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Unspeakable: My Father's Suicide and a Childhood Memoir

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"Unspeakable: My Father's Suicide and a Childhood Memoir"

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HONORS 389
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Honors Thesis

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Introduction

Letters and Voices

Some memories I have are amazingly clear. These are the memories that slice like glass through all the blurry moments. Some people claim these memories to be when one has their first kiss or hits a home run. I remember the first time my Dad ever told me he was proud of me. I was sitting in my mom's writing chair looking at the stucco ceiling trying not to let my self cry and ruin my mascara. I was about to go out on a date. It was a week before my dad killed himself June of 1998. He had just received the letter I wrote him in the mail. He told me over the phone from Santa Cruz it was good writing. He had never told me I wrote well. All the stories in which he painstakingly corrected my spelling and dotted my i's, he never once said they were good. All the papers I showed him in high school meant nothing because he pushed them aside. But that letter he said was great: "really good writing, honey." And then just when I thought I still might hold out on not having to re-do my eyes, he told me he was proud of me. I remember that as if it was ten minutes ago. The way his voice got shaky and he paused; the way I said I had to go and hung up the phone sobbing, crouching over and knowing, knowing he was going to die.

This memoir begins with the letter I read at my father's funeral service in June of 1998. The following two sections of the memoir are chapters, "Houses" and "Lies", which are stories from my childhood. The concluding section of the memoir addresses
why I chose the memoir form and gave me the chance to recognize works that guided my writing.

My close friends don’t hear my voice in the stories; they wonder if I have separated myself from my own memories. I have chosen not to speak in that assured, articulate voice, because the six-year-old me was scared and could speak only in screams. My current voice, like everyone’s, evolved in response to what I had to learn to speak against. Of course, at five I was too young to be the person I am now. Yet I could see and feel things that I can’t see or feel now. I begin with sensory descriptions of these years because that is how I saw the world as a child. The voices in this memoir emerge from memory, from pain, from hiding, from exclaiming my femininity, and from being very careful to say what I mean to say.

My father was my audience when I began writing, and his suicide in 1998 was my initial topic when I started this memoir. Before he died I sat down and wrote a letter because he had warned me he might die, although I did not know when, or how, at the time. The memoir began as a chance to say the things I never had the chance to tell my father. Before he died he told me I was the only one he truly loved and his only intellectual equal. To understand what he meant I had to look at my childhood, not at his actual death.

My childhood was the foundation of my relationship with my dad. I chose to write about myself as five years old, which was approximately 1984, because at that age I had not yet started judging my environment the way I am able to judge my environment now. I had to write about a time period in which I would not analyze, but rather, describe
my life. Just because I am writing about myself as a child, does not mean I can entirely separate my self from my recollections of being an adolescent or being an adult.

In both “Houses” and “Lies” the primary subject is the relationship between my father and me after my parents were divorced when I was three years old. I am around kindergarten age in both chapters. As much as this is a story about my relationship with my father, it is also a story about place. The places I lived as a child are central in this work. “Houses” takes place in Afton, Minnesota, in the farmhouse where I lived with my dad half the week. The other half of the week I lived with my mother in Saint Paul. In Lies I explore my daily relationship with my dad. The recollections of the farmhouse, and images from childhood, have been coaxed out of my memory by smells, such as dried chamomile, and sounds, such as hearing an Irish ballad. In the introduction to Memoirs of a Geisha, the translator writes, “A memoir provides a record not so much of the memoirist as of the memoirist’s world” (1).

I had to fill in some gaps of information, but, overall, I have chosen not to do much inventing. The relationship I had with my dad was already too far into the realm of the unbelievable for me to feel it necessary to invent. The ethical question of how much to disclose is one with which I have struggled. My concept of what happened in my childhood is not as dark as what my elementary teachers would have written, nor is it as happy as my mother would have written. My father’s brothers could never read this memoir. If Michael and Peter read this, they would hate him, they would see incestuous love, not emotional love, which would be incorrect. In condemning him they would likewise condemn their own memories.
The ambiguity of truth is an unavoidable roadblock when working on any kind of memoir. I feel scared to say too much and dishonest saying too little. I am aware that I would like to control how much I tell according to the audience.

What do I need to say about my father? What do I want to say about him? These things are vastly different questions because this memoir is not therapy. I do not wish to convince myself, or anyone else, that my father was a hero or a villain. I simply wish to paint a portrait of a real man, a beautiful and manipulative dreamer, and a father who emotionally was a lover. Our relationship breaks boundaries of moral definitions. The things that will shock others do not shock me. I have been part of an adult world as long as I can remember, and, specifically, an adult world in which sexuality, fantasy, and abuse have been freely discussed.

I will fail if those who hear my story love my father or hate him. I will fail if I portray a horrible childhood just as I will fail if I portray an ideal childhood. Our relationship was absolutely paradoxical.

I ask myself why I am choosing to make this relationship public when I still feel so protective of my dad and of the nature of his death. I want to explain that I learned to survive; that I was not destroyed because, through everything, my parents loved me. Choosing to make this public requires opening myself up in a way I have never done before, and accepting that the publicity may be painful. At the same time the publicity is a chance for me to receive the feedback about my life that I did not have access to as a child. This is a chance to publicize the pain in order to further understand what was behind that pain.
My dedication and love for young children is also a reason I chose to make this relationship public. This memoir looks at what happens under the guise of alternative parenting. The borderline between sexual abuse and alternative parenting leaves me constantly walking a tightrope. My hope is that my writing will inspire people to ask the questions I have been asking myself. How did my early years learning classics and talking about theory help me in life? How did the lack of boundaries and misguided lessons about sexuality hurt me? Did I experience trauma because it was inherently traumatic, or because I was told what my father did was wrong. If my words ever help someone else understand their lover or father then the publicity of my intimacy will be justified. Also in part I am choosing to make this relationship public because I want to articulate the truth of abusive love and, more importantly, how I was both loved and abused. I want to remember the duality of my father – the parts I can’t and don’t want to accept, and the parts I loved, and have the right to remember lovingly.

