It felt like being given the answer key to a test.

Rather than a chair in Dr. Long’s office, I sat in my living room, surrounded by the art and books I love. The environment produced fruitful conversation, and she asked that I describe my sensory perception in neutral language. I acknowledged the abundance of data I took in from the world. It meant more to manage, but that wasn’t bad. She said it made me a better writer. She noted I was drawn to details, like remembering the exact shade of lemongrass green I painted my bedroom at thirteen or the look on Peter’s parents’ face when the doctor said he needed brain surgery. I could capture feelings that not everyone can feel, sense, or articulate.

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2 Singer, Sandra. “Women, Trauma and Narratology,” ENGL6611, January 9, 2019, Guelph, ON.
I used to consider emotions like binaries, opposites that couldn’t coexist. Anger opposed happiness. I defaulted to the simplistic. I applied two-dimensional logic to a three-dimensional world. I was flattened. In a binary frame of either-or, the negatives of these emotional qualities overpowered any others. At the end of this process, I had a different perspective. I used to see the world in absolutes. I imagined some kind of cosmic score card that held all my successes and failures, which tips the scales of my worth. I compared my experiences and in that, deflated the impact. Binaries didn’t make space for these small acts of appreciation. By writing my thesis, I learned the importance of synthesizing two states for the best results. I came into this project thinking that I’d write about all my qualms with the world. Another thing happened: I found gratitude.

I wrote my first draft for others. The result: twenty-thousand words of indecipherable jargon. The theme seemed to be, look at all the academic references I can whip out, with a couple of personal anecdotes. I learned to model the economy in which academia trades, which are quantifiable and measurable products. I cited Althusser and Gramsci, Lacan, Derrida, and Zizek. I had a five-page bibliography. My ideas lacked depth. The writing hovered at the surface, never deeper. I hid behind the theory. I depended on from theorists to cultural critics and respected academics to validate my work. I worried about the value and substance of my project. I didn’t know where my creative non-fiction thesis fit into the genre of memoir.

**Creative Writing Process:**

I read ample amounts of theory and literary criticism before it occurred to me that I should hunker down with a stack of memoirs. The broader the range of topics, the better. My personal favorites: *Nobody Cares*, a collection of essays by Cambridge, Ontario author, Anne T.
Donahue; the musings of Nora McInerny in *No Happy Endings* and Roxanne Gay’s formidable *Hunger*. I was particularly drawn to academic memoirs. I am now the proud owner of battered copies of Erin Wunker’s *Notes from A Feminist Killjoy: Essays on Life*, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, and *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* by Kate Manne.

As I read about the function of narrative elements, I realized the flaws in my first draft. For the first time, I approached my experiences with a neutral quality, still attuned to the emotional truths, but detached from judgment. I wrote and realized as I committed scenes to paper, their power waned. I moved away from the past and developed new behaviours. My writing changed. I shed the all or nothing mentality that ruled most of my life: “I am this or I am that.” I found a space between.

Rather than choose emotion or reason, I included both and privileged neither. I nestled into the wisdom offered, and for the first time, I returned to class notes from graduate classes, not for ideas to replace or uphold mine, but concepts to compliment my efforts.

I did months of research. I decided the most effective way to summarize the use and inclusion of theory in this project was to pinpoint the fundamental themes which informed my writing process and the final product. The field of narratology, specifically, offered the language and definitions to unpack themes of gender, intergenerational relationships, and traumatic experience, all aspects of my creative section. I considered how concepts of binary oppositions, trauma, narratology, and discourse analysis naturally lent themselves to my stories or their telling.
Narratology is the study of narrative and narrative structure and the ways that these affect human perception. Narratology provides the tools of language that help us analyze gender, intergenerational relations, and traumatic experience. I gained perspective from the difference between the narrator and focalization: narrator tells the story, and focalization notes the selection or restriction of narrative information to the experience and knowledge of the narrator. The two mechanisms of narrative helped inform which details to include and how avoid speculation. This differentiation was most prominent in chapters like “My Skin Does Not Fit,” and “You Can Call Me Dad,” where I relay my experience of interactions with my parents, who have their own narrative.

In story, narratology notes that time can be represented in two ways: narrative and clock time. The impact of a five-minute experience might take years to process. Memoirists might feel it is best to represent their life in chronological order, but at times, its best to ditch the linear timeline and arrange events and memories thematically. Narratology highlights the alternative means of representing time, citing narrative time, and clock time, which comprise the story. Clock time often limits the representation of trauma.

Some events take more time to narrate than others. Sometimes a writer must deaccelerate and write a scene in slow motion. Other times, a quick sentence could cover a year. In writing each section, I considered chronology, as well as clock and narrative time.

