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STEPHANIE FOO

WHAT MY BONES KNOW



A MEMOIR OF HEALING FROM COMPLEX TRAUMA

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A Memoir of Healing from Complex Trauma

Stephanie Foo



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

For my fellow complex PTSD darlings: I know that trauma books can be triggering and painful to read. I've struggled through a number of them myself. But I felt that it was necessary for me to share my abusive childhood in order for the reader to understand where I'm coming from. Part I of this book might be tough for you, though I ask that you at least give it a shot.

But I won't judge you if, at any point, you need to skip ahead a few pages. And I'd like to promise you this, even if it is a bit of a spoiler:

This book has a happy ending.

PROLOGUE

"Do you want to know your diagnosis?"

I blink and stare at my therapist. She gazes at me from her serene office, where sunshine glows through her gauzy curtains, birdsong bursts through the windows, and one of those little fountains with a giant marble on it burbles, which I guess is supposed to be relaxing. In the back of the room is a framed copy of the poem "Desiderata." *You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.*

But I'm not really *here*. My therapist's warm office is in San Francisco, and I am in my dark, freezing, six-by-six-foot office in New York City, talking to her through a small window on my computer. The reason I know about the poem in her office is the same reason I can't believe she is only telling me my diagnosis now: I've been her client for eight years.

My sessions with my therapist, whom I'll call Samantha, began when I was twenty-two, when I lived in San Francisco and needed help with a very San Francisco problem: an INTJ tech-nerd boyfriend. I lucked out with Samantha. She was acerbic and clever but loving. She'd always make time for an emergency session after a breakup and even bought me a beautiful leather-bound travel journal before my first solo trip abroad. My sessions with her quickly moved beyond boy talk, and we began discussing my monthslong bouts of depression and my constant anxiety around friendships, work, and family. I loved her so much that I kept seeing her via Skype after I moved across the country to New York when I was twenty-six.

—

Our session today begins with me complaining about my lack of focus. Samantha asks me to do some positive visualizations and suggests I picture myself in a safe space, as a powerful being, full of light. I try half-heartedly, but I always feel corny doing this stuff. Then, as she does every week, she tells me not to be so hard on myself. “I’m sure you’re being more productive than you’re letting on,” she says, ignoring my eye rolls. “I’ve seen you pull yourself out of depressions like this before. I know you can pull yourself up out of this one.”

But that’s exactly the problem. I’m tired of pulling. I don’t want to pull anymore. I want a dumbwaiter, or an escalator, or a floating rainbow drug cloud. Anything to lift me toward emotional stability. To fix me.

—

I’ve suffered from anxiety and depression since I was twelve years old. The pain is a fanged beast that I’ve battled a hundred times throughout the years, and every time I think I’ve cut it down for good, it reanimates and launches itself at my throat again. But in recent years, I’d convinced myself that this battle was completely pedestrian. I mean, twentysomething millennials are all really stressed out, aren’t they? Isn’t depression just shorthand for the human condition? Who *isn’t* anxious here in New York, the capital of neuroticism?

That is, until I turned thirty. One by one, I’d watched my erratic friends hit thirty and quickly become adults. They reported that they had less energy, so they stopped caring as much about what other people thought and settled into themselves. Then they bought beige linen pants and had babies. I’ve waited for that mature, elevated calm, but my thirtieth birthday was months ago, and if anything, I care more than ever. I care about shopping cart placement and plastic in the oceans and being a good listener. I care about how I seem to fuck everything up all the time. I care and I care, and I hate myself for it.

My friends got one thing right, though: I’m so tired now. Thirty years on this earth, and I’ve been sad at least half that time.

On my subway rides to work, I stare at the supposedly neurotic masses—who are calmly staring at their phones—and think: Maybe I’m different from them? Maybe something is wrong with me? Something big. In the past week,

I've been scrolling through various mental illnesses on WebMD, searching for symptoms that sound familiar to find an answer.

Now, near the end of my session with Samantha, after we've exhausted the usual pep talks and affirmations, I gather up my courage to ask about my internet diagnosis. "Do you think I'm bipolar?"

Samantha actually laughs. "You are not bipolar. I am sure of it," she says. And that's when she asks, "Do you want to know your diagnosis?"

I don't yell, "Lady, I've been seeing you for a fucking decade, yes I want to know my goddamn diagnosis," because Samantha taught me about appropriate communication. Thanks, Samantha.

Instead, I say, "Yes. Of course."

Something in her jaw becomes determined, and her gaze is direct. "You have complex PTSD from your childhood, and it manifests as persistent depression and anxiety. There's no way someone with your background couldn't have it," she says.

"Oh. Yeah, PTSD." Post-traumatic stress disorder. I had a crappy childhood, so I kinda figured that.

"Not just PTSD. Complex PTSD. The difference between regular PTSD and complex PTSD is that traditional PTSD is often associated with a moment of trauma. Sufferers of complex PTSD have undergone continual abuse—trauma that has occurred over a long period of time, over the course of years. Child abuse is a common cause of complex PTSD," she says. Then her eyes drift to the corner of the screen. "Oh—we're out of time! Let's continue this next week."

The first thing I do after our Skype window closes is bring up Google. I've never heard of complex PTSD. Surprisingly, there aren't that many results. I go from Wikipedia to a government page about C-PTSD as it relates to veterans. I read the list of symptoms. It is very long. And it is not so much a medical document as it is a biography of my life: The difficulty regulating my emotions. The tendency to overshare and trust the wrong people. The dismal self-loathing. The trouble I have maintaining relationships. The unhealthy relationship with my abuser. The tendency to be aggressive but unable to tolerate aggression from others. It's all true. It's all me.

The more I read, the more every aspect of my personhood is reduced to deep diagnostic flaws. I hadn't understood how far the disease had spread. How

complete its takeover of my identity was. The things I want. The things I love. The way I speak. My passions, my fears, my zits, my eating habits, the amount of whiskey I drink, the way I listen, and the things I see. Everything—everything, all of it—is infected. My trauma is literally pumping through my blood, driving every decision in my brain.

It is this totality that leaves me frantic with grief. For years I've labored to build myself a new life, something very different from how I was raised. But now, all of a sudden, every conflict I've encountered, every loss, every failure and foible in my life, can be traced back to its root: me. I am far from normal. I am the common denominator in the tragedies of my life. I am a textbook case of mental illness.

Well, this explains it all, I think. Of course I've been having trouble concentrating on my work. Of course so many people I've loved have left. Of course I was wrong to think I could walk into fancy institutions full of well-bred, well-educated people and succeed. Because the person with C-PTSD, the person who is painted here on the internet, is broken.

The orange walls of my office close in on me. I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere. I try to stay another couple of hours at my desk in a desperate attempt to prove to myself that I am capable of a full workday, but I can't see my computer screen. My co-workers, laughing outside my door, sound like jackals. I grab my coat and rush out of the building, into the cold air, but even outside, I haven't escaped. With every step, one word echoes in my head: Broken. Broken. Broken.

For ten years I thought I could outrun my past. But today I realize that running isn't working. I need to do something else.

I need to fix this. Fix myself. To revisit my story, one that has until now relied on lies of omission, perfectionism, and false happy endings. I need to stop being an unreliable narrator. I need to look at myself, my behaviors, and my desires with an unflinching, meticulous eye. I need to tease apart the careful life I have crafted for myself, the one that is threatening to unravel at any minute.

And I know where I have to begin.

Every villain's redemption arc begins with their origin story.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

There are only four family movies that haven't been thrown away. I keep the tapes in the highest, farthest corner of my closet. I can't watch them—who even has a VCR anymore? Still, I keep them as the last surviving relics of my childhood, and at last, they have a purpose.

I've always known that I carry my past with me, but it exists in moods and flashes. A raised hand, a bitten tongue, a moment of terror. After my diagnosis, I find myself in need of the specifics. So I borrow a VCR and struggle with the puzzle of plugs and cords, then push one tape in.

The tape starts with Christmas. I see a four-year-old girl in a velvet dress, her little neck swallowed by an enormous white lace collar. She has thick, straight-across bangs and braided pigtails. She is me, but I barely recognize her. Her nose looks much wider than mine, her face rounder. And she seems happy—impossibly so. But I do remember the toys she opens, every one of them. Oh, I loved that blue magnifying glass, that Magic School Bus book, that shell-shaped turquoise Polly Pocket—whatever did I do with that? Where did all of it go?

The tape skips. Now she is kneeling on the floor of our living room with a packet filled with collaged pictures of vegetables. She is presenting a preschool project on the food pyramid, and I am surprised to find that I had a British accent. "Oranges have VITT-amin C," the little girl announces with a smile, showing off two adorable dimples. I don't have those anymore, either.

Now it is Easter, and she is hunting for plastic eggs, crawling around the couch and filling up her little basket. The house I grew up in looks unfamiliar, too—it is sparse, nothing on the walls; our living room furniture is awkwardly

small. I count backward and realize that at this point we had been in the United States for less than two years. We hadn't yet filled our rooms with painted Chinese screens and tchotchkes from Country Clutter, framed batik prints, and an upright piano. All we had was the rattan furniture we'd shipped from Malaysia, covered in floral cushions too thin to hide an egg underneath.

The scene changes for the final time, and the camera turns to my mother and the girl. They are on our front lawn near our rose bushes, which are in full pink and yellow bloom. My mother is pretty in an oversize button-down shirt, jeans, and bare feet. She looks so calm and confident, and she is blowing bubbles. The girl chases the bubbles, giggling breathlessly, running in unsteady circles in the grass. Finally she yells, "I want to try, I want to try," and my mother ignores her for a bit.

My adult self is fully prepared to judge my mother in this video. To hate her. *She won't let me. She thinks I can't do it.* But then she does lower the wand to my lips. I blow too hard and the soap splatters. She dips the wand again, lovingly coaxing me to try until I get it right, and a single bubble floats into the sky. The scene feels like too much and not enough. Wait—who is this woman? What is this carefree life? This isn't how it was. This isn't the full story. Show me more. But the tape cuts out, and that's it. Just fuzzy static.

—

My family didn't come to America to escape. We came to thrive.

I was two and a half when we left Malaysia and settled in California. My father worked in tech, and his company gave us a down payment for a home in Silicon Valley as part of our relocation package. For my father, it was a return.

Growing up, my father was the smartest kid in the small tin-mining town of Ipoh. His family was poor, and what little money they had, my grandfather often gambled away. My father didn't take after him. He had brains and grit. He solved all the problems in his math and English textbooks, then went to the library, checked out all of *their* textbooks, and solved the problems in those, too. And he wasn't just an obsessive brain. He tumbled with other brown-skinned boys on the rugby field. He was both well-liked and brilliant: a promising young man.

But when he wrote to American colleges asking about scholarship options,

they told him not to waste his time—they didn't offer scholarships for international undergraduates.

Then my father got a perfect 1600 on the SATs. Back then, this score signaled academic virtuosity. That 1600 was his ticket out of poverty and out of Malaysia. His older sister, who'd married well, loaned him the money to apply to colleges in the United States. He got into every single school, and every college offered him a full ride.

My father, who had spent his lifetime immersed in tropical heat, was intimidated by the brochures the Ivy League sent him, filled with images of students swaddled in scarves and coats amid frosted old buildings or auburn leaves. In contrast, the image on the brochure for one prestigious Californian school featured students wearing tank tops and shorts, playing Frisbee on a green lawn. That's why he chose it.

"You could have been an East Coast girl in another world," he often said. "You are only a California girl because of that damn Frisbee."

After graduation, my father's job took him around the world for several years before he returned to Malaysia to settle down. He met my mother at the bank; she was the teller. She was pretty and charming, and he was twenty-six—ancient, really. His mother kept telling him he needed to find someone. They dated for all of two months before they got married.

Then I was born. That year, Malaysia's king clubbed a caddie to death for laughing at a bad putt and suffered no consequences. That violence and corruption scared my father. We are ethnically Chinese—one of the ethnic and religious minority groups that face discrimination in Malaysia. When my father was a kid, his uncle, mother, and eldest sister were living in Kuala Lumpur when a race riot broke out, and hundreds of Chinese people were massacred. His sister left her office barely in time to find a safe house in a Chinese neighborhood, where the family hid for days—a friend with connections with the police had to bring them food so they wouldn't go hungry. Outside, children on school buses were slaughtered on their way to class.

My father knew America's freedoms and luxuries. And he knew that my future was constrained in Malaysia. He knew my job and education prospects would eventually be limited if we stayed—that I'd likely have to go abroad in order to follow in his ambitious footsteps. Why not now?

And so we moved into a beautiful home in San Jose with a deck and a pool, near good schools (though we lied about our address so I could attend the best). My father bought us a Ford station wagon; my mother purchased matching Talbots sweater sets. My parents decorated our new house with our old Malaysian furniture, but they bought me a wrought-iron, American queen bed. It was fitting for a girl they named *Stephanie,* wasn't it? They chose the name because it means "the one who wears the crown."

—

On Saturdays, my parents took advantage of our comfortable suburban neighborhood. They took me to The Tech Museum of Innovation or the Children's Discovery Museum or Happy Hollow Park; my mother spent lots of time interrogating the other PTA moms, researching the most educational activities in our area. When we'd exhausted our options, we'd host a barbecue by the pool in our backyard for our fellow Malaysian expat friends and their children. My mother made honey-grilled chicken and always saved the drumsticks for me.

Saturdays were for fun. Sundays were for penance.

On Sundays, we went to church. My father wore a tie, my mother and I wore matching floral dresses with giant globular shoulder puffs, and we sang "Shout to the Lord" with our all-white congregation. Then we went to New Tung Kee, the Chinese-Vietnamese equivalent of a diner, and I'd order No. 1: combination rice stick noodle soup. Once we got home, my mother would sit me down in front of a yellow spiral-bound notebook with my handwriting on the front: *Diary (GERNAL).* One Sunday, she wrote this prompt:

Please write about your time at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. What did you do? What did you see? Make your journal as interesting as possible, starting from the morning and ending in the evening. Write neatly!

It took me more than an hour to complete my assignment, even though I only needed to fill one page. I was six years old and kept getting distracted—playing with our beaded place mats, poking the little felt llamas and tomatoes on the Peruvian arpillera on our wall, drawing elaborate comics on the opposite page. But eventually I dragged my attention to the prompt.

Hiya, folks! I wrote. This was a departure. Usually I started each entry with

Dear Diary, but today I was feeling voicey.

On Saturday I went to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. First, we had to get in line so we could get some tickets. First we went on the Cave Train ride. It was not so scary. We were going through a time machine when we saw cave men dancing, fishing, washing and fighting bears. Then I went on a Ferris Wheel. It was quite tall so my mom had to go with me on it.

Hmm, I thought. I'd better add some excitement. Something to show Mommy how much I loved the adventure she went through all the trouble to take me on.

Then I played two frog games. I finished one frog and got a prize! Then I went on a thing called trampoline thing. I did a flip on it! Then I did it again! The lady there said I did it very good. Well I had quite a fun time!

To cap it all off, I thought I should draw attention to my saucy little address. I noted: *Hey! Did ya know the beginning here is different? I just did that for fun. Love, Stephanie.*

I looked over everything, and it seemed pretty good. I called my mother over. She sat in her chair and placed the notebook in front of her, holding a red pen. I assumed my proper place—standing at attention to her left, hands folded in front of me—and watched as she began the edit. She dotted my work with fierce red *X*'s, circles, and strikethroughs. Each progressive pen mark was a punch to the chest, until I was barely breathing. *Oh no. I'm so dumb. Oh no.*

At the end of the entry, my mother sighed. She wrote an assessment at the bottom of the page:

There can only be one "first." You are still writing too much "Then." <u>Then</u> I went on a ferris wheel. <u>Then</u> I played two frog games. Try to use other words. And I did it <u>well</u>. Very <u>well</u>. Not good!

Then she slapped a large grade at the top: *C-minus*. She turned to me. "The last two entries, I already told you to write *then* less. I told you to be more interesting. Are you slow? And what are you talking about here at the end, about whatever you did for fun? I don't get it."

"I'm sorry," I said, but she was already reaching into her drawer, so I stuck out my hand. She raised the plastic ruler above her head and brought it down on my open palm: *thwack.* I didn't cry. If she saw any tears, she'd call me pathetic and do it again. She closed the notebook. "You'll redo this entry tomorrow."

The point of this journal was to improve my writing skills, but it was also to preserve my well-curated childhood. She hoped that as an adult, I would flip through this notebook fondly, letting it fill me with sentimental memories. But as I read through it now, it appears her mission miscarried. I have no recollection of the Santa Cruz trip, or this lion dance, or that trip to the beach in Mendocino. The only thing I remember vividly is that clear plastic ruler on my palm.

—

The theme of the trip was "Growing Up," which, we would soon learn, meant "Puberty."

Our Girl Scout troop had never done anything like it before; we'd never taken our mothers on a cabin trip. But this was a special time, a time for firsts. We were eleven, and a lot of things were changing.

Our whole troop drove up to the cabin on Saturday afternoon, and after dinner, we spent the evening playing games. All of us played Pictionary together, and we laughed at our mothers' terrible drawings. Afterward, we girls went across the hall to play Uno while our mothers stayed on the couches, talking about mom things. My mother looked glamorous in comparison to the others. Many of them hid their lumpy bodies with baggy clothing. A couple of the Asian moms who didn't speak English very well hunched over shyly, as if they didn't want to be seen. But my mother sat with her back yardstick-straight and commanded the room, looking radiant even in her high-waisted jeans and T-shirt. Her shoulders and arms were muscled from the hours of tennis she played every morning, and a perfectly round perm hovered around her head like a halo. Her voice was strange—high-pitched, warbly, and tinted with a strong Malaysian-British accent. I could hear it splintering across the cabin. But nobody ever seemed to notice, because her voice was often followed by laughter. Men thought she was willful and stubbornly attractive; women found her generous and charming—the kind of person who took new immigrants under her wing and introduced them to kalbi and margaritas and Thanksgiving dinners (though she always bought a turkey *and* a Peking duck to supplement the dry meat).

Meanwhile, the girls had shifted to talking about 'N Sync. I said, "I like BSB better," and the troop leader's daughter snorted and said, "BSB is for babies." The other girls nodded and turned away from me. I dragged my one

friend in the troop to our bunks early so we could talk about our nerdy ghost theories in private, but before I left, I turned to see my mother exchanging numbers and promises with all the other women, the mothers clamoring to write their names on her piece of paper.

The next day we had a full puberty curriculum. Our troop's leaders had brought pads and tampons, and they did a graphic show-and-tell about how to handle your period. This was followed by trust falls and going around in a circle to share puberty-related feelings…. I'm sure there was more, but everything was so embarrassing that I have blocked out nearly all of it. One cringey memory that persists is when our leaders brought out large rolls of paper, which we spread out on the floor. The girls lay down on the paper, and our mothers traced the outlines of our bodies in marker. Then, together, as mother and daughter, we were supposed to draw the changes we'd expect on our bodies. Breasts on our chests. Armpit and pubic hair. I tried to be funny and made stinky green waves coming out of my armpits and a puka-shell choker around my neck, but there was no evading how abominable this entire exercise was. My future boobs didn't have nipples. Neither of us could bear to draw nipples. Just big, hulking, grape-scented, purple *U*'s on my chest.

I kept waiting for my mother to deride this as white-people nonsense, but she played along gamely the entire time, smiling and laughing and teasing me, as if she were just like them.

Afterward, we all stood in a circle and held hands. My troop leader pulled out her guitar, and we swayed together while singing "Sunrise, Sunset" from *Fiddler on the Roof*. The lyrics are nostalgic, wondering how a daughter could have blossomed into a woman when yesterday she was just a girl.

As we sang, all the mothers became misty-eyed, stroking their daughters' hair, kissing the tops of their heads. The other girls leaned into their embraces. My mother did not touch me but stood alone and wept loudly. She cried all the time in the privacy of our home—ugly, bent-in-half sobs—but she never fell apart in public, and the sight alarmed me.

If it hurt her so much for me to grow up, I wouldn't. That moment determined my actions for the next few years: I did not tell her when I got my period and instead stuffed my underwear with toilet paper and hid my stained clothes in the attic. I bound my chest, wore baggy T-shirts, and hunched to keep

my developing breasts from showing—even when she slammed her hand between my shoulder blades and snarled that I looked like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. But I would do anything to make sure she was happy, to show her that I would be hers forever. That was all that mattered.

After the song, we hugged our mothers, and they wiped their tears and held us close. Then we went to our bunk beds to grab our duffel bags and go. My mother's face was still red from crying, but I hoped she wasn't just upset. I hoped the strange rituals had made her closer to me, somehow.

Unfortunately, the car ride was silent. I fretted and peeled my chapped lips until we were home and we'd unloaded the duffel bags from the car. It was then that she exploded.

"At breakfast this morning, you corrected the way Lindsay was holding her knife. Do you remember that? You told her to cut her ham differently. In front of her mother! Why did you do that?" she snapped. "It's not your job to teach people that! You looked like an asshole!"

Flummoxed, I replied, "I don't know—she was holding her knife wrong, like she couldn't even cut it. I thought I could help?"

"Help! Ha!" she barked. "Oh, a lot of help you were. I was so ashamed of you on that trip I couldn't even stand it. Do you know how competitive you were during Pictionary? You got upset when other people didn't know what you were drawing, like a big baby. Everyone felt uncomfortable. Everyone was staring at you. I wanted to die watching you. I wanted to say, '*That is not my daughter.*' "

It felt like I'd sat up quickly in a top bunk and thwacked my head on the ceiling. Now? Really? Of all times, after a *mother-daughter bonding trip*? "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't realize."

"Of course you didn't realize. Because you don't think, do you? You just act without thinking all the time even though I keep telling you, '*Think.*' No wonder all the kids at school hate you."

"I'm sorry about the Pictionary. And with the knife. I was just like…here, try it this way. I don't think her mom felt bad. It didn't seem like she was upset, but…"

"Ooh." My mother's lips formed a very thin line, and her eyes narrowed. "You think you know better than I do? Now you're talking back to me?"

“I’m just trying to apologize! Please! I’m really sorry. I just thought… maybe after that weekend…I thought maybe things would be okay.”

“How can things be okay when you keep *making me look bad*?” she screeched.

I knew none of the other girls in the troop were being screamed at right now. I thought of the ease with which the girls had leaned into their mothers during that song, how they *expected* to be held. How they expected to be safe. But at the same time, my mother was right—the other kids didn’t like me. They said I was weird and *intense*. Maybe I had been overly competitive at Pictionary? Had they really been staring at me? How did I not notice that? How could I know when I was screwing up? Was everything I did a mistake? My eyes welled up.

“Don’t cry,” my mother yelled. “You look hideous when you cry. You look just like your father, with your fat, flat nose. *I said, don’t cry!*” And she slapped me. I put my hands to my face, and she wrenched them down and slapped me again and again. Then she sat down and sobbed. “You’ve ruined my life. I wish you were never born. All you ever do is make me look bad. All you ever do is humiliate me.”

“I’m sorry, Mommy. I’m sorry,” I said.

—

I suspect my mother was unfulfilled. She was a meticulous but reluctant housekeeper and a lazy cook, preferring instead to fill her afternoons volunteering part-time as a treasurer for the school district, tapping on her calculator and filling out spreadsheets. Sometimes she asked my father if she could get a job at the bank. He always dismissed her. “You barely graduated from high school! Who would hire you?”

But this is an adult assumption—a theory I’ve pieced together after watching shows about bored housewives and projecting them onto my parents’ marriage. As a child, I knew exactly why my mother was sad all the time. She was very clear on the source of her misery: me.

—

Here is what I *have* kept from my childhood: my whippings. My mother whipped me a lot. She whipped me for not looking her in the eye when speaking to her, but if I looked her in the eye with too much indignance, she whipped me again. She beat me for sitting with one leg up on the chair "like a trishaw puller" or for using American slang like "don't have a cow, man." Once, she beat me for half an hour with her tennis racket for opening the plastic covering on her *People* magazine after it arrived in the mail. Sometimes the beatings would be mild—she'd use her hands, chopsticks, my toys. Other times she would whale on me with a plastic ruler or a bamboo cane until it broke, and then she'd blame me for it. "You made me do it because you're so stupid!" she howled. Then she turned her eyes up to the ceiling and screamed at God: "What did I do to deserve an ungrateful, useless child? She ruined my life. Take her back! I don't want to look at her ugly face anymore."

A few times a year, my mother would get so tired of me that she decided God should take me back forever. She grabbed my ponytail at the top of a flight of stairs and used it to hurl me down. She raised a cleaver above my wrist, or she pulled my head back and pushed the blade into my neck, its cold edge pressing into the softness of my skin. I'd apologize frantically, but she'd scream at me that I didn't mean it, to shut up before she sliced my jugular open. I'd fall silent, but then she said I was never repentant. So I'd start to apologize again, and she said my apologies were worth nothing, plus now my tears made me so ugly she was certain I had to die. So I stayed quiet until she screamed at me to speak again. We'd sit there, trapped in a senseless loop for hours.

My mother's voice hadn't always been so warbly. It was high and wispy because it was damaged from screaming at me. The doctor said her vocal cords were shredded, so if she wasn't careful, she could lose her voice entirely. This did not faze her.

—

People often ask me what it was like to grow up with this kind of abuse. Therapists, strangers, partners. Editors. *You're telling us the details of what happened to you,* they'd write in the margins. *But how did it feel?*

The question always feels absurd to me. How would I know how I felt? It was so many years ago. I was so young. But if I had to guess, I'd say it probably

felt *fucking bad.*

I probably hated my mother for being impossible to please. But I also loved her, and so I guess I must have felt guilty, too, and frightened. I remember that I cried bitterly when I was beaten, and not because of the pain—I was used to that. I cried because of her words. I bit my lip and dug my nails into my palm, but I could never successfully hold back my tears when she called me stupid, ugly, unwanted. I'd sniffle, which disgusted her, and she'd slap me again.

After the beating was over and the berating stopped, though, it was easy. I just turned off the flow of tears and stared out the window. Or I went back to reading a Baby-Sitters Club book. I put it all behind me and moved on. Once, after a severe beating, I had a harder time—my breath came in quick hiccups and I couldn't slow it down enough to get air into my lungs. In retrospect, this was probably a panic attack. But I remember watching myself with a strange bemusement. *This is so weird*, I thought. *What's happening? How funny!*

But what was I supposed to do with those feelings? Catalog them? Sit there thinking about them all day long? Tell them to my mommy and expect sympathy? Please. My feelings didn't matter. They were pointless. If I felt all those soft, mushy feelings, if I really thought about how messed up it was that my mother threatened to kill me on a regular basis, could I wake up and eat breakfast with her every day? Could I sit on the couch at night and cuddle her to keep her warm? No.

If I took up all that space with *my* feelings, what space could I maintain for hers? Hers were more important. Because hers had greater stakes.

—

My mother kept a large green bottle of Excedrin on her nightstand. She kept it there for her migraines. She also kept it there as her escape route.

After my mother's worst panic attacks, after the most vicious beatings, she curled into a ball on the floor and rocked back and forth. Eventually, in the dry, crackling silence, she whispered that I ruined her life, so now it was time to end things, to take all of her pills. "Please, no, Mommy," I begged, and I tried to give her reasons to keep living, reasons why we appreciated her and all of her sacrifices, reasons why she was a good person who was needed in this world. Sometimes this worked. Other times, she'd ignore me and lock herself in her

bedroom. She told me that if I called 911 and she lived, she'd slit my throat. So I sat outside with my ear pressed to the door, straining to hear her breath, trying to decide at what point it would be worth it—at what point I should trade my own life for hers.

I started monitoring my mother every time she took a nap. I'd creep into her room, stand above her, and stare, making sure her eyes moved under their lids, that her breathing seemed regular.

But once, I missed the signs. I messed up somehow. She made a bona fide attempt and swallowed a bottleful of pills.

I don't know exactly when she made her big attempt, because there were so many little incidents. I think maybe it was the time she disappeared for a couple of days and my dad told me she went to a Holiday Inn for a mini staycation. Later, her friend told me my mother had actually spent the night in a psych ward. Or maybe she really tried to kill herself the night she took some pills, chased them with a case of Heineken, and slept for eighteen hours. My father and I stood at her bedside the next day. "She'll sleep it off. It's called a hangover. Go watch TV or something," he said eventually and stalked off. But I kept watch for a long time before tiptoeing away.

There was some lasting damage, though. Taking Excedrin in those massive quantities gave her stomach ulcers that never quite went away. Every time her stomach twisted after that, she told me it was my fault.

How did I feel about the fact that my mother blamed her suicide attempts on me? I couldn't tell you. Those would be some very big feelings for a very little girl. But I do know this—that every night before bed, I kneeled and said the same prayer over and over like a mantra. "Please, God—let me not be such a bad girl. Please let me be able to make Mommy and Daddy happy. Please make me into a good girl."

CHAPTER 2

In middle school, I stopped sleeping.

I had tennis lessons three times a week, Chinese twice, piano practice, and Girl Scouts. With all of these activities, plus school and homework, I usually worked twelve-hour days. And then there was the other activity that took up the remainder of my waking hours: being my parents' mediator.

The ambitious father I'd heard so much about—the one who pulled himself and his family out of poverty, who worked his way to a hopeful American future—was not the father I grew up with. I got a shell of that man.

My father worked for eight hours a day, then escaped to the golf course. When he was home, he was a half-present phantom, decaying in front of the television for as long as he could before being roused with the annoyance of familial obligation. Sometimes I wondered if his passions were stolen from him by America's glass ceiling—its insistence that an Asian man like him could not rise above an unexceptional middle-management position. But if you asked him, he'd say his soul was flattened by my mother.

I was not the only one my mother took her moods out on. She lashed out at him for chewing with his mouth open, for sweating too much, for talking too much or not enough. For his part, he could be thoughtlessly blunt and could not comprehend her intense unhappiness ("All you do is watch TV and play tennis; what is there to complain about?"). They fought about money: She wanted a Lexus; he said we couldn't afford it. They fought over the fact that he moved us to America, with all of these clueless *gweilo*s and their rude children who called her by her first name. Then the fights would escalate, a soap dish would get

thrown across the room, horrific threats would be made, and someone would drive off. I'd sit in the garage, shivering in the dark, praying for them to come home.

I took it upon myself to keep everything in a tenuous kind of order. When my parents wanted to sleep in on Sundays, I'd force them to go to church so God could know how serious we were about maintaining the peace in our household. I'd remind them of things to be grateful for. I'd pick my father's clothing up off the floor before my mother could find it and scream at him. If my mother was angry for no reason, I'd lie and tell my father I'd misbehaved egregiously that day so he'd forgive her fury. Then I'd feed him ideas for consolation presents he could buy her. "It's not her fault. It's just that I'm bad, I'm awful, I'm evil," I told him, and he believed me. "Why do you have to be like this?" he'd ask. "Why can't you just be better?"

Eventually, even I began to believe the stories I constructed. So I did try to be better, less of a burden in school and everywhere else. I pushed myself until I had faster mile times and flawless performances and As all down my report card.

But I was still a child. I could not survive in a world where I simply fought, negotiated, and worked toward perfection. I needed play. I needed release. So I handled that like I handled everything else. I *made* the time for it. All it required was popping Sudafed before I went to bed—baby meth, to keep me awake. After I heard my parents go to bed, I snuck down to the family computer and lurked on the internet until four A.M. most nights. I read copious amounts of fan fiction, trolled AOL chat rooms, and talked to my *real* friends on *Star Wars* message boards. Yes, I fell asleep every time a teacher put a movie on. Yes, I had a really difficult time remembering any Chinese vocabulary words, and sometimes I got dizzy when I stood up and kind of fell over a little bit. But I could handle it all. This is what needed to be done.

One night after I logged on, I happened to look to the right at our printer. There was a picture of a girl there, pixelated and streaked from cheap toner. She was sitting on a beach, blond and bronzed and very naked, except for two flawless circles of sand strategically applied to her boobs to cover her…well, her *nips.* I snatched the photo out of the tray. My eyes did a quick scan—my mother would find it if I placed it in the trash can, and she often checked my backpack, so that wouldn't work. But we did have some enormous, seven-foot-tall, solid

wood bookshelves in the office. They had not moved for as long as I could remember. I slipped the printout behind them.

I was furious. I spent my whole life being vigilant, trying to preserve my mother's tenuous sanity and hold together their marriage. So this felt almost insulting. How could my father be so careless? Still, I had this under control. I made myself the primary account holder on AOL and changed his parental controls. Now he could only look at content appropriate for a thirteen-year-old boy.

A couple of days later, my mother came storming into my room. "What happened to all of our money?" she screamed. She slapped me across the face. *Why couldn't my father access his online bank account? What had I done? Had I lost all of our money? How were we going to pay bills? Pay the mortgage? What the fuck did I do?* Oops. I hadn't accounted for this. Had I really erased all of our money? My breath grew frantic. But I couldn't tell her why I'd done what I'd done.

"I think I can fix it, if you give me five minutes," I stammered. "I was just trying something. I'm sorry—"

"I don't want you to fix it. You're never using the internet again. You can't use the phone for six months. You're grounded for six months. You can't see any friends. You can't watch television or movies. All you are going to do from now on is study instead of *wasting*"—she slapped me across the face again—"your *time*"—she kicked my knee in so I collapsed—"on *stupid bullshit*!"—she kicked me in the stomach as I lay on the floor. "Give me your password right now!"

The internet was my only refuge from *this*. I didn't know what I'd do if she took it away. I'd already taken to fingering our knife blades late at night, wondering how much it would hurt to slit a wrist and whether my mother would notice in the morning if I slipped one into my backpack to take to school. I once snuck out of the house to buy a copy of *The National Enquirer* that contained a picture of Dylan Klebold's and Eric Harris's dead bodies, and sometimes when everything seemed like too much, I stared at it and fantasized about suicide as a last-ditch option.

I figured I'd rather die than have my only comfort taken from me. So for the first time, I went cold and said, "No."

“WHAT?” my mother hollered. “You disrespectful—You aren’t worth anything. You ugly, hideous monster. I don’t know why I ever gave birth to you!” She continued to land blows on me—on my body, my face, the top of my head. Then she grabbed my hair and pulled me out of my room, down the stairs, and around a corner. She threw me into the office, where my dad was sitting at the computer, fuming. He looked up.

“She won’t tell me the password,” my mother said.

Beatings from my father were rare, but ruthless. I hyperventilated, my words coming quick: “I can fix it. I don’t need to tell you the password—” But before I could finish, my father stood up, grabbed me by my shirt, and threw me. My back hit the closet wall, and I slid down to the floor. Then he picked me up and threw me to the other side of the office, up against those tall bookshelves, the ones with the naked printout behind them. He grabbed the shelves and said, “If you don’t tell me your password, I’m going to tip this over onto you. I’ll crush you.”

“No,” I begged, but then I shut up because they didn’t like *no*. *No* was talking back; *no* was a word I had no right to. I tried to keep my lips sealed as they leaned into me again, slaps and kicks and wrenched wrists, a mess of bloody gums and insults until it was late and we were all tired. They stood above me, in the living room now. I sobbed on the floor, drained. I silently chanted, *It’s unfair. It’s unfair. I didn’t do this to be bad. I did it to protect you. It’s unfair.*

And then my father went to his golf bag and brought out his driver, its round head bigger and harder than his fist. “TELL. ME. THE. PASSWORD!” he screamed, and his face was twisted and unrecognizable. He lifted the club, then swung down toward my head. I rolled out of the way. We had a rattan ottoman covered with a blue cushion with pink flowers. It gave way.

The driver got stuck in the splintered hole in the middle. I gave way, too. I gave them the password. Before I went to bed, I slipped a knife under my pillow. Just in case.

CHAPTER 3

When I close my eyes and think about my childhood in America, all I can picture are welts and white knuckles. If forced to dig for something positive, I can maybe see myself watching *Sailor Moon* on TV, wearing a giant T-shirt with Garfield on it, playing DDR, or eating Lunchables pizzas. Man, Lunchables pizzas were good.

But when I think about my childhood in Malaysia, my memories aren't fragmented. Instead, I am transported, an entire sensory world unfolding before me: the sweat on my upper lip, the sound of traffic, the smells—gasoline and smoky frying pans and the woody, heady smell of jungle decay.

Because I loved Malaysia. I loved the storm drains that lined the Colonial-style row houses and shop fronts. I loved the rattan overhangs on the hawker stalls and shops and digging through the freezers for lime-vanilla ice cream bars. I loved getting into pillow fights with my cousins during monsoon season—crouching in the dark until a bolt of lightning illuminated our hiding spots and we clobbered each other's faces off. I loved the food: rich, lard-filled black mee and funky, spicy prawn mee and crunchy, chubby Ipoh bean sprouts and silky, lukewarm Hainanese chicken—all served on robin's-egg-blue plastic plates with bright orange chopsticks and a big icy glass of Yeo's soybean milk or neon Kickapoo Joy Juice. I loved not having to wear my seatbelt in the back seat and loved playing computer games with my cousins all day long. I loved the language, which I can wield like a native. Its elegant conciseness (*Can lah!*), its phalanx of exclamations (*Alamak! Aiyoyo! Aiyah! Walao eh!*), the many

languages it steals from (Malay: *Tolong!* Cantonese: *Sei lor!* Tamil: *Podaa!*), its fun, puzzling grammar (*So dark! On the light one! Wah, like that ah?*).

But most of all, I loved Malaysia because Malaysia loved me.

—

When I was growing up, we made a pilgrimage back to Malaysia every two years or so, sometimes for a couple of weeks during winter holidays, sometimes for a couple of months in the summer. I prepared for our trips months in advance by lying down on the dizzy-hot California blacktop during lunch, becoming inured to the feeling of glorious heat so I could run and play undeterred in the tropics.

Malaysia was relief. It was respite and safety. My parents were lighter when they were surrounded by family. They laughed, they ate, they never fought. They did not require careful intervention from me, so I was free to be a kid. My cousins and I ran off together to secret magical worlds all our own, and nobody interrupted except to feed us. We lived like kings.

And I was the king of kings, the supreme ruler, because I was heralded—celebrated!—as the favorite. Not the extra-serving-of-cake kind of favorite. I was the kind of favorite where everyone would straight up say at family gatherings, “Oh, Stephanie’s the best.” My aunts would tell their children, “Why can’t you be more like her?” I was brilliant, they said, and exquisitely well-behaved. I rarely got into trouble, and everyone bought me all the toys I wanted. And the person leading this campaign was the matriarch of our family: my dad’s aunt. We all called her Auntie.

Auntie was my great-aunt, and even though she was less than five feet tall and shuffled through the house blindly, she was a fiery old gal. Often, she’d bang her fist on the table and disappear into a rant about how hard it was to find a good rambutan these days (Auntie’s main passion in her old age was good fruit). And she’d mastered the art of casually extreme theatrics. Once, she was calmly telling me stories from her childhood and mentioned that when she was a kid, if you got a zero on a test, your family had to pay a fine to the school. I was surprised for a moment—really? Had I heard her right? “Pay a *fine*?” I asked.

She startled, her whole body snapping upright as if she were possessed, eyes wide behind her Coke-bottle glasses, jaw slack, hands trembling. “WHAT LAH,

YOU!” she shouted at me, with a passion generally reserved for cussing out murderers. “YEAH, LAH! PAY FINE!” Then, just as quickly as it began, her body settled and she went back to her story, giggling.

She was like that: a total wack job, but her whole self, even her anger, even her sadness, was infused with mischievous glee. Once, she farted loudly during a mah-jongg game and then laughed so hard about it she peed her pants, then hobbled to the bathroom, leaking pee everywhere and screaming with laughter.

Auntie was the caretaker of our whole family. When my father was growing up, his mother (Auntie’s sister—my grandmother) got a job as the foreman of a glass factory in Kuala Lumpur, a couple of hours from their home in Ipoh. So my grandmother rented an apartment in KL and stayed there during the week, seeing her kids on the weekends. While she was gone, Auntie took on the responsibility of raising her sister’s children. She worked as a secretary and bounced babies on her hip and even had a money-lending business on the side. Eventually, she saved enough money to buy two houses for her nieces. My father and his siblings all considered Auntie to be a second mother, so after my grandmother died when I was seven, Auntie ascended to the powerful role of matriarch. And she used that power to spoil me.

Every time I walked into a room, Auntie would reach for me and coo, “*Ho gwaai, ho gwaai.*” So well-behaved. So good. She dug the fish balls out of her bowl of soup and fed them to me. She taught me mah-jongg and stroked my hands.

The other adults fell in line to say something nice about my eyes, my dimples. My aunts traveled to the market just to buy me my favorite treats—soft pork jerky, curry puffs, butter pineapple tarts, a dozen different kinds of kueh. I had one cousin who wanted to be an artist when she grew up. She had filled an entire bookshelf with her sketches. I showed up and started doodling, and everyone flocked around me, praising my natural talent. My cousin stormed off and didn’t talk to me for days.

—

Once, my mother and I went to our safe-deposit box at the bank and I watched her delicately pick through the bounty in red velvet boxes. “Your grandmother gave you the best of the family jade, and one day, you’ll inherit all of this

because you're the favorite," she whispered, and she clasped a gold chain around my neck. Dangling from it was a solid gold rabbit pendant with ruby eyes. "She gave this to you when you were just a baby. A bunny for the year of the bunny!"

"But why am I the favorite?" I asked. "What did I do?"

"It's simple," she said. "Your dad is the eldest son in the family. And you are his firstborn child. So naturally, you are the favorite." This sounded enough like something out of an Amy Tan novel for me to believe it.

—

I felt most special during my one-on-one time with Auntie. In the late afternoons, when everyone else was napping, I followed the sound of green bean stems breaking juicily between Auntie's fingers, my bare feet slapping gently on the marble floor, and sat on a rattan chair, the kind that imprinted elaborate patterns into my lower butt. I snapped the green beans, too. "*Ho gwaai, girl, ho gwaai,*" Auntie said to me in her gentlest voice. "You are such a sweet girl, being the only one to help your Auntie." She'd tell me stories about growing up in Ipoh, of faceless great-grandmothers and tussling with her sisters over mangos. And then she would dispense some Chinese wisdom, the same sayings her mother had told her a million years ago. Optimism, Auntie stressed, was of utmost importance in this life.

"When the sky falls, use it as a blanket," Auntie repeated to me. "Big things, make small. Small things, make nothing. When someone wrongs you, never keep it in your heart. Let it go. Smile through your tears. Swallow your pain."

I nodded absentmindedly, but when my cousins woke up and I ran back to play, the black-and-white memories of old, pajama-wearing ancestors and their funny sayings faded into the back of my memory. All that time, I thought Auntie was trying to give me some sense of where I came from. To make sure my McDonald's-eating American self stayed a little bit Chinese. Back then, I never suspected an ulterior motive: to give me what I needed to survive.

CHAPTER 4

When I was thirteen, my mother took me out for a bowl of my favorite shrimp dumpling noodles and told me, “I’m sorry, but I can’t take it anymore. I’m divorcing your father.” This time, no amount of crying or pleading worked—she had made up her mind. “You should think hard about who you want to live with afterward,” she said. Then she took me home, packed a duffel bag, and drove away.

I called her cellphone for days, trying from the moment I woke up until three in the morning. She only picked up once, a weekday at midnight. “I’m fine. Stop calling me,” she said. Her voice sounded dangerously free. It was loud in the background; I heard music. A bar? Then she hung up. I called again. No answer. After a week, I stopped calling.

She returned for the first time two months later to pick up some clothes. I rushed downstairs when I heard her car pull into the garage. I wanted to hear her say, “How’ve you been holding up?” or “I missed you” or maybe even “Hello,” but instead she walked in and looked down at the cat’s litter box, which we kept near the door. “You didn’t scoop the litter while I was gone?” she yelled. “Look at this, it’s full of shit! Do I have to do everything? What’s wrong with you?” She dragged me into the kitchen, grabbed a pair of chopsticks, and hit me. As she lifted her arm again, I said, “Stop hitting me, or I won’t live with you.” She froze. For the first time, the power balance between me and my mother had shifted. I had suddenly gotten off the seesaw, slamming her down on the tanbark. She stormed off, and I knew then that I’d already made up my mind. Something inside me closed toward her that would never open again. My father was a mess,

but he needed me. He swore he wouldn't hit me again, and I believed him. Meanwhile, she was just fine without us. The choice was obvious.

A couple of weeks later, she returned again and called me into the kitchen. "Stephie," she proclaimed, "I have found a new husband. He has a big house, and if you move in with me, we can have a good life. So. Who do you want to live with? Me or your father?"

My face was blank. "I want to live with my dad."

"You'll regret this," she replied, and those were the last words my mother said to me.

—

After she left, my father spent a lot of time lying on the floor. I tended to him, coaxing him into bed, yelling at him to wake up. He moved sluggishly and defeatedly, his shoulders slumped as I checked my watch and told him I'd be late for school if he didn't move faster. I tried to distract him from his pain with movies or shopping or nerding out over *Lord of the Rings*. But he often turned to me and said with teary eyes, "I wasted my life."

"No, you didn't," I said, holding his hand. "Look, you came from nothing! You came to America! You became successful! You have me, right?"

"But I never should have married her. What was I thinking? Why? Why? And now maybe she's a lesbian," he speculated. "She was probably cheating on me the whole time."

"You didn't even like her very much. You were always threatening to leave her anyway."

"But I never would have. Because we're Chinese. Nobody gets divorced in this family. Too much shame. I'm the only one."

"Well, look. You still have lots of life left. You're really smart and funny. And you were withering away in that marriage anyway. She was so boring! Now, we're gonna make you *cool*. Let's go shopping!" I said, hopping around eagerly, yanking on his hand. I made him drive us to the mall, where I forced him to try on a rack of Tommy Bahama Hawaiian shirts. He twirled around in a colorful array of parrots and palm fronds, and I clapped. "Look how young you look! This is more like it!" He giggled and pulled out his credit card.

In this way we survived the next two years together. We had to sell the

house and move into a much smaller apartment, so we threw away everything that reminded us of my mother—which turned out to be almost everything we owned. All of her ceramic figurines, all the family albums, the piano, the rattan furniture, the batik prints, the teak chests and the linens inside of them, the Magic School Bus books. I picked out a leather couch, chrome light fixtures, and tiki mugs for our new apartment. The result looked like a fourteen-year-old's bachelor pad—which, in essence, it was.

I made him a new, absurdist email address that he accepted without question. I talked him through conflicts with his friends and family, advised him through decisions in his job. I even showed up to bar nights with his pals, and they used me as a parlor trick: How many shots could my fifteen-year-old body take without appearing drunk? Before the divorce, my father used to call me a pet name, *Noi Noi.* It's a sweet diminutive for *girl.* He never called me that after the divorce. I was not a girl. I was his caretaker.

But it wasn't all bad. In some ways, this messiness was a relief. For the first time, nobody meticulously structured our every waking moment, watched us like a hawk to ensure our productivity, or lectured us on our manners. We took our newfound freedom to extremes like a couple of irresponsible college students. We stayed up late watching R-rated movies. I quit all of my extracurriculars, started failing my classes, wore dog collars and miniskirts, and became a tiny, foul-mouthed pirate, spewing all the furious expletives I'd held inside for so long. And I stopped believing in God. I drew Sharpie pentagrams on my wrists and binders. Being virtuous and good hadn't gotten me anything but a ruined family. I might as well go the other way.

My father also began a delayed adolescence in which he tried to convince me that he'd been a friendly bro the whole time, a frog under a spell who was just now turning back into the prince he was always meant to be.

I made him drive us to art galleries and bookstores in San Francisco so we could become cultured. He took me to Haight-Ashbury, even chaperoned me while I explored the head shops, oohing and aahing over the shiny glass bongs. He told me stories about all the ex-girlfriends he should have married and about getting high in college with a guy named Volcano. We'd always listened to my mother's soft-rock station growing up, but now on the ride home, we blasted Pink Floyd, chanting, "Hey! Teacher! Leave them kids alone!"

I'm not sure why, but I started affectionately calling him "Poop Dawg" instead of "Dad." When I yelled, "Poop Dawg!" and he yelled back, "What?" all of my friends would scream with delight.

Our most valuable bonding time was over dinner. My father didn't know how to cook, so he'd take us out whenever it was time to feed me. And there, over quesadillas at Chili's, one of us would start. We never used the word "mother." Never uttered her name. We simply said "she."

"*She* never would have let me eat this because she'd say it had too much fat, too much sodium. She was the one always getting sick, yet she worried about everyone else," he spat.

"What a fucking bitch," I said way too loudly, and people turned to look, but neither of us cared. "Do you remember all of the times she wouldn't let me eat dinner because I couldn't choke down the salad?"

"I'm sorry. I don't remember that," he said. "What a horrible woman."

"Total whore. HUGE whore! Did I ever tell you about the time she beat me for an hour with chopsticks because I didn't want to eat the Chinese broccoli in my soup?"

He sucked his teeth. "I wish I'd known; I would've left her a long time ago," he muttered, and I knew that was a lie, but it was okay.

—

Hatred, I learned quickly, was the antidote to sadness. It was the only safe feeling. Hatred does not make you cry at school. It isn't vulnerable. Hatred is efficient. It does not grovel. It is pure power.

If a kid bumped into me in the hallway, I'd bodycheck him back. This one chola girl gave me a dirty look and I knew she was talking shit about me, so I called her a slut. She spat in my hair, so I crept up behind her as she stood at the edge of a hill and tried to whack her so hard with my tennis racket that she'd roll down it (I failed, luckily). I threw a jar of paint on a girl. A boy called me a goth bitch in math class, so I turned around, said, "I'm not a goth," and slapped him across the face. A kid wrote "Ab Dominal" when he meant "Anno Domini," so I doubled over laughing and called him a fucking dumbass, and, come on now, why are you walking away? Well, fuck you anyway.

Pretty soon, the kids at school were frightened of me. Rumors followed me

everywhere. People said I was a drug dealer. An addict. A witch who sacrificed chickens in her backyard. A whore who'd slept with everyone at school. None of it was true, but who cares about truth in high school? A mysterious burner account messaged me on AIM to call me an *intense, annoying psycho,* and I replied, "What do you mean, annoying? Tell me what the fuck *annoying* even is." But they just typed, "ROFL lololol ok bitch u funny" and logged off. So instead of trying to convince everyone I was normal, I leaned into my freakishness, doubled down on my fury.

In his adult circles, my father wasn't faring much better. His small handful of friends had distanced themselves from him because he couldn't stop complaining about his shitty ex-wife.

Soon, my father and I found ourselves alone in this world, and our simmering hatred had nowhere to go but toward each other.

CHAPTER 5

The first night my father told me I was just like my mother, he uncorked a lifetime of rage. It had only been two months since she'd left. Sometimes I thought I could still hear her screaming my name. I'd stand up and whip around in the schoolyard during lunch, looking for her in a panic, afraid she was coming for me.

I would not tolerate this accusation from him. "Fuck you to hell and back," I screamed at my father, "I am nothing like her. You know what she did to me. You know what she did to us. She tortured me my entire life and you never protected me from it and now you dare…you DARE to compare me to her. Who is the one who takes care of your pathetic, sorry ass now?"

"Oh," my father replied. "Now I see why your mother hates you. I get why she left."

"Well, if you don't want me, fine," I spat, and I ran. I slammed my feet into my Vans, threw open the front door, and sprinted. I didn't care if I didn't have any money or food or a coat; I'd figure it out, I'd go someplace, I'd find someone. I was a kid. People take care of kids. They're supposed to. One foot in front of the other. Here was one thing I knew how to do.

He tried to follow me. I heard him yelling, "Wait, come back, stop!" but my legs were slingshots, my head was clear, the fall air was brisk, and when it entered my lungs, I became the night. I was sure I could disappear.

And then I heard him scream. A shrill, guttural wail. And then: "MY FOOT! MY FOOT! I CUT UP MY FOOT!" He'd run across the asphalt barefoot.

I ran for a half a block more, maybe. But it didn't take long for me to slow, then stop. I stood there for a minute, looking toward the far end of the block, the cars passing on the main road. Our block always smelled of desert grass and warm pavement. An indigo dusk settled itself behind the tops of the palm trees lining the street. It would be dark soon. Where was I really going to go?

He was still making little whimpering noises. I walked back. He was gripping his foot with both hands, squeezing it desperately. Back home, I helped him up the stairs to the bathroom. He sat on the floor. "There's so much blood," he moaned. I got the Neosporin and asked him to move his hands. He did, sucking in his breath. I looked. The cut in his foot was smaller than a pencil eraser. It had barely broken the skin. It was not bleeding. I stared at him and waited. I tried to make him look at me. He didn't. I threw the Neosporin at his head, went to my room, and slammed the door. I took a hunting knife and sliced open a large red gash on the pad of my thumb. I didn't flinch.

—

By the middle of my sophomore year, I saw my dad maybe three nights a week. The other nights he spent at his new girlfriend's house. But that's not what he called her. "My friend," he said. "This is my friend's car I'm borrowing." "It's my friend's kids I'm watching." As if he just had a best buddy with whom he had fun pajama popcorn sleepovers every night. He knew I didn't want him to date. I'd told him I was still too traumatized and couldn't handle another mother figure in my life right now. So his solution was to keep us separate and divide his life: one half with me, and one with her. He felt like he got everything he wanted. I felt like I was being abandoned again. When he first started disappearing, I started disappearing, too. I stopped eating and dropped to ninety-five pounds. But in time, I came to terms with the fact that it wasn't him and me against the world anymore. It was me, alone.

—

The day that marked the beginning of the end was outstandingly sunny. I was sixteen, about to start my senior year, and he was driving us home. I can't remember what we were arguing about, but I knew things had escalated to a

dangerous place when his eyes went wild. He sweated. The car engine revved faster and faster.

“Don’t do this,” I warned, but he just laughed, the pitch of it rising eerily.

“It’s too late, it’s too laaate,” he said in a singsong voice. He blew past one stop sign. Two.

I knew how this went. The first time he’d done it, I was ten years old. My parents had a fight at New Sam Kee, and my mother left the restaurant and walked me home out of spite. My father pulled up alongside us and screamed, “GET IN OR I’LL KILL YOU!” His voice was savage and distorted, his eyes like ping-pong balls in their sockets. “Go,” my mother whispered, reluctantly setting me in the car, and before I could close the door, he floored it, sixty-five in a school zone.

“We’re going to die. We’re going to die. I’m going to kill myself. I’m going to kill you with me. I can’t do this anymore,” he said in a voice nothing like his own. A small part of me was irritated by the drama of it—like the voice was something he stole from a movie.

“Please, Daddy,” I wailed, but he screamed at me to shut up and then swerved into oncoming traffic. A symphony of horns announced my death. But at the last minute, he swerved back and then stomped on the pedals—left, right, left, right, stop, go, until my head dove forward and then slammed back against the seat.

I went through everyone just in case: Allah, Buddha, Jesus. Then I asked Jesus’s forgiveness for cycling through so many gods, because obviously there’s only one, but you understand, right, Jesus? I put my hands up rigidly. Maybe if the car flipped, I could push myself off the ceiling, protect my head. But wait, don’t they say that babies don’t die after they fall from heights because they’re relaxed? Should I relax? Should I jump out? Should I scream? Isn’t death, too, a problem I can solve?

We got home safely, but I never forgot that look on his face, that shuddery voice. I was disturbed to see it again after the divorce.

—

My father didn’t hit me once after my mother left, but he was a fan of car terrorism. Whenever we fought while driving, he’d start sweating and shaking,

breathing heavily until the car windows fogged up. Then he'd blow stoplights, brake so hard my seatbelt choked my breath, careen near the edges of cliffs, all while laughing maniacally. "It's time for both of us to die," he'd sing, smiling. "I'm going to kill myself because I'm tired of this life, and you're a fucking bitch so you're coming, too." He almost killed us a dozen times; each time, I'd beg and plead and placate him, feeding him reasons why we needed to live. Still, the incidents kept happening. First occasionally, then once every couple of months. Then more frequently.

But this time, on this beautiful summer day, I did not pray or panic. Even though my heart was pounding, I felt strangely calm. I very quietly gripped the door handle and waited.

Eventually, he was forced to a stop behind several cars at a red light. He screeched to a halt, our bodies bowing. The second it was safe, I threw open the door, ripped off my seatbelt, and stumbled out. He took off.

I was nowhere. Just hills and grass on each side, among the sparse foothills of San Jose. I plodded slowly toward the new house he'd bought. The way back was all uphill. The sun beat down on my head, but I was shivering. I tried to count how many times I'd had to beg for my life, but I couldn't. I wondered how long it would take before my luck ran out. Before he ran the wrong red light and we were T-boned by an SUV.

I walked back as slowly as possible, not knowing what would await me when I got home. The grass made me sneeze. On the side of the road, I saw a half-size shopping cart in a ditch. Hey, cool. I dragged it out and pushed it home with me.

When I got home, I opened the wooden gate at the side of the house and pushed the cart into the corridor there. And that's when I saw the pile of tools. I had never noticed them before. They'd been left by the previous owner in a wheelbarrow next to the woodpile. They were old and rusty. A pitchfork. A shovel. An ax.

The perfect prop. The ax would certainly convey a message, I thought. A decisive *back the fuck off* if he was still angry. I weighed the heft of it in my hands and slid in through the back door. My father was asleep in front of the blaring TV. I quietly padded up into my room.

The day chugged forward into night. I was too afraid to go down into the kitchen to see if there was anything in the refrigerator. Probably not, anyway. So I didn't eat. I didn't cry. I sat on my bed fuming, my mind churning.

I had faced death so many times before that I knew the feeling well. At a certain point, your body gives up on wild, animal panic and instead settles into a foreboding calm. You accept the end. You lose hope. And then, with hope, goes sanity.

That's how I found myself in his room in the middle of the night, standing above his bed. I watched him sleep, examined his gaping mouth, his peaceful face. Then I heaved the ax up above us in a graceful arc that would end on his balding skull. And I started to scream.

His whole body jumped up under the sheets, and he struggled to focus on me, on the ax, on his sorry situation, before he cried out in terror. It shames me to admit that threatening his life felt…satisfying. To hold so much power. To feel so much control. He squirmed, and for the first time in forever, I was not afraid.

"How do you like it?" I said quietly, in that same chilling, deadpan, serial-killer tone I knew so well, and it felt delicious in my own mouth. "How does it feel to be on the other side of things? To be inches from death? How does it feel when someone wants to kill *you*?"

He whimpered.