On June 21, 1998, Summer Solstice, Father’s day, my dad committed suicide. He had moved to California when I was finishing high school. I wrote this in one sitting trying to come to terms with what I needed to say to him before he died. The original letter has not been changed. This letter, and a knife, were the only things he held in his hands as he died.
Dear Dad,

I just am starting to understand I might not see you again. I am trying not to be desperate because I don’t want you to be desperate, but that is impossible for both of us I think. I feel afraid and sick about what you might do to yourself. I know you want to leave the earthly body form that ages. I know that wherever you go we will always be together. That is inevitable. I am part of you, the only part of you that will be left in the world. You told me two nights ago you were scared, so scared, that you might not be able to hear the birds wherever you go. The things that bring you joy will bring me joy for a very long time to come. It is hard for me to write, I am crying, but they are tears that have been in me for a long time. Pain is not new for me, as it has never been new to you, but articulating pain is usually confusing. I love you so much, I always have, and always will. I am not sure what our relationship looks like on the outside but I don’t care. It seems impossible to explain to anyone.

What I do know is that you will be proud of me and what I do with my life, because I will do it with love and passion, whatever I do. You gave me passion. You showed me beauty. I will not forget the fervency with which you taught me to love what you love: Ireland, Myth, dark beauty, words, ideas, and humanity. Your heart has always been the biggest heart in the world. Don’t you dare deny that; I won’t let you. You always wanted to help everyone, and couldn’t watch other people going through hardship without feeling it yourself. This may be why you caused hardship for other people you always did well when things were falling apart you wanted to hold people up. But to dwell in the pain caused instead of the origins of the cause is no longer necessary. The fact of the matter is you wanted to hold up the world. I don’t want to hold up the world,
but I do have that vehemence. That ardent nature that makes me fight for my dreams. People around me say I introduce them to a sense of loving life. I do love life, and I love myself. I may get down on things, but then I work to change the things I don’t like. I never want to give up on myself. There is so much of the world I want to see, and that I will see.

When you are gone, whenever that is, I will remember so many things; baked apples, Yeats, Thoreau, Joyce, bright yellow pants, big dogs, big trucks, Special K with cream, fried Ham, Pipes, woodcarvings, your hands with watches, the sheepskin I would curl up on and watch you write, camping, Bailey Island, your eyes, and most of all your laugh, your amazing smile. Those are just some of the things I will remember, but those are the things I will hold dear to my heart.

You once told me that a simple statement can be the most prophetic poem. I had written down something to the extent of, “Rain drops fall on hot tub cover like tears.” The simplest words that I want to whisper over and over are, I love you. All the other concepts are simply bits of thoughts that are ideas on the road to that thought. Time, destiny, fate, hate, compassion, suppression...all these concepts are part of a circular journey that must end in what we call love. Love to me seems to be acceptance and peace. When a mind exhausts itself in reason, only then does it relax into love. The love which bathes the wounds that consciousness has pushed aside in order to survive in this world. When we accept love maybe then peace finds us and then the light comes to us which is the only thing that ultimately heals. I am going to miss you.

* * * * * * * * * * * *
The next section of the memoir is called "Houses", and it takes place in Afton Minnesota. I write in the voice of a child, or my best rendition thereof. I wrote about this age trying to separate what I think now, and what I simply lived then. I have tried to piece my memories together. The best way to describe these chapters is like a quilt, patches of memories sewn together with what I think might have happened. Although this part is completed I see it as a patch that will some day be stitched into an ever bigger covering, a quilt that will be my entire story. That quilt will speak more about my mom, about my step dad, my sisters, and my chosen life as a girl evolving into the women I am now. That quilt will show the influence of those who have guided my writing, my teachers, my friends, and my lovers. That quilt will have all the colors, the textures, and the delicate additions I have so carefully constructed, that do not fit on this first section. It is a handmade quilt that holds the first cuts of my life.
CHAPTER ONE

HOUSES

He loves to sit and hear me sing,

Then laughing, sports and plays with me;

Then stretches out my golden wing,

And mocks my loss of liberty.

William Blake, “Song”

The farm was always a place where a person could find a book and curl up with a soft wool blanket. It was also a place where there were no boundaries: A place I feared and loved. Our home in Afton, Minnesota, smelled like expensive coffee, pipe smoke, and the oil in Guatemalan sweaters. Our home was usually messy and had stacks of books, papers, and piles of the New Yorker in every room. Many of the stacks were categorized, such as “Irish Poets,” “Mythological texts concerning Apollo,” or “Deirdre’s Enyd Blyton Novels.” The people who visited our farm had almost always never set foot on a farm before. Our farm was where my dad practiced psychoanalysis and wrote endlessly into the night, producing books that would never be published. From the dirt road the farmhouse did not look abnormal. The olive paneling and wood addition looked appropriate in the center of two expansive fields. I suppose the absence of wrecked cars, rusty tractor parts, and an American flag did differentiate us from the three other farms on Old Driscoll road. But the real difference was inside the walls.
The driveway stretched in a half moon behind the house. In the dirt chamomile grew. I used to pick it in bundles and Lona, one of my father’s lovers after my mom left, taught me how to tie it with a rubberband and hang it from the cabinet handle. After the chamomile dried, Lona and I would crumble off the yellow-green tufts of herb into a tea strainer. In front of the farmhouse was a large tree from which my dad hung a rope swing. My only clear memory of the rope swing is pretending to get knocked out by the smooth wooden seat in order to fake death. I lay beneath the full branches and wondered how long it would take my dad to notice me sprawled out on the dirt. He never noticed me. In our driveway two vehicles were parked. The first was the Saab and the other a truck that rotated between red and blue. I suppose my dad must have repainted it often. Behind the vehicles were the two barns. The barns were a place for me to disappear when I needed to.

