THE BEST THING TO EVER HAPPEN TO YOU

A Project
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

by
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Spring 2015
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Tomie Anne Bitton

Spring 2015

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my husband,

David Bitton.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project could not have come to fruition without the support and encouragement of many people. I cannot thank them all by name, but I am grateful for those mentioned here and those who are not.

Thank you to my family, especially my husband, David, who has lovingly encouraged me in all my endeavors.

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ABSTRACT

THE BEST THING TO EVER HAPPEN TO YOU

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The Best Thing to Ever Happen to You is a memoir that seeks to explore the dynamics of change in a woman’s life, especially adolescence and motherhood. These stories follow a young woman as she comes of age, capturing and evoking moments when she questions her beliefs, her roots and her role as a mother. Each essay invites the reader to enter and experience the words set to these pages and re-examine life through their lens.

This project is divided into six parts, with an introductory essay for each, and another, longer essay that follows. Each part begins with musings on beds – a lyrical approach to discovering life based on where one sleeps and the lessons learned therein. The opening pieces frame the manuscript, creating a thread to follow life’s journey, and the section after each is directly tied to the same time period, although not necessarily limited to that specific phase – they often utilize a braided approach to reveal moments, thoughts and progression for a variety of ages.
In the Critical Introduction, I address the genre of memoir and discuss important authors and theorists of creative writing, such as Phillip Lopate and Brenda Miller. I also reference feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich and Hélène Cixous. At the heart of memoir is the attempt to bring to the surface discussion of memory, how it plays out in each individual, shapes us. Creative nonfiction, in any form, also provides avenues to show similarities we all share. I believe it is essential for women writers to participate wholeheartedly in sharing their own stories and act to support one another in these endeavors to ensure a more accurate view of her perspective, grasp equal exposure in all literary spheres.
CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Sharing the Prize

In 1974, feminist writer Adrienne Rich received the National Book Award for her work *Diving Into the Wreck*. In her acceptance speech, she said:

The statement I am going to read was prepared by three of the women nominated for the National Book Award for poetry, with the agreement that it would be read by whichever of us, if any, was chosen.

We, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker, together accept this award in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain. We believe that we can enrich ourselves more in supporting and giving to each other than by competing against each other; and that poetry—if it is poetry—exists in a realm beyond ranking and comparison. We symbolically join together here in refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declaring that we will share this prize among us, to be used as best we can for women. We appreciate the good faith of the judges for this award, but none of us could accept this money for herself, nor could she let go unquestioned the terms on which poets are given or denied honor and livelihood in this world, especially when they are women. We dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, of every color, identification, or derived class: the poet, the housewife, the lesbian, the mathematician, the mother, the dishwasher, the pregnant teenager, the teacher, the grandmother, the prostitute, the philosopher, the waitress, the women who will understand what we are doing here and those who will not understand yet; the silent women whose voice have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work. (Rich, “Acceptance Speech”)

The speech, but more importantly the act by these three women writers, speaks volumes. Not only is it a stinging critique of the male-centered literary marketplace, it reveals their understanding of who they are in the world as females, their part in the realm of sisterhood. They recognize the nation of sisters and invoke joining together to strengthen
and build up the individual woman and the women in our society. In addition, they credit sisterhood. They credit all women – those before them, surrounding them and even those to come, as part of the family required to carry on, to excel. This “Band of Sisters” needs to break ceilings and break ground in all they take part in, to push boundaries farther and farther toward a society of equality in each and every arena.

Rich is addressing her field of writers, yes, but her voice has reached the ears of many more. It has traveled beyond the divide. Generations beyond hers hear her message, accept her bold gestures, and feel called upon in some way. Some are drawn to scribble away in her shadow, to try to perpetuate her declarations, copying her example, paying it forward to the gender they feel so blessed to be a part of. Some give back by sharing their talents, not hiding their internal voice. I am one of these.

Unspinning the Past

A fellow student once commented that he appreciated my writing because it is so honest and open. My response was, “Well, once you have a baby, most modesty goes out the window.” We laughed and went our ways, but for me, his statement was true in a number of ways. There was something about lying in a hospital bed, feet spread and reaching to the sky with my cervix dilating for the world to see that really opened me up. Literally. But it also opened me up to the physical and spiritual bond I had to others who shared this birthing ability. A flood of emotional correlations engulfed me as a gush of bodily fluids rushed out of me. At that moment I became aware that I was a part of the biggest sorority ever.
It was in the months and years to follow that I pieced together my labor experience with the wisdom I was beginning to accumulate through mothering. I was learning that along with the honor of belonging to the union of women, there also came responsibility. For me, that job was to share the story of my body – the body that was pregnant, carried and grew life within it, and then delivered it to the world – to share these feminine experiences, and others, by writing creative nonfiction. As my insides became rearranged during the process, something in my head may have been dislodged as well, I’m not sure, but my thinking certainly took on a new shape and was asked to give more.

My writing capability stems from history, from those who blazed the trails before me – like Rich and other women writers, and the countless others throughout all eras and within all spaces – but it also comes from a feminine-only aptitude. My body is not only able to physically produce life; it can spawn words on the page. It does so in a manner that is distinctly feminine. In “The Laugh of Medusa,” Hélène Cixous writes, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement” (1643). Cixous is referring to women and their sexuality; she is acknowledging the body of a woman and its impact on the way she writes. She continues:

I say that we must [write as women], for, with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity, exceptions so rare, in fact, that, after plowing through literature across languages, cultures, and ages, one can only be startled at this vain scouting mission. It is well known that the number of
women writers (while having increased very slightly from the nineteenth century on) has always been ridiculously small. (1645-46)

In my work as a writer I can contribute to the world of women’s writing and do so in the popular genre of creative nonfiction. Although the personal essay and the memoir are strongly linked, this project is a memoir because its primary roots stem from my memory. Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola in *Tell It Slant* state, “To be memoir, the writing must derive its energy, its narrative drive, from exploration of the past” (95). In being intimate, honest, and emotional, and tapping into my own past, I can touch upon the female experience the most. Miller and Paola continue their definition of the form: “Memoir mines the past, examining it for shape and meaning, in the belief that from that act a larger, communal meaning can emerge. Memoir can heal, it can warn, and it can provide spiritual direction” (95). Through my writing I can also write to address the passion I feel towards sisterhood, motherhood, and womanhood.

In his Introduction for *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate says:

Fortunately, the modern era has seen women writers adopting the essay form more and more, helping to revive it, transforming its concerns, and at times giving it a different sound. One has only to read Virginia Woolf or M. F. K. Fisher or Annie Dillard to realize how much more comfortable certain women essayists are than their male counterparts with sensuous description, dazzling lyricism, and a willingness to dilate the moment. (l iii)

This part of Lopate’s Introduction appeals to me. But having an affinity to my fellow sisters and being able to bear children simply doesn’t qualify me to write creative nonfiction. I know this. Yet, because I am both a female and a female creative nonfiction writer, ultimately, I align myself with his declarations that females and female writers have an ability to see the world differently than males and that these traits provide the makeup for a very talented personal essayist or memoirist who can take the daily rituals
and simplicity of life and turn them into much more on the page. “For those of you interested in the memoir form,” Miller and Paola say, “think of yourself as an ‘unspinner,’ a voice striving to undo some of the cultural distortion you see around you” (96).

In another part of Lopate’s Introduction, a section entitled “Honesty, Confession and Privacy,” he zeros in on the idea of being truthful in creative nonfiction. It seems many writers and readers are consumed with this concept, even grappling with it throughout their writing and/or reading experiences. He says, “Let us say the writer has caught the reader’s attention with frank, conversational manner . . . In effect, a contract between writer and reader has been drawn up: the essayist must then make good on it by delivering, or discovering, as much honesty as possible” (xxv). What strikes me most is his use of the word “discovering” as it refers to honesty. This word indicates that honesty has to be found, worked out or even (dare I say?) created.

Other language Lopate uses within this section suggests the same. Words like: “struggle,” “climb,” “delve further underneath,” “scrape away illusions,” “baring the naked soul,” “rough handling” and so on. All of this to me suggests that honesty within creative nonfiction is not black or white, but is something that is constantly evolving, changing or being re-understood. Going back to his initial statement regarding a contract between the essayist and the reader, it is the job of the memoirist to promise to do her best – as far as honesty is concerned – but he doesn’t say the writer must be perfect or non-changing, or filled with facts; she simply must “discover as much honesty as possible.” I believe it should be understood that the memoirist’s view of things is always changing; her honesty with herself may take different forms at different times in her life,
but in order to fulfill her part of the bargain each writer needs to work through, find, create – or in Lopate’s words “discover” – honesty for herself.

In the following project, a collection of essays structured into one long memoir, it is my goal to explore topics of adolescence, womanhood, motherhood and an overall female perspective on life. At the same time I look for angles and issues that all readers can relate to and I write about subjects that fit into wide-reaching themes. I do this because I want to explore and write honestly about life experiences. I agree with Lopate when he writes, “At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience” (xxiii). I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to be a writer and share my understanding of life. In addition, I agree with Miller and Paola when they write, “This is one way a memoir essay transcends the personal: by examining small concrete details to approach larger, more universal themes” (97).

One way I believe I can reveal unity in the female experience is to go back to the physical, tapping into both the power that binds the female gender together and my intrinsic talent. Cixous writes:

*Woman for women.* – There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other – in particular, the other woman. *In* her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter. . . . Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was “born” to her. (1647-48)

Although my project is for the most part linear, tracing a progression from my own personal experiences beginning with adolescence to the current young mother that I am, asking and answering questions I have had along the way, the narrative is embedded
within six parts that are meant to highlight different stages or places for me, literally and/or metaphorically. Each section begins with a brief introduction to the essay that follows it, in an attempt to encapsulate larger subject(s) in the longer sections that make up a number of feminine experiences. By digging into my memories, by excavating some matters and emotions of my own, I hope to touch upon the aforementioned connection I feel toward women and what I believe to be our similarities.

Specifically, each section begins with a passage about the bed I associate with a particular time in my life: a childhood bed, my marriage bed, the bed my first child was conceived in, hospital beds I endured during pregnancy, my child’s crib and my current “family” bed. In “Bed of Roses, Bed of Nails” and its sister essay “Learning to Swim,” I discuss how an ornamental canopy bed I received in childhood was eventually outgrown. As I graduated into a teenager, I experienced the urge to try things out for myself, rising up against authority. I write:

As I grew older, becoming a teenager, I didn’t want to feel smothered any longer, with my view blocked by the delicate awning above me. Like most adolescents, I felt cramped and uncomfortable beneath the sheets. I rebelled against my mom and dad, and their fighting. I wanted to pull back the blankets, jump out of bed – a bed that wasn’t a bed of roses, but a bed of nails. (18)

The essay that follows covers more than just my own childhood and youth; it becomes a meditation on hair and femininity, on me as a daughter seeking control, and on my mother’s reaction to it, combined with some reflections on my own daughter. In “Learning to Swim” the idea of pushing boundaries, linked to personality traits I see as ultimately inherent (and not just a condition of adolescence), begins to emerge in the character of me on the page. The essay starts with a scene where I just had my long hair shortened. I write:
My mom thought I did it to hurt her, to cut away at what she’d tried to make. At the time, sitting in the chair in front of the mirror while layers and layers were chopped off, I didn’t care. I wanted it all gone—her brushing, her combing, her molding of me. I didn’t understand why she tried so hard to get rid of the knots. They’d been there from day one. They weren’t ever going to straighten out. (19-20)

This essay and the rest that follow all focus on me as a girl or woman. Admittedly, the topics are centered on me, a woman, but in order to accomplish my goal of supporting other women and also show our unity, others must being able to identify with what I am writing about.

After receiving feedback and undertaking revision, I have realized that many times I merely scratch the surface within the discussion of sisterhood that I feel so compelled to be a part of. To address this I scan for areas in each essay that others might identify with, even though their experiences are not the same. I touch upon a variety of themes and topics and even continue chronologically along my journey, for the most part, to capture different ages and phases. Other time periods are mentioned because much of what affects us is generational and it is important for me to acknowledge this.

Another way I strive to invoke universal subjects in the project is by bringing in questions of faith and the effects of the choices we make in our lives. The next pairing of sections (“In Bed With” and “Believe”) reflects attitudes as I unpack some of my thoughts on being born into a Mormon home. I walk the reader through some of my experiences as a female member of this church, ultimately exploring the question of what I believe in. This part begins and ends with my husband, showing the first bed we bought as a married couple, up to the first years of married life together. But the bulk of what I am exploring is myself as I became sexually active while being an active member of a
church that highly discourages such behavior outside of marriage. This section focuses on the struggles I encountered emotionally as I was trying to figure out who I was as a person, a girl drawn to boys and the attention they gave me, and how that coincided with any spiritual teachings I was being given at the time.

In an effort to provide a more fully rounded portrait of myself – one who once again seems to have rebellion running through her veins – and to discuss larger ideas in the project, I write about such things as losing my virginity at the age of fifteen. In “Believe” I write about music and a rock concert I attended with my first serious boyfriend to portray feelings I had at the time. I write, “I was swept up in the moment and didn’t recognize how immature I was. Again, I also didn’t really know the territory I was entering. I was simply going along for the ride. Choices were becoming more and more important, but my young mind was only beginning to grasp that fact” (42). The discussion of rebellion and sin in this essay, in the end, is an effort to nail down my own personal beliefs about religion and faith, yet also brings together more sensual, strong details of female sexuality and the role it plays in life and choices that go along with being a woman. Albeit subtly, I raise the question of why women have not been supported when trying to discover themselves in a society that does not always encourage rebellion because I have often wondered if this critical juncture in my life during adolescence not only shaped who I became, but how my voice developed as a woman and ultimately as a writer.
Your Own Slant

Two female creative nonfiction writers I’ve come close to as of late – Maxine Hong Kingston and Peggy Shumaker – and their works, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and *Just Breathe Normally* have directly influenced my project. Although my life and experiences are not similar to these women, their craft is something I strive to emulate. Many of the themes they touch on are female-oriented and are an honest representation of parts of the feminine life. Their writing contains nonfictional elements that can bring unity to womankind including discovering truth and honesty and delving into memory.