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Seymour Chatman has called the negotiation of clock and narrative time as the “chrono-logic” of the narrative\(^5\). Before I wrote, I listed experiences I wanted to cover in chronological order. The sequence is mostly linear, save sections where I span multiple years or one key chapter that I will discuss in the next paragraph. Narratology helped me understand that some events would take up more time or real estate than others.

While writing, I returned to Abbott’s definitions of story and discourse to produce my narrative\(^6\). I listed moments that shaped my life, first in chronological order, then grouped based on the theme. I asked how events inscribed themselves onto my body, into my being, and what discourse that produced. The difference between story and discourse created a way of constructing meaning from previous life experiences. I thought about ways in which I classified what I now understand as assault as a personal failure, a byproduct of being a woman in the world. I felt like the world was something I needed to survive, rather than a place to grow and thrive.

The effort to find balance became the on-going theme of the writing process. I considered the way to construct scenes, the interconnection of simple facts and pondering meaning. In each scene, I had to find a way for the two methods to coexist. I questioned what the experiences meant at the time and what it means in retrospect. I allowed myself to enter the intimacy of the moment and embrace the privileged wisdom afforded by hindsight. I valued that I worked to learn the art of writing and the processes innate challenges, unique from deciphering theory.

\(^5\) Abbott pg. 16

\(^6\) “The difference between events and their representation is the difference between *story* (the event or sequence of events) and *narrative discourse* (how the story is conveyed)” Abbott pg. 15
Robyn Warhol’s explanation of feminist narratology pressed me to question my history and consider the cultural context in which I was raised. I considered instances of systemic misogyny. I thought of the power of binar­ies, as I’d learned in school from a young age. Mas­culine and femin­ine nouns. One had more power and clout than the other. If there was a binary, I wanted to be on the right side of it. If emotions created weakness, knowledge provided the path to strength. I figured I could cut off my troublesome feelings and think my way out of any dilemma. I thought back to grade eleven French class, in which Mme. Snell tried to explain that if there were a group of a thousand women and one man present, the group would be defined by the masculine pronoun ‘ils.’ Romantic languages are not the sole offenders. Mrs., as married women are called, derives from middle English ‘Mr’s,’ denoting the woman as man’s possession. Gloria Anzaldúa articulated my anger best: “We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse” (54). Writing felt like resistance. Every chapter, I reconsidered my conditioning by the outside world, at home, and in myself.

My understanding of chronology and narrative time defined the placement of the *Sexual Assault* chapter. Though the main story and events take place over a few months in 2008, their placement later in the text shifts the focus of the discourse from the event that happened to the experience of processing and sharing for the first time. I arranged the story around the discourse, considering the personal, social and cultural contexts shaped my life. Earlier, I had denied that my own past involved trauma. I had repressed uncomfortable memories. But it became impossible to do so as I grew older, especially once I began the process of writing this memoir.
Little by little, I found my building blocks. I divided long stretches of text and scenes into parts or units to present and analyze. In each chapter, I considered the story I aimed to tell, story to be understood as the chronicle of events, and the aspects which produced the story, divided into constituent and supplementary events. I took two highlighters and marked the memories on the list as constituent or supplementary events. For example, in the sixth chapter, “Insert Title,” the constituent events, or the core aspects that shape events, and make the story work, are meeting Serge, and discovering the truth about my paternity. The supplementary events provided thematic meaning, in this case, underscoring my unease around men.

**Tone Down the Theory and Reflect**

I get easily overwhelmed by my senses. Even on a good day, the inside of my head feels like an overloaded circuit breaker. Desperate to prove my worth and capacity, I researched and wrote my weight in drafts. I dumped in all the ingredients at once and mixed, and the chunky, clunky result didn’t meet my standards. At times, while I wrote my memoir, I drowned in academic theory. All the research felt chained around my ankle and unmanageable weight that held me back. I needed a succinct way to think through the steps required to write the memoir. I stared at the flashing cursor on the empty document, blinking along with my beating heart. I over-intellectualized everything, to the point of not recognizing any of the words or ideas before me. I needed to step back. Rather than perform a complex reading of my creative section, I reflected and thought through the schools of thought and subjects that drove my writing. I

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7 "Constituent events are only necessarily more important than supplementary events insofar as we are concerned with the sequence of events that constitute the story itself. But supplementary events can be very important for the meaning and overall impact of the narrative" (Abbott 23)
reflected on the representation of my past experiences and considered the narrative and theoretical perspectives.