A friend recently told me he had five bibles, the books that changed his life forever. It seemed as if we had everyone’s bibles on the shelves of our home. Different people continually lived at the farmhouse. My dad’s patients never went home after their sessions ended. People lived in tents, one at a time, outside my bedroom window. There was always a lost soul, an academic who found my father in order to understand the world. These lost souls hung around in search of their bible. I wished for exuberant souls who wanted me around. Instead they were brooding loners more messed up than my Dad, who saw me through his eyes and treated me with distance and respect. I prayed for a huge Italian family to come and claim me as their own. I prayed to escape the silence that rang like gibberish in my ears.
The Afton farmhouse is where I lived with my father half of the week. At the farm there were no boundaries, in space or time. I was expected to understand an adult world. It was a world of books, ideas, and misguided freedom. The other half the week (three days, three days), I lived with my mother in our small city home by the children’s hospital in St. Paul. I had clothes, toys, and pain in both places. But Irvine was different than the farm: my mom’s guests charmed me. Robert Duncan read me a poem about Angels. Andy Wiel looked through out spices pleased to find ginger and garlic. Storytellers paused in their conversations with my mom to weave me a tale of fairies and knobs.

If a person were to drive up and park behind the red/blue truck, the first thing they would see would be the front porch. It was actually more like a deck; we have pictures of my dad holding me up as a baby to see all he had done. There was some kind of stone path leading from the dirt drive to the deck and pointed in the direction of the screen door into the kitchen. The tiles on the kitchen floor were the color of sunburnt skin. There was one tile with a D carved into a center tile. Dad told me the elves did it, so it was a magical tile for me. When I was very young, I would sit on the tile for comfort, tracing the “D” shape with the point of my finger. The tiles were always cold in the summer. The table was thick dark wood, a purple Mahogany, without place mats or cup holders. Some dining room tables have laundry on them, others have Betty Crocker baked goods; ours had clementine oranges and my dad’s coffee-stained notes from his patient’s dreams.

I had three favorite spaces in the house. The first was the barnwood room facing the other side of the crescent driveway and separated from the kitchen by the living room. The barnwood room was literally made from the wood of an old barn, so the walls were
rough, unfinished planks. The centerpiece in the room (it was a small room) was a wood-
burning stove. If my tea got cold, I could set my cup on the stove and it would heat up
with lovely sizzling noises.

My second favorite spot was the loft in the addition my dad built. The loft room
was huge with gigantic windows open to the backside of the farm, the expansive stretch
of our land. One night my dad came into my yellow bedroom and scooped me up still
warm and moist from sleep to show me the Northern lights. He held me in his arms in the
loft room watching these amazing streaks of color, like a rainbow tilted sideways and
magnified. In this room we had the stained glass windows my Dad loved. The room was
like a pioneer church in the height of the afternoon with the unfinished wood next to
beautiful stained glass.

The Loft room was also a micro version of a Palo Alto fitness club. My dad loved
to watch tennis matches. He would be in his sports pants practicing his serves in the
living room. I would dance around behind him holding on to the elastic waistband of his
pants. The most familiar smell of my dad is sweat.

On those professional athlete days my favorite activity was pushups. He would
alternate one-arm pushups with me on his back. I would be in charge of holding his free
arm against the small of his back. Instead of counting numerically he would say a line of
poetry for each completed motion. His favorite “pushup poems” were by Byron and
William Blake.

Push and exhale: *She walks in beauty, like the night*

Down: Inhale

Push and exhale: *Of cloudless climes and starry skies*
Down: Inhale

Push and exhale: *And all that’s best of dark and bright*

Down: Inhale

Push and exhale: *Meet in her aspect and her eyes.*

I would rumple the back of his curls. Then he would tell me to make up a line. I liked making up poems and singing them. *“Dreams turn into colors.”*

Push and exhale: Fantastic kiddo!

Down: Inhale

Push and exhale: *Thus mellow’d to that tender light which heaven to gaudy day denies.*