Kingston’s nonfiction memoir *The Woman Warrior* is filled with atypical essays that take an intimate look at what it is like to have a Chinese heritage. I believe this work to be a very strong example of what Lopate argues about the female perspective and the female essayist. As Kingston re-tells many of the memories and the historical narratives that her mother told to her as a child about growing up Chinese in America, she uses vivid imagery that serves to take the mundane in life and make it a mystery. Her language is intense and she weaves fairytale-like accounts with evocativeness. Her writing pertains not only to her experiences but also the experiences of other women from her life, like her mother and aunts.

In the last section, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Kingston touches on a theme of finding one’s own voice and asserting one’s authority, and in doing so makes a statement on whether truth is the result of the process of telling a personal story. She raises the question of whether speaking out or telling your own version may actually
change the truth. This reveals that when a writer creates, writes down and shares her own reality she may actually be creating a new truth. She is suggesting that a writer’s story may not just be subjectively slanted, but it may be evolving in terms relating to her own development as a woman and her role as a woman.

Kingston details a time in her life when she felt compelled to tell to her mother a list about bad things she had done. She says, “. . . I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me . . .” (197). She debates in her mind when and where and how to tell her mother these things, expecting her mother to be shocked by the list. When her mother does not seem to flinch at young Maxine’s confessions, Kingston realizes that the list is more important to her than to anyone else and that in sharing it with others it actually begins to take on a life of its own, even changes. She writes, “And suddenly I got very confused and lonely because I was at that moment telling her my list, and in the telling, it grew. No higher listener. No listener but myself” (204). In both instances Kingston uses the word grow, indicating not only change, but also an increase or advancement. Kingston is commenting on finding a voice, highlighting the empowering effects writing has for women.

As a writer of creative nonfiction I often feel an obligation to telling the truth – I admit having my own “lists.” The Woman Warrior reminds me that even if I am perfectly accurate in all my details, and capture the memory precisely, I still am “growing” some kind of mental list I have developed, or that in the telling of that list change inevitably takes place.
Shumakers’s book *Just Breathe Normally* is a moving memoir of childhood and family. It opens with a traumatic accident, a near-fatal bicycling crash that turns into a long recovery. As part of her healing, Shumaker meditates on life and death and forgiveness by revisiting her past. I believe this work to be a very strong example of what Miller and Paola argue about the memoir: it draws heavily upon memory and even contemplates on the mind itself, the power our mind has to restore what may have been lost and even regenerate memory. As Shumaker pieces her life back together physically and mentally she touches upon universal themes of healing. Her lyric prose pieces are short, fragmented to resemble the rebuilding process. She raises the shared questions we all have regarding mortality and the struggle to survive.

In the piece “Kitchen Table,” Shumaker touches on an idea that a woman must find her own view of the world and believe in her ability to live and be in the world with that way of thinking. She makes the point of showing how each one of us is unique, how important it is to appreciate not just our own point of view but others’ as well. This reveals that she learned as a writer to share her own experiences but at the same time consider that her own experiences can’t be relayed in a manner that is self-indulgent. She must craft them in a way that can echo different perspectives.

Shumaker writes the memory of sitting down with her grandmother to share with her a poem she had written about her mother, her grandmother’s daughter. She writes, “This was a woman who had already survived her parents, two sisters, her husband, and now her first born, her only daughter. I did not want to cause her more pain” (251). She describes the simple kitchen and herself nervously sitting there at the table while the poem was being read, then listens as her grandmother says, “‘We did not know the same
person. I knew her from the time she was an infant. You knew only the troubled adult. So we’ll never see her the same way. It would be wrong for us to”” (251). Shumaker learns that the memories people have are based on their own personal perspectives, personal circumstances of when and how that memory occurred. She writes, “We talked most of that night, close in our separate ways of seeing. Neither one wrong. . . . Each mind, each imagination, must have its own slant, must have confidence to take on the world its own way” (251). In the sharing of this one moment, Shumaker shows how as a person and as writers we are continually learning. As we sculpt our writing, our recollections on the page, we need to embrace ourselves and give ourselves permission to examine what may seem like small details or other ways of thinking.

As a writer of creative nonfiction it is important to me to concentrate on my own story, my own memories, while at the same time considering the effects of my writing on others and be able to stimulate their minds. Just Breathe Normally reminds me that just as life is viewed from a number of angles, so too will be my writing. It is in the sharing of memories, with an open mind, that we can touch others.

Paralleling Inner Stories

As I reflect upon women, our place in history and society – specifically women writers and the history of female essayists – I would be remiss in not discussing the current cultural landscape of feminine writing in our society. Alongside writing about my own experiences in life, I cannot fail to look at that writing and see where it fits in the literary marketplace today. Although I believe there has been improvement, there remains unequal exposure for the female writer. In her article entitled “Underrepresentation of
Women Writers in Best American Anthologies: The Role of Writing Genre and Editor Gender,” Jean Oggins writes that editor gender and implicit bias about genre might compound selection of men’s writing over women’s in several writing genres. She cites a report by VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts, a women’s literary-arts nonprofit organization that collected data from 1978 to 2012 on characteristics of pieces of writing from Best American anthologies of short stories, poetry, and nonfiction (on travel/nature and sports). Its goal was to see if the selection of women’s pieces correlated with a given type of writing (genre), the gender of the annual-issue editor, or the original publication in one of the six most common media sources in each genre. The study found women writers were underrepresented in 2010. In that year men’s writing outnumbered women’s writing by ratios of 2:1 to 4:1 in such top U.S. newspapers and magazines as The New York Times Magazine, The New Yorker, and the Atlantic.

Oggins concludes: “Perhaps male writers and female writers had different preferences for writing genres, or had different chances of being selected as writers or editors in some genres; in either case, role congruity related to genre appeared to be associated with men’s greater representation as anthology writers and editors” (Implications of the Study). Oggins notes that since the report, many have responded in an effort to debunk the trend of underrepresenting women writers and VIDA continues to post its yearly “count.” In doing so, they keep the conversation going.

In September 2011, Sarah Menkedick was another who took action. She launched Vela Magazine as a response to VIDA’s findings, with the mission to “help close the
byline gender gap by publishing exceptional nonfiction written by women.”1 According to its website, Vela claims:

We are not a “women’s magazine” and our writers aren’t writing exclusively for a female audience on “female” subjects (a notion we hope to tacitly challenge). The fact that all of Vela’s writers are women is almost, almost incidental: it would be completely incidental if the publishing world did not create a situation in which women’s voices represent only a fraction of the conversation. Our aim is to ensure that women writers are as recognized and read as their male counterparts.2

In 2013 Vela went a step further in attempt to accomplish making women writers and their writing more visible, accessible. They compiled, with the help of their subscribers, its “Unlisted List” so not only women readers and writers would have a collection of nonfiction writing that is “more representative of the world we live in,”3 but also so those piecing together anthologies might refer to it as well. Menkedick says that despite all we face as female writers in being seen as equal to male writers, we cannot give in, but must continue to write and support other women writers. Her objective, like Adrienne Rich in the Seventies, is to join together with other women to build each other up and send our work out into the world. She writes about Vela: “It is what happens in the absence of the pressure to ‘make it’ in an industry that is not only physically but intellectually dominated by men. That is what this site is: a space to maneuver freely without having to either set one’s work apart as distinctly female or suck it up trying to prove that women can do what men do and that what men do is the best and the norm.”4

Vela Magazine is not the only advocate for women writers, just one of the more recent. There are a number of other websites, literary journals and presses dedicated to

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1 http://velamag.com/written-by-women/
2 http://velamag.com/about/
3 http://velamag.com/the-unlisted-list/
4 http://velamag.com/written-by-women/
women’s writing, some established for decades. These include but are not limited to: *Calyx, Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers, Literary Mama, Mutha Magazine, PMS poemmemoirstory, Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature, SheWrites* Press and Women’s Quarterly Press. While I’m happy to find a list of others who wish to strengthen and support women writers and their writing talents, I believe more can be done for the current and future state of women’s writing, to get it to a more appropriate echelon within anthologies and the literary sphere. It is up to women writers to stand together, to strengthen one another. In providing and giving to each other, looking for ways to build one another up, we can improve the publishing marketplace.

In conclusion, it is my objective with this project to join hands with Rich, Cixous, Kingston, Shumaker, Oggins and Menkedick, and many others, in an effort to write as a woman, to tell my story and hopefully add to the discussion and demand for the growing but not yet equal creative nonfiction written by women.
CHAPTER II

THE BEST THING TO EVER HAPPEN TO YOU

Part One:
“Bed of Roses, Bed of Nails”

For my twelfth birthday I was given a new bedroom set. Held up by tall, light-brown wooden beams, a dusty peach canopy trimmed with vintage, off-white lace draped above. The bedspread and pillow shams of the same fabric were lightly padded, gracefully tied together with clear stitching. The collection made the auburn-hinted buds on the wallpaper appear to bounce, come to life, springing out to anyone who might want to lay his or her head down and get lost in nature.

The desk and dresser completed the space, providing nooks to hide away pre-teen treasures like dog-eared love notes or gifted trinkets from kindred spirits. On top of the dresser stood a mirror framed with the same honey-colored wood, crowed with scallop detailing. Within the timber that made up each piece of furniture were dark knots that seemed to look at me, watch me. As a young girl I remember feeling watched over, safe because I could be enveloped in that elegant, old-fashioned tent surrounded by wildflowers and scents of the forest.

*I’ve learned a lot about life in the bedroom.*
Sometimes the reflection in the mirror revealed only a dream. Outside those four posts and out from under the covers I sensed I was living in a fractured home, its foundation crumbling, yet people only saw the sturdy furniture. Many times I sat on that bed listening to my parents fight. When they screamed at night I would escape into the dream. I remember waking to kitchen cabinets slamming, footsteps stomping up stairs. It was like being woken during camping, limbs frozen in the bitter cold air – having to lay there the rest of the night, awake, hearing only the echoes of the howling coyote, cooing old owl.

As I grew older, becoming a teenager, I didn’t want to feel smothered any longer, with my view blocked by the delicate awning above me. Like most adolescents, I felt cramped and uncomfortable beneath the sheets. I rebelled against my mom and dad, and their fighting. I wanted to pull back the blankets, jump out of bed – a bed that wasn’t a bed of roses, but a bed of nails.

In an attempt to change perfect appearances into what I was really feeling inside, what I saw as fake in the mirror’s image, I insisted I have a new bed and redecorate the room by myself. I had a sleepover with my girlfriends prior to painting when I was sixteen and we tried to rip the wallpaper off. When that didn’t work we resorted to writing on the half-torn parts with permanent markers. We felt rebellious as if we were actually graffitiiing something we shouldn’t. I painted the walls and ceiling the darkest purple I could find and applied the paint right over the wallpaper and those cheery little flowers. Emerald green carpet is what I chose to cover the floor. It was hideous, shocking; just the statement I wanted to make.
I’ve learned a lot about love in the beds I didn’t lie straight in.

To this day, even twenty years later, it seems like a whole other life to me; my parents have yet to repaint that room. They’ve covered the walls with picture frames and more furniture, shoving in tall bookshelves reaching from ceiling to floor, but the built-in cabinets and drawers, and ceiling can’t be concealed. Plenty of that purple upheaval glares through into what has now become the home’s man-cave. It remains a dark reminder of the isolation that often the entire house embodies for me.

I have gotten out of bed to lead my life; forgotten about sleeping in. I’ve learned to lie still.

Inevitably I’ve grown and moved on. I now sleep in a different house, in a different bed. I’ve had a number of beds over the years – I’ve learned I don’t have to take drastic decorating steps to make a statement, or force changes. The part of me that once wanted to drown the world in amethyst can now rest in any room, of any color.

Learning to Swim

I came home from the salon with a sensation I’d never experienced before. What once was long, heavy and tangled, flowing in many directions, was now short and out of the way. It was light and I felt carefree. I could see myself.

The first thing I wanted to do was go swimming – see what it was like in the water.

My mom thought I did it to hurt her, to cut away at what she’d tried to make. At the time, sitting in the chair in front of the mirror while layers and layers were chopped off, I didn’t care. I wanted it all gone – her brushing, her combing, her molding of me.
didn’t understand why she tried so hard to get rid of the knots. They’d been there from day one. They weren’t ever going to straighten out.

The earth-toned red strands had always been my highlight. When my mother introduced me to others, they would say, “What beautiful hair you have!” Even those who already knew me couldn’t help comment on the color of my God-given locks each time they saw me.

In her mind primping my hair was something she had to do – an obsession with perfection she applied to everything she did: her cooking, her cleaning, and her sewing; most likely the things she felt she had control over. This characteristic engrained in her comes from someplace I can’t put my finger on and probably somewhere I will never understand.

In my young mind it was not necessary, each morning sitting backwards on the toilet so she could do my hair – make parts, place bows, cross one strand over the other, over and over until the twist or braid or tail was in just the right place.

“Sit still,” she would say each minute, pulling me back into place. I was a doll being tugged back and forth, left and right at every brush stroke. It seemed to me we wasted a lot of time and hairspray.

I still remember sitting in the pews at church, barely able to see the pulpit, legs too short for my feet to touch the floor. Her hands: long, thin fingers so supple and soft and a bit shiny from lotion; her nails immaculately shaped and painted the night before. I liked to spin her golden rings round and round on each of her fingers, get lost in their beauty.
She had me painted up, too. Perfectly ironed and in colors matching hers. My hair especially had to curl and lay just so, so that everyone could see its suppleness, softness and shininess. As I focus in on the large white pearl on one of her rings, I’m interrupted. I look up to see her other hand in front of her lipstick-tinted lips, index finger and nail pointing straight up like the steeple above. She mimics the “SHHH” sound that normally, at home, would blow out my eardrums. But here I am saved; here a congregation of worshipers surrounds us.

I pucker my lips, feeling their cracks, and begin to pout; my cheeks flush with embarrassment. Had I been making noise? The way she scolds is as precise and as clearly completed as the makeup on her eyes. Each lingering eyelash and shade of eye shadow on her brow is in unison with her pleas for me to be quiet.