"ANSWER ME!" I screeched.

"N-n-not good! It's not good!" His chin was wobbling. *So dramatic*, I thought. *I handled this with more dignity when it had been my turn.*

"I can bring this down on your head at any second. I will crack your fucking skull open. Slam it into you until your brains burst out of your head. Watch your eyeballs roll under the bed. Would you like that? Do you want me to do that?"

"N-n-n—"

"DO YOU?"

"No! No!"

"Okay, then let's get one thing straight. You are *never* going to threaten my life again. NEVER. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"I SAID. DO. YOU. UNDERSTAND. ME."

"Yes!"

“You will never grab me. You will never touch me. You will never go over the fucking speed limit. You will drive *right.* You will never use your car to punish me. Do you have any idea what growing up with a constant fear of death has done to me? It has turned me into the fucking monster you see right now. This is happening because *you* did this to *me.*”

“Okay. I see. I see.”

“DID I SAY YOU COULD FUCKING TALK? Good. Now what do you say? Are you ever going to threaten me again? Will you ever?”

“No! No! I promise. I’m sorry. I’m so, so, so sorry. It was wrong.”

“No you’re not.”

“Please! I promise I won’t!”

“You fucking better not,” I said, and I swung the ax down to my side. I walked out of his room, slammed the door, and wrapped myself around the handle of that ax before falling asleep.

—

My father left a few months later.

The new house he’d bought us was in the middle of nowhere. It took me forty-five minutes to drive to school. So now I was alone in the boonies. The house was already large for two people, but once he moved out, it felt cavernous.

On the outside, it looked like a cookie-cutter *Arrested Development* home, made hurriedly for the pre-2008 housing boom. Inside, I painted the rooms wild colors: lime green and purple. One room was empty; I used it exclusively to throw dirty clothes into. The backyard had a broken fountain filled with brackish water, which was teeming with the carcasses of enormous Jerusalem crickets. One day, I was outside painting a large, red butcher-paper sign advertising the homecoming dance when the wind blew it into the cricket pool. The whole thing was super gross, so I just left it there. Over time, the paper disintegrated, and the water turned an ominous blood red.

My father would drop by a few times a week while I was at school and leave me a plate of roast chicken, maybe a sushi roll on the counter, but after I got food poisoning from the food sitting out too long, I threw it away. I had a debit card for essentials, but he checked my purchases every day and called to yell at me whenever I spent more than $40 on anything. I didn’t want to deal

with any of that, so I rarely used the card except to buy gas to get to school. I subsisted on a large supply of shoplifted Healthy Choice microwavable dinners.

One time I heard noises downstairs and thought someone had broken in. I ran outside in a large T-shirt and no pants and begged the neighbors to call the cops. When they arrived, they searched my filthy home. They found clothing everywhere, frozen chicken burger wrappers on the floor, mugs and old plastic food containers piled on the coffee table. But they didn't find an intruder. I still stayed awake all night.

After a couple of months alone, I began, as they say, "making plans." I stole razor blades, sleeping pills. Most of my friends had graduated or moved away, so I barely talked to anyone at school. I filled up a journal's worth of entries on how badly I wanted to die and wrote multiple suicide letters and last wills and testaments. On some bad nights, I'd call my father. He'd learned better than to pick up, so I'd leave him scathing voicemails calling him an impotent, fat loser; then I'd hang up and count out twenty pills in my hand, willing myself to swallow them all. Why not? When had I been taught that life was worth anything?

One of my suicide letters read: *Father—I bet I've been gone for over 24 hours before you found me. You don't deserve a goodbye.*

CHAPTER 6

I didn't kill myself for three reasons.

The first reason was I was too chickenshit. I was afraid of being unsuccessful. I was afraid it might not be pleasant to die.

The second reason was my two remaining friends, Dustin and Kathy. Dustin's grandmother died earlier that year and he was taking it hard. It would suck to make things worse for him. Kathy and I had been best friends since the fourth grade. Now we were long-distance BFFs because her mom moved her to L.A. Things were very bad for both of us, so we made a life pact—the opposite of a suicide pact. But still, there were times I thought Dustin and Kathy didn't really care about me anyway. *You'll get over it,* I wrote in their farewell letters. *You'll think of me when you see a nice sunset sometimes, but you'll move on.*

The third reason was journalism.

I joined the school newspaper my junior year. My journalism teacher took a liking to me, which made me feel special, because he was a crotchety, nitpicky man who was rarely satisfied with anything. In the winter, while everyone else was laying out copy, he summoned me to his desk and told me I had a "biting sense of humor." He asked me to read a bunch of Dave Barry columns, then sat down with me to dissect their structure and technique. He coached me through several satirical columns criticizing the school administration. My senior year, he named me editor in chief. In my diary that day, I wrote with no joy, just relief, *Thank god, I got EIC so I don't have to kill myself anymore.*

By mid-senior year, I wrote two monthly columns: my editor's letter for the school newspaper and a Teen Scene column for the local weekly, where I was

ostensibly an intern, though I often wrote front-page stories. In these stories, I reported on a huge financial scandal in my school district, where the district lost millions of dollars in funding.

The Mercury News in San Jose didn't cover the scandal. The *San Francisco Chronicle* wouldn't touch it. I was the only reporter on the case. I went to every budget meeting, took furious notes, and recorded dozens of interviews with teachers and parents and students and dodgy district leaders and the superintendent. And after everyone left, I approached the speaker's table and grabbed all the untouched El Pollo Loco meals the district catered for the board members. In my car, I shoveled multiple meals into my mouth, getting shredded lettuce all over the seat. I didn't worry too much about fat content because this was the only thing I'd eat for a couple of days.

On those meeting nights, I would get home at nine P.M., then I'd sit down to write my coverage for my two papers—an article with a focus on the teacher's union for my school newspaper and a restrained, skeptical version for the conservative weekly. Then I started on my math, physics, and English homework. At six A.M., I drove to school, where I sat through quizzes and worksheets and petty dramas, and at the end of the day, I started on my editorial duties—doing a full edit of the layout designs, reminding Maddie to reel it in with the cutesy clip art, sending Jenny back for a second pass. I returned home at six P.M., crashed hard in my bed, woke up at midnight, and started my homework, working until six A.M.

This was how I discovered the power of journalism—not just as a force to right wrongs and change the world, but as a force that turned my anguished brain into a functioning machine. I liked many things about journalism. I liked that it was one thing people thought I was good at. I liked that it gave me a reason to go out into the world, like an explorer heading into the jungle to collect specimens. And I liked that journalism was a puzzle. You lay out your evidence and order it from most important to least, the inverted pyramid a force against woeful attention spans and chaos. I could take feelings and injustices and even tragedies and figure out a way to shape them all into something purposeful. Something controlled.

—

On weekends, when the work was done and I had no more deadlines, I struggled mightily. I was never invited anywhere; I would have been a downer anyway. I lost the ability to speak to anyone without the purpose of an article and a script of meticulously planned questions. Instead, I watched marathons of *Six Feet Under* and *Sex and the City*. I drove to thrift stores and altered the clothing I found with supplies I shoplifted from Michaels, turning sweater sleeves into leg warmers and scarves into belts. And my mind unraveled. I heard noises. Fantasized about death and cried myself to sleep. But when I woke up, it was Monday, and thankfully there was more work to be done.

It was journalism that gave me my first portfolio—a marker of value. It was journalism, particularly my editor in chief position, that got me into the University of California, Santa Cruz, even though I had a miserable 2.9 GPA. And it was journalism that got me to my high school graduation stage.

The event was held at the massive stadium downtown, thousands of parents and family members roaring facelessly around us. My father was not one of them.

Everyone was giddy in their caps and gowns. We were already nostalgic, and that made us generous, hugging old friends and tearfully forgiving our nemeses. But my eyes remained dry. I heard other kids saying, "Hell, yeah! We made it, we survived!" For me, that feeling was literal. *I shouldn't even be here,* I mused, dazed, as I watched my classmates smile on the Jumbotron overhead. *I should be dead.*

Then, as we filed out of the stadium, my wacky freshman-year English teacher ran up to me and handed over an envelope. In it was a letter she'd had us write to ourselves on our very first day of high school.

My handwriting had been more childish as a freshman. The letter was written on Hot Topic notebook paper with a skull embossed on the page. It read: *That's a nice diploma you've got there. You're welcome. Lenore #8. System of a Down. Terrorist Attacks. You probably haven't thought about this shit in years (or yesterday. Whatever.) Well, however you are now, whoever you are—you're a better, smarter, more uh…mature (snicker) person than you were now. You've come a long way since 4 years ago, and for better or worse, I'm proud of ya.*

Finally, the tears came. It didn't matter if my parents were proud of me. I was proud of me, and that was the most important thing. Because *I* had done

this. I’d gotten myself here with my own hard work.

CHAPTER 7

Achievement was my constant. My comfort. In college, I edited the humor paper, freelanced and interned for national magazines before I turned nineteen, taught classes on gender and religion as a junior, then graduated in only two and a half years, decorated with honors. I graduated early because I wanted to begin my work as a journalist. What was the point of going to classes about literary theory when I knew what I wanted and already possessed the skills for it?

But I also graduated early because nobody wanted me on campus anymore.

In my line of work, I had learned a great many things about interviews and story structure, politics, and people. But I still had not learned how to be kind.

At UC Santa Cruz, I lived like a girl who had just escaped the gallows. I took all the Goldschläger shots and stole bags of chicken nuggets from the dining hall. If I wanted to get to a seat in the middle of the lecture room but there were people blocking my way, I did not shuffle through the aisles delicately. I jumped onto the desks and danced to my seat. In an attempt to become the humor paper's most popular writer, I pulled many extremely stupid and offensive stunts. For one story, I wore a nude bodysuit that I drew boobs and a bush on with Sharpie, declared myself a militant feminist, and ran around campus trying to get free things from various cafés as reparations for patriarchal oppression. When an employee chased me around the bookstore insisting that feminism did not entitle me to free Slim Jims, I screamed, "Good woman, wake up! This is no mere snack! It is a phallic symbol of male dominance!" and ran away.

But even though I got more courageous, I also got angrier. For example, I actually encountered very real misogyny and racism for the first time in college and did not take it well. One white guy asked me at a party if Asians had slanted vaginas; another told me not to cover my mouth when I laughed because it made me look like a passive Japanese schoolgirl. When another guy groped my butt as he rounded third base during an intramural softball game, I grabbed a metal bat and chased him, threatening to crack his head open until my teammates tackled me. I was wild, swinging blindly at the terrifying world around me, hurting people in the process. I told myself that I needed to be this way to defend myself. I told myself, *I am not a girl. I am a sword.*

And one of the most shameful things I did happened when one of my best college friends was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Cancer. She wasn't even twenty-one yet.

She and I were partners in crime. We co-wrote a sex column even though neither of us knew anything about sex. (*You're embarrassed about your queefing? Next time keep an umbrella by the bed and open it in his face each time you toot, he won't even notice!*) We shoplifted at Ross together, went to the gym together. We went to bars even though we were underage and hid under the tables when they came to card everyone. At karaoke, we sang "Freebird" in matching Daisy Dukes, and at the end, she threw me into the air as I flapped my arms. But when partnership really mattered, I left her hanging.

I should have been there for her after her diagnosis. I should've made her soup and asked how she was a hundred times a day and taken her out for walks and stolen cute shoes for her and listened to her fears. I should have made that entire time about her. I should've listened. Instead, I went over to her apartment and lay on the couch as she played with her newly short hair, droning on and on about how I'd just now realized that racism sucked. I gave her my pain to hold in this horrible time, instead of cradling hers.

A few months later, when she was in remission, her boyfriend knocked on my door. "I'm sorry to break this to you, but she doesn't want to talk to you anymore," he said. I was blindsided. I had no idea why this was happening. I cried and I begged. "But I love her! What was it I did wrong? How am I supposed to be?" I asked.

“She says it’s unfair to ask you to change because you are who you are. You should just go be who you are somewhere else,” he said, and they both unfriended me on Facebook. When I tried to look at her page later, I saw that she’d posted a photo-booth picture of me and her hamming it up together. The caption read: *I had to go through chemo, but the real cancer is pictured sitting next to me.*

What a bitch, I thought at the time. You really couldn’t trust anyone in this cruel world, could you?

—

It’s no small wonder that I had more enemies than friends at college by the end of my sophomore year. The pile of abandonments started to make me feel like my life was a broken record. I kept spinning around and around, finding myself back where I started—watching people’s backs as they walked out the door.

I wasn’t self-aware enough to see a way out of the loop, so I considered the sleeping pills once again, then settled for chugging a bottle of whiskey that I kept at the foot of my bed. In the morning, I added another five credits to my schedule to keep myself busy.

It took two more years to understand why this was happening. One night, lying awake in the tiny San Francisco room where I moved after graduation, it occurred to me that maybe the problem wasn’t everybody else—wasn’t human nature and its treachery. Maybe the problem was *me*.

I had just turned twenty-two, and my friends and I had gone out to karaoke to celebrate. Some guy started hitting on me, and I told him to go fuck himself. He flipped his badge open. “Is that any way to talk to a police officer?” The night devolved into chaos and tears, with my friends holding my hands behind my back to keep me from getting arrested. The anger was getting me into trouble again. Was it my fault? Did the cop deserve my wrath? There was no point in asking these questions. All that mattered was that afterward, my friends’ lips were tight, their eyes exhausted; why did nights with me always have to end in disaster?

It was only then, in the wake of so much I had demolished, that I realized I had done this to myself, and I had done it because it had been done to me. My anger was a reflection of two people who had self-immolated with *their* own

anger. I could see that I was already kind of an asshole, and if I continued down this path, I would transform into them.

But how was I to begin letting it go when anger was the force that gave me momentum? My anger was my power. It was what protected me. Without it, wouldn't I be sad and naked?

I decided, in the end, to cleanse myself of all of it. An act of radical forgiveness was the only thing that might rip me out of the loop. And so, one by one, I counted the people I hated and told myself that I could not know their struggle. I tried to see things from their perspective. And I wished them the best.

The next time I was at a taqueria, some drunk guy cut in front of me, demanded food, then meandered away, oblivious. My whole body burned with the desire to yell, to call him pathetic, rude, *bald*. Not doing so felt like leaving a chunk of rice at the bottom of the bowl, like dipping out without paying the bill—unfinished business, a miscarriage of justice. And yet. What would it accomplish? I let it go. I strong-armed myself into normalcy.

As part of my big forgiveness journey, I even called my father and asked him to take me out to dinner in San Francisco. I tried to be patient and listen the whole time as he talked about his new estate-sale finds: a letter signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, an excellent Persian rug. I tried to slip in details of my own successes. I tried not to be disappointed when he didn't hear me.

Several months after my decision to let go of my anger, I started seeing Samantha, my therapist, to learn to love better. Slowly, she taught me the basics of healthy communication. To listen more than yell. To assert myself in calm, measured tones. Armed with her techniques, I practiced punching down my anger like a ball of dough, flattening it out. After a couple hundred times, it became a reflex—my eyes unfocused, my voice went flat, and I floated somewhere near the ceiling, far away from the conflict. I let it go.

—

Samantha helped me see that the loop kept happening because I was repeating behaviors taught to me by my mother—that her voice remained inside my head. And so, tenaciously, I fought to erase her. I stopped myself from asking for much. I engaged in conflicts that ended peaceably. I learned how to listen a little better. I promoted kindness over vengeance.

Miraculously, this worked. My circle expanded to include a large collection of lovely, loyal individuals. I could find a party easily every Saturday night; I was always invited. And everyone attended the huge rooftop parties I threw, during which I was held by dozens of tight arms when LCD Soundsystem's "All My Friends" came on and we bounced gleefully, screaming the lyrics out over San Francisco, too young and naïve to notice it is a sad song.

My friends let go of me when the song ended, and I drunkenly meandered to the railing. My roof had a majestic view of Civic Center and the Bay Bridge, and I stared out into that milky, glittering expanse, feeling like royalty. In that moment, I decided I had conquered my past. I'd *earned* this love, through sheer determination. At last, I was healed.

—

When I told people this story about my life—that I was abused and abandoned when I was a child, but I was all better now—they always believed me. Why wouldn't they? Everyone loves a happy ending, and my résumé was superb: I had friends, a nice apartment, a cute wardrobe, a 401(k). And, of course, my career. Nothing lent more credibility to my healing than my career.

When we say someone is *resilient*, we mean that they adapt well to conditions of adversity—they are strong, in possession of "emotional toughness." But how do you measure someone's emotional toughness, exactly?

When scientists and psychologists provide case studies of resilient individuals, they do not showcase a housekeeper who has overcome personal tragedy and now has impressive talents at self-regulation. They write about individuals who survived and became doctors, teachers, therapists, motivational speakers—sparkly members of society. Resilience, according to the establishment, is not a degree of some indeterminable measure of inner peace. Resilience is instead synonymous with success.

Which of course made *me* resilient as fuck. Like a good Protestant American, I continued to save myself through work.

I graduated during the Great Recession of 2008, when none of my peers were getting jobs. I landed a couple of unpaid print internships, but the newspapers I worked for kept folding. Luckily, I had begun falling in love with a storytelling radio show called *This American Life.* Every episode made me laugh

or cry, so I made my own podcast and called it *Get Me On This American Life.* I snagged rides on Craigslist to porn conventions and medieval war reenactments and tried to fashion stories that would one day attract *TAL*'s attention.

They were too busy running the biggest podcast on the planet to listen to a show that had a whopping fifteen listeners, but my crappy podcast did catch the attention of a brand-new, Oakland-based storytelling public radio show called *Snap Judgment.* They hired me as a paid intern at first, and I came in on my first day with twenty pitches for stories. Three months in, I was making half the content on the show, so they hired me as a producer.

At *Snap,* I worked fifty- to seventy-hour weeks. Long weekdays and weekends. And every Wednesday, the night before the show aired, I worked a twenty-one-hour day, staying at the office until four A.M. if we were lucky and seven A.M. if we weren't. I did graphic design and web content. I made short films. And I produced hundreds of stories.

I helped build the show from the ground up. We went from being on 2 stations, to 20, to 250. More than half a million people listened to me talk every week. Slowly, I climbed the Bay Area's spires to become a member of the San Francisco glitterati. I got free tickets to the best shows and festivals and events, where I slipped hors d'oeuvres into my purse. I was invited to mansions in the hills and opera halls, and fancy famous people would shake my hand and say they were a fan of *me.*

There, see? *That's* resilience. That's what I call *healed.*

CHAPTER 8

Even though I was loved and loving, successful and happy—even though I'd actually suggested to Samantha that we no longer needed to work together—there were some…inconsistencies. It was mostly fine, really it was. Just, there were times when I got this *feeling.*

I woke in my apartment at seven A.M., last night's makeup staining my pillowcase. I was twenty-five and covered in glitter because the day before I'd gone to an excellent all-day music festival, after which I'd sampled all the flavors of Four Loko at a friend's apartment while watching mustachioed dudes do whippets at the kitchen table.

But now it was morning and there was no music, just silence, which twisted something at the base of my scalp. I tried to recall all the good things from the night before, moments of dancing with old friends, sharing intimate confessions with new ones, thinking of the VIP press passes I had. *Proof, proof, proof of my worth. I am awesome, I am powerful, I am okay. I am okay.*

But still, something felt treacherous. Like I'd forgotten something. Like something had happened that was about to end me. I racked my brain for the source of this danger. *Did I get too drunk toward the end of the night? Did I say something wrong? Did I tease my friends too much, push too hard?* After half an hour of suffering through endless doubts, I leapt out of bed and checked my email, because it would be good to get some work done, even though it was Sunday. I killed a few hours this way, eyeing the clock carefully for the moment it hit ten A.M.—late enough to be socially acceptable, right? And then I texted my

friends: “that was fun last night! did u get home safe? urrghh hangovers amirite? man i can’t really remember the end of the night! did i say anything stupid?”

As I waited for a response, my mind raced so fast it vibrated. I took a shower and tapped my fingernails and paced around, the pitch of the thrum getting higher and higher until an hour later somebody woke up and texted back, “omg. last night was pure magic! thank you for inviting me, i will never forget it! umm what do u mean stupid? like stupider than usual? kekeke jk ilu.” Only then did it feel as if I could exhale the tornado of bees that had been thrashing in my lungs. Only then could I exhale the thing I called *the dread.*

The dread arose when I was editing a tricky radio story, or I said something irritating at a party, or I admitted to a friend that I didn’t know where Persia was and she grimaced and said, “*Iran,*” like I was a tier-one dumbfuck. It seemed as if other people might be immune to moments like these; they somersaulted through their failures and ended up on their feet. But when I made a mistake, the dread crept into my field of vision and I couldn’t see anything except my mistake for an hour, maybe even a day. Still, usually, these moments could be cured with a gulp of whiskey and a good night’s sleep.

Then there was something larger—seemingly random hours or days or months when the dread swelled and became profound, like an enormous dark shadow lurking underneath me as I treaded water. I thrust my face underneath the surface to try to name the source of this dread but surfaced only with the usual guesses: *I must be lazy* or *I’m making mistakes in my career* or *I’m spending too much money* or *I’m a bad friend.* And then I worked as hard as I could in a dozen directions in order to satiate the beast.

If I was at a restaurant, I analyzed the health content of each item and agonized over a dollar price difference. If I ordered a burger, I couldn’t enjoy how good it tasted because I’d be worried about its fat content or greenhouse gas emissions or whether I was eating enough fiber. I made a star chart and hung it on my closet door, awarding myself stickers when I did more freelance work, created more art, got more stories on the show. Always, always: I tried to be *good.* But when the dread was at its most terrible, no matter what I did, I was never good enough.

The great black dread started to ruin everything. I didn’t know how else to feed it—what it wanted from me. I cried at random moments during the day, my

hair fell out in clumps, and I wondered if I should distance myself from everyone I loved in order to protect them from me. Because the dread told me that I was on the precipice of fucking everything up. That one day, very soon, it would strike, and it would take, and it would kill.

Sometimes the dread actually *did* strike—and it struck often with men. I was confidently flirtatious with boys I dated. But as soon as we made things official, the dread would ring like tinnitus in my ears. In the first months of a new relationship, I had dismal visions: A boyfriend flashed me an impatient look and I fast-forwarded through to the end, to some tragic domestic scene five years later when our love was spent and all that was left was resentment. In order to quell these disturbing prophecies, I asked for affirmation over and over, fishing for compliments every time I looked in the mirror: *Ugh, my skin is so bad right now. How can you love me? Oh, I'm so stupid. You should just dump me. You still like me, right?*

I asked them for support, asked if I could come over even though I just saw them yesterday. Then I freaked out that I was turning into a needy leech and pushed them away. I disappeared for days, and when I returned, I was resentful of them for abandoning me.

Eventually, all men tired of these charades. They sighed and said, "I've already told you that I love you and that you're beautiful a million times. Why do you need me to say it *again*?" I apologized. I said that maybe it had something to do with the way I was raised, and they looked deflated. One of them pointed to the banner of multicolored letters I strung in my room spelling out THIS TOO SHALL PASS. He demanded to know what happened to that strength, that optimism I'd led him to believe I possessed. Hadn't I told him in the beginning that I'd overcome all of that? And once I sensed the men pulling away from me, I pulled away, too, so I could be the decider, the one with agency in the impending split. But then I was always a shameful, pleading mess when they told me they were leaving me for good.

One of these men was a guy who loved cyberpunk and postapocalyptic fiction. (It *was* San Francisco, after all, and my childhood sci-fi obsessions had transformed me into a dystopian dream girl.) We wrote each other stories and went shopping for survivalist supplies at REI and did an apocalypse photo shoot with combat boots and machetes among the rubble at Albany Bulb. I shaved half

my head because he said it would be hot. Less than a year into our relationship, he took me to a gun range for the first time, and I was delighted to find I was a great shot: All of my bullets traveled right through the head of the paper man-shaped target. A week later, the guy dumped me. He said it was because I was too intimidating; he was afraid that one day, I'd wake up and shoot *him* in the head, too.

I was devastated. For three months, all I consumed were bottles of Jameson and a single box of cornflakes—a small handful a day, and even that made me nauseated. I lost so much weight that my ribs formed a stepladder, my vertebrae sharp shells pushing dangerously out from beneath my skin.

But I thought I fixed this problem, I muttered to myself all day long. *I thought I became a nice girl.* I picked and picked at my memories, trying to figure out how, despite my best efforts, the horrible, rotten core at the center of myself managed to get past my defenses and worm its way out. I questioned every word I uttered, every movement I made. How was I supposed to be?

The dread grew immense, threatened to swallow me whole. It knocked the wind out of me when I was walking home from work, and I had to duck into a dark Civic Center alleyway and lean against a wet wall, breathing heavily, paralyzed by grief and terror.

But I dealt with it. I handled it the same way I handled every wave of dread. I stayed at work until midnight on Friday and went in at seven A.M. on Sunday. I went to work on Christmas and on New Year's Day. I sometimes worked with tears running down my cheeks, blurring the computer screen. I downed Diet Coke after Diet Coke and ran down to the Korean deli for kimbap and ate two rolls over the course of a day, and then I worked some more. I checked my email and cut my tape or logged my music, and then I texted everyone I knew asking where the next party was. I told myself that everything was fine, that my life was incredible and I wasn't sad and I'd just send more emails and swig whiskey in order to fall asleep at two A.M. every night, empty bottles lining the foot of my bed. I wrung my body out like a towel, twisting both ends with red fists and sinking my teeth into it, gritting out, "It's fine it's fine it's fine," until one day, I woke up and there would be a new accolade on my shelf, a new accomplishment I could never have dreamed of, and then—finally—it *would* be fine. It'd be

perfect. For that day. Or an hour. And then tendrils of the dread started peeking into the corners of my vision. And I had to start all over again.

CHAPTER 9

In this way, I was able to convince myself that the dread was good for me. It was the biggest driver of my ferocious work ethic. Because of the dread, in 2014, I got my dream job at *This American Life*—the biggest storytelling radio show out there, the one with several million loyal listeners and walls full of Peabodys and Emmys, so popular it had parodies on *Saturday Night Live* and *Portlandia.* It took just four years to go from *Get Me On This American Life* to actually working at *This American Life.* When I got the job, I screamed and threw a big party and then moved to New York to become a public radio superstar.

—

New York was difficult at first. I didn't have the right coat or socks for the winter weather. I didn't know how to spot black ice, and I slipped and fell on my ass. At twenty-six, I was the youngest person in most of the circles I was exposed to. And it was weird that, all of a sudden, I wasn't the hardest worker in the office anymore. I didn't understand how New Yorkers stayed alive. They worked all day, and then after work, they went out for drinks and got tanked and went home late and woke up early and worked some more. At the bars, the first question everyone asked was, "What do you do?" They feigned indifference when you told them you were successful. They actually *were* indifferent if you were merely normal. Everyone had their job and their side project and their speaking circuit. They all wore overpriced black sack dresses and geometric

statement jewelry. Here, I was nobody special. Which meant the dread became even more difficult to feed.

—

I did a little bit of everything at *This American Life*. I pitched stories, helped design shows, reported and narrated stories, edited others' work, and did a lot of sound design. My first month, I produced a kick-ass story and was told that the music I'd scored it with was excellent. This was a skill I was particularly proud of. I'd mixed hundreds of pieces at *Snap Judgment* and was known for my speed and music taste.

But then I was reassigned to a different boss. He listened to five seconds of one of my stories before recoiling. "Can you hear that?" he asked, playing it again. "Can you hear how this piece of tape is coming in too early? It's two-tenths of a second too early. Can you hear it?" He played it again.

"I guess so. Maybe? Okay, I'll note that. I'm sorry," I said.

"You can't? What's wrong with you?" He played it again. "You can't hear that? I thought you were supposed to be good at mixing? But this needs space. No, no, no." He played it again and again.

"Okay, I'll fix it right away. I'm sorry," I said.

"Ugh, this isn't working," he muttered, as if he couldn't hear me. He played the same clip four more times. "This isn't good. Too early, much too early." I apologized until he decided to move on to the next mistake, which came just a few seconds later. He dwelled on that error, too—I'd made the music two decibels too loud.

My piece was ten minutes long. It took him *an hour and a half* to play through it, and he spent the entire time telling me I was deaf. He seemed surprised when I fled the room, crying.

After that day, this boss seemed to determine I was incompetent. Whenever I said anything in meetings, he ignored me or snapped that I was wrong, and the other producers would look at me sympathetically as I bit my lip and shrunk in my seat. It took so much courage to speak, but if I was quiet, he'd ask why I didn't have an opinion, or if I waffled around a point nervously, he'd sigh exasperatedly and interrupt me to ask one of his favorite reporters, "What about you?" Sometimes they echoed me, and then he'd praise them for being so

incisive. *Did I not communicate as well as they did?* I wondered. *Did I not use big enough words? Was I not witty enough?* I tried to emulate them—Ivy League–educated journalists who came from brilliant stock. But I was unsuccessful. A year in, I started being excluded from group edits on important stories. I asked my co-workers if I could sit in, but they apologized nervously. "Don't say anything, but X said he doesn't want you there," one of them told me. "He said that you're too contrary, that you'll slow the edit down."

"But—really? I feel like I agree with him 90 percent of the time. And other people are way more aggressive than me," I said, but my co-worker shrugged. "Sorry," she said, running down the hall, "I'm already late."

Another day, a photographer for a Malaysian zine came into the office to shoot me for a feature on badass women of the Malaysian diaspora. My boss literally chased the photographer out the door, then told me I was threatening to "misrepresent the company's brand."

None of this was good for the dread. What made me such a terrible representative? Maybe I wasn't funny enough. Maybe I wasn't professional enough. Maybe I wasn't informed enough. I tried wearing heels and dress pants. I read more. I took on more work. I stayed later and came in earlier. When he told me that my stories were bad, boring, tepid, I'd fight for them to get on air anyway. Time after time, they were huge audience hits—dozens of people would tweet that they cried at my stories, that my episodes were their favorites, the best they'd heard all year. I produced a short that won us an Emmy. I taught classes at Columbia. This changed absolutely nothing.

So I tried to be more personally appealing. I tried cracking more jokes and changed the tone of my voice to be flatter and deeper. I changed my tastes in entertainment, music, stories; I listened to the things *he* liked and started conversations about them. I brought him cake on stressful days and mixed cayenne shots for him when he came in sick. Nothing worked. One day, I walked into his office while his back was turned and said, "Hi."

"Hello! Good, I wanted to ask you something," he responded, and then he turned. "Oh. It's *you*," he sneered. "What?"

But even though the dread grew until it was constant and hysterical in the back of my head, there was a positive side effect. I did become more meticulous. My work got better, I became a better editor, and I was damn proud of most

everything I created. After another major show tried to poach me, *TAL* gave me a raise that allowed me to drown the dread in expensive cocktails at parties where celebrities I never had the courage to speak to twirled braver and prettier young women on the dance floor. I leaned my cheek against the cold taxi window on the way home, turning up my headphones to keep me awake: *Started from the bottom, now we're here.*

—

And the dread gave me one more gift: It kept me on Tinder and OkCupid. It whispered that my looks were fading, the circles under my eyes were getting darker, and I'd better settle down quickly before I lost the cachet of youth. So I went on bad date after bad date—fifty in a year and a half. I came up with techniques to maximize the dating experience. Changed up my profile a hundred times. Used a photo of my face, then switched to a photo of just the back of my head. I vetted men on Skype dates before in-person ones so I could quickly weed out the creeps while saving money on beer.

One day, I matched on Tinder with a cute man carrying a Christmas tree. Joey was genuine from the beginning. After our first date at a local bar, he texted me *Every. Single. Day.* No games, no withholding. He invited me to everything. He told me without reservation, surprisingly early on, that he loved my nose, my fingers, my brain. He loved that I was always researching something new—the ethics of immortality, Afrofuturism, Chinese traffic jams—and we debated these topics for hours over dosas. He had fascinating and nuanced perspectives on everything because of his history as a former soldier and his current work as a speech and debate teacher.

I loved that Joey was capable of wide swaths of empathy for seemingly everyone. I loved his exotic-to-me Queens accent, the way he said "How ya *dough*-in?" and "Hey, boss!" at the bacon-egg-and-cheese guy at the deli. I loved that years ago he'd run a radio station in Afghanistan. I loved that now he spent his days reading Ayad Akhtar and Warsan Shire, searching for passages for his Black and brown students to recite during tournaments. I loved that he opened doors for old ladies and picked up litter and ate dinner with his parents at least once a week. So of course I buried my crazy deep down inside and pretended I was the marvelously sane girl of his dreams.

Three months into our relationship, he looked at me funny and said, “I feel like I still can’t put my finger on you.”

“What? What’s wrong with me?”

“I don’t know,” he frowned. “But I’m sure something is. I still don’t really *know* what’s wrong with you. What are your insecurities? What makes you anxious? I want to know you, the good *and* the bad.” He sat across the couch from me, boring holes into my head with his intense stare.

“But what if you learn that you can’t deal with it? What if you hate the bad?”

“Then it’s helpful, isn’t it? If we decide we really hate each other’s flaws, we can move on without wasting our time. Tell me what’s up so I can actually answer that question.”

Logical. Sensible. Terrifying. But I couldn’t figure out how to get out of it. I asked for more whiskey, and he poured me a few fingers of the good stuff.

“Okay, fine. You wanna know? You *really* think you wanna know? Well, here it is. First of all, I have an abandonment complex. Obviously. My mom left. My dad. Then everyone else.”

“Yeah, I got some friends in similar situations. It’s really tough. I hope you understand that none of those losses were about you, though.”

“Sure, whatever. And I need constant reassurance. I’m really insecure. And I have a really hard time trusting anyone. And I sometimes get really involved in work.” I went on for what seemed like forever, laying out all of my greatest shames, the things that I hoped I could hide for another few months, at least. He remained terrifyingly poker-faced the whole time, and I guessed he’d tricked me into digging my own grave. At the end, he absorbed my failings in silence for a minute and then nodded.

“Okay. Is that it? Yeah, sure.”

“What do you mean, ‘Yeah, sure’?”

“I mean sure, that’s doable.”

“How do you know? Maybe it’s not.”

“I don’t know, there’s a lot of trauma and abandonment and anger around here. Your issues are solidly within my wheelhouse. Thanks for telling me. It’s good to know, and I think we can make it work.”

“But maybe you’ll get tired of it. I mean, I’ll still work on my shit. I promise.”

“Sure, and I’m glad for that, thank you,” he shrugged. “But, you know, it’s okay to have some things you never get over.”

It’s okay to have some things you never get over. In the span of half an hour, this man whom I had known for less than a season did what nobody in my life ever had: He took all of my sins and simply forgave them. He didn’t demand relentless improvement. There were no ultimatums. He asserted that I was enough, as is. The gravity of it stunned me into silence. Joey was the opposite of the dread.

—

He asked me to move in with him two months later. We went through with it on our one-year anniversary. He talked constantly about our future together, our children. Nobody I dated before him had ever considered marriage. They didn’t even want to make travel plans eight months ahead of time. Joey wanted to know what clubs we should join at the senior center in forty years. He thought shuffleboard might be the ticket.

And so, somehow, I found myself living a perfect life: my dream job, my dream man, a big rent-controlled apartment we finagled through a friend. We had a beat-up car, and we bought the good olive oil. Combined, we had a respectable library of graphic novels. We went to an animal shelter, and became a happy little family: me, him, a mischievous cat.

And, of course, the dread.

Yes, it stayed, darkening my whole chest every day. Still, I thought, we could coexist, me and the dread. In a way I owed everything to it, didn’t I? All of it—even, eventually, its counterbalance. Joey said it was okay to have things you never get over, right?

It might have gone this way forever.

If I hadn’t lost the thing that allowed me to believe that everything was fine.

If I hadn’t lost work.

CHAPTER 10

It was the end of 2017, and every morning when I walked into my office, I hung up my coat, sat down, and cried. I wasn't exactly sure why, though if pressed, I harbored a miasma of suspicions—my own ineptitude and uselessness, racism, the collapse of democracy. But instead of trying to figure out the most likely reason for the dread this particular morning, I decided that would be wasted time. I had to calm down like a normal person who goes to work and does stuff. So I started scrolling through Twitter. It was like swimming through kelp, painfully pushing my way past apocalyptic predictions by talking heads and stupid hot takes on even stupider tweets from our president, searching desperately for the respite of a cat video.

Cat with Roomba. I began to be placated. Cat with owl. I felt merely dead inside instead of incomprehensibly sad. Cat reunited with its owner. Well, fuck. Tears again. Back to the drawing board. Fat chinchilla. Fat frog. Fat goiter on fat pug. An hour passed. I stared at the Post-it stuck to the bottom of my computer screen, on which I had written the most optimistic idea I could possibly muster: NO ONE ELSE IS HAPPY EITHER. How could anyone be truly happy in a world filled with unrelenting suffering?

I told myself I'd be ready to be productive in five minutes, then ten, then somehow it was almost noon, so I got lunch and a Diet Coke, which gave me the energy to work. I brought up a draft of something I was working on, picked at it for a couple of hours, watched a video of someone getting shot by the police, hastily shut it down. I was feeling a little less tired, but it was almost time to go home. I stood up, grabbed my coat, and left.

—

It had been a long year. The week of the 2016 election, I worked so hard on covering it that I barely had time to process what happened…so Trump's inauguration in January felt like a bomb. That weekend, two of my best friends and I went to our favorite café and ordered burgers and fries.

"I knew America was racist. That's not a surprise," one of my friends said. "But I guess I didn't know *how* racist. It feels like they really don't want us here." We at the table were all immigrants.

"Remember, Trump didn't win the popular vote," my other friend piped in, squirting ketchup over her fries. "More people want us here than not. We belong here."

"But I've met people in, like, rural Georgia who don't personally know any immigrants," I added. "They don't know whether we belong or not because they don't *know* us. I think it's our job to engage them and show them that we are human and have similar struggles, to create a dialogue so things won't be so binary."

My friends both went quiet. The clinking of forks on other people's plates was unbearably loud. Then, after a few moments, one friend said slowly, "You're putting a lot of the onus on people of color, Stephanie. That's a lot of emotional labor for a group of people who didn't create this mess. Maybe that's some people's jobs. But that's not my job."

"I agree," the other said. "I don't think that has to be everyone's responsibility if they're not emotionally there. That seems like it could be dangerous. Or unhealthy."

I could not back down now. I had momentum. "It's everyone's job now!" I cried. "What's the alternative? Civil war? We can't just shut ourselves into factions and not talk to each other! It's my job, and it's your job, too. We have to! The stakes are too high!"

That was my last brunch with those two friends. They stopped returning my texts and calls after that day. I was wrong. They didn't *have* to do anything.

Still, I engaged in the dialogue as promised. I spent hours on the phone with cops and border patrol agents and ex-KKK members and current white supremacists. I searched and searched for an ounce of humanity in one overt

white supremacist until eventually he conceded, “You seem like a perfectly nice, intelligent woman, and I’m happy to talk to you now. But when the race war happens, I won’t hesitate before shooting you in the head.” So *that* really improved race relations in America.

In time, I learned that putting white supremacists on the radio was emotional terrorism for both myself and listeners of color, and it actively aided the KKK’s agenda. But it seemed like raging racial injustice was the only thing my bosses wanted to hear about. They were no longer interested in my pitches about human joys and foibles if they didn’t include a contrarian political angle. And everyone kept talking about the importance of this kind of journalism, even in goddamn Super Bowl ads. So I bought into its importance and kept thinking about that Spider-Man quote: “With great power comes great responsibility.” I was glued to the news all day, every day, trying to find the right political story that would solve everything. My boss never green-lit any of my pitches.

—

In the beginning of 2018, my anxiety reached a fever pitch.

In January, I started getting weird around others. A friend held a cassoulet party where she prepared dutch ovens full of meat and beans and invited a hearty group of revelers. I brought french onion dip made from sour cream and a packet of dry mix, which seemed underwhelming next to the truffled cheese dip and port-wine chicken liver pâté. When the conversation turned toward *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (never seen it), to nostalgic stories from New York’s prestigious Stuyvesant High School (grew up in California), to Le Creuset cocottes (yeah right, I found my cookware on the street), I tried to interject with some joke about Asians that nobody thought was funny. Chastised, I went to stand near the cheese dip and pâté, which I accidentally ate way too much of by standards of common courtesy and also by standards of my own lactose intolerance. Eventually, I found myself sequestered alone reading Jamie Oliver cookbooks and farting violently into a corner until Joey was ready to leave. I kept feeling the pressure of shame, regret, and gas long after we’d gone to bed. Talk about dutch ovens.

—

During my entire tenure at *TAL,* I had a habit of barging into co-workers' offices and asking if they would go downstairs and smoke with me so I could complain about my mean boss. But the last few times I'd done that, my co-workers' faces fell. I was exhausting, I realized. I should keep my negativity to myself, but also, I had nothing positive to say. So I drew my blinds and stopped talking to anyone, choosing instead to wallow alone. The one time I forced myself to go out with co-workers, I found myself whining miserably the whole time, like an unstoppable train.

I started crying every day on the subway while listening to *The Daily*. My panic attacks were getting longer and longer, the sobbing more violent and uncontrollable.

—

One day in mid-February, my boss called me into his office. He told me I'd made a small mistake on last week's show: I'd left in one plinky-plonky piece of instrumental music instead of swapping it out for another plinky-plonky piece he liked more. "You're careless," he told me. "You always do things like this. You don't pay attention to detail. You have to step it up and move more slowly, or else…" He shook his head. Or else what? He'd fire me? I wasn't even supposed to work on the last show. I took on production at the last minute because other people didn't know how to use Pro Tools. And I'd been lead-producing show after show lately—a job that required weeks of intense, meticulous coordination of the entire staff. The powers that be had asked me to take on this exceptionally stressful role because everyone knew I was damn good at it—*because* I had such a relentless attention to detail. I had always pulled my rage away from his office, but this time, it returned as a tsunami, and I could not hold it back.

"I can't do this anymore," I snapped at him, and even though I knew he despised tears, I couldn't stop a few from leaking out of my eyes. "Everything I do is wrong. You're abusive, and you take me for granted. Everyone on this staff sees that you hate me. Multiple people on staff have told me that they *pity* me because they see the way you treat me. God, do you have any idea how humiliating that is? To be *pitied* by everyone here? Well, I'm tired of it. I don't need it. I quit."

"Let's, uh, let's slow down here," he said, leaning back. *He* was floundering

for once. “I don’t hate you, and if you have that impression…I’m sorry. I am sorry I was mean to you. It’s just that…I have a hard time trusting you because…I’m willing to admit that perhaps I…Well…maybe I created an impression of you when you first got here that you might’ve outgrown. It’s just, you struggled when you first came here. And from the minute you came to this show, you were just so…*different.*…from the rest of the staff.”

“Why do you treat other producers better than me?” I asked him straight up.

He didn’t even pause. “Because *they’re* great reporters.”

Now it was my turn to recoil. My rage superseded my heartbreak just enough to hold back another round of tears. “I don’t know how I can work for someone who doesn’t respect me,” I managed. “I’m sorry. I quit.”

I walked back to my office and stared at it. It was so full of *stuff*. Vitamins, snacks, clothes, space heaters, blankets—I had truly made work my second home. Now I crammed whatever I could into a large box, and even though it was only two in the afternoon, I took it straight home and crawled into bed. “Different.” I was so *different* from the rest of the staff. What did that mean? How was I supposed to be?

Another boss called me that evening and begged me to come back. Told me my jerk boss had agreed to be nicer and was ready to apologize. I was talented and valuable—he was just a numbskull. Couldn’t I please give them one more chance? So I went to work the next day and the next. But every night, I’d dig through my drawers and fill my purse with my belongings, slowly emptying the office one lipstick at a time.

In mid-February, I made myself attend just one more company party, and I spent most of it standing in a corner listening. There they were, once again: the clinking glasses, the bright smiles, joy seeping out of the bar with a butter-yellow glow. The disconnect was painted in vibrant relief. Maybe other people *were* angry about the state of the world, but in real life, they were laughing about television shows. On Instagram, they were making muffins. They were remembering to call people back. Everyone was…generally okay. If I possessed the anxiety-and-depression combo meal everyone else had, then why was I the only one crying on the subway every morning? Why couldn’t I figure out how to be like everyone else? Why did the dread follow me, leaving a path of destruction everywhere I went?

—

On February 28, I learned the answer to all of those questions when I called Samantha for our therapy session.

CHAPTER 11

"Do you want to know your diagnosis?" Samantha had asked brightly, her face glowing like a moon on my screen. And when she said "complex PTSD," she tossed it off so casually that I just shrugged in response—oh, okay. She wouldn't have waited eight years if it was *that* important, right? How bad could it be?

So after our session, I googled it. I clicked on the Wikipedia page, then the Veterans Affairs website, and saw the list of symptoms: People with complex PTSD have trouble holding down jobs and maintaining relationships. People with complex PTSD are needy. People with complex PTSD see threats everywhere and are aggressive. They are more likely to be alcoholics, addicts, violent, impulsive, unpredictable.

Most of these symptoms rang true for me. But it was the hyper-specific ones that freaked me out, like the idea that C-PTSD patients spend their lives in "relentless search for a savior." How could they have known about that? Somehow, this Wikipedia entry called it. Every time I met someone new who seemed wise and stable and kind, I wondered if they might be the answer to things, if they might be the new best friend who'd finally crack the code, the one who would make me feel loved. I thought this was a weird but very personal trait of mine. And this whole time it had been a medical symptom.

More than symptoms, these felt like accusations. The scientists and doctors might as well have written, *People with complex PTSD are awful human beings.*

Okay. But now you know, I tried to tell myself. *Knowing is good. Now you can fix things. Healing always begins with a diagnosis.*

But then again, so does dying. Oh God.

My fingers frantically jumped across the computer keys: “True story” + “complex ptsd.” *I’ll find a story,* I thought. *I find stories for things like this all day.*

“Celebrities with complex ptsd.” I wanted to know I wasn’t alone. “I healed from complex ptsd.” I wanted to know I was fixable. “Complex ptsd” + “happy now.” I wanted to see women like me who could hold down jobs and cook dinner and didn’t screw up their kids, women who adopt old incontinent dogs and have nice husbands and subscriptions to *Real Simple,* women who have survived catastrophe and morphed themselves into something selfless and lovable.

But there were no results for celebrities with complex PTSD. At least none that I could find. Instead, the internet told me about Barbra Streisand, who apparently has PTSD from forgetting the lyrics to a song in the middle of a show. The “true story” avenue didn’t fare much better. I found pleas from people struggling with C-PTSD on message boards, begging for solutions to their pain. There were only two results for “I healed from complex PTSD.” One was a broken link, and the other was a line in a weird old poetry blog.

This, of course, was not inspiring. This was barely survival. There was no thriving here.

I shrunk in my dim, orange office lighting. How had these symptoms already manifested in my own life? I waded waist-deep through images and hauled them up one by one to reexamine in the context of my brokenness: Blowing up at my boss. Blabbering about my problems during parties. Constantly knocking on co-workers’ doors. Chasing a man around a baseball diamond with a bat in my hand. The wreckage I had wrought, all around me. *Different.* This is what made me different. I thought of that famous line about trauma: *Hurt people hurt people.* I didn’t want to hurt people anymore.

—

I left the office early that day, and the next day, too. Every moment I was there, I felt like a vampire who’d snuck into a morning church service and was about to burst into flames at any moment. Part of me felt guilty for bringing my petty trauma into such an intellectual, fancy space. And another part of me felt

betrayed by that space. I'd dedicated so much to my career, gave it so much of my identity, missed dinners with friends, and let relationships die because I had chosen to spend my late nights at work. I had done it all because I thought it would make me respectable. But here I was, still the same nutcase I had been when I was a teenager, just in J.Crew pants.

In March, I read parts of the book *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* by author and psychotherapist Pete Walker. He frequently writes about what he calls the obsessive/compulsive flight type: "When [she] is not doing, she is worrying and planning about doing…. These types are also as susceptible to stimulating substance addictions, as they are to their favorite process addictions: workaholism and busyholism. Severely traumatized flight types may devolve into severe anxiety and panic disorders."[1]

Maybe work was not salvation. Maybe it was a symptom.

—

I could not tolerate this constant state of humiliation, of rehashing the past and being terrified of the future. I had to find one other person who knew how this felt, to prove to me there was another way to live this life. So I tried another trusty story-finding internet technique.

I posted on social media, "Do I know anyone who has been diagnosed with C-PTSD?" Nobody hit "like." I only got one comment on Twitter: "I had to google that 😵 but no..... doesn't look nice from what I've read 😞."[2] I was on the brink of despair when I finally received a response. One acquaintance—a wonderful journalist I'd worked with briefly years earlier whom I'll call Lacey—sent me a private message. "C-PTSD for the win! Super complicated to diagnose, but once we figured it out, it completely changed my life. I really started to heal!"

I was shocked. Lacey? Lacey had a book deal. She's on television sometimes. She has great hair and is from a nice neighborhood in a nice part of the country. People at my office respected Lacey. "You have no idea how relieved I am that you have it," I frantically typed back. "I thought everyone who had it was a trainwreck. I've been spiraling. But you seem totally together."

"I'm not totally together! Nobody is. But I'm here to tell you I've done a whole lot of healing. I've accepted that I'll always have more to do, but I've

made leaps and bounds and it feels manageable in ways I could not have imagined years ago." She sent me her number.

Lacey and I texted for a few minutes. I didn't know her intimately enough to share my deepest fears with her, and I didn't want to burden her, either. But her cheerful, exclamation-marked texts showed me, at the very least, that survival wasn't impossible. Somehow, there would be another side of this thing. A way out, if only I could find it.

Lacey said the road would be long and difficult. That sounded about right, considering I was endeavoring to relearn how to be a person. I wanted to learn to be happy and strong and independent so I could support others instead of letting my own depression always take center stage. I wanted to learn how to be a better friend, partner, family member, to invest in permanent relationships. I wanted to be the kind of woman people didn't leave. I had to find out what was salvageable, if I had good qualities underneath all of those layers of trauma and hurt and workaholism.

In order to do that, Lacey said, she'd needed time and space. Long walks in the middle of the day to practice holding awkward, painful new revelations. The ability to step away from her writing when she felt overwhelmed and sad. "The important thing was learning how to take good *care* of myself. To treat myself kindly," she told me. And so I knew with certainty what I had to do.

The very next day, on April 1, I officially gave my one month's notice to leave the job I'd wanted my whole life. I told my boss, "Healing needs to be my job now."

PART II

CHAPTER 12

I'd always fantasized about indulging in a nervous breakdown. I watched *Girl, Interrupted* with a twisted, jealous fervor, felt envy when I saw celebrities enter rehab. What entitlement. What privilege, to just let life fall to the wayside, to stop working and pretending and just *fall apart.* To let my grief-swollen brain split at the seams and spend my days crying and sitting in therapy and drinking lemonade in meditative silence on a manicured lawn. And what impossibility. Because rent.

I didn't have the money to enter some elite facility with groomed grounds and full-time therapists. But after ten years of constant work, buying the least expensive entrées, and thrift-store shopping, I had finally saved enough money to not work for several months. At last, a burnout of my very own.

I knew this was an enormous privilege that most people don't have. I also knew that one of my PTSD books said in its beginning pages that you should absolutely *not* quit your job after diagnosis—survivors need structure and purpose in order to heal.

Still, the books also said that healing from PTSD isn't truly possible while you are still in danger. You can't convince yourself that you're safe if you're actually unsafe, and my work environment felt threatening on a daily basis, so I had to leave. Besides, I was focused, I told myself. I would be structured and purposeful. Maybe if I made healing my full-time job, I would be as productive as ever. With any luck, I'd be fully healed and ready to become the CEO of a new trauma-friendly podcast corporation by the end of 2018. And so the first thing I did was what any good journalist would do. I began my research.

—

Learning about C-PTSD is not easy because it doesn't officially exist. The name "complex PTSD" is somewhat new, coined in the '90s by psychiatrist Judith Herman. And it doesn't exist because it isn't officially in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which is essentially the bible of mental health: If it's not in there, it ain't real. There was an effort by a group of mental health experts to include it in the DSM-5, which was published in 2013, but the faceless arbiters of mental health behind the DSM—a group of psychiatrists I envision as a society of hooded figures chanting around a sacrificial child star—decided that it was too similar to PTSD. There was no reason to add a "C," no need for a distinction between the two. It's worth mentioning, however, that the U.S. Department for Veterans Affairs and the United Kingdom National Health Service both recognize C-PTSD as a legitimate diagnosis.

Because of this, there isn't much literature on C-PTSD. What does exist is often dry, dull, and written with all the kindness and emotional intelligence of a tech bro. But still, I was desperate to learn, so I bought a small stack of books, each with a vague impressionist painting on the cover coupled with uninviting font. And I made my way through them, one painful page at a time.

The books taught me that when we live through traumatic experiences, our brains take in the things around us that are causing the greatest threat, and they encode these things deep into our subconscious as sources of danger.

Let's say, for example, that you are hit by a car. Your brain registers the noise of the car screeching to a halt, the grille speeding toward you. It shoots out an onslaught of stress chemicals like adrenaline and cortisol that elevate your heart rate and blood pressure, narrowing your focus to the thump of the impact and the pain and the sound of an ambulance. But at the same time, your brain is subconsciously taking in thousands of other pieces of stimuli: the foggy weather, the Krispy Kreme at the intersection, the color and make and model of the car, the Midwestern accent of the guy who hit you, his blue Wolverines T-shirt. And your brain imprints deep inside itself the powerful connections between these stimuli and this pain.

These associations are stored in your brain along with the corresponding emotions from that day. And they often do not come with full stories. Therefore, your brain might not encode the logical connection between the Krispy Kreme and the car crash. It might simply encode: KRISPY KREME. DANGER.

The result is that when you see a glazed doughnut or a blue Wolverines T-shirt, you might become uneasy without understanding why. Your brain is recognizing a pattern that it has flagged with life-or-death importance, and it reflexively shoots out what it believes to be the appropriate emotional response. This reflex might manifest in a big way, like a panic attack. Or it might manifest in a smaller way, like suddenly feeling very grumpy. You might decide that you're irritated at your girlfriend for a mildly stupid thing she said that morning and text her to say so. None of this, of course, is reasonable or rational. But your brain is not trying to be reasonable. It's trying to save your life.

If someone pulls out a gun near us, we shouldn't need to ponder for a few minutes about the make and model of the gun and how guns work and what caliber the bullets might be and the amount of damage they might do. If we see a gun, we need to know one thing, and we need to know it fast: GET DOWN. MOVE. RUN.

What we might think of as emotional outbursts—anxiety, depression, lashing out in anger—aren't always just petty, emotional failings. They may be reflexes designed to protect us from things our brain has encoded as threats. And these threatening inputs are what many people call *triggers.*

No, having triggers doesn't make you a fragile little snowflake. It makes you human. Everyone has them, or will have them eventually, because everyone will experience some form of trauma. That annoying blank stare your ex used to give you. The sound of the ventilator your grandmother was hooked up to in the weeks before she died. Having an emotional response to a trigger is perfectly healthy. Those triggers are only considered PTSD when an event is so traumatic that its triggers cause symptoms like panic attacks, nightmares, blackouts, and flashbacks—when the emotional response becomes debilitating.

And here's what makes *complex* PTSD uniquely miserable in the world of trauma diagnoses: It occurs when someone is exposed to a traumatic event over and over and over again—hundreds, even thousands of times—over the course of years. When you are traumatized that many times, the number of conscious

and subconscious triggers bloats, becomes infinite and inexplicable. If you are beaten for hundreds of mistakes, then every mistake becomes dangerous. If dozens of people let you down, all people become untrustworthy. The world itself becomes a threat.

—

I put down the books and stared at the wall for hours after reading these sentences, trying to figure out what they meant for me specifically. I started counting some of my obvious triggers. Whenever I saw an angry man, I'd get intensely pissed at them—my boss, my boyfriend, Joey, a random guy in the street. Whenever Joey chewed the inside of his cheek or set his jaw a certain way, the exact way my father used to clench his, it enraged me. I'd snap, "What? What's wrong? What's your problem?" Often, he would look at me in surprise and confusion.

"You're mad," I'd insist.

"I'm not mad," he said, mad. "Why do you think I'm mad?"

"I'm intuitive! I'm good at reading people," I said.

Then I read a section in one of the books that featured a long line of photos of a woman making various expressions—transitioning slowly from a sad face to an angry one. A study at the University of Wisconsin showed these pictures to children who had not experienced abuse, then to children who had.[1] The abused kids thought that more of these photos presented an angry threat than the children from normal homes. They were hyperalert to even the smallest twinges in facial expressions.

Was Joey actually mad? Or was I interpreting the tiny knots in his forehead as anger because I was a paranoid crazy person? What was real?

If I could misinterpret a furrowed brow, what else could I misinterpret? I must possess a million subconscious triggers, so how much of the world, exactly, is my brain incorrectly afraid of?

My eyes scanned my living room. Gelly Roll pens? I used those a lot when I was a preteen. Halogen lamps? We had those. We had a big poster of emperor penguins in our living room, where I was beaten frequently. Are fucking penguins a subconscious trigger now? I google "emperor penguins" and look at pictures of them, waddling around the Antarctic stoically. They're fat and cute.

But I guess I feel anxious? So are they a trigger, or am I already triggered and anxious from reading the stressful trauma books? What is real?

This line of questioning illuminates the nuanced difference between healing from traditional PTSD and complex PTSD.

If I had traditional PTSD…if, let's say, getting hit by a car was the one foundational traumatic moment of my life, I could learn to isolate and resolve the triggers from it, potentially through exposure therapy: walking past the Krispy Kreme every day, crossing that intersection with a safe protector.

But unfortunately, I do not have one foundational trauma. I have thousands. So my anxious freak-outs are not, as the books say, "temporal." They don't only occur when I see an angry face or someone pulls a driver out of their golf bag. My freak-outs are more or less constant, a fixed state of being.

Ah. The dread.

That infinite plethora of triggers makes complex PTSD more difficult to heal from than traditional PTSD. And the way the books seem to think about it, our fixed state of being also makes us more problematic.