When he taught me martial arts he would put on his Judo gee. He said he stayed alive in the military by reading books and practicing Judo; otherwise he would have had nothing to live for. Each time he taught me a flip he swore he would disown me if I ever joined the army. Not even having joined first grade, I looked at him, so far above me, and crossed my fingers as Sarah had taught me when we promised to be blood sisters forever. He’d grin and throw his head back laughing. He had an amazing laugh. His smile was my very favorite thing about him, but his laugh was a close second. He’d tie the black belt with seven red embroidered dragons tightly around my waist. Solemnly he would tell me to concentrate. We would look into each other’s eyes. When I began to lose patience, he would sweep my legs out from underneath me. My eyes watered up as my back hit the tiled floor. I learned that the sting of having the air knocked out of my lungs meant I was tough.
My third favorite space was the upstairs bathroom. Next to the tub was a small metal heater. Because we used wood to heat the house, the mornings were biting cold. From the time my dad and I moved to the farm when I was four, I would wrap my comforter around me and make my way downstairs in the dark winter mornings to start my Dad’s coffee. The down comforter made me forget the numbness of my hands from waiting for the coffee to brew. I brought the coffee upstairs and put it on the floor next to the shower. He would sing in the shower taking sips of the black Java, and his deep baritone woke up the house. He sang Bob Dylan or Jefferson Airplane. I liked the song about Alice in Wonderland the best. He said that made me mature because the song was about an acid trip. After his shower he would run Nexus gel through his black waves, small curls forming at the back of his neck. His various girlfriends always wanted the honor of cutting his hair but other than when he did it himself only I cut his curls. The truth was he had so much hair, and it always curled that it was difficult to mess up too much.

Usually his eyes were a bright clear green, but they changed color like the sky when it stormed. His brothers resented him for his looks. My uncle Peter once told me when he visited, “Baby, don’t ever trust a man as pretty as your father.” Really he didn’t do much to stay in shape. I thought his Adonis body was normal. When his back hurt he would lie down on the carpet and I would drive matchbox cars through the maze of his six pack muscles.

I was always right beside his beauty trying to find my own.

My dad’s other brother Mike would say, “Kenny, your problem is no one ever calls your goddamn bluff. Either you get what you don’t deserve because you’re too
smart for anyone to catch your lies, or you are too handsome to be challenged. That, in the end, is what will ruin you.” I did not know what a bluff was.

My Dad once said the most prophetic poem is the simplest statement. He told me this after I wrote “Rain drops fall like tears on the hot-tub cover,” when I was nine. My mother told me my first sentence was a poem when I was two: “This road turns, it turns like a cashew.” I grew up surrounded by poetry. My home was a Minnesota Santa Cruz, a post hippie library. My parents both received PhDs in the History of Consciousness at UCSC. I think I received an honorary degree in the same subject by the time I could speak. I was instructed as to what books I should love, whose words I should echo. When my dad dropped me off at school, he would make me memorize a quote or a concept before I could get out of the truck. I would have my fists balled up frantically not wanting to be any later than I already was. As he animatedly re-told the line from Blake or Joyce, I did try to remember it, in order to please him, in order to get out of the truck.

I wish I could explain the screaming in the walls of our home. There was so much love there, so much encouragement to believe in thought. And yet there was an air of fear, a blackness in the middle of the afternoon that was inescapable. Walking into the kitchen I always wanted to be there, but I felt a reserve of fear. It was as if the world could fall in at any moment. I needed security and what I received was passion. I wanted monotony and what I received was constant change. I desired a cabbage patch doll and I was given wooden carvings of Buddha.

It was not that my father did not care for me, it was that he expected too much of me, and he expected me to complete him. His gaps of fathering I was expected to fill in. We spent too much time alone together. I began to understand how he functioned and
disappeared easily when he was angry. When he was in his Green Beret moods, I silently held his knives and stood near by as he leaped from ledges and scaled trees. When he was the Doctor I sat silently under his desk and wrote illegible notes about dreams, consciousness, and past lives.

Screams hung damp in the air, becoming part of our bodies as we breathed. I did not understand why I had to wake up afraid and go to sleep desolate. When my dad became angry, he would be irrational and did not have the patience to take care of me. I learned how to stand before the mirror and scream in a way that evoked terror in my own eyes. I removed myself from the body and watched myself grow hysterical. He either did not hear me, or he believed my pain was an inevitable part of life. My dad often told me life was hard and I might as well learn it early.

The days when food was actually prepared were few and far between. Those days the house smelled like a home, as if there were many, many people to feed. When my dad did eat it was amazing. He would dump a whole box of Kellogg’s Special K into a mixing bowl and empty a carton of heavy whipping cream over the top. He’d devour three or four Tangelo oranges with his cereal and a pot of coffee. Other days it was multiple T-bone steaks and ripe avocado.

His specialty was baked apples. To make the right baked apples we would find local tart orchard apples; he always paid far too much for everything, especially food and watches. Then we would buy pure whipping cream, brown sugar and cinnamon sticks. The assembly required coring the apples, soaking them in thick whipping cream and sticky sugar. He baked them until they boiled and spat at the over door. When the apples were done, my dad would remove the pan without a hot pad, dropping the metal pan on
the stained wooden table. He’d grab two spoons and we’d sit side by side at the table
eating out of the pan. He would eat half a dozen apples for each one I ate. I liked the side
of the pan where the mixture baked on, creating a kind of tart caramel.

A couple times a month Dad would make a batch of French toast from an old loaf
of sourdough bread. Then he would have me cut slices of sharp Vermont Cheddar with a
butcher knife because we didn’t have any small knives. Knives represented my dad’s
time in the Marine corps. An unspeakable time, unlike Christmas, that he did not
celebrate. It took both my hands to grip the knife that was originally designed for gutting
a human being. My dad would throw slices of ham from the butcher in the large orange
cast iron frying pan. Sourdough French toast, Vermont Cheddar, fried Ham and pure
maple syrup were placed on a heavy ceramic serving plate. I would drink a Mason jar of
water while he guzzled fresh black coffee.

Most days I don’t remember him eating at all. He ate in cycles, missing days
entirely. Other than fruit and coffee there was no guaranteed food. The days when my
dad forgot to eat I would crawl up on the counter and dig through the cabinets. I would
find a jar of maraschino cherries, coffee, and cereal. I just was never sure if I would be
feasting or picking at cereal mixed with condensed O.J.