Standing in the preschool room watching as the kids begin a project, I overhear the teacher whisper and nod with a kind smile toward my daughter. She speaks in a kind manner, “I wonder if I was a loud child?” I smile too.

As if on cue, Morgan yells across the room, “Mom, look what I did!”

I walk over to her miniature table to see the little pieces of red paper she has glued to a large sheet of green construction paper. “Tell me all about it, honey,” I urge as I sit in a yellow chair that is not big enough for my backside to fit in. I balance there uncomfortably until she promptly jumps up and runs to the next table declaring, “I’m done!” so loudly the other children look up from their own collage and wonder if they
have to be finished as well. I begin to raise my finger to my lips to reprimand her for the outburst and that same feeling of shame fills my stomach. I hear my mother’s “SHHH.”

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I realized early on my mom and my daughter look alike. Morgan has her coloring, not the fair, freckled skin I have, but a unique olive tone that compliments her dark eyes and hair. Of course Mom has doted on her from the beginning, wanting to dress her in pink clothes and bows from head to toe. At only a week old Mom pulled her black baby curls back into a clip.

“You need to start doing her hair early,” she said to me. “That way she will get used to it.”

I’ve always preferred to let Morgan’s hair fall naturally. She was born with the most stubborn part – no matter how you style it, it comes back to the same place. I learned early on not to fight against it. I figure, in going with the flow, I can let Morgan dictate her own look. Each time they’re together Mom makes a point to do Morgan’s hair, even if it’s just to comb it after a bath. I let her play at it and compliment the results, but sure enough as the minutes tick by, the band, barrette or ribbon Mom has placed in it comes slipping off and Morgan’s stringy strands are back to normal – nothing fussy, nothing perfect, just simple and pure like waves in the water.

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We took Morgan into the ocean to feel the water when she was just seven months old. Mom had wanted to take her to Hawaii. Even as an infant Morgan looked to be in her element. When I close my eyes I can see myself holding my baby half-in the water and
half-out, making sure to hold her close to me. She didn’t squirm as the undertows and fish swirled beneath and around my goose-pimpled legs. She didn’t make a noise as the surf splashed onto the beach. I thought her little body might want to jump right in and be with those fish.

Just like me, she would want to swim freely.

Off in the distance I saw the lemon-yellow sun setting behind a grass-covered mountain, and Mom lying on the sand with her eyes closed to keep out the rays.

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Mom straightened my hair once. As opposed to all the other times she crimped and coiled, placing my waves in order, this night she took out our iron and ironing board and, after taking care to iron out each crease in the blouse I was planning to wear, had me come over and kneel so my head was as close to the board as possible. She smoothed out my waist-length hair on the board. I could feel the heat from the iron as she moved it back and forth. I could smell a few of the strands burning. She flattened all of it. Not a bit of volume was left and for the first time ever I could run my fingers through it without them getting stuck.

That night I lied to her. I told her I was going to a girlfriend’s house, but I went to a party and got drunk for the first time. Through the haze I can recall tequila poppers, Saturday Night Live on the television set, and the boys paying a lot of attention to me. Although she found out later where I really went and was upset that I lied, I didn’t get the impression that she wanted to know any of the other details.

Now I think it’s ironic how she helped me get ready for it.
As an adult and a mother looking back, I can understand how difficult it might have been for my mother to talk about alcohol and sex with her daughter. We had never really talked about such things, though I knew her feelings about staying away from promiscuous activities. It never felt like we were close enough, at least not in a way to talk seriously. Honestly, I’m not sure if I pushed her away or if she didn’t pull, but either way I regret it. I wanted a mother who was my friend, who I could talk to about anything.

A year later, my junior year of high school, Mom and I took a mother-daughter trip to Hawaii. We fought constantly as usual about little things. We spent a lot of time lying on the beach in our bikinis. I can recall the pictures she took of me jumping the waves and rocks. My body was small with very little curves, almost childlike. My swimsuit had blue and white checkers with red gingham trimming. It fit me like a glove. My hair blew so wildly in the wind that it covered my face in many of the shots.

It’s sad how many swimsuits of mine that I can remember from that time period, or other times growing up, yet I can’t recollect any serious discussions Mom and I had. I know we both yearned for a better relationship to accompany all the time we spent together shopping, trying on clothes, doing our hair.

On the trip we took a kayak tour with a young, well-built surfer who probably was just between us in age. He was slender and strong, had a laid back attitude, and, of course was extremely tan. He smelled like salt and had wiry, sun-bleached hair. I recall the three of us having a fabulous day out on the kayaks. Mom and I worked hard together to maneuver our double man rig over the ocean waves. We even took breaks to jump out into the water to swim with the sea turtles and listen to whales singing off in the distance.
as we snorkeled underneath the surface. We ate lunch on what seemed like a deserted island under the coconut trees. Our guide flirted with us and we flirted back. I’m sure he was looking for a good tip.

We’ve had many special experiences together like the kayaking expedition. I am grateful for those times and memories. But along with them comes remembering that after all the excitement and accomplishments of such a great day, back at the hotel, alone together, clean and wrapped up in soft terry cloth towels, we didn’t talk about was really on my mind.

I wanted advice about boys and my relationships with them. I wanted to talk about why she and my dad fought so much. Did she even want to be married? Was she happy with her choices in life? Instead, in what could have been intimate times for us, we would laugh about our funny tan lines. Ramble on about what shows we liked or our favorite bands. Mostly she would stand in front of the mirror applying makeup or curling her bangs. I stood around wondering what to do with myself and wanting to be out in deeper waters again.

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I remember learning to swim. I would jump into my swim teacher’s arms. The water in his pool was warm, like bathwater. His skin was even warmer and not just to the touch: it was bronze and had a smooth look similar to new leather. I knew I needed to hold on and follow his instructions, but I felt tense and nervous as if I would slip away if I didn’t do the strokes right.
Mom sat off to the side of the pool in a silver and blue lounge chair that was close to the ground. Her tan, baby-oiled legs pointed right at us as her toes swayed back and forth.

Next he would want me to jump off the diving board. He stood in the shallow end, close to her, the water hitting right under the ripples of his abdomen muscles. As I stood bouncing at the other end of the long divide, I watched as she watched him.

“You can do it,” they said. I would splash into the deep end then reach toward his large chest, placing one arm over the other in the water. Finally, coming up for breath half way to him I would pause to see how far I’d come. I could hear their voices calling out to me to keep going. Before I knew it I was in his arms again.

After that I was done. He would give me a little push so I would glide over to the steps. She stood up and walked over to wrap me in a beach towel. As I dried off they talked. He leaned over the edge folding one arm on top of the other showing off his biceps. She appeared relaxed as she smiled at him. She giggled, which seemed funny to me. As we walked away together we heard a splash behind us as he dunked beneath the water to cool off. We drove down the long driveway passing another car, probably the next mother who was bringing her child to swim lessons.

I enjoyed swimming but I didn’t enjoy this pool. Even as a child I could tell my swim teacher liked the moms. He had a way with them. He had a charismatic smile. His hair was dark but had blonde layers of ringlets on top. It was shockingly long – the only adult male I knew with grown out hair. It was a stark contrast to my father’s bald head.
I could feel the attraction between my mother and my swim teacher, but I didn’t know what it was. All I knew was he was different that other men I knew. He looked at my mother differently, and gave her attention she didn’t get from my father. I can’t count how many times I had been there or would be there after that. Mom wanted to make sure we knew how to swim. Or so I thought. Maybe she just needed something for us to do.

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Not too long after we returned home from the Hawaii trip that was supposed to bond us, I had an experience that further and forever scarred our relationship. It reminded me of swim lessons and all those strange feelings that came with it.

Sitting in my room I heard the phone ring. I picked up the receiver to speak but was quiet as I heard voices:


Ruth: (Mom’s lifelong friend) Hi Marcie.

Mom: Oh, Hello, Ruthie! I thought I heard Tomie pick up the phone too. I guess not. How are you?

Ruth: Doing good. How are you? How was the trip?

Mom: Oh, the trip! It was wonderful!! I just love it there! There’s no place on earth quite like Hawaii.

Ruth: That’s for sure. Can’t wait until I can go again.

Mom: Anyways, how are things with Rux?

Ruth: Nothing like being a newlywed again, if you know what I mean?

They both giggled.
Mom: Actually, you remember the guy I was telling you about? Well, I saw him again.

My heart stopped. Was what I’d always suspected true? Was my mom cheating on my dad?

Mom: The sex is so good!

My mind cannot retrieve what was said after that. Carefully, I pushed the receiver in with my finger to hang up without being heard and slowly put the headset down. My thoughts raced. I cried. My thoughts raced some more. I cried. All night this contest went on. In the morning my head and eyes revealed signs of the marathon I’d run – but I knew I couldn’t tell anyone what I heard, what I felt, or what I’d been through.

I went to have my hair done.

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Morgan learned to swim this past summer.

“Your mother learned to swim the summer she turned four, too,” Mom tells her.

“You both are my little fish,” she says.

I look at Morgan and fill with pride. She splashes around and jumps to me over and over again. When she comes up for breath her bangs cover her face, but she wipes them away and continues on. She doesn’t notice the hair in her way.

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Over twenty years and an unlimited amount of hair-dos later, I haven’t spoken to my mother about what’s on my mind. It’s not something I know how to do. We remain in touch; I do all I can to have my parents involved in my daughter’s life as she is
swimming through it. But as we go through life we continue on as we always did – relating only to one another on the surface. We don’t dive into deep waters it seems. Secrets remain buried below in that sunken ship while we adventure out to find other buried treasure.

I wonder why I have held onto the memories that I do from adolescence as I try to piece together my new role as a mother. Why I hold onto some things so long and let go of others. Why do I feel the need to write about such things, break the silence?

Honestly, I know very little about what transpired between my mother and my father. My teenage mind made a lot of assumptions, as does my adult mind to this day. For better or for worse, the relationships she’s had are her relationships. The choices my mother made are her choices. I know for a fact that she and my father went through many difficult years in their marriage – their vicious fighting during most of my upbringing still keeps me wondering why anyone would remain married to someone they seemed to despise so much – but this story is not about them. It is my story. I have perpetuated the cycle of secrets and I have enabled this behavior for too long.

It is not, and has never been, my personality to be done up I must go with the natural flow of things. Like my daughter’s loud voice that I never want to “SHHH” and that stubborn part in her hair that I’m sure will always bring struggle, I must remain true to myself. I must wipe the hair away, not only for my sake but hers as well.
Part Two:
“In Bed With”

My husband and I still laugh, some umpteen years later, about where we bought our first bed. We were newlyweds and naïve, not quite knowing who we were in bed with. Neither of us had lived with anyone except roommates of the same sex as college students. We were raised to believe sex should be something shared between two people who were married. Living with someone of the opposite sex, especially if you were sleeping with him or her, was not acceptable.

Should we share our beds?

Even though neither of us were virgins, and had already slept with each other, we felt a pressure to get married before we could move into an apartment together. One of the first things we bought as a married couple was our bed. His parents had offered to pay for it as a wedding gift. We went to the first place we saw as we drove in our new city – the ever impressive Freeway Furniture.

Keep beds with us when we move?

We had a small one-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a reconstructed Victorian-style house. It was at least one hundred years old. The maroon carpeted stairs hit you right as you entered the building and creaked like those of a haunted house. Each step was wide and long, larger than any others I’d seen before, and seemed as if they could be beds themselves for the homeless that slept on the sidewalk just outside the front door.

Roll around in the hay with others as we venture in a new life?
Moving all of our junk in, climbing those stairs over and over and combining our two separate lives seemed like such a daunting task at the time. I remember wondering where everything would go. Would we really keep all those baseball cards of his? Would he like my grandmother’s old quilt as our bedspread?

*Beds don’t need to travel with us.*

It didn’t matter. The bedspread was rarely used, winding up on the floor most nights, days, and all the times in between as we pounded away at our newfound sexual freedom. The mattress was more for padding as I experienced my first orgasms. The unstable head and footboards made of pine were more for holding on to as we tried new positions.

*We move our beds with us only if we want. Beds can stay behind in the rooms, structures they were placed in.*

My memories of that bed are not of rest or sleep but of exploration of a new world I’d found. It began at place called *Freeway Furniture* and traveled many roads as the years merged on.

Believe

Smack dab in the middle of the word believe are the letters L-I-E. Smack-dab above my desk in my room as a teenager, hand written in block letters on a piece of turned sideways binder paper, ripped, holes facing up, was the word B E L I E V E, the word LIE circled for emphasis. I didn’t have a “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door, no “Welcome to Tomie’s Room” sticker, just this personally drawn sketch of two words, one within the other, taped up in a place that was clearly visible to me as I sat in front of
my computer monitor. It was positioned directly opposite to the door, so anyone walking by, looking in, or daring to tread my territory couldn’t help but notice. While I stared at homework or the screen in front of me I often thought about these words and their meaning.

I thought I was one deep thinker.

I wondered what others thought as well. My parents never asked what it meant, why I insisted on displaying it. I knew it irked them, though. I’m sure it especially frustrated my mother. I would imagine her thinking, “How could my baby girl have such a cynical view of the world?” That thought actually brought a little joy to me inside, in my inexperienced mind, because I assumed I could see the three letters in the middle and she couldn’t.

Other times I would consider that it made her sad, and felt a little bit sad myself, knowing my mother loved me and only wanted the best for me. She had spent so much time raising me: teaching me to be kind; feeding, clothing, and helping me grow up. She had also spent so many hours getting me ready for school or church, driving me all over the place so I could participate in dance and piano lessons. There were years I couldn’t even remember, as well, when her life consisted of changing my diapers and drying my tears or disciplining my tantrums.

It was during all these thoughts that I would become frustrated myself, at what I didn’t know. Confused by all the thoughts one word could summon up, I wondered why the display of one word would create so many mixed emotions. I also felt all of it was . . . wonderful! In my mind the beauty of believing in whatever you wanted. Believing in lies
or the idea that lies could be living within belief. Wow! Was the world filled with believers, liars? What was a lie? Why did I believe what I believed? Why did my neighbor’s beliefs differ so much from my family’s or the kid at school have a dad who believed this way, that way? In the end, what did I believe?