—

The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk is a kind of bible for C-PTSD sufferers. Though I have real reservations about van der Kolk's work because he is an alleged abuser himself,[2] the book *was* a crucial first text in helping me understand the basics of C-PTSD. In it, van der Kolk writes about a study in which he analyzed three groups of people: adult victims of childhood abuse, adult victims of recent domestic violence, and adult victims of a recent natural disaster.[3] All the groups displayed some symptoms of PTSD. But survivors of natural disasters (generally sufferers of a singular traumatic event) had distinctly different symptoms from survivors of childhood abuse (generally sufferers of complex trauma). "The adults who had been abused as children often had trouble concentrating, complained of always being on edge, and were filled with self-loathing. They had enormous trouble negotiating intimate relationships," van der Kolk writes. "They also had large gaps in their memories, often engaged in self-destructive behaviors, and had a host of medical problems. These symptoms were relatively rare in the survivors of natural disasters."

In other words, complex trauma created a consistent set of defensive traits—

of personality quirks—within its victims. And these were uniquely terrible even within the PTSD community. It seemed to suggest we had our own culture. Americans are individualist. Chinese people are oriented toward the good of the collective. The French are romantic and love cheese. And people with C-PTSD are drama queen self-saboteurs who are impossible to love.

I questioned whether this dark reading of the material was simply my "self-loathing" brain placing a dark lens across these scientific studies. But then again, there was that one book that described victims of early childhood trauma as "a burden to themselves and others" and "a minefield many would prefer to avoid."

How could I read these words about myself and not be pounded by shame? How could I not want to protect everyone from the burden of these noxious traits?

This was the most disorienting and upsetting idea that emerged from my reading: the idea that C-PTSD was baked into my personality, that I didn't know where my PTSD stopped and I began. If C-PTSD was a series of personality traits, then was everything about my personality toxic? Was everything about my history toxic? And would I have to throw it all away? My diagnosis called into question everything I loved—from ginseng abalone soup to talking a whole lot at parties to doodling during meetings. I couldn't tell which parts were pathologically problematic and which were fine as they were.

I had already tried to wipe away everything my mother gave me. Her specialty was biscotti, which I refuse to eat now. I pluck yellow roses out of my bouquets because they were her favorite flower. I removed her sayings from my vocabulary. But then I'd come across a picture of her and see that I have her hands. Her shoulders. Erasing C-PTSD from myself seemed as impossible as swapping out my collarbones. In order to heal, would I really have to throw away everything that made me who I was?

I searched the books for an answer to these questions. The books were full of *how to not be* a person with trauma. They listed in great detail all of our faults and failings. But to my question of *how to be* a person…solutions were relegated to a mere ten, maybe thirty pages in the back of the book. There'd be one happy story about an abused, underdeveloped child getting the right kind of treatment, developing resiliency, and eventually performing at the same level as his peers. It was so often a kid. Kids' brains are more flexible and recover more quickly,

the books insisted. Adults—not so much. *Maybe try yoga,* the books said. Some of them, like *The Body Keeps the Score,* suggested a number of mysterious and expensive therapies, such as EMDR and neurofeedback, but even then, van der Kolk cautioned that they were effective only a small percentage of the time.

I came to these books in search of hope. But they provided so little. There were days when the only hope I could see was that I needn't worry about the pain lasting too long. At least I was going to die soon.

CHAPTER 13

Between 1995 and 1997 the California-based healthcare network Kaiser Permanente gave more than 17,000 patients a questionnaire to assess the level of trauma in their childhoods. Questions included whether the patients' parents had been mentally or physically abusive or neglectful and whether their parents were divorced or had abused substances. This was called the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study.[1] After taking the questionnaire, patients were given an ACE score on a scale of 0 to 10. The higher the score, the more trauma a person had experienced in childhood.

The results of the study were astoundingly clear: The more childhood trauma someone had suffered, the worse their health outcomes were in adulthood. And their risk for contracting diseases didn't go up just a few percentage points. People with high ACE scores were about three times as likely to develop liver disease, twice as likely to develop cancer or heart disease, four times as likely to develop emphysema.[2] They were seven and a half times more likely to become alcoholics, four and a half times more likely to suffer from depression, and a whopping twelve times more likely to attempt suicide.[3]

Scientists have learned that stress is literally toxic. Stress chemicals like cortisol and adrenaline surging through our bodies are healthy in moderation—you wouldn't be able to get up in the morning without a good dose of cortisol. But in overwhelming quantities, they become toxic and can change the structure of our brains. Stress and depression wear our bodies out. And childhood trauma affects our telomeres.

Telomeres are like little caps on the ends of our strands of DNA that keep them from unraveling. As we get older, those telomeres get shorter and shorter. When they've finally disappeared, our DNA itself begins to unravel, increasing our chances of getting cancer and making us especially susceptible to disease. Because of this tendency, telomeres are linked to human lifespan. And studies have shown that people who suffered from childhood trauma have significantly shortened telomeres.[4]

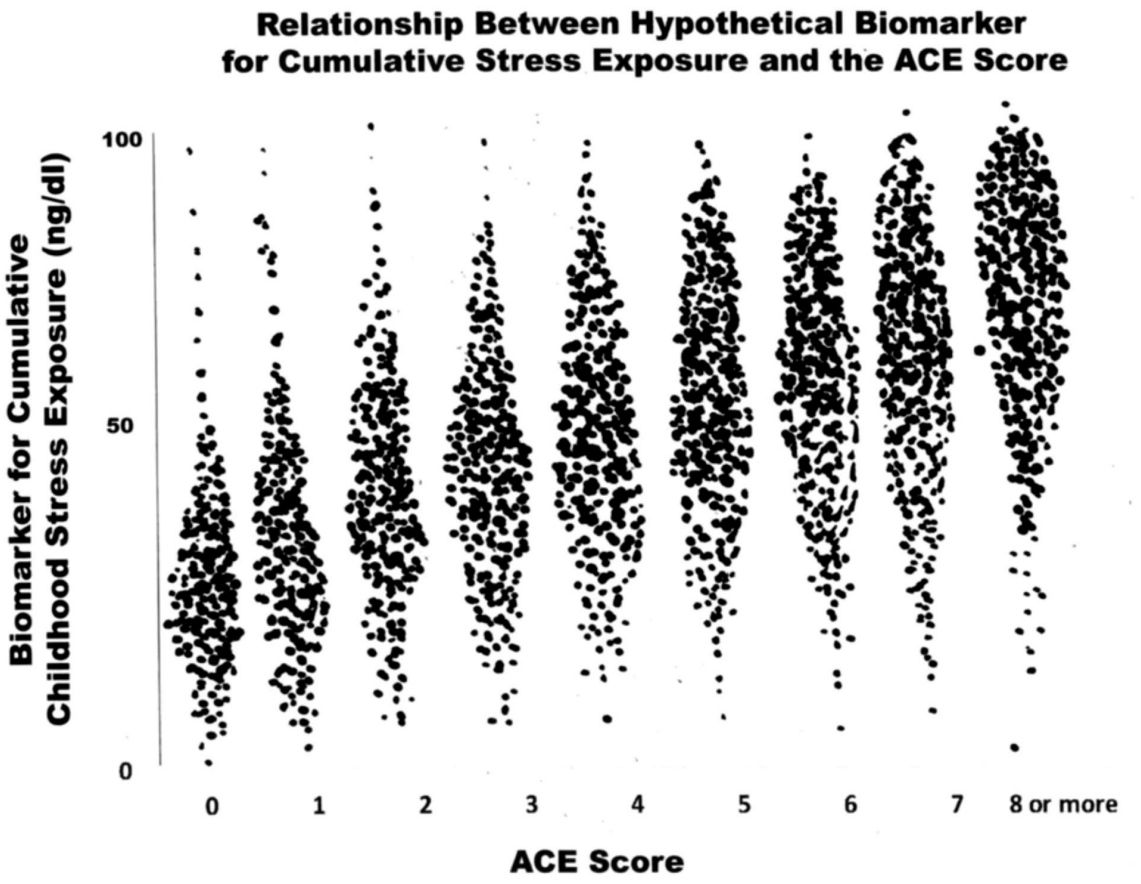
In the end, these studies claimed that having an ACE score of 6 or higher takes *twenty years* off your life expectancy. The average life expectancy for someone with 6 or more ACEs is sixty years.[5]

My score is 6.

At thirty, I was halfway to the end.

—

I embarked on this research in 2018. It's important to understand that two years later, in 2020, Robert F. Anda, the co–principal investigator of the initial ACE study, came out with an article and a YouTube video stating that ACEs were a relatively crude way of measuring childhood trauma.[6] The scores are remarkably helpful epidemiologically—for people to understand the overall significance of childhood trauma on public health. But Anda underlined that ACEs are not a good measure of an individual's life span or health outcomes. There is a wide level of variation for each score. For example, a person with an ACE score of 1 who had extremely frequent instances of their trauma might be just as traumatized as someone with a score of 6 who witnessed a broader breadth of events but experienced them on a much rarer basis. As the following chart shows, there is a lot of overlap. Clearly, people with higher scores do face genuinely larger risks. But the scores are not hard-and-fast determinants.



ACE scores also don't account for whether a child had good resources, such as adults who provided them with safe and loving relationships or therapists who taught them to manage their stress better. They don't account for gender variation, as PTSD manifests differently in men and women. In his article, Anda cautioned that using ACE scores as an individual screening tool has several risks, including that ACEs "may stigmatize or lead to discrimination…generate client anxiety about toxic-stress physiology, or misclassify individual risk."[7]

—

I was incredibly relieved to read this in 2020, but in 2018, without any of this context, I felt anxious and stigmatized as hell. I became obsessed with my imminent demise, and like anyone who has been handed a death sentence, I underwent a mini existential crisis. I felt rushed, frightened, and angry—furious. Years of future life had been stolen from me. Years I could have spent hiking

Machu Picchu or taking care of grandkids or painting cubist renditions of chickens.

And it wasn't just the ACE score that seemed to tell me my body was shattered and sick. My grief kept growing with every progressive study I read about the biological effects of trauma, all the charts and graphs and diagrams that told me I'd sustained brain damage.

Brain scans prove that patients who've sustained significant childhood trauma have brains that *look* different from those of people who haven't.[8] Traumatized brains tend to have an enlarged amygdala—a part of the brain that is generally associated with producing feelings of fear. Which makes sense. But it goes further than that: For survivors of emotional abuse, the part of their brain that is associated with self-awareness and self-evaluation is shrunken and thin.

Women who've suffered childhood sexual abuse have smaller somatosensory cortices—the part of the brain that registers sensation in our bodies. Victims who were screamed at might have an altered response to sound. Trauma can result in reductions in the parts of the brain that process semantics, emotion and memory retrieval, perceiving emotions in others, and attention and speech. Not getting enough sleep at night potentially affects developing brains' plasticity and attention and increases the risk of emotional problems later in life. And the scariest factoid, for me anyway: Child abuse is often associated with reduced thickness in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with moderation, decision-making, complex thought, and logical reasoning.

Brains *do* have workarounds. There are people without amygdalae who don't feel fear. There are people who have reduced prefrontal cortices who are very logical. And other parts of the brain can compensate, make up for the lost parts in other ways. But overall, when I looked at the breadth of evidence, the results felt crushing.

The fact that the brain's cortical thickness is directly related to IQ was particularly threatening to me. Even if I wasn't cool, or kind, or personable, I enjoyed the narrative that I was at least *effective.* Intelligent. What these papers seemed to tell me is that however smart I am, I'm not as smart as I *could* have been had this not happened to me. The questions arose again: *Is this why my pitches didn't go through? Is this why my boss never respected me? Is this why I was pushed to do grunt work in the back room?*

Being my parents' caretaker imbued me with an illusion of control—a belief that I could prevent disaster if only I was vigilant enough. But these health outcomes proved I was wrong. If anything, it was vigilance itself that destroyed me.

—

When I worked at *This American Life*, one of my co-workers, David Kestenbaum, reported a story on whether free will actually exists. In it, he talked about a friend of his who hit his head while ice-skating and sustained temporary amnesia. On the stretcher, his friend asked what had happened. His wife said, "You fell and hit your head," and he replied, "That's not how you want to leave the ice." But a moment later, he forgot that entire exchange. He asked what happened again. His wife kept telling him. And over and over, he kept cracking the same joke: "That's not how you want to leave the ice." "That's not how you want to leave the ice." It's a common symptom of short-term memory loss. Patients repeat the same stories, jokes, and questions over and over, with the same word choice and inflection, like a tape recorder being rewound and played again.

When it comes down to it, our brains are not so different from the most basic cells in their operational trajectory: *stimulus, response*. Our brains are mechanical objects programmed in such a specific way that if you input a certain stimulus, you will always get the same response. In his story, David talked about how quantum mechanics and probability validate this finding—that our circuitry leaves no space for randomness, for any different outcomes outside of what our programming dictates. And he interviewed a neuroscientist named Robert Sapolsky who wrote an entire book on the subject called *Behave*. Sapolsky explained to David the process of moving a muscle: "A muscle did something. Meaning a neuron in your motor cortex commanded your muscle to do that. That neuron fired only because it got inputs from umpteen other neurons milliseconds before. And those neurons only fired because they got inputs milliseconds before and back and back and back. Show me one neuron anywhere in this pathway that, from out of nowhere, decided to say something that activated in ways that are not explained by the laws of the physical universe, and ions, and channels,

and all that sort of stuff. Show me one neuron that has some cellular semblance of free will. And there is no such neuron."[9]

After reading all those articles about my brain, I relistened to David's piece. It seemed to align with what I'd learned: that my brain is a predictable computer programmed by my experiences in childhood. One that does not divert from its code. Stimulus, response. Stimulus, response. If input X, then outcome Y. So it is. Every time.

The problem with this premise, of course, is that whereas other children had programmers who fed their brains with love and kindness, my programmers were evil. My code is flawed.

My first instinct was to just delete the bug. Remove my terrible code from the system entirely. Briefly, ancient plans resurfaced: carbon monoxide and sleeping pills. But that would have its ramifications, too. My previous efforts to heal might not have fixed me, but they had woven me into this world, sewing me emotionally and professionally into a network of lives. I had friends who cared dearly about me, mentees who looked up to me. And Joey, of course. If I cut myself out of the web, I would leave a gaping hole that would hurt all those around me. And the whole point of this endeavor was to stop hurting people.

I guess I had to embrace the impossible. Goddamn it, what a task: I had to fight against fate itself.

CHAPTER 14

If the existential quandary was that I was trapped within the loop of *stimulus, response* and I could not change the responses…then maybe I could change the stimuli. Maybe I could hack my brain.

Quitting my job was a critical first step. Removing myself from the stressful stimuli of my boss snapping at me meant that I no longer had the accompanying problematic responses. I didn't need to pull co-workers outside to smoke all the time. I didn't need to complain about my boss over dinner with Joey every night. I didn't constantly think I was the worst radio producer to ever live. So, that achieved something.

Next, I called neuroscientist and psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett, author of *How Emotions Are Made.* She told me that our bodies have a limited number of metabolic resources. We need a certain amount of sleep and water and nourishment in order to think, to learn new things, to produce the correct hormones. If we don't get all of those things, our bodies are "running at a deficit."

But we don't often understand what deficits we're running at. We are not like *The Sims*, where we can see our hunger and rest and boredom levels represented as little progress bars at the bottom of the screen. Barrett said that when we're dehydrated, we don't necessarily feel thirsty—we feel exhausted. When we have something odd happening in our stomach, our body doesn't quite know if we have a menstrual cramp or a stomachache or if we need to poop. We might not even be aware for a long period of time that our stomach *hurts.* And this isn't unique to people with PTSD. It's normal, everyday bodily dissociation

that we all suffer from. If we find ourselves in a shitty mood, we might not necessarily be mad about a certain trigger. We could just be running at a metabolic deficit. Our body might be screaming "I NEED FUNYUNS" while we project our hangriness onto, say, this poor sweaty schmuck who's breathing too loud in the elevator.

But Barrett said that PTSD does make these inclinations worse. It affects a variety of systems in the body, throwing them all out of whack. Our hearts might beat faster. Our lungs might pump harder. Our body budget can get tipped off-balance more easily. And when it does, our reactions to these deficits can feel outsized.

"Make sure that you get enough sleep, make sure you exercise, make sure that you eat in a healthful way," she told me when I asked her what I could do to be a better person. When I countered that that didn't seem like enough, she kindly offered, "You know, all you can do is take as much responsibility as you can. And sometimes it's the attempt that matters, you know, more than the success." Then she chuckled at herself. "That's a very Jewish mother response!"

So, first step of hacking my brain: sustaining it with enough oxygen and nutrients. I adopted an aggressive diet that involved lots of chickpea pasta and cauliflower. I got an app that let me take fitness classes all around the city—Pilates, boxing, high-intensity interval training—and I took three classes a week. I filled my tote bags with nuts and dried fruit and chugged constantly from a giant water bottle. I quit drinking and smoking, cold turkey. I got eight hours of sleep every night and wore a Fitbit to keep me honest.

These efforts helped in some ways. I had more physical energy. My legs felt strong and capable. Exercise boosted my mood temporarily. But my psychic energy was supremely lacking. I could leap up subway stairs with a load of groceries, but I often still couldn't get myself up off the couch to send an email.

One spring day, I was walking through a corridor of cotton-candy-pink cherry blossom trees on the way to the subway when I was abruptly beset with anxiety. I was sure I was forgetting something: Did I leave the stove on? Was I supposed to call someone? Did I have a doctor's appointment I was missing? The recrimination was so strong, I wondered if I should turn tail and go home. But even though I didn't know what triggered me or why this was happening, at least I knew one thing: This terror wasn't coming from my body. My actions

allowed me to assure myself that I was well rested, well fed, and healthy. This anxiety must have come instead from the dank alleys of my mind.

Well, I thought, *I guess I better muster up the courage to walk inside and look for the source.*

CHAPTER 15

In Gretchen Schmelzer's excellent, gentle book, *Journey Through Trauma*, she insists on the fifth page: "Some of you may choose a therapist: a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, counselor, or member of the clergy. Some of you may choose some form of group therapy. But I am telling you up front, at the beginning: in order to heal, you will need to get help. I know you will try to look for the loophole in this argument—try to find a way that you can do this on your own—but you need to trust me on this. If there were a way to do it on your own I would have found it. No one looked harder for that loophole than I did."[1]

After my diagnosis, I looked for that loophole, too, for a while.

—

After I started realizing the magnitude of what having C-PTSD meant, I was livid at Samantha for not telling me about it sooner. This should not have been a secret, I thought. My diagnosis should have been a critical part of the conversation about my mental health this entire time.

I wrote to Samantha telling her my feelings, asking why she hadn't been more open about C-PTSD. She explained that she *had* brought it up during our first session—but that was eight years ago. Our first session was so strange and new for me, I'm sure I'd missed that one little word of difference: *complex*. In terms of why it never again came up, Samantha said that whenever I was in a depressive state, she didn't want to add to my burden by bringing up the weight of my diagnosis. And whenever I was happy, she didn't want to cloud my joy.

She was protecting me, she insisted, and she saw now that it might have been the wrong decision, even though it was made with love.

I thanked her for her explanation and for her help over the years. But as grateful as I was for her love and support, I knew I couldn't see her anymore. This lack of communication bordered on deception for me. I needed someone new.

I knew that a superb therapist could point me in the direction of healing—I'd benefitted so much from Samantha's help over the years. I knew that in the right therapist's office, I could feel safe.

But I really, really did not want to look for one.

Finding a person to declare your craziest, most profound insecurities to is not exactly a picnic. But the bureaucratic idiocy of America's healthcare system turns what should be a chore into torture.

If you're a middle-class person in America, the dance goes like this: You call your insurance provider to find a meager list of therapists who take your insurance. Most of the people on the list are licensed clinical social workers or licensed mental health counselors. They can be wonderful and very helpful, but they often have less schooling and experience than, say, psychologists and PhDs. After digging deeper, you find that some of these therapists don't take your insurance after all; others have full client lists. And even if they *do* have space in the day to treat someone, they might not be interested in treating *you*. According to one study, a low-income Black person has up to an 80 percent lower chance of receiving a callback for an appointment than a middle-class white person.[2] And even though intellectually, therapists tell you that anger can be a helpful and legitimate emotion in processing trauma, God forbid you actually seem angry on the phone. Several mental health professionals have told me that therapists often avoid rageful clients because they seem threatening or scary.

Therapists instead prefer to take on YAVIS—Young, Attractive, Verbal, Intelligent, and Successful clients.[3] They love an amenable type, someone who is curious about their internal workings and eager to plumb them, someone who's already read articles in *The New Yorker* about psychology to familiarize them with the language of *metacognition* and *congruence*. Good luck if you're a regular-ass Joe who'd rather watch *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*.

But say you get lucky and find a licensed clinical psychologist with an open slot. The psychologist is white, of course (86 percent of psychologists in the United States are), which isn't ideal if you are a person of color. But, fine, whatever: You just need to receive an official diagnosis for your insurance. You are certain you have complex PTSD, but he can't diagnose you with that because it's not in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Your insurance only covers treatment for conditions listed in the DSM in order to assign a number of sessions to you. Most forms of insurance will pay for, say, only six months of therapy relating to anxiety, ten for depression, as if you *should* be better by then. Another consequence of C-PTSD not being in the DSM: This psychologist hasn't been trained in treating it. He says he doesn't believe that it's a real diagnosis. He'd like to provide you with some questionnaires to see if you have something he can actually handle—bipolar disorder, maybe, or manic depression. This does not inspire confidence, so you leave.

After some internet sleuthing, you find a woman of color who seems really cool. She's specifically trained in the treatment of complex trauma. She has blurbs on her website that resonate with you—it seems as if she might truly understand you. But she doesn't take insurance. (Psychiatrists are the least likely of any medical provider to take insurance—only about 45 percent of them do.[4] And most of the time, the ones who don't are the most qualified practitioners.) You can't exactly blame her. You learn on the internet that insurance companies haven't updated reimbursement rates for therapists in up to twenty years, despite rising rates for office rent and other administrative costs. If therapists were to rely on reimbursement rates from insurance alone, they'd wind up making about $50,000 a year on average,[5] which is fine, but like, not great if you're an actual *doctor.* So this awesome lady therapist says she charges $250 per forty-five-minute session. If you see her once a week, that's your rent. *How much am I willing to pay in order to be happy?* you ask yourself. *Is it worth spending $1,000 a month? Is it worth going into debt to be happy?* You could spend a luxe weekend in Miami every month for that much money. Maybe that would make you happy, too.

You go back to the psychologist who doesn't believe your diagnosis, figuring he's your only real option. He diagnoses you as having a major

depressive disorder. But even though you work with him for months, you don't seem to be getting better. You start to think that's your fault—that you're beyond help. You're just too broken to be fixed. When you eventually drop out, you feel like a failure.

Or let's say you receive a magical inheritance of a few thousand dollars and you can find whatever therapist you want. Even then, the process is not necessarily easy. You might find yourself rejecting a perfectly fine, competent therapist because he has a face that stresses you out. Or because he seems overly judgmental. Or because she accidentally cc'd you and all of her other clients instead of using bcc, exposing everyone's email addresses, and now you don't know if you can trust her again. These aren't bad reasons to leave a therapist. You want to find someone you can trust, someone you truly vibe with. Just like with dating (except without any of the booze, sex, or fun), finding your match can take time. And just like dating, even if finding the perfect person might be life-affirming, the process itself can be so demoralizing that you wonder whether it's even worth it.

—

I had a couple of bad therapists when I was in college. A man with a bow tie who tried to hit on me. A woman who sighed at every turn of my childhood as if it were a Dickensian tragedy. There was a psychiatrist who tried to put me on Prozac. I quoted *Brave New World*. "I want to know what passion is! I want to feel something strongly!" The psychiatrist responded, "I think that passion might be a chemical imbalance."

And then, luckily, I found Samantha. Now, I needed someone new.

I felt equally equipped to find a good therapist at thirty as I did at nineteen. I googled "Complex PTSD therapist NYC" and went to the first person listed, a man who promised he could cure anyone within three months. He charged $200 an hour, but over the course of only twelve sessions, that seemed like a deal. I got through only one session with him. In that one hour, he barely listened to a word I said. He talked twice as much as I did and kept interrupting me every time I said some key trauma word, pathologizing me with all the enthusiasm of a golden retriever playing with a Frisbee: "Oh, I see! You rely on your boyfriend for stability: That means you are codependent! Overly needy! Ah, but he was in

a bad place when you met him, and you helped him, too? That means you are only attracted to chaos and broken birds!" I didn't care if it was supposed to last only three months, I didn't want each of my therapy sessions to feel like an episode of *Jeopardy!* where he raced to answer all of my questions before even hearing what they were. I paid him his exorbitant sum and spent the next two months trying to recover from being lambasted by his pathologies, shouting to myself in quiet moments, *CODEPENDENT! NEEDY! YOU ONLY LOVE BROKENNESS!*

With another therapist, I only went to one session because she was the opposite: too quiet. She barely responded to anything I said in our sessions, just kept asking, "So how does that make you feel?" Ugh. How boring. I could do that myself, at home, for free.

Another woman seemed competent during a consultation, but she butt-dialed me later that afternoon and left me a long voicemail. It was a drawn-out negotiation between her and her child: "No, Mommy won't give you anything unless you clean your room. No, you need to go poop without Mommy." The child was winning. I never called her back, which admittedly was unfair, but I didn't think I could walk into her office and pretend I hadn't listened to her laboriously debating her child's poop.

At the same time, in my reading, I discovered some evidence that traditional talk therapy might not actually be particularly effective for C-PTSD. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk writes about how talk therapy can be useless for those for whom "traumatic events are almost impossible to put into words." Some people are too dissociated and distanced from these traumatic experiences for talk therapy to work well. They might not be able to access their feelings, let alone convey them. For others, they're in such an activated state that they have a hard time reaching into difficult memories, and the very act of recalling them could be retraumatizing. One study showed that about 10 percent of people might experience worsening symptoms after being forced to talk about their trauma.

Between 40 percent and 60 percent of people drop out of therapy at some point. Most drop out within the first two sessions. And plenty of statistics show that even pointed, skills-based talk therapy is ineffective for PTSD. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a form of talk therapy where patients unlearn negative

patterns of behavior and try to practice strategically positive patterns, is widely accepted as a treatment for PTSD. But it has abysmal statistics. In one study of seventy-four patients, eight got better with CBT, compared with four who received no therapy at all.[6]

Still, my friend with C-PTSD, Lacey, mentioned that *her* therapist had helped her significantly. She said her therapist helped her restructure her life, creating boundaries and allowing her to take good care of herself.

Which again reminded me of dating. It seems like the worst thing in the world, an absolute waste of time, until you find your person. And then all that effort, all that complaining and crying—it all becomes worth it, right?

I really hoped it would all be worth it.

CHAPTER 16

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk writes about a form of therapy called EMDR, or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. It's a strange process reminiscent of hypnosis, where a patient revisits past traumas while moving their eyes left and right. It seemed too simple, almost hokey, but van der Kolk passionately sang its praises. He told the story of a patient who came out of a single forty-five-minute session of EMDR, looked at him, and said that "he'd found dealing with me so unpleasant that he would never refer a patient to me. Otherwise, he remarked, the EMDR session had resolved the matter of his father's abuse." *Resolved!* Here was a form of therapy, van der Kolk said, that could help "even if the patient and the therapist do not have a trusting relationship." Then again, he said that EMDR was far more effective for adult-onset trauma, and it cured only 9 percent of childhood trauma survivors. But at this point, 9 percent was better than nothing. Nine percent was a beacon I couldn't afford to ignore.

I found exactly one EMDR therapist in New York City who took my insurance. She was located in the financial district, near Wall Street, but her office was the size of a large gas station bathroom, with about as much appeal. There was paper everywhere. Hastily stuffed manila folders stacked several feet high formed a ring around the entire room. Her air-conditioning was spotty and tremendously loud, so she had a couple of pink plastic dollar-store fans, about six inches tall, on the floor, swirling hot air around our feet. "Eleanor" was a tiny, frail-looking woman with a large, frizzy nest of gray hair around her face. She had a persistent dry cough and was a few minutes late to every appointment.

But she charged $30 a session—and since apparently I didn't even need to like her, she'd suffice.

During our first session, Eleanor scratched on her notepad through the quick and dirty version of my life story. "Wow," she said, shaking her head. "You've been through a lot and come across the other side with such resilience. You're really impressive." I liked that the tone she took wasn't pitiful but that she acknowledged the severity of what I'd gone through. I could work with this. Then she described the basics.

EMDR was developed by psychologist Francine Shapiro in 1987. She discovered that when she was walking through the woods, her upsetting thoughts dissipated when she moved her eyes back and forth, scanning the path around her. She then conducted studies where she waved a finger in front of patients' faces, directing their gazes left and right, while asking them to revisit their most harrowing traumas. She reported that subjects who received EMDR therapy had "significant decreases in ratings of subjective distress and significant increases in ratings of confidence in a positive belief."[1]

EMDR therapy is referred to as "processing," and in EMDR circles, specialists stress that processing does *not* mean talking. Talking gives us knowledge about why we are the way we are, but that knowledge isn't enough. Processing, on the other hand, allows us to truly come to terms with our trauma and resolve it—to rewrite the memories in our brains with a healthier narrative. This seemed abstract to me, and I didn't really know what it meant. But it sure sounded good.

Nobody is exactly sure why EMDR works, which makes it easy to discredit. One theory is that EMDR mimics the way the brain processes memories during REM sleep. Other research suggests that these eye movements tax our short-term memory, dimming the painful vibrancy of past experiences and making them easier to revisit with a sense of clarity. Whether or not either of these theories is true, many studies keep showing real results: Somehow, this weird process is surprisingly effective in helping patients recover from trauma.

In the years since Shapiro invented EMDR, technology has improved beyond the finger-waving. There are now EMDR light units that kind of look like the scrolling LED light-up signs advertising beer at corner stores. And for people like me—people who feel more comfortable keeping their eyes closed

throughout the EMDR process—there are now little machines that hook up to vibrating bullets that you hold in your hands, with headphones that play sounds in one ear, then the other.

In her Manhattan office, Eleanor handed me an EMDR machine with buzzers and headphones. It would play a noise in my left ear, while buzzing a vibrator in my left hand—then play a noise in my right ear and buzz my right. This wasn't hypnosis, she emphasized. I'd be in full control of my faculties and could stop or change course whenever I wanted to. Then she pulled out a worksheet that consisted of a series of questions, and as we went through each one, she marked down my answers with an eaten-up pencil.

"Have you ever found yourself in a place with no memory of how you got there?"

"No," I responded.

"Have you ever found yourself dressed in clothes with no idea how they got on you?"

"No."

"Have you ever felt like you were able to watch yourself at a distance, as if you were watching a movie of your life?"

I knew what Eleanor was trying to do. She was trying to figure out how *dissociated* I was. When I was first diagnosed with C-PTSD, though many symptoms were familiar to me—depression, aggression, yadda yadda—I was relieved to find a couple of symptoms that did not resonate. Mainly those of dissociation. "Dissociation is common with complex PTSD," I'd read. "Dissociation can manifest as flashbacks, out-of-body experiences, trances, amnesia, and episodes of time loss."[2] I was somewhat unobservant, sure, with a tendency to trip on the edge of carpets a lot, but the word "dissociated" seemed strong to me.

An extreme form of dissociation is dissociative identity disorder (DID), brought into the mainstream by *United States of Tara*, a smart but short-lived Showtime series starring Toni Collette. Whenever she was triggered, the main character, Tara, would disappear into different alter egos—a perfectionistic housewife, a hard-drinking male Vietnam vet, a flirty teenager. Each time she transformed, she'd completely black out, and when Tara came back to her own body, she could not remember the damage her "alters" had wreaked.

That wasn't me. I didn't black out. If anything, I was proud that I remembered so much about my trauma, that I could recall the viscera of the most violent moments of my childhood.

After a few more questions, I interrupted Eleanor. "Look, I'm obviously messed up in a bunch of different ways, but I don't think I'm really that dissociated."

She nodded patiently but finished her worksheet anyway. I answered "no" pointedly to every question.

Then Eleanor said we should settle on just the right memory to focus on during EMDR. It should be an early moment of trauma that I felt was critical to process. Did I have any ideas?

I flipped through my Rolodex. "Well," I said, "there are kind of a lot. Like, there's the one involving the golf club…" I described the incident in all of its gory detail.

She listened patiently, and when I was done, she asked, "On a scale of one to ten, ten being most disturbing, how disturbing is that memory?"

How do you give a numerical value to how you feel about your parents trying to kill you? I guessed that maybe near-death experiences should automatically qualify as nines, but when I sat with it—when I imagined that actual golf club whooshing toward my head—I felt nothing. "Um. Like, a two, maybe?"

Eleanor cocked her head. "A two?"

"Yeah, like, I've thought about that memory a lot, I guess. I think I've processed it. Because it's not really that disturbing. I tell people about that one a lot. So, I dunno, I'm not upset right now thinking about it."

"Okay, well, let's work on something really disturbing," she said. "Something you feel strong emotions about."

"Umm…what's one that comes up a lot? I guess maybe…there are the times my parents tried to kill me in their cars. They'd swerve near cliffs, threatening to kill us both."

"And what number would you give that?"

"A three? Maybe."

"It's interesting you say that you aren't dissociated," Eleanor said carefully. "When you describe some terrible things being done to you, you have a

remarkably flat affect when talking about them."

"Maybe I've just processed these memories already! I've been in therapy for ten years. It's not like these are buried secrets that I've never told anyone. I've told these stories to people a bunch of times in my life, ex-boyfriends, therapists. So maybe in the act of doing that, I've thought about how they affected me, and learned things, and then…moved on."

"Fine, that could be true," Eleanor conceded, looking annoyingly skeptical. "But we still need to find something disturbing. So let's try something else. Can you remember the first time you experienced the abuse?"

"Um…well, no. I was so young. I kind of remember when I was five years old, maybe younger…my mom hit me with a hanger, and then afterward, she actually apologized to me. The only time I can ever remember her apologizing for hitting me."

"How disturbing is that memory?"

"A one? A two? It's not very specific. Maybe I shouldn't even be trying to work through this abuse stuff. I don't know that any of the hitting is actually that disturbing. Maybe I should be trying to work through more, like, abandonment stuff. I do have serious abandonment issues. Or this feeling of failure that I always carry…"

Another skeptical look. Eleanor said gently, "I think that, generally, earlier is better. First traumas can be more formative. But this is guided by *you*. Whatever you think is best. When you think of the moment of the first abandonment—when your mother first left you—on a scale of one to ten—"

I slumped on her couch and threw my head back exaggeratedly. "Ugh. A one."

"Well, it looks like we're running out of time," Eleanor said. "Give it some thought this week. What memories *are* actually upsetting to think about? If you want to bring in an example that you really want to work through, we can spend the entire next session using the buzzers to process it."

—

In my later research about EMDR and therapy, I learned that you can start *anywhere* with EMDR, that you can process any memory you'd like to take a deeper look at, even recent ones. It's not just about finding the most traumatic

memory you can possibly dredge up. In fact, some might argue that starting C-PTSD treatment by diving into the back of your closet and chasing out your scariest, most deeply buried skeleton is a terrible idea. You could find a murderous clown in the storm drain of your life, and he could start haunting your everyday existence. You could dig up something that triggers you badly and makes your symptoms worse or is so unpleasant to look at that you just quit therapy and never come back. That's why many trauma therapists try to set up a strong framework of coping mechanisms *before* people launch into their foundational traumas. So if you find Pennywise in the cellar of your brain, you can have some solid techniques for how to handle him.

But I didn't know that when I started working with Eleanor. At the time, as I walked out of her office into a sea of Brooks Brothers suits, I thought, *How the hell am I going to find this thing?* I thought my panic attacks at work were disturbing. I thought one of my best friends dumping me the previous year was pretty disturbing, too. But my childhood abuse was old hat. Still, perhaps there were less-cited abusive moments somewhere in my skull, the B sides of my trauma history. Perhaps *these* would hurt.

On the train ride home, my brain fumbled through traumatic events like a hand in a junk drawer, pulling out a stapler, then a fly swatter. What about the time with the Playmobils? Nah, that was a three at most. The time in Malaysia about my homework? That time at Girl Scouts? If I was disturbed, my mind should race and my heart should pump. When my boyfriend says *mm-hmm* in a way where I know he's irritated at me for talking nonstop, I can feel my brain pushing down on the gas. Given that, maybe it was a *little* weird that I wasn't getting any reaction to reliving the most violent moments in my life. On the train, I closed my eyes and pictured knives and burns and canes. Then I opened my eyes and did a body scan. Hunky-fuckin'-dory. If anything, I was just kinda hungry.

I fumbled for an explanation. Maybe I didn't remember any of these events thoroughly enough to be disturbed by them? When I thought about each event, I could remember moments, feelings, and images, sometimes I could remember how long things lasted. But I only remembered a few sentences from what were often hours-long beatings. I remembered my mother's hands, her body, but I didn't remember her face. I couldn't remember what she looked like without

makeup. I couldn’t remember what she looked like when she cried. Maybe, in order to go back to one specific memory and make it detailed enough to be disturbing, I needed to retrigger myself. And I knew exactly how to do it.

CHAPTER 17

I first watched *Mommie Dearest* when I was fourteen, channel surfing on the couch. As the movie went on, I crept onto the floor…and then farther back, into the hallway…and then up the steps, until I was watching it from around a corner. Afterward, I had to lie in bed for a while because what I saw onscreen so precisely mirrored my own life. My mother had been gone for a few months at this point, but when I saw that film, she was back. Faye Dunaway, a white actress from a different era, had eerily channeled my mother's words, her expressions, her ghostly white cream masks. I hid under my covers shivering until my body understood that my mother had not actually returned.

So on a sunny Saturday, two days before my next EMDR session, I downloaded *Mommie Dearest*. I might as well have lit candles and drawn a pentagram underneath my laptop. My mother's spirit was the demon to be summoned. I hit PLAY.

The movie is darkly lit and ominous from the get-go. In every scene, I kept my eyes open for clues. Most of the film is juicy Hollywood gossip fodder. Still, there were a few moments that strummed some taut string inside me. When Joan Crawford gets overly competitive with her daughter Christina in the swimming pool. When she insists that Christina not be spoiled. When she obsesses over cleaning. But my back tensed when I got to the most famous scene. The one with the wire hangers. This was it, I knew, the echo of what happened to me.

When Joan finds the wire hanger, she doesn't just yell or nag. She screams hysterically, every word rasping the limits of her voice, every syllable extending for seconds: "NOOOO…WIRE…HANGEEEEEEERS!" I remembered the

hands and the fact that it had all felt overwhelming and chaotic. I remembered the feeling of a wire hanger zipping through the air, lashing my skin, but…I did not remember the volume of my mother's voice. If she truly had shrieked at me enough to shred her vocal cords, it must have sounded something like this. *So loud,* I wrote on a pad of paper. *Was it really this loud?*

The rest of the scene is totally batshit. Joan beats her daughter with a wire hanger, then throws her into the bathroom and hurls powdered soap on everything, screaming the whole time. In fact, critics cited this scene when they panned the film, describing Dunaway's wailing as melodramatic and campy. Roger Ebert said the film left him "feeling creepy," in a bad way. Dunaway herself said she regretted doing the film, saying her acting was a "Kabuki performance." But it was realistic to me.

The part of the wire hanger scene that was most familiar was the very end, after Joan leaves Christina alone in the bathroom. Christina sits there, still, in quiet shock. While you are getting the shit kicked out of you, there isn't much room for injustice or disbelief, just survival. How do you calm the monster? Manage their rage? But in this silence, after it's over, that's when the sorrow finds you. "Jesus Christ," Christina whispers to herself, and I recalled multiple perfect reflections of this moment. That quiet slice of time you get when the monster retreats and you have a minute to survey the wreckage—the powdered soap everywhere, the lace dresses strewn all over the floor—and sit with the absolute *what the fuck* of your life before you have to pull it all back together, clean up the mess, and pretend that everything is fine.

I didn't cry when I watched the movie. I had no panic attack. I made my careful little notes, closed my laptop, and found Joey in the other room. "We've got to get going if we're going to make the party," I chirped. But I kept ruminating over the loudness. I had something to work with here.

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On Monday, I was back at Eleanor's office. I was prepared. "I think I have a pretty disturbing memory!" I announced proudly as soon as I plopped myself on her couch. "I watched *Mommie Dearest,* and it was pretty intense. So I think I'll go for one of the times *my* mom beat me with wire hangers."

"I'm glad. Though that's a heavy movie, I remember…" Eleanor said, her

voice trailing off as she unzipped a vinyl black bag. She handed me a pair of ’90s-looking headphones and two buzzers, which were like tiny, oblong eggs in my palms. “Okay, once again, this is *not* like hypnosis. If you ever feel uncomfortable or you want to stop, just tell me. But having a safe place might be able to help you, too. A visual place you can return to if you feel uncomfortable. Can you close your eyes and envision a beautiful, peaceful place around you? It can be anything in the world. Whatever you think feels safe.”

I close my eyes. I’ve always said there are forest people and desert people. Forest people are nurturing and fertile, but they have a tendency to hide behind their branches. I’m a desert person. Hard and acerbic and difficult to endure, but honest. You always know what you’re getting in the desert because there isn’t anywhere to hide. In that dry air, you can see a storm coming from ten miles away.

“I’m in a desert,” I say, picturing a cloudless blue sky and the fine, bleached powder in White Sands, New Mexico.

“That’s good. Now pay attention to the sounds and smells of the desert.”

There are no sounds in White Sands. It’s the quietest place I’ve ever been, so silent you can hear the tiny footsteps of stink bugs. There isn’t a smell, either. Dust and ozone, maybe. Just empty expanse.

“Now, I want you to think about your savior. This is one person who is going to protect you. Who do you trust to take care of you?”

In front of me, in a white T-shirt, appears Joey. He stands there, smiling at me.

“Okay,” she says. “Now I’m going to start the machine.” I feel the left egg buzz as I hear a short beep in my left ear. Then the right egg buzzes, accompanied by a right beep. It’s not distracting—just there. “I want you to think of wire hangers and just pay attention to what comes up.”

Buzz, beep. Buzz, beep. The sounds and feelings start to fade. In my head, I see my closet. The brown-orange shag carpet. I picture a ruched floral dress on the floor, a pair of discarded jeans. I see me, maybe six years old, with big eyes and thick, straight-across bangs. I’m wearing a T-shirt and turquoise shorts. And then I see her. Some amalgamation of my mother and Faye Dunaway maybe, screaming, wielding a wire hanger. She is whipping a child version of me as I stand to the side, watching. Red welts form on my child-self’s upper legs.

My mother screams. “How many times have I told you to hang these up? Why can’t you take care of nice things? Why do we spend all this money on you when you just waste it? What kind of daughter *are* you?”

“I don’t know. I’m trying. I forgot. I’m sorry,” little me says.

“You’re talking back. You’re not sorry! You’re giving excuses! How dare you!” Her voice is unbearably loud. My adult self recoils at the detail of the scene I’m witnessing—it is much more vivid than ever before.

Eleanor pauses the machine. I open my eyes, almost surprised to see her there. “What happened?” she asks. I give a brief summary of the movie that played in my head. “Okay,” she says. “Now keep going, paying attention to the *You’re not sorry.*”

The buzzers begin again.

“You’re not sorry,” my mom says. “You’re never sorry. You do this to torture me, to hurt me. You’re just like him. You have his huge, flat nose, his stupid expressions. I want to throw up just looking at you.” She is talking about my father.

“But I *am* sorry,” little me says. “You care about me so much. You take me to tennis and piano practice. You volunteer at school. You give me so much support. I am so grateful. I love you, Mommy.”

Oh my God. It hits me: I was constantly having to beg my parents to believe they were loved. That was my primary job as their child. It should have been the other way around.

The buzzers pause. I open my eyes, and my cheeks are wet with tears, but my breath is steady. “I didn’t expect this,” I manage. I hadn’t trusted Eleanor and her crappy dollar-store fans! I had barely trusted this process! What the hell was happening?

“Okay,” Eleanor says. “Now, send Joey in to rescue the baby version of you from this situation.”

Buzzers on. Eyes closed. Strong Joey. I imagine him striding in with his big-ass muscles bulging as I watch from the sidelines. He yanks the child version of me away from my mother. “You have to come with me,” he says. To my mother, he snarls, “This is unacceptable. Stop. You are not going to hurt her.”

Baby me starts to cry. “No! It’s my mom. What are you doing? Who are you? Don’t take me away from my mom.”

“You have to leave this. You don’t deserve to be treated like this. You have to leave.”

“I can’t leave. They need me. I have to protect them.”

“No, you don’t.” Joey hugs baby me extra tight. “You don’t have to fix anything to deserve love. I love you for who you are. You can fuck up. You can do whatever you want and you’ll still deserve love.”

Baby me struggles, tries to fight her way out of his grip, bites his arm hard enough to draw blood. Finally, Joey holds her at arm’s length, looks her in the eye, and says, “THEY DON’T LOVE YOU.” He points at my parents. “They don’t love you like you deserve to be loved. They are buried in their own misery and hurt to the point where they just cannot give you the kind of love that you need.”

Buzzers off. Tears still flow freely down my cheeks.

I sum up what has happened.

“Does baby Stephanie want to leave yet?” Eleanor asks.

“No.”

“Can you send in anyone else to help?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about adult Stephanie? She might recognize you.”

Joey disappears. I step forward and I kneel down next to her. “Listen,” I say. “I understand why you want to stay. It’s because you don’t know any kind of love outside of this. But I promise there’s different kinds of love out there, and you will meet other people who will give you what they can’t.”

Baby Stephanie looks at me hatefully and says, “But all those people left you.”

It’s like she’s slapped me. And then I’m angry. Tough-love time. I point to my parents. “But *they* both leave,” I say.

She seems shocked. Somehow, she hadn’t known.

“It’s true,” I yell, and now I’m loud. “They both abandon you in a few years. All the hard work that you put in to save them, all the mediation, the effort, none of it pays off. They don’t appreciate it at all. They never thank you.”

I see her harden. I know she believes me. It’s time to get her out.

Buzzers off. Eleanor pulls me out again. I tell her what happened. She says, “But what if she can’t go? Can you give her the tools that she needs to stay?”

Buzzers on.

I want her to leave so bad. My real body is crying out of fear for her. I think of all the rational tips and tricks I could provide her with, things that could defuse conflict situations, but she's already doing them.

"I just want you to know that you haven't actually done anything wrong. Just remember that eventually you *will* be loved, I promise," I say. "And…I want you to know how *powerful* you are. Your vigilance. Your diplomacy. You are only a small child, but you are the nucleus that keeps this family together. With or without you, these two toxic adults would be fundamentally unhappy. But you make them less unhappy, if anything. Their grief is not your fault."

I grab her and pull her to me. I am trying to impart a lifetime of love and warmth in a single embrace.

And then that's it. Buzzers off. It's over.

I emerge, dazed and blinking in Eleanor's cluttered office.

"How did you feel?" she asks.

"Less…hypnotized than I thought," I reply, which is a ridiculously inadequate description of what just happened, but…do I have words for what just happened? I thank Eleanor, shake her hand, and stumble into the hallway, where I stand for a few minutes, staring blankly at the wall.

—

I had recalled that moment of abuse two hundred times and not once had I ever cried. I never flinched. I always felt calm all over, a flat, barren nothing. Past therapists told me many times, "The abuse was not your fault." And I felt that windless chill and responded, "Yeah, sure. I know that."

"Do you?" they asked. They forced me to repeat it, made me sit on their couches and awkwardly recite "The abuse I suffered was not my fault" over and over.

"And how do you feel now?" they'd ask, hopefully, after I was finished.

"I guess good?" I said. "Yeah, it's true. It wasn't my fault." But I was a void when I said that. A voice and a body reading facts from a leaflet.

Real life is not *Good Will Hunting*. Robin Williams himself could've looked me in the eye and yelled and whispered "It's not your fault" ten or twenty or two

hundred times, and I would not have collapsed into his arms sobbing about my lost youth. I would have blinked back at him, “Yeah, sure, I know.”

But *this* had been something else. Those little buzzers had worked some kind of electronic Robin Williams magic. I didn’t just understand the weight of my abuse logically. I *felt* it, like a blade through flesh, like a bone popping out of place. I felt it like a lover saying it’s not going to work: sharp, immediate, and terrifying. I actually felt, with searing clarity, the horror of what happened to me—maybe for the first time ever. I felt how tremendously sad it was that I was forced to make my parents feel loved at such a young age. I felt how courageous I must have been to endure that torture, day after day for so many years, by the people I trusted most in this world. I felt a sense of love and adoration for my childhood self that I’d never been able to summon before.

There is a difference between knowing and understanding. I had known that this wasn’t my fault. EMDR unlocked the gate to the next realm, toward understanding. The difference is one between rote memorization and true learning. Between hypothesis and belief. Between prayer and faith. It seems obvious now—how can there be love without faith?

—

I learned two critical things that day. First: Just because the wound doesn’t hurt doesn’t mean it’s healed. If it looks good and it feels good, it should be all good, right? But over the years I’d smoothed perfect white layers of spackle over gaping structural holes.

And the second thing I learned was: My parents didn’t love me.

It’s not as if I hadn’t suspected this. There was that whole child abandonment thing, after all. But in my head, there were reasons and excuses for this. And now, for the first time, I saw the truth—the real reason they could not love me, had never loved me. I believe that they hated themselves too much to love me; their sadness made them too selfish to see me at all. The reason I hadn’t been loved had nothing at all to do with me or my behavior. It had everything to do with them.

I tried this new idea on for size. “My parents didn’t love me,” I muttered to myself, quietly, then louder: “My parents didn’t love me.” It’s a tragic sentence. It should feel like a shot to the gut. But instead, it had both resonance and

stillness. It happened. It's true. And it's okay. There *are* people who love me. I will be cared for. And I have my capable self. Everything is going to be fine. *Holy cow. This shit is for real.*

I arrived at my front door having barely registered how I got home. On repeat: *My parents didn't love me, and it's okay.*

Maybe I'm cured, I think. Maybe it truly is this simple.

CHAPTER 18

For five whole days, I was happy. Normal. When Joey *mm-hmm*ed at me, I realized he was probably busy, and I went to talk to the cat instead. When I made a mistake in a freelance project and my editor pointed it out, I just fixed the thing and we moved on. I was cautiously optimistic. Some sources say it takes three to five years to feel substantially healed from C-PTSD, but I have always been precocious. Maybe I knocked all my healing out in three months.

The fifth day was Saturday. It was our anniversary weekend, but Joey was too swamped with work to do much. It was his first year teaching middle school math—a Herculean task, as it turned out—and he was often busy and distracted. He was appropriately sorry and disappointed, but he said I should go have fun with my childhood best friend, Kathy. We'd celebrate later.

Kathy still lives in California, but she was in New York on a business trip for a few days. We hadn't seen each other yet because she'd been working a lot, too, and last night she was too tired to meet up. Today, she said she was finally ready to hang—but she'd invited other friends, people I'd never met. "We're going on a soup dumpling crawl," she said. "Jared says he knows all the best spots!"

"Is Jared Chinese?" I asked.

"No, he's white."

"Really? You think a white dude knows the best spots in Flushing?" She shrugged diplomatically, didn't say anything.

When I showed up on Roosevelt Avenue, Kathy and her pals were recalling monumental burgers and bulgogis of yore, and I realized that this was their

thing, food crawls. They'd been on so many together before. I'd never tried any of the restaurants they mentioned, so I had nothing to contribute. Jared said he knew about this incredible hole-in-the-wall with great lamb broth that we could try, too. "Oh, I also know this great place in the food court that has this really stinky, pungent, delicious seafood stew that I've never had anywhere else," I added, but everyone ignored me, so I shut up. The worst part was that Jared actually *did* know all the good spots. I only knew Nan Xiang Xiao Long Bao, but he knew about Joe's Shanghai and Shanghai You Garden and a secret place with unique egg tarts, and the basement boiled lamb soup *was* very tasty. But instead of my mood improving with each delicious bite, I got more and more irritable.

When they left for their second dessert, I said I had a stomachache from too many dumplings. I headed home, and when Joey asked me how it was, I said it was fine, but that I was too tired to talk. I picked out the dumbest movie I could find on Netflix, and even though I wasn't hungry, I ate the leftover lamb noodles while Joey made a lesson plan beside me on the couch.

On the sixth day, Sunday, I woke up on the wrong side of the bed, all elbows and angles. I didn't want to let my bad mood persist all day, so I went to a morning exercise class. The stretches felt good and the squats put out my fire, but they didn't quite extinguish the smoldering ashes of my irritation. Fine—let's try another tactic. I went to a nice outdoor café and ordered a croissant and a beer. I sat there in the sun, listening to the birds sing. I tried to be present and grounded, to take in as much pleasant stimulation as possible. But the beer just made me sleepy, like a grumpy cat woken from an afternoon nap. Finally, I went home and collapsed into bed, where I started sobbing. At first, I was mostly upset because I didn't know why I was upset. Everything was fine. Nothing was wrong. And yet I still felt like I was full of a purple angry porridge—everything was so mixed up and sloshed together that I couldn't begin to pull out a single thread of *why*. I tried breathing. I tried counting red things. Then I looked inward. In the sludge, I found a thread of resentment, a bone-deep belief that nobody really cares about me. Aha. After ten minutes of deep breathing and digging, I deduced that I was probably mad that Kathy didn't schedule any alone time with me during her visit.

Yeah! Shouldn't best friends always carve out some girl gossip time when they visit from across the country? But honestly, this really wouldn't have even bugged me that much if Joey hadn't also brushed off our anniversary. If he really cared about me, we'd have done something fun this weekend instead of him working.

I kept stirring the porridge. Now I was angry at myself for being needy and upset about something so stupid. This was all my fault. *Kathy is enormously generous. It's okay for her to bring her perfectly fun friends around, and now you made yourself look like a spoiled brat in front of strangers, critiquing Jared's totally valid dumpling assessments. And doesn't Joey tell you he loves you every day? How much love do you need?*

I interrupted myself to laugh bitterly. I guess EMDR didn't cure me after all, did it? I spent my whole last session trying to trust that I was loved, and yet here I was, letting waves of shame and regret lap over me like a depressed starfish.

Still. Amid the muck and grime, there was a small glimmer of awareness: It was ridiculous that it took me sixteen damn hours to figure out that I was upset and four more to ascertain why. Why didn't I figure this out sooner? Could I have wasted less time and spent less energy being upset if I'd identified my feelings and moved on? I could have told Joey about feeling irritable last night. I could have let him comfort me. We could have tried to talk about it or made new anniversary plans. If I'd acknowledged these feelings earlier, I could have asked for the attention I wanted. But instead, I felt that hollow, dry, *fine* feeling. The same feeling I had when I talked about knives to my throat. The same feeling you get when you have to stop crying, pick up the rag, and finish cleaning up the soap. The silent, soundless expanse.

Maybe you *can* hide in the desert after all.

I may not have *United States of Tara* levels of dissociation. But it's now clear I do have my own kind of dissociation, tamer and perhaps more dangerous in its subtlety, because up until now, I've been able to ignore the fact that it even existed.

—

Weeks later, I found a journal entry from my sophomore year of high school:

I think there's something wrong with me. I'm jaded. Like…super jaded. I

kind of wish I could feel again. I wish I could be genuinely happy, like I used to be. I don't feel that anymore. I even wish that I could be depressed, scream-at-the-world-stab-myself-in-the-chest angry, like I used to be. But I can't feel that either. When all of these terrible things keep happening, everything should have fallen apart, but it didn't. It was like I was watching it all through a glass. It was a movie.

A movie. I had used the same exact phrasing Eleanor used when she'd questioned me from her worksheet, the same language clinicians and psychiatrists use to diagnose people with dissociation, the language I denied in her office. It was now clear that I had hung a veil up decades ago—a thick white sheet in the back of my mind to keep certain truths from myself.

The dread was a catchall. It was a colorless amalgamation of feeling because I did not have the tools to tease out the wild knot of my real emotions and needs. The dread was a sliver of light escaping from behind the veil.

When I used EMDR to move the veil aside, I found: *My parents never loved me, and that's not my fault.*

What else was hiding behind the veil?

CHAPTER 19

Dissociation exists for a reason. For millennia, our brains and bodies have removed us from our pain so we can keep moving forward. A tiger just ate your wife? Bummer, but breaking down or freezing up is not an option. You better go out hunting today or your kids will starve. Your house was just destroyed in an air raid? Okay, but you have to pack up what's left and find new shelter, *now.* Feelings are a privilege.

And oh boy was I privileged. I no longer had my old tools of dissociation: work, booze, forgetfulness—a comfortable suit of armor that allowed me to move forward blindly. Now I had nothing but time, the excruciating expanse of leisure. And without my armor, I was raw, the elements scraping against exposed muscle. What's behind the veil? *Pain.* A lot of fucking pain.

—

One summer evening, as the mosquitoes started to emerge from the new warmth, my friend Joanna and I went out to drinks. The bar's backyard was generally closed after nine, but the owners let us stay out there since Joanna always has a big smile and asks nicely. Maple branches sashayed along to the dim melodies of a jazz band playing inside. While Joanna told me stories about when she lived in South America, I listened and nodded, trying to ask questions. But when there were lulls in the conversation, when she asked how I was doing, I didn't know what to say. I had been paralyzed by shame lately—shame over my failed career

and my diagnosis—but I didn't know how to share my feelings because I still didn't know how to not be a burden.

Joanna is a midwesterner and exudes hay-fed Minnesotan warmth. She laughs easily, leans in and asks permission before gossiping, and then after she's spilled some very mildly spiced tea, she apologizes and says, "That's my alter ego Lit Joan talking. But what can I say? I just have to live my truth!"

So I didn't tell her how I felt. Instead, I racked my brain in a panic for something to offer. Oh, I read a funny *Onion* headline yesterday. She chuckled pleasantly, a success. But then the conversation somehow segued into talking about a friend who dated a few jerks. I didn't notice that we were gossiping until the words were out of my mouth, and in a flood of shame, I shut down. Crap—how could I be interesting *and* good at the same time? Another lull stretched on. I asked more questions about South America and let her fill in the blanks. At every point in the conversation, I tallied my fuckups. And then I realized that this was problematic because it meant I was not being totally present with my friend. Here I was worrying about every word coming out of my mouth while I should have been enjoying Joanna's presence! But even her niceness seemed to be an indictment. I was jealous of Joanna's intuitive ease, how she didn't have to sit there and agonize over how to be decent because she was raised with love. How could I be more like her when I was never given the ingredients for it? Why was I a flinching, hissing animal, never safe or tame enough to sit quietly in someone's lap? Would my inner beast always force me away from others—into a hovel, alone?