After three days with my dad, going to Irvine Avenue was like entering a
sanctuary. Dad would pull up in the truck, and I would drop, already running toward the
outstretched arms of my mother. She says this was the saddest time of her life, not
knowing how to keep me with her. But to me she was only loving and stable. Her hair fell
in a long dark sheet past the waist of her corduroy pants. Her eyes were gentle, like the
color of a well-worn teddy bear. When she laughed she seemed so young. My mom has
never been airy; even in her laughter she is grounded and connected to all the emotions around her. Even when she was exhausted from work or crying about my dad, her eyes would shine as she watched one of my many pajama theatrical performances. She made fresh pesto from our little city garden. In the late summer we would have fresh tomatoes for our pasta, and in the winter the pesto would be frozen in small cubes that she would defrost in a quarter-sized puddle of virgin olive oil.

The Irvine house was small and sparsely furnished. Our kitchen was the size of the barnwood room at the farmhouse. The bright red table only had room for two, which was just right for us. The coral colored couch took up most of the living room. The walls were the only part of the house that were elegant, because even then she had real art. The kind only artists appreciate. My mother must have been terrified the three times our house was broken into, but she did not show me that fear. Unlike my father she understood that a child’s world needed to be protected. The Irvine house was a place where I was not confused by manic changes and where I knew I was not in charge of an adult world.

Women in my dad’s life felt like manic changes. There were some women I loved. Women who held me, poured me cereal in the morning, and taught me how to swim and sew. These women came and went with bruised lives and sordid stories.

When my dad’s lovers did leave, I felt as if they also left me. I had to start the coffee again and wake up to the cold. In his pain my dad blamed me for his loneliness. One woman, Lona, was very much a mother when she lived with us. When Lona left I was six years old. Apparently he tossed all her belongings out the window and locked her out. It sounded horrible as much as everyone tried to sugar coat it for me. I sat in the dark
next to the phone when I found out she was gone and tried calling the number my dad
gave me. He told me she would come back if I asked her to. That was cruel of him. I
cried alone in the dark. I cried because I was scared. I cried for Lona to come back so I
did not have to take care of him all alone. I cried because once again I was the only one
for my dad to love.

When I was eight my Dad met a pretty blond nurse named Gay Joel. This fall, 14
years later, she completed a Doctorate in Psychology. My Dad always has inspired
people even if it was a rocky road of inspiration. When I first met Gay, she was
struggling as a single mom to put herself through college. The first time my dad talked
about Gay I was eight years old.

It must have been fall because I was playing in the leaves. There were so many
trees on our thirty-six acre farm property that we never raked leaves. I would run circles
around the house bent low to the ground creating a whirlwind of colors all around me. I
usually ended up in the back of the house balancing on the unfinished back deck. It was
one of the decks my dad started and never finished. This one was odd for two reasons.
One, it was on the backside of the house with no doors or windows connecting it to the
inside. Secondly, the deck would have required quite a set of steps because the
floorboards were five feet off the ground. The skeleton looked like an open window blind
set atop four log posts. So I would sit and dangle my legs between the slats. It is amazing
the only accident that happened was an occasional sliver. I’d been playing in the leaves
and then climbed up to perch on the boards and think. I always did my thinking outside.
As I was thinking that fall day, I slid my hand along the unfinished beam and a small
wedge of wood stuck in my palm and stung.
I dropped through the window blind deck and ran into the house to find my Dad. He was up in the loft room. We sat Indian style on the floor and examined my palm. My dad treated injuries with great importance, so the gravity he expressed made me remember Gay’s name even more clearly than if had he told me in another instant. “You know, Pumpkin,” he said looking at the sliver, “Gay is a nurse and could get that sliver out of your hand.” I did not respond, I was thinking about the kind nurse who could get the wood out of my palm. Actually I did not meet Gay that day; it was a few days later on the weekend. Instead my Dad took the sliver out as he always did by sanitizing a needle in the burning flame of a candle and poking at the sliver gently until it slid out. I never remember this process hurting. I think it was because I was being diverted. He would run one of his large callused fingers quickly through the flame as I watched, scared it would hurt him. All around the farm, in various rooms, were big beeswax candles in colors like crimson, violet moon, and golden honey.

It is possible my Dad told me about Gay before I met her. All I remember is that she could get my sliver out and that she was a nurse. What I actually knew about her, and what I know now about her, is a blur of pages already turned in my life. Perhaps he told me she was a struggling single mom with two boys, or that she was finishing college on her own, or that she was his student. In the first months of dating he had not met the whole Joel clan yet, the overly happy, slightly neurotic but wonderful, Swedish family. When I met Gay I was actually more interested in Tim. Gay drove out to the farm that Saturday in the fall with her son Timothy Colin, who was nine months my senior. Tim and I immediately hit it off. We went upstairs and sprawled out in the sun on the plush baby blue carpet. The sun fell in wide streaks from the oversized loft room windows.
Tim’s hair was whiter than the light and fell in a silky bowl cut past his delicate ears. I found out he loved to run as I did and he liked action figures, which would become my hobby for the next four years. That first day we met Tim drew pictures of his older brother Patrick, a stick figure with his head blowing up. I so desperately wanted a family I couldn’t imagine making fun of a sibling, but I had a lot to learn. At that time Patrick was thirteen and wanted nothing to do with his second grade brother.