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I’d learned at home to say the word “believe.” I’d learned at school how to spell it, write it; use it in a sentence. I’d been taught from the history books the beliefs of the founding fathers, to believe in freedom and to pledge my country’s flag. I learned of other peoples, other countries and their beliefs. I’d learned on the playground that you couldn’t believe the words coming out of Michael’s mouth and that Pam believed in Santa Claus.

Mostly I learned, at church, to believe there was a God, that I was a child of God, and that believing in Jesus Christ was something I must do. It was in church I think that this word ultimately became a thing that had two sides to it and possibly something other than the truth could be residing in it.

One phrase I heard at church often was used as people had the opportunity to share their own feelings. Children and adults alike would get up and almost without thinking begin their statement, “I know this church is true.” I realize now it was simply a way to begin, a way to get past the heart-pounding nervousness that often came from getting up in front of a crowd to say something, something as personal and heartfelt as a spiritual belief. However, hearing it so much struck and stayed with me. It does to this
day as well, even though I haven’t set foot in a chapel (other than for funerals and baby blessings) more than a handful of times in the past dozen years.

Up until the age of twenty-three I felt like I spent more time at church or church-related activities than I did in school. It was a huge part of my upbringing and education. I probably read the scriptures more than textbooks. Or at least it seems that way looking back. During the hours on Sunday as a child and then into my teens during early morning attendance in Seminary, my world revolved around church.

I participated in a lot of other things, as well. I actively played sports, worked on the school newspaper and even tried my hand at acting in a few of the school plays. Although I liked church, the people that I rubbed shoulders with and the other kids I grew up with who also belonged to what we considered to be a family outside of the family, I also liked and got along well with people and other kids who weren’t affiliated with the church, or its members. From very early on I played with friends who didn’t have any religious affiliation or beliefs. I spent time in homes where there were no Bibles. I played in single-parent homes where the kids were meant to fend for themselves or take care of one another. I spent the night in small, two bedroom homes or other times five-room, two story houses where I’d get lost trying to find the bathroom.

Exposure to all types of lifestyles is what led me to ask questions, to make homemade posters, plaster them on my wall and ask myself what I believed in. I didn’t understand why beliefs had to be so black and white, right or wrong. It seemed at church I was being told that there was one way to believe yet it made me uncomfortable inside –
like the letters L, I and E inside of BELIEVE – to think there was something bad about my friends who weren’t believers in my religion, who didn’t belong to my church.

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Over the summer I took my daughter to a cousin’s wedding in Utah. The morning after the reception, we were invited to church to attend the blessing of another cousin’s new baby. As we walked into the chapel my daughter asked if somebody had died. It hit me at that moment that the only other times I had taken her to church was when my grandparents passed away. In her mind, churches and chapels were for funerals.

*Oh the irony,* I thought as we sat there in the back row and the proceedings of the meeting – prayers, hymns, families lined up in rows and rows before me, played itself out like a vintage film in front of me. I was sitting there between my mother and my daughter in a place that should feel like home, but it didn’t. As people folded their arms and bowed their heads to pray, I watched. Memories flooded my mind. I looked down to see my daughter watching me.

I was just a few years older than she was when I began preparing for Baptism. Being born under the covenant (which means my parents were married in a temple before I was born) and attending church meetings since birth, I would be blessed with becoming an official member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints at the age of eight years old. Although already on church records since my own baby blessing as an infant, baptism was the next big step. My preparation for this momentous occasion occurred on Sundays growing up, three hours each week: Sacrament meeting; an hour of Sunday school; and another hour (depending on age and interest) of group instruction. I had
graduated from Sunbeams (the first level of Primary, probably the class my daughter would attend if I took her to church) and up through the ranks, each year advancing with friends and learning the Principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or: How to be a Mormon.

Growing up, my friends were always welcome to come over to my home. I had swim parties or sleepovers with them, some invited from school and some invited from church. My parents encouraged involvement in all good things and education in all its forms. School, and the occasional sports event, was probably the only other thing beside our religion that would ever come first. Family time and participation happened naturally and we did our best to function as a healthy, supportive unit. Sitting down together for dinner was important. Attending church together was important.

Within the town I resided, living within certain boundaries, I was a member of the Oakdale, California Ward (a local congregation within the Church, sometimes referred to as a Ward Family). The Ward was part of the Modesto, California North Stake (a group of Wards make up a Stake in the Church). My baptism in 1984 took place at the Stake Center in Modesto as part of a recurring event that took place monthly within the Stake. All other eight-year-olds who had also promised to keep the covenants of Jesus Christ, and wanted to become an official member of the church, were there, along with any others who may have wanted to join the church as a convert.

I remember feeling extra special because the appointed baptismal date that month happened to be on my birthday. Other things I recall about the occasion include having a
fever and feeling sick. I received a large white journal from my parents. It had gold, cursive letters on the cover with a place to write my very own name inside. I wore a brand new white dress, layered with lace and bows to the church. My mother helped me remove the dress (careful not to mess my hair) in the restroom beforehand to put on a white, one-piece garment for the baptism itself. The heavy polyester jumpsuit zipped up the front. Before leaving the house we made sure I was wearing white undies and that we had a dry pair to put on afterwards.

My father stood in the font, water almost waist high in his own white clothing – including a white necktie. My toes inched toward the warm water on the first step. Next, my ankles were wet as I began walking down the three or four tiled steps, careful not to slip. There was a large metal handrail like those I’d seen in the bathrooms of hotels or old-folk’s homes. The water saturated the thick fabric I was wearing and made it cling to each part of my body – my lower legs, then thighs, and then waist – all the way up to my chest. I seemed to glide over to my father as he stood facing the small crowd. I placed my hands on his outstretched arm in front of me. He raised his right hand, making a square, and said the scripted prayer: “Tomie Anne Grisham, having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

After all the other “Amen’s” were said, I bent my knees a little as he laid me back making sure to plug my nose with one hand and continued holding onto my dad’s arm with the other under the water, fully dunking me. We both knew if every part of me
didn’t go under, even a strand of hair floated to the surface, we’d have to do the whole thing over again.

We didn’t have to. After I came up from the water my dad gave me hug and then I turned to walk back up the stairs. I’d been taught that at that moment all my sins had been washed away and that I was perfect. I believed I was starting over with a clean slate. I should have felt light; instead I felt like I was a strip of material hanging down from the end of a mop.

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As I entered high school, I also began attending early morning Seminary, in addition to church meetings on Sunday. Before school each morning, girls and boys from freshman on up would meet at the church building and study the scriptures. Generally we were grouped by grade, but occasionally when there was low attendance, we would be combined with another older or younger class. The teachers tried their best to make the time engaging for sluggish teenagers. Some bribes I remember them using include providing treats to those in attendance and/or prizes for participation. Mostly I think they were grateful to have bodies at the desks. There was no credit offered through school or really any extra incentive to those of us who attended religiously.

I don’t remember being bothered by what normally would be seen as just another activity I was supposed to take part in. It felt like a normal part of life for me, and for many of my friends. I’m sure there were mornings when I had to be dragged out of bed, but mostly I remember waking myself up, getting ready for the day, even arriving to Seminary and then school on my own. Actually, it became quite fun when I had my own
car, drove myself to the church and then had others pile in with me to cross town and arrive at school before the first bell rang. We’d laugh about the average teenage things, transition into “the world” together and tease one another about remembering to “CTR” – and old mantra from our Primary days standing for “Choose the Right.”

The interesting thing, at least looking back now, is how much rebellion went along with all the religion in my life. The BELIEVE sign on my wall was just the tip of the iceberg. For whatever reason (currently I blame it on my personality; then, I blamed it on my parents – it was probably just being young), I needed to test what I was learning, needed to push boundaries. It took me a long time to learn that the choices I made outside the church, choices that seemed to be opposite to the values I learned from the pulpit and scriptures, were actually pretty normal behaviors for a vibrant, hormone-filled adolescent simply trying to understand herself, her world and her place in the world. I tried new things and asked new questions.

I also found it very difficult for me to forgive myself, if or when I sinned. I could recite passages until I was blue in the face, or tell you the steps to gaining forgiveness. Yet I really had a hard time applying what I been taught in church about the Atonement of Jesus Christ to myself. This is why I think I created my BELIEVE sign originally. It was an outward display of what I was feeling inside. I wondered if everything I’d ever been taught at church was true, if God was real. Or, maybe it was all one big lie?

~

The reason I stopped going to church isn’t a simple one and over the years I have blamed it on many things. I figure, as a woman approaching middle age with children of
my own, that quite possibly it may not matter. Blame it on religion. Blame it on a dysfunctional family. Blame it on my DNA. Whatever you want to blame it on, my personality has been and always will be to push boundaries, make waves. Maybe it’s because I was a bicentennial baby, born 200 years after the birth of American and it was the Seventies so females breaking the rules was in the water my mother drank? She of course passed that taint along to me. Maybe it’s because my parents named me Tomie – pronounced with a long “O” (like a toe + me) and would forever have to explain that? Blame it on Birth Order or my red hair and freckles. Blame it on my first grade teacher.

I do not know why I am the way I am, I just know I have always been this way. Trying to change it hasn’t worked. Believe me, I’ve tried. Along with all the times I did what I knew I shouldn’t, there were just as many where I did what I should. Doing both led me to where I am now – saying and doing exactly what I fear is not good, but every part of me must do it – write down all my dirty laundry, all my family secrets that I never felt I could talk about, share it with the world in my “oh-so-Tomie” fashion and risk regret or hurt or embarrassment. Risk getting blamed.

Silence is a difficult thing for me. By ending it I hope to gift myself, and those I love, freedom from any blame.

~

There are a number of episodes from my youth that seem to sum up the rebellious side that went hand in hand with my religious side. Many involve music. When I look back on my Nineties it’s hard not to see the soundtrack playing alongside my life. Just as the rock band U2 was reinventing itself with an album called Achtung Baby, my teenage
world was in its early stages, far from taking on re-dos, and experiencing just about everything in the real world for the first time. I had no idea just how young I was.

Standing in the mosh pit on Oakland Coliseum’s ground level, dust rose from the baseball field below, clumps of green grass unbalancing each step I took. My tiny frame swayed with the crowd as “ZooTV” flashed in neon pink on giant screens to my right and left, reaching as high as the nosebleed seats of the stadium, disappearing into the starry sky above. Marijuana smoke, sweet smelling, formed clouds above my head. My two girlfriends and I watched, wide-eyed, as joints were passed from one person to the next in front of us. We could feel the bass pounding a few feet away and into the whole of our fifteen-year-old bodies. It rattled our ribcages, made our eardrums nearly burst, but as our senses were tickled and awe filled our hearts we could not stop grinning. The moment tattooed itself into our minds.

There are times now when I’ll be driving around in the car and I’ll hear “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” on the radio. I think back to that concert, smile, and realize there’s always something better. Or at least know there is more to appreciate about life. It was nice to believe Bono and some of his political statements could impact the world, and that for one night I might be a part of that, but the truth is the concert probably smelt more like a collage of armpits and cheap perfume.

Another concert I attended in high school, a few months after the U2 experience, also has sharp memories for me. I recall not just being moved by what was in the air and what surrounded me, but by emotions that took on a whole new chord – probably due to the company I was with. Instead of attending with girlfriends, I went to the Guns &
Roses/Metallica Stadium Tour with my boyfriend Brett. It featured the heavy metal and hard rock intensity that sang harmony with this first serious relationship I was wrapped up in.

As Axl Rose came out on stage and asked if we knew where we were, I could not keep my footing yet I could not move if I wanted. If I thought I had been “moshing” before, this time was on an entirely elevated level. In fact, I think Brett may have literally saved my life that night when he held me up, his arms wholly encasing me as the mass answered back all in one voice: “You’re in the Jungle, Baby!” and G N’ R started their set.

Once the song ended we were able to get free and retreat back to our seats. The rest of the concert was a bit tamer – if you can call traveling through a “Civil War,” “Paradise City,” and “November Rain” tame. Metallica’s set (“Sad but True,” “Unforgiven,” “Nothing Else Matters”) wasn’t any gentler. I was definitely more relaxed, though. Brett held me softly while we whispered “Sweet Child o’ Mine” into each other’s ears and mouths the rest of the night.

I was swept up in the moment and didn’t recognize how immature I was. Again, I also didn’t really know the territory I was entering. I was simply going along for the ride. Choices were becoming more and more important, but my young mind was only beginning to grasp that fact.

Not very long after the concert, I was getting ready for the school Christmas dance. My mom and I had been shopping for weeks to find the perfect dress – a skin-tight velvet formal that hit me right above the knees and showed every little curve my
developing body had. We had spent most of the day planning what nylons I’d wear, selecting jewelry to match, and primping my hair. My boyfriend Brett and I had decided on going out to dinner with a group of friends and then heading over to the dance before going out for a special treat – something Brett had been planning.

Brett and I had been dating since the summer. Though we’d known each other most of the year, had the same group of friends throughout school, it was an early June evening when we really hit it off. I remember going ice blocking (a kind of sledding without the snow or sled) at the golf course – sitting on a large, store-bought mound of ice, freezing my little tush off and feeling the warm night air on my face as I slid down the grassy hills in the dark. Even more, I remember laughing so hard alongside Brett that I almost peed my pants.

After that, and for the rest of the summer, we spent nearly every day hanging out at his house with friends. We spent a lot of time in his bedroom, alone, too. One day we were sitting on the stairs in the house. He told me that he believed the first person we ever had sex with would be a special person to us for the rest of our lives. It was his way of telling me he wanted to go all the way with me. Even though I enjoyed the attention, I never felt quite ready to have intercourse. Whether it was because of the gory pictures I saw in Sex Ed about STDs, or the warnings at church about losing my soul, I wasn’t ready to take the next step. I was scared of getting pregnant. I was worried about what people would think. I was nervous that it would hurt. I knew my parents would disapprove, but I also knew they’d never ask.
So, when Brett told me he had plans for after the Christmas dance, I knew we would have sex that night. He knew it too, that’s why he packed a bottle of champagne and a blanket in the back of his truck. He drove me to one of the parks near the river just outside of town. Under a bridge, in the chilly December air, I lost my virginity.