I spiraled, like a maple seed pod spinning down to the ground, unable to stop even hours later, long after Joanna and I said goodbye.

The next day, I canceled my friend plans for the rest of the week.

No matter what I do, no matter where I try to find joy, I instead find my trauma. And it whispers to me: "You will always be this way. It's never going to change. I will follow you. I will make you miserable forever. And then I will kill you."

The literature says this is normal for traumatized people. Experts say it's all part of the three *P*'s: We think our sadness is personal, pervasive, and permanent. Personal, in that we have caused all the problems we face. Pervasive, in that our

entire life is defined by our failings. And permanent, in that the sadness will last forever.

But, as usual, knowing that I am textbook doesn’t help me rise off the page.

CHAPTER 20

The books say that in order to stop being a burden, I must learn how to "self-soothe." I need to learn how to calm my anxieties by myself, without immediately texting everyone in my phone. Therapy and EMDR might eventually work to heal my trauma on a longer timeline. But to ease the searing pain of the present moment, everyone says the first step should be meditation and mindfulness.

There is overwhelming evidence that meditation can increase focus and decrease anxiety, depression, and cortisol flooding.[1] There is evidence that it decreases activation in the amygdala, one epicenter of fear in the brain, and increases activity in the prefrontal cortex.[2] People who meditate are able to unstick themselves from cyclical, dangerous thinking and see things from a calmer, more positive perspective.

The sympathetic nervous system, or the fight-or-flight system, is activated by stress. This is the system that gets us ready to run. The counter to this is the parasympathetic nervous system, the resting-and-digesting system. It lowers heart rate and blood pressure, slows breathing, and directly counters the stress response. Meditation activates the parasympathetic nervous system.[3] It's literally the antidote to stress. Plus, it's what all the evolved, cool girls who look good without makeup are doing, according to social media.

But meditation does not bring me peace. I've tried it maybe a dozen times before, and it always goes the same way: I try to clear my head. I close my eyes and try to think about nothing. I want to make my brain a blank slate, but images keep popping up: an idea for a story I should follow up on, the laundry I haven't

done, the shoes I should take to a cobbler. I think about something simple and pure and basic: a block of fresh, soft, white tofu. For twenty seconds, I succeed, imagining a white cube, jiggly and shiny in my mind. Mmm, tofu. What should I eat for dinner? Wait, damn it! Okay, fine. I'll focus on my breathing instead. In. Out. In. Out. In. Was I able to breathe in as much as I should? Why did it feel like I couldn't get enough air into my lungs? Why did I feel like I was wheezing? Was I wheezing? Is there something wrong with my lungs? Do I have lung cancer? I must be dying. That's the only explanation for it. I never had my will notarized. I should probably get it notarized. Am I okay with dying? I never got to scuba dive in a coral reef. Now all the coral reefs are dying because of global warming. If I have lung cancer, there's no way they're going to let me scuba dive.

I read later that breathing exercises can actually be *more* triggering in certain populations. Sounds about right.

—

Then there is the more achievable exercise of "grounding." Grounding sounds like meditation lite—an act of mindfulness but briefer than meditation and more focused on concentrating on small things in the world around you. One of the more helpful C-PTSD resources I found is a website called Beauty After Bruises, which describes grounding this way: "Being grounded refers to a state of mental awareness where you're fully present with the here and now. You know who and where you are, the current time and year, and what's happening all around you. *It is the opposite of dissociating.* The act of 'getting grounded' means taking deliberate steps to bring one's self out of flashbacks, dissociation, and/or other distress…. This is a vital skill for trauma patients."[4]

I had always thought that having a flashback meant fully hallucinating your past. In the movies, soldiers would be transported back to Afghanistan—they'd see desert sand and automatic rifles in a waking nightmare. But even when I remembered moments of abuse, I knew where I was. I knew I was on the couch. I knew I was not going to die.

But I soon learned that in trauma lingo, people often aren't talking about the movie version of flashbacks. They're talking about *emotional flashbacks.*

For example, before I quit my job, my boss often came into my office to tell

me I'd made some minor mistake. If my body and brain were totally in the present, I would have felt embarrassed for messing up but would recognize that it wasn't a huge deal, acknowledge my faults, and get back to it. Instead, after my boss left, I always felt guilt and anxiety and shame and terror. I'd run downstairs to have a cigarette, text a friend about how I was a moron, and spend half an hour freaking out about how nobody respected me and I'd probably end up fired. Even though consciously I was completely in the present, my emotions were back in 1997, back when I was a little kid and making a mistake on a spelling test could literally be a matter of life and death. This return was an *emotional flashback.*

Beauty After Bruises claims that the way to fix these emotional flashbacks is to ground yourself. So the next time I found myself in a panicky and depressive state, I read their Grounding 101 tips: Open your eyes. Put your feet solidly on the floor. Look at your hands and feet. Recognize they are adult hands and feet. Name five things you can see and hear and smell.

I put my feet on the floor, stomped them a little, looked around. I looked at my hands. Ew, wrinkly. Definitely not a child's hands. My nails were dry and peeling. I ripped a jagged edge off. I smelled my shirt. I checked in. I still felt like total shit.

—

Maybe there was another way in. Maybe I'd start with an even less cerebral mindfulness exercise. One that wouldn't just lift my mood but could help me lift my ass, too.

"We're going to need a blanket, a strap, two small pillows, and one big pillow today," the instructor said. I followed a spindly older woman into the supply closet and watched as she pulled out a bunch of navy-blue pillows—sturdy ones, like couch cushions; a heavy, gray felt blanket; and what looked like a canvas belt. The class had been listed as "Yin/Restorative Candlelit Yoga," and I'd picked it because, as the last class of the evening, it was 30 percent off. I wore stretchy pants and an old tank top, ready to sweat, but everyone around me seemed to be wearing their coziest pajama gear—baggy sweats and long cardigans that swept their knees.

The instructor, Jennifer Chang, sat near a pair of dazzling, aquamarine-

painted doors at the front of the class. Battery-powered candles were flickering all around the classroom, and she lit some palo santo to get us in the mood. She was Asian, which somehow gave her a legitimacy that put me at ease, plus I liked her round, jolly face.

"Okay, everybody. Give yourself a pat on the back just for showing up. We're going to start with yin yoga today, which is all about getting deep into your fasciae, the connective tissues in your muscles, and we're going to do some really deep stretches. Some of these poses might be intense for you, and everyone's body is different. Listen to your body. This class isn't about doing the most extreme version of everything. If it hurts a lot, pull it back. We want to be going for 70 percent here, never pushing for 100 percent. If anything is difficult for you, just raise your hand and we'll figure out an alternative together." And then she made us get on our backs and stretch out our legs with the strap.

I kept waiting for the challenging part of the class—the part where I'd have to stand on my head, or on one leg, or fold over upside-down. But that part never came. My heart rate didn't go up, and we spent most of our time lying down or seated—my muscles stretching instead of straining. Twenty minutes in, I figured that yin was not the kind of yoga I'd seen on YouTube. It wasn't a workout, which at first irritated me—I wanted that good butt, after all—and in my experience, if something wasn't hard, it didn't work. Still, I found myself settling in. The mood of the dim room was pleasant enough.

But weirdly, my favorite thing about this class was that the instructor, Jennifer, never shut up.

If we were doing a thigh stretch, Jennifer said I should imagine my breath as a golden light zooming out of the top of my head during my inhale and back into my thigh as I exhaled. If I was flexing my toes, I should envision my feet as plants, sending roots all the way down into the earth. She kept reminding us over and over to think intensely about the body part we were stretching. She would name each individual muscle and force us to focus in on the sensation of it pulling in our body. She had me imagine that I had nostrils on my butt, and that I was breathing out of them. The fact that she never stopped talking meant that my brain never really got the chance to wander.

The stretches were just intense enough to force me to pay close attention to the (satisfying) pain in my body. And the visualizations forced me to keep my

attention on my legs. It wasn't like PE, where we counted to twenty for each stretch. Instead, we sat in these positions for a few minutes each. I had never in my life spent five full minutes thinking so intensely about every sensation within my toes, or my shoulders, or my calves.

After thirty minutes of yin yoga stretching came the restorative yoga part. Jennifer told us to arrange our pillows into a structural mound. I prepared myself for some new physical test, but she said, "Now lie down on the pillows with your knees open and your arms to your sides." Restorative yoga, as it turned out, was just lying down in different comfy-cozy positions with a warm blanket on top of you. "If you want another blanket, just raise your hand and I will come around and tuck you in," she called out, padding gently around the room. She asked us to close our eyes and gave us more visualizations: We were instructed to envision that someone was slowly pouring a giant carafe of golden oil all over our bodies or that a light was building in our bellies and coming out of the crown of our heads, radiating warmth and goodness into the world. If you'd approached me before class and asked me to try these thought experiments, I would have felt too silly to commit to them fully. But now I embraced them and let that light expand in my belly like a pure globe of euphoria.

I understood the purpose of the first half of the class now. While we were stretching, the instructor had been training us to pay close attention to tiny sensations in our bodies. And now that we were relaxing on a mountain of pillows, those sensations were exquisite. My favorite position was something called a "heart opener," in which I lay on my back with a pillow under my spine so my arms hung limp on each side of me, my chest spread wide. The feeling of perfect cool air flowing over my open palms transported me to a meadow on a spring day. The feeling of my chest stretching wide made me feel courageous and whole. My back felt devoid of pain, my waist felt heavy and warm underneath the heavy blanket. Even my breath felt fresh and clean coming in and out of my body. And most importantly, there were no annoying voices. I wasn't thinking about the past, or various insecurities, or the future.

The term "grounded" started making sense. Being utterly and completely present allowed me to focus on the immense, full-body pleasure of simply being alive. I was surprised to find tears streaming off the sides of my face. This pleasure—as intense as staring into the sun—didn't have to cost anything. It was

available to me anytime. I was overwhelmed by my discovery of a rapturous new drug that also happened to be free and legal and noncaloric!

But at the same time, I was crying because a small part of me was sad: How had I not known, until this moment, the pleasure of breathing? How had I not known that feeling air on my palms could be so comforting? How much pleasure had I missed because I was too in my head to pay attention? How often had I longed to leave all of this, to die, because I hadn't understood how satisfying it could be?

The tears started flowing even harder. Swaddled in a blanket, feeling utterly safe and comfortable, I felt…cradled. As if someone was taking care of me, flooding me with kindness and generosity and love. And *I* was that someone.

—

Months later, I learned that what happened that first day at restorative yoga hadn't been entirely spiritual—I hadn't just found the exact spot on the astral plane to tap into my sacred core. Instead, my instructor's techniques happened to be the perfect mechanism to turn down my DMN.

The default mode network is so called because if you put people into an MRI machine for an hour and let their minds wander, the DMN is the system of connections in their brains that will light up. It's arguably the default state of human consciousness, of boredom and daydreaming. In essence, our *ego.*

So if you're stuck in a machine for an hour, where does your mind go? If you're like most people, you'll ruminate on the past or plan your future. You might think about your relationships, upcoming errands, your zits. And scientists have found that some people who suffer from depression, anxiety, or C-PTSD have overactive DMNs.

Which makes sense. The DMN is the seat of responsibility and insecurity. It can be a punishing force when it over-ruminates and gets caught in a toxic loop of obsession and self-doubt.

The DMN can be silenced significantly by antidepressants or hallucinogenic substances. But the most efficient cure for an overactive DMN is mindfulness.

Here's how it works: In order for the DMN to start whirring, it needs resources to fuel its internal focus. If you're intently focused on something external—like, say, filling out a difficult math worksheet—the brain simply

doesn’t have the resources to focus internally and externally at the same time. So if you’re triggered, you can short-circuit an overactive DMN by cutting off its power source—shifting all of your brain’s energy to external stimuli instead.

Of course, doing difficult math while triggered is not going to be easy—though I’d done some version of that for years, using work as a DMN-silencer. Other people use alcohol. Or drugs. A potentially easier and healthier external task? Focusing on the five senses.

Turning your attention to things that are happening right now around you—the feeling of a warm bath, the sweetness of a perfectly ripe peach, the sound of a mournful violin, the smell of a lover’s neck—is powerful and immediate. That’s what my instructor was drawing me to when she asked us to stretch to the point of discomfort and then narrowed our attention with laser focus to that sensation of oh-so-good pain. That’s why lying there, feeling my arms and legs and chest exist in the world, felt so relaxing. Because it also completely shut up the voice that constantly edits and punishes me.

And there’s another advantage to shutting the DMN down. When our ego is silenced, there is a dissolution of the relationship between self and other. We more easily enter a state of interconnectedness, a feeling that we *belong* to something—a society, a world that is bigger than us, that shares our essential humanity. That’s why it was so much easier for me to engage in visualizations where I was breathing loving energy out of my lungs and into the universe itself. This wasn’t just me submitting to hippie-dippie hypnotism. This openness was based in very real science.

Restorative yoga is just one way to slow down the DMN. Once you start searching, there are plenty of good mindfulness exercises that can “ground” you—get you out of your damn head and into the world. I started trying all of them out and asking friends what worked for them.

For some people, popping an ice cube into their mouth or eating a big bite of wasabi helps shock their systems into paying attention to a sensory experience. A journalist I knew had a lot of success tapping his face and hands. Lacey loves to focus on the rhythmic feeling of her feet hitting the pavement during a long walk or taking a swim in icy water. Another friend melts into a happy puddle when she covers herself with her weighted blanket.

Most of these exercises didn't quite hit the spot for me, but I started to find ones that did. One of my favorites was mindful eating. In the past, I had always worked through lunch, my food magically disappearing between drafts. But now, I was slowing down and focusing on each bite. I paid close attention to texture and flavor, savoring it slowly. The item that unlocked the magic of this experience was, of all things, a chicken parmesan wrap from Pret a Manger. Not even a sandwich! The saddest vehicle of foods—a skimpy, cold, overpriced bodega *wrap*! But on this day, I was able to narrow my focus, laser-like, on the taste. In one bite, the sweet tang of tomato sauce. In another, ooh, creamy cheese. In another, the light crunch of breaded chicken. Every bite, with its new proportions of textures and flavors, was thrilling. With a little attention, that shitty Pret wrap morphed into the sweet nectar of the gods.

And there was one mindfulness trick that was like a giant emergency button I could whack in a crisis. While I was fighting with Joey about household chores one day, he slammed a lid down onto a dirty pot, and my triggered ass went from zero to a thousand and twelve. I hurled a spoon into the sink and yelled that it wasn't my fault if he was an anal-retentive neat freak. As we started hollering at each other, a tiny part of my brain suggested I try a grounding technique I'd recently read about: counting colors. I whirled around the room and counted all the red things: a book cover, a board game, a flowerpot, a dress in a painting, a flower on a cushion. When I ran out of red things, I switched to blue. It seemed like a kindergarten technique, something to calm a toddler out of a tantrum, but I was shocked to find my brain clearing after just a few seconds. It was like turning a knob down on a speaker. Two minutes later, my virtuous rage had quieted somewhat. It wasn't *that* big of a deal. Apologizing seemed like a decent option, also maybe washing the damn pot.

I had expected that curing my trauma would be like climbing a sixth-floor walk-up while hauling a suitcase: hard-won and painful. This revelation proved that second chances did not always have to be fought for—they could be taken in handfuls for free like after-dinner mints. Could I truly clear the fetid swamp of a past like mine with dandelions and butterfly stretches? Was it really that simple?

No, not exactly. But it was a start.

CHAPTER 21

The first restorative yoga classes I scheduled were blissful—an almost drug-like respite from my constant, vicious pain. So I scheduled more mindfulness classes. A generous, accessible meditation teacher at the Brooklyn Zen Center insisted to me that even the most practiced monks sometimes got lost and stressed during their meditations, too. I went to classes taught by a punk ex-addict covered head to toe in tattoos who wove brain science with ancient Buddhist thought. I even tried out fancy high-tech meditation pods, where I'd sit on ergonomically designed cushions in acoustically treated rooms while ambient music and electronic guided meditations played.

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These were all useful in some way, so I researched more and more services and activities I'd heard could help—anything nearby that I could afford.

First, I visited a friend who was an acupuncturist. She looked at the color of my tongue and told me I had too much heat.

"Should I drink…more water?"

"It's not that you're actually hot," she said. "You just have too much heat in your liver. It's not something I can explain in Western science. Just trust me on this one. How are you feeling?"

"I feel like I can't concentrate. I have no energy. But I'm also anxious."

She nodded and told me that she'd prick me in ways that would give me energy and peace. She wrote down a brand of Chinese herbal pills I could buy

online, then stuck needles in my forehead and ears. She put one pin in my toe, and my thighs started to hum with a strange heat. “Whoa,” I squeaked. “My legs are on fire!”

“Yeah, that pin connects to your thigh chakras,” she assured me. “Now close your eyes and relax.” I tried to take deep, even breaths, but when I inhaled, it irritated the pin right under my rib cage.

The rest of that day I felt a little buzzed, as if I’d had a cup of coffee but with no comedown. Though I was extra focused, the effects of the acupuncture didn’t do much to puncture my mental pain. In the end, I visited her twice and appreciated her talent, but it just wasn’t enough.

Then there was the swanky sound-vibration studio in Tribeca where I went to experience a workshop on breathwork. Stanislav Grof, a Czech psychiatrist who guided thousands of LSD-laced psychiatric sessions, developed breathwork after the drug was declared illegal in 1968 and he needed an alternative for his patients. His invention, holotropic breathwork, is a fancy term for “hyperventilating until the levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your body are so whacked-up that you hallucinate.” Some people report having intensely cathartic experiences afterward, akin to those associated with hallucinogens. I’ve read accounts of people seeing images of dead family members or reliving their deepest traumas and walking away cleansed.

I sat in a large square with about a dozen other people, and we breathed in and out rhythmically for about ten minutes. After our instructor told us to resume breathing normally, I had a physical hallucination—like my body was floating off the ground. I savored this strange sensation as someone played a didgeridoo near my head. But I did not have a psychic breakthrough or meet dead people.

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I even joined a childhood trauma support group. It was very ad hoc—a small group of friends-of-friends put together by an acquaintance. We didn’t go around and say, “My name is Stephanie, and I’m a survivor of abuse,” but we might as well have. Everyone shared their stories and their day-to-day struggles. There was a lot of crying. And it was hard not to compare my trauma with everyone else’s. My story was not the worst by far. One of the members was explicit about it. When I said I had a boyfriend, they replied, “It must be nice for you that you

weren't sexually assaulted so you can have a healthy romantic relationship. I wish I could have that." I flushed with guilt and said, "I'm sorry," because I didn't know what else to do.

But despite our differences, I recognized that all of us exhibited very similar patterns of behavior. I could see myself in all of their struggles, in their outsized reactions, in their sadness and anxiety. Unfortunately, instead of finding kinship in the fact that we all had similar insecurities and struggles, I couldn't help but silently pathologize them in the same way I'd been pathologizing myself over the past few months. *Ah, they won't answer phone calls from people. Classic case of avoidant attachment disorder. Blaming themselves for someone else's bad mood even though they did nothing wrong. Anxious attachment, maybe anxious/avoidant—also, warped self-perception!*

It did not help that of everyone there, I'd gone through the most therapy. I found myself in the awkward position of being an incompetent pseudo-therapist, trying to provide comfort for people and suggesting books and therapies, even though I was decidedly not okay, either. It occurred to me that there is a reason trained, experienced facilitators are always a part of support groups—so nobody in a crisis is expected to take on this role.

Still, one aspect of this group made my attendance worth it—the ability to see that C-PTSD did not inherently make a person monstrous.

Each of the group's members was profoundly shattered. But they were all trying their damnedest to piece themselves back together in a way that didn't hurt anyone else. They told darkly funny jokes, set out good cheese when they hosted at their apartments, and wrapped their arms around one another when they cried. They all had fierce protective streaks and passionately defended one another against the negative voices in their heads. They were talented and charismatic, quick to be introspective. They read self-help books and danced all night and painted bright, joyful canvases.

So it broke my heart to see this: At the beginning of each meeting, we would go around in a circle and say how we were doing that month. And we almost never said "good." *Okay,* we said. *Meh.* There was always a current struggle, a friendship on the precipice, a narcissistic parent sending passive-aggressive texts. We were all deserving. Why couldn't any of us just be good? I wished so badly for us to be good.

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Soon my calendar was packed with trauma-centered activities. Sound baths, yoga classes, my support group, Buddhist talks, massages. I hightailed it on the subway to make a meditation class in Midtown after a yoga class in Brooklyn, then hustled back for a physical therapy appointment. On these hectic journeys, I of course made mistakes. I forgot to bring a healthy snack, or I wasted too much time huffing essential oils in a gift shop and arrived too late to a yoga class, where I lost my $15 deposit. Each time I fucked up, I chastised myself: *You're jobless and bleeding money! You're living like an entitled socialite! Except without any of the fun parts! Like octopus carpaccio! Or yachts!*

One day, I arrived at a meditation class five minutes late and had to step over crossed thighs, shuffling apologetically to my spot, where I stewed in shame on my pillow. *Everyone thinks I'm an asshole! They can hear me panting! I'm ruining the vibe!* And then it dawned on me: I was stressing out about not being perfect at my *relaxation class*.

I was approaching "wellness" with the same obsessive, perfectionistic tendencies I'd brought to my job. This was no less disordered than being a workaholic, and the pattern had a distinct echo: moments of intense joy through achievement followed by anxiety over finding my next success.

I decided to cut down on the number of wellness activities I participated in, keeping only my favorites, the ones that brought me sincere and easy joy. And I spruced up my at-home meditation routine, setting down a special cushion in front of my bay window, surrounded by my plants. I told myself that self-care shouldn't cost money or come from a place of obligation. Being truly healthy should feel like a pleasure.

CHAPTER 22

If I was going to meditate and stick needles into myself and chug strange concoctions, I of course had to try the ultimate alternative treatment, the one that has gone in and out of favor with the human species since our inception: hallucinogens.

Let's be real: I went to college in Santa Cruz. I am no stranger to magic mushrooms. They facilitated some excellent raves in my early twenties.

I first did shrooms alone when I was twenty-three, after my terrible breakup with the cyberpunk boy who was afraid of me. He dumped me in October, and I partied heavily until December, when everyone left the city and went home for the holidays. I had nobody to celebrate with, nothing to lose. So on Christmas that year, on a warm and sunny San Francisco day, I ate an eighth of shrooms and chased it with orange juice. Then I went up to my roof and lay on a lounge chair, watching magnificent fractal blossoms and skulls rotate in the sky. Just as "The Sunshine Underground" peaked in my headphones, the shrooms opened a door. I left behind my tiny, mortal, self-loathing self and osmosed into the universe. I saw that creation was beautiful and I was a part of that gorgeous creation. Every part of my body filled with compassion and admiration for myself, and I could barely contain this powerful joy. I was almost afraid that if I took off my sunglasses, rainbows would beam like searchlights from my eye sockets.

I gave everything I had in that relationship, the shrooms allowed me to see. *I was not unkind or abusive. I* was *stressed out and anxious and consumed with work. But I am twenty-three years old and I basically run an NPR show. If I have*

yet to figure out how to balance my life perfectly, that's to be expected from a twenty-three-year-old girl.

This spiritual Christmas trip was the first time I had ever experienced unconditional love. And I was receiving it from *myself.* This forgiveness was transformative. It released me from the blame I heaped on myself all day for the collapse of my relationship. That evening, I took care of myself like I would someone I loved. I took a bath. And I ate my first real meal in three months: half of an apple pie and cheap Chinese takeout. In the weeks after, I hid my hip bones with a healthy layer of fat. I started dating someone else. And my spiritual beliefs shifted. After my parents' divorce, I'd eschewed my idea of a cruel, transactional God. Now I believed in a force greater than myself. Not a deistic being, per se…more like the idea that the universe might be organized around something like love.

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There is a ton of information now—including TED Talks and Michael Pollan's book *How to Change Your Mind*—about psilocybin and MDMA being highly effective medications for PTSD. Anecdotal stories abound of suffering veterans emerging from one meaningful trip completely cured, with a new vigor for life. Shrooms in particular have proved to be a great salve for people with terminal illnesses. The oncoming specter of death can be terrifying, but after these suffering patients emerge from their hallucinogenic experiences, many are at peace with their lives and deaths, content to be absorbed back into the fabric of the universe. Shrooms have also been shown to suppress your DMN and dissolve your ego, allowing you to look at your life with a childlike, brand-new perspective. They can draw connections between disparate parts of the brain, building creative solutions to our life's struggles and strengthening areas we don't use frequently enough.

But for me, the effects of shrooms, although powerful, were always temporary. That feeling of freedom from self-doubt, of confident self-love, only lingered for a few days or weeks. Eventually, the dread always returned.

I'd try to chase it away with shroom trips every three to six months throughout much of my twenties, in botanical gardens from Berkeley to Brooklyn. While sitting under a grand spruce, I'd commune with the wise

shrooms, which always guided me back to a place of perspective and peace. These trips were not confetti-strewn party extravaganzas. Instead, they often involved lots of crying and digging through hard truths, coming out on the other side with a clearer lens through which to witness this sublime world.

But there was the problem of access—shrooms are a Class A drug, after all. After I moved to New York, I wasn't able to find a dealer, and my supply ran out. Fear scribbled black marks all over my vision once again, until I couldn't see the world's beauty—just my own ugliness. By the time I was diagnosed, I hadn't tripped in a couple of years.

If I ever needed a new perspective on life, it was now, so I went back to my favorite medicine. I interrogated my friends on the encrypted messaging service Signal for a few months until I found a very pricey eighth. I ate it at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden on a sweaty summer afternoon, excited to see myself once again through prismatic, all-loving eyes.

Unfortunately, the first hour and a half wasn't prismatic at all. Instead, I found myself power walking in circles through the Japanese Zen garden, thinking about how human beings' superficial needs were bringing on the Anthropocene. I had so many needs, too. Needs from Joey, needs from my friends. Oh God, I thought. A woman is simply supposed to provide, not to need. The worst thing a woman can do is take up space with her hunger. With her hysteria.

All of my aggressive walking finally led me to a very large, flat rock overlooking a wildflower meadow. I remembered my initial goals and decided to sit on this rock and resolve that I was not a useless piece of shit if it was the last thing I did. I sat there slapping my forehead, muttering, "You're awesome! You're awesome! You're awesome!" until a question popped into my head. *Why do people believe in you?*

Why? There must be something inside me that deserves that belief. *Back up.* Who *believes in you?* I scrolled through my phone. There were sweet little texts from a bevy of people. All of them were so smart. So talented. They were good judges of character, and none of them suffered fools. I looked at the last text messages some of these people had sent me. One friend said she missed me. Another said she thought I was one of the silliest people she'd ever known. An

old co-worker told me just last week that she believed I was responsible for her career.

Usually when these people send me compliments affirming my existence and worth, I send back some version of: “Oh, pshaw, you’re soooo nice, but I’m actually a fetid sewer marsupial, lolol,” and then I rush to catch my train or chop garlic or respond to my next email.

The shrooms showed me that my C-PTSD was a void. When Dustin didn’t text me back for three days, when Kat snapped at me because I said something careless during a conversation, when Joey locked himself in the office to get away from me for a few hours…the black hole expanded, its maw impossible to fill, and it began to whisper dangerous things as it grew: *Why aren’t you a priority? Why aren’t you loved? Surely this means they are about to leave.* My fear of being abandoned forced me to need proof of love in abundance, over and over and over again, a hundred times a day. So even though my friends were constantly attempting to fill the great void of my self-hatred with generous words, assurances, and compliments…they were all simply getting sucked into that black hole, mere crumbs for my intense desire. I dismissed them. In the end, my friends’ exhortations had gone to waste.

But now, with the help of the shrooms, I allowed all of this praise to finally penetrate. To allow myself to believe I was worthy of it.

All of my friends’ tiny acts of generosity and kindness did not pass me by. Instead, they took my breath away. They filled me up. I scrolled through the messages on my phone, and they lit up like gemstones, painted a full landscape of me, dappled with light and complexity, weeds and miraculous flowers, much like the meadow I was currently gazing at. My heart swelled with gratitude for every text, even the silly meme ones. I must not be a monster. Would a monster be capable of receiving this much kindness? No—I must be loved tremendously. I must be magic.

I laughed gleefully on my rock, surrounded by towering sunflowers, which seemed to dance with my joy. And then I laughed louder, lucky that nobody was nearby. I sat up suddenly, startling an old couple. I was overcome with an urgent need to put on more sunblock. AND! To return the favors that had been extended to me. For months, I had been too afraid to text people and bother them with my nonsense, but today I whipped out my phone and tearfully texted grateful

compliments to everyone. “You’re such a bomb, brilliant person, thank you for being my friend.” Send. “You mean so much to me, and I’m so grateful to have you.” Send. “It was so fun running into you the other day! I miss you!” Send.

Immediately the responses came back: “Omg! Miss you too! Love you too! Do you want to go grab coffee?” I felt like Joanna, like a normal person, or maybe even a Minnesotan. Being nice came easy. Even after I’d come down off the drugs, I soared high on these future plans, these connections I was continuing to affirm.

For a few days, it seemed so easy to be in the world with other people. I fielded dozens of phone calls and text messages with merry aplomb. After a couple of weeks, as expected, the old anxieties returned, and I could feel my brain bending back toward negativity. The shroom bliss never stays forever.

But something was different this time—a new determination to somehow make my revelations *stick,* outside of the shroom space.

The big black void in my head was a well-worn path built into my programming. I realized that no number of singular trippy experiences—whether they came from shrooms, acid, ketamine, hyperventilation, or ayahuasca—would ever completely overwrite this programming, no matter how transcendental.

But my trip had also shown me that there was one thing that could combat the void for a little while: *gratitude*. It was the flame that penetrated the darkness, that filled me all the way up. And the only way to keep the flame going was to keep feeding it. I had to force gratitude into my routines in ways I could not ignore or forget. I had to systematize the light.

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My old therapist Samantha had told me to do it a hundred times and I’d ignored her.

“Keep a journal every day this week of three things that you feel grateful for,” she said, and I agreed to the assignment but internally snorted at the idea that this stupid exercise could solve my crippling depression. When I came back the next week with nothing, she said, “Okay, can you come up with one thing a day that you feel grateful for?” I forgot. Oops. Still nothing.

But now, motivated by the residual positivity from my shroom trip, I knew it was time. I had a ridiculous pink, yellow, and blue notebook I’d snatched from

the free bin at work that had FUN STUFF INSIDE stamped on its cover. Also, 100+ STICKERS! This seemed appropriate for my first gratitude journal.

I divided the first page into two columns. I titled the left column *Gratitude* and the right *Pride*. The idea was to make note of both the things that brought me joy in the world and the ways *I* brought joy into the world.

The first day, I wrote three things under *Gratitude*, and I was surprised by how easily everything came: A playlist a friend had shared with me. My boyfriend being safe and fun to talk to. A guy who'd made me a hubba-hubba huge beefcake okonomiyaki, having poured in too much batter by accident, but gave it all to me anyway with a huge smile on his face.

Pride was more difficult. It's not every day that you get some awesome text message from someone saying they owe their whole career to you. What do you do with the rest of the days, the mundane ones where you don't change the world? This particular day had mostly been wasted on television and social media. I'd played with my cat and snacked. I'd gone to the doctor, then walked around Manhattan aimlessly for a couple of hours before eating that okonomiyaki and meeting up with a group of friends. How had that made anyone's life better? How had I proved my worth, my right to be here? But, I recalled, I had made my friends laugh a little. That was something. Was it enough? For this stupid journal, probably. I wrote it down. I had a productive work call. I made a bad borscht, but I made it. I sat there for a few minutes, drawing a blank. What else? Earlier in the day, I'd had to poop in a cup for my doctor. I had done an astonishingly neat job of it! Now *that* was worth some praise.

Well, I thought after I was done, *that wasn't so painful.*

I diligently filled out the notebook every day for weeks. It was always easier to come up with the joy I'd received than the joy I'd provided. At first, I thought the tiny things I'd accomplished were cop-outs or cheats. A coffee I bought someone. A card I sent.

But after a couple of weeks of listing things I was grateful for, I came to see that the little things were everything. The little things were what I held on to at the end of the day. Single jokes that gave me the giggles. A beautiful flower arrangement, viewed through the window of a café. The fact that my cat came to

cuddle me when she saw I was sad. These things gave me hope, pleasure, solace. Together, they added up to a fulfilling life.

If a simple flower arrangement could make this world just a little more bearable, then perhaps my own small actions meant more than I was giving them credit for. Maybe when I made dinner, or listened to a friend rant, or complimented a woman on her incredible garden, I was helping make this world survivable for others. Perhaps that evening, when tallying up their own wins and losses for the day, someone would think of something I'd done and smile.

And my silly little sticker-filled gratitude journal kept its initial purpose—forcing me to witness the good along with the bad. I noted in my journal that Mark or Jon texted me just to see how I was. Would they do that for someone they didn't care about? I noted how tight someone hugged me hello. When Jimmy sent me a meme, I didn't just laugh at it; I noted how it made me feel special knowing that when he saw something that made him laugh, he was reminded of me. Everywhere was evidence of myriad magic.

These acts of generosity kept staying with me. Kept filling the void.

Like with food—like that one miraculous Pret chicken parmesan wrap—when you take the time to savor the good, you simply need less of it. An ancient idea, but it was never too late to relearn it. As Melody Beattie said, "Gratitude turns what we have into enough."

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Gratitude lifted my baseline mood up from being constantly seared by the pain of existence to living a largely satisfying life. Joy returned for the first time in a long time. I laughed easily, enjoyed the company of friends, hated myself less. I felt mostly like I had before my recent meltdown…effective, happyish. I took a couple of freelance editing gigs to get back into the game with work, and the experience was fulfilling. But all this new pleasure was still delicate. It was not robust enough to battle the power of time travel.

I could be grounded and grateful as hell. I could meditate for an hour. But if, after I got off my cushion, I walked into the living room and saw Joey angrily break a pencil in half, I would still burst into tears. If I ran into my former co-workers at a party and had a stilted conversation with them about my boss's newest victims, there I was—my hair gathered in my mother's fist. I'd spend the

next two hours jittery, afraid, transported back into my childhood, where unfortunately there was not much to be grateful for at all.

I could breathe and count colors to get myself out of that terrified state. But grounding and gratitude were palliative care versus curative care. I was still treating the symptoms without treating the source, and I would never truly be healed unless I confronted it. Now that I had stabilized the present, it was time for me to dive back into the past.

PART III

CHAPTER 23

Here is what I remember about San Jose.

Our parents had other names. In mixed company, we might call them mom and dad. But when those people left, our fathers became appa or baba or papá, our mothers umma or mama or maan. Our parents washed and reused our Ziploc bags and takeout containers and put their yarn in cookie tins. They watched *Home Improvement* and Chinese soap operas and Bollywood films while darning holes in our jeans with cloth left over from the dresses we outgrew. Our parents didn't talk much to our friends, but our friends didn't mind because they'd be occupied eating our mothers' big trays of pancit and lumpia, or Burmese pancakes, or phở with chả lụa, or fluffy taro buns and Yan Yan. Our parents didn't know what butternut squash was, or Walter Benjamin, or hegemony, or the difference between Bush and Gore because neither seemed particularly like a fascist or a communist, so whatever. The entire point of America was that you didn't always have to understand; the system could be trusted to function on its own.

Ours was a city of immigrants. None of our parents were born here, and many of us weren't, either. They all touched down at SFO and drove forty-five minutes south, past the It's-It Ice Cream factory off the 101, until they reached San Jose. They took the exit and saw strip malls with towering block-lettered signs for mercados and fish-fronted Asian supermarkets. *Like home,* our parents thought. With the windows down, they smelled flowers in the warm air. San Jose is almost never cold. This area used to be called "The Valley of Heart's Delight," because until the 1960s, most of our nation's flowers and fruit grew abundantly

here, a veritable Eden. *Like home, but better,* our parents told themselves. We saw it as suburbia. They saw it as paradise.

All of our parents had accents, and some of us did, too, but none of us could hear them. When I was a teenager, the headlines read SAN JOSE BECOMES MAJORITY MINORITY CITY. If you're growing up in it, *majority minority* seems like a nonsensical term, a paradoxical way of saying, "This is not how you are supposed to exist." But exist we did.

As we got older, we came to resent that the census lumped us all together as *Asians* or *Hispanics,* and we chafed at the stereotypes that diffused us into simplified cartoons of ourselves. But when we were young, we the minority majority *did* consider ourselves a singular unit. We came to experience our respective cultures with such regularity that that which was strange became normal to us.

We knew to take off our shoes before we barged into our friends' houses to watch *Power Rangers.* The smell of their homes, always a surprise the first time, soon became familiar: curry, incense, stale rice, al pastor. We understood not to ask what one another's fathers did because nobody knew, just that they put on a tie and drove to Silicon Valley every morning to do something vaguely techy. We knew that Indians and Filipinos were the best dancers because of their weddings and cotillions. At the Indian weddings, we hopped around and pretended to screw in lightbulbs until it felt as if all the gulab jamun was going to come back up, and at the Filipino cotillions for our friends' big sisters, we line-danced with the *lolas,* who always knew every turn and dip. We ate with joy and curiosity whatever our friends' mothers put in front of us and teased the few white kids mercilessly when they wouldn't, waving cracked balut under their noses and shrieking with laughter when they gagged. We knew that Filipinos always had good streetwear from 555 Soul; the white girls and hot Viets could hook us up with discounts at Abercrombie; Taiwanese girls went home for the summer and brought back outfits with bows and lace in odd places; and aZn and Mexican girls knew how to apply impeccable eye and lip liner.

But we also knew that as this unit, we were allowed to borrow from one another: You could bring chana masala to school even if you weren't Indian; I was vice president of the Japanese Club. Sometimes we wore each other's lip gloss or denim miniskirts at homecoming, but we always knew to put on a long

skirt when we left the house and change in the bathroom once we got to school. Some of us drank, some of us smoked, a few of us had sex. None of us snitched. We knew what the consequences would be.

Now, let's be fair. Some parents thought their kids could do no wrong. Gerald Chan's mother wouldn't hear a bad word about him. She thought he was God's gift to mankind, and Gerald agreed. Alice Ngo's and Betty Chin's mothers would bring them fresh, lovingly made meals every day at lunch. Lucy Tran and her crew went on massive parent-sponsored shopping sprees at the Great Mall on weekends.

And plenty of parents were reasonably easy to please. When their children failed, these parents were merely disappointed. Jill Cheng said her parents never hit her. They only shook their heads and were sad if she brought home a bad grade and then encouraged her to do better next time, just like the dad on *Full House*. Leslie Nguyen's mom grounded her sometimes, and once I saw her yell at Leslie for not making curfew, but that was about as bad as it got.

But in general, our parents were not taught to take slow breaths when they were upset to calm themselves down. And many of our parents were not taught to spare the rod.

The way I remember it, the school entered into a state of anxious panic when grades were dispensed. You'd see kids here and there curled up in the fetal position in the hall, their heads between their knees, sometimes sitting still and sometimes with their shoulders shaking. You might see a girl with her face in her hands, all of her friends clustered around, rubbing her back. These were the kids who got the B-pluses or worse.

At a senior-year hotel party, the cops came. There were forty of us drinking a single bottle of Hpnotiq and smoking stolen cigarettes. When I heard their adult voices, I made a break for it and somehow slipped under the low bed. As the police decided what to do with us, the girls sitting on the mattress above me began to cry. One of them shout-whispered between sobs, "My mom's going to send me back to Vietnam!"

And then there was the group of us that used to huddle near the portable classrooms at the back of the school. Out on the edge of the blacktop was a large, pale-yellow shipping container, and that's where the sad kids hung out. Every day we would summon our smoldering angst and hurl a bit of our lunch at

the container. We hoped that by the end of the year, it'd be a Jackson Pollock abstract masterpiece of chocolate milk, spaghetti sauce, and Mountain Dew stains. And then we played our favorite game: Who Had It Worse?

I remember one boy's mother burned him with cigarette butts. Another's locked him out of his bedroom and forced him to sleep on the couch because, she said, he was so worthless that he didn't deserve his own space. My close friend's mother chased her around the house slapping her and telling her she was nothing, and she once woke her daughter up by choking her. I talked about the welts on my legs, about how I'd curled into a ball when I was thrown down the stairs. We would debate the logistics of our abuse: Was it better to be whipped with something narrow like a cane or be hit by something large and solid? Was a welt more painful, long-term, than a bruise? Was it more demoralizing to be belittled or simply ignored?

My other close friend's father once got so angry that he kicked down his bedroom door in the middle of the night. Just splintered it off its hinges. Then he attacked. My friend came to school with bruises all over his body the next day, and that was the only time I considered telling. I told him I was going to call the cops. I told him this wasn't okay. He begged me not to.

"It'll ruin my mother. She can't divorce him," he said. "Please, don't. It'll ruin our whole family."

"But she can't help you," I told him. "I don't care about protecting her. I care about protecting you."

"Protecting her *is* protecting me," he said.

I kept silent. Like all the rest of us, I didn't tell.

Our parents knew what it was to be hungry. Our parents were refugees. There were pages of Nguyens in our yearbooks and a wave of Trans. Their parents remembered living in camps. Sometimes they spent all of their money as soon as they got it because they remembered what it was like to lose your life's savings in a month, in a week, in a moment, when a dictator rises or a bomb falls.

Our parents were alone. Many of them had brothers or sisters or parents back home whom they rarely saw, and so they had to take care of their children without the support of the large families that many of the white kids had. Some of our parents were undocumented. Even though they should have felt power

and safety in numbers—in our majority minority status—they never forgot they were guests here.

Our parents did not talk about loss. Sometimes, once in a long while, they might offhandedly mention soldiers or a violent father, but nobody ever said anything about what must have happened: abuse, sexual assault, the traumas of poverty and war. But even at a young age, without understanding what these things were, we sensed them as we kicked our way through the currents of our day. We could feel it looming somewhere, large and dark beneath everything: our parents' pain.

So when the hands came, we offered our cheeks. We offered ourselves as conduits for their anguish because they had suffered so we wouldn't, so we could watch Saturday morning cartoons and eat sugary cereal and go to college and trust the government and never go hungry. We excused all of it, absorbed the slaps and the burns and the canings and converted them into perfect report cards to wipe away our parents' brutal pasts. We did the work, as they like to say now. We got into good colleges, got internships and postdocs, and eventually moved on to successful, rewarding careers in big cities that paid us enough money to buy high-end audio gear for our modernist apartments. We achieved the American Dream because we had no other choice.

—

For a long time, this was the story I remembered about my childhood. I told myself it was not worth dwelling on. It was what it was. It was the price you paid for growing up in the Valley of Heart's Delight. My story was the same as everyone else's story.

But now, I wasn't so sure.

CHAPTER 24

I'm blasting "Work" by Jimmy Eat World on the 280 from SFO to San Jose—a tribute to the last version of myself to embark on this drive. I listened to this song every day on my way to high school—an anticipatory anthem to escape. *Can we take a ride? Get out of this place while we still have time?*

I allow myself a moment to feel pride for that teenage self, the way she harvested that emo-pop angst into a rocket that blasted her out of this goddamn town. Then I shiver a bit, wondering what she would think of me now, driving back of my own volition, still sporting blue hair and combat boots fifteen years later.

—

I've come back to San Jose to fact-check my abuse.

I've come back because ever since my diagnosis, I've been questioning the reliability of memory.

The veil of my dissociation, I know now, has done some damage to my memories of this place. Some of my recent research has stoked my skepticism. In some studies, scientists implanted false memories in their subjects: They made people believe they'd gotten lost in the mall when they were children,[1] or that there was footage of the crash of United 93 on September 11, though no such footage exists.[2] Our memories are fallible, scientists say, and there is evidence that our brains are constantly rewriting them; in fact, the very act of conjuring or relaying a memory can change it in our brains.[3] In the years since

I'd left San Jose, I'd frequently brought up violent memories of myself and the children in this community being abused. How much of that was truth—and how much of it had been the equivalent of running a picture through a copier too many times, degrading my memories until they became a grainy blur?

Perhaps everything I'd perceived during my childhood in San Jose was magnified through the skewed fun-house lens of my trauma. Were my memories a figment of my overactive, fear-focused imagination? Had everyone else been crying over unrequited crushes and not grades? Had everyone been as on edge as I remembered? It's true that some of my closest friends had abusive parents. But had I been self-selecting in the people I'd chosen to love? Had I only been drawn to the few who were hurt, while overlooking the rest of my class?

Since reading about damaged PTSD brains, I'd been losing faith in my own mind. Every time I tried to touch a memory, doubts and questions multiplied around it, preventing me from being able to see my own past.

How much of my own experience had I projected onto other children because it was happening to me, because I hadn't wanted to be alone? How much of my understanding of immigrant trauma was fabricated by a narrow reading of my own experience? And was this understanding, in fact, racist? I was casting abuse and bad parenting as a central theme across my community—was this perpetuating a negative, unhealthy stereotype?

So this is why I am back: I want to know whether my trauma is personal or communal. I want to know the truth so I can fully understand my community of origin. To understand how place shaped me.

And I want to know the truth because I can't fact-check what happened within the walls of my childhood home. The only witnesses, my parents, are unreliable, and over the years they have denied nearly all of the violence they inflicted on me. But if my memories about our communal trauma are accurate, then that would validate the memories surrounding my personal trauma. It would validate my withered brain matter. My very sanity.

—

I don't know if anyone in San Jose trusts me enough to tell me the truth because I have purposefully severed my ties to them for fifteen years.

I ignored friend requests from everyone I went to high school with. I

pretended I didn't see them if they walked past me on my college campus. I deleted their DMs. I treated everyone from San Jose like that box of VHS tapes I hid at the top of my closet—part of a past I didn't want to touch. But now I have to ask for their help.

I make a generic, friendly-sounding Facebook post explaining that I'm writing a book about trauma. I acknowledge that I've been a victim of abuse and would love to talk to other San Jose natives about their experiences anonymously. I add a peppy call to action at the end: "Let's end the cycle of trauma and abuse together!" Then I send awkward "Heeey how are you?" messages to the most popular old acquaintances I can think of, asking if they might share my post around. They all graciously do, and I wait. For one week. Two. Not a single person responds. I actually hope to God that this is because everyone from high school remembers me as a crazy Wiccan slut and prefers to avoid me at all costs. That would be a thousand times better than the other option—that nobody else has a story to tell. That I am the only one.

In the end, I decide the only way to find out the truth is to go back to the scene of the crime. I rent a car and a motel room and hit up a bunch of my old high school teachers to schedule visits. And a decade and a half after I left, I finally drive back to the beginning, and I turn the stereo up. *It just takes some time. Little girl, you're in the middle of the ride. Everything, everything will be just fine.*

—

On the 280, I count down the exits as I drive past San Bruno and Burlingame and Redwood City, winding through the hills between San Francisco and San Jose. I made this drive a bunch of times when my father and I went to the Haight to buy cheap earrings and goth comics. I remember gazing out the window into a banal expanse of rolling hills, wavy green fields that went on forever and lulled me into a stupor.

But these hills aren't how I remember them.

What's happening outside my window now is not sleepy. It is *riotous* in its beauty: craggy baby mountains with high, chiseled peaks and greenery-filled canyons. These mountains are covered with lush fields of grass and clusters of trees—plump bulbs of live oak and slivers of gray pine and spicy eucalyptus that

I can smell through the rolled-up windows. Even the weeds are gorgeous: fields of tall, yellow wood sorrel, bowing in waves. The idyllic green-blue expanse goes on for miles, dipping and twisting, everywhere curvaceous and lovely.

It all has to be a trick.

"This wasn't here before," I say aloud.

Silicon Valley had gotten exponentially richer since I'd been here last. Probably all the tech companies had chipped in to create some new natural landmark. But how could you possibly move this much dirt? Can you even build a gorge? I guess you can, because they must have.

It took ten minutes of me gawping stupidly at canyons and cows to come to the obvious and devastating conclusion: It had always been this beautiful. I'd just missed it.

I had only ever seen San Jose as a place of hurt. A place where people were cruel for no reason. When people asked me if it was worth visiting, I scrunched my nose and told them it was a wasteland—that everyone here was devoid of substance or truth and all you could do with your one wild and precious life was spend it walking laps around an outdoor mall.

But that wasn't true, was it?

There is beauty—astonishing beauty. It's not just the hills. The neighborhoods I drive through are filled with magnolias and honeysuckle and shaded by swaying palm trees. There is so much citrus. Abundant globes of oranges and grapefruits and lemons adorn every street.

Wolfe. Bascom. I get off on the Story Road exit, pull into the parking lot of King Eggroll, push my face into the steering wheel, and start sobbing—huge, heaving gasps. I've only just gotten here, and already it's clear how much my dissociation has stolen from me.

I walk through the strip mall to calm down. The storefronts *smell* familiar, of eraser rubber and medicinal herbs. The counters are loaded with cheap foam trays of bánh cuốn and bánh da lợn, and I want to buy all I can carry. There is so much goodness. An abundance of it. The Valley of Heart's Delight. And I'd lost it all.

—

There are two ways this loss could have happened. Option one was that I had

ignored all this beauty because I had been sequestered in the tiny, dark world of my family dysfunction. I'd been so overwhelmed with the responsibility of keeping myself and my parents alive that I didn't have many moments to look out the window and appreciate the hummingbirds and clover.

Option two was that I *had* lived it. My skin had always been a deep copper tan when I had lived here. I'd laughed with friends in fields year-round and slipped the pointy ends of foxtails into the cushy heads of pineapple weed to make little darts. I'd skateboarded down these enormous, wide sidewalks with the sun on my face. I'd gone cherry-picking with Auntie in the summertime; she'd lifted me up with her arms and I'd taken the sweet, dark fruits straight from the branches into my mouth. I'd held all the nourishment and warmth of this place, but my memories of Eden were wiped. In these blurry intervening years, my entire childhood had disappeared along with the family photos I destroyed when my mother left.

I had not only thrown out the bad.

I had thrown out all the good.

—

This is heartbreaking.

I walk back to my rental car and shut the car door before letting the grief hit me. The steering wheel carves a dent into my forehead as the tears keep coming. The loss is enormous. An entire childhood's worth of happiness. The bedrock for a happy life. A smart girl with a gap-toothed grin who conversed easily with strangers at the checkout aisle. Wiped. What a waste. Outside, the birds sing. It is a perfectly warm day, the sky a shameless expanse of blue.

The doubt bloats heavily in my stomach. If I could twist mountains into hills, then what else did my traumatized brain dissolve?

Can a mentally ill woman ever be trusted with her own story?

—

I take a breath and start the car up again, cruising toward Piedmont Hills High School. A few blocks away, I watch at a light as a group of middle schoolers walks by, shuffling slowly under the weight of their oversize backpacks, extra-

large hoodies obscuring their eyes. Every single one is Asian. It's just 1:30 P.M. Have they gotten out early? And then, out of a corner of my eye—is that Carter Wu? I blink. It isn't, obviously. Carter Wu would be approaching his mid-thirties right now. But there he is, crossing the street, his bottom lip jutted out into his signature angsty pout.

I have never been prone to flashbacks or seeing ghosts. But then again, I have not been here in a long time. And the flashbacks are the entire point. They are what I came for.

—

The large parking lot in front of PHHS is covered now with elegant solar-harvesting canopies, which I resent. I had gone to a shabby, underfunded public school. I enjoyed that narrative. How dare they challenge that by making it nice all of a sudden?

The common areas are abandoned; everyone is in class. Like San Jose itself, the campus feels like a sprawl that has slowly gotten wider over time, new buildings and portables added to the original building until it seems more like a dilapidated college than a high school. The biggest hallway is covered with butcher-paper posters just like the ones we used to make. There are some new clubs now, though. The Tea Club, which has a boba fundraiser on Thursday. The Military Club. I pause by a large series of photographs taped to the wall. It features the kids in student government—the class presidents and secretaries and publicists and treasurers. The elite ruling class of the school. I count. There are forty Nguyens and Chans and Enriquezes. Not one single white kid. All of them have black hair; clear, golden skin; and massive, confident smiles.

Near the art room, I see the ghost of myself. She is wearing Weezer glasses, an *Invader Zim* T-shirt, and cargo pants, and as she passes through me, scowling, she imbues me with her resentment. In my imagination, the quad fills up with the shadows of the jocks, the skaters, the popular Viets, the FOBs, the preps, the anime geeks, the cholas, the aZn cholas, all of them threatening, none of them my friends. This isn't magic, right? I mean, some philosophers believe that the past, present, and future exist simultaneously. That everything that ever happened before is just a dimension away, occurring just beyond the grasp of our

feeble human brains. And so we careen foolishly and helplessly toward catastrophe, like lemmings over a cliff that we don't know is there.

The science wing has no ghosts because it is brand-new. I poke my head through the door marked 2A and see a classroom full of students. Mr. Dries waves me in. "Don't worry about them. Class is almost over."

I step inside. The children all ignore me. The situation is even more extreme than when I had attended: Every kid is Asian, except for one blond boy. And of course, Mr. Dries. "How about this, huh?" he says gleefully, ripping open Amazon packages of camera equipment for his upcoming vacation. "I have skylights and open cabinets now. Remember those skanky portables? It's not a portable if you're there for ten years."

Mr. Dries has aged a bit over the years, but he *feels* the same. He has the look of a man who must have been bullied in high school but the confidence of a man who came out the other side not giving a single fuck. He has the student body's total respect because he is very funny, his wife is very hot, and he has all twenty amino acids tattooed on his arm. On our first day of AP Bio, he told us all, "Yeah, I cuss in here. You can cuss in here. I don't give a shit. It's not getting in the way of you learning science. If you go tell your parents, 'Wah, wah, my teacher says bad words,' nobody will care, certainly not me, so you might as well not fucking bother." This made me trust him immediately.

When the bell rings and the kids clear out for the day, I nervously swivel on a metal lab stool. "Um, so first of all, do you remember me?" I ask.

"Yeah, of course I do."

"It's okay if you don't. I only had you for like three weeks before switching out to physics. But if you do…what do you remember about me?"

He cocks his head to one side. "You were bright," he says. "You seemed like you had your shit together. I don't know much more than that."

"Okay." I take a breath. "I don't know if you knew through the grapevine that I lived by myself. That my parents weren't around when I was a kid—my mom left the summer I came here, and my dad pretty much left my junior year. I don't know if the kids talked about the ragers I used to have at my house and stuff."

"No, I didn't know about that. That's terrible. God, what awful parents," he says, which I admire, because few people have the balls to acknowledge

something so cruel and so true. “No, I had no idea. You hid it really well when you were here.”

“I remember talking to a few other kids, a couple of my best friends specifically, who went through similar experiences. Like, I was led to believe that it was common when I went to school here. As a teacher here, have you encountered a lot of kids who were abused?”

I expect Mr. Dries to spend some time digesting the question, but he looks at a space somewhere to the left of me and launches directly into an answer. “I had one girl. I knew her dad was beating her up, so I reported him to CPS (Child Protective Services). She was this tiny Vietnamese girl, and her dad was barely bigger than her. This tiny man, beating his tiny daughter. So she got put in a group home, where a bunch of drug-addicted girls stole her shit and bullied her.” His voice gets flat. “That made things better.”

Then he leans back in his chair and his eyes find mine. “But no. Look. The faces of my AP kids are the same every year. I have one white kid in my three AP Bio classes. And he’s super white! He’s from Finland! I get maybe two Indians and Middle Easterners. Once I had three; that was a banner year. And in my sixteen years of teaching AP Bio, I’ve had three or four Black kids. But Asians? They’re unlimited. They’re asymptotically approaching infinity. To casual observers, they have the perfect life. They have everything the poor kids don’t. They’re sitting there with $1,000 iPhones. Typing into their MacBooks. But my kids are overly stressed. They’re overwhelmed, taking four AP classes every quarter so their moms can go to their tennis clubs and say, ‘Oh, we got into Berkeley and Harvard!’ So my kids are often up all night.”

“But why?” I ask.

“The motivation is tiger moms!” he says, with utmost confidence. “The stress of not meeting their elders’ expectations in a culture where they have to please their elders is real.”

I look down at my notebook as I write furiously, trying to keep my expression neutral. This logic seems to have a Panda Express kind of simplicity to it—the hollow smell of an exoticized half-truth.

I did not think much about race growing up. But in the intervening years, I’ve realized there was something strange about the ratio of students of color to white teachers.

In the 1960s, the only Asians at Piedmont Hills were the children of Japanese farm workers who harvested flowers and citrus and cherries. In the early ’70s, the first large wave of Vietnamese refugees arrived. This wave was composed of elites—high-powered doctors and politicians who had the economic means to escape. At first, the PHHS community loved the new Vietnamese students because they came with expensive educations and intellectual parents. They had astounding test scores and brought academic standards way up. Then in the ’80s, the boat people arrived, poor and desperate refugees who escaped with the clothes on their backs and spent time in camps in Malaysia and the Philippines. About 880,000 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in the United States between 1975 and 1997,[4] many of them at Camp Pendleton in California. More than 180,000 Vietnamese people now live in San Jose—the biggest Vietnamese population in any city outside Vietnam.

In the ’90s, a massive population of Chinese and South Asian immigrants bearing H-1B work visas arrived to take jobs as engineers in blossoming Silicon Valley. By 1998, a third of all scientists and engineers in the area had come from somewhere else. Around this time there was also a shortage of teachers and nurses in America, and so came the wave of Filipinos who emigrated to help care for our young and infirm.

Altogether, Asians made up more than half of our school. About 30 percent of students were Latinx, and a small minority of Black and white students filled out the pack. But most of our teachers were white. In the fifth grade, when we were learning about the Pilgrims, we celebrated Colonial Day by dressing as American colonists and writing with feathers and ink. In hindsight, it seems very odd that the teachers could look out beamingly onto a classroom full of Asian and Latinx faces dressed as European colonizers in lace bonnets and vests and not see a problem. There was a different lesson that could have been taught about forced assimilation—about Native American boarding schools, “Kill the Indian, and save the man,” Chinese men in San Francisco who were forced to cut their queues. But instead, they taught us to cross-stitch.