Tim and I were the same age and we were always in the middle of everyone yelling. Tim cried in the chaos and and I learned to turn the anger inwards on myself. When Tim ran to his room to cry, I would lock myself in the bathroom and scream at my own reflection. My face would become puffy, and distorted. About that time Tim helped me cut off all my hair. I had been dressing like a boy since I could remember, but this brought my look to a whole new level. It was the only way I knew to make myself asexual in the eyes of my father. Our pain joined us, me and Tim, it made us siblings for life even after I moved away, even after my dad killed himself.

We left the farm when we moved to Minneapolis to create a “family” with Gay, Pat, and Tim, on Cumberland Street. The Cumberland Street house was never home. I lived there half the week as always for a year and a half. I have felt the presence of home within minutes of entering a space. Home is the slight mess of comfort, the smell of basic favorite foods, like toast with honey or peppermint tea, and having a well-worn beach towel when you dry off from a shower. Cumberland Street was none of these things.

At night my Dad would sit at his desk with one small lamp and write. His desk was actually a large rectangular table covered with coffee stains, Gatorade gum wrappers, and piles of books. Beneath the books were unopened bills that would never be paid. The
lamp he had gave off piercing green glow because of the tinted glass shade. In the darkness, with only the green light, I would watch him work. Piles of crumpled up paper grew as the night progressed. Occasionally he would reach down a hand that looked too strong to write, and pat a dog's head. The Newfoundlands stayed right by his feet, shifting a paw every now and then to avoid the swivel chair. If I made my way across the room he would look up and grin, a soft wide smile motioning for me to come sit with him by the green glow. I was so excited to be leaving the loneliness of the dark I would run towards the desk tripping on the white plastic feet of my one-piece fuzzy pajamas. He would scoop me up easily, tuck my head beneath his chin and switch modes to reading a book. Pushing my cheek against the hairy skin that was exposed from the unbuttoned LL Bean red flannel shirt, I put my hands between our bodies, my small fingers twisting the hair on his chest below his heart. His body was never soft; there were ridges and ripples all over his chest and arms. Even when he sat the stern lines of muscle lay across his stomach. During the day light hours we would play and I would punch him as hard as I could only to hurt my hand. At night even though he was not soft he let me soothe him. We would sit together and mesh quietly. The only time I relaxed was when I felt him laugh. He would read a passage and rock me with him, tilting his head back and exclaiming "Goddamn kiddo that was brilliant," as if it were I who had made him laugh.

Nighttime at my mom's was bright and warm. I still feared sleep but I felt comfortable going towards it at her house. After dinner I would play in my dollhouse or with my orange crate of little figures. I had a red record player the size of a dinner plate that would scratchily churn out children's songs. It was one of many hand-me down toys that I used far more than the dozens of plush bears stacked in my farmhouse bedroom.
My mom usually sang along with the music and we would dance together, me clinging around her waist while she gracefully moved around the Chinese rug inherited from my grandmother. She ran me a bath and made tea at the same time so that after my bath there was a cup of chamomile tea with honey-bear honey on the brown stool by my futon. The bathroom at Irvine was my favorite space in the house, although the pantry was a close second. The bathroom was painted pastel pink and had an old-fashioned bathtub, the kind with feet. There was a radiator that burned your fingers if a hand went too close to the white painted metal. While I splashed in the bath my mom ran her toes along the rows of color in our rag rug. That was our best talking time. I would tell her about school, about a story I'd made up to pass my “lonely time,” and how much I missed her. She scrubbed my back with the blue ducky washcloth, and when I had to clamber out of the slippery tub she wrapped me head to toe in a fuzzy towel the color of the walls.

Maybe I knew her sadness and maybe I saw the deep pools of regret in her eyes. I could not change her life. I tried to make her understand that someday I would escape and then her life would change, but I was too young to know what it was I needed to escape. For now we had the bath time, we had fresh pesto in the summer, and we had shimmery lipstick that left traces of love on my forehead.
CHAPTER TWO

LIES

This is the Hour of Lead -

Remembered, if outlived,

As freezing persons, recollect the snow –
First – Chill – then stupor – then letting go –

Emily Dickinson # 341

My father’s anger was unpredictable. I walked on hot coals, not egg shells. The fear of his disruption did not startle me; instead it was a constant source of tears. I did not smile as a child; instead I watched everything very carefully. I watched how much noise my breathing made in the darkness, afraid that my dad would leave my bedroom if I woke him up. I watched how quickly I moved my eyes, knowing that if he perceived my anxiety it would make him erupt. I could not give the words of forgiveness he begged for. He would hold my hands roughly in his own, the soft pink of my flesh rubbed raw by the coarse movement of his hands over mine.

One night, late in the fall, when I was six years old, his anger had erupted without reason, and I slipped out the back door of the farmhouse and ran in the direction of the highway. I ran with stones cutting into my feet. The darkness confused me as I tried to head towards the trees in order to reach the road more quickly. I heard the screen door slam behind me and I strained my ears, trying to tell if someone was behind me. I heard only my feet moving through the dead leaves. The frost stung the scrapes on my feet from the gravel driveway. Next to my side I clutched Hans, my German doll complete
with lederhosen. I stopped by the road to catch my breath; I was still crying and my six-
year-old body could not keep up with my need to escape. Out of the silence a hand
grabbed the back of my neck, then I heard laughter and my body was turned to see my
dad. In the darkness I could barely make out his form towering over me, laughing,
squeezing my neck as he lifted me up off the ground. I did not laugh. His eyes were
piercing, more scared than mine, still he laughed. He dropped me and grabbed Hans out
of my clenched fists. Then I screamed a scream that shook my body and made sweat
break out all over my skin. Standing in the dark by the side of a country road my dad
laughed at me and stole my doll. He then turned around and left me alone, taking Hans
with him and saying over his shoulder, “Go ahead and walk to your mother’s. It will take
you about three days. The doll stays here.” I stopped screaming and started to cry again. I
begged him to just give me Hans back, but he was gone back into the house. I collapsed
in a pile of icy, rotting foliage.