Brett dumped me not long after that night. He moved on as teenage boys do. What had been such a big moment for me may not have been for him. For the weeks and months following that night, I’d be reminded of my choice when the Red Hot Chili Peppers came on the radio – and “Under the Bridge” came on a lot during that time. For better or worse, my decision would always be tied to that song. Even today as a grown adult, married and with children, I cannot help but think of Brett whenever that song is played. Although we remained friends, my outlook changed after that relationship; I decided to look forward and focus on my senior year and future. Fortunately I did not get stuck beneath what felt like a very difficult obstacle at the time. I found a way to cross over and keep moving.

~

It felt natural to return to the church, something familiar and welcoming even with the questions that came along with it. This time I was determined to push the doubt out of mind, and dive fully back into the church and its lifestyles. Yes, I had been a member and attending all throughout the relationship with Brett, but my heart wasn’t in it and the level of my questioning rose with the level of my rebelliousness. So did my guilty conscience. I found that it was easy enough to play the “good girl” Tomie role while there.
One of my strongest weaknesses was boys. It actually didn’t begin with Brett. Beginning in the eighth grade, I began “going out” with one boy after the next. They seemed to be drawn to me as well. I’m not sure if there was something I did to attract their attention – maybe they sensed my vulnerability or eagerness for attention, but now I know I had both qualities. I was vulnerable, not realizing or admitting that most of the time they were looking for more than just friendship. Some of them would write love letters, others bring me gifts but they all wanted to do more than hang out and talk. Some were secretive about this; others wanted others (especially their buddies) to see.

I’d been taught over and over in church to stay away from spending one-on-one time with the opposite sex, and of course refrain from kissing and petting. My church leaders said that living a chaste life, abstaining from sex before marriage, was one of the most important things a girl needed to do. I should protect my virginity at all costs. If I didn’t, I would ruin my chances for finding a worthy man to marry in the temple. I would not be worthy of him.

I remember searching the scriptures to understand the meaning behind such words relating to living a virtuous life – infidelity, adultery, and fornication. I would comb the pages wondering if allowing a boy to French kiss or feel me up, go all the way, would send me to hell.

One talk given during a church meeting I attended compared sexual activity for youth to playing Russian roulette. Although the speaker was referring to taking chances on an emotional level, the image of a gun to my head stuck with me – and has into adulthood. Yet, apparently, such fear-driven messages did not work with me. I continued
to spend time with boyfriends and do things with them that I felt bad about. Either I was simply enjoying myself, couldn’t stop once started – or maybe this was a normal part of being a teenager?

I knew there were others who were in relationships, having sex, or at least coming close. I had friends (outside and inside of the church) who were not so shy about talking about it. We’d sometimes exchange stories amongst ourselves. Though, at the same time, I also knew several friends who wouldn’t even think of holding a boy’s hand, let alone make-out with him. These friends got so nervous just dancing with a boy.

In my mind I can see myself sitting in the Bishop’s office crying my eyes out, confessing my transgressions with boys. One time – in order to be allowed to attend a church college – having to list all the names of the boys I had been with, and exactly what activities we had engaged in. I was embarrassed and humiliated. I was assured that my shame would go away after going through this part of the process of forgiveness. He handed me the book *Miracle of Forgiveness* written by a latter-day prophet and encouraged me to read it apply the rest of the process so I again could feel God’s spirit in my life. He also promised that if I did all of this, my slate would be wiped clean, as if I were perfect. I had to take the steps as outlined and have faith that Christ would do the rest if I wanted to receive all the blessings God had promised me. And, of course, repeating the offences was out of the question as well.

I left his office and scoured the book, as I had done with my scriptures. Highlighting and underlined passages to make sure I understood and followed the
directions to a T. I spent hours on my knees asking God to forgive me, hoping in my heart I could be better.

And, it worked – at least for a while.

I was accepted and went to the church’s college, Brigham Young University, Idaho, where other young adults of the same faith surrounded me. Alongside the typical freshman courses I continued to take religious classes that were required. I had a lot of special experiences being away from home for the first time, living in the dorms, having roommates, etc. I dated and spent time with boys, but it was different this time. For the most part, these young men were trying to live chaste lives as well, or least respected girls a little more. Many of them were preparing to serve missions for the church.

After BYU, Idaho (at the time a two-year school) it seemed obvious that I should transfer to BYU, Utah, the church’s four-year university. My parents had met there and even had me while living and beginning their married life in Provo. So, a place that was literally a part of my history made perfect sense. Right? It didn’t feel like home, though. And if I’m honest, neither did Idaho. It always felt somewhat unnatural for me, playing a role again. Never quite feeling like I fit, belonged, or was good enough.

Most members of the church, like those from my home ward, were good and kind people. But, as before, I didn’t like being kept from different backgrounds, different beliefs; I needed variety and diversity. It always bothered me the way Mormons – for the most part – stuck together and weren’t as open-minded as I felt was truly part of my makeup. I craved learning other ways of doing things and of course it was at my core to challenge, even question my beliefs.
In spite of all this I continued on at BYU, Utah and even volunteered to be a missionary for the church before completing school. I remember feeling a bit stuck, not having direction in my life and the path of church always seemed to have an answer for the next step. If not married, why wouldn’t a twenty-one-year-old girl want to go on a mission? Leave home and comfort and knock on the doors of strangers to share the word of God?

And that’s where I was. In the back of mind I figured it would keep me from me from having to make a decision on where to go next – continue school? Find a career? I was scared and a mission would be good for me, right?

Yes and no.

As luck would have it, it was as a missionary for the church – sacrificing my time and life for the church, a belief system – where I ultimately discovered the church was not for me. I did not believe.

There were a number of reasons why, and they did not all come to me while serving as a missionary, but probably the one thing that got the ball rolling (once again) was the desire to get to know others and other ways of living. I connected with those not of my faith and with the sheer knowledge that there was an entire world out there living, believing – and living and believing differently, which ultimately in my mind was one hell of a thing.

Everyone doing the same things in the same way was boring and simply not right in my heart. Whether that’s what the church stands for, or not, if I was true to myself, then living my life this way didn’t align with my center. It is a little more than interesting.
to see and admit that the church itself nudged me in this direction. Through it I learned to love everyone – and love myself, and ultimately respect who I am.

I came home early and connected with an old friend from BYU, Idaho. A friend who was going through similar experiences, choices, and decisions in his own life.

Oddly similar.

On April Fool’s Day, 1999 in San Jose, California I attended an Alanis Morissette/Garbage Junkie Tour concert with a young man who would, a few months later, become my husband. In the car on the ride there we listened to the Jagged Little Pill CD to get warmed up. We sang, “Hand in My Pocket” and “Ironic” together at the top of our lungs. I remember listening to Barenaked Ladies and Savage Garden CDs also. Our favorite songs were “One Day,” “It’s All Been Done,” Truly Madly Deeply,” and “The Animal Song.”

At the concert I watched as Alanis played the piano and the crowd held up lighters as she ended the first set with “Uninvited.” I wondered if the person next to me would remain a part of my life longer than just a short session. Something inside told me he would. There was a bond between David and I like none I’d had before. When we were together, we were better, stronger; we had direction.

We weren’t rebelling either because this time around it wasn’t just the music – there was something more.

A few months after the concert, on my twenty-third birthday, he came and surprised me at college in Utah. He was planning on attending San Jose State in the fall and we wondered how we could be together since I had at least a semester left before
graduation. It was then that we decided to get married, move to San Jose and finish up school together. We ended up back in the same city where we saw that concert.

~

Dressed in a very simple, homemade off-white gown – swaying slowly with David to the song we’d picked for this very moment – I knew what others were thinking: “They got married too quick . . . They’re too young . . . They won’t make it.” Those thoughts quickly disappeared though as David pulled me close, kissed me and we heard our song, “When You Say Nothing at All,” fill the reception hall. I had a huge smile on face when Alison Krauss sang the words, “All day long I can hear people talking out loud. But when you hold me near, you drown out the crowd.” I kissed him again, knowing our love needed no explanation, that our relationship needed no words.

As my father cut in, we laughed together, knowing it was just another song to him – and to everyone else. It would continue to be an anthem for us as the years passed and we celebrated one anniversary after the next.

As our collection of songs played on at the wedding, others joined in to dance. I watched as David went to his mother, pulling her out to the dance floor, hugging her tightly. She giggled as he spun her around, dipping her as they almost fell to the ground. Shania Twain came over the sound system with “You’re Still the One.” David and I managed to share a glance and smile as we heard the words, “Looks like we made it.”

~

I still consider David to be the love of my life, possibly the best thing to happen to me, but it hasn’t all be perfect, or easy. In fact we almost didn’t make it through the first
year. It was a very challenging time for us. I wish I had kept a better journal because not only did we experience the typical struggles many newlyweds do, there are surely some personal anecdotes which have been stolen by the thief named memory.

I do remember vehemently trying to fight with him, often – and because he just as vehemently would not – I would become even more angry about whatever was going on between us. One night I got so upset that I kicked him out. I sat on the couch, the older one my parents gave to us, and picked at the burnt-orange colored swirls on the armrest. I glared into the flame of a candle on the coffee table and fumed. I wondered where he went.

David decided to drive to my parents’ home a couple hours away. He went to the very home I grew up in, probably even slept in my purple room.

I eventually did calm down, but it took me a long, long time to learn how not to fight.

Part Three:
“Put to Bed”

After ten years of marriage, sexual exploration eventually turned to baby making. We had wanted to wait until we finished college and had stable jobs before starting a family. We had wanted to enjoy some of our twenties without kids. And we did. But when the time came we had less control over things than we thought. After trying for nearly a year to get pregnant naturally, and with frustration setting in, we sought medical help. At first we just wanted to make sure all the plumbing was in order, and it was. So what was the problem? Thinking back now I think it was just the way our daughter works
– she has the cute yet unnerving ability to make everything a challenge. From the night she was conceived until this day as a four-year-old she likes to put her own spin on things.

*Load up your mattresses and memories.*

After three years of calculated lovemaking, two attempts at artificial insemination and countless nights crying myself to sleep, I went on a thirty-first birthday vacation to get away from all the intercourse that *wasn’t* working. I relaxed, I ate, and I soaked up a lot of sun – by myself.

*Remember the roads you took and always come back to those beds to sleep it off.*

*Dream it away.*

I came home to my husband, my lover, and we had the best sex we’d had in years. It was like we were newly married all over again. We didn’t think about making a baby. We released our grip on controlling things. We thought about each other the wonderful life we’d shared together – all the beds we’d made.

*Forget about hours of lost sleep; enjoy the waking hours.*

A few weeks later when my period was late I figured it was just due to my recent trip, or stress, or something else I never quite understood. We were watching *Out of Africa.* I recall watching Meryl Streep and Robert Redford melt together in their youth on the screen. I was lost in the romantic melody when it hit me. I was pregnant. It was different this time. I felt it deep down; it wasn’t just a hope. I thought back to the night I returned home and just knew that had to be the night. I quietly went upstairs and grabbed one of the tests I’d collected and opened the package like I’d done so many times before.
I peed on the strip. The plus sign came quickly and I ran down the stairs just as fast. I looked up at my husband and held up the wand – I didn’t have to say a word.

Roots Interrupted

As I sat playing with an orange plastic clock on my lap, pointing the black hands toward the 12 twelve and two, I look up to see why my teacher paused before telling the class to show her the time. My father who has come to take me to the hospital and meet my new baby brother interrupts her. The life of my older brother and I has been interrupted as well. Here we’d had six years together, and now this. Jeffrey Lars Grisham was born on October 18, 1982, into our family of four who had been living in Oakdale, California for four and a half years. He was born to two parents who had had difficulty having more children after me, who came into their lives three years after their first son, Todd.

~

I can still see my mother and my aunt sitting on the bleachers, giggling together as they watched my cousin and me during basketball camp. Where’d all their athleticism come from? We didn’t look it – me with my red hair and freckles, Elise toe-head with bright blue eyes – but we had African–American ancestry. Our mothers joked, silly or not, that our basketball skills may have come from that. Their father – my grandfather – had African-American grandparents.

~

We called him Jeff. He can hardly be seen in the photograph taken in the hospital the day he was born. Cradled in my mother’s arms, swaddled like a chrysalis, he is being
held by my mother who is propped up in the hospital bed. My dad, crouching in at the bottom of the bed, Todd and I standing front and center grinning from ear to ear. Our first family picture.

~

My aunt had stumbled upon the knowledge of our black heritage while doing some genealogy years earlier as a college student at BYU. In 1973, while taking a course, she found census records from South Carolina beginning as early as 1870 indicating that her paternal grandparents Nora Vance and Walter Jones and their family to be “Black.” Their son Walter D. Jones was my mother and aunt’s grandfather. He had left home at a young age, moved to California, and never spoke about where he came from. My mother and aunt spent time with him as children and his background was never discussed. In fact, his marriage and death certificates list him as “White.” In photographs he does not appear to have dark skin and his wife was Swedish. It wasn’t until his deathbed that he told my grandfather about his family, and even then he never mentioned that his parents were African American. Up until the time when my aunt made her discovery, no one in the Jones family had ever suspected such roots.

~

Jeff was named after my mother’s younger brother Jeffrey, who had only lived five days. His middle name, Lars, came from her Swedish grandparents Carl and Selma Larson. He became the love of our family, a baby for each of us to call our own. My brother and I would read to him in his Jumping Johnny, show him how to eat peas in his high chair, entertaining him for hours as we lined him up next to our stuffed animals. We
taught him how to unwrap birthday and Christmas presents, helped him take his first steps.

~

When my aunt asked my grandfather about what she’d found he became upset and defensive, and became a lot like his own father – ashamed, never wanting to talk about it. Because of the times, having that kind of background was an embarrassment for them. Even my aunt encountered questionable treatment from others when she disclosed it and had to get approval from the Church to marry in the temple. As the years passed, the subject continued to be somewhat of a secret in the Jones family. It became something my mom would whisper about, but never discuss openly.