Surely, I think, the racial divide might blind white teachers like Mr. Dries to our plight—immigrants can be very good at blending into the scenery. Then again, Mr. Dries is the teacher I would have gone to if I were the kind of girl who went to teachers for help. Regardless of race or background, Mr. Dries has

always come off as someone who would give a shit. Who would figure it out, overcome obstacles of misunderstanding, and knock down doors to save you. So the fact that only one child in more than sixteen years of teaching had come to him with this struggle seems…strange. *Wrong,* even.

But of course, it's only strange if the school existed as I remembered it—as a breeding ground for immigrant intergenerational trauma. It's not so strange if his version is reality, if he teaches at a competitive school where parents merely have the pushy, helicopter-hovering, model-minority anxiety that comes with wanting to maintain one's privilege.

"This isn't like other schools in the district," Mr. Dries says. "Those kids are in gangs, they're homeless; in every class you've got some girl being sexually abused by someone at home. I can't imagine what it'd be like to teach there. These kids, they're coming from a different background."

I talk to multiple teachers who all agree with Mr. Dries. They show me photos on their walls of students who went on to be radiologists and pediatricians. Yes, there was that one genius kid who got into MIT, struggled to find a job, then returned to PHHS in the middle of the night, tied weights on himself, and slipped under the swimming pool cover. The freshman swim team found his body early the next morning. One teacher says he had a student who was suicidal because, in her own words, "I just can't make my essay sparkle." He repeats this disbelievingly. "I can't make my essay *sparkle*!" He says that this confession caused him to stay awake at night. He talked to his wife about it; he couldn't sleep. It felt beyond his scope as a teacher. What could he possibly do to counter a problem like that? But that's one person here, another there. Anomalies.

And I finally speak to one beloved Asian teacher who cautions me: "Be careful when you use the word *abusive*. 'Abusive' can be very misleading. If you shout at somebody, you're being abusive because you're too loud, right? I wouldn't use that word."

At some point during each of these conversations, I feel bad about my line of questioning. All of these teachers got into this profession because they wanted to nurture children as best they can. They had welcomed me into their busy day, hoping for yet another heartwarming success story, and instead they got a bitter ghost hurling accusations and questioning how well they'd truly observed their

students' pain, interrogating the efficacy of their life's purpose. Eventually, they all ask, "But you turned out okay, didn't you?" So I put one of those confident smiles on my face and list my accomplishments, and with each progressive accolade, I can see the furrows in their brows melt away a bit more with relief.

But that night, I feel anything but accomplished. I lie awake in my cheap motel room, cursing my fragile mind. If I misremembered my community's trauma, maybe I really was misremembering my own.

CHAPTER 25

The next morning, I drive toward my childhood home. The street I lived on is too wide, I think, acres and acres of space. It's only when I park that I realize it's because there are no other cars parked in the street. They are all safely housed in spacious garages. There are no people on this street, either. The houses are of varied architectural styles, with well-kept but individualistic gardens, so it feels suburban yet distinctive. Still, the lack of humans gives the street an eerie air.

There are so many details about this house that I never could have named but are intimately familiar. I could never have told you what the steps leading to our house were made of, but now that I rub the gray-and-white pebbles with my fingers, I have memories of making my Playmobil figurines dance down these steps and huddle in the grass.

I ring the doorbell. A small, older Vietnamese woman comes to the door and cracks it, eyeing me suspiciously. "Hi," I say. "Um, I know it's kind of weird, but this is the house I grew up in, and I was wondering if I could come inside and take a look?"

I don't think she knows enough English to respond, but she knows enough to understand, and a bright smile spreads across her face. She throws open the door and opens her arms wide in welcome. The first thing I notice is the dark mahogany steps and floors. "Oh my God," I say. "You took out the carpet." This apparently is enough to confirm that I am a former inhabitant, because in an absurd act of trust, she leaves me to wander the house by myself and waddles to

the kitchen to rejoin another elderly woman who is busy plucking the stems off vegetables from a gigantic plastic basket.

I know the layout of this house instinctively—I could never forget it—but being inside it is another thing entirely. The house's irrational spaciousness stretches in all directions away from me, far too much room for three people. I have been confined by itty-bitty city apartments for many years now, but I feel my face get hot as I move from one room to another, an embarrassment of square footage.

It looks different, of course, full of someone else's stuff and new curtains and a coat of white paint. The office is now a bedroom, my bedroom is now an office. But the bones are solid. The handles on the doors are the same.

I wanted this place to shock me with hidden memories, for the pebbles and the rooms and the railings on the staircase to transport me into clarifying tragedies. And memories do surface, but none of them are surprising. They're the same old smooth stones that I've been rubbing in my pocket for years. Yes, this is where my mother cradled me that night when we thought my dad was going to kill us. Yes, this is the staircase she threw me down, and here is the staircase I slapped my father on, next to the penguins, and here is the den where I was beaten severely for it. Maybe if I spent an hour in each room, absorbing every angle, I would be transformed. But I know the nice old lady is waiting for me in her kitchen and I do not want to take advantage of her kindness, lingering too long, waiting for the specters to find me. Instead, I briefly stand in each room, making a note of whatever memory arises.

And then I walk into the backyard. There it is, the comforting hum of the pool filter, the gray cement bricks that wall a part of the pool off for a hot tub, the deck with the planter where we grew chilis, the lemon tree. A feeling comes over my whole body, and it takes a minute for me to register what exactly it is. With some level of wonder, I'm stunned by something unfamiliar: Nostalgia. Joy.

When I imagined this pool in my memory, I thought of it as the place where I almost drowned when I was four years old. The place where my mother forced me to do laps so my life would never be threatened in that way again. No matter how I flailed or kicked, there was always something wrong: "Straighten your

legs. I said *straight!* Why are you so bad at this? Cup your hands. Straighten your back. Now you've straightened your back, you're bending your legs!"

But now that I'm here, that memory is absent. That stressful feeling is gone. The sun keeps shining, the chlorine smells chemical-sweet, the lemon tree is fragrant and lovely. I can't pick out a specific happy memory. I know we had pool noodles and I dove for quarters and my parents passed plates of food from the grill into the kitchen window, but none of those things feels particularly vivid or alive. I just have a feeling. I was happy here. That acknowledgment feels much sadder than any of the echoed memories of abuse.

The kind old lady gives me a businesslike nod as I thank her on my way out—I have certainly taken my time, despite trying my best to rush. After I leave, I go for a walk in the park just across the street from my house, a forty-acre, lawn-covered expanse filled with winding walking paths and tennis courts and play structures. The cement is inlaid with patterns of leaves. A girl films herself doing TikTok dances with multiple Hula-Hoops.

In the universe my teachers painted, this community suffers mainly from a parental overemphasis on mathematics and an overprotectiveness that limits exposure to teen drinking. In this universe, this community is a paragon of immigrant success, privilege, and happiness. It is a miraculous place, a place where immigrant trauma comes to disappear. It is a place where death and war and rape are vanished by good grades and white-collar jobs and clean, two-story homes with pools. And I think, *Maybe it wasn't so bad.*

The teachers are right after all, I think. There are so many communities in this country—Black, Indigenous, undocumented, poor—truly ravaged by their trauma, suffering from hunger, addiction, and violence on a grand scale. Compared to that, maybe I was making mountains out of molehills. We'd had the resources. Weren't they enough?

—

On the way back to my rental car, I catch a glimpse of the house across the street from mine. The names come back to me clear as day, but here I'll call them Fred and Barbara. And one last memory returns. It's not an unfamiliar memory, but it occurs to me that this memory was the one and only time the veneer of our

beautiful house was shattered. When its pretty exterior could not hold what was inside.

I don't remember where the fight began, only that at one point, my mother pulled me across the orange shag carpet by my hair.

"I hate you. Stop crying," she said when she let go. I tried to appear stronger. Instead of letting my face melt into helplessness, I pulled it into a tight frown.

"Oh, now *you're* mad at *me*?"

"No, I was just trying to make my face less sad," I protested, but she didn't hear me because she was already shrieking over me: "HOW DARE YOU LOOK AT ME THAT WAY?"

Then something was pounding. The doorbell rang, once, twice. We both stopped, stunned, and the silence was somehow louder than all of our hollering. Neither of us could look at the other. Both of us just stared at the front door, as if we were shocked that it existed. It had always seemed that whenever we engaged in this dance, there was no door. There was no outside world. Our home was our entire universe. I was all my mother had. My mother was everything I knew. But now the illusion was broken, and we didn't know what came next. She slowly unraveled herself and tiptoed to the door. She looked through the peephole. "I can hear you in there!" a voice yelled. "Open up, or I'll call the cops!"

She opened the door, and I stood behind her, trembling. Our neighbor Barbara stood there with her gray hair piled on top of her head. She and her husband, Fred, were a couple of friendly retirees with no children. Sometimes Fred struck up conversations with my dad about their roses or their cars, and once, we went over for dinner. But Barbara looked very different today.

"I hear what you're doing to that child," Barbara said. "I sit in my home across from you and I have to listen to you screaming at her, day after day…and I just…I can't do it anymore. I won't." Barbara straightened and announced: "I'm going to call the cops on you, because you are torturing her."

There was a moment of shocked silence, but only a moment. "You're spying on us?" my mother quickly retorted, expertly twisting Barbara's barbs back at her. "What are you doing, sneaking up to our door to eavesdrop on us? Go ahead! Call the cops. We'll tell them that you're trespassing. We have the right to our privacy."

“I don’t have to spy,” Barbara scoffed. “I can hear you screaming from my living room. But it’s true, when I come closer, I can hear her begging. I can hear her crying and saying, ‘Please.’ My God, she has to *beg*. A *child.* How could you?” Barbara looked at me with sadness and kindness and an indignant jut to her chin. She thought she was my defender. She was wrong.

I pushed past my mother to Barbara. “Please don’t do that,” I said. “Thank you so much for caring and for coming here trying to help me. But I don’t want the police to take me. I want to live here, and I love my mommy and daddy. She sometimes yells at me, that’s true. But she just is helping me so I know better next time. I can be an awful child, you just don’t see it.”

Barbara’s eyes were full of pity. “It’s not okay that this is happening to you, sweetheart. I’m sorry, but I have to do something.”

My panic response kicked in. I knew what I had to do. “Please, Barbara, please,” I said. My mother stepped back. She knew I had it from there.

I started to cry, gently at first, and then so hard that I was hiccuping. I could not live without them. I was genuinely terrified, but I was also good at conveying my terror with the necessary sense of drama. Barbara was right. I did beg all the time. I’d gotten good at it.

I collapsed to the floor and crawled toward Barbara. I clasped my hands in prayer and pawed at her ankles in her shoes.

“It’s okay, sweetie. Please get up,” Barbara said, gently. Her face was pained. She looked at me on the floor, then at my mother, then back again. She recognized she was out of her depth.

“Are you going to call the police still?”

She hesitated.

“I don’t want to hear you doing this to her anymore,” Barbara said to my mother. “Or I will. I won’t this time. But do you see what you’re doing? This is *wrong*.” I couldn’t see her face because I was still on the floor, my shoulders shuddering. But her voice was quiet, overeager; she wanted this to sink in. Poor Barbara. “You’re damaging her. She’s going to be damaged for life.”

My mother didn’t say anything. The only sound was me sniffling. There was a long pause before Barbara walked away. I watched her sandals retreat past our opulent jasmine and bougainvillea before my mother shut the door.

My mother waited for half a minute, long enough for Barbara to be gone, then cussed her out under her breath. “A busybody, that’s who she is. Getting into other people’s business. Who is she to judge other people?”

When my father came home that evening, my mother told him a neutered version of the story. She said that Barbara came over to complain about how loud my mom’s yelling was.

“Can you believe? The house alarm was set off when we were on vacation, and it went on for half a day before Barbara heard it and finally called someone! But then she says she can hear me screaming at this one.” My mother narrowed her eyes at me. “This girl is so much trouble that she forces me to scream at her so loud that the neighbors can hear. That’s how bad she is.”

My dad shook his head and shoved another mouthful of rice into his face. “Why do you have to be like that?” he asked me. “Can’t you just be good to your mother?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I promise I’ll be better.”

—

Judith Herman, the woman who coined the term complex PTSD, wrote: “The abused child…must find a way to preserve hope and meaning. The alternative is utter despair, something no child can bear. To preserve her faith in her parents, she must reject the first and most obvious conclusion that something is terribly wrong with them. She will go to any lengths to construct an explanation for her fate that absolves her parents of all blame and responsibility…. The abuse is either walled off from conscious awareness and memory…or minimized, rationalized, and excused, so that whatever did happen was not really abuse.”[1]

Despite the fact that I *know* what happened to me—that I’ve always known that what happened to me was awful—I keep applying a level of journalistic skepticism to my story as if it were a complete stranger’s. Over and over, I create excuses: Maybe EMDR is bunk, maybe the teachers are right, maybe some level of privilege erases abuse. But this narrative gives me a false sense of control. If it’s all my fault, then I can change it. I can fix it.

But from underneath these shreds of doubt, a new woman punches her way to the surface, someone who has read the data. This whole fucking narrative of all of these Asians settling gently into the American dream is bullshit. The facts

just don’t add up. You have a community of immigrants and refugees who survived extreme violence—but they don’t believe in mental illness, don’t talk about trauma, don’t allow for feelings or failure, and everyone is just fucking *fine*? The worst angst here comes from not being able to make an essay *sparkle*? Come on.

I don’t take a final look at the ridiculous facade of my happy home. Instead, I turn the key in the ignition and head to Starbucks to talk to the person who is my last hope at validation.

CHAPTER 26

I'm early, so I buy a bottle of fizzy water and shred my cuticles. I haven't seen Steve since high school, and the last conversation I remember having with him was in middle school. We were getting ready to board a bus for our school trip, and he'd made me a mix CD with Papa Roach and Staind on it—songs about being alone and nobody understanding.

I'm both relieved and jittery when he comes through the door, and we exchange an awkward handshake. I buy him an enormous coffee. He is much taller than I remember, and he's filled out. His demeanor is not unfriendly, but it's very cool—he doesn't smile too widely, his movements are careful and restrained, one hand on his coffee, the other in his lap.

"So it's been a while, huh?" I ask hammily. We exchange a brief history of our lives. He still lives here, has a girlfriend, has a great job in tech, still keeps in touch with a bunch of kids from high school. I try not to flinch when he lists off the name of a kid who called me a "nazi bitch" because I was a hard-ass in the newsroom.

"So I wanted to talk to you about high school and middle school," I say. "It was really hard for me, because I was an unpopular loser and everything, and I wanted to ask you about your experience."

"That's funny. I don't remember you being that unpopular. It seemed like you were…generally pretty well-liked, I guess. I was definitely a loser, though. But I'm sure part of it was my own problem. I didn't exactly know how to communicate well with others."

“Oh, really? How so?” I ask, and he pauses for a long time before he gives me this odd side-glance.

“Well, I don’t know if you knew this—you probably did—but I had a huge crush on you.”

“Woooow, I definitely didn’t know that!” I laugh asininely, overcompensating for my shock and horror. For the first time in a while, I feel lucky about the all-encompassing nature of talking about trauma so we can move on from the abomination of preteen hormones.

I tell Steve my practiced thirty-second version of the abuse and neglect I’d experienced in childhood; he expresses his condolences and says he didn’t know it was that bad for me. Then I tell him about the previous day, how all of our teachers at PHHS had not known that I, or practically anyone else, had been abused and how they said that our main concern was stress over getting As. “And I guess I just wanted to ask, *is it true*? I could have sworn that I knew so many other kids who were getting hit, too, and I just wanted to run a gut check by you—and I’m so sorry, of course, if I’m getting it wrong.”

Steve laughs bitterly. “Of course the teachers don’t know!” he says, incredulous. “Nobody’s going to tell the teachers what’s happening to them!” I sit up straighter.

“Yes. We were all getting our asses beat,” he spits. “Well, not all of us. But. I know a LOT of people who got their ass beat. Yes. Why do you think we were so stressed about getting all those As in the first place?”

“I KNOW, RIGHT?” I yell at him. “Thank you! That’s what I thought! Thank you!”

“Even the people who look so happy now and have great relationships with their parents on Facebook…they were all getting beat. There are varying degrees, obviously. I got fists and feather dusters. Other people got slippers, chopsticks, small stuff.”

Steve insists that our neighborhood had its fair share of rich kids, but not everyone’s life was cushy; we both remember playing *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater* at our friends’ homes in trailer parks. He himself was a latchkey kid because his parents worked long hours in restaurants.

Steve doesn’t go into all the gory details, but he does tell me that his parents hit him a lot, often because of grades, especially math. We both got beaten by

our parents after we received B-plus grades from the same eighth-grade math teacher. He says he felt anxious all the time, pressured to do well or face their wrath at home. They stopped beating him after he fought back one day when he was thirteen—when he got big enough to scare them. And then, like me, he started failing classes out of spite. His relationship with his parents is still strained sometimes, he says, and when his mom nags at him, he can fly completely off the handle and start screaming at her.

"It wasn't just the Chinese kids. It was kids who were Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Korean…" He lists some names. I am surprised by many of them. One is a boy *I* had a crush on, a popular, brilliant boy who was well-dressed and aloof. Or maybe, I think now, shy. Or introverted because he was dealing with some very hard things.

"Thank you," I keep saying to him. "Thank you, thank you. I knew I wasn't crazy. Thank you." I know we're impossibly far apart—in life, in friendship, and otherwise. He has friends I hate. Our interaction in the coffee shop feels a little blasphemous, a secretive bubble that allows for honesty and plausible deniability. It makes me feel so very close to him.

And, Steve acknowledges, the repercussions from his abuse haven't disappeared magically with time. "I think it's why I work so hard all the time. I'll take on other people's work, I'll do more than I should, because I have this need for acceptance. I need my boss to tell me that I did a good job or I'll have this anxiety—this incompleteness, that no matter how hard I try, I can't hit."

We trade stories of feeling anxious and inferior at work, echoes of what our parents made us believe when we were small. I keep nodding vigorously at everything he says.

Then I say, "I'm surprised you're still pretty tight with your parents. I hold so much resentment."

Steve gives me that whole side-eye, time-to-drop-some-honesty look again. "Me and my mom have tense moments, but we're much better now. Because… *they didn't leave.*"

"Oh, yeah, that whole thing."

"Yeah, uh…Your situation sounded worse than most people at school."

I almost argue with him, but then I catch myself: Oh, right. We're not in middle school anymore. We're not playing the game, the stupid pissing contest

of Who Had It Better? Who Had It Worse? He's not playing an adult version of the Oppression Olympics, either. Pain is pain. We all suffered. Some of us turned out better, some of us turned out worse. Some of us healed, and some of us couldn't.

Steve and I give each other careful goodbyes. In keeping with this wonderfully no-bullshit meeting, we don't exchange promises to keep in touch. Just thank-yous, blunt appreciation, and an awkward one-arm side hug. Still, as I walk to my car, I feel so much gratitude and relief, I could have squeezed him for a whole minute.

I might have been wrong about the hills. I might have been wrong about so many things. But about this, I was right. I was right.

Maybe I'm not as crazy as I thought.

—

It takes a few weeks for Yvonne Gunter to call me. She is the social worker and therapist for Piedmont Hills High School—a job title that didn't exist when I was a student there. She couldn't meet with me during my visit and delays our talk over and over and over again.

"Sorry," she says breathlessly as she calls me during her lunch break, her only free moment during the day. "I couldn't talk to you on Friday because I had a kid on suicide watch. I have about 230 referrals right now, a lot of them for anxiety, but I have everything from cocaine addiction, pregnancy, incest, major depressive disorders, ten kids with psychotic episodes, self-harm, and homelessness."

"Oh, uh, wow!" I say. "That's a pretty…dismal list. The other teachers seem to think their students' major source of angst is simply stress around grades."

Yvonne laughs a big, hearty guffaw. "We definitely don't have as much gang affiliation as other schools, though we have a couple people embedded in the gang system because of family, but—yeah, I think teachers are naïve to what happens."

She tells me that many of her students are enduring sexual assault. One of her students was raped by her father every night. Yvonne was forced to call CPS to report him. The girl's mother stormed into her office the day after he was arrested, screaming about how they didn't have another source of income—the

girl's father was the sole breadwinner, and how would they survive now? Yvonne, helpless, could barely manage, "I don't know…I don't know…" until she burst into tears and she and the mother sat holding each other's hands and sobbing.

And, of course, there's the kicker: "I can't tell you how many of my kids are going through physical abuse," Yvonne says. It's so common that her default assumption is that anyone who enters her office is being physically abused at home. When the kids she treats start to veer into that territory, she has to remind them again and again and again: "Are you sure you want to keep going? If you keep going, I have to do mandatory reporting and tell CPS that this is happening." Over and over, her kids keep talking anyway.

"They're just so desperate for help," she says. But perhaps the kids are confident in the inadequacies of CPS. She's submitted hundreds of cases to the agency, but almost nothing has come from any of them, because when social workers pull up to the kids' clean, well-kept homes with nice-looking Asian parents, the children won't talk. Now it's my turn to laugh bitterly, both of us so tired. "Of course the kid isn't going to say anything in that situation," I say.

"With the parent standing there? Of course not!" Yvonne shouts.

It's been fifteen years. Sure, yes, there are recent immigrants flowing into San Jose. But also, some of my former student body are now sending *their* kids to Piedmont Hills. Have we been passing on our parents' mistakes to a third American generation? Oh God. Are we continuing the cycle? Has my generation gone from being the victims to becoming the perpetrators?

I ask my next question tentatively. "Do you think one of the reasons that these kids' trauma is overlooked…is because they're Asian American?" What I'm really saying: Are we being overlooked because of the incorrect stereotype painting us as the model minority? The AP students? The well-behaved kids with swimming pools and those fancy laptops?

"Absolutely," she says, and I can hear her nodding on the phone. "Not every Asian kid is high-performing. Of course."

Not all Asians are made equal in America, and the term "model minority" flattens our massive diaspora. Test scores could vary wildly among Chinese students—whose parents might have had more resources, more education, and a better grasp of English—and, say, Vietnamese or Cambodian students, whose

parents were often impoverished refugees. To counter the rich-Asian narrative, Yvonne tells me about the significant population of kids who fall under the poverty line and the fact that a big chunk of her students qualify for Medicaid when she sends them to psychiatrists or therapists. She tells me about her kids struggling with homelessness.

But, Yvonne affirms, even the more privileged, higher-performing kids are suffering from real, valid mental health struggles. "We had a Welcome Back to School Fair for students and parents, and I had a booth where I was offering my help to any student who wanted to see me," she says. "A dad came up to look at my booth and said, 'My kid doesn't need counseling—he gets straight As! Ha ha ha!' Fast-forward two years, he has the highest-performing kid in school—with a major cocaine addiction. Parents and teachers are not even thinking about what these kids need to do to stay awake that long, to be successful in school while taking five AP classes. The kid couldn't function without coke and Adderall."

She also told me about two different children who were having psychotic episodes and weren't grounded in reality. When she told their moms, both separately said, "It's because they have too much time on their hands to think. They just need more tutoring. Then they'll be better." The Kumon joke is played out, but we keep telling it because it's true. Kid has anger issues? Send them to Kumon. Pregnant? Send them to Kumon. Dying of Ebola? Send them to Kumon. *Goddamn it, Asians,* I think.

Even though I am horrified, and even though we are talking about the prevalence of child abuse in a community, Yvonne and I are almost giddy, enthusiastically snapping back and forth, "Intergenerational trauma, am I right?" "Yaaas, girl, you know!"

Our laughter is that of relief. My conversation with Yvonne, as dismal as it is, feels so much lighter than my conversations with the other teachers because it is *true*. Ugly things become uglier in the dark. For once, we don't have to cushion the truth, massage it into something palatable. We hold that difficult truth, together. And the openness of this ugly reality also comforts me in another way.

—

All the books I've read on trauma tried to absolve me at some point. They said

that my ferocious nature is not my fault, because I was abused. It's like faulting a mountain lion for mauling a man; how can you blame its nature, a consequence of its programming? This never comforted me. I wanted to believe I had more agency than an animal.

But talking with Steve and Yvonne finally gives me a dose of the absolution the books hinted at. For a moment, I do not feel like a single traumatized freak. I am a product of a place. I am one of many. All of us are victims of a dysfunctional community that was very good at throttling itself while murmuring, "Smile through your tears. Swallow your pain."

It is within this normalcy, this transformation of a unique misery into the utterly banal, that I finally feel empowered. Maybe I can change my programming after all. Because the more common the disease, the more survivors there must be. A whole damn neighborhood can't go down together in its entirety, can it? There have to be people who escape the stranglehold.

I already made it out of this place once. I'm going to make it out of here again.

CHAPTER 27

I came home from San Jose seething against the silence.

So much unexplored pain in that sunny oasis. So many unseen children. So much untreated anguish that everyone thought they were enduring alone. I wanted to shout it from the rooftops. Write it up in the newspapers. Call up my old teachers and scream it to them for as long as they'd listen.

At first I was angry at my teachers for not knowing about our trauma, but that wasn't quite right, because how could they have known if we hadn't told them? Then I was angry at us kids for not telling anyone about our trauma, but that also didn't feel right. Finally, I got angry at our parents. Because they hadn't told us where our trauma came from.

Few acts of violence don't have a motive. Hurt rarely materializes out of the ether with no rhyme or reason. Why did this happen to us? To our community? What was the source material for our pain, for all the lashes we received? Did any of us know? Before I screamed, it was perhaps wise to listen.

I dove into research. I called community centers and therapists in California that cater to Asian populations. I read up on my classmates' painful family histories: the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the Cambodian genocide. I realized that my community was built in large part from the wreckage of America's brutal proxy wars against communism. America massacred civilians in No Gun Ri and My Lai, it poisoned fields of crops and buried mines, it left behind machine guns in the wrong hands and let houses turn to rubble. San Jose is America's consolation prize for those who lost Saigon and Seoul.

I also spoke to dozens of Asian children of immigrants—Asians of my generation. I told them all that I had some questions about the difficulties they'd faced from their parents growing up and what they knew of their parents' histories.

In these conversations, everyone always wanted me to know that their parents were *good people*. They came here with nothing; they overcame so much. They're just, you know. Stoic. Anxious. Quiet.

"Okay," I said carefully. "Do you know where that comes from?"

They narrowed their eyes at me. What do you mean? They're *Asian.* So.

"Yes, of course. It's just—do you know whether they might've suffered from any trauma when they were younger?"

I don't know about capital *T* trauma, they said at first. Trauma's a big word. They laughed me off. I looked at them. Well, they said, their eyes drifting to a corner of the room. There is that one thing. The thing they never talked about.

And then came the confessions. So, so many of them.

—

K. recorded his parents' oral histories in his late twenties. It was only then he learned that his mother escaped from Vietnam on a boat. The trip was harrowing; a woman was raped in front of her as she lay still, pretending she was asleep. Once his family settled in America, her two brothers attempted to join them by braving the same journey. But their boat didn't make it. Until that point, K. hadn't even known he'd *had* two uncles. The memory of them had vanished with their bodies in the sea. Maybe this explained his mother's paranoid episodes? Her tendency to hide anything remotely valuable in absurd places around the house?

H. wanted to understand her father's violent, abusive anger. She read Korean history and pieced together that he'd lived through the 1980 Gwangju uprising, a military-led massacre on pro-democracy activists that devastated his hometown. But what happened to him during that uprising? In what ways was he hurt? She no longer talks to her parents, so she had to turn to historical South Korean films to try to ignite some empathy for his suffering.

M.'s mother was always obsessively overprotective. She refused to allow M. to even walk to school by herself. Just recently, M. thought she might have

learned why. Her mom had started yelling in the middle of the night, crying out in Vietnamese, “Help! Help us! Don’t take her! She’s not yours!” When M. walked into her bedroom, her mom was in a twilight state; her eyes were open but she wasn’t awake. M. shook her out of her nightmare. The second time it happened, M.’s mother woke up and said, disoriented, “Oh, I just had a memory of my friend being kidnapped. I was walking with two of my friends, and then when I turned around, one of them wasn’t there anymore. So I was screaming for anyone to help.”

In the morning, M. walked into the kitchen and asked her mother, “How are you?”

“Fine,” her mother replied.

“You don’t remember what happened last night?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mom…did you have a friend who got kidnapped in front of you?”

“Oh yeah,” her mom said. “Don’t worry about that.”

—

“Obfuscation is my inheritance,” author C Pam Zhang writes in an essay in *The New Yorker*.[1] She says her parents “depicted their pre-America lives as mere prologue, quickly sketched…. It is far too easy…as the naturalized citizen of a country that tries to kick dirt over its bloody history…to see only the castle on the hill and not the thickets of bone we trod through to arrive at it.”

This essay is itself a defiant, courageous act: Its existence blows clear that meticulously crafted fog of obfuscation and bares the maggoty ribs of our past for the vultures to pick at. I suppose I am doing the same now, tempting damnation with each page. “You know the whole Asian-shame thing,” my usually Westernized cousin cautions me when I tell her I am struggling through writing about my abuse. “You really need to put all that out there? You might, you know, ruin your father’s life.”

I am not entirely hard-hearted. Of course I fret about this. I have no interest in ruining anyone’s life.

But also. If it weren’t for all the secrets. If we had simply said things, stated what was happening out in the open, then maybe someone could have stepped in to prevent my parents from ruining mine.

CHAPTER 28

My family was good at trading in secrets. So good, in fact, that I never seemed to realize the depth of their deceptions until decades after they were seeded.

When I was sixteen, I was the main subject of gossip in our family. My father called his entire family disconsolately multiple times a week, seeking comfort and complaining about me. He'd already done the most shameful thing he could do—get a divorce. At this point, he had nothing left to lose, so he spread news of my exploits through his lens: I threw his car keys into a bush. I screamed obscenities at him. I almost burned down the house.

I heard back from the Malaysian cohort, trying their best to discipline me on my father's behalf. My eldest aunt, Tai Koo Ma, sent me several emails stating that I needed to get it together. That cousin who loved to draw sent me an email saying I wasn't so great at art after all. And, oh yeah, I shouldn't have such a big head about how awesome I was given that I'd broken up my parents' marriage.

At this point I had lost two parents. If they had died, there would have been a funeral. Gift baskets. Someone to take care of me, maybe. But instead, all I got were emails blaming me for it. Saying it must have been my fault. Clarification didn't seem worth the effort. Anything I said would be my father's words against my own. So I stopped corresponding with anyone back in Malaysia.

Still, eventually I had to return. It was what we did, the pilgrimage every two to three years. And I thought that maybe, in person, Malaysia would be the refuge it always used to be. That the heat and the smells would bring comfort

and stability, that I would still be the favorite despite my sins. I didn't go with my father. I brought my college boyfriend instead.

Things started off normal enough. We were welcomed with open arms. My family escorted us to the nicest restaurants in town, to the best tourist attractions—the Petronas Twin Towers, the limestone caves, the bird park. Auntie cracked jokes about my boyfriend's surprising ability to eat spicy food. She called him "the white devil" and cackled. But everyone seemed a little reserved. There wasn't that extreme, performative drama—sudden, wonderful screaming matches over nothing at all. Instead, conversations ran out of air and deflated. My aunts had a hard time looking me in the eye. They mumbled that I was "too American." I wasn't the golden child anymore.

To be fair, I wasn't acting like her, either. When I was younger, we had mostly talked about food and my crushes at school, but now I felt empowered to pick fights about their opinions and their politics. I was grown now, smart enough to identify their racism and criticize it, sneer at their simplistic understanding of American economics. Finally, someone asked me how my dad was. I said I didn't know. I said he was an asshole.

They got defensive. In quiet moments, Auntie and my other aunts cornered me and asked why I couldn't be a better daughter. "Is it true?" one of my aunts asked me gently in her sitting room. "I heard from Tai Koo Ma that you have such great fights with your father, that you say things to him no respectful daughter should. How can you do this kind of thing, girl? You must be calmer."

I told my aunt, "Okay, yes. I did that." I *had* thrown the fucking car keys and screamed and struck the match. "But is that all he told you?" I shouted. "Did he tell you that he moved out? Did he tell you that I microwave my dinner every day? Did he tell you that I suffered through an infection for months because he refused to take me to the doctor? How, when I was delirious from anesthesia after I got my wisdom teeth taken out, he screamed that it was my fault he left me?"

"Is that so?" my aunt asked, but she seemed disbelieving. Unsympathetic. My family shook their heads, clicked their tongues. This was impossible. I was exaggerating. I tended to be overly sensitive about these things. To take everything the wrong way. And what did I mean he *left*? Not *left* left, of course. So he went back to hang out with his girlfriend for a few hours that day, big deal.

No need to be so jealous, to make it seem like an abandonment—how ridiculous. How American—to be so self-pitying. We complained about food here, not feelings.

Auntie just laughed at my anger. “Don’t get like this, lah. Everything ah, you must tolerate a little bit. Even if you are right also. Even if you are right, there must be some things you don’t talk about.”

“You don’t keep anything in your heart, Auntie?” I asked.

“Nn-nn. If I hold everything in my heart, then I died long ago.”

I crossed my arms and pouted, and she just sighed and looked at the wall.

I spent several days in Ipoh with Auntie, but when my family took me to the airport, Auntie grabbed hold of me and hugged me tight to her. She whispered in my ear, “You are not a good person, okay? You need to become a better person.” Then she let go and walked away. I shrugged it off. What could I expect? They hadn’t *been* there. They hadn’t seen what I’d lived through. They could never understand the lack of love that I intimately knew.

Regardless, it felt like a failure. All the women in my family—Auntie, my grandmother, my great-grandmother—had endured their difficult lives with silent dignity, not blinding rage. They had shown that suffering was the heart of strength. I was not capable of that decorum. I was a meteor, a ball of whirling knives, an American girl who walked with her pistols blazing. And I paid the price for it. Because Malaysia no longer loved me, either.

After that trip, I stayed away from Malaysia. I worked on my career. I cycled through men. I no longer declared “aiyah” when I tripped. I said “shit.” I made pancakes and paella and worked at the farmers market selling cheeses that Auntie would have never dared to touch. I did not call. I did not email. I had survived alone this entire time and would continue to do so.

—

Five years passed. The longest I’d ever stayed away. And then my father called me and told me that Auntie was sick. She was stable, but I should visit. So, out of a sense of obligation, I went back with my dad. I hadn’t spent more than a couple of hours with him since he’d left and started his other family. Now, we were about to embark on a two-week trip. There were many awkward silences. At our layover in Hong Kong, he bought me a bowl of wonton mee and tried to

talk to me: How were things? How was work? But this was the first time I'd had Wi-Fi in fifteen hours, things were chaotic at work, and I had five emails to respond to. I shushed him. He picked at his noodles, pouting as I typed away on my laptop. *Well, well,* I mused. *When I used to sing "Cat's in the Cradle" to get you to play with me, you told me to be quiet and let you watch the game.*

But when we arrived in Ipoh, it was hard to hold on to my anger. Because when Auntie saw me, she was so excited she almost fell over. She grabbed the edge of the table next to her just in time and cried out, "*Ho lang!*" You're so pretty.

My whole family told me how wonderful it was that I'd come back with my father. Because of this effort, all was forgiven. Auntie loved me again. She plied me with constant, enormous plates of meats. I turned her down again and again, and five minutes later she'd return with an even larger plate of fruit or a gigantic plate of pastries until I forced something down. She reached out for my hand as we watched TV, and I squeezed her tiny fingers gently, leaning my head on her shoulder.

I stayed with her a little over a week, and during that time, I recorded hours of our conversations. I wanted to preserve our family history—and her screwball antics.

I cuddled up to Auntie on the couch, just like when I was a little girl, and she retold the old stories. I asked more follow-ups than I had as a child, and now that I was an adult, she felt free to explain things in more graphic detail. She told me about my grandma flirting with boys for free sodas. She told me about how the local outhouses had only sheets covering each stall, and at night, somebody kept peeping around the corners of the sheets to watch people poop. When at last they caught the perv, the neighborhood beat the crap out of him.

And then, seemingly apropos of nothing, Auntie started talking about when I was a little kid. About how I'd been the favorite. She banged her fist on the table and said, "Everybody is kind to you because everyone knows that you suffer a lot." She nodded, her toothless jaw jutting out defiantly, her eyes closed. "That's why they're so kind to you. Because when you're young, they realized. You suffer a lot."

I knew what she was talking about immediately. "Wow," I can hear myself say on the tape. My voice sounds casual, but inside, my whole history with this

place—a story of huge, lavish love—was warping.

"Did you see her beat me?" I asked.

"Yeah," Auntie responded. "Everybody also seen."

It was like all the flat memories I'd had of my past suddenly blossomed into three dimensions, with angles and corners I'd never been privy to. Suddenly, I remembered this one time I wasn't allowed to eat dinner. Instead, my mom told me I had to cross my arms, pull on my earlobes, and do squats in front of my family while they ate their meal in silence. And then there was the time during a visit when I was six when I disagreed with my mom about what my homework assignment was. She beat me with a ruler for talking back. She beat me for hours.

At some point, I tried to hide under a table. As she pulled me out by the legs, I started to scream for mercy. I knew the house was full of family. I wondered why nobody was coming to help me. *They must not be able to hear me,* I thought. I felt totally alone. But now I knew.

A few feet away, my younger aunt, Sam Sam, must have stood with her ear to the wall, my cousin's My Little Pony dolls in her hand, a gift to give me when it was all over. When my mother slapped me so hard I fell to my knees, Auntie was likely peering around the corner, mulling the kind words she'd share later about how I was a perfect, good little girl. When my mother screamed at me for spilling a glass of water, Tai Koo Ma must have been right there, pursing her lips. Plotting to take me out for ice cream that night.

There was no air in my lungs. "How come you never say anything when she beat me?" I asked in my pidgin English.

"You say anything, who suffer? Your father."

"So what about me, suffer?"

"You, you suffer? If we say, don't do that, she would done more. She would beat more. *Cheh!* Not to say it stop. You think it's like that?"

In other words, "You think it's that simple? That we'd just tell her to stop and it would end?" Then Auntie told me a story about how, when I was little, I once woke up scared in the middle of the night and walked into her room. She woke up and whispered reassurances and ushered me back into bed as quickly and quietly as she could. She was terrified the entire time. She believed if my

mom found out that I had gotten up in the middle of the night, she'd hurt me. So Auntie did not dare wake her up or tell her what happened.

"It's unfair. Life is like that," Auntie said to me, and she shrugged. Sam Sam walked into the room. Auntie hollered at her in Cantonese. Sam Sam hollered at her small, fluffy dog. Then they both turned to me. "You want curry puff or not, ah girl?" they shouted. "Eat, lah!"

It was the first time I could recall that Auntie had said that something wasn't fair. Life had not been kind or fair to Auntie. How could my pain compare?

—

According to Auntie, all the men in our family were losers, or as she put it, "hopeless fellows," starting with my great-great-uncle. He was the origin of our history, the first of our clan to emigrate from China to Malaysia. But he didn't start off a dumbass—Ipoh is a mining town, and my great-great-uncle owned three mines and some rubber plantations, amassing an enormous fortune.

Auntie's mother married into this family. She was a sixteen-year-old girl in China when the matchmaker paired her with the entrepreneur's nephew. She was ecstatic. This was a monumentally wealthy family! Her new husband was apparently a complete stud! She was set for life!

But when she finally met her husband, she discovered that his family had tricked her by showing her family a picture of her brother-in-law. Her new husband was born with his legs twisted—he could not walk—and his face left something to be desired. And when the new couple arrived in Malaysia to live on his rich uncle's compound, they found out that his wealth was on the decline. World wars were complicating his business dealings and closing the mines. But, more importantly, he was spending a fair chunk of his fortune on women. "Got four wives and still go and get prostitute!" Auntie condemned. "WOMANIZER!" Within a few years of her mother's arrival, the wealthy uncle was broke, and Auntie and her family were out on the streets with nothing.

Because Auntie's father couldn't walk or work, her mother was forced to support her family alone. By this point, she had four daughters—a grave disappointment. These daughters would not carry the family name, would not help her cross the river of death to ascend to heaven, and they'd all require dowries if they were to ever marry. So, my great-grandmother decided, these

girls would need to fend for themselves. Though she struggled to earn enough to house and feed six people, she still scrambled together the money to pay for all of her daughters to go to school.

To do this, she tailored clothing. She sold lunch to the men who worked the mines and came up with discounted meal plans for them to ensure she'd have a steady supply of income every month. She took any odd job that was offered to her. And, of course, she did the domestic labor of raising her four kids.

But under Japanese occupation, the mines closed entirely. There were major food shortages, and thousands of people suffered starvation. Japanese people were suspicious of the Chinese Malaysian community because of China's involvement in the war, so they regularly tortured, imprisoned, and disappeared young Chinese men. To avoid suspicion and harassment—and to make a little bit of money on the side—my great-grandmother bought clothes for cheap from grave robbers, who dug up corpses, looking for gold. She and her daughters unraveled the dead people's clothing, spooled the thread, and used it to sew new clothing…and make Japanese flags. She sold these flags back to the Japanese soldiers—the World War II equivalent of undocumented immigrants selling Trump hats on Canal Street.

After the war, when the British came back to recolonize Malaysia, my great-grandmother found the moneymaking magic of mah-jongg. Her talent was indisputable—she was a force of nature with the tiles and eventually earned enough to open her own gambling house. Once, she thought she might be able to make a pretty penny selling opium in the gambling house, so she crossed the border to Thailand and brought home a fat sack of it. As soon as she got back to Malaysia, the going rate for opium collapsed. She lost a big chunk of her savings on something that was now nearly worthless. Instead of crying about it, she splurged on crab to calm her sorrows. "What to do?" she asked. "Might as well eat crab, lah!" That was her attitude, Auntie recalled proudly. Relentless optimism, despite everything.

This was the lesson, then—a lesson Auntie repeated to me over and over throughout the years: that my great-grandmother's history was worth our remembrance and our respect because of her hard work, her sacrifices, and, most of all, her unfathomable endurance. It made perfect sense to me later in life when I discovered that the Chinese word for *endurance* is simply the word *knife* on top

of the word *heart.* You walk around with a knife in your heart. You do it with stoicism. This is the apex of being.

And so Auntie endured, even though she grew up destitute and fearful, even though she grew up hungry through multiple wars and occupations. She endured when she grew up and was unable to marry or have children because she wasn't pretty or wealthy enough. She endured as she hustled most of her life as a car saleswoman, a secretary, a pawn-shop owner, and a lottery rigger, while also caring for her sister's six children. Auntie was especially close to my youngest aunt, whom she essentially raised and loved as her own. And then my youngest aunt died of leukemia at only thirty-five. Still, Auntie endured.

"When the sky falls, use it as a blanket," she repeated to me, day after day. "Big things, make small. Small things, make nothing. When someone wrongs you, never keep it in your heart. Let it go."

—

So it felt significant—generous—for Auntie to sit here and tell me that the way my mother raised me was *unfair.* It was a permission of sorts to recognize—even among this generation that was so inured to pain—that the way I was brought up was not right. Not how it was supposed to be.

It had been so unfair, it seemed, that Auntie had placed a finger on the scale of my life, trying to level things. All that time, I had not actually been the favorite child. I was not loved more or less than anyone else. But the truth was something better than that: I had been seen. My family had seen me. And they loved me enough to orchestrate a grand performance that had spanned decades and involved my entire family. All those years of "*Ho gwaai, ho gwaai.* You're so well-behaved. You're such a good girl." At first, those lines were crafted to show my mother that I was deserving of love. That didn't work. But perhaps they were also endeavoring to show *me.*

CHAPTER 29

For a long time, I considered my family's coordinated deception—their theatrical elevation of me as the favorite—to be a great act of love. But after I visited San Jose—after I interviewed so many people suffering from similar deceptions in the name of protection, after I witnessed over and over the wreckage of secret-keeping—I began to tire of the charade.

I counted the lies and misdirections that were fed to me as a child. The pile was so high.

—

I am twelve. My mother calls me into her room. She is plucking her eyebrows at her dresser, sitting on a chair with a pink-and-green embroidered cushion. I grab an ottoman and sit next to her, start playing with her lacquered jewelry boxes, running my fingernail along the exotic little Chinese houses etched into the wood and filled with opal. "I have something to tell you," she says as she plucks. "I am adopted. Your Ah-Ma isn't your real grandma. Uncle C. isn't your blood uncle. They are my adopted family, who adopted me when I was a baby."

"Oh, okay," I say. I wait. There is nothing else, so I ask, "Why did your parents give you up for adoption?"

"I don't know that," she says. "I never met them."

I can't tell if she is sad, angry, or neither. "It's okay," I say, just in case. Eventually, she tackles her mustache, and I leave the room.

—

I am thirteen. My mother has just left, and my father spends many nights theorizing about why she ultimately decided to leave: Maybe she was a lesbian. Or she was sleeping with her supervisor at the school district where she volunteered. Or she was sleeping with one of her many male tennis friends. “I always knew she was a good liar,” he says one day. “We never told you this, but you have a half sister.”

I am sitting at my mother’s dresser, at the same chair with the embroidered cushion. *“What?!”*

He tells me that when my mother met my father, she was already married, in the process of getting a divorce. And she had a two-year-old daughter. She didn’t tell my father about her child until right before their wedding. He loved her, so he offered to adopt the child as his own. “No, that’s okay,” she said. “We’ll leave her with her father’s family.”

Years later, I tried searching for my sister. I imagined that when I found her, I’d tell her, “I know that it must have been awful for you to lose your mother as a baby. And I know it’s awful that she left you to have *me.* But I want to tell you that you are the lucky one. You didn’t want her as a mother. You were better without her, and hopefully this knowledge can heal some of the trauma of your abandonment.” And then we’d both hug and talk about the things we had in common and maybe be the family that neither of us got to have. But I was never able to live out this fantasy. I couldn’t find my sister. It was too difficult because nobody on either side of our family remembered her name.

—

I am twenty-seven on a trip to Singapore with my father. We are here for a few days before we travel to Malaysia for my cousin’s wedding. Every morning after I wake up, I make my way to my Tai Koo Ma’s narrow apartment balcony, where we eat breakfast beside a copy of *The Straits Times*. No matter how early it is, my aunt is ready with her big Tai Koo Ma energy: She asks if I’ve turned off the air conditioner, says I look skinny today, brings out a large jug of water kefir and tells me I should make it at home because it is very good for regular bowel movements. She sets out the char bee hoon she made last night and calls

the maid to bring out kaya toast for everyone. My father sleepily enters, plops down on a chair, and starts chowing down.

"Wah, you like this?" Tai Koo Ma asks. "Doesn't your wife ever make this for you?"

His wife? He has a wife?

"When did you get married?" I ask.

"*Haiyo!* It's been so long!" my father says, casually oblivious.

"You got married, what, eight years ago already?" Tai Koo Ma laughs.

Eight years ago. I was nineteen. I had not known. Nobody told me. I wasn't invited. Whenever my dad mentions her to me, he still calls her "my friend."

I am a good little Chinese girl for the rest of breakfast. I swallow my anger as we pack, as I set up Tai Koo Ma's Netflix account. Through otak-otak and carrot cake. I hold it behind my teeth for the whole taxi ride to the airport. I bite it back as we go through security and find our gate.

Then we sit down on the black-leather-and-chrome airport chairs. A man in a suit sits across from us and starts typing on his laptop. I ask it quietly at first, as if I don't care: "Why did you lie to me for ten years? Saying that you had a girlfriend, when all this time you were married?"

"What? I never lied to you."

"This entire time you talked about your *friend.* And she's actually your *wife*? You got married to her when I was in college? When I lived forty-five minutes away from you?"

He flies into defensive mode. "It was just a small thing! What else would you expect me to do? You never liked her. You never even met her. You *still* have never met her because you're…you. You would have gotten angry and pissed and freaked out if I told you. You're always like that. So what was I supposed to do?"

"You don't know how I would have acted. And that isn't an excuse." My voice rises a few decibels. "And—oh my God, dude, go to therapy, this is so fucking transparent—you are obviously attacking me to conceal your own shame. With you, there's never any fucking accountability!"

Without looking up, the man in the suit quietly packs up his laptop and moves to the far end of the gate to extricate himself from this situation. I don't

care. Let the world see. Let the world hear. Say it. Say it out-fucking-loud. Say the truth, however hurtful it may be.

But my father just gives me the same rant he always does. “You always look into the past. And what’s the point? I can’t go back in time just to make you happy and make your life perfect. And you can never see the future because your head is stuck on backward. The past. Is. The. Past!!”

Except it isn’t, of course. The past is always here, haunting our homes, standing over us at night. They say you don’t get rid of a ghost by pretending it isn’t there. The legends tell us to address the ghost directly. Declare that this is *our* home and it isn’t welcome here anymore. But I’m the only one yelling, screaming at spirits in the living room while everyone else averts their eyes, pretending there’s nothing wrong.

CHAPTER 30

It couldn't be a coincidence that nobody in my family, none of the parents of the Asian kids I interviewed, and almost none of the Asians at my school wanted to talk about our foundational traumas. I wanted to know why our community was so good at hiding our pasts. So I moved toward our culture in search of answers. Did it have something to do with Buddhism? Confucianism? The Tao?

My family had largely converted to Christianity by the time I was born, so I had minimal interactions with Chinese religion. But they had been lightly Taoist for generations—though their adherence manifested itself more through tradition and practice than any sort of deistic belief system.

Taoists adhere to the concept of wu wei, which means "success through non-effort." This idea acknowledges that there are forces in nature beyond us. The world is an immense and intricately organized system, perfected over millions of years. There is no point in pushing against this system. Effort only causes disruption. Instead, we must simply *flow like water.* Accept and adapt. Let the currents carry you where you need to go.

Growing up, one of Auntie and my grandmother's favorite sayings was, "What to do?" It was never a question, just a statement of resignation. "What to do? It is what it is." Neither of them spent much time hollering at their children, either. They instead spouted Taoist-tinted sayings like "If my child has any sense, I don't have to yell at them. If he has no sense, even if I yell a million words, it won't change anything. You can never spoil a good child. And you can't teach a bad child any sense." My father would repeat this as an affirmation

when I was older. “It’s true! Look at you! I made mistakes, but you turned out so successful! You were just born with sense!” I rolled my eyes at this. It was just another way for him to avoid taking responsibility for his neglect, to let himself off the hook.

Which was why, when I read the Tao Te Ching for the first time in college, I rejected it as simply too easy. “Flowing like water” sounds innocuous until the water starts flooding your boat, and instead of taking up buckets to dredge it out, you just sit there soaking your ankles until you sink. “Flowing like water” was what led to the tragedy of my childhood. So I put the Tao back on my shelf and wrote my midterm religion essay on Genesis instead.

But now, years later, I regretted my cursory college reading and took a basic online Chinese philosophy course. In it, I learned about the Chinese practice of ancestor veneration—perhaps the oldest form of religion. We build altars to our dead and light incense to them, praying to them for guidance. These ancestors are equipped to advise us because they possess thousands of lifetimes’ worth of knowledge—the wisdom collected throughout our entire bloodline. Adherence to ceremony and tradition were ways we could follow that ancient wisdom and impart it to our children. This intergenerational fount of knowledge helped create the path. The way. The Tao.

But now I was even more confused. If my ancestors provided my family with the path, then why were we intent on blocking our history off with secrets and silence?

So I reached out to Russell Jeung, a professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University. He has written many books and co-authored *Family Sacrifices: The Worldviews and Ethics of Chinese Americans*. I asked him, “The more I learn about the Tao and ancestor worship and the Tao flowing intergenerationally, it just seems like the antithesis of what you would want in terms of secret-keeping and the erasure of history. Do you have any thoughts on that?”

I could tell Jeung was skeptical about my line of questioning from the get-go. There was a long pause, after which I could hear him puzzling hesitantly on how best to respond. “I don’t know if silence is necessarily secret-keeping,” he said slowly. “I’m sure parents don’t talk to their kids about a lot of things. They don’t talk about their sex lives. I don’t know that it’s necessarily a Taoist

approach. There are probably things they'd just rather forget. And there is a Chinese popular religion thing where people don't talk about negative things. It's why people don't talk about cancer. You know *The Farewell*?" he asked, citing Lulu Wang's Golden Globe–winning and BAFTA-nominated film about her family's decision to hide her grandmother's lung cancer diagnosis from her. Her grandmother was supposed to live only six months, but her family thought she would fare better and live longer if they told her she was just fine. The approach may have worked. At the time I am writing this, eight years after her diagnosis, Lulu's grandmother is still alive.

Jeung suggested that this was not a result of a singular belief system (of which China alone has many) but a culture of positivity and superstition.

"It's why Chinese people don't talk about death. When you articulate things and you speak things out, it makes it reality. Right? So by talking about death, you sort of make it come true. That's why they don't say negative things during the New Year time. You always say positive, good things. Because you're speaking that into reality. Have you heard this Chinese saying, 'Eat bitterness'? You just take that grief and you swallow it."

"Okay," I pushed back. "But I can't imagine swallowing that grief is good for you. I think it can make you sick. And don't we still learn from passing down hard things?"

"Well…the Western approach is 'We've got to heal, we've got to take control.' And I think that's a privileged position." Jeung took a long pause again. "Most of the world expects trauma and suffering. Most people live through it. It's not an exceptional, one-time experience. So even if you get health issues as side effects from trauma, it's like, well, yeah. People suffer, people get sick. And so it's only privileged people who think of it otherwise."

As most good liberal people do when they are called out on their privilege, I withered in shame. *Privilege* seemed like a bad word. But something about this didn't sit right with me—if my desire for accountability and acknowledgment was entitled, did that mean disempowered people did not deserve justice? Still, as I hung up the phone, my family's voices scolded me: "Ah girl. You are just too American."

—

A couple of weeks later, I spoke to Hien Duc Do, a professor of sociology and interdisciplinary social sciences at San Jose State University, and he also suggested that I was misplacing my blame—but not because I was privileged. First, he suggested that their "forgetting" was not so much cultural as it was a case of good old dissociation. This was a fair point. After all, hadn't I forgotten wide streaks of my childhood in my effort to survive? Do brought me out of my cultural obsessions to recognize that this was not a uniquely Asian American problem. Plenty of white Americans of the Greatest Generation had no interest in speaking about their time on the beaches of Normandy, either. I have Jamaican and Mexican and WASPy friends whose parents also preferred to bury their family secrets in a hole in the woods as a survival mechanism.

Then he encouraged me to consider that the blame should not just rest on Asian culture, because the American culture within which our community existed had a significant role to play in the perpetuation of these secrets.

"In America, there's the pressure to assimilate, to do well, and to not reveal anything negative about our society," Do told me. "To be the grateful refugee because the United States has allowed us to become successful. It would be ungrateful to reveal how traumatic or difficult that was, so it's easier to point to the success, to go along with the pressure of the model minority myth."

America herself is called the melting pot for a reason. We are systematically encouraged to forget, to blend in. At Piedmont Hills, my white English teachers assigned only one book by an Asian American—*The Joy Luck Club*. I guess we did also read *The Good Earth,* a book written by a white woman about a Chinese family, which was full of stereotypes I chafed at. Our history classes covered the Revolutionary War up to World War II. We never learned about the Vietnam War or Korean War—though you'd think the history teachers would have attempted a unit, considering at least a quarter of our population was Vietnamese. To this day, one of my Vietnamese friends, a child of refugees, has no idea whether the communists came from the North or the South.

On the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., there are no names of the Vietnamese soldiers who fought alongside Americans. Or the Korean, Iraqi, Cambodian, or Hmong soldiers who sat in the trenches with us over various wars. There is no memorial for the Afghan interpreters America left

behind to die in exchange for their help. We have not made remembering them a priority.

But as Paul Gilroy writes, “Histories of suffering should not be allocated exclusively to their victims. If they were, the memory of the trauma would disappear as the living memory of it faded away.”[1]

No Vietnamese names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. But two miles away from the long black wall, you can go to a hip restaurant with pink neon signage and spend $14 on a corrupted vegan bánh mì with “edamame pâté.”

In his book *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War,* Viet Thanh Nguyen writes that immigrant communities like San Jose or Little Saigon in Orange County are examples of purposeful forgetting through the promise of capitalism: “The more wealth minorities amass, the more property they buy, the more clout they accumulate, and the more visible they become, the more other Americans will positively recognize and remember them. Belonging would substitute for longing; membership would make up for disremembering.”[2]

One literal example of this lies in the very existence of San Francisco’s Chinatown. Chinese immigrants in California battled severe anti-Chinese sentiment in the late 1800s. In 1871, eighteen Chinese immigrants were murdered and lynched in Los Angeles.[3] In 1877, an “anti-Coolie” mob burned and ransacked San Francisco’s Chinatown, and murdered four Chinese men.[4] The neighborhood was dealt its final blow during the 1906 earthquake, when San Francisco fire departments dedicated their resources to wealthier areas and dynamited Chinatown in order to stop the fire’s spread. When it came time to rebuild, a local businessman named Look Tin Eli hired T. Paterson Ross, a Scottish architect who had never been to China, to rebuild the neighborhood. Ross drew inspiration from centuries-old photographs of China and ancient religious motifs. Fancy restaurants were filled with elaborate teak furniture and ivory carvings, and completed with burlesque shows with beautiful Asian women who were later depicted in the musical *Flower Drum Song*. The idea was to create an exoticized “Oriental Disneyland”[5] that would draw in tourists, elevating the image of Chinese people in America. It worked. Celebrities like Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Ronald Reagan, and Bing Crosby started frequenting Chinatown’s restaurants and nightclubs.[6] People went from seeing

Chinese people as coolies who stole jobs to fetishizing them as alluring, mysterious foreigners.

We paid a price for this safety, though—somewhere along the way, Chinese Americans' self-identity was colored by this fetishized view. San Francisco's Chinatown was the only image of China I had growing up. I was surprised to learn, in my early twenties, that roofs in China were not, in fact, covered with thick green tiles and dragons. I felt betrayed—as if I had been tricked into forgetting myself.

Which is why Professor Do asks his students to collect family histories from their parents, in an effort to remember. His methodology is a clever one. "I encourage them and say, look, if you tell your parents that this is an academic project, you have to do it or you're going to fail my class—then they're more likely to cooperate. But simultaneously, also know that there are certain things they won't talk about. But nevertheless, you can fill in the gaps." He'll even teach his students to ask distanced questions such as "How many people were on your boat when you left Vietnam? How many made it?" If there were one hundred and fifty at the beginning of the journey and fifty at the end, students may never fully know the specifics of their parents' trauma, but they can infer shadows of the grief they must hold.

—

I suppose I am a privileged American and so are the current students at Piedmont Hills. But I don't see these teenagers as spoiled by their privilege. I still see them as vulnerable. And in some ways, I see their American entitlement doing them good.