The leaves had ceased to smell because of the early November frosts, so they
made a cold bed void of comfort for my body. I longed for the dark sheet of my mother’s
hair to cover me. I cried, angry with myself for being so scared. I cried because I wanted
my doll back. I loved Hans with his creamy vanilla-smelling arms and soft leather
lederhosen. My mom had just bought me Hans, and I had been afraid to bring him to my
dad’s because he always destroyed everything I loved.

When I became too cold for defiance, I made my way in the dark back to the
porch light. I tiptoed into the kitchen and saw my dad sitting at the table. Nothing had
happened. His eyes were calm again and Hans was nowhere in sight. He asked me if I
wanted to get toys tomorrow, if we should make baked apples, if I wanted to stay up all
night with him listening to Irish music. I felt insane. Shivering and dirty with bloodshot eyes I wondered if I looked normal to him. I looked past his smile and crept up to my room crying soft sobs to myself; I found Hans placed carefully with all the bears by my bed. My dad came up and gave me two tablets of sleeping medication. As a six-year-old I was too young for even the smallest dosage. The drug made me groggy and more confused until my tears dried as I slept, hiding Hans under my stomach.

Often when something happened he would give me two little yellow pills, or one big white pill which was Codeine. There was always Codeine around, I learned to recognize the bottle. The scariest part of life were the mind games, tricks and illusions that lead me to hysteria. He would make fun of me until I cried when I was hardly more than a baby, and then tell me he had said nothing, that I must have dreamt it.

When I was barely four years old, I remember standing by the wood-framed doorway without a door. We had no doors in the old farmhouse because my dad did not believe in privacy of any kind. Standing there in one of the many door-less doorways I watched his fury grow. Already at four years of age I was aware of his tidal wave of fiery emotion. I let my hands drop limp to my sides silent, waiting. I am sure we were late, and that I was worried about inconveniencing people on the other end of our agenda. I tried to conceal the fear I carried with me like a second skin. I held a small yellow plastic cup in hands dirty from my early morning adventures in the acres behind the olive colored farmhouse. My dad stood across the kitchen from me by the sink. His words were without substance for me. What I listened to was the inflection, the desperation in his bellowing voice. I watched his enormous body flex and the hand with the two paralyzed fingers grip the ceramic coffee mug. Late morning light poured in the un-blinded
windows, contrasting with the darkness between us. I had to move, my legs hurt from being so still. I shifted slightly towards the stairs. His body spun and the green fire met my eyes. I didn’t flinch as the mug shot towards my face. I didn’t blink. The mug hit the floor inches from my red clogs. The ceramic shattered and the burning brown liquid and shards of petrified earth covered my Pooh Bear corduroy overalls. I did not cry. Instead with all the might that I could muster, I threw my small yellow cup into the mess he had made.

To other people, the farmhouse seemed like respite with the cool kitchen tiles and mugs of iced, neon-colored sports drinks on the hottest July day. I would sit with my friends, Sarah and Lauren, and know I was safe for a little while. I relaxed into the humidity and noises of the country. It was rare that my friends stayed at the farm, but when they did my dad changed. Sarah and I listened to the wind whistle through the tall weeds where corn once grew. My dad treated my friends like the princesses they were. He allowed them to be little girls, or boys, or children. With my friends he acted as if I too were a child. When friends came home with me, he closed the books and put on a record of Disney music I did not know we owned. I would watch him quietly as a wife watches her husband, and I would silently thank him for pretending.

Sarah used to like having sleepovers at the farm because my dad bought Sarah her very own toothbrush. He knew how to make a child’s day. Sarah came over for the first time in first grade. She was a year older than me so I was only in kindergarten. She was scared to be without her mom. My dad brought home Kentucky Fried Chicken and a bright purple toothbrush in shiny plastic casing. Sarah’s eyes lit up as she took her toothbrush. I smiled as if to say, “See isn’t my dad cool,” mostly trying to convince
myself he was the person my friends saw. After our messy dinner Sarah and I went upstairs to create a theatrical performance with stuffed animals. The next morning we actually got to school early, and it would take years for Sarah to understand that that was amazing.

My friends’ dads stayed the same; my dad changed all the time. Sarah’s dad didn’t talk much and watched TV all the time. Lauren’s dad wore a suit to work and could make delicate crepes. Sheila’s dad was not allowed in the Guzman home even though her baby brother had his name. Some days he was a professional athlete, making obstacle courses from trees and ropes around the farm. Some days he was a doctor and would sit very still and smoke his pipe while people told them what they were scared of. Other days he was Vietnam vet and he would yell and throw things; those days he seemed very young. To my friends he was larger than life, a hero dad. At my house we would have huge cups of grape Gatorade and stay up late watching Miami Vice. Then we would fall asleep and wake up tucked tightly into flannel sheets surrounded by stuffed animals. Lauren told me, “Staying at your Dad’s is like going on vacation.”