At the end of March, I finished the creative portion of my thesis and returned to endless pages of academic notes and citations I’d left untouched for a while. The pandemic loomed. University classes cancelled and the campus empty. Storefronts closed. Grocery stores aisles suddenly became toxic lanes. The world was chaotic but quiet. I was inadvertently offered the ideal conditions for self-reflection. I was home with this thesis, whether I wanted it or not. I rose every day, brewed a pot of tea and grabbed my favourite, “I’m figuratively dying for a cuppa,” mug and headed to my office: the living room. In my fuzzy L.L Bean men’s slippers and matching pyjama set, I settled onto the couch, under my quilt and got to work. Whenever I got frustrated, I shook a little yellow tin with pink flamingos and my rabbit Sawyer sprinted across and leapt onto the couch with me. He’d lay pressed up against my thigh while I typed. I moved to reading, so I could pet his velvet coat while I worked.

I sought inspiration for how to strike a balance between academic and anecdotal. I gathered an armful of books from the Massey Lectures series off my shelf and scanned them. I picked up Larry’s 2013 lecture, *Blood: The Stuff of Life*, cracked it open and flipped to the back of the book. I read the acknowledgments and stopped near the bottom of the second page. “My grandfather, the American theologian, and African Methodist Episcopal Church minister Daniel G. Hill Jr. used to ask me, while he leaned on his cane, to ‘prop me up on every leaning side.’ I thought of my grandfather as I relied, all too heavily, on scholars, lawyers, and physicians to prop up my early drafts on every leaning side” (354). That summed up my initial writing process...
 summed up in two succinct lines. I depended on scholars, the ideas of others to prop up what I felt like an inadequate offering of personal writing.

I reframed my approach to the academic section. I questioned what challenges I faced while writing and how consulting the works of feminist academic and prominent trauma theorists helped negotiate the blocks or gaps I felt. I traced themes and connections through the creative writing process. I thought less about singular theories and moved to the intersections.

Much like the first draft of my thesis, the original academic appendix was clunky and heavy-handed with jargon. I thought that was the only way to prove I deserved my degree. I needed to go back to the basics. I read an article on Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, which defined discourse as ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity, and power relations. I read through the ten steps the article listed, and I generated a list of questions to reflect on the experience of writing, the interconnection of scenes, and reliance on my own social and historical contexts. I realized I performed the first step, Present Data, over one hundred pages by meditating on my life.

As I realized that I had inadvertently followed the steps to performing an academic reading while writing, I felt less confined to the traditional definition of a thesis. I didn’t need to pontificate on its relevance or prove its validity. I performed step two, Identify Themes, Categories, and Objects of Discourse, while I structured the chapters. I grouped scenes and stories depending on the focal point, like gender in “Bruised and Battered,” or my socio-economic experience in early life, represented in “Little Lump Sums of Resentment.”

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The Result: Self-Reflection and Conclusion:

The months spent writing this memoir were some of my life’s most laborious. I felt pain, realization, and acceptance at whirlwind rates, perpetually dizzy, tired, and invigorated. In the final stretch, I wanted to dedicate myself to elevating my writing, which I assumed could be done if I found the connections between things in my thesis and the work of great intellectuals. Self-reflection didn’t feel sufficient. It felt like a cop-out because I still struggled with that idea of worth. But the truth, a new voice joined the choir, a harmony to the nagging feeling that I can’t. It assured, yes, you can, you can try.

I walk away from my master’s degree with an entirely new skill set. I learned the necessity of emotional truths. What is the purpose of learning if not to apply theories to your life? I tried to learn and incorporate logic without diluting my voice.

I always hated uncertainty. Perhaps that’s part of why I struggled to relinquish the safety blanket of binary thinking. I craved the immediate satisfaction of having the answer to a question and willfully ignored the nuances. Writing is existing in a perpetual state of uncertainty. I learned to nestle into this ambiguity and find the heart of the stories. The writing process, like many things in life, didn’t go according to plan. It required patience, flexibility, and vulnerability: skills I do not naturally possess. It felt like I assembled a puzzle without the faintest idea of the picture. As I continued to write and revise, the picture began to come into focus.

I didn’t realize until recently that, as I wrote, I redefined relationships, recognized patterns, and developed new emotional processes. I stopped searching for tidy conclusions. I don’t tamp myself down into a set expectation. I say what I mean.
For every moment of pain or discomfort, I found forms of validation. I may not have had control of my environment growing up but researching and writing this thesis demonstrated that I yearned to untangle the narratives of failure that I wove into the fabric of my life. I dusted out the cobwebs in the recesses of my brain. In the process of writing, I found my voice. The memoir became “about” uniting my narrative and experiential selves. The process wasn’t a magic cure-all but did help me shed the binaries of all or nothing. Either. Or. I was no longer necessary to seek validation from others. I found it in my own accomplishments.


Mann, Kate. *Down Girl:*