Before I left Piedmont Hills that day in San Jose, I dropped by the newsroom that saved my life, just to see it. It looked exactly the same, just with newer Macs. "Hey, guys—it's an ex-student, who's a real journalist in New York!" the new journalism adviser proclaimed. They didn't care at all. Just kept their eyes glued to InDesign. Good kids. I walked around and looked over students' shoulders as they laid out the paper. One headline caught my eye: A DIFFERENT STATE OF MIND: DEREALIZATION AND DEPERSONALIZATION.

The article was all about recognizing that being emotionally closed off—as if you're looking at the world through a pane of glass—is a potentially

dangerous way of coping with stress and a possible symptom of depression and anxiety.

“Who wrote this?” I asked, and the students pointed at a girl with a giant hoodie and unwashed hair in the corner. “This is incredible. Where did you learn this stuff?”

“Ms. Gunter taught it to me,” she said shyly and smiled. Yvonne. I turned back to the screen.

The last paragraph read, “If you are experiencing depersonalization and derealization. Breathe and slow down your thoughts. You are in control. If these symptoms remain, contact a mental health professional. Many people have experienced these feelings, so do not be afraid to reach out for help. You are not alone.”

CHAPTER 31

Despite recent departures from tradition, I am convinced that my ancient Chinese ancestors left a trail of breadcrumbs for me in the Way. They believed that the Way allows us to pass knowledge and information down from generation to generation…that dead ancestors who came before us can return and guide us with their wisdom. They believed that the dead could live through us, their descendants, encouraging us to make the choices they might have made.

They didn't know about periodic tables or cells or quantum theory. I'm certain my grandparents didn't even know about chromosomes. They didn't know *how* any of this was true. They just knew it was. And wouldn't you know it—they were right.

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At the Emory University School of Medicine in 2013, researchers conducted an experiment with male mice.[1] They exposed the mice to the smell of cherry blossoms, then gave them an electric shock. The mice came to associate the smell of cherry blossoms with danger. Eventually, the mice were able to identify the smell at trace concentrations. The smell receptors in their brain enlarged—they *changed* to identify the scent. Researchers even identified changes in the mice's sperm.

Then, after the mice had offspring, the researchers exposed this next generation of mice to the cherry blossom scent. Despite the fact that these mice had never smelled cherry blossoms before and had never been shocked, they still

shuddered and jumped when it wafted into their cages. This generation of mice had inherited their parents' trauma.

Yet another study by the Brain Research Institute of the University of Zurich in 2011 exposed baby mice to stressful situations by separating them from their mothers.[2] The abandoned mice experienced anxiety and depression—which, right, seems obvious. What was shocking was how this separation affected future generations of mice. When the traumatized mice had babies, and then when their babies had babies, the scientists never separated them from their parents. They led perfectly content, nurtured little mouse lives. But for three subsequent generations, the anxiety and depression persisted.

There is real scientific evidence that the traumas we experience can be passed on to our children and even our grandchildren. DNA, of course, is the genetic code that determines the shape of our nose, our eye color, our likelihood to contract certain diseases. So when our body is making and remaking itself, every cell in our body actually "reads" our DNA and uses it as a blueprint for what to build. But not every cell reads the entire blueprint—the whole, long string of DNA. Inside each cell is both our DNA—or our genome—and the epigenome, a layer of chemical markers that sits on top of our DNA. The epigenome is like a SparkNotes for the cells—it flags which genes our cells really need to read. So the epigenome helps decide which genes actually get represented by our bodies. It turns certain genes on and other genes off. Both the genome and our epigenome are passed down generationally.

The stuff we think of when we think about DNA—nose shape, eye color—only comprises about 2 percent of our total DNA. The other 98 percent is called noncoding DNA, and it is responsible for our emotions, personality, and instincts. The epigenome on top of noncoding DNA is very sensitive to stress and the environment. When a body adapts to constant, overwhelming stress—not a car accident or a bad flu, but long-lasting trauma—the epigenome changes. Trauma can turn on a gene that responds to the smell of cherry blossoms, for example. Or turn off a gene that regulates our emotions. It might turn on a gene for fear.

In 2015, Rachel Yehuda, director of the Traumatic Stress Studies Division at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, conducted a study where she analyzed the FKBP5 gene, which helps control stress regulation.[3] The study

showed that Holocaust survivors and their descendants shared the same epigenetic tags on the very same part of the FKBP5 gene. Then Yehuda compared those genes with those of Jewish people who lived outside of Europe and did not suffer through the Holocaust. Their epigenetic tags weren't altered. It was clear that the trauma of experiencing the Holocaust specifically created DNA methylation on the FKBP5 gene of survivors…*and* their children.

Even more surprising, Michael Meaney at McGill University has studied whether it's possible to *reverse* this DNA methylation.[4] He had a population of mice whose mothers didn't lick them very much growing up. These mice essentially had distracted, neglectful mothers and grew up anxious. So Meaney injected a solution into the brains of these anxious mice that could pull off the epigenetic markers. And…it worked. Afterward, the mice weren't anxious anymore. Their stress response was completely normal.

Unfortunately, there is no brain injection that works for humans. And even if there was, what might the consequences be? If I was to remove the wiring that's been written over generations, it'd be like restoring the factory settings on a computer. And what would my default settings be? *Who* would I be?

—

Every adaptation our brain makes is an effort to better protect our bodies. Some of these backfire—the deadly result of an overactive stress response. But some might actually be advantageous to our health.

The Swedish town of Överkalix has the most comprehensive and oldest birth, death, and crop records in the world. Their records go back generations—a remarkably rich data set. And in analyzing this data set, scientists found some fascinating correlations. There were good and bad years for the crops in Överkalix and some particularly bad years where families were forced to go hungry. But scientists discovered that when children suffered starvation between the ages of nine and twelve, their grandchildren would on average live *thirty years longer.* Their descendants had far lower rates of diabetes and heart disease. On the other hand, when children were well-fed during those ages, their descendants were at four times the risk for heart attacks and their life expectancy dropped. In some strange way, the trauma of starvation changed descendants' genes to be *more resilient.* Healthier. More likely to survive.[5]

—

Clearly, it wasn't just my ruthless nurture that had shaped me into who I was, though who knows what kind of rampant methylation savaged my epigenome during my beatings and assaults. Beyond that, every cell in my body is filled with the code of generations of trauma, of death, of birth, of migration, of history that I cannot understand. Just piecemeal moments I collected from Auntie over the years.

My family tried to erase this history. But my body remembers. My work ethic. My fear of cockroaches. My hatred for the taste of dirt. These are not random attributes, a spin of the wheel. They were gifted to me with purpose, with necessity.

I want to have words for what my bones know. I want to use those gifts when they serve me and understand and forgive them when they do not.

But now I turn my head like the Sankofa bird and see nothing. I want to reclaim my stolen past. I need it to write my future.

—

Auntie died suddenly, just a couple of months after I last visited her and she told me I was not the favorite after all. As much as I'd like to, I cannot ask her further questions about my family history. But I *do* still have recordings of our interactions from that visit. I dig up my old hard drives and dive back into them, transcribing whatever I can understand, leaving out the Cantonese bits. I supplement these recordings with oral histories I find stored in Singapore's National Archives to learn the details of what bitterness my family was forced to eat.

I learned that Auntie and my grandmother had not just survived World War II, as I'd previously thought. There was another war they lived through, a secret war that history would prefer to forget.

Under Japanese occupation of Malaysia during WWII, a Communist guerrilla force grew in the jungle. With half a million members, they called themselves the Malayan National Liberation Army, or MNLA, and they wanted freedom from the oppressive rule of colonization, which at this point had rocked

the country for hundreds of years—first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, then the British, then the Japanese.

After the British came into power yet again, the MNLA waged an all-out war against them for twelve years. But the British never called it a war. They dubbed the conflict the "Malayan Emergency," because calling it a war would have meant that insurers wouldn't cover losses for their many assets—tin mines, pewter mines, limestone quarries, rubber and palm plantations. But make no mistake—thousands of soldiers and five thousand civilians died in this conflict. Britain's success in this war was actually what persuaded America to go to war with Vietnam. Their tactics in Malaysia were used as a template for American warfare in other nearby jungles full of yellow usurpers.

The MNLA was mostly composed of Chinese Malaysians, and they survived in the jungles by accepting donations from Chinese sympathizers who left food and money in trees by the forests' edges. So the British made it illegal for Chinese citizens to aid the MNLA with food or money, then ensured compliance by forcing 400,000 Chinese people who lived near the jungles away from their homes. They resettled these Chinese in what they called "new villages," which had curfews, barbed-wire fences, and rations so citizens would not have enough food to hand out extras to the freedom fighters. Today, the online Encyclopedia Britannica refers to new villages as "roadside relocation settlements for rural Chinese."[6] Other sources are more direct: They call them internment camps.

With their food supplies cut off, the MNLA got desperate. They approached homes and businesses near the jungles, demanding money and food and threatening to kill civilians. My grandfather worked at a lumber plantation that harvested wood in the middle of the rainforest—in other words, MNLA headquarters. The MNLA threatened the plantation, and in order to preserve their safety (and their bottom line), the plantation caved and provided them with food. But eventually, the British found out about this betrayal. Someone had to take the fall, and that unlucky bastard was my grandfather, a low-ranking employee. The British did not give him a trial. They arrested him and imprisoned him for three years. My aunts were so young when he left that they have no memories of their father before this imprisonment. Whenever I asked my eldest aunt to tell me why, exactly, her father had been in prison, she didn't

even really understand the details of the Malayan Emergency enough to say. “You might want to google it one day,” she told me. “I just know it had something to do with the communists.”

When my grandfather came back, he had no teeth. No one in my family knows why or how it happened—whether his teeth fell out from malnutrition or were punched out by fists. But in *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya,* Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied paints a bleak picture of the prisons that held MNLA supporters:

“These places were badly lit, overwhelmed by the stench of latrines, and infested with bed bugs and rats, which ensured that the prisoners had minimal rest. The prisoners were required to relieve themselves in the cells, where they were not provided with any water, and they could only dispose of the filth every morning…. The Malay radicals were deprived of food and drink and subjected to verbal assaults in sessions that could last for several hours at a time.”[7]

When my grandfather returned home, he was not the same. He got a job as a mediocre traveling salesman that kept him far from home much of the time. On the occasions that he *was* home, he drank and gambled heavily and sometimes yelled cruelly at my aunts.

I wonder what epigenetic scarring took place during his time in that prison. I wonder if he passed those scarred cells down to my father. I wonder if my father passed them down to me.

Like their mother before them, my grandmother and Auntie became the main breadwinners of their household. And like their mother, they tried starting up illegal gambling operations to survive. My grandmother had a few lotteries going. But when my eldest aunt, Tai Koo Ma, was seven, my grandmother was arrested over the operation.

Tai Koo Ma says she stood there, helpless, and watched her only remaining parent scream as the police cuffed her and dragged her away. Auntie sucked her teeth as she watched her go. “Well, *that* doesn’t look good,” she deadpanned. “She’ll probably go to jail!” Typical, blunt Auntie.

Luckily, my grandmother was bailed out after just a day or two. After that, she turned to more legit business dealings—eventually getting a job as the foreman in a glass factory. Auntie contributed money from her various hustles. And the children they raised went on to achieve middle- and upper-class success.

One uncle became a doctor, one aunt a banker, another a diplomat's wife. My father went into tech. Then, a generation later, came me.

And all of these mouthfuls of bitterness comprise only half of my genetic code. Less than half. There is still so much more. My grandfather's father died when he was a child—that's really all I know about his family history.

I know absolutely nothing about my mother's side. What historic brutalities contributed to her ferocity? I know one of her brothers died when she was young. Her dad died when she was twenty. But even earlier than that, why had her birth mother given her up for adoption? Were they too poor to keep her? How had her family come to settle in Malaysia? My mother was born during the Malayan Emergency. Did the conflict have something to do with why she was given up? Some people say my mother looks as if she may be mixed-race. Was she the result of rape? An encounter with a British soldier who despised the Chinese? Was my mother's mother affected by negative prenatal hormones; could her own emotional instability be traced to the anxiety of a woman who knew she was carrying a daughter she could not keep? So, so much bitterness. So many knives to carry.

No wonder I carry them, too.

PART IV

CHAPTER 32

The calls kept coming.

It was a year before my diagnosis—the beginning of 2017. Donald Trump had just been inaugurated, which exploded our newsroom at *This American Life*, and I was constantly running between meetings that were interrupted by people throwing open the conference room door to give us some terrible breaking news brief. In the middle of all this chaos, my father would call.

I told him to text me ahead of time to set up a time to talk, but he never did. He'd call in the morning, unannounced, and I'd have to excuse myself from meetings to pick up. It was the first time my father had ever called me multiple times a week of his own accord. It was because he was going through a hard time.

My dad's stepkids—the ones he'd raised from toddlers—had grown into rebellious young men who played too many videogames. His wife was dealing with stress at work. It all made him depressed and anxious. He called to tell me what was happening, how sad he was, how lonely he felt, how he didn't know what to do. I listened and counseled him, urging him to communicate better with his family. Because counseling him was what I had always done. Because his stepchildren deserved a better childhood than I'd had. Because he kept saying he needed me, that I was the only one he could talk to.

During one of his first calls, he told me that he was just now realizing the complexity of loving people. "You have to not just *do*…you have to *be* someone they want to be around," my dad told me in astonishment. "You have to talk to

them nicely…you actually have to *say*…out loud!…how much you care about them."

No shit, Sherlock, I thought, bewildered that a man his age was only now coming to these conclusions.

"Anyway," my father said, "this thing…this idea that I have to talk to them in a different way…it's giving me anxiety. Before I talk to anyone, I worry about it. What if I don't do it right? It makes me want to crawl into a hole and die. You're the only person I can talk to. You're the only one. I just want to die. I think about it all the time now. Maybe I should just die."

Even though I was talking to him while walking in circles around my office building on a busy Midtown Manhattan sidewalk, the vaguest mention of suicide from a parent triggered me. I yelled into the phone. "You *cannot* say shit like that to me! It's so selfish! You *cannot* put that kind of pressure on me! The pressure of your life! It's not fair!" An elderly woman and her small dog both looked at me quizzically.

"Okay," he said, his voice tired. "Okay, okay."

It took me a few minutes to calm down, but when I was back on an even keel, I brought up an old family friend we often complained about. "Look at Henry," I said. "He never worked on himself. He just lives his life being an asshole, pissing everyone off, without ever looking in the mirror. If he did, he'd see what you're seeing now. He'd see a need for change. He'd be upset about the way he treated people. But he'll never do that because he'll never look. You, at least, are looking. It's very brave. But change is hard. It's possible. It just takes practice."

I spent half an hour telling him things I'd learned in therapy. Things I wished someone had told me in my twenties. Things I'd learned from my mistakes. Mistakes I made because I was acting like him.

"You're right," he said in astonishment. "Of course you're right about it all. How did you become the parent and I became the child?"

How did he not understand that this had always been the arrangement?

I told my dad that I had to go. I'd already been away from work for too long. "Okay," he said, sounding reluctant. "But if there's one thing that comes out of all of this, it's that I want to repair my relationship with you. I want to be better to you."

“If that’s the case…in the past three times you’ve called, have you ever asked me how I am? Have you asked me a single question about myself?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Well, why not? Part of caring about people is asking them questions about how they are.”

“But I know you’re fine. You’re successful, you have Joey,” he protested. “I know you’re okay, so what do I have to ask you about?”

I slumped against the faux-wood-paneled wall of the elevator as it took me back up to work. It was just *sad*. Just so sad that he never seemed to grasp the basic concepts of what it meant to be a father.

—

My father and I had always seemed to struggle with what our relationship was to each other. I felt as if I had to take care of him growing up, even as I looked to him for food, shelter, advice on math homework. As adults, we could not find a middle ground. Were we strangers? Acquaintances? But, of course, there was that pesky genetic tie of obligation.

I was indebted to him in some ways. There was the whole conception thing. Then, providing for me financially as a child. My dad paid for college, and though I held jobs here and there and shoplifted most of my books and meals, he also paid my rent until I graduated, when I was twenty. If we’re going to take out the bill and tally it, then I’d have to add those free dinners he gave me in my twenties. He let me buy $100 worth of groceries at Trader Joe’s for my birthday month (though he never remembered the actual date or my age). He bought me a fancy camera in high school, a camcorder in college. I stayed on his family cellphone plan for years. Did the thousands of dollars he spent on me allow him to pay off his sins? *But I went to a state school,* I tell myself. *But I graduated in two years. But I didn’t take money from him after graduation.* I count and recount, as if I can nickel and dime my way out of having to love him.

—

There were periods of six months here and there when I would not talk to my dad at all. There were so many blow-up fights with him that ended with me

screaming that I never wanted to speak with him again. But I always went back. I always took him up on his offers when, after months of no contact, he asked me to go out for a free meal, especially when he said he needed to talk because he was going through something. I would return home afterward feeling grumpy and short.

So many boyfriends, dragged unwillingly to these awkward meals, asked me why I bothered going in the first place. So many therapists asked me why I retained a relationship with my father when it was clear he put in the bare minimum of effort. But I always snapped back that they didn't understand. That it was my choice. That it was my duty. That this is just how Asian people *are*.

Of course, I was fulfilling my filial duty only in that I continued to show up. While I was out to dinner with my father, I'd criticize the sweat on his brow, the food on his chin, his terrible sense of direction. I'd clap back at every small annoyance, I'd call him stupid, I'd snort with impatience if he took too long to order or stumbled over his words. I struggled mightily to mask my rage. Two of my boyfriends said, while breaking up with me, that if I was capable of being so cruel to my own father, I would one day turn that cruelty toward them.

—

For years, I had a recurring dream of my father dying. In my dreams, I felt deep remorse and guilt that I hadn't done enough, that I hadn't fixed things before he left this earth. In my dreams, I sobbed shamefully at his funeral, throwing myself over the casket, but I would always wake up confused and disconnected from any of those emotions. I could not discern which feelings were real—the grief in my subconscious or my deep indifference in the light of day.

In either case, I wanted to be good. I wanted to be able to forgive. I kept going to dinner after dinner, thinking that forgiveness would come with the generous platters of steamed fish and fried squid and tender pea shoots my father bought me. I hid my clenched fists underneath the table.

—

During one of our infrequent dinners, he had a revelation. After an awkward pause, he stammered, "I'm afraid I ruined your life."

It was the closest he ever got to admitting fault. He looked so small underneath his too-big white polo shirt. He had always been fragile, but now he looked it.

"You're very lucky," I said. "I turned out fine."

But still, he must have had the sense that there were amends to be made. Because months later, he asked me, "What can I do to be closer to you?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Make a list," he replied. "Make me a list of what you want, and give it to me, and I'll do it."

I never made the list.

I didn't make the list because I was confused about what to put on it. What *would* fix things? Was there really anything that could make up for what had happened? *Remember my birthday? Be there for me when I'm falling apart? Come visit me one time? Decide that for just one Christmas, shit, even one minor holiday, you're going to spend it with me? Call me, text me, just to ask how I am? Fully acknowledge all the things you've done wrong instead of minimizing them and claiming that I'm obsessed with the past? Acknowledge how much this hurts?*

I didn't make the list because I was resentful of it. Why did I always have to do the work? My father had given love and affection to his two stepkids. To them, he'd been a mostly stay-at-home dad, the one who cooked for them every day, took them to school, went to their sports games. Once, when I was in Malaysia with him, I overheard him on the phone with them. I heard him say in a tender voice—a voice I found completely unfamiliar—that he loved them. That he missed them. He did not go on a long soliloquy about his own life. Instead, he asked about their grades and their scores on their latest golf tournament and what they ate for lunch. He loved them, genuinely, and I watched him show it. If you really loved someone, I thought, you wouldn't need a list. If you really loved someone, it would emanate from you, sincere and overflowing, generous and unconditional. But for me, my father's love had always been conditional. Here again was just another condition: In order for me to love you, I need you to write out a list. Why should I have to teach my father how to love me?

And, I'm ashamed to admit, I didn't make the list because I was afraid. Afraid that even if I wrote out everything I needed, and he gave me all of it,

spent all of his time, money, and energy trying to make things right, I would still be too afraid to love him back. I wouldn't be able to forgive. And then it wouldn't be *him* who was the real asshole. Not anymore. Then it would be me.

—

A few months after he started calling me regularly, I asked my father for his wife's email address. This had gone on long enough.

I wrote her a very long email explaining my mother's abuse and subsequent abandonment. I wrote about when my dad left and how painful it was. I wrote about how I blamed her for it and how I still felt resentment toward her: How do you ask a man to abandon his own child to take care of two of yours? But if she was willing to apologize for the past decade's worth of pain, maybe we could begin to move on.

She and I exchanged a couple of emails and phone calls where I learned that she had never known my mother was abusive. She hadn't known my mother abandoned me. She'd never known I lived by myself when my dad left. He hadn't told her anything about my situation except that I yelled at him and disrespected him, and all she'd thought about at the time was protecting her young sons from that kind of behavior. She admitted, with regret, that she'd never thought about me at all, really. She was sorry.

I was not as furious at her as I always assumed I'd be. I was upset at her for not thinking of a child, not asking where I had been on all the Father's Days and Thanksgivings. But she only knew as much as my father had told her.

—

They visited me in New York later in 2017, in the fall. My father, his wife, her two kids, Joey, and I all spent one day in Manhattan together. I got them New York's best doughnuts and some mediocre pizza, showed them how to swipe their MetroCards, walked them around the enormous buildings of Midtown.

Her sons were sweet. I'd spent my teenage years and entire adult life despising these children, lamenting about them to my therapist, calling them "brats," and complaining that they had stolen my father and my life. But in the flesh, they were just kids. Of course they were. Well-behaved, curious, innocent

—giddy at New York's giant Uniqlo and Bape, thrilled at the underground jostle of the subway and the chaotic process of transferring between the A and F trains. He'd raised them well.

His wife loved skyscrapers, so after Uniqlo we went up to the top of the Empire State Building. On the way in, every visitor was asked to stand in front of a large green-screen backdrop, and an employee snapped their photo. The final product was an image of guests in front of the glowing crown of the Empire State Building, as if we had floated all the way to the top somehow, the date superimposed on top. It was hammy and touristy, so I made a dumb face when they took the picture.

We went up to the top and relished the brilliant views of the city, all of its massive buildings tiny from so high up. It was a perfectly clear blue day, and we could see for miles. The boys oohed and aahed. On the way out, we passed the gift shop. And that's when they hawked our photo back to us.

There we all were. Everyone was smiling widely, looking overjoyed to be together, a true blended family. And then there was me, my brows knitted, my hand on my hip as if I was fed up, my lips a sideways, dissatisfied line. Snottily superior to this tourist trap.

But my father barely saw the exorbitant price, barely saw my fed-up mug. When he looked at that absurdly tacky image, his face lit up. For the first time in decades, here was photographic evidence that it was possible for him to have everything he wanted, everything together, everything he loved, in one place. He bought a framed five-by-ten copy.

That evening, I took everyone to my favorite joint in K-town, which had delicious, meaty stews and opulent spreads of banchan—tiny, sweet, chili-infused dried anchovies and fish cakes with salty bean sprouts and strong, funky kimchi. As we gorged ourselves on galbijjim and chicken stuffed with ginseng and sticky rice, my dad and his wife chatted about the day while his kids grilled me and Joey on what our lives were like.

"How did you guys get into your careers? Where did you go to school?" the younger son asked.

"I went to UC Santa Cruz, and then I moved to San Francisco, then Oakland," I responded.

“Wow! You lived in San Francisco? And Oakland, too?” he asked, turning those hopeful eyes on me, and the questions poured out of him like bubbly soda: “What was that like? Did you like San Francisco or Oakland more? And how’s San Francisco different from New York?”

I kept a smile on my face. I told him about the differences in food and weather. But inside, my heart thumped harder and I felt light-headed.

My stepbrothers hadn’t known I’d lived in San Francisco?

I’d lived in the Bay Area for five years after college. Just a short drive from their home. I’d visited their home while they were at school. For years, I’d had those monthly dinners with my father. He’d helped me move four times, taking the same twenty boxes, bookshelf, desk, and mattress from tiny apartment to tiny apartment. Where had he told his children he’d gone those days? Had he told them, too, that he was meeting up with “a friend”? How had they not known what college I went to? How had they not known anything about me?

On the train ride home, I made a note of it to Joey—that I had been so close and yet so far away.

“It’s too bad for them,” he said. “They really would’ve benefited from having a great sister like you in their lives.” Sadness and fury bit into each other like two warring serpents in my stomach.

“Don’t say that,” I managed, and I swallowed everything back down and opened up the crossword app on my phone.

It took a couple of days for it to hit me: an unbearable understanding that changed everything. This time, *I* am the secret.

I am the same as my long-lost half sister, her existence so cobwebby that nobody in my family can even remember her name. I am my grandparents’ jail time and my mother’s birth parents. I am my mother’s opaque childhood, her missing siblings. I am the great-uncle who cross-dressed, whom my aunts used to peek at beneath the floorboards to catch a glimpse of him putting on lipstick. I am the great-aunt who maybe had a female lover, the one nobody likes to talk about.

I am the trauma you bury away. I am the lie you hold under your tongue, the thing you bury, vanish, erase, the thing you can almost always pretend is forgotten as long as you don’t touch it. My mother goes to her tennis club with her new husband and plays in the local tournaments. My father goes hiking with

his two sons and his wife. On Facebook, in private profiles I have to stalk to access, they smile widely in the photos with their new families, my mother flashes a big diamond ring and a little dog, my father posts vacation pictures, smiling with his sons. Their lives appear whole. But only if you forget I exist.

I am blood and sin. I am the sum total of my parents' regrets. I am their greatest shame.

—

After his trip to New York and once he was back in California, my father texted me a picture of the framed family photo. But now it looked different. I looked photoshopped in, a dark anomaly. I was looking directly into the camera, my eyes a challenge: *I will not pretend like nothing happened—like I can be killed off and resurrected without consequence.* My eyes held everything that had happened.

The thing you left doesn't forget.

—

Four months later, I got my diagnosis. And now that my past was spilling over, exploding, a volcano spewing hot toxic waste all over my present life, it was all I could think about.

I sent my father an email with the subject line FINALLY GOT AN OFFICIAL DIAGNOSIS. In the body of the email, I attached a link to the Wikipedia page for complex PTSD.

At the time, the Wikipedia page read, "Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD; also known as complex trauma disorder) is a psychological disorder that can develop in response to prolonged, repeated experience of interpersonal trauma in a context in which the individual has little or no chance of escape."

And then, a paragraph down: "C-PTSD is a learned set of responses, and a failure to complete numerous important developmental tasks. It is environmentally, not genetically, caused. Unlike most of the diagnoses it is confused with, it is neither inborn nor characterological, not DNA based, it is a disorder caused by lack of nurture."

A lack of nurture.

I didn’t write a hello in the body of the email. I didn’t include a sign-off. All I included in the vast expanse of white space was that link. What I didn’t write, but what was implied, what I hoped to convey: *You ruined my life. You ruined my life. You ruined my life.*

He didn’t answer. He’d stopped calling months ago, now that I’d helped resolve his relationships with his family. I waited and I waited. My phone stayed silent.

CHAPTER 33

I always thought that estrangement was an on-off switch. But that's not so, says Kristina Scharp, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. She's one of the very few academics who study estrangement. "I think that's one of the myths of estrangement, that estrangement is a complete cutoff, or it's final," she said in an NPR interview. "Really, estrangement is more of a continuum, where you can either be more or less estranged, and actually people often go through multiple times of trying to create distance before they're able to maintain a level of distance that's right for them."[1]

I came to Scharp's work by way of my friend Catherine Saint Louis. Catherine is a brilliant reporter and editor. She takes up space in a room, and not just because she is six feet tall. She is forceful—in her offerings of food, her own story, her opinions, and her kindness. We first connected on Twitter, and though we met up in a bright, bougie coffee shop in downtown Brooklyn to talk about freelancing, we quickly learned that our new friendship would center on our experiences with estrangement. Catherine has reported a lot on the topic, done tons of research on estranged families. Her work is inspired by her estrangement from her own father. And what she wanted to impress upon me was that even though there is a tremendous stigma around estrangement, it is fairly common.

"Really?" I asked her at the time. "But I never hear about this from anyone except for a couple of close friends and you."

"I have spoken to four dozen people who say the exact same thing as you," she said, smiling. "That's why we need to talk about this in public."

Catherine told me about her own difficult relationship with her Haitian immigrant father—a man who wanted the best for her, who wanted her to do well in school and in her career, but also terrorized and demeaned her. Deciding to stop speaking to him, she told me, felt like deciding to stop touching a hot stove. Every time she got near him, she was burnt—and so at a certain point, she had to protect her skin.

I told her that I was trying to decide what to do with my own father. I could not imagine continuing a relationship with him as I tried to climb out from the enormous pile of rubble that was my past. But at the same time, there was that guilt. What I owed him for those trips to the Tech Museum and the beach when I was a child, when he taught me about the Monkey King and tucked me in every night. What I owed him for the time when we both believed he loved me. The scales were also tipped by that weight of immigrant obligation.

"There's something there, about the immigrant experience," she replied. "My dad definitely had childhood trauma. It was off the charts. He would say about Haiti, 'If I messed up at school, it wasn't just my mom who beat me. It was the whole neighborhood! Everyone on the street would come up and say, "Why'd you do that?" ' " And, here, she mimed a smack. "He never hit me, but in his mind, he was like, 'I didn't hit you. And physical abuse isn't even a really big deal. What's the problem with my verbal abuse?' "

"Yes, yes," I told her, tapping my leg on the floor anxiously. "It's so hard to deal with this idea of what I *should* feel about it. What I'm allowed to feel."

"That's what your culture has taught you. It's not just immigrants—all Americans expect children to grow up and take care of their elders. Especially as women. You know, there's a term that scientific journals have given to the caretakers of people with Alzheimer's and dementia: *daughter care*."

"Why daughters?" I asked, but my question trailed off as she gave me a withering look.

"You know why."

I barked out a bleak laugh. "Right.

"You've interviewed sixty people who are estranged from their parents," I stammered. "I don't know if you have studies on it, but, um, in your experience—did the people who estranged themselves, did they feel free afterward?"

"No," Catherine said with certainty. I waited. There was nothing else.

“No…?” I asked, my heart sinking. “Well, if not freer…were they… happier?”

Catherine munched on her cracker and shrugged. “Meh,” she said.

She must have seen my unhappy expression. “Look,” she explained, “I don’t think it brought anyone joy. It didn’t make people happy to have to do it. It was just *necessary.* I think you just have to figure out if it’s necessary for you. I can’t tell you if you should do it or shouldn’t. All I can say is that if you *do* do it, you’re not alone.”

—

In the summer of 2018, a few months after my diagnosis, I emailed my father again to tell him that I needed my space in order to heal and that if he wanted to communicate with me, I’d only do it with a mediator present—preferably a therapist. Then in September, I arranged to meet with him for the last time in downtown Oakland. I told him I was in town and wanted to pick up a few belongings: some old Japanese dolls, my yearbooks. I didn’t say that this needed to be the last time, but after my previous email, it was assumed. My father texted me, asking where I wanted to meet. I named a random street corner. I brought Joey along for emotional support.

When we crossed the street, my father was standing there with a paper bag. He looked hollowed-out, old, and he was wearing glasses. I felt bad for him, guilty about this already. He said hello but was frowning at me. I replied, “Hello.” I reached for the paper bag.

“I would like to sit down and take a minute of your time, if you can spare it,” he said jeeringly, his voice hard. There was a café half a block away, so we sat down. I went to the bathroom first and left Joey sitting with my dad.

Joey told me afterward that my father had asked him, “Do you know what all this is about?”

“I think she can tell you herself,” Joey replied.

“I don’t know why this is happening now. This could have happened ten years ago,” my father said. Probably referring to the estrangement. To the cutting of ties that he knew was about to happen. Had already happened?

By the time I got back from the bathroom, my father’s jaw was already set in that way that let me know a fight was coming. And he said, “Let me say my

piece.

"When you first told me this, I felt bad about myself," he said. "I thought, oh, you know, *You're bad. You're terrible.* Whatever. But then I thought, *You know, this is really hurtful to me.*"

"It's hurtful to *you.*" My voice instinctively came out sarcastically.

"I knew you'd say that," he said. "I just think—I don't know what brought all this on."

"You don't know?" I heard myself cut in.

"Will you let me talk? It's just, I can't change the past. And I don't know what you want me to do."

"This isn't going well," I said.

"Well, fine," he said, and he angrily got up to leave. "I'm through with this."

I halted him, saying, "I was hoping you'd respect me enough to talk to me through a therapist. Because this is devolving into a hundred conversations we've had before."

"I've seen my therapist FIVE TIMES," he said, furious now. He held up his hand to show his five fingers. Then he went on. "Anyway, I just wanted to tell you to have a nice life. Because I am done. And I don't even know why you are doing this, but I don't care. I'm done."

"You don't know why? You honestly don't know why?"

"Tell me in one sentence why. I just want to hear one sentence."

I said it slowly. "Because *you don't love me*."

"What do you mean I don't love you? Tell me what that means."

"What does that mean? Abuse. Neglect. And you used me…"

"I *used* you? What did I use you for?"

"You just started calling me last year to talk about your depression, about how you wanted to die again. Did you think about how that would make me feel? You called *me* for that. *Me*, of all people. And—"

"You know what, fine," he interrupted. He didn't want to hear anymore. "I thought you were my friend, but I guess I was wrong."

"I'm not your friend," I shouted. "I'm your *daughter.*"

That was the entire problem.

Heads in the café turned to look. "Fine," my father said, not looking at me. He threw up a hand. "You know what? Fuck it. Have a nice life."

On his way out the door, he turned to Joey and said, “When you have your kid, give it a kiss for me. Okay?” He clapped him on the back. Joey whipped around and snapped, “Don’t you fucking touch me.” I grabbed Joey’s arm and said, “Stop.”

And then he was gone.

—

I sat there staring into space, silently, for a few minutes. I had done the unspeakable. I was floating in the air above the abyss now, without roots, without a home, seething with rage and self-righteousness. I was aware the other patrons in the café were staring at me. But I had no shame.

“Let’s go,” Joey said gently, and he led me out of the café. One block away, my breath finally came, hot and quick, and I collapsed into his arms, sobbing in the middle of Broadway, big, gasping, childlike sobs. “Even at the end—even now—why did he have to…why couldn’t he give me anything?” I asked. And even at the end, even now, I knew what *I* had to do. I sent a text to his wife: “I don’t think my father is in a good place today. Please watch out for him. I’m afraid he might try to hurt himself.”

And that was it. I was done protecting him from himself.

—

Catherine was right. Estrangement is not freeing. It has not felt joyful. It has not been happy. It has only felt *necessary,* and even that is something I question all the time: Does this make me selfish? Does it make me cruel? Then I think of the Thao Nguyen lyric, *You made a cruel kid. Come look what you did.*

The silence now is not so different from the lonely holidays I endured over the years, an extension of the months of silence we’d exchanged but more total. There is one major difference: I don’t have to work on earning his love anymore. I can just work on accepting that I will never have it. That is far from peace. But it is what it is.

CHAPTER 34

Removing my parents from my life protected me, but it did not fix me. The excision was not healing in and of itself. Instead, it cleared the way for me to rebuild. Because now came the hard part: replacing them.

Many believe that in order to heal from C-PTSD, we must receive kind and compassionate parenting. If we can't receive that from our own parents, then we must find a new parent to do the job.

One form of therapy actually enlists other people to assume the role of your parent. There are group therapy retreats in which other patients take turns "parenting" one another. Your new stand-in parent makes the apologies your parent cannot give you, then provides you with the generous affirmations you deserved to hear as a child—that they are proud of you, that you are inherently good and beautiful. For many, this provides closure and allows them to foster new beliefs about themselves.

And there are many other therapies built around teaching adults to reparent *themselves.* EMDR is one of them. In my first EMDR session, I embraced a child version of myself, "saved" her from her abuse, and told her she deserved love. But subsequent EMDR sessions were less effective, and I never was moved as starkly as in my first experience. Plus, Eleanor, her worksheets, and her constant coughing got on my nerves. After about three months, I stopped seeing her.

—

It was now seven months after my diagnosis, and summer had turned into fall. Even though I'd applied to a waitlist in the spring, it had taken this long to be paired with an affordable trauma-therapist-in-training through the National Institute for the Psychotherapies. Mr. Sweater-Vest had a gentle smile, but it was offset by his eyes, which seemed terrified of me. Among other modalities, he practiced Internal Family Systems, or IFS, a form of therapy that asks patients to break up their mind into subpersonalities—a kind of internal family unit. Let's say you're an alcoholic. You might consider that drinking is not your entire identity. There is just one part of your personality that wants you to drink all the time. IFS practitioners call it your "firefighter," because firefighters react to triggers and try to put out the fire by comforting you—often with unhealthy habits like drinking, binge eating, or doing drugs. This framework allows you to see your firefighter as part of your "family unit" and to subsequently forgive him for his tendency to throw beer on everything. He's just trying to calm you, after all, and maybe you needed him for a time. But also, maybe you can retire him from service now and use another, healthier part of your "family" to care for yourself. I know many people who found IFS to be instrumental in their healing process, so I gave it a whirl.

My new therapist, Mr. Sweater-Vest, asked me to draw caricatures of all of my subpersonalities. I doodled a jump-roping girl: my silly, fun side. A six-armed North Korean traffic controller: my obsessive manager. A Stepford wife with a meatloaf: my nurturer. A sword-wielding Arya Stark figure: my fighter. And a black puddle of sludge: my needy sad sack. He tried to get me to talk to these cartoons, to celebrate them and thank them for their service. But befriending them was a block I couldn't get over.

"What do you want to say to your puddle?" he asked me.

"Um…I have no idea. I…am not a fan of the puddle. I wish the puddle would go away forever. So…I…hope you dry up one day? Sorry?"

Mr. Sweater-Vest looked peeved.

"No? It doesn't seem you like that. Can you give me some direction? Is there something I *should* say to it?" I asked.

He just forced a smile and shrugged. He was trying to be quiet, hoping the growing awkwardness would force me to eventually feel so itchy that I'd fill in the space with my talking. I knew this technique because I used it all the time

with my interview subjects. *Well, you can't use my own tricks on me, buddy*. I fixed my gaze on him and we had a stare-off. His eyes started to take on that uncomfortable, scared-doe look, and something about his fear made me want to put him in my crosshairs.

"You have to trust the process," he eventually said, "or this isn't going to work. Where does your skepticism of this process come from? Do you want to explore why you have a hard time trusting others in the first place?"

"I *know* why I have a hard time trusting others, I just don't know what I'm supposed to say to a fucking *puddle*."

In retrospect, maybe I didn't talk to the puddle because I was too afraid to face and accept the part of myself I hated most. Or maybe I was rejecting reliance on family, even a made-up family in my head. Or maybe some people just don't jibe with talking to imaginary inanimate objects. In any case, IFS never really stuck for me. I exited the sessions with a voice in my head saying, *That was stupid. You're wasting your time, or maybe you're just too dumb to get this.* I knew that voice was my mother. But I still couldn't get her to shut up.

—

Once in a while, when I felt like I needed a pick-me-up, I still went to meditation classes. On a few occasions, I tried out MNDFL, an intimidatingly hip meditation space that looked as if it were straight out of an episode of *Black Mirror*. It had one very white, empty room with an enormous floor-to-ceiling circular window displaying a lush garden. It was peak wellness-as-gentrification, but it was also in the network of my fitness app, so I got to go for dirt cheap.

One of the times I went, the person directing the meditation was a beautiful man of indiscriminate nationality with a lovely, soothing British accent—straight from central casting. I set my pillow down between my legs, closed my eyes, and listened.

"I want to define love," he began. An interesting diversion from other guided meditations I'd heard before, which generally followed a template. "Love is something you innately know. You know what love feels like. It feels like wanting the best for another person. Feeling connected to that person. Feeling like you accept that person despite their flaws. I want you to focus really hard on a person who you love deeply and who loves you."

Of course I went with Joey. I unfolded my love for him enthusiastically. I conjured his kindness, his reassuring grin, the reckless certainty he made me feel. The love I had for him felt huge in my arms, too big to hold, like it was going to leap out of my chest. We all sat with these feelings of love for a few minutes, each of us a bright, humming being, radiating delight.

"Okay. Now, I want you to take that same feeling. That warm, wonderful, loving feeling. Feel it in your chest, in your feet, in your face, in your gut. Notice the texture of it. The shape of it. The joy of it. Now, I want you to apply it to yourself and understand that the person you love…must possess the same feelings for *you.*"

This was trickier. But Joey was waiting for me at home. He had made it clear that he'd *always* be waiting for me at home. So. It *must* be true. I tried to feel what he must feel toward me. Tried to see the good he must certainly see. Tried to see how he loves my flaws. But I struggled with this exercise, and tears started leaking out of my eyes. In the end, I stopped listing reasons. I just knew he loved me a lot. And what a fucking gift that was. I let waves of gratitude flow through me. How lucky I was to be loved in this way. How lucky, how lucky, how lucky.

After some time had passed, our teacher spoke for a third time. "Now. Gather up that warm and wonderful feeling of love. And apply it to *yourselves.*"

A year ago, I never would have been able to achieve this part. It would have been too hard. But the lessons from EMDR came flooding back.

During EMDR, I was able to conjure two separate, simultaneous versions of myself—the child version and the present version. I was able to feel child Stephanie's emotions and my own. I was able to comfort her with my present wisdom. I was able to simultaneously be the one giving love and the one receiving it.

Now, I practiced a similar visualization to the one I'd had during EMDR. I brought up a recent image of myself—one from nine months ago. The Stephanie who initially struggled with her diagnosis. My hair was purple now, but I imagined a figure in front of me with the gray-blue hair I'd had at the time, wearing her winter parka. And when I saw her, when I applied that big fat love to her, I didn't see disgust, actually. I felt empathy and pity and sadness, and

what I saw most of all was that she was working really, really hard. She was trying her damnedest to be *better.*

"You're trying so hard," I said to her. "You're suffering. But you're doing good work. You're doing all the things you think you're supposed to do."

I then explored other versions of me. It was like fanning out a deck of cards, each of them with some version of myself…little twelve-year-old me, little college me, me in my early twenties. And as I flipped through all of these Stephanies, I kept repeating this sentence again and again: "You are suffering, but you are trying so hard."

The teacher interrupted my soliloquy. "Embrace her!" he cried out, his tone celebratory, like a trumpeting reveille. "Accept her! Accept her despite her flaws! For who she is!"

My face scrunched up into a wrinkled raisin because this was really difficult. But I took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and leapt in. I embraced my February self. And then I tried to shift to embracing my current self, which was harder. To be held by my own consciousness. I pushed through the wall. It felt like curling up in a tulip. Like throwing a bull's-eye and winning the prize I'd always wanted. Foreign. Wholesome. *Good.*

Around me, the handful of other meditators sighed or caught their breath. It seemed the meditation was working for them, too.

Love yourself. Ah, there it was. For the first time without the help of hallucinogens: unconditional self-love.

—

I didn't feel peaceful walking out of that meditation place, but I felt a new determination—like I had a duty to take better care of myself emotionally. For the rest of the day, I collected things I liked about myself, and it was easy, because it felt like assembling a book of compliments for a friend.

But the best reward from that meditation center was a familiar face I could access every time I sat down to meditate. For a couple of minutes, I basked in the sun and breathed, and then I summoned an older version of myself, a year into the future. I imagined she was sitting behind me, enveloping me in a big-spoon hug. She had a few more wrinkles. A couple more freckles. She was wearing baggy, soft clothing. "Hi," I said.

“Hi,” she said.

“I’m sad today,” I admitted.

“It’s okay to be sad. You won’t be sad a week from now. I love you, and you are doing your best,” she said, and I knew she was right. I leaned back into her belly. I could almost feel it pushing back against me, a solid pressure, telling me I was not alone. She silenced my mother’s voice in my head. Excised her not just in body but in *mind.*

She did it because, as my third parent, that is her right.

—

Self-parenting exercises taught me to slowly rebuild healthy self-talk. But it must be said: Even though I know reparenting has helped dozens of my friends and acquaintances, almost everyone has told me it’s exhausting. Reparenting takes time, and concentration, and calmness. It takes an intellectual and physical effort to shove aside the comfortably worn neural pathways and go in a different direction. And even though that effort comes with joyous rewards, sometimes it also comes with sadness. Because expressing the kindness to yourself that you deserve often reminds you of the kindness you didn’t get.

Trauma isn’t just the sadness that comes from being beaten, or neglected, or insulted. That’s just one layer of it. Trauma also is mourning the childhood you *could* have had. The childhood other kids around you had. The fact that you could have had a mom who hugged and kissed you when you skinned your knee. Or a dad who stayed and brought you a bouquet of flowers at your graduation. Trauma is mourning the fact that, as an adult, you *have* to parent yourself. You have to stand in your kitchen, starving, near tears, next to a burnt chicken, and you can’t call your mom to tell her about it, to listen to her tell you that it’s okay, to ask if you can come over for some of her cooking. Instead, you have to pull up your bootstraps and solve the painful puzzle of your life by yourself. What other choice do you have? Nobody else is going to solve it for you.

That sadness—the sadness of loss—is a different flavor than the sadness of reckoning. The sadness of reckoning feels visceral and angry and tinged with violence. It feels healable, somehow, with revenge or justice.

But the sadness of a lost childhood feels like yearning, impossible desire. It feels like a hollow, insatiable hunger.

I'd spent my life telling myself I didn't *need* a mommy or a daddy. But now I was beginning to realize that this hunger isn't childish—it is a universal, primal need. We all want to be taken care of, and that's okay. The woman who appears to me when I meditate, in her soft, baggy clothes—she isn't quite the same as a parent, and she never will be. But she takes me into her arms and whispers, "I want to love you." I lean in and let her.

CHAPTER 35

Learning to need a family—to rely on them and give myself to them—was a skill I had to learn in order to date Joey.

Christmas was approaching, which meant that Joey and I needed to go to the mall (a sweater for his mom), Best Buy (a drone for his dad), Forbidden Planet (comics for his brother), CVS (a Whitman's Sampler for his grandmother), Verameat (jewelry for his youngest sibling), and Sur La Table (cooking stuff for his other brother). And that was the bare minimum. We'd need to pick up at least ten other presents for aunts, uncles, and significant others along the way.

The fact that I was shuttling around town, spending my hard-earned cash on mom sweaters, was strange to say the least…because I had always hated Christmas.

I endured my first solo Christmas my senior year of high school after my dad left. I drove to a Christmas fair downtown and bought a hot dog on a stick. I stared at couples riding a snowflake-festooned Ferris wheel, children laughing on a shiny green Christmas train. And I thought, *You all are so fucking stupid.* Reindeer are stupid. Associating snowflakes with Christmas in California is stupid. Capitalism in general: STUPID. On my way out, I passed a street vendor, stole a large inflatable Santa (inexplicably attached to a stick), and proceeded to cry in my room for the rest of the night.

—

For a few years, I spent Christmases and Hanukkahs with friends' families, but even though they were all very welcoming and kind, I couldn't help but feel out of place. I'd watch loving parents catch their children as they passed through the kitchen and pull them into a hug. They'd whisper, "I love you, *mijo,*" or "When did you get so big, *bubeleh*?" They'd savor well-worn family stories at dinner, and afterward, my friends would jump into cuddle puddles with their siblings on the couch. It was all so beautiful. And it was excruciating, because it wasn't mine.

Eventually, I stopped attending entirely. I tried to pretend that Christmas wasn't real. I'd work, or paint, or watch DVDs, or take a hot bath. I'd treat myself to an elaborate meal or bring cheesecake to the dudes at the halfway house across the street in exchange for loosies and jokes. But eventually, at two A.M., I'd find myself listening to Death Cab's "Someday You Will Be Loved" on repeat.

Christmas got way better when shrooms came into the picture; everyone else was celebrating Jesus, but I was the one getting *really* spiritual. Still, I tensed up after Thanksgiving, changed the channel if I heard "The Little Drummer Boy." Took the long way to avoid seeing too many Christmas lights.

—

But all of that changed when I started dating Joey. Because Joey really, *really* loves Christmas.

We'd been seeing each other for only a few months when the holidays rolled around. I told him, "I'm not really into the Christmas Industrial Complex because that shit is for people with families." He nodded, listening, but was suspiciously quiet. When I next visited his apartment, it was decked out—a pot roast on the stove, lights, garlands, and a bare tree next to a box of his parents' ornaments. It was like I'd wandered into a Lifetime Christmas movie, and even though I usually turned my nose up at these things, there was something different this time: I wasn't walking into someone else's Christmas. It was all just for me.

A few days later, he handed me a hot chocolate and took me to a neighborhood famous for its Christmas lights. And a week after that, on Christmas Eve, he insisted I come to Queens for his family's two-day Christmas

celebration. When I arrived, his family smiled and introduced themselves to me, hugged me hello…and then his dad immediately brandished a wet, briny bag.

"Do you know how to make clams?"

"Um…yeah? Like, clams with white wine and garlic?"

"I dunno. *Clams.* I picked these up, no idea what to do with them." He dropped the bag into my hands. "Here, you make 'em."

It was the craziest Christmas I'd ever crashed. There were no quiet, warm snuggles while the parents took the food out of the oven in a timely manner. Instead, his little sibling started yelling that nobody understood them, his father went on a rant about the lamestream media, his mother couldn't find her glasses and shuffled around bumping into things, the eggplant was embroiled in chaos and drama, and the dog shat on the floor. No, that last part's not true. Since the kitchen was under construction, the dog shat on the enormous cardboard mat that was the floor. Instead of wiping it up, they cut a square around the poop with an X-Acto knife and kept moving. There was no room to be socially awkward because most social rules were out the window—and around the corner and maybe a few neighborhoods away. Because of the remodel, we all had to sit on the floor around the coffee table in the living room to eat, but the food was plentiful and good, and his family was hilarious and loving and *so excited I was there* and repeated it hastily every time they passed me on the way to clean up the next mess.

Tradition dictated that on Christmas Eve, his family would stay up late making presents for one another. Everyone had to announce themselves before they entered a room to avoid possibly seeing their gift, but inevitably, there were mishaps, followed by more yelling. At four A.M., the yelling ceased, everyone crashed, and in the morning, there was an avalanche of sleepily wrapped, incredibly thoughtful presents. Joey got me a claddagh ring and wrote me an exquisitely crafted love letter about how excited he was about our blossoming relationship. He had tried so hard to make the holiday special because he wanted me to love Christmas—but more than that, he wanted me to love the thing that Christmas represented. He wanted me to feel comfortable belonging to a family.

But he would not have succeeded if his family had not also gone to great lengths to make me feel comfortable. His siblings got me teas and comics and jewelry. His grandmother kept making dirty old-lady jokes at us in her Irish

brogue: “You’re so good, Stephanie! I’m sure the two of you never had a fight. You did now? Well, get to the making up fast. That’s the fun part.” And then she’d wink and elbow me. His mother asked Joey what my favorite pie was and made it special for me—raspberry pear. She also gave me a pile of gifts too large to carry: kitchen appliances and perfumes and lipstick and hats and socks and sweaters and everything warm and cute she could possibly imagine. I felt so guilty for the expense; this was just *so much.* But she beamed as she watched us open it all. It was clear that there was little in this life that brought her more joy than to watch people rip open the paper she’d so carefully folded.

Their care extended beyond Christmas. One day, his mother asked me about my family and then said, “Well, forget about them; we’re your family now. You’re ours.” His siblings invited me to every birthday celebration or karaoke bar hangout and told me their secrets. They gave me their old furniture and playlists and forced me to watch the cartoons they loved. We all organized epic annual summer blowouts together upstate, where we played tug-of-war in the woods. When I shared my anxieties around family with Joey’s mother, she grabbed my hand with tears in her eyes and said, “I promise you I’ll never leave you.”

On our second Christmas together, his mother gave me a bunch of clothing that I previously thought might be too revealing to wear to a family occasion (but if she wanted me to look cute and show off my whole derriere, then cool I guess), mugs and appliances and a salad bowl for our apartment, and a horde of other items, which all got blended together with the rest of his family’s maddening generosity. Joey continued his “You Better Love Christmas” campaign and gave me a wooden clock he’d crafted himself. It opened up to a ten-year calendar to plan our future.

—

Somehow we survived my crazy year of diagnosis and unemployment and meditation, and now, this would be our third Christmas together. I was excited to see what kinds of mischief he’d get up to this time. But after all the presents were opened and the wrapping paper crumpled into a bag, I still hadn’t received anything from him. That’s when he handed everyone in the family envelopes. Inside each of them was a puzzle piece.

One Christmas years ago, when Joey and his siblings were little, their dad designed an elaborate treasure hunt for them to find their presents by following clues. The kids got really into it and started throwing these treasure hunts for one another. This year, Joey was taking up the tradition.

We divided into two teams and started searching; there were clues designed for each family member. One required finding the Mirror of Erised from Harry Potter and looking into its reflection. That led to a clue based on a *Rick and Morty* joke, which led to a chess puzzle, which led to us changing the pitch on a series of musical notes until we realized they spelled C-A-B-B-A-G-E, inside which the next clue was hidden. The three-hour hunt required us to pick locks, sip liquor, look for clues in the Bible, and solve math problems. And then we all stumbled over one another up the stairs.

On the door to his brother's room was a large map of New York City with some index cards tacked to each side. Each of the cards listed key moments in our relationship: the first time he told me he loved me, the tour he'd taken me on of downtown New York, my old apartment. And that's when I knew. When I solved the puzzle, the final clue told me—and me alone—to go to his grandmother's house down the street. I started trembling and crying, and I couldn't find my shoes anywhere, so Joey's mother gently led me to the closet and put her own Uggs on my feet. I hiccuped with nervousness and excitement all the way down the street.

Joey was waiting in his grandmother's living room, next to the wall of family pictures. "Everyone here loves you so much," he said quietly, as I continued to hyperventilate, tears streaming down my cheeks. "And they have good reason. You're wonderful, and no one's ever made me feel more at home than you have. I want to be your home, and I want to do it forever. I want you to be my family. Will you marry me?" He got on one knee and opened the velvet box; in it was a beautiful ring I'd lusted after with my best friends.

I yelled, "Oh my God, Joey, NO! That's a diamond! This must have been so expensive! You should have gotten a cubic zirconia!"

But also, I said yes.

—

Afterward, his entire family was waiting for us in their home. His siblings all

gave me sincere and heartfelt welcomes, and one of his brothers told me, “I cannot think of a better person to take care of my brother, but I also can’t think of a better person to have in my family and my life.” His mother hugged me and cried on my shoulder, then opened a bottle of champagne. His grandmother held my hand before falling asleep next to me on the couch.

The present wasn’t really the ring. The present wasn’t even really the proposal. The present was three years of barbecues and escape rooms and raspberry pear pies, wine prayers exchanged at Passover, and late-night movie screenings. It was the fact that when I needed help moving, washing dishes, figuring out what board games to buy, there was always someone there. The present was this little tribe of reliable people who considered me a part of them. It was this feeling of belonging. *You’re ours.*

For days afterward, I couldn’t sleep. I was too happy. Too unbelieving. *How did you do this? How did you persuade someone to commit themselves to your crazy ass?* I’d ask myself. And then, in awe: *At last, somebody wants to take care of you. Somebody loves you so much. Somebody wants to stay.*

I turned toward Joey in the dark to look at his sweet face. Even though he was asleep, he responded to my stirring by rolling toward me and enveloping me in his embrace.

PART V

CHAPTER 36

In January 2019, nearly one year after my diagnosis, I was finally feeling like I could enjoy the fruits of my labor. I was engaged to the man I loved. My freelance career was finally coming together—I had steady work and was making almost as much as I had before leaving my job. And my self-soothing techniques were paying off. Most of the time, I felt more gratitude than doubt. People around me seemed so much nicer: I got a free scone from my café! People chatted me up on the subway! It took some time to realize why—I was moving through the world with less fear. I was smiling, trusting, open.

I was going to start this brand-new year with a bang by heading to the Sundance Film Festival in Utah, where I was scheduled to do a live performance of one of my radio stories. While I was there, I was going to meet up with my childhood best friend, Kathy, and we were going to enjoy some nature—hot springs, skiing maybe. I hoped that this trip would be representative of the coming year: full of adventure instead of fear, friendship instead of isolation, success instead of self-loathing.

I hustled through the Delta terminal to catch my flight, when all of a sudden, I felt a deep, stabbing pain so abrupt and shocking that I stopped in my tracks, my rolling suitcase skidding ahead of me. I *was* on my period, but this wasn't a menstrual cramp. It was something sharper, as if someone had stuck a fishhook inside me and was tugging with every step.

The pain flicked on and off during my trip. Walking aggravated it, but the muddy hot springs soothed it away. I saw a gynecologist when I returned. She ordered several tests—blood tests, an ultrasound, an unpleasant scan of my

uterus that involved sticking a camera *up there* and wiggling it around a lot. And then she sat me down and told me matter-of-factly, “Well, it seems like you probably have endometriosis.”

“What? What is that?”

“Well, it’s basically when the lining of your uterus starts growing outside of your uterus. Around your fallopian tubes, around your whole pelvic area, sometimes around your intestines or the muscles of your lower back. There’s no way to really prove that you have it without opening you up for surgery. And there’s no cure. There’s just pain management, maybe putting you on hormones to try to keep it from growing aggressively. Eventually, if it gets really bad, we might open you up and try to cut some of the lining back, but we’ll try to avoid that.”

The first thing I thought, and subsequently blurted out, was, “I have complex PTSD. Did that cause this?”

“Endometriosis affects about one in ten women. It’s really common, nothing odd there. And tell your psychiatrist about your mental health stuff. Don’t tell me.”

I flinched at her directness, even though I’ve been told some version of that sentence before: “Tell your psychiatrist. Your brain has nothing to do with your physical health.” Even though I knew that was completely wrong, I felt self-conscious using my precious few minutes with the doctor to give her a lecture on how trauma affects brain/body systems.

The doctor told me that my periods would become increasingly painful as the endometriosis progressed. My period had already been difficult, but it was mostly psychological. For years I had aggressive premenstrual dysphoric disorder, which resulted in deep anger and depression the week before my period. Now it was going to feel as if I was getting emotionally *and* physically stabbed? Well, at least the doctor said she wanted to stop my period entirely to slow the progression.