Growing up I never could grasp why, what was so significant or private about it. Why would my grandfather be angry about where he came from? Why couldn’t we talk about it? The truth is, we were from completely different generations. I didn’t live in the same world as he did.

~

When Jeff was born I became a middle child, my whole world changed. A middle child and a daughter between two boys. According to birth order, some could say he was more of a first child because he came so much later into the equation of our family. Yet Jeff had all the benefits of being the youngest child, Todd, the brunt of being the first. I was the middle child, watching and learning from Todd. Our somewhat-trained parents had learned a little by having him. Jeff simply watched and learned from Todd and me – and had not only seasoned, but highly relaxed parents in my mom and dad. Jeff was
allowed to do things we only ever dreamed of doing when we were his age. He had way more television time and heck of a lot less vegetable time.

~

I was born three years after my aunt learned about our family history, in 1976. My parents always called me their “Bicentennial Baby,” which always sounded cute, even patriotic, but as an adult – with some life experience and perspective – I can see more clearly what it actually means. Technically, I came into existence 200 years after America was born, over 100 years since the Thirteenth Amendment was passed abolishing slavery, and with the African-American Civil Rights Movement of the Sixties fresh in the country’s mind.

I was born and raised after people in this country, at least legally, were not judged or treated differently because of the color of their skin. I was taught in home and school and church to accept and befriend all people. If my grandparents or parents or teachers felt that African-American people were unequal, I certainly didn’t hear about it or see it. My grandfather, his parents, and certainly his grandparents did not live in a world like that. A genealogical report my aunt has states that there are no census records from 1850 and 1860 for Nora Vance and Walter Jones because they were probably slaves. That itself says a lot about the life they lived.

~

Although Jeff came into our lives rather suddenly and abruptly, he was a true blessing for all of us. He always has been the carefree, busybody of our bunch. He grew to be tall (even taller than my six-foot-three father) to be six-feet-six, which actually
came from my mom’s father. He took from my mother’s side of the gene pool in other areas as well, like being blonde. Just in general, he looks unlike my brother and dad who had definite Grisham features. My dad’s father, my dad, and Todd all look strikingly the same in the face and have bald heads. Jeff’s full head of hair and height are so much more. He either was meant to be a Jeffrey Lars or he literally grew into the name.

His genes didn’t all come from her paternal side, though, and it’s fitting that he has the Lars middle name to carry on. Though my mother didn’t talk about the Jones side of the family, she did often share memories from her Larson side. To this day she brags about being three-quarters Swedish. I can still hear her voice in my head: “Three of my grandparents were Swedish. That makes me three quarters Swedish.”

She often made Swedish meatballs or pancakes for us growing up and her kitchen is filled with Swedish decorations; she has a cabinet full of Swedish gifts from her grandmother (even a Polaroid of me dressed in a Swedish dress) in her living room curio cabinet. It’s almost like a shrine built to this side of her heritage. Carl and Selma Larson I knew all about. They met in New York City after emigrating from Sweden. They came to this country to begin new lives, even came through Elbs Island. I think it’s a lovely story, and I knew it well. It makes me proud, too.

But it also makes me sad to know that I only heard about them growing up. Why didn’t I hear about others? All the other people who made my life possible? Is it because they had a different skin color? Background? Is it because our society during my youth was just beginning to value diversity?

Yes.
It makes me ashamed and embarrassed myself. Not because of my DNA, but the slow progress of this country. I have never felt the need to hide where I came from – and I am grateful for that. When I think about my grandfather and my great grandfather and those before them, the things they went through – most, which I cannot even comprehend – I am so grateful for the easy life I’ve had. But mostly grateful for all the opportunities my own children will have. They will be blessed with a life filled with all kinds of people. They will know about history, their history, and their place in history. They will know this because the world they live in is different. Different than my great grandparents’ world, and different from mine. It is getting better in the regards of equality, though I dare say it’s perfect.

My children are also surrounded by people of all races, creeds and backgrounds because my husband and make sure of it. We value getting to know all kinds of people, not just those that look and believe in the things we believe in. We don’t judge others in our home or talk negatively about anyone. That is important to us. Just as we want them to learn to be honest, learn to work hard, we want them to respect others and learn from others. We may not attend church or have specific religious beliefs, but we do believe in rooting for love.

Part Four:
“Can’t Lie Straight In Bed”

The weeks passed. I grew. I felt things happening to my pregnant body that were amazing and terrifying all at the same time. I loved feeling the baby move for the first
time, seeing it kick my belly, and hearing the heartbeat at the doctor’s office. Everything was perfect. Or so we thought. Our daughter would have to throw her wrench into things.

Wake up!

When I was thirty-three weeks along I went in for a routine doctor’s appointment and my blood pressure was high. My doctor was not sure why and asked me to come back the following day. It was still high – through the roof high. She said I needed to go on bed rest, which meant absolutely no activity except for getting up to use the bathroom. We wondered how I would survive the next seven weeks doing nothing. It turned out I couldn’t. Whether it was because of my stubbornness, due to my doctor being overly cautious, the stress of my husband working as an embedded journalist covering the war in Iraq, or just because the baby inside me willed it, I failed bed rest – at home. My blood pressure never went down and my doctor ordered me to the hospital so my baby and I could be monitored around the clock.

Think of your childhood bed, your grandmother’s bed.

The hospital bed seemed like a punishment at first, but turned out to be a very special experience. I was forced to lie there and bond with the life growing inside me. Each day the nurses would come in and we’d listen to my baby’s heartbeat. Several times I was wheeled down the hall to have detailed ultrasounds. I got to hear and see my baby daily, literally watching her develop.

Think about all the nights slept there, days napping. What’s in store for those lying there?
I didn’t tell my husband about the situation right away. Not only was it difficult to get in touch with him, but also I didn’t want to worry him or for him to come home prematurely. As it happened he did come home a bit early, just in time for the delivery of our girl who arrived at thirty-seven weeks, after thirty days of bed rest. She only weighed five pounds, four ounces. Her weight did not even compare to the amount of time, trouble, and worry she caused. But she was worth it all.

The Best Thing to Ever Happen to You

Thirty-seven weeks along. Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling above me. Waiting. Just waiting. Round, swollen, uncomfortable in every way. Just waiting. I had never felt more ready to become a mother – for the big event – yet never had been more unsure about what was going to happen, what was about to come. There was a stillness dwelling inside. Other nights the constant movement would keep me from sleeping, but tonight the unknown, the terrifying reality of it all, would keep me awake. I was on the verge of a whole new actuality.

_Motherhood isn’t always a dream come true. Sometimes it can get messy._

I remember one of the delivery nurses at the hospital telling me, just a few moments before I began pushing, that she never really enjoyed being a mother.

“Motherhood isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” she said. She looked at me and asked if I needed some ice – “Kids are so much easier when they get older,” she said – offering me a plastic cup filled to the brim with ice chips.

I couldn’t believe that after the last six hours of her coming in and out, checking on how much I had dilated; helping me breathe through contractions, that this is what the
nurse was telling me. She wasn’t explaining how to bear down or prepping me for crowning, but was thinking about – had this need to share with me – her feelings about having her own children. That as a mother herself there were parts of being a mom that didn’t appeal to her.

Amid all that was going on, I couldn’t help but think about her words. They struck me, resounded with me. Although I couldn’t fully comprehend what she was saying, she seemed to be trying to prepare me for what was to come – after the baby came out. What she was saying scared me as well.

I quickly had to turn my attention to other matters, but what she told me, the timing of it all, is something I think back on often as I try and figure out my feelings about motherhood. While living the day-to-day reality of being a mom, her words remind me that no one’s experiences with having babies and being a mom are perfect.

Adrienne Rich, in her book Of Woman Born, writes about how each one of us comes from a mother. We are connected to our mothers in ways like no others, yet in general we know so little about motherhood. Or, at least, we fail as a society to pay respect to this identity that binds all of us, creates all of us, shapes all of us. She says:

The child gains her first sense of her own existence from the mother’s responsive gestures and expressions. It’s as if, in the mother’s eyes, her smile, her stroking touch, the child first reads the message: You are there! And the mother, too, is discovering her own existence newly. She is connected to this being, by the most mundane and the most invisible strands, in a way she can be connected with no one else except in the deep past of her infant connection with her own mother. And she, too, needs to struggle from that one-to-one intensity into new realization, or reaffirmation, of her being-unto-herself. (Rich, Of Woman Born 36)

Rich’s words resonate with me. During, and immediately after the grueling process of pregnancy and delivery, there is also the mental aspect of childbirth that must be dealt
with. We often forget to recognize, discuss the psychological encounters taking place between mother and child. The emotional challenges within the mother are overlooked because the physical are easier to attend to.

~

I remember my doctor visiting my hospital room. She was making rounds. She came in before the sun came up with clipboard in hand. Recapping the events from the day before, she cringed as she inspected my sutures below. “You’re going to be sore. You tore a bit,” she said. She recommended applying an ice pack to the area as much as possible as she prescribed Tylenol with codeine. “You can leave as soon as you have a bowel movement,” she said as she left the room, moving onto the next patient.

The nurse came in later handing me an Uri bottle and two cans of Benzocaine spray. “These will be your best friends for a while,” she said half-smiling, half-frowning at me. She set a tiny paper cup with stool softener caplets on my food tray. “You’re gonna have to get up, Mrs. Bitton. The doctor wants you to walk around.”

My body felt like a bus had hit it, it was painful just sitting, yet I was being asked to somehow move my legs and get out of bed. I took a deep breath, held it, and willed my limbs to inch a bit. The entire process took minutes, and I probably shed a tear and an expletive or two, but I slowly made my way up and out of bed. It was one small step toward healing.

Sometimes motherhood is like a bad dream. You want to wake up and make it all go away, but you can’t. Once that baby is born, you can never go back.
It’s been six years since I went into labor and I can still feel the warmth of the puddle gushing from me and onto a disposable bed pad as I sat on the edge of the delivery table. “I’ve never seen quite this much fluid after breaking someone’s water,” the nurse stated while standing next to me. I looked at her, not knowing what to say. I wondered if that was a good thing.

Even to this day, I still notice a twinge in the middle of my back when I arch it. Inevitably, I imagine the anesthesiologist’s needle entering my spine as he administered the epidural, the extended pinching as pain medicine entered my body and made an empty promise to make all the hurt go away.

I can still see the look on my mother-in-law’s face as she stood in my bedroom doorway the morning after I came home from the hospital and watched me scream as pee or water, or a combination of both, rushed down my legs and soaked the carpet. A complete inability to control oneself is never a good feeling.

No matter how many years pass, you can’t tell me these parts of being a mom are dreamy.

Here are some other memories that can’t be glossed over: I couldn’t sit normally for two weeks after giving birth. Friends and family would come to visit, see the baby, and I’d gingerly waddle down the stairs. I’d hang onto the handrail with one hand and hold a nursing pillow in the other. I had learned that using a nursing pillow, one with a hole in the middle intended to be wrapped around the torso to help support your infant while feeding, could also be used for sitting upon if your labia was swollen to the size of an apple.
Ice always seemed to be running out. Sitz baths and pain medication could not remedy the situation all together. Time was what I needed and it didn't seem to be passing quickly. I’d try and sit comfortably through the visit, watching those around me pass the bundle of joy around the room. Then when it began to get fussy, the baby would be handed back to me. I’d have to try and stand without crying to go and breastfeed. Slowly making my way up the stairs I could feel their eyes upon me. They would soon return to their conversation, talking and laughing, as I’d struggle to get the baby to eat.

I felt a world away. I wanted so badly for the breastfeeding to work. Even though I had been given formula, assured that my baby would be “okay” if I chose to bottle feed – even knew in the back of my mind that not every mother in the world breastfeeds or has chosen to breastfeed – I had been told over and over that breastfeeding was what was best for the baby. It was always the first line I read in books or the first thing out of someone’s mouth for advice on nourishing your child. Most of the other young mothers I knew had or were breastfeed. What kind of mother was I if I at least didn’t try to do what was best for my baby?

I wish I would have been easier on myself, had been able to truly ingest important and wise advice written in accounts such as *Of Woman Born*. Rich, in her logical approach, continues as she discusses some of the more rational parts to mothering:

Nothing, to be sure, had prepared me for the intensity of relationship already existing between me and a creature I had carried in my body and now held in my arms and fed from my breasts. Throughout pregnancy and nursing, women are urged to relax, to mime the serenity of madonnas. No one mentions the psychic crisis of bearing a first child, the excitation of long-buried feelings about one’s own mother, the sense of confused power and powerlessness, of being taken over on the one hand and of touching new physical and psychic potentialities on the
other, a heightened sensibility which can be exhilarating, bewildering, and exhausting. (Rich, Of Woman Born 35-36)

In placing so much emphasis on the physical, the external, often a mother’s real problems aren’t addressed. We do a great disservice to mothers when we fail to recognize what is happening to them emotionally.

~

After what turned into weeks of latching problems, I went to see a lactation consultant. I’d tried every suggestion in the book, every position from the nurses, every idea from other mothers, all the advice from the doctor. Nothing was working. I was engorged. I had inflamed lumps of milk forming under my armpits and it felt like milk was reaching up my chest and into my neck. The nurse wanted to see my breasts, for me to show her what procedures I had been using. It didn’t take her long to figure out that I had been producing too much milk. She took one look at me and said, “Wow, you could feed the whole neighborhood!”

While her comment provided some relief – just in the fact that there was a reason behind my struggles, and knowing that I wasn’t the only one going through such things – I still had no clue how to feel better or feed my baby without it hurting. The nurse explained that normally having too much milk was a good thing, but in my case the five-pound baby could not expel enough milk and my body kept creating more.

“It should be simple supply and demand,” she stressed; she advised using ice to help with the swelling and tenderness, and put together a plan for pumping along with feeding the baby so I could begin to regulate my production.
I purchased a breast pump and watched as white liquid began squirting out in streams from my nipples. I hadn’t ever thought about what happened during breastfeeding, but now all I could see was what looked like the spurt of water coming out of a child’s bath toy – when completely full and squeezed – shooting straight across the tub. As I held the cups of the pump to my body, vibrations suctioning the boobs back and forth, tubes collecting the product, I felt like a cow hooked up to a milking machine. I couldn’t help but think back to the time I tried to milk a goat on a farm fieldtrip in elementary school – pulling and tugging, the fluid slowly accumulating into a metal can below. I wondered if my chest would begin to look like those worn udders.