“How can we stop my period?”

“We’ll put you on the pill.” The doctor typed into her computer without looking at me.

“Wait—I’m allergic to the pill. I’ve been on a few, and they all make me break out into a full-body rash that’s so bad it leaves scars,” I countered.

“What about IUDs? Says here you have a copper one. How about Mirena?”

“Mirena made me so depressed, I felt suicidal for the two months I was on it,” I said quietly. “Should you take out my IUD? Will that help? I mean, it makes periods worse, right?”

“No need. Copper has no hormones, so it won’t change anything. Hmm. Okay—then I guess we’ll have to force you into an early menopause. I’ll give you Lupron—it’ll give you hot flashes, mood swings, that kind of thing—but it’ll stop your period.”

Her bedside manner was infuriating. As if this was no big deal. “Wait!” I said, racking my brain. I’d tried damn near every form of birth control, and everything had made me depressed. But becoming menopausal two decades before my time didn’t seem great for my mental health, either. This decision felt impossible: Should I prioritize my physical health or my mental health? But I knew that my physical health and mental health were deeply intertwined. If my mental health suffered, my physical health would suffer, too. Should I refrain from taking medication and endure the pain, which would probably affect my mental health? Or take medication that would improve my physical health but wreck my mental health?

“Do I have a choice here? Do I have to go on anything? There isn’t anything else?”

“If you don’t go on any medication, your pain will probably steadily increase until it is excruciating. Trust me on this one,” she said and laughed. “I have plenty of patients who can’t think about anything *but* their pain. That’ll make you miserable, too.”

“Okay then.” I gave in. “I’ve been on the NuvaRing once before, years ago. It also made me really depressed, but it was the least terrible hormonal option I’ve had. If that’s the only thing I can do…”

“It is. Great! I’ll write you a prescription for it.”

“I don’t know if you understand. It’s not great. I’m going to be really sad now,” I said, squirming under my paper gown in her cold, gray room.

“If it makes you depressed, I’ll just write you up a prescription for Zoloft. That should cover it,” the doctor returned brightly and then waltzed out of the room to her next patient.

My legs were wobbly with this life-changing news, so I indulged in a taxi ride home and googled “endometriosis.” One study showed that women who have suffered from childhood trauma were 80 percent more likely to develop painful endometriosis.

Of course.

—

It is a great, sexist irony that in our society, PTSD is generally considered a male condition. It is the *warrior’s* disease, a blight of the mind that must be earned by time in battle, in some dangerous overseas desert or jungle.

But the real statistics suggest the opposite: Women are more than twice as likely to have PTSD than men. Ten percent of women are expected to suffer from PTSD in their lifetimes, as opposed to just 4 percent of men. But even after #MeToo, a global movement to recognize the legitimacy of women’s trauma, treatment for this trauma remains a half-assed endeavor, an afterthought in the shadow of the glory of war. And it has always been this way.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman argues that even though women were critical to the development of modern psychoanalysis, our pain has been abandoned and ignored at every turn. The patient zero behind talk therapy was Anna O., a patient of the pioneering psychoanalyst Josef Breuer. She was critical to the understanding that trauma could spawn mental illness. Sigmund Freud was the first to hypothesize that female “hysteria” stemmed from childhood sexual assault, but he retracted his theory once he realized that it meant the ritzy neighborhood in Vienna in which he practiced was rife with sexual predators and child molesters.[1]

A hundred years later, our scientific community still attempts to brush women’s relationships to trauma under the rug. Until very recently, whenever PTSD researchers experimented with trauma in mice, they only used *male* mice. When they started trauma studies on female mice, however, they found that females responded to electric shocks very differently.[2] Whereas male mice froze up when shocked, female mice darted and tried to escape. This lack of scientific study on female bodies is significant because PTSD manifests differently in human males and females as well.

Symptomatically, men with PTSD are more likely to exhibit anger, paranoia,

and an exaggerated startle response. Women are more likely to be avoidant and have mood and anxiety disorders. Women generally focus on regulating their emotions, while men focus on solving problems. Women often deal with stressful situations using a tend-and-befriend response, rather than men's fight-or-flight response. Women generally seek more social support than men do, and they benefit more from psychotherapy. They also tend to lean more heavily on self-blame.[3]

But no one knows exactly why men and women experience PTSD differently.

Joe Andreano is a cognitive neuroscientist and instructor at Massachusetts General Hospital, who, among other things, studies the changes that happen in menstruating people's brains during their cycles. "A lot of the time women at conferences will tell me that I'm very brave for doing this," he confessed to me. "And then afterward I feel slightly threatened that they would view it that way. Like, what…what should I be afraid of?"

For the record, I think Andreano, as a man in science, handles his subject matter with a very well-balanced mixture of scientific objectivity, sympathy for the feminine experience, and antagonism at dude bros who make PMS jokes at conferences.

They make these jokes because Andreano has found in his neuroimaging studies that during the mid-luteal phase (the second half of the menstrual cycle after ovulation), we have higher levels of emotional arousal and more connectivity between emotion and memory. This finding is far more complicated than just "Bitches be PMSing!" This connectivity means that if we are unlucky enough to be abused during this time period, those abuses can lodge more deeply in our memories and become encoded in our brains. These memories are also more likely to encourage a negative memory bias, a tendency to return to these negative memories more than positive ones. Bottom line: We are more vulnerable to developing PTSD or depression if we experience trauma during a certain point in our cycles.

"But the amygdala is also involved in endocrine regulation and the regulation of stress responses, right?" Andreano explained to me. "So you're not just going to be having this change in behavior or memory. You're also going to have changes in the way that your body hormonally reacts to stress. And the

stress hormone and sex hormone systems are very intimately connected. You do something to one, you're going to influence the other. We perturb sex hormones, we perturb stress hormones, which then further perturbs sex hormones, and so on."

"So it becomes a feedback loop," I said, piecing things together.

"Right."

It starts to make sense. Women are more vulnerable to trauma during certain parts of our cycles. Then that trauma makes women more vulnerable to unhealthy sex hormone changes. The facts bear it out. Children who experience trauma are more likely to hit puberty earlier. Again, women who experienced childhood trauma are 80 percent more likely to experience painful endometriosis.[4] They're much more likely to develop premenstrual dysphoric disorder. More likely to develop fibroids.[5] It may affect fertility.[6] They're at greater risk for postpartum depression[7] and depression in menopause.[8]

Fate had finally come knocking. I did not have to wait until I got older to experience the inflammation and health risks the books had warned me about. They were here.

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After I got my endometriosis diagnosis, I blubbered on the phone to my friend Jen. "I was just getting happy," I told her. "I was just figuring it out. I was just *healing*. And if I have to go back on the NuvaRing, I know I'm going to get depressed. I know I'm going to go all the way back to square one."

Because she is the most empathetic person I know, she started crying on the phone with me. "Oh, Steph," she sighed, sniffling. "You've worked so hard. You've learned so much. Maybe it won't be that bad."

But it was that bad.

The NuvaRing did make me depressed—terribly so. It also gave me vulvodynia, which made me so sore I couldn't even use tampons.

I went on Lexapro to offset my depression. It was the third SSRI I'd taken.

Throughout my life, people have wanted me to take meds because they assumed the drugs would "fix" me. After I went off Prozac in college because it made me foggy and unable to concentrate, one friend said not taking my

medication meant I wasn't "trying hard enough" and I didn't really prioritize my mental health, so she couldn't take care of me anymore.

A decade later, another friend, also tired of my constant complaining, said that going on an SSRI would make me "less selfish." Samantha, my therapist at the time, said it was a bad idea. She said I needed to work through my problems, not numb them. But I didn't want to be selfish, so I ignored her and went on Wellbutrin anyway. It exacerbated my panic attacks and made me manic. Luckily, I noticed that my resting heart rate had skyrocketed to more than one hundred beats per minute and immediately went off it.

After Wellbutrin, and after my diagnosis, I spent a good amount of time reading about how SSRIs were far from a one-stop fix for PTSD, depression, and anxiety. I have many friends for whom medication has been critical in order to sleep, work, get through the day. And if meds work for you, take them. More power to you! But for millions of people, meds can be unhelpful—or even make their conditions worse. Antidepressants fail to outperform placebos in up to half of clinical trials. Armed with fMRI technology, brain scientists now understand that assuming we are born with chemical imbalances is putting the chicken before the egg—trauma changes the structure and chemical and hormonal responses of our brains. In many cases, we can't just pump opposing chemicals into our brains with the assumption that things will change. We have to treat the underlying, original cause: the trauma.

So I popped my first Lexapro with great hesitation. And I made a pact with myself that if the medication didn't work, I would not blame myself, and I wouldn't jeopardize my health by continuing to take pills I knew weren't right for my body. At first, the Lexapro didn't seem to do much at all except make me a bit drowsy. After a few weeks, it became clear that my suffering was somewhat alleviated—but only because I was sleeping so much. I'd sleep ten hours a night and still nod off at my desk twice a day. A couple of months into my very low dose, I was driving our car across town and pulled over at a nice park to enjoy the view for five minutes. I accidentally fell asleep for two hours. That level of constant drowsiness didn't feel safe. So I went off the drug and tried to manage my sadness with the many tools I'd acquired.

But my tools weren't as accessible as they had been before. The increased stress from my depression caused my joints to inflame to the point where I

couldn’t do yoga—restorative or otherwise. Even meditation was no longer an option. When I lay down to try to do a body scan, I could no longer focus on the air on my palms because the throbbing in other parts of my body was so loud. I tried guided meditations designed for pain, but even these did not help. Focusing on my body, focusing on the way it felt, just brought up waves of dread, betrayal, and anger. Dread at the inflammation coursing through my body, bringing fears of my imminent death, of becoming another ACE statistic. Betrayal at a body that had never felt quite mine and that I now wanted to dissociate from more than ever before. And anger—because it was as if my mother’s hand was reaching forward, defying the laws of space-time, to hurt me again. The pain from being slapped to the floor or lashed with hangers—it was not gone. It had been stored deep inside my joints and womb. I was still being punished.

Without my tools, and exacerbated by my hormone medication, my C-PTSD symptoms returned, stronger than ever.

I tried my best. I really did. I did not slip back into the quicksand of C-PTSD’s grasp without a fight. I read Anne Lamott’s books and Suzan Colón’s *Yoga Mind* and listened every day to podcasts put out by Esalen and local Zen centers. I tried to understand that even though my world was narrowing to the very essentials of being alive, the essentials were still an abundance. I tried to bask in that abundance. I tried to eat my oatmeal with seaweed in it mindfully. I read the writings of American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön, which suggested I ask, “As a result of my pain, [do] I know more about what it is to be human?” I read *How to Do Nothing*, a book by Jenny Odell about the value of stillness, and tried to understand that my *can’t*s were okay—were, if anything, a fiery rebellion against a capitalist culture of overwork. I spent a lot of time sitting outside and staring at birds.

And I continued with therapy. Well, for a while. I’d been seeing Mr. Sweater-Vest at the trauma school for a few months now—the guy who had me draw pictures of my personalities. He had promised at the beginning of our time that within six months I’d feel significantly better, but we were most of the way through that time frame and I felt worse than ever. So one day, I walked into his office and started yelling about how furious I was that I had no control of my body.

“Yes. That sounds hard. I hear you saying that you tried your best to take care of yourself, but this situation is unfair and you feel hopeless,” he said in his careful, therapist-y way. It drove me fucking crazy. “Do you want to do some EMDR? Shall we try a calming technique?”

“What exactly are we doing here?” I snapped at him. “I’ve asked this of you many times, but I actually need an answer today. What is my treatment plan? What the fuck am I supposed to be EMDRing? Or IFSing? Or CBTing? Do you not have anything else to give me to deal with this? Like, what stage are we in? What comes next? When is this supposed to work? What’s my homework? What’s the plan?”

“Let’s talk about why you feel you need a plan,” he said. “I feel like you’re not trusting the process.”

“I could trust the process more if I understood more about what the process is.”

“I think this could have roots in your trust issues and your trust of me. Shall we talk about how this might be your obsessive need to control things coming to the surface?”

I am lucky that I was able to maintain one trauma tool. In retrospect, it might’ve been the most important one: the ability to say “This is not what I need. Bye.”

I’ve had doctors tell me I was crazy, that my symptoms were psychosomatic when I got rashes from the pill and depression from Mirena. I’ve had doctors tell me that my copper IUD couldn’t be affecting my mood or my endometriosis or my hormones because it had no hormonal side effects. I’ve had doctors charge me hundreds of dollars to give me incorrect diagnoses or gaslight me into thinking that I didn’t know my own body.

But this time I would not be denied my reality by doctors. I was fed up with it.

I stopped seeing my therapist after that session. Wanting information and structure on the nature of my therapy should not have been pathologized. It was a reasonable need that should have been respected.

And I stopped seeing the gynecologist who snapped, “Tell your psychiatrist about your mental health stuff. Don’t tell me.”

No. I will be heard.

I switched to a new gynecologist who specializes in pelvic pain disorders. Her intake forms took longer than other doctors' because there was an entire section for trauma and whether I was abused. When she sat me down for a consultation, one of her first questions was "What was the nature of the abuse?"

When I looked startled, she said, "It's okay. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

But I just grinned. "No, no, no! I want to! I'm happy to! I'm just surprised!"

Dr. Emily Blanton wasn't rushed. She took her time with me—a full hour of careful, deliberate examination and explanation. As she snapped off her gloves, she said, "My theory is that you've spent the last two decades with chronic inflammation as a result of endometriosis. You probably have muscle damage in your pelvic area from it being stressed and inflamed for years, and you're just finally seeing the consequences now. It's like you've been walking around with a charley horse, constantly, for years."

Dr. Blanton allowed me to continue on the NuvaRing for a couple more months, but after my next checkup, when I came back depressed and in pain, she didn't hesitate a moment. She didn't deny my pain. She didn't make me feel as if I *should* be responding to treatment better or as if any of this was my fault. "Well, you're not going to continue on this treatment plan anymore," she declared brightly. "You're not going to take something that makes you feel bad. Emotional pain is just as bad as physical pain, and we're here to make you feel *better*."

She took me off the NuvaRing and started me on pelvic floor physical therapy—fifteen minutes of stretches a day.

Within a month, I was feeling better. Shortly thereafter, she took out my copper IUD. That reduced my symptoms to the point where my pain was totally manageable. And—for the first time in the ten years I'd had my IUD—my premenstrual dysphoric disorder symptoms alleviated significantly. If I hadn't had the courage to leave my crappy gynecologist, I'd probably be going through menopause right now.

And if I hadn't had the courage to leave awkward Mr. Sweater-Vest, I might never have found the therapist who gave me the healing I so desperately needed.

CHAPTER 37

"The essence of what trauma does to a person is it makes them feel like they don't deserve love," the voice in my headphones said. I was on the train, on my way to yet another doctor's appointment, but this statement rang so true that I dug furiously through my bag and pulled out a notebook to write it down. I was about to put away my pen when I heard another especially good line, so I kept it out, writing furiously on my lap.

My friend Jen, who often sends me little poems and links throughout the day, sent me this podcast—*Road to Resilience*, a show put out by the Mount Sinai Health System. This episode, "The Long Arm of Childhood Trauma," features comedian Darrell Hammond, who is a C-PTSD survivor, speaking with Jacob Ham, a psychologist at Mount Sinai. It's nice that a celebrity like Hammond is out here normalizing the condition. But it was Ham who excited me. He kept spouting off some of the best nuggets of trauma-based truth I'd ever heard. Especially when he talked about the Incredible Hulk.

He explained that Bruce Banner was abused as a child, and as a consequence, he developed a trauma-informed rage. Then he was blasted by gamma rays that made his rage an actual superpower. Ham said the Hulk operates exactly like someone who has been triggered. As his rage grows, his IQ decreases. He can't speak, he can't form complete thoughts, he loses self-awareness. All he cares about is what's in front of him and how he can protect himself. And he can't turn the Hulk off immediately—it takes time for him to calm down, sleep it off.

“The…thing I love about the Hulk is that he’s not a villain. He’s actually one of the most badass superheroes in the whole universe, right?” Ham said in my headphones. When your own triggered Hulk starts to come out, the reflex is to think, *Oh no. I’m getting rageful. I’m turning into a monster again. No, stop, Hulk! Go away!* But Ham takes an opposite approach. He talks to his own Hulk tenderly. “What I’m trying to do is to say, like, ‘Hulk, you’re back? You think that I’m in trouble? Oh, thank you so much for loving me so much that you’re trying to protect me.’

“Make friends with the Hulk,” Ham asserted.

I still felt so much shame when my Hulk emerged with all its terrifying rage. But to frame it this way was comforting. That rage is not always evil. It can even be productive if deployed correctly.

Then Ham said that we as a society should be tolerant of Hulks sometimes. He advocated explaining your Hulk to others. To tell those close to you, “Sometimes he comes roaring out. And then as soon as the Hulk is gone, I’m going to be back. But please don’t mistake me for my Hulk.”[1]

It would feel so safe to have everyone in my life understand where I’m coming from just a little bit better. I was immediately inclined to text this podcast to everyone I knew, but I stopped myself. I was full of questions. How could I ask people to tolerate my Hulk? Wouldn’t it be considered selfish? Why shouldn’t everyone just get rid of their Hulk friends? So as soon as I got home, I found Ham online. He is the director of the Center for Child Trauma and Resilience at Mount Sinai. I shot him an email, explaining that I’m a journalist researching trauma and I wanted to know more about effective treatments for C-PTSD…and I had questions about his Hulk comparison. He replied eight minutes later, asking me to come to his office next week.

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Jacob Ham has a small office down a sterile tan corridor at Mount Sinai. His office decor is straight out of a CB2 catalog: modern gray furniture, soothing-yet-hip blue-gray walls, decorative wooden…doohickeys. The kind I’d pick up and examine at a store, then shruggingly put back because they were too expensive. A cubed bookshelf filled with trauma books, snacks, and games for his kid patients. A standing desk.

He greeted me with a mixture of warmth and hesitation. He was smiley and slim, with glasses and good Korean skin. Was he thirty-five or fifty? No way to know. He moved gracefully around his office, as if everything were made of glass.

In contrast, I sat down with a loud flop on his gray couch, yanked my recorder out of my backpack, and immediately got down to business: I loved your podcast, such a fan, so interesting, the Hulk part! Wow! Yes, sit here. Yes, your mouth should be this far from the microphone. What did you eat for breakfast? You sound great!

And then I launched into my questions. “So I’ve read a bunch of trauma books, and it seems like there are a lot of tactics for intervening in traumatized children’s lives but not so many solid answers for what to do with adults, particularly for complex PTSD. It seems like techniques like biofeedback or EMDR or CBT or IFS or MBSR or a bunch of other crazy acronyms can help for singular trauma, but for people with complex PTSD, these therapies are less reliable. So for someone who has C-PTSD, where do you start as a clinician? How do you treat them?”

“I trained in five different evidence-based treatments for trauma: TFCBT, attachment, self-regulation and competency, something called STRONG Families, and child-parent psychotherapy. But I currently use modern relational psychoanalytic approaches. And I really do think that it’s through the relationship that I get to exercise different experiential states, self-states that are free from trauma,” he said.

I nodded, trying to act smart. “Oh…”

I tried to pull more out of him, but each explanation led to another confusing explanation. He spoke abstractly about different kinds of attunement and the relationship between prefrontal cortex deterioration and attachment issues. He kept saying he practiced “pulling for poignancy,” which I felt like I should get but didn’t. All of these terms and phrases were familiar, so why didn’t I understand him? Would admitting my confusion make me seem like a bad journalist?

“Yeah, but, TFCBT—*does it work*? Like, which of these things that you do actually *works* the best? What’s the *answer*?” I asked, a bit stupidly. This led to

another tangent of kind-of-maybe-depends abstract noodling about various modalities.

Forty-five minutes of confusion later, I looked down at my list of questions hopelessly, feeling lost. Maybe this interview would just be a wash. In a final bid, I asked, “Is there a question I should ask that would help me help you give advice to people with C-PTSD?”

Ham focused in on me, his eyes narrowing behind his glasses. I recoiled instinctively at the intensity. Then he said, “So whenever we are thinking about big-picture stuff and it’s leading us nowhere, it makes me want to focus on what’s happening right now. So, right now, this makes me want to understand the quality of your despair. You keep asking this big question of can things change? But why are you in this state? You said earlier that you’ve been striving for ten years and you’ve been doing all this research…but the research isn’t helpful to you. And in my mind, what remains a curiosity is: What’s *your* suffering? What makes it intolerable? What do you still want to change?”

“Um, hmm. What is my *suffering* like? Um…uh…” I was completely unused to my interview subject turning the mic around on me. I took a deep breath.

“I think…my default is to be distrustful and fearful and to be in a state of…*bleh.* And that *bleh*-ness ranges from being very depressed to walking around in a sort of dissociated state. It gets in the way of things like, you know, sitting in a meeting where I’m supposed to—it’s…” I sighed. “It still feels like a constant barrage of doubts and beliefs that everyone hates me.”

“And why do you do that?”

I tried to redirect the conversation back to the abstract: to charter schools, to intergenerational trauma, to something else, something larger than me. But over and over, he latched on to me with eerie, homed-in eye contact and volleyed my questions back to me: Why did I ask? What had I tried before? When I failed, did I forgive myself? It was like no other interview I’d ever sat through, and it was utterly perplexing. At the end of our hour and a half, I still had no idea whether I learned or understood anything, and I couldn’t figure out how or why I divulged so much about myself.

As I was packing my kit to go, Ham gave me a hesitant look and said, “I’m going to ask you something. I don’t even know if it’s ethical—I’ll have to ask

my colleagues to check. But I'm curious. Would you let me treat you? For free?"

"What?!"

"I'll treat you for free, in exchange for us recording our sessions. And then at the end, maybe you can do something with the audio." He explained that he'd been really fascinated by audio storytelling and had been interested for a long time in playing around with it. He'd recorded sessions with patients before, with their permission, and people had found listening to these sessions helpful. He liked that I seemed so eager and willing to heal and that I was an audio professional who could try to teach others with my work. But, of course, only if I was open to putting my therapy sessions out there.

"We'll try it for four months. If it doesn't work for you, you can stop anytime. You can leave, no questions asked. It's no pressure, no obligation. You also would have one hundred percent ownership of the audio. Anything you want to use, you can use. Anything you don't feel comfortable with, you can leave out. You're in complete control. And if at the end you decide you don't like it, you don't have to do anything with it. I just think it has the potential to be an interesting experiment," he said.

From the moment he offered, I was already on board. I needed a great therapist. Ham was kind of a weirdo, for sure. But at the same time, he gave me trustworthy, kind, and appealing vibes from the get-go. He *did* seem like a disturbingly good listener. And I didn't have a problem putting my therapy sessions out there. I'd actually asked therapists before if I could record our sessions, thinking they'd be interesting, but they'd always denied me the opportunity. Were there any reasons why I *shouldn't* do this? I couldn't think of a single one.

"Sure!" I said, eventually. "Sure! I want to try this out. Out of curiosity, though…how much do your sessions usually cost?"

"Four hundred dollars an hour," he said sheepishly.

"FOUR HUNDRED DOLLARS AN HOUR!" I shouted back at him.

"I have a full-time job doing director stuff," Ham explained. "So I have a really limited amount of hours to do therapy." Forty-plus hours of his week were already going toward creating trauma and substance abuse programs for youth at Mount Sinai, creating trauma centers for Black men in Harlem and LGBTQ+ communities in the city, and training postdocs and staff at the hospital.

The next day, Dr. Ham got back to me and said he'd spoken to his colleagues and his boss. They said that as long as there was absolutely no pressure or manipulation for me to use my work in a way that made me feel uncomfortable, it was okay for him to take me on pro bono.

This was a rare and unbelievably lucky opportunity. A real, in-demand expert would actually be taking me on. FOR FREE. I did the math—this would be $6,500 worth of therapy! I hesitated. I worried about the ethics of it and my immense privilege. How many people could afford to invest in their mental health in this way? But these doubts were quelled by the singeing pain under my skin—I was desperate for relief.

"You've got a deal," I said.

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Some therapists believe that you can learn everything there is to learn about how to heal in the first session. The rest of the time spent with your therapist is just theme and variation, practicing fractals of your first conversation, repeating the lessons until they finally ingrain themselves in you as fundamental beliefs. That was certainly the case with my first session with Dr. Ham, which was unlike any first session I'd ever had. (Most of his patients call him Jacob, but from the very beginning, I facetiously called him "Doc," or "Dr. Ham," and it stuck.)

I'd seen so many therapists at this point—almost ten—that I knew the dance of the first session well. You tell the therapist what you want from this experience. Then you tell them some abridged version of your life story to let them know how broken you are, while they nod sympathetically. Finally, you talk a little about your modern-day challenges and you save any real work for the next session.

The beginning of my first session with Dr. Ham seemed to follow protocol. He asked me if I had an agenda. I did. Of course I did. I came prepared with a whole document of therapy goals.

"In terms of overall need, I think my diagnosis has made me extra self-loathing, insecure, and less social because I'm afraid of imposing it upon people," I said, just like I'd rehearsed. "I want to change my relationship to the diagnosis and how it makes me understand myself."

"Can I ask how it impacts your relationships in a toxic way?"

“I’m just *noticing* things. All the time. Bad behaviors. Like, I tend to categorize people as ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe.’ And when I don’t like somebody, I see them as unsafe and I can’t deal with them. And then whenever anybody’s upset, I’m not good with sitting with their discomfort. I’m always trying to help and fix. And some people have told me I have a tendency to make things about myself. And I’m negative and I’m always complaining about my life. And I always feel like I’m having a crisis because I’m still not good enough at self-soothing.”

Dr. Ham nodded throughout my explanation. He’d seen this before. “This sounds really familiar, like—prototypical or classic or something. But I’m hesitant to say that because I don’t know whether you’re going to—”

“Well that’s the thing! That’s why I have such a fucked-up relationship with this condition. I’ve read all these books that say people with complex PTSD are tough to be around. And that’s really hard. It puts me in this category of suboptimal human. And I certainly knew I was flawed before the diagnosis, but I didn’t see myself as an irreparably bad human, I guess.”

“So the diagnosis made you make sense of why you act the way you do, but it also doomed you in that there’s not much that can be done about it.”

“And it gave me much more awareness of things I need to change and bad patterns I perpetuate. But I feel weighed down by the amount of shit I need to fix. It just feels like I can’t even have a conversation with friends because there’s so much wrong. I think I always had a fear of being patently unlovable. But now I have all these scientifically validated reasons that prove I’m patently unlovable. So I think the main thing I would like to get out of this is being able to reframe it.”

“Yeah,” Dr. Ham said, smiling, almost in awe. “That’s *awesome.* I want to say that I think the progress you made is really hope-inducing. Tell me about the changes you feel like you’ve made.”

“Well, there was this time with my aunt about a month ago that I’m pretty proud of,” I started.

A month ago, Joey and I had visited my family in Singapore and Malaysia for our pre-wedding honeymoon. One day, we drove past the post office and my aunt handed a package to Joey and told him to go inside and mail it for her. As soon as he left the car, she turned to me. “Ah girl, you must know no matter how

nice your in-laws are to you, they are not your *real* family and you must not trust them. You must not act the same in front of them as you do me, and you must never fight with Joey in front of them. They will always side with Joey and not you." This turned into a longer lecture about how I must forgive my father because we all have to forgive our *real family* for slighting us, because they're the only actual family we'll truly have.

Joey was only gone for ten minutes, but by the time he got back to the car, I was sobbing angrily, crouched over with my face in my hands, shouting, "You don't know what it's like!"

"What *happened*?" Joey gawked, swinging his gaze between the two of us. Nobody paid any attention to him.

Instead, my aunt sucked her teeth and said, "*Wah*, you are still so upset about this stuff with your father, huh? After so long? You know, you should really take your pain and use it to be a better and stronger person."

"You know, I think Stephanie already does that. She works really hard to become a stronger person," Joey pushed tentatively from the back seat, because I was crying too much to respond.

"Oh, good, good," my aunt said. "Aiyah, okay lah girl, sorry lah. Come, stop crying, let's go eat chicken rice."

Before I'd gone on my trauma journey, my aunt's comments would surely have ruined my day, I told Dr. Ham. I would have kept crying for an hour, then held a grudge, then self-loathed for holding a grudge. I would've stayed triggered the rest of my visit. But instead, I counted colors out the car window, regulated my breathing, and let it go. I was back to normal within a few minutes, cracking jokes and enjoying myself.

"I mean. That's *okay*…" Dr. Ham said, sounding skeptical.

And this is when our first session got weird.

"Tell me if this sounds interesting to you," he suggested. "You can do the grounding exercises for sure to start, but it's not enough. If you just go, 'Okay, let's move on,' you're only doing the regulation part but not the reconnecting part. I would ask you to make sense of why your aunt talks the way she does. And first understand why it bothered you so much."

Any other therapist would have patted me on the back and given me props on my progress. But right off the bat, Dr. Ham was challenging me. It

disconcerted me and, quite frankly, upset me.

"I know why it bothered me," I countered impatiently.

"Okay. Name it."

I told him that my aunt was projecting because Chinese mothers-in-law of her generation were notoriously nightmarish, but she'd never met my mother-in-law, who was an absolute gem. I listed past fights we'd had that had led up to this moment, issues with her defending my parents. But he kept pushing: "And so? So what? What was the raw nerve?"

Finally, I spat out, "The nerve is that my entire life all I've wanted is a family. I've always wanted to know what it's like to be loved unconditionally. And the joy of entering this family is feeling something like that. And she was saying, no, you don't get that still. You can't trust them; you can never trust anybody. So, you know. It's this hunger. And her shitting on it." My eyes welled up as I said it.

Dr. Ham, who had been leaning forward in his chair, finally sat back, smiling as if he'd gotten what he wanted. I resented him a little for it. Cool, he felt like he was achieving some kind of fucking breakthrough, but this wasn't new information to me. I wasn't getting anything out of this. So I tried to change the subject to something more relevant—my relationship or more family history. But after a few minutes, Dr. Ham interrupted me.

"I have to say, I just want to *register* that. When I asked what nerve your aunt hit and you said you just wanted to be loved. That felt really moving."

"Yeah, okay," I said irritably. "So like, you're saying I'm dissociated from __"

"Oh, no. Actually, I was just tracking and sharing with you that…um…I'm trying to…Oh God. I'm sorry." He paused, seeming confused about how to proceed. "It's just, there are moments when you become hypervigilant and you presume to know what I mean. And you try to jump in."

"Sorry," I whispered, my voice barely audible. *Oh no! I did? I'm such a bad listener. Yet another C-PTSD trait.*

"And there are other moments when you're just really raw and, I don't know…poignant. That moment when you talked about wanting to feel loved felt really good. It was making me tear up, and I was resonating with you. Do you feel this coming and going, too?"

“The hypervigilance?” I asked. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even notice it.”

“You just said sorry.” He sighed. “Oh, fuck. It’s just like what you said earlier about how your C-PTSD ruins relationships.”

“Can you see how?” I asked, hesitantly. “Am I weird?”

“That’s not how I meant it.”

“Oh. Okay. Um…I can be sensitive.”

“It’s okay. I can be a little rough.” A long pause. “How is this session going for you?”

“It’s okay. It’s pretty normal, I guess. But, well…earlier, when you said just regulating isn’t enough, I was like, what do you mean not enough? What else am I supposed to fucking do? But I was curious. I said that kind of challengingly, but I was both curious and defensive. I had both of those inclinations in my head.”

“Yeah, that makes perfect sense.” Dr. Ham paused. I sat there, confused at what exactly was happening. Eventually he said, “I wish I could communicate more effectively.”

“I mean, lots of people come to you for the way you communicate,” I said.

Suddenly, Dr. Ham jumped forward in his seat again, gleefully, his eyes enormous behind his glasses. “That was an interesting moment! Can we analyze it to death?”

I looked at him as if he’d just pulled a whopping booger out of his nose. “Um…sure?”

“You jumped ahead of me again! You just jumped in with something. Some pat reassurance, right? Why did you do that? Did you notice that? What was going on for you?”

I giggled at the absurdity of this overanalysis. “ ’Cause you said you wished you could communicate better…and I don’t want you to feel bad!”

“So you started to parent me! But you said it with an energy of like, *That’s tough shit, because people come here for comfort*.”

“I didn’t mean it that way? Um…” I laughed more. “I do have a droll way of speaking, particularly around people I don’t know very well yet?”

“It wasn’t quite droll. It was matter-of-fact!” Dr. Ham said.

Okay, I was *completely* lost here. Why did it matter what tone I’d used? “So…saying things in that tone can be off-putting?”

“Oh God! No, no, no! I’m not judging it yet! That would shut down the exploration!” he exclaimed. “I’m just trying to point out things for you to wonder about. To wonder about what you’re *feeling* when you say things. Because I don’t think it was purely reassurance.”

What the fuck? What I was *feeling*? I didn’t know what the fuck I was feeling at that one little moment. He seemed bummed, so I tried to say something nice. Which was a weird thing to do in a session about *my* PTSD, but, whatever. I sat on it for a while. “I think I was trying to reassure you and myself at the same time because communicating well is a thing I’ve been thinking about? And then I think I said it in that tone because I was, like…tired?”

“AH! THAT’S WHAT IT IS!” Dr. Ham spluttered, almost jumping out of his seat. “You’re tired! Tired of buttressing yourself!”

“I have a lot of work to do, yeah. To try to communicate better.” Case in point.

“What did it feel like? To microanalyze that?”

“Jesus Christ. If I were to microanalyze all my shit like that…it would take me forever. But what was the purpose of that? To call me out on it?”

“NO! God, no!” Dr. Ham scrunched up his face in disgust and shook his head. “I’m flabbergasted at that! You’re perceiving me as judging you *again*!”

“Sorry,” my mouth said again, reflexively.

“You just jumped ahead of me again and asked, Is that a thing I’m not supposed to do?”

I shrugged. But it felt as if he was being critical. Or something? He was being weird? I didn’t know what the fuck he was doing. How was I supposed to react? I was lost, so I tried to grab a foothold. “Why did you pick that one thing where I tried to make you feel better? To microanalyze?”

“Because it was a mismatch in what we were experiencing. There was a momentary rupture in our communication. And it’s always revealing whenever there’s a rupture. So we’re going to keep practicing curiosity and exploration rather than judgment, and it’s through this process that you’ll start being nicer to yourself. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah…it makes sense,” I said. It kind of did, anyway. Not the momentary rupture part. But the last part. Being nicer to myself. “I have an immense amount

of curiosity about why I do what I do. But it's not like, *Oh, that's why I do that!* It's like, *Shit. That's why you do that, you fucking moron.*"

Dr. Ham nodded at me again, his smiling eyes saying, *Yes, exactly.* His intense gaze bored into me again. "It's really interesting, because most people feel more liberated and forgiven once they get a PTSD diagnosis. Because other diagnoses like bipolar and depression are pathological. And PTSD is the only one that says this isn't your fault. It offers you an excuse. But for you…"

I shrugged. "I'm just anti-excuses, I guess."

After a while, our conversation dwindled into a long silence. I broke it. "So, doc. What do I do now?"

"Well, what I heard is that you want unconditional love but still no bullshit. Do you want me to care enough that I push you to get better and call you on your stuff? You want me to be both tough and gentle at the same time?"

I hadn't outright said any of that, but, yes—it *was* what I wanted. It sounded so impossible when he laid it out like that, though. So many contradictions, all competing for attention. I squirmed and made my body as compact as I could on his couch. "Is that too needy?" I asked in a small voice.

"No. No. It's actually exactly what you need," he confidently declared.

Well, that sounded good. It sounded *really* good. But was Dr. Ham capable of it?

CHAPTER 38

After I left his office, I had no idea what to make of the past hour and a half. But unlike other therapy sessions, I could do something about that. I immediately went to a café around the corner from Dr. Ham's office, uploaded the audio from our session onto my computer, and put it into an automated transcription service. Within a few minutes, I had a full transcript of the session I'd just been in. I copied it into a Google Doc, shared it with Dr. Ham, and started to read through it.

To my surprise, what had sounded like a totally perplexing conversation in person started to make more sense on the page. During the session, each time Dr. Ham had butted in and asked me to explain why I'd just said something, his interjections had felt random and senseless. But now, reading through our conversation, I noticed that he'd butted in every time I'd said something disparaging about myself, any time I'd changed the subject abruptly on him, and a couple of times when I'd gone on rambling, off-topic asides. As I read through, a comment popped up on the screen. Dr. Ham was adding notes to the transcript! "This was a wonderful summary," he commented where I had expressed my desires in the beginning. He highlighted a sentence I had said later on and noted: "This was the first time you jumped in pre-emptively." At two moments of self-doubt, he commented, "This is fear BS!"

I emailed him. "Can I add comments, too?" He responded in less than a minute. "Of course!"

Together we filled in a better picture of what had just happened. He explained, in the margins, his reasoning for a bunch of the interjections and

comments he'd made. I pointed out moments I'd been irritated at him, and he acknowledged them with a laughing generosity. He apologized for moments where he'd been too pushy. And I pointed out moments I recognized that something deeper might have been going on with me. I noticed that I often derailed the conversation and changed the subject when I didn't understand something he was saying. And often when I was confused, I didn't ask for clarification. Instead, I reflexively assumed that he was criticizing me. I'd jump in and interrupt him, apologizing for my bad behavior. I said a lot of unkind things about myself. At multiple points, I rambled incoherently. I noticed one occasion where I was blabbering on about Joey's job of all things. I made a comment: "What the fuck am I talking about. Where am I?" Dr. Ham responded, "YES! This is the aftermath of dissociation."

Huh. Interesting. Why had I been dissociated? I scrolled up.

Immediately before my nonsensical rambling, I'd been talking about being physically abused, giving my quick and bubbly description of having knives held to my throat. Ooh. I'd turned off my awareness to talk about my trauma. And then I turned a corner and got lost, hardly aware of the words coming out of my mouth. How fascinating!

I *loved* this form of therapy. If Dr. Ham had called me out for that in the moment, I would've gotten defensive or confused. But something about editing this on a Google Doc gave it a pleasant distance. It gave our interaction objectivity—laid out the truth for everyone to see so there was no "he said, she said." And it turned my therapy into an interesting project to investigate rather than a depressing way to obsess over my flaws. I had not often taken it personally when good editors and I had sat down in front of Google Docs just like this one to make little notes and edits on my drafts. We were collaborating to make my work better. This felt the same—we were *editing* my trauma out of the conversation. It thrilled my journalistic sensibilities.

I didn't even mind Dr. Ham's tendency to latch ferociously on to tiny things, like the tone of my voice or a simple change in subject. Three out of four times there really *was* something interesting to notice there. He did swing and miss often—like once when he yelped in a session, "You're tearing up! Why are you crying!" And I said, "Dude…I just yawned." But I came to see that occasional overanalysis was the inevitable consequence of doing a close reading.

I got As on almost all of my college papers—the ones that were thematic comparisons or cultural analyses of the books I'd read. But every time I had to do a close reading of a poem or a one-paragraph passage in a larger work—whenever I had to interpret an author's intentions with regard to the choice of a single word or syntactical pattern—I always got a disappointing grade. I wanted to analyze what Joseph Heller was saying in *Catch-22* about the absurdities of bureaucracy or the anguish of war. Individual words had no inherent meaning; they were just vehicles to get to a greater, universal idea. But my instructors never saw it that way. *You were supposed to write about this one paragraph, not the whole book*, they wrote, and I'd approach them afterward to argue that you could not divorce a single paragraph from the context of an entire book; it lost its significance that way. Unmoved, they would not change my grade.

But Dr. Ham was like a literature obsessive on steroids: He was a close reader on *life*. When I told him this, he got all hyper again. "It's like when I'm reading one of E. E. Cummings's poems and he starts a poem with a closed bracket [a ')']. WHAT DOES THAT DO TO MY BRAIN! It makes me be like, okay, whatever you were thinking about and living before, it's done. Closed bracket. Now you're going to be in this world of the poem!"

I laughed at him. "Right. And reading that poem…I would not get that."

But it turns out there's a lot of shit you miss when you refuse the close reading. I'd spent so much time pathologizing my flaws, seeing them in grand, thematically untackleable ways—*I am a bad listener*—that I'd sit in terror, unable to see how I was failing at listening from moment to moment in a conversation. Now, having this conversation laid out, I could truly witness it. On page 12, I interrupted Dr. Ham by jumping to a negative conclusion instead of asking for clarification. On page 4, my word choice could have been more open, less defensive. On page 25, the tone of my voice shut a conversation down. And something about the Google Doc format made these mistakes easier to bear.

Exploring my trauma in the comments gave me the direction I'd craved from my last therapist. The direction I needed. The direction Dr. Ham said it was okay to need. And the collaborative spirit of it gave me a sense of control.

So often, past therapists I'd encountered had presented themselves as a kind of all-knowing, all-seeing Wizard of Oz. "Why do you think you feel that way?" they asked. But whenever I wanted to peek behind their curtain and examine

their process, they demurred. In contrast, Dr. Ham was only too happy to give me a tour of the engine room.

"I was tracking your facial expressions here and realized I was floundering," he commented at one point. At another point, where he had told me a small personal story, he noted: "I gave a self-disclosure to empathize with you on the pain of growing."

Dr. Ham was acknowledging his own vulnerability within the session. But his vulnerability didn't make him seem less competent or trustworthy. It did the opposite. I trusted him more. I felt comfortable letting him correct my behavior, but I also felt okay pushing back on him and telling him when he was being too much.

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At my second session, I brought up the fact that he was entirely different from the therapists I'd seen before.

"It's because I hated being the patient of therapists like that," he admitted. "It terrified me. It didn't ever make me feel safe. You have to be aware of how big a power difference there is between patient and therapist. And if you really want to work effectively with people, you have to keep surrendering your power. And that means being humble and making mistakes and fumbling and being comfortable with that."

That fumbling made it easier for *me* to fumble, too. In our first meeting, I simply *uh-huh*, *okay*ed every time I got confused. I'd wanted to feel smart and competent and act like I understood what he was saying. But now, I knew that would get me nowhere. So I asked ten times as many questions in my second session, interrogating Dr. Ham on everything I was unsure of. I asked him to define all the jargony terms he liked to drop on me. I asked him why he made the decisions he'd made. And I asked him what I *really* should have done with my aunt in the car that day. Why counting colors had just been *okay* to him, but not good enough.

Dr. Ham admitted he'd approached the story about my aunt with "asshole energy" and had perhaps been overly critical too quickly. But, he said, "In my mind, the most helpful thing for you is to be reconnected with another person. Self-regulation is a very *insular* thing. That's just survival. Like, 'I'm not going

to actually learn how to be connected to you, but at least I'm going to be able to regulate how upset I get from you.' And I don't want you to just be self-regulating in a corner by yourself. Shame makes you want to hide and tuck away. But what if instead you were in this state where you could ask, 'Who are you? What do you need from me right now? And what do I need from you?' "

What would I have said to my aunt if I hadn't been triggered? If I'd had the time and mental ability to ask all of those questions? Maybe I would have said something like: "I understand that having difficult in-laws was part of your experience, and for that I'm sorry. But I love my in-laws, and in America, they *are* my only family. So you saying they aren't my real family—it's hurtful. Instead, I'm going to need you to support my positive relationship with them." Would she have reacted well to that? Would she have shut me down? Could it have strengthened our bond instead of being just a weird temper-tantrum-y moment we had to move through and put behind us? Maybe I could have tried to show myself to her?

"If it works, you could have a cheesy, lovey outcome where you both reconnect with each other and you are hugging her at the end," Dr. Ham said. "Or, you could state your needs to her, and she could *not* respond in the way you want. And you could stay mad at her and disappointed in her and be okay with it. Because you're recognizing why she acts the way she does. And you're forgiving yourself for reacting to her, and acknowledging, 'I need more than that from her.' "

"I'm reconnecting with *myself*," I said slowly. "That counts, too?"

"Yes."

This was Dr. Ham's whole theory: that because of its repetitive nature, complex trauma is fundamentally relational trauma. In other words, this is trauma caused by bad relationships with other people—people who were supposed to be caring and trustworthy and instead were hurtful. That meant future relationships with anybody would be harder for people with complex trauma because they were wired to believe that other people could not be trusted. The only way you could heal from relational trauma, he figured, was through practicing that relational dance with other people. Not just reading self-help books or meditating alone. We had to go out and practice maintaining

relationships in order to reinforce our shattered belief that the world could be a safe place.

“Relationships are like sports. It’s muscle memory, it’s all the action of doing. You can’t just read about tennis and know how to play tennis. There’s a lot of dueling involved. Interpersonal dueling!” As he saw it, his office was a safe place to practice dueling. Learning how to listen, how to talk, how to ask for what I needed.

The Google Doc took the sports metaphor one step further. Dr. Ham loved to play squash. He was really competitive at it. But whereas other players would just practice for hours on end, he’d also record his games. He would set up a little camera in the corner of the room and watch his videos afterward to see where he’d made mistakes, how he could adjust his form. This allowed him to get better quickly. Relistening to my therapy sessions was meant to employ the same technique.

“It’s a courageous thing you’re doing,” he said. “Not everyone can watch themselves play. A lot of people are too self-conscious.”

It would make sense if this form of therapy creeped other people out. After all, it took me months to adjust to the sound of my own voice when I first started working in radio. At the time, all my weird breaths and lisps gave me the heebie-jeebies. But because of my job, this process felt familiar. With an energy I hadn’t felt in months, I told Dr. Ham at the end of our second session, “I feel good! I feel optimistic!” It had been only two weeks, but I felt as if I had some solid techniques to bring to conversations in my life. Some real, concrete ways to love the people around me better.

A few days later, I was on the phone with Kathy as we talked about our weeks. She started to say that her co-worker was annoying but then drifted off. “Eh, never mind,” she said. “It was nothing. Anyway, how is your work going?” My immediate reaction was to let it go and move on in the conversation. But then I paused. Something about my new, heightened awareness clued me in to the way her voice had trailed off. I should follow up on what she was saying. My second thought was to complain about annoying co-workers or even trash-talk her co-worker whom I knew nothing about in order to comfort her. But instead, I asked, “No, wait. What were you saying about your co-worker? How did they make you feel?” Given the space and opportunity, she shared some vulnerable

thoughts about her fears at work. Stuff I never would have gotten to hear if I'd moved on or jumped ahead in the conversation. Afterward, I felt closer to her, and I think she felt closer to me, too. For the first time in months, I ended a conversation feeling capable. Like a good person.

Maybe this was going to work.

CHAPTER 39

Going to Dr. Ham's office felt like going to the gym: It was a training ground built to work out your mind and heart, to make them stronger. And it reminded me of another training arena for younger people. A couple of years earlier, while doing some research for a potential *This American Life* story, I had visited a place called Mott Haven Academy, a charter school in the Bronx where most of the student body was in foster care. The school let me spend an entire day observing its students, and I noticed immediately that it felt very different from your average school.

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On the playground, all around me dozens of children were playing soccer, swinging on the swing set, screaming from the jungle gym, and generally chasing one another maniacally. It was all normal, sure. But something felt a little off. It took me a moment to recognize it: *Where were the loners?* Most playgrounds have an odd kid or two who hang out in the corner, drawing quietly, reading a book, or jumping rope by themselves. But everyone here seemed like they were part of a giant crew. Everyone, that is, except for one single eight-year-old boy who stood by himself, glowering. I watched him intently as something churned inside him, growing darker and darker, until eventually, he crossed the playground to pick up a four-foot-long fallen branch and hurled it at a group of kids playing tag. He missed them, and they gave him a bit of a weird look and went to play a little farther off.

A yard duty monitor approached him. What he had done was an unmistakably violent act, one that could have really hurt someone, so I expected her to put him on a time-out or send him to an office somewhere to be dealt with. But instead, she knelt down and said, “You look upset. What’s going on?”

“My best friend is playing with other people today,” he said, looking down, close to tears. “I’m mad because we play together *every* day.”

The monitor called over his best friend. “Hey, Nico!” Nico trotted over.

“Jeremy here says that he’s feeling worried because you’re playing with other kids today. Jeremy, are you feeling worried that maybe Nico doesn’t want to be your friend anymore?”

Jeremy, again avoiding eye contact, barely nodded.

“Oh, yeah, of course I still like you,” Nico said, smiling, a reassuring *duh* in his voice. “I’m just trying something new today.”

“It’s okay to be great friends and still sometimes play with other friends, right? It doesn’t mean you don’t like each other,” the monitor said.

“Yeah, you’re my friend, Jeremy!” Nico affirmed confidently.

Jeremy finally looked up. “I like you, too, Nico.” The yard duty monitor retreated. In the span of a minute, Jeremy was a changed man. He ran toward the kids playing soccer, and for the last moments of lunch, he dribbled the ball gleefully up and down the field, having rejoined the flock.

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You want to talk about trauma? Man, it doesn’t get much worse than kids who’ve survived the foster system. Fifty-one percent of children in the foster system have four or more ACEs, compared with 13 percent of children outside the foster system.[1] It’s not abnormal for foster kids to shuffle in and out of a dozen or more foster homes during their childhood, leaving them without a sense of the stability of a true home. One study found that foster children are ten times more likely to be sexually abused.[2] Of course, these painful childhoods have real consequences when the children get older. Ninety percent of foster kids who have had more than five placements will enter the criminal justice system.[3]

These statistics are why Mott Haven has a different focus from other schools. Instead of academic success, Mott Haven’s main priority is on creating a *community* within their school—a place for kids to feel safe and to have a

stable, loving, family-like structure they might not have at home. And a big part of that means having a totally unconventional disciplinary system.

In their classrooms, children aren't punished for slouching or tapping their pencils or even getting up and walking around in the middle of a lesson. In fact, as long as they're actively listening or working, kids can stand up or change desks. If they're truly overwhelmed, there are quiet spaces in which children can hide out—little cozy blanket forts or beanbag chairs where they can excuse themselves and take a minute to self-soothe. There is a period a few times a week specifically built for students to share the things that are really bugging them in school and in life. And most of the kids meet with therapists at least once a week.

When children do act out—as children, especially traumatized children, are wont to do—administrators focus on healing and maintaining relationships rather than punishment.

When the yard duty monitor went up to Jeremy, she knew he wasn't acting out because he wanted to be bad. She recognized something was going on with him. When she asked him about it, she recognized that he just wanted to be seen, to be reassured he was loved. Sure enough, his anguish dissipated as soon as he felt safe. And in calling over his friend, she also gave Jeremy a way to repair a relational rupture—*and* she taught Nico how to assuage his young friend's fears. "Yeah, we never let a fight just *go* here," the monitor said. "It's different from other schools, in that we mediate every disagreement and argument. We don't want grudges to fester. We want everyone to feel safe."

"There isn't this group, that group. We are all a group," said a girl I'll call Willow. "At this school, everybody has a problem. And everyone has a niceness inside of them. They can be mean sometimes, but even when they're bad, they can be…*good.* Very, very *good.*"

Willow was a fan of Nina Simone and Cardi B. She loved to crack corny jokes and giggle mischievously afterward, like a tiny dad. You'd never guess it from talking to her, but she told me that before she came to Mott Haven, she'd been suspended from multiple schools for her anger issues—she'd assaulted teachers and thrown chairs across the room. She had low expectations for Mott Haven. She expected it to be like her old school, where popular girls teased her

for having bad hair. But she told me that conflicts here didn't end with her feeling ugly.

She shared a story of a spat she'd had with a friend a couple of weeks prior. Willow had called another girl crazy. Her friend told her that was inappropriate and ignored her for the rest of the period. But the next day, Willow asked her, "Are you still mad at me?" And her friend—using the deftly reassuring language she'd been taught—said, "No, I'm not mad. I'm over it, because I'm your friend."

These friendships changed Willow. Her grades rose. She became interested in subjects she'd hated. Before, she'd thought of herself as lazy and illiterate. Now, after just a month, she had constructed a brand-new narrative: She was a good writer who had the strength to push herself to new heights. And she was patient. On another day, when she felt like her whole class was ignoring her jokes and antics, she went to the beanbag chair in the corner of the room to be alone for a minute. "I was like, *Willow! It's just kids. I don't know why you're getting mad right now. It's okay.*" She was able to self-soothe, not explicitly because her teachers and therapists taught her to. She had picked this up intuitively. The brain's fear reflex is very real. But it has an opposite force, too, as ancient and as powerful. Our bodies and brains melt into kindness in the presence of one key ingredient.

"This school made me feel like I was somewhere where people actually loved me."

I had to blink back tears when I saw Jeremy and Nico make up. I thought they were so cute…but also, I was in awe of their skills. I wanted to be as adept as they were. I wanted an adult Mott Haven. How else would I learn these skills? Who would teach me?

—

"What do you want to talk about today?" Dr. Ham asked when I plopped down on his couch.

My voice was flat and tired. "I had a bad day this weekend because we had another stupid fight."

Joey and I were on a train headed home after a night out. We were talking, filling each other in on our days, when Joey winced as he shifted his weight on

the orange seat. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he said, dismissively.

“But are you in pain? How much did you sleep?” I pressed. “Oh no. I told you to go to bed earlier last night!”

Joey flashed me an angry look—one of exhaustion and fury.

I matched his expression and multiplied it. “What?” I asked. “Why do you need to give me that look?”

His face shut down and he turned away from me, ending the conversation.

When Joey had promised me years ago that he could “handle” my trauma and its corresponding issues, at the time I thought that meant he’d take them in stride. I gave him too much credit. He is a good egg, but he’s no saint or savior; nor should it be his responsibility to be one. The years passed and our foibles became less quirky and more irritating. He begrudgingly tolerated many of my failings, but he certainly had his limits. He has a temper, too, one that can snap unexpectedly and send me into a spiral. Like it did on this day, on the train.

“What did that look do to you?” Dr. Ham asked.

“I hate those looks. I’ve been getting more and more angry whenever he gets angry at me, because I’m just like, oh, I can’t open my mouth without accidentally fucking up all of my relationships.”

“Oh geez,” Dr. Ham winced.

When we got to our stop, I stormed ahead angrily. Joey caught up to me ready to snip. “I just feel like giving you that look was an appropriately rude response to what you said, which I felt was kind of rude.”

“*You* interpreted it as rude. I didn’t mean it in a rude way.”

“It was rude. What, I have to walk on eggshells so I don’t trigger you with my anger, but you can’t be responsible for your own mistakes?”

“Oh Jesus Christ,” I mumbled, but I decided to drop it.

The next day, Joey and I were walking past a small park in our neighborhood. He wanted to grab a coffee at the corner, but I told him I didn’t think that was such a good idea. He flashed me that exact same look, that snarl of, *You’re doing the thing. The rude thing.*

“What the fuck?” I asked. “Yesterday you got all mad at me over nothing, and now today it’s the same thing. What the fuck? What’s your problem?”

“Well, what if I was constantly checking up on you? Asking you, ‘How’s your vagina?’ How would you like that?”

“I’d like it just fine! I’d just fucking tell you about my vagina! I’d tell you about my poop, too! What do you want to know? The consistency? The color?”

He rolled his eyes and walked away.

My mind reeled. *What do I feel right now? How do I communicate it?* “You’re being mean to me. You’re not caring about my feelings,” I called out at him.

He smirked and barked out, “HA!”

Asshole. “What did I ever do to you?” I yelled. “Tell me what exactly I did that makes me deserve this? WHAT THE FUCK DID I DO?” I dropped down to the curb with both hands on my face, and the tornado began. *Oh, great, now I’m crying in public. I can’t fucking talk because otherwise everyone will hate me. I’d better just be a mute statue of a woman from now on.*

“Come on,” he said eventually. “Hey, what is going on here?” But statues don’t respond, so I said nothing.

He stood and watched me for several minutes before he asked, “What are you thinking right now?”

“I don’t want to tell you. It’s too fucked-up,” I eked out.

“That you hate me?”

“No.”

“That you don’t want to get married after all?”

“No.”

“That you think I’m evil?”

“No! No!” I wailed. “No, I just hate myself and I wish I was dead!”

When I told Dr. Ham this part of the story, he burst out laughing. “Oh my God!” he said, not even trying to stifle his laughter. “Sorry. I can’t help it.”

It was disconcerting, but I’m chastised for my inappropriate gallows laughter all the time, so I got it. “It’s okay. I laugh about dark stuff all the time.”

“No, it’s just…it’s outrageous that you making a silly comment ends with ‘I want to die.’ You just have to laugh at how silly your trauma reactions are.”

“I guess.” My smile sagged. “It doesn’t feel silly to me.”

“No, of course not.” He fell serious. “No, it’s devastatingly painful. For you to want to die means that you went to the threshold of what you could bear. But

for you to convert it into another example of how *you're* the fuckup, that you're the most antisocial, toxic thing in the universe, *that's* ridiculous."

"Yeah."

We sat there in silence for a minute. Finally, Dr. Ham asked, "What drives it? What drives that need for you to ask him about his body?"

"The need for control," I said, sighing. "Clearly it's parental stuff."

Most therapists would jump at the opportunity to dissect this, to go back into my familial history and have a field day of analysis. But Dr. Ham wanted to stay tied to the moment. "Okay," he insisted, "but why did you feel like you needed to control that?"

"Because…ever since he started teaching, he stopped eating right and he stopped sleeping. He only sleeps like four hours a night because he's up grading papers and making lesson plans. He works these seventeen-hour days, and if he works any less, his boss tells him he doesn't care about his students. And he has an autoimmune disease that flares up every time he's really stressed out and doesn't sleep, and then he gets really sick. And it's been flaring up recently, and I just constantly have to be the one telling him to put his work down, eat right, and take care of himself."

"You're worried about his safety," Dr. Ham realized, and his eyes got big again. "And losing him."

"Yeah," I whispered.

Dr. Ham thought for a moment, then to my surprise, he exploded. "I would be livid! You have a right to nag him if he's not going to take care of his health, as someone who loves him. How dare he do that."

"Oh. So. I'm…right?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm not saying you should keep nagging him. I'm saying your nagging comes from a good place, and you shouldn't say, 'I'm an idiot for nagging.' "

"Well…if the nagging and my fear are justified, how else can I do it? Without him getting mad?"