Rich does acknowledge the physical in mothering as well. Much of the time physical aspects such as nursing are directly connected to what is going on in the mother’s mind. She states:

From the beginning the mother caring for her child is involved in a continually changing dialogue, crystallized in such moments as when, hearing her child’s cry, she feels milk rush into her breasts; when, as the child first suckles, the uterus begins contracting and returning to its normal size, and when later, the child’s mouth, caressing the nipple, creates waves of sensuality in the womb where it once lay; or when, smelling the breast even in sleep, the child starts to root and grope for the nipple. (Rich, Of Woman Born 36)

Throughout the breastfeeding process, a woman experiences so many new physical sensations. Support often comes in the form of applying Band Aids to the pain, or looking for solutions to fixing problems instead of responding with patience and advice to calm nerves. Simply acknowledging there so much more going on behind the scenes can go a long way for the mother.
I seemed to be making progress, then one day, I looked down and saw a milk blister – an area on one of my nipples that seemed blocked, to be turning red. In order to unclog the nipple my doctor recommended two strategies: taking a very hot shower or immersing the area in a glass of extremely hot water. I figured I’d try both. Standing in the shower, having to shield myself from any direct current, I looked down to see if anything was happening. I began to cry. As if in unison with the tears, there were milky drops forming on the edge of each nipple. Each drop would trickle down my body as the one behind it formed and pushed it out. I couldn’t tell the difference between the puddles of water, tears and milk mixing together and making their way down the drain.

Standing at the sink, waiting for the water to reach its hottest temperature, I wondered how this was going to work. With steam rising from the filled cup, I leaned over and gritted my teeth, held my breath as I let out a muddled yet distinct moan. I remained there as long as I could then stood to inspect myself in the mirror. I couldn’t tell if the blister had or would make its way out, but I definitely could not mistake the look of my body. It had become unrecognizable to me – the once soft, malleable curves were now tight and bulging, and I felt stuffed with an unrelenting, pulsating heat. I probably smelt like sour milk.

After a few days and several of these attempts, the blister did not go away. I got mastitis – an infection that led to red splotching on and sensitive mounds beneath my skin. The doctor put me on antibiotics and told me that if breastfeeding still hurt after six weeks, I should stop.

“You did a good job,” she said.
All those voices from books I’d read, news reports on the television and people in my life telling me that what’s best for a baby is to have its mother’s own milk – that the baby would be smarter, healthier, stronger – were making me feel like I had failed. Now I realize, though, I was letting those voices drown out reason. They were clouding my judgment and actually interfering with me healing, bonding with my child and even letting others help me. I finally had a friend say something to make me move on and be okay with giving my baby a bottle. She said she always thought of mothering in terms similar to what they tell you on an airplane: “In case of the unlikely event of a loss of cabin pressure remember to put your own oxygen mask on first before assisting others,” she recited. “How can we help our children, if we don’t help ourselves first?” This made sense and deep down I already knew it, but it took me awhile to figure it out. I hadn’t failed, I’d done the best I could and it was time to move on.

Again, I can understand Rich’s words: “But just as lovers have to break apart after sex and become separate individuals again, so the mother has to wean herself from the infant and the infant from herself. In psychologies of child-rearing the emphasis is placed on ‘letting the child go’ for the child’s sake. But the mother needs to let go as much or more for her own” (Rich, Of Woman Born 36). At some point all mothers need to heed this advice and take care of her self.

Sometimes I feel bad about knocking childbirth, seeing the ugly in being a mother. But there’s something inside me that won’t let it go. I have to share my story in all its untidiness. Like my delivery nurse, I have a difficult time seeing past what I don’t like about motherhood and want to communicate that with others. Maybe I hope to
provide some insight to another young mother. Maybe I’m trying to prep others the best I can for something they haven’t considered, just to plant the seed, to give them something to think back on when they’re faced with something they hadn’t expected – something that wasn’t in a magazine. Remind them that it’s okay to feel frustrated at times, that they don’t have to love every single moment with their child.

Dr. Suess said: “You know you’re in love when you can’t fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams.”

My daughter didn’t starve. I can walk normally now. My body isn’t deformed – that much – yet I am not the same woman. I’m not unhappy with my children or being their mother. In fact, I often say they are what inspire me. When I think about the times it felt like I changed more diapers than there were hours in a day, or all the times I was down on my hands and knees constantly cleaning up strained carrots, spit up, or shit from the floor, I am often reminded about the triumphs and miracles as well. I must admit there are other things I remember, too:

The warm, new smell of my baby’s skin.

A miniature hand wrapped around my pinky finger.

When the house became still after hours of bouncing and rocking the baby.

Coming home from a long day’s work to bath time – seeing the pure excitement in their eyes from a simple splash.

Watching that first step.

Playing peek-a-boo.

Hearing authentic, contagious laughter and never wanting it to end.
I know my experiences aren’t the same as others; struggles come in all shapes and sizes, but I believe there’s no right or wrong way to feel about being a mom. There is no shame in acknowledging that the process can be surprising, downright difficult at times and even something you don’t always like.

In all honesty, I don’t always like being a mother. I don’t like the promise of motherhood, the myth that being a mother is the best thing to ever happen to a woman. Or, that it’s perfect. I don’t think this is always the case, or has to be, and I for one don’t want to get to the end and realize that there could have been more. I don’t want to feel defeated, to feel a world away, or that I’ve failed. Instead I want to listen to those voices which remind me of reality, encourage me to move on if needed.

And hopefully I’ll be able to remember when exactly it is that I’m supposed to use ice.

Part Five: “Good Night, Sleep Tight. Don’t Let the Bedbugs Bite”

Among the many baby gifts we received after our bundle of joy arrived was a Precious Moments doll that recites the well-known prayer when squeezed.

“Oh I lay me down to sleep.’”

I wasn’t taught this prayer as a kid, but I was taught to pray. For many years I would kneel by the side of my bed and pour out my heart to God. Most of the time I remember crying, as praying turned into a session of pleading for a life I didn’t have. As an adult I don’t kneel to pray. In fact, I don’t really pray anymore. I live. I am grateful for what I have been given. I pray in another sense, through living.
“I pray the Lord my soul to keep,”

The first night I brought her home from the hospital, I laid my daughter down in her unused, blemish-free bassinet. The four white bears above her danced to a lullaby as the mobile spun around. She looked up at me and said with her perfect eyes, “Mom, everything is going to be okay. I have just come from Heaven and there is nothing to worry about. Let’s enjoy each other, this life. No matter where we go, which beds we sleep in, you will be my mother, I will be your daughter and we will be together.”

“If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

I have hope that my daughter will be happy. I tuck her in at night believing she will find her own prayers, her own beds to make.

“Amen.”

Motherhood Interrupted

“I don’t have sisters,” I said, adjusting my seatbelt in the backseat of Julie’s CRV as we pulled onto Highway 70 heading south, “but this is what I picture sisterhood being like.”

Brianna, sitting next to me with her light blue Kleen Kanteen filled for the two hour trip, and Amy, directly in front of me, strands of unruly hair poking out in all directions from the headrest, laughed in agreement and along with Julie when she responded, “This is better than having sisters!”

Julie adjusted the XM radio to classic tunes, and the Steve Miller Band filled the vehicle as we hit the 70/99 interchange. It had only been fifteen minutes but time was
already flying. Before I knew it, we would arrive at Lake Tahoe, cozy up in front of the fireplace at Julie’s cabin, drink some red wine and talk late into the night.

My friends and I were eager to get away from the strains of daily life raising our six toddlers. Making arrangements for our husbands, kids for the next thirty hours seemed to take weeks of planning. The drive had begun with the typical chatter about Facebook, polite gossip about other women in our circle of friends, and of course the latest of our kid’s achievements. We laughed and bonded, though little did I know the impact the trip would have on me. Like the careful design of dots placed on the pages of a connect-the-dot coloring book, a new, color-filled picture was about to emerge.

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It was on this mom’s trip where my view of motherhood changed. My eyes were opened. While away from my children, focusing solely on myself – something I had not done much in the past four years – I began to realize motherhood had been drawing life out of me. Though they had been filling me with experiences and love and laughter, many wonderful moments, I had also let my children take my identity away. In taking some time for myself, I realized that as my children had been nursing, they had not only been taking milk and nourishment, but I was being sucked away as well. In giving all of me to them, I had lost sight of who I was. All of us were starving.

I had met Brianna about two years earlier at Baby Boot Camp, pushing our strollers around the Yuba-Sutter Mall trying to get in a good workout and trying not to strangle our terrible two-year-olds. We were both new to the area and both had lived in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Having something to talk about connected us right away.
Amy and Julie were also part of the exercise group; their kids were just a bit older than ours. The fact that they too were challenged with sleep deprivation, potty training and picky eaters gave us plenty to discuss and share with one another. Whether we were sweating from doing crunches or doing laps around the play yard, we had found plenty of experiences and stories to compare. We also found that being together became a remarkable learning tool and emotional outlet to handling the curve ball we were thrown as first time mothers.

Reaching Sacramento on I-5, we found our way onto Highway 50. We started to climb the hills and then decided to pull off in Placerville to gas up, grab a coffee at Starbucks and find some Sudafed for Amy’s and my ears. The traffic was heavy, normal for a Friday evening, and it was quickly getting dark. As we hopped out to stretch our legs, I breathed in the fresh, pine scented air. Stress began to melt away as the sun set back behind us in Sacramento.

We began winding through the dark mountains as rain drizzled on the windshield. Lights from oncoming cars flashed in and out of view. We started laughing harder as Julie recited some of her Burning Man stories. Amy chimed in about memories from her college days working at a food co-op in Oregon. The two of them had similar experiences with drugs in their youth and were not shy about sharing. “Trips” became a running joke for the rest of the night as we lost track of time and for a few moments, here and there, forgot about the kids back home.

In the back Brianna and I were quieter, possibly somewhat jealous that we could not relate to ever being stoned or having experienced moments where we had completely
let go of ourselves. I know, for me, there was an admiration for individuals like Julie and Amy who could reminisce about their past, some of their questionable choices, instead of feeling guilty or ashamed. They seemed to recognize the good and the bad about their backgrounds and embrace themselves. They didn’t allow where they came from, who they used to be embody or weaken their current selves. They were comfortable with their new role as mothers, having stability at home with their husbands. They were proud of the lives they created for themselves, the strong families they worked hard at filling with love, and the children who they felt very blessed to raise and rear. They no longer made irresponsible choices, but definitely took any opportunity to have a good time.

Highway 50 turned into Highway 89 and I knew we were getting close. It’s as if I could feel the change of altitude inside of me. The uplifted feeling, brought on too by friends and conversation, is something I hadn’t felt in a while and not as consistently as I once did. Giddiness began to envelope the whole of the car as each one of us contemplated an evening without interruptions.

Could we possibly stay up as late as we wanted without the thought of having to be woken prematurely? Go to bed without having regrets about drinking a little too much? The further away we got from home, the more relaxed I got. No schedules, no expectations, no plans. We were simply four women treating ourselves to some time off from being Mom for a few days – having to be the one to orchestrate the ins and outs of everybody else’s life. Being together not only was enjoyable, but it also seemed to give us permission to be away – to air not only the great things about being a mother, but the challenging things as well.
As we reached the south end of the lake and navigated toward the cabin, I looked out my window to try to see the lake. I couldn’t see the water, but just knowing it was there calmed me. I could see a rough outline of it, the faint glimmer of lights hugging both the California and Nevada shores off in the distance. You'd think we'd want to go gamble a bit or have a night on the town, but all of us were very pleased with the idea of lying low, getting into our favorite pajamas and just hanging out listening to music or watching a chick flick. We loved the idea of having to be nowhere and doing nothing.

When we grabbed our color-coordinated overnight, hang-up and toiletry bags, personalized with our own signature touches, I thought to myself about how organization had become such an important thing to me. If this had been a vacation ten years earlier, I probably would have had a backpack for my bathroom stuff and a very worn duffle with a broken zipper. My clothes and shoes would be thrown in and half falling out. Why had I become so enamored with this idea of appearance and looking like I had it all together all of the time? Why did I need to arrange everything so perfectly? Going to jewelry and make-up parties to support my circle of friends reminded me of my own mother, her shelves lined with Tupperware and Avon products.

I also wondered for a moment why I liked being away so much. Why two hours away from home for two days felt freeing for me?

After unloading and getting settled, Julie showed us new touches she had made to the cabin. She had hung some burgundy and beige checkered curtains. The matching pillows with moose and bear shaped embroidery had been placed on the chairs and couches. The deer head hung above the small fireplace along with the collection of
family treasures atop the wood beam mantle just below it. I looked at pinecones of varying sizes and shapes placed in a wicker basket on one side of the fireplace as someone recalled something from a previous visit.

Julie arrived and walked in becoming nervous. She noticed a few things out of place and a trail of mud tracked in by what looked like footprints. She thought someone had broken in when she looked up and realized there were fresh roses on the table and a bottle of wine. Her husband, always the romantic, had arranged a welcome gift.

“Remember how scared you were?” Amy teased Julie.

“I know! I thought we had a burglar!” she said smiling.

I could see that she missed Clark. She reached for her cell phone to call and let him know we had arrived.

“Oh! He sent a picture!” she said. “He and Jack are having a movie night.”

She handed the phone to Brianna so she could see the picture of the two of them snuggling on the couch.

After we all came back from going to our separate parts of the cabin to change our clothes and touch base briefly with our families, Brianna came down the stairs and started talking about what spa treatments she’d chosen for tomorrow.

“I think I am going to go with the hot stone massage this time,” she said.

“I thought about that one, too,” I said. “I decided on the deep tissue, though.”

Amy said her favorite part was always the facial. “My skin always feels so soft afterwards.”

The conversation quickly turned to what was going on at home.
“I tried to not bring it up,” Brianna said. “We can’t ever get away, can we?”

I looked at Amy as we grinned and nodded at each other in the kitchen.

“Which bottle should I open?” Amy said. “Red or White?”

Julie, in the living room, bending down to light the fire called out.

“Both!”

~

We woke early the next morning, not because we necessarily wanted to, but because our bodies were programmed to do so. As we sat bundled up, snuggling beneath furry blankets sipping hot coffee, we listened to the quiet. We watched the cream swirl. I realized my shoulders were not tense, but softer and not necessarily in need of the upcoming massage. I laid my head back, closed my eyes and for the first time, in what felt like a very long time for me, felt my body breathe. I was comfortable, happily soaking up this time with these women who felt like family to me. Their support in the last few years, years that changed the whole of me, my life and my future, touched me in ways I hadn’t known before -- different from schoolmates, roommates, teammates of the past. More like that first best childhood friend that you don’t ever forget no matter where life takes you both. The time spent with that person forever molds who you become like the DNA piecing you together. I knew just from the feeling in the cabin that Julie, Amy and Brianna had affected me in a similar way and would remain a part of my soul always. We even talked about these emotions, trying to capture the mysterious sort of sync we shared.
Amy said, “When I am old and senile, maybe even wearing diapers, I still want to be like this. Surrounded by my sisters being as adventurous as I can.”

Part Six: “Early to Bed, Early to Rise”

Now we’re in our late thirties; our life has never been more full. We have two miniature versions of ourselves and we’re lucky if we get an uninterrupted eight hours of sleep a night. We’ve added two more beds into an even smaller house and have been paying off the purchase of a much nicer mattress for two years now. We’ll officially own it in another two.

Beds are more than a place to sleep.

It sits upon a bed frame we bought when we were both working and had thirty thousand dollars in the bank. Now we are about that much in debt, never get to have sex without the door locked, and go to bed with one child and may wind up next to the other sometime right before the sun rises. We’re lucky to have a moment alone to spoon in our very own mattress.

Beds are time travel.

Just this morning I snuck out of our master bedroom in the dark, peeling Morgan’s arm off of my own, to go snuggle with my husband in her room down the hall. I whisper, “Can I join you for a little bit?” He rolls over, either out of habit from hearing someone beckon, or because he’s just as excited to get a quiet moment with me before the pitter-patter of the day begins. Either way, I’m thrilled to feel the warmth of my
favorite bedmate next to my body – even if it’s in a trundle bed with polka dot sheets in a room tattooed with butterflies and pooh bears.

_Beds are intimate spaces._

It doesn’t matter at all that we can’t fit in it together or that it was purchased off of Craigslist to save a buck. Gone are the days when alarm clocks were set to wake us. Gone are the days of privacy and uninterrupted moments of ecstasy.

_Beds are connection to ourselves._

Our home and our beds may not have the consistency they once had, but pillow fights and jumping on the bed has taken on a whole new meaning. After what we’d consider to be a normal night of sleeping, one, then the other monkey join us for morning laughs and tickles before we tackle the day ahead. And there’s never been a better way to begin.

_Beds are respite._

When I think back to the beds of my youth, the rooms that suffocated me, or the walls I stared at for hours on end, I cannot help but realize that each pillow my head happened to fall upon all led to this one, though it might be a little lumpy at times. As we keep waking up each day, next to someone, or simply solo; in the custom mattress or one covered by a pee pad, I find comfort.

Chico State Mom

Dropping my daughter off at her first day of preschool and arriving at the college bookstore – to purchase my own school supplies – occurred the same morning. Here I was, a thirty-five-year-old woman, wife, mother; not feeling anything like a student,
walking through this new door to buy books, a binder, some college-lined notebook paper.

_Do they still use paper?_ I wondered for a moment.

I looked at the young girl standing in front of me as we wound our way up to the registers, her back-length, razor-straight, chestnut hair pulled sloppily back into a bun.

_Do they still call it a bun?_

It looked more like a bird nest resting atop her head, meticulously placed, with perfectly picked strands falling out here and there. It was almost like she put together a piece of art before slipping out of bed and hitting the street.

This is not the only thing I notice about her. Along with her bra-revealing tank top and clunky foam thongs (_Wait, I mean flip-flops_) she is wearing shorts that appear to be ripped, with shreds of white cotton dangling entirely around each of her upper thighs. Because they are so short and tight, I doubt the possibility of her wearing underwear . . .

_I know they still call it that, but maybe they don’t wear it?_

The only times I wore “altered” shorts was in the Eighties and Nineties (they were popular then, too) along with mock-necked, shoulder-padded t-shirts, and permed hair. I know because in my eighth grade school picture I am wearing a neon green high-necked shirt, adorned with a splattered-in-art-class looking black vest over top. My brushed-out frizz is partially covered by a rounded b-bop style top hat. So, although you can’t see the shorts complementing my flare in the picture, I vividly remember them being cut-off jeans. In those days they were cut fairly neatly, and possibly even folded a few times. Never would there be shreds of dangling material.
It’s not as clear in my mind, but I also could have been wearing penny loafers stuffed with green socks (identically matching, of course) and two dimes in case I needed to make a phone call.

The other time I recall owning a pair of shorts that looked revamped for a fashionable appearance, was after high school. I purchased them at the GAP while in college – the first time around. They were knee-length, slightly faded on purpose and, even though they had been cut, they’d also been hemmed to look somewhat messy/hip and somewhat finished/presentable at the same time. Students were not allowed to wear shorts on campus at conservative BYU so I bought them for hanging out in the dorms or for wearing on the weekends. I lived in those shorts. They were trusty, reliable – boyfriend-like before clothes actually were labeled as such.

Those shorts stuck with me through most of college, some real boyfriends, and into marriage, as well as some of my first jobs and moves. Even motherhood. I didn't necessarily fit into them in each stage, but I held onto them, hoping maybe someday I would be able to slip them on, and hit the street again like I had back in my own carefree days.

~

As the girl in front of me was called over to pay for her iPad, earphones and undersized college-logoed fitted tee, I watched her. I looked down at my bulky Clark sandals, could feel my Hanes briefs starting to crawl beneath my work slacks and I wondered what in the hell I was doing.
Here I stood, holding my binder paper and textbooks. Not only was I worried about being in the classroom again, in a new century, I was worried if I had packed enough food in my daughter’s lunch pail. I was thinking about the dishes in the sink at home. My mortgage payment. I had no clue how to use Blackboard Learn or do research for an assignment on the Internet. How would I be able to juggle everything and also feel like a student again?

*How was I going to manage this new phase in my life?*

After what felt like several hours waiting in line and going through a lifetime of feelings in my head, I walked up to pay for my supplies. I walked past a section in the store filled with reusable cups and license plates stamped with the phrase *Chico State Mom*. I did a double take. I knew the products and this saying weren’t for me, but I couldn't help but crack a smile. I had gifted a similar sweatshirt to my own mother over fifteen years ago when I was a single, broke undergrad. When I wasn’t a mom.

*Maybe I could buy one for myself?*

~

Part of applying to graduate school involved taking the GRE. Not only was I facing this new world as a returning student, I actually had to study again. Reading, writing and preparing for tests – dusting out the cobwebs from not only the books, but the brain cells as well – and memorizing facts and figures. Taking a standardized test was something I hadn’t done since taking the SAT in high school. At that time there were tiny bubbles to fill in with a #2 pencil, scheduled dates and places to go and sit with hundreds
of others and nervously answer questions to evaluate exactly how much I knew, or didn’t know, to determine how I would manage in college.

I took the GRE a few weeks before my daughter’s birthday. I remember waking up with her that morning, helping her dress for the day. I stood behind her in the bathroom, both of us looking into the mirror. Her feet crowding on a stepstool below, she studied her face. We spent a moment discussing which hair clip we should use to pull her hair back and out of her face. It was such a huge decision for her. I looked at her reflection and wondered for a moment where the time had gone? How did my baby girl get so big? The butterflies circled in my stomach thinking about the questions that’d be on my test in a few hours, having to choose between answers “A” or “C” and use the mouse to click the appropriate box.

Our daily routine of getting up together in the mornings and getting ready for our days at school had become normal and comfortable. Yet I knew that after this test and in the coming months, life was going to get a lot busier, probably even hectic at times. Days filled with shuffling between my classes and her school. Late nights doing homework after finishing up bath time and dinnertime, just to get up and do it all over again.

“What does your day look like, Mom?” she asks with serious eyes. She tilts her head to the side as I brush. I can see two new freckles on her nose.

“Today...let me think,” I say. “I am spending most of the day studying for my test.”

She realizes I am finished and quickly hops down and runs down the hallway to the kitchen.
“Have you bought me a birthday present yet?” she sings. Her words are left behind in the hallway like musical notes on paper.

On my drive to school that morning, my thoughts are filled with party planning. I know she wants a princess theme, an Ariel cake. Should we have the party at the park or at home? Weather is usually nice, but this time of year it could be a gamble to have it outside. I think about favors and decorations, decide to send out the invitations that evening.

Before I realize, I’m at school, trying to find parking and rushing to arrive on time for class. My daughter’s party is put on a shelf in the back of my head. The professor is reviewing the upcoming schedule – a paper due next week, midterm the following week. Don’t forget about posting a Blog to the class website. My stomach growls, and I head to the library to study.

I have a text message from my mother about the party, an email from the doctor about my husband’s upcoming appointment. There’s another email from my girlfriend wondering if Friday night works for a Mom’s night out? I look at my calendar. The only thing I can see is the upcoming GRE date circled in bright red. Focus, I think to myself. Focus.

The day of my GRE came. Like any other day, we got up as a family and headed our different ways. I was so nervous. Tests had never been my strength, but I knew it was one hurdle to get through if I wanted to continue my education. Since becoming a mother, struggling through getting pregnant and then pregnancy and then giving birth and then recovering from giving birth and then . . . the list goes on, an inner strength had been ignited in me. I had found a group of friends, other mothers, who had helped me re-
recognize my true potential – remind me that I could accomplish whatever I wanted, even if it might be uncomfortable or difficult at times. Even if I have a child to tote along as well.

It wasn’t just my body that changed through the new gift of motherhood; there was a new mindset, something that came with the realization that my life and goals would always be a sort of footnote to my child’s. It’s not that I was forgetting myself – far from that, in fact – it was simply the reality of being a parent. Slowly I learned in the beginning, and often am reminded as days go by, that no matter how good (or bad) things get for me, there is another little person who is living and growing and having her own experiences. She might one day even create her own signage for the wall to show me just how smart she is, how much more she knows about life than I do.

I drove home from taking the test, happy to have all the stress and anxiety behind me. As I pulled into the driveway I let as a huge sigh of relief, but quickly noticed the house was dark. My cell phone rang as I walked through the door.

“Honey, Morgan’s sick. We’re at Urgent Care,” my husband said. There was no, “How was your day or how’d it go?”

Test, I thought…What test?

~

A few years later and we are still both going strong. I’m entering my last semester as a graduate student and my daughter is well into the first grade. The GRE turned out to be just a slight hurdle. After that, more real-life tests have come and gone. Workshops,
seminar papers, symposiums and portfolios, and even my own class to teach, have filled
my days. All of it has been fulfilling, rewarding. If I’m honest, it has also been tiring.

I still haven’t figured out how to get the dishes done each night and there is a
collection of dust bunnies behind the couch. But we continue to get up each day and
tackle it separately together.

My daughter has lost three teeth, with another dangling and about to surrender as
we speak. Her new favorite thing to do is read – and to write stories. She rides a bike with
confidence, attends gymnastics every Tuesday night (if Mommy can make it home on
time) and tries her hardest to get a basketball through the hoop at recess. It isn’t necessary
for me to walk her to her classroom anymore. We now line up at the curb with dozens of
other cars and she unbuckles her seatbelt, opens the door and hops out of the car. She
walks off with our signature thumbs up and a blown kiss as I drive off. She skips to the
playground.

She’s beginning to figure a few things out.

I wouldn’t say all the nerves are gone, though. There are times when she or I still
have to try something new or may have questions. The other night as we were driving
home together, she asked if Santa Claus was real. I should have been prepared for the
question with the holidays right around the corner and the buzz of Christmas beginning to
brew. I answered her question with a question: “Well, what do you think? Have kids been
talking about that at school?”

She said, “I was just wondering because I don’t see how someone could watch
everybody all of the time.”
“You’re right,” I said. “That’s probably not possible, is it?”

“Do you think maybe he has helpers?” I continued, answering her question with a question.

“Or...” she cut me off.

“Maybe he’s just a fairytale?”

As parents we often feel we have to know the answers to these types of questions, or at least create a sphere where our children can ask questions and figure things out for themselves. This will be the first of many big questions my daughter will have. The next might be about God or where she came from. It will be, “Mom, what do you believe?”

~

I look back and can laugh about that first day on campus, standing in line feeling out of place. It makes me wonder, though, why I felt so nervous. Why am I always so nervous? Why do I worry so much and why can I ever not begin something new without questions swirling around in my head? I think about where I came from, my own mother. How she probably instilled this urge inside of me without even knowing it – passed along traits that weren’t just genetic. Mothers do that. They have a way of stamping themselves on our lives no matter what stage we find ourselves in, no matter where we go. No matter where they go.

Part of why I wanted to come back to school was so that I could be that old adage for my daughter: to show her that she really can be anything she wants to be. I don’t want her to question herself. Question the world, yes. Question her beliefs, yes. Question me, too. But not wonder if she is ever good enough or that she doesn’t fit in. I wonder if the
things I do today, as her mother will stick with her, what things will float away. Even, what she’ll have to overcome because of my intentional – and unintentional – influence.

One day she will begin her first day of college. I envision her standing in line, winding her way up to buy supplies – Who knows what kind of shorts she will be wearing! She will be draped in confidence, drive and determination (I hope) and possibly have her hair pulled back into a bun. She may not know exactly what she believes in or why but she will be trying to figure it out.

I will be in a different place, too. Maybe this time it won’t have so many questions attached to it.

Maybe.
WORKS CITED
WORKS CITED