"You can share it with him. Like, 'I don't want to nag you, I'm sorry. But you cannot die on me, and I cannot watch you not take care of yourself. So please take care of yourself for me.' "

“Oh. Okay. I’ll try that.” This seemed like a good, prescriptive solution, but I still didn’t feel better. Saying something like that when I was all triggered and crazy sounded impossible. And honestly, Joey would probably get irritated at *that,* too.

I grabbed a pillow from Dr. Ham’s couch and hugged it over my belly. “Maybe we shouldn’t even get married in the first place if we’re going to fight over stupid things like this. If I’m going to constantly be triggered by the way his *face* looks.”

“You’re so stupid,” Dr. Ham said, laughing again.

“What?! You…you can’t call me stupid. I’m not stupid.”

“You’re *being* stupid,” he said, grinning infuriatingly. “It’s not the fights that matter. It’s the *repairs.*”

The repairs.

You’re still my friend, Jeremy. I’m over it, Willow, because I’m your friend.

—

As adults, Dr. Ham told me, the process of repair is a bit more complex, more transactional. But no less satisfying.

“See, for people who are traumatized, all they know is rupture,” Dr. Ham explained. “They always have to come to the abuser with an apology. But it’s never about them having *their* own needs. It’s not a mutuality thing. It’s a one-way street.”

I thought about this for a moment. “You mean…I was only taught how to apologize whenever there’s a problem and say, ‘I’m sorry. I’m so fucked-up.’ ”

“Exactly. You don’t know how to apologize by making it a two-way repair.”

I stammered out what I thought he was saying. “So for people who are traumatized, that means they’re constantly apologizing…but they’re not having their own issues witnessed and repaired. Or they’re constantly demanding an apology and not—”

“Recognizing the other person. Right!”

“So they’re lacking nuance in their repairs,” I said with some awe.

“Yeah. Forgiveness is this act of love where you say to someone, ‘You’re an imperfect being and I still love you.’ You want to have this energy of ‘We’re not

giving up on each other; we're in this for the long haul. You hurt me. And, yes, I hurt you. And I'm sorry, but you're still mine.' "

"That sounds really good. I want to be able to have that two-way thing. But I don't know how to do that, really."

"That's why you're here."

CHAPTER 40

The truth is not an easy thing to discern. If it were, the world would be a much more peaceful place. Instead, each of us is a delicate bundle of triggers, desires, emotions, and needs—and we all have our own ways of concealing those needs. And so, when our understanding of what people need fails to match up with what they want—therein lies conflict. In order to minimize conflict, the trick is to ascertain some version of that truth. To identify what is *actually happening* around us. Only, as in a quote often attributed to Anaïs Nin, "We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are."

According to Dr. Ham, complex PTSD further clouds our perception of basic sensorial instincts. We are jumpy creatures, expectant of danger and conflict, and so that's what we see. We're often blind to what is actually happening.

So Dr. Ham advocates for what the Dalai Lama calls "emotional disarmament—to see things realistically and clearly without the confusion of fear or rage." For every narrow, fear-based C-PTSD reading, Dr. Ham said, there is a wider truth—layers and layers of truths. Of course it isn't possible to always know that entire truth, because the people we love might not even be aware of that truth themselves. What is important is to approach all of these interactions with *curiosity* for what that truth is, not fear. He said I should approach difficult conversations with an attitude of "What is hurting you?" instead of "Have *I* hurt you?"

Dr. Ham modeled this curiosity for me in most of our sessions. In the middle of a conversation with me, he'd often go ramrod straight, look at the

ceiling, and ask, “What am I doing?” or “What’s happening?” I’d sit there and wait as he figured it out: “I think I’m being grumpy to you because you were challenging me,” or “I think I’m trying to make you feel better by relating to you,” or “What just happened with you, why did your expression change?” It was a relief to have someone so open and honest about everything that was going through their mind and who was so unabashedly eager to know everything that was going through mine.

—

After a couple of weeks of combing through Google Docs looking for misattunements between Dr. Ham and myself, I started finally identifying misattunements in my interactions with others. I had brunch with two friends, I told Dr. Ham, and the conversation never quite clicked. It felt as if I was forcing conversation or performing most of the time. “Good, I’m glad you noticed it,” Dr. Ham said.

I had a dinner party that felt a little strained, and I went through the details with Dr. Ham to try to pick apart the truth of what had actually been happening. Had I been a bad host? A careless overtalker? A bad person? “Hold on. Was it two girls, two guys, a couple?” he asked.

“A girl and a guy.”

“Were they both single?”

“Uh…yeah. But they’re not interested in each other, I don’t think?”

“You invited two single people of the opposite sex? It must have felt like some kind of setup. That’s going to make kind of a weird vibe,” he said, chuckling. “This one’s an easy fix. Just invite more people next time.”

Once in a while, I picked up on my little realizations quick enough to act on them. Like one day, Joey’s brother was over for dinner and told us he’d recently injured his hand. I started talking about my own sprained thumb to relate. He grunted in response. *Hmm,* I thought. *That didn’t quite land right. Maybe I shouldn’t have compared our injuries, especially since mine is so much smaller. Maybe affirming his pain was what he needed instead.* The next day, I sent him a text. “I’m really sorry that your hand hurts. That sucks so much.” Then I shared a couple of links to CBD pain creams that I liked. He thanked me. *Okay,* I thought. *That felt more right.*

But those actionable moments were so few and far between. One day, I told Dr. Ham about a friend who had just been through a breakup. “I listened to her talk for four hours, but I don’t think I made her feel any better. Maybe instead of giving her advice, I should have just told her, ‘Wow, you’re in a lot of pain.’ Maybe she needed that.”

“Ah, that’s very intuitive! That could have been a very helpful thing to say.”

“It would have? Oh, goddamn it.” And then I proceeded to spend the rest of the session feeling miserable regret about not having thought of it at the time.

“You’re going to your shit spot,” Dr. Ham cautioned when I did this. “You’re triggered right now. Don’t go there.”

Whenever he issued this warning, I’d fight back: “I’m not going to my shit spot, I don’t even know what a shit spot is, I’m not triggered.” And he’d say, “Okay,” until I realized I *was* triggered, and then I’d be embarrassed that I hadn’t known I was triggered, and I’d just sit there and cry and rocket myself straight into I’m-Going-to-Die-Aloneville. At some point during these hourlong ordeals, when I was busy saying the worst things about myself, Dr. Ham would try unsuccessfully to stifle his chortles, and he’d call me stupid. For some reason—which I can only attribute to *Asians! That’s how they are!*—I would not take this personally and would instead yell back, “I’m not stupid, you’re stupid, STUPID!” We’d both laugh, and then I was back in a position where I was ready to do the work.

—

One night, I had a dream that I was taking a painting class. I made friends with two of the women, and we all got close as we created frescoes of sunsets and ranches. During seaside villa day, one of them started talking about her divorce. She was going on and on and on about it, and I said to her, “Oh yeah, that really sucks. By the way, should we paint this section blue?” My dream friend screamed, “I’m so sick of you! You’re a terrible listener! I’m never talking to you again!” and stormed off. I chased after her, screaming, “Wait! Wait!” and sobbing and shouting at myself, *Oh no! I didn’t attune to her! I didn’t intuit what she needed!*

Dr. Ham laughed at this dream, too. “Why is it so literal?”

“I know!” I said. “My subconscious could try to be a little less on the nose.”

—

And then, six weeks in, I watched the video that changed the tone of therapy completely.

I'd been clicking through old *Saturday Night Live* videos on YouTube when I discovered that Dr. Ham had a channel. Scrolling through, I burst into giggles. Trust dorky, jargony Dr. Ham to give his videos the least punchy titles humanly possible. I clicked on the video labeled "Healing Attachment Trauma through Attuned Love."[1]

The video was a recorded session between a father and daughter. Dr. Ham was facilitating their conversation. There were no images, just audio transcribed with white words on a black background. If I had to guess, I'd have said the daughter was in her twenties, the father a big, rough New Yawker. It was immediately clear that the daughter didn't have the best relationship with him because she didn't feel cared for by him (relatable). When her father would get angry, he'd lose his temper and yell that she was spoiled and selfish, which made her afraid to approach him if she needed anything. This dynamic seemed to have been profoundly aggravated by the death of a family member. Her parents had been in so much pain after this person's death that nobody was around to help their child process her feelings. Afterward, whenever she tried to express anxiety or sadness, her parents would dismiss her, saying she was being dramatic or even suggesting that their pain was worse than hers.

The daughter was hesitant and withdrawn at first. But with Dr. Ham's coaxing, she cried, her voice shaking as the words tumbled out of her mouth, quick and uncontrollable avalanches of anger and sadness that she'd clearly held back for years. "You were okay after, but I wasn't. I wasn't okay, because I was holding your pain. Who can I talk to? Who's there for me? No one!…And I don't get an opportunity to feel coddled or protected because I'm so busy listening to *you*. It's frustrating because I know you want to protect me…but then all the moments I need you to protect me…*where the fuck are you*?"

At first, the girl's father was defensive. He didn't remember saying the things she claimed he'd said. And how was he supposed to know she needed him if she hadn't come to him? Was he supposed to read her mind? *Ah, so familiar*. I

remembered having almost this exact conversation with my own father a hundred times before.

But with the girl and Dr. Ham ganging up on him, the father eventually realized he'd messed up. His armor of defensiveness cracked, and instead, he hurled himself into despair. "I fucking suck at relationships," he said hopelessly. "I just lash out when I shouldn't. I don't have control. For so long, I just wanted to be that great dad." There was a long pause, then a strangled confession: "But I'm not."

This, too, was familiar. In rare conversations with my father when we had reached this point, when I had made him cry, I'd felt somewhat seen but not satisfied. Because his self-hatred put me in the position where I had to comfort and parent *him* again. This recognition was raw and unpleasant, but now there was something else. Something different and even more disconcerting.

Watching this video, I didn't just recognize myself in the daughter—I saw myself in the father, too. *I fucking suck at relationships.* This man was stuck fully in his shit spot of self-flagellating hatred. He was me, sitting on the curb, wailing that I wanted to die instead of addressing the problem at hand. I picked my cuticles uncomfortably as I listened.

Luckily for this family, in this conversation, Dr. Ham was there to halt this line of thinking. "Why are you responding like that?" he interrupted the father in his characteristically blunt way. But his voice was gentle and generous. "How is that responding *to* her? You're not being attuned to her. Don't go that far. Be sad about what happened, but don't go so far as to say you're a bad dad."

Then the daughter cut in. "I'm scared that what I'm telling you, you're taking as, *I suck, I'm the worst.* It goes to that dark place in your head where it's all the bad things that you were told were bad about you, that were like, *You suck, you're bad.* And I'm like…no! Fuck! No!" She smashed her fist down on something. "You're *not*! You're just not there yet. I don't want you to feel hurt. I want you to feel *motivated*!"

At this point, I didn't have faith in the dad to be able to respond thoughtfully to this. It didn't seem as if anybody else was optimistic, either. The daughter admitted she couldn't even look at her father. Dr. Ham clearly didn't know how to direct him further without causing him more pain. "I think you somehow have to let her pain seep in and be still in your attention. I don't know how to do

that…I need your heart to fully absorb her experience," he said, but I could tell he was floundering nervously. Everyone felt resigned to the fact that the daughter was not going to get what she needed today.

But then—suddenly, when we least expected it—it was as if the hand of God touched the man. The quality of his voice changed from hesitant and fearful to simply…full. "I just feel a lot of love towards her right now," he said. His voice was still trembling but not because he was scared of what he should say. His voice was trembling because he couldn't find the words for the fullness of his love. "I'm waiting for her to look at me," he said joyfully. He was not resentful of the fact that she couldn't meet his eyes. He was laughing, reveling in the presence of his beloved girl. He was full of grace. "My whole feeling right now is just to hold you. I'm *here*. I'm here for you. To hold you. To do whatever it is you want me to do."

It wasn't even the words, really; the very tone of the father's voice had immediately changed the frigid timbre in the room. A fire had been lit. The daughter's anger melted. She let herself into his arms. The father and daughter embraced each other and cried, the sobs muffled by each other's clothing. Even though so few words had actually been said, something healing had just occurred.

"That was the right answer," Dr. Ham said proudly.

—

I sat back and closed the video. The image that occurred to me was of Anne Sullivan forcing Helen Keller's hand under the pump and spelling out the letters W-A-T-E-R on her palm. This video had similarly baptized me, awoken me to a shocking truth:

Punishment doesn't work.

I was taught that punishment and shame were the logical and necessary reactions to screwing up. The benefit of punishment was that it would keep my wild and terrible natural tendencies in line. It would shame me into being *better.* "Justice is the firmest pillar of good government," after all, and justice meant people had to pay for their mistakes. When something went wrong, there had to be fault. There had to be blame. There had to be pain.

Now I knew I was wrong. Punishment didn't make things better. It mucked

things up even more.

The father's self-punishment did not grant him his daughter's forgiveness. It did not whip his sins out of him. Instead, it removed him from his family by isolating him in a prison of self-loathing. Locked in this prison, he couldn't hear what his daughter needed. He couldn't give her what she was asking for. There was blame and pain in spades. But all of this actively prevented him from making amends, from healing his relationship with his daughter.

Punishment did not ease Willow or Jeremy or the other children at Mott Haven back into their circles of friends. Punishment excludes and excises. It demolishes relationships and community.

When I was a little girl, my mother used to ask me all the time, "Who do you love more? Mommy or Daddy?" I knew from a very young age to be diplomatic, to say, "I love both of you equally," even though this always seemed like a disappointment to both of them rather than a reassurance.

The question would come up during fun times—mornings when we all snuggled in my parents' bed—and tense fights, when they dragged me out of bed in the middle of the night to arrange some premature custody agreement. Finally, one day I was fed up, or maybe I was just tired. So when my mother asked, "Who do you love more?" I answered, "I guess Mommy. Because she punishes me more. So she must love me more."

I could not believe it had taken me this long to realize that punishment is not love. In fact, it is the opposite of love.

Forgiveness is love. Spaciousness is love.

It was only when the father in the video was able to escape his self-punishment that he could see what was actually happening. He shed his dark glasses and witnessed his daughter, saw her in blindingly bright, multicolored truth—a remarkable girl, his girl, a girl who felt alone and needed her dad to parent her. Only then was he able to see that he possessed all the power to give his daughter what she needed. It was the opposite of shame that allowed him to really *be there*.

Over and over, the answer is the same, isn't it? Love, love, love. The salve and the cure.

In order to become a better person, I had to do something utterly unintuitive. I had to reject the idea that punishing myself would solve the problem. I had to

find the love.

—

The next week, one of the reporters I was editing was struggling against me. She refused to take any of my edits and sent me three drafts in a row that were almost identically incomplete. Finally, after I pushed her yet again to add more narration, she emailed me suggesting that maybe this relationship wasn't working—maybe she needed to be reassigned to a different editor. As soon as I read the email, I went into full triggered mode. *I'm not good at my job, I messed up, oh my God, I'm a mess, if I were a kinder, better person she wouldn't feel like she hates me, oh God.* My immediate instinct was to shut down and run: *If she hates me I should just not work with her. Fine. Good riddance. She can pick another editor. Bye.*

But this time I also knew: This self-punishment was all a waste of time. It solved nothing. What was *really happening* in this situation?

I now had a bunch of tools in my kit. I took a multipronged approach to solve this problem. I ate some food and then sat and meditated for a while to calm my body. I felt better but still was plagued with self-doubt. So I reached out to someone I trusted and knew had the emotional space for a five-minute perspective check—my old *Snap Judgment* boss, Mark—and asked for his take on the situation. He assured me that I am a fantastic editor but that tons of people have trouble taking criticism. This was not about me.

I sat with that a moment. I remembered how people with C-PTSD can often assume problems are about them—not out of selfishness or narcissism but because they want to have enough control to be able to solve the problem. But if this was not about me, then what was she struggling with? What did *she* need? Could I provide it? I tried to prepare for the fact that I might not be able to, and that's okay, too.

I reread her past emails and sensed an enormous amount of anxiety. I empathized with where she was at—overwhelmed, crazy deadlines haunting her, a full slate of interviews on the horizon. I scheduled a call with her to understand more of where she was coming from. As soon as we got on the phone, she was off to the races—a million thoughts, her complaints, her anger, her doubts—and it occurred to me that, for once, I knew exactly what she needed. I'd been

pressing her to change things, but I hadn't asked her *why* she hadn't changed them. This reporter simply needed someone to listen to her.

I let her talk and talk. After she finished, she was breathless. I told her, "I hear you. I'm here to listen. Is there anything else you need me to know?" I could hear that she was taken aback. She had been preparing for a fight, but now that she knew one wasn't coming, she softened. She started listing her fears, the personal issues she'd been struggling with. I let her vent for another fifteen minutes, just repeating, "I hear you. I hear you. What do you need to be able to get this done?" We decided to tweak our workflow a little and do more in-person editing rather than online. By the end of the call, she was apologizing about her ultimatum and was ready to get back to work.

This was a small moment, but it was a meaningful one. A big personal win. For now, anyway, I had preserved a relationship by navigating a real, live repair. A repair that didn't involve groveling. A *nuanced* repair.

—

Armed with one success under my belt, I started analyzing things more confidently in the world: minute details and misattunements in conversations. I picked up on them when people looked away, or didn't respond to a bid for connection, or changed the subject. Instead of feeling insecure or guilty about it, I chanted to myself, *Okay, curiosity. Curiosity, not self-blame*. This change seemed so impossibly small. But all of a sudden, with just this slightest change in attitude, worlds of complex behaviors lit up like a secret plane of existence coming into view. *Oh, we were just talking about B.'s sister, but he suddenly changed the subject—ah, he feels guilty about their strained relationship! Why did A. just get so uncomfortable right now? Huh, now that we have started talking about peanut sauce, her body has relaxed. Ooh—I get it! She feels anxious talking about her career!*

One day, my friend Jen told me she was struggling with parental stuff but then did a hard swerve and kept aggressively asking me about my life—why? Ah…was it because she was insecure about being needy? How could I address this feeling she was having? I *mentalized* and *metacommunicated*—fancy terms Dr. Ham taught me that basically mean *say what you're thinking out loud.* "I'm feeling worried that you're shifting the attention to me because you don't want to

burden me with your problems. But I just want to say that your problems aren't a burden—I'm so curious about what's going on. My life is so boring right now, and I want to spend time learning about you!"

"Okay," Jen said, and she started sharing the tough stuff she was going through and let me comfort her. I felt privileged to be able to hold space for a friend I love.

Even in our sessions, as Dr. Ham bore his all-seeing eyes into my skull, he had taken to smiling at me and saying, "You feel curious today." He might as well have been telling me that I was his favorite patient. It was a glowing compliment.

I am not always curious, of course. When I perceive someone being rude to me, I do not get it together to practice this dance of attunement every day. Not even most times. But more and more, I am curious enough to ask the magic question: "What do you need?" These four words open doors and break down walls. With the benefit of understanding, we are no longer two separate beings floating through these threads alone. We are giving and receiving. Two reciprocal atoms hugging each other through the turmoil around us. *I hurt you. You hurt me. You're mine.*

—

There is one last thing, though, that we must consider when we think about *what is really happening.* Something that questions don't always answer. Something that lies far under the surface of most people's understanding of what is happening.

In my research, I came across a neuropsychologist at Emory University, Negar Fani, who studies the effects of PTSD on people of color. She did a study where she scanned the brains of Black women who had experienced continued racist microaggressions in their personal lives and at work, and found that this abuse had changed the structures of their brains.[2] What's more, their brains had undergone similar structural changes to people who had complex PTSD. The takeaway here: Racism can cause PTSD. Even Negar herself told me that her work was inspired by the slights and microaggressions she'd endured from her older white male colleagues in academia.

On top of those findings, there have also been a number of studies showing

that consuming racist or threatening media can be harmful to one's mental health. Black people who have watched videos of unarmed Black men being shot by police have reported anxiety and depression. I'm sure the same could be said for Latinx people watching videos of dead-eyed children separated from their parents at the border.

This made me reconsider the timing of my breakdown. It was no accident that it occurred at work, a space where I was forced to think about white supremacy and violence against people of color all day, every day—all while facing prejudice and abuse from my own management. Now, years later, I know many journalists of color who were forced to quit their newsrooms in the same time period I did, for similar mental health struggles.

It isn't just racism. Being part of an oppressed minority group—being queer or disabled, for example—can cause C-PTSD if you are made to feel unsafe because of your identity. Poverty can be a contributing factor to C-PTSD. These factors traumatize people and cause brain changes that push them toward anxiety and self-loathing. Because of those changes, victims internalize the blame for their failures. They tell themselves they are awkward, lazy, antisocial, or stupid, when *what's really happening* is that they live in a discriminatory society where their success is limited by white supremacy and class stratification. The system itself becomes the abuser.

When my boss said I was "different," I thought it meant *broken.* Now I think it meant something else.

CHAPTER 41

"I had a wonderful weekend and I'm upset about it," I said. Dr. Ham gave me a confused look, and I sighed.

We'd had an extravagant barbecue with Joey's family on Saturday. And the next day, I'd gone out to dinner with friends who were in town, and we walked the streets of Manhattan until late at night. I had laughed for two days straight. But on Monday, in absence of all that company and revelry, I'd felt lonely. *My stupid-ass C-PTSD,* I'd thought. *Always conspiring to make me feel alone no matter how much good stuff comes my way.*

It was shameful, I said. "Like, who feels lonely after not being surrounded by loving people for half a day?"

"Everyone," Dr. Ham replied.

"Wait—but isn't it crazy?"

"No. That's the way it should be. Your body knows better than you."

"That…really? It's not a crazy thing, to feel lonely?"

"No, especially when life is delicious. You just ate the best food for the whole weekend and then all of a sudden you are eating crackers and water all day. You're like, what? I'm not supposed to miss the good stuff? You need to stop judging your body and its natural feelings."

On another day, I talked about how deeply depressed I got after logging on to Twitter. Looking at other colleagues' career advances made me insecure. I tweeted something irreverent, got worried that it might be construed as offensive, and then immediately deleted it. How very C-PTSD, I complained, to get triggered over Twitter.

“Social media is stressful. Everyone feels this way,” Dr. Ham said.

“Do they actually, though?”

“Yes. They do. There *could* be real consequences to you tweeting something irresponsible. This is a valid thing to be afraid of.”

And then there were several days when I was feeling miserable at therapy about tiny things. I didn’t even want to bring my feelings up, they felt so stupid and small and not worth talking about. How dare I be sad about rereading an old, depressed blog entry? Or about the fact that I didn’t get a fellowship I applied for?

Dr. Ham saw through my veneer, though. On those days, he knew I was hiding from him. Knew I wasn’t quite being honest, even though I was trying to be present. He’d keep pushing me that something was wrong until I’d snap back at him, “I’m fine. You don’t know everything, you know. You’re not psychic.”

During one of my *fine* moods, Dr. Ham tried to get me to conjure baby Stephanie and nurture her.

“Great,” I deadpanned. “I’ll tell her that this is not her fault, and she doesn’t have control over everything, and it’s okay, and she has people who love her, and all that shit. Wonderful.”

He looked at me, surprised at my anger. “Wait, wait, wait. What just happened?”

What was happening was that these goddamn hokey tools took up so much time and effort, and sometimes they didn’t work, and…

“I’m just feeling tired,” I said. “Just mad that I have to do any of this in the first place. I’ve been working really hard for such a long time. I’ve been coming to you for months now.” (Eight weeks, to be exact.) “So when am I going to be fixed?”

Dr. Ham pivoted. “Look. There’s this really cheesy exercise—I’m embarrassed to say it, it’s so cheesy. But you like artsy-crafty things, right? Do you want to draw a circle?” He handed me a pad of paper and a pen.

I gave him a withering look. Usually artsy-crafty exercises were particularly cloying to me. But I relented and took the pad and pen and drew a circle because at least this was new. “Now what?”

“Draw on the inside the feelings that you’re allowed to have. That you allow yourself to have. And on the outside, write the feelings that you’re not allowed

to have."

"Okay." Inside the circle I wrote: *Happiness. Anger sometimes.* Outside the circle, I wrote: *Stressed out. Sadness.* "I'm not allowed to be sad," I said as I scribbled. "I'm allowed to be capable and in charge of my narrative. Not helpless and stupid."

Dr. Ham laughed at me.

I sat with my circle a while, filling things outside of it, and then turned it around to show him. "There. Do you like my chart? Most feelings are on the outside. But see how it just says *SMART!* really big in the center of the circle. That's mostly what I'm allowed to be."

He leaned forward and squinted at it. "Looking at that, I imagine a tiger mom."

I flipped the chart over to take another look. Crap. My mother, on the page, again. "Oh my God. Yeah."

"Now, Part B of this stupid exercise is—imagine if you ever have a little child. What would you allow your child to have?"

I knew this exercise was really a variation on taking care of child Stephanie, but still, the point he was making was potent. If I did this to myself, would I traumatize my future child by putting this on them? "Oh my God!" I moaned. "This is a nightmare! It's terrible!"

"You would never do this to your child," he insisted.

"Yeah. You would do this—" I drew a giant circle around all the feelings.

"Right. You'd allow everything." Dr. Ham sat in silence with me for a while. Then he said, "You're tiger-childing your recovery—you're telling yourself you have to be perfectly happy all the time. And if you're feeling sad, you're fucking up. You're not really *recovering*."

"Yeah," I whispered.

"That's not how it works." Silence again. "Listen—let me tell you about hearts."

I rolled my eyes and scoffed, prepping myself for another woo-woo purehearted Buddhist story.

"No. Real hearts. The heart as a muscle," he said. "A healthy heart doesn't pump at the same rate all the time. That would actually be a really *unhealthy* heart. The healthiest hearts are adaptable, and the quicker they adapt, the better.

When you start running, your heart should ideally speed up quickly. Then, when you rest, it should slow down quickly. It's the same for your emotions. When something really tragic happens, it would be weird if you were still happy, right? Or if you just sat there with no reaction. When something tragic happens, you should be there with that pain, feeling that sadness. When something unjust happens, you should feel how aggravating it is. And then, after you've sat with those feelings for the appropriate amount of time—and it could be an hour, or a day, or months, depending on the severity of what happened—then, you can go back to a state of rest. Or joy. Or whatever. Being healed isn't about feeling nothing. Being healed is about feeling the appropriate emotions at the appropriate times and still being able to come back to yourself. That's just life."

—

Negative emotions are of course terrifying in the context of our society's obsession with happiness. But they're especially bad for anyone struggling with modern psychiatry's pathologizing perfectionism. When I'd first read those books about people with complex PTSD, so many of them had described us as *emotionally erratic* and said we had trouble *self-soothing*. For the past two years, I had felt some form of shame whenever I wasn't in a state of blissed-out gratitude and appreciation.

But, Dr. Ham told me, these negative emotions are not simply something to endure and erase. They are purposeful. Beneficial. They tell us what we need. Anger inspires action. Sadness is necessary to process grief. Fear helps keep us safe. Completely eradicating these emotions is not just impossible—it's unhealthy.

These negative emotions only become toxic when they block out all the other emotions. When we feel so much sadness that we can't let any joy in. When we feel so much anger that we cannot soften around others. True mental health looks like a balance of these good and bad feelings. As Lori Gottlieb says in her book *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*, "Many people come to therapy seeking closure. Help me not to feel. What they eventually discover is that you can't mute one emotion without muting the others. You want to mute the pain? You'll also mute the *joy*."[1]

—

I sat with this knowledge for a week. When a bad driver suddenly cut us off and Joey yelled out the window that he was going to beat him so thoroughly his mother wouldn't recognize him, I let myself feel stressed and anxious for a minute. Because this was a stressful situation. Then when the bad driver accelerated away, I let my anxiety go with him. When I received bad news about a sick family member, I took time and space to mourn it. For once, I did not feel bad about taking that space. I watched TV without guilt. I ate cookies without guilt. And a kind of miraculous thing happened. I felt *better* the next day. Way better. I still felt sadness about my family member. But also available to me: *joy.*

These moments seemed so small. Negligible, even. But some larger change had occurred. It was like every negative emotion I had was lighter. The duration of my suffering was shortened. A negative emotion would arise, and after a while, it ebbed. It didn't feel as intense or crippling as before. Then it flowed out to sea. Every emotion felt…appropriate. At last, it seemed I had conquered the deadly triad of *P*'s—personal, pervasive, and permanent.

The next week, I told Dr. Ham, "A lot of what's helpful is you essentially giving me permission for things and telling me things are normal. Because I've assigned trauma to every element of my life to the point where everything I do seems freakish. Pathologizing everything. So it's nice to differentiate what parts of the trauma are things that are human and normal, and which parts are actual problems."

"You're allowed to have these feelings. Do you know the difference between pain and suffering?"

"Um…I don't know. Do I?"

"Pain is about feeling real, appropriate, and valid hurt when something bad happens. Suffering is when you add extra dollops to that pain. You're feeling bad about feeling bad."

"Double punishment," I clarify.

"Yes. So getting rid of suffering means you're not adding to the pain. You appropriately felt awkward and uncomfortable and regretful that that dinner party didn't go well. You appropriately feel annoyed and angry at one of your friends who is being prissy. You're just accepting of it all. And if the feeling

stays, you ask, okay, why is this feeling still in me? And then, assume that there's incredible wisdom in your intuitions and just start listening to them. What is this? What is this thing in my body right now? What are you trying to teach me?"

—

I am not a girl. I am a sword, I used to tell myself. Hacking and slashing, I refused to succumb to belts or golf clubs or gatekeepers saying no. I would stay alive. I would get what I wanted.

But the thing about being a sword is that you can never lay your weapon down. You never get to experience the ecstasy of surrender.

—

Dr. Ham, in some ways, became my anti-mother—a caring parental figure (it helped that he was naggy and accidentally harsh and Asian) who could skillfully counter my parents' voices in my head. My mother had created boundaries in my brain, rules for acceptable ways of being and thinking that forced my consciousness to walk a narrow, treacherous corridor. I swung my sword at the walls, trying to force an inch to breathe.

But Dr. Ham lifted those barriers entirely by demolishing the rules. *You are allowed. You can do that. That would not make you a bad person. Go ahead. Surrender.*

Dr. Ham gave me permission to feel irritated when a friend didn't text back. One morning, I watched a woman try to jump in front of the A train (another woman pulled her back at the last minute). I called him all triggered and weepy, and he gave me permission to take the rest of the day off and watch television. "You're done today," he said. "You're going home. Relax." He gave me permission to treat myself to dessert. No longer did I have to hack and slash at myself on the road to betterment: *But what about calories? But what about carbs? But what about inflammation?* Instead, I surrendered to my basest instincts. *But what if I want to? But what if this feels right for me, right now?* I ate the cookie. I ate two. I went to bed and cried for an hour at three P.M. I held a

grudge for a week before I was ready to let it go. I did all the bad things. I didn't feel bad about them.

And the world didn't collapse. In fact, the opposite happened.

I was still productive. Maybe even more productive than before because my brain felt freer. I was still healthy. I still nurtured my friendships. Nobody died.

And the corridor widened. My life gained spaciousness. The circle grew. The circle contained everything.

—

It took about fifteen weeks—a little more than three months—for Dr. Ham to change my inner narrative from a hateful whip-bearing tyrant to a chill(er) surfer dude. Like love and bankruptcy, it happened slowly, then all at once. Right now, I'm making breakfast. I woke up late, I accidentally missed a call this morning, it's eleven A.M., and I have work to do. But I'm not rushing. I'm sautéing potatoes and onions and peppers together and frying eggs and chopping cilantro for some breakfast tacos. I assemble them carefully and then crumble cotija on top. They are delicious. I decide I'll get to washing up when I get to it. I'll get to everything when I get to it. The world will keep turning. The tacos are delicious, and I take my time eating them. And then I'm marveling: *Oh, wow*. *Maybe this life I've got is going to be spectacular, after all.*

CHAPTER 42

I told Joey that I wanted our wedding to be about more than just him and me. If our marriage was entirely about us, we could simply elope in a chapel in Vegas and get everything we wanted out of it. But the reason we were having an actual wedding, with crudités and table decorations and an audience, was to tie a community together. I wanted our ceremony to be a process of gratitude and unification. We'd both seen weddings where the ceremony itself was ten minutes long, a poem and some "I do's," but we wanted our ceremony to be the focal point. I wanted it to be interactive and emotional and tailored to our friends and family as much as it was to us.

The average cost of a New York City wedding is $77,000. I did not make that much money in all of 2019, so there was no way that was going to happen. Our budget was a tenth of that. All of my friends' weddings had servers who helped dole out food and planners who put out the chairs and designed the centerpieces. I assumed that we'd need to do the same—hire a crew to make the day happen. But Joey laughed at me. "I've got like twelve people in my family," he said, astonished at my fancy nonsense. "We *have* a whole crew!"

"That's not what I meant by *interactive*," I fought back. "It's fine that your family can help without resenting you for it afterward or thinking that you were cheap, but I don't have any family." I had invited a cousin and an aunt, but I did not invite my parents. The decision was painful, but at the end of the day, I wanted to be surrounded by people who loved me. "I don't know if I feel comfortable asking my friends to do that. It would seem like an obligation."

He shrugged. "I'm sure they'd love to help!" he insisted. "Just ask!"

And so we enlisted the help of my friends and his family to fold one thousand paper cranes to decorate our wedding. His brother *learned the harp* to be our on-site musician. And then the day arrives. A small army of our people shows up to the venue hours before our ceremony to set up tables and chairs, help me into my dress, tape together my bouquet, run to the store to get balloons. The whole time, I am a beam of pure adrenaline as I direct people here and there, ending each request with a wad of guilt and gratitude: "Do this, please. Sorry! Thank you!"

And then time stands still for a moment. I hear the harp music playing, and I walk myself down the aisle. Joey welcomes me with a hug. We are standing outside under a white wooden arch draped with garlands of paper cranes. Even though it is September, we lucked out: It is a perfect day, seventy-eight degrees and sunny. At our garden venue, the blossoms sway in the light breeze, the branches of trees whisper to one another. A little green caterpillar makes his way to the top of the microphone. A very fat cat sidles up to Joey and nuzzles him sweetly. I grip the microphone with a trembling hand and address our audience:

"Love is not a finite resource, something you have to mete out carefully like a package of Oreos. Instead, providing love begets more love, which begets more and more love.

"As many of you know, I grew up largely with the absence of love, and I was essentially orphaned fifteen years ago. And sometimes that was as sad as it sounds. But most of the time, it wasn't. Because I wasn't alone. The same way I am not alone here today.

"To my friends: Even in my loneliest, most painful moments, it was your love that shone through the dark. Your love kept me alive. Your love raised me. When I let your love in, it made me better. It taught me how to slowly become kinder and gentler, and then, as love tends to do, it multiplied and blossomed and taught me how to love myself, and how to love others, and how to love this wonderful man…to give him buckets of love, all the love he deserves. So I am truly grateful that you are here today to witness your handiwork. You put us here. Thank you.

"And to Joey's family, the family I'm joining today: Thank you so much for showing me what a real, actual loving family unit looks like. Even when it involves chaos and yelling and the dog pooping on the floor, your family is

forgiving, and loyal, and truly dedicated to each other, and for all of your quirks, each of you is fundamentally kind. From the very beginning, you all welcomed me into your loving chaos with open arms. You said, 'You're ours now.' Grandma, your mother took in a baby whose mother died and loved him as her own child. You loved him as your own brother. And three generations later, your family has not forgotten that lesson. Love begets love. I cannot express how monumental it is to me to exchange gossip and forgiveness with all of you, to play games and laugh with siblings, and to pick up the phone and say the words 'Hi, Mom.' Thank you for being here today and every day. In return, I will try my best to carry on your family tradition of generosity and acceptance for generations to come."

I look up from the paper I am reading from. There is so much sniffling. Tears are gushing down Dustin's cheeks, and Kathy's and Jen's faces match their pink dresses. Joey's eyes are brimming, too, and then he asks everyone to reach under their seats.

When I'd expressed that I wanted a community-based wedding, Joey had not only agreed but also suggested we write a personal letter to every single person in the audience telling them why we were glad to have them in our lives. At this point, everyone finds these letters taped underneath their seats and murmurs their surprise.

Someone calls out, "Do we open these, Joey?"

He stretches out his arms. "Open them!"

I had originally brightened at Joey's idea. But, in practice, many of the letters were difficult to write. Each of them had its own unique challenge. Some friendships felt like delicate glass globes—they were relatively new, and maybe if I pressed too hard on them, they would break. Some friendships felt too enormous to sum up in words—I'd been friends with Kathy and Dustin since I was nine. Some friendships had immense value to me in college or my early twenties, but they hadn't been quite as active in my life since then. And then there were people like my old boss at *Snap Judgment*, Mark—I loved him, but our relationship generally revolved around good-natured shit-talking. He constantly made fun of me for being a cheapskate. I once called him to make sure he was okay after being injured but then spent most of the time roasting him for the cause of his injury: falling down while rollerblading. I teased, "It's not

the ’90s anymore, old man!” He shot back, “Very funny, motherfucker.” How could I tell this chodebucket how much I appreciated him without sounding sappy and lame?

In the end, I decided to go hard on all the letters—to fill them with earnest love, as sincere and honest as I could muster. I leaned into my sappiness. *You’ve lived up to the nickname I have for you: Uncle Mark,* I wrote. *Thank you for always tolerating me and my neuroticism, always worrying about me, always thinking about how to protect me, and showing me love and kindness in a way I barely deserve. I’m so lucky to have an Uncle like you.*

We give everyone a couple of minutes to read, at which point I have the brief opportunity to gaze into this sea of people. Their heads are bowed, they are smiling, laughing, crying. Okay, not just crying—*ugly crying*. Dustin is re-wadding a sopping-wet tissue. Barely able to sit upright, he leans on his husband’s shoulder. My cousin gives him a new tissue, then pulls out another for herself and blows her nose. Tai Koo Ma, next to them, looks more peacefully satisfied than I’ve seen her in a long while. Mansoor and Mark are smiling; Noah gives me the biggest, dumbest, toothiest grin; Jen is sniffling; Kathy turns her wet face up to look at me, and we exchange a shy, tearful moment. As I look out onto my community, all in one place for the first time in my life, I think, *Man. These are good goddamn people.* Each one represents countless acts of love and kindness, late-night calls and baked goods, cold beers and warm hugs. Behind all of these smiles is a lifetime of joy. The void is, for once, full. It is overflowing.

I am glad I wrote them letters. I want to write them more letters. I want to keep telling them how much I love them a thousand million ways, constantly, every day. I want to send them a billion more texts. I want to grab their hands and squeeze them. I want to look and look at them until we are old and wrinkled and my cataracts keep me from seeing their beautiful faces.

The PTSD had always told me I am alone. That I am unlovable. That I am toxic. But now, it is clear to me: That was a lie. My PTSD clouded my vision of what was actually happening.

—

What is actually happening now: These people are not thinking about me being

overly meticulous about fork placement. Dustin is not thinking about how he got burned with the hot glue gun while making the centerpieces. Kathy is not thinking about the time I called her a bitch when we were fifteen. There is no guilt or shame in this space. There is only the purest expression of love. My friends, many of whom do not know one another, are crying in public because they love me and because they feel loved by me. It is nothing short of a miracle. What is happening is an exchange of grace.

I am crying up in front of a crowd wearing too-heavy fake eyelashes. I should not have eaten pizza earlier because I am gassy and my belly is bulging unflatteringly in my dress. I'm having my picture taken a thousand times. I am laying out my most vulnerable self in front of friends and some strangers. I have never felt more cherished. I have never felt safer. I have never felt truer or more confident in the validity of what is really happening.

Then it is time for our vows. Before Joey even says anything, the extraordinarily tender way he looks at me already sends me into a tearful tizzy. "This is home," he says, looking around at New York City. "And it is *good to be home*!" Everyone laughs as he hams it up, winning the crowd over with his charming delivery. His vows are so well-crafted and eloquent, organized around the idea of the home we will build and repair together. He is realistic but optimistic. Full of excitement for a difficult but blessed future. "No one has ever seen me so thoroughly and loved me so well as you have," he says at the end. "I will be loyal to you. I'll be true to you and I'll be true with you because to be known by you touches me wholly. I'll ensure that you know you are the most important person in my life, that you are loved. I will make these words forgettable because I will live them for you every day." He pauses, shrugs. "Probably not every day. Most days. Many days, I will live them." We all laugh through our tears.

In my vows, I tell Joey that because of the way I was brought up, I couldn't, for the longest time, comprehend the concept of unconditional love. That isn't true anymore. His constant, unwavering love has healed me in ways I never could have imagined. Through him, I learned that you can make mistakes and still deserve love. You can fight and then repair. Through his love, I understood how to unconditionally love myself.

Tai Koo Ma and Joey's grandmother both give us the rings to exchange, and we embrace them tightly before taking them. Then we exchange our "I dos," kiss, and walk through the applause of our loved ones up into the attic of our venue. There, we hold each other's hands and cry and spend a few moments suspended in awe. The fact that we were able to create a moment like this together makes me know I picked the right partner to share this life with.

Afterward, there is food—we've laid out spreads of buttery curry puffs and salty spareribs and spicy mee goreng from Jaya 888, my favorite Malaysian restaurant in Chinatown. My brothers-in-law give speeches about how ecstatic they are to welcome me into the family. One of them pulls me aside after and says, "You know, you're really good at this family thing. You already make an incredible friend. So I'm really excited that now you're my sister."

All night long, people keep coming up to tell me how much the ceremony meant to them, how it was worth the trip, how they were leaving feeling changed or at least reinvigorated about the power of love. They tell me that I should be immensely proud of creating something so beautiful. And they keep sharing their own little stories of what *I* mean to *them.* How I'd held them in hard moments or taught *them* to love. When Kathy had to move across the state in high school and didn't know anyone in her new town, I'd handwritten her a letter every day. When Dustin's grandmother died, I'd stayed up late every night talking to him on AIM. Tai Koo Ma and I had long confessional bonding sessions over being Westernized Malaysians. To so many people, I had been present in their most dire moments. I'd been the family member they'd needed to feel seen.

As Mark gives his speech, he tells the crowd that there were times he felt so tenderly toward me, it was almost as if I were his daughter, and he'd cried multiple times trying to write this speech for me. He says that a couple of years ago when he was going through a hard time, I called every week to check up on him. I remembered those conversations as me mostly complaining to him about work, regaling him with my brutal dating stories, and nagging him to rest more and eat better. At the time, he mostly brushed me off. But today, in front of everyone, he tells me that those calls meant the world to him and helped him work through the scary emotions he was feeling.

—

Here's a theory: Maybe I had not really been broken this whole time.

Maybe I had been a human—flawed and still growing but full of light nonetheless. All this time, I had received plenty of love, but I'd given it, too. Unbeknownst to me, I had been scattering goodness all around like fun-size chocolates accidentally falling out of my purse as I moved through the world. Perhaps the only real thing that was broken was the image I had of myself—punishing and unfair, narrow and hypercritical. Perhaps *what was really happening* was that, along with all of my flaws, I was a fucking wonder. And I continue to be a fucking wonder. A fun, dependable friend who will always call you back, cook for you, and fiercely defend your honor. A devoted sister and daughter who prioritizes and appreciates family in ways less-traumatized people can never quite understand. A hardworking, capable employee who brings levity and mischievousness to the offices I inhabit. I am a person who is generous with her love, who is present in texts and calls and affirmations, because I know so intimately how powerful that love can be.

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When I'd written *Love begets love,* it had been somewhat of a hypothesis that I'd gathered from other people's stories. But like some Chinese magic, it feels as if I have spoken it into reality. I do not only feel like I have just married the love of my life—though, certainly, I have. I also feel as if I've married a whole flock of people. Like I've tied myself to them in some permanent way, with golden links that multiply every time we vow our commitment to each other—love and more love and more and more love until it is blankets of love, fields of love, worlds of it, bigger than hurt, bigger than fear, bigger than division or prejudice or petty shortcomings, power beyond time, death, or human comprehension.

This would be a nice place to wrap things up. A happy ending, after all, contained within the best day of my life.

But in the end, it was not simply love that helped me come to terms, once and for all, with my C-PTSD.

It was tragedy.

CHAPTER 43

So the world was ending, of course.

No bread in the grocery aisles, racial reckonings that trickled up from seas of marchers on Broadway to the sparkly glass offices downtown, hate crimes galore, armed rioters in the U.S. Capitol, and, oh yeah, hundreds of thousands dead from a weaselly, shitty virus that chews your lungs up like old gum.

It was 2017 all over again but worse, an endless news cycle with commentators so tired they were hallucinating on air, shaking their heads at the camera slack-jawed and declaring, “That was a shitshow.”

But this time, I was fine. I was good, actually.

I was productive. Teaching, writing, sending encouraging paintings to friends in crisis, spending hours on the phone comforting friends who were evacuating their homes in California, which was being incinerated by wildfires.

Online, everyone was melting down. My friends were posting that they didn’t have the attention span to finish reading a book, let alone work. They were lying in bed sobbing all day long. They showed up to my Zoom calls puffy-eyed, in bed. I sent them comforting messages and gave them pity “likes.” And then I patted Joey’s head and went to sleep.

I felt bad about this okayness at first. Was I only doing well because I could work from home? Because I was privileged or insensitive? Because I was dissociated?

But then again…the week prior, I had gone for a walk and saw a sticker with UNAVAILABLE UNTIL AFTER THE CRISIS plastered across the front of an ATM,

then stood at the edge of a funeral home's gate and watched them wheel yet another body bag inside. I stood there helplessly, and my mouth crumpled behind my mask, my shoulders shook. But then I went home and made a delightful potato leek soup, and it really was just so good with a dollop of yogurt.

It took a couple of weeks for me to get it. Ah. I wasn't freaking out because I was made for this moment.

Dr. Ham would tell me that PTSD is only a mental illness in times of peace. The whole point of PTSD is to prepare you for being on the verge of death at any moment. My parents prepared me to face a vicious world with danger around every corner.

But as an adult, I hadn't lived in that world. I lived in a fluffy, down-comforter world with seventeen kinds of capers at the grocery store, where if you decided you wanted to relax, you could have someone bring a vegan ylang ylang bath bomb to your house in a matter of hours. My fear was misplaced and paranoid here. Until the pandemic.

With freezer trucks full of dead bodies parked outside morgues and Asian women being kicked, burned by acid, and shot, my PTSD transformed from a disability into a superpower. Because objectively, PTSD is an adaptation, a mechanism our genius bodies evolved to help us survive.

All of a sudden, I was no longer hypervigilant. I was just vigilant. I rationed our canned food and grew vegetables and fastidiously sanitized our groceries in the bathtub, but that didn't make me an oddball. It made me responsible.

—

"Sometimes it's a curse, and sometimes it's a blessing," said Greg Siegle, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist at the University of Pittsburgh. He studies the brains of C-PTSD patients, and he told me that my suspicions were right—there were many ways in which C-PTSD could be considered an actual *asset.* "I call them superpowers," he told me. "So many of what we call psychopathologies are actually skills and capabilities gone awry."

Much of my research had stated that people with PTSD had shrunken prefrontal cortices—that experiencing triggers often shut down the logical centers of our brains and left us irrational and incapable of complex thought. But

Siegle told me he'd discovered that research to be flawed. He'd found that for many people with complex PTSD, the exact opposite was happening. In moments of intense stress and trauma, our prefrontal cortices were actually far *more* active.

Normally, if you're facing a threat, your body immediately reacts to it. Your heart starts pumping blood. The hair on the back of your neck stands up. This is all in service of getting blood to your legs so you can run the hell away from it. On top of this, you *feel* your heart beating faster. You recognize that you're freaking out. That makes you even more anxious, and your heart beats even faster. But Siegle told me, "As far as we can tell with complex PTSD, in really stressful situations, you've got this coping skill that allows the prefrontal cortex to just shut off some of our evolutionary freak-out mechanisms and instead have high levels of prefrontal activity. So our bodies stop reacting."

In other words, in some moments of intense stress, we are super-duper good at dissociation. Our hearts don't pump as hard. Our brains cut themselves off from our bodies, so we don't really have that feedback loop of getting anxious about getting anxious. Instead, our prefrontal cortices blink online—we become *hyperrational*. Super focused. Calm. Siegle explained it this way: "If running away has never been an option for you, you have to be cunning and do other things. So it's like, this is time to bring all of our resources online, because we're going to survive this."

People with C-PTSD might have an outsized, gnarly freak-out about a cockroach in the house or a flash of anger on someone's face. But in times of real danger—when someone furious is coming toward us with an actual machete in their hand, ready to kill—we face the problem head-on, while everyone else is cowering. A lot of the time, we're the ones getting shit done.

When I was in college working for the school paper, there was one month when we didn't sell enough ads to cover the cost of printing. The head of student media called the editor in chief, the ad sales guy, and me into our office and just absolutely lost her shit at us. She was screaming, saying that we were incompetent and irresponsible, that we could never have a career doing this kind of work. The ad sales guy completely shut down. The editor in chief sobbed. But I spoke calmly and plainly. I told her that her anger wasn't beneficial. I told her that we were students, and this was the appropriate time in our careers to make

these kinds of mistakes. I told her that we were sorry but that we needed her support in order to fix the problem. Before I knew it, the head of student media was apologizing to us and admitting *she* was the one who was out of line. Afterward, my editor, still wiping her red eyes, marveled at me. “How did you do that? *You,* of all people?” she asked. At the time, it didn’t make sense to any of us. Now it does.

It makes sense why I lose my shit at Joey over him dropping a pot in the sink, but if he’s in a screaming brawl with his family, sometimes I can mediate the conversation.

It makes sense why now that the world was falling apart, I was calmly gluing the pieces back together.

When it came time for Siegle to name this phenomenon—the dissociated state that means you don’t always have emotions that are totally appropriate for a situation—he called it Blunted and Discordant Affect Sensitivity Syndrome. The acronym for this? BADASS.

“The vision was always, you know, the little girl comes into the clinic after being abused and totally has no self-esteem. And the clinician just says, ‘Well, maybe you’re just a little bit BADASS.’ That’s where I want to go with that.”

“Damn,” I said. “It would have been helpful if I’d talked to you after I first got diagnosed. Oh well.” Then I laughed, my BADASS-ness casually inserting itself into the conversation.

—

As the fog of pathology burned off and my understanding of my superpower blossomed, I started to see that my C-PTSD did come with a fair amount of badass benefits.

Over the summer of 2020, Lacey started dating an extremely hot dude. Unfortunately, like most extremely hot dudes, he also insisted on being extremely unavailable. He frequently canceled plans without rescheduling new times to see her and didn’t call when he promised to. He blamed it on his busy schedule, but his flakiness was driving her increasingly up the wall.

“Is this normal?” she texted me every few days. “I don’t want to seem needy or weird. But I can’t sleep. I feel all this anxiety and rage. It’s all I think about.”

“Totally normal! Of course you feel that way. Most people would feel bad

about this. But your C-PTSD means that you especially value stability and reliability!" I replied. "It's okay to have these needs. They're not out of control. They are a part of you, and it's okay for you to make them known. If he can adapt to meet your needs, then he's a decent dude! If it freaks him out, good riddance to him."

It turned out that he was indeed a Grade A prime-cut fuckboy. But by the time the weather chilled, Lacey was Tindering with other men who made her feel safer. That's when she reached out to me with one of her characteristic voice messages—passionate, sincere missives that she sent when she was too busy or overwhelmed to text.

"You know when I was anxious about that dude?" she said, her voice brisk and breathless as she walked along a beach somewhere, ocean air scraping against her microphone. "I tried reaching out to all my 'normal,' non-C-PTSD friends, and all of them kept asking, 'Why are you obsessing over this guy?' But you immediately saw that my feelings were not really about this dude. You pushed me to be authentic in my interactions with him. You had a level of insight that I've never gotten from anyone, even other therapists! And you never made me feel ashamed. It was such a relief and is still such a relief. I'm actually able to date now and have fun! You're my knight in shining armor, Foo!"

How about that. My struggles with C-PTSD made me more empathetic. They made me more attuned to what people needed and uniquely skilled in comforting them.

Even the negative parts of my C-PTSD had a silver lining. It was true that when Joey was angry or upset, I had a hard time sitting with his pain and never let him sulk in peace. Instead, I'd nag and badger him until he told me exactly what was up. Once, fed up with me pawing at him like a squirrel analyzing a nut, he yelled, "Can't you just say, 'I hear you, that sucks' instead of trying to solve all of my problems? Not everything needs solving!"

But days afterward, once he was feeling better, Joey often thanked me. "In the end, because you pester me, I tell you things I don't tell anyone else. And then the talks we have about my feelings change me for the better," he told me. "Nobody makes me feel cared for as much as you do."

I wasn't loved *in spite* of my C-PTSD—but, in part, *because* of it.

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I wasn't the only one who came into her powers during the global pandemic.

I taught a podcasting class via Zoom that summer, and one of my students spoke to a woman with severe germaphobia and OCD. For a long time, the woman was bound to her home, washing her hands with bleach until they bled. Her friends and family used to think she was crazy, but after the pandemic began, she got a couple of calls from people apologizing for judging her. "We get it now," they said. Her reaction to this was that she wanted to *leave* the house. Seeing everyone obsess about germs as much as she did made her want to run her fingers over things. It made her want to kiss people.

One woman I know has a strained relationship with her parents, who've struggled for years to understand her C-PTSD. But while being quarantined, they expressed feeling helpless, depressed, and panicked. "Yeah," Susan told them. "That's what it's like to be me all the time." And something clicked for them.

"Even though they don't understand it entirely, they've come closer to understanding it. And that's an experience I've struggled for decades to convey to them," my friend said to me. "It's not something I would've wished on anybody, but being able to articulate my past experience in ways where I feel understood reduces a lot of shame."

Which brings me to the final reason why I felt I was thriving in the apocalypse. It reminded me of Dr. Ham's definition of pain versus suffering—of feeling legitimate pain versus the suffering of shame associated with that pain. When I saw nurses breaking down and crying on the news, and I cried with them, I was feeling legitimate pain. What I wasn't feeling anymore was the suffering.

That felt like freedom. That felt like healing.

—

At the grocery store those first days of the pandemic, I hid behind dark sunglasses and scarves wrapped around my face. I was scared that there were no eggs or pasta on the shelves. But I felt something else. A kind of familiarity. Like maybe I had been here before. And honestly, I had.

When my grandmother carried the egg containing my father's genetic code in it, that egg also contained the genetic code for his future seed. In some microscopic way, I had been there when my grandmother went to the store during the Japanese occupation and could not find rice. I had been there when she sewed those Japanese flags.

I had never felt that I could compare my own experience to the great historical tragedies my ancestors survived: poverty and sexism and racism, not to mention the great wars, dotted with sepia-toned images of bombs and blight. I could never live up to the stories that Auntie had told me of their impossible endurance. I was the entitled and delicate youngest daughter in this line, the one with soft hands and a shaky temperament. But now I have survived history, too, have I not? I've done so with my own strength and grace. And I've done more than survived.

I've fought.

—

There is a Chinese saying that "a third of the world is under the control of heaven, a third is under the control of the environment, and a third is in your hands." I got here through forces of war, luck, dowries, parents, bad bosses, and good boyfriends. But I took what was given to me, and I used my third of the equation to make choices to heal some of the wounds that had coursed through our family for generations.

I picked out the rocks and the weeds. I am doing everything I can to provide a better plot of soil for those who will come after me.

In Eugenia Leigh's poem "Gold," she writes, "Tell me // I am not the thing / my children will have to survive. / Tell me // the mob I inherited will not touch / my son. Yes, the cavalcade / of all that's tried to kill me // may forever raid my brain, but know / this: in my mother's first language, / the word for *fracture*, for *crack*, / is the same as the word for *gold*."[1]

One day in the future, I will show my child her great-grandmother's jade, the little gold rabbit with the ruby eyes. I will tell her that this will be hers. I will tell her all the stories about how our family survived, about the wars, and the gambling dens, and, yes, eventually even the golf club. I will tell her that when the sky falls, she should use it as a blanket.

And then I will give her the shining thing, the thing that none of us got, the thing that only I, in all of my resilient power, can give. The thing that all this pain has given me. I will hold her tight and tell her that I love her more than anything in the world. That she can always come to me for anything at all, and I will fix it if it needs fixing or just listen if she needs to be listened to. And as long as I live, I will never leave.

—

As of February 2022, it has been four years since my diagnosis. And I wouldn't describe myself as healed from complex PTSD. I wouldn't even say I am in remission.

I've learned that the beast of C-PTSD is a wily shape-shifter. Just when I believe I can see the ghoul for exactly what it is, it dissipates like a puff of smoke, then slithers into another crevice in the back of my mind. I know now it will emerge again in another form in a month or a week or two hours from now. Because loss is the one guaranteed constant in life, and since my trauma reliably resurfaces with grief, C-PTSD will be a constant, too. Rage will always coat the tip of my tongue. I will always walk with a steel plate around my heart. My smile will always waver among strangers and my feet will always be ready to run. In the past few years, my joints have continued to rust and swell. I cannot transfuse the violence out of my blood.

Every time the beast returns, I have to fight it slightly differently. The wars are shorter now, and often, the old tools work well. Counting colors and curiosity and conversations with my child-self muzzle the beast and shove it back into its hovel. Sometimes the beast requires new weapons—new forms of IFS or CBT, new mantras, new boundaries. Sometimes the beast bites a chunk out of me and gives a relationship a decent thrashing before I can get it in check again. Sometimes I fall into familiar pits of catastrophizing or dissociation, sometimes I find new, unpleasant swamps to wade through. Each episode is its own odyssey through past, present, and future, requiring new bursts of courage and new therapy sessions.

But there are two main differences now: I have hope, and I have agency. I know my feelings, no matter how disconsolate they are, are temporary. I know

that regardless of how unruly it is, I am the beast's master, and at the end of each battle I stand strong and plant my flag: I am alive, I am proud, I am joyful, still.

So this is healing, then, the opposite of the ambiguous dread: *fullness.* I am full of anger, pain, peace, love, of horrible shards and exquisite beauty, and the lifelong challenge will be to balance all of those things, while keeping them in the circle. Healing is never final. It is never perfection. But along with the losses are the triumphs.

I accept the lifelong battle and its limitations now. Even though I must always carry the weight of grief on my back, I have become strong. My legs and shoulders are long, hard bundles of muscle. The burden is lighter than it was. I no longer cower and crawl my way through this world. Now, I hitch my pack up. And as I wait for the beast to come, I dance.

For Joey, Kathy, Dustin, and Margaret
for being my family

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