How can this be the same father who woke me up in the middle of the night? How can this be the same man who laughed when he took my doll away from me? How can I explain that my dad was honestly a good father while being erratically abusive? It was difficult to understand how some days could feel like hell and others could feel like the perfect childhood. That was the paradox of my childhood. I had truly fantastic experiences, as well as truly horrifying experiences.

My dad was one of those people who would buy the whole bar a round of drinks, even though he did not drink. He would bring me to a toy store and tell me to pick out
whatever I wanted. I was always a bit sad that he did not like dolls, so I chose bears. I had three bears that were three times my size, the kind children point at in the windows of FAO Schwartz. The bears were lined up in a row against the wall of my farmhouse bedroom, as if to remind me I was a child. My dad loved to buy things, as if it were a way to connect to the rest of the world which he otherwise pushed away.

Running errands with my Dad was not like running errands with my mom or anyone else for that matter. The best errand was going Wzolet’s bakery on Grand Avenue in St. Paul. From the street the bakery looks like a small Swiss sweet shop, with decorated cakes and twist bread in the glass window. Usually I would try a new marzipan fruit. The almond paste was shaped in brightly colored shapes the size of a strawberry. While I took bites of my treat, my Dad would flirt with the women behind the counter and usually get free sourdough bread along with free coffee he never drank because he only liked Sumatra Blue Lintong. To get the Sumatra Blue Lintong we had to go to one of two coffee and tobacco stores in the Twin Cities. The one I remember the most vividly was in Victoria Crossing. We only did this errand once a month, and my Dad would get tobacco for his pipes and a couple bags of the rich dark brew. Against the back wall of the shop were stacks of coffee and tobacco up to the ceiling. On the front wall was an old blackboard displaying the coffee imports surrounded by mugs and glass jars of chocolate covered coffee beans. My Dad would talk to the coffee man for awhile. I usually went outside the shop doors and sat down by the potted palm tree. The tree was small and had many brown leaves.

Part of me always expected something bad to happen. I did not believe I could be with him and make it through the day without being teased or embarrassed. I would wait
impatiently trying to become invisible. I was not afraid of my dad, I was afraid of his actions. He never tried to hurt me physically; it was always emotional tearing. His body was mine. I did not fear his large sun-beat hands, or his hairy arms, those arms held me, and I understood that he loved me even when he hurt me.

After my Dad had purchased his coffee, he would grin at me and I would know his eyes were twinkling through his Oakley Sunglasses, as he said, “Ok, Kiddo, lets get a croissant.” Then we’d walk through the mall to the yuppie deli, passing the Guatemalan Sweater Shop and Garden of Eden Boutique. We never walked past a bookstore. I knew my way around every bookshop in the area. I hated them. Other kids did not have to spend sunny Saturday afternoons trapped between dim rows of books. Between my parents I practically grew up in the Hungry Mind Bookstore. Oddly enough I rarely sat down with a book and I never went to the kid’s sections. I ignored the brightly covered oversized books. If I found a book it would simply mean we would stay longer in the store. I memorized the names on the books my dad pulled out and put back. I noticed the ones he passed over, and the ones he paged through with delicate respect. Soon I would grow restless and pull on his arms, tug on the untied laces of his wallabies, and bury my head against his stomach, my head hidden beneath his shirt, the tip of my nose tracing the chiseled lines of his abdomen. I bit his stomach and rubbed my cheek against his thick black body hair. He always bought a book, and then we went to get the croissant. He loved apricot and ham and cheese. I usually got hot apple cider and picked at a croissant that he ended up eating. I always got the kind of croissants he liked.

The errand we did all the time that I hated was shopping for wilderness gear. We would not bring the dogs when we went to REI or Midwest Mountaineering, so I knew
we would be gone awhile. Those stores still remind me of boredom and excess. Even more than that, those stores represent being cheated out of a childhood, having a forced identity I hated. My dad looked like an ad for one of those places. His chest and arms pushed at the seams of extra large Patagonia T-shirts. He always chose purple, fuchsia, yellow, or orange shirts and cut the tags out so only the heavy cotton would be against his skin. The pants he chose were always some kind of airy Gore-Tex blend that were made for scaling rock ledges. Then there were the jackets, just as bright, and much more expensive. My Dad was prepared for anything but the reality of daily life in silk weave long underwear, polar fleece vests, crimson rain gear, and watches that could dive to the deepest depths of the Atlantic.

In the darkness of night, my father quietly sat in my room smoking his pipe, reading Gaelic poetry, physics textbooks, and Jung, and waking me up throughout the night to ask me what I was dreaming. He demanded to know if I liked my anima or if I had colors or blood in my dream world. Before kindergarten I was able to explain the unconscious mindbeing. I was forced to learn how to meditate, and one of my first books was Damian by Herman Hesse. The idea of normalcy was not only foreign; it was dismissed as an uneducated phenomenon by both my parents. My mother taught me to be an individual by loving my difference; my father taught me by hating that which was normal.

I found comfort in the gentle love of my mother and her organic homeopathic ways. The days I spent alone with her in a small city home was my healing time before I went back, three days later, to my father. I would paint wild red firebirds on my easel while my mother wrote.
With my father the reality of my life required being a shadow, watching his excess, and watching him choose the things I would learn to hate. He bought me a burnt orange mountain climbing T-shirt, and I decided firmly never to like the color burnt orange or go mountain climbing. At REI, I would find the smallest tent possible, the kind people shopping for tents ignore because they are too practical. I would hole up in the small display tent that was just right for me to disappear into and think about what I would wear when I grew up and he did not hate me for being a girl anymore. He said he wanted a girl, but he wanted a clone of himself that I could never be. Living in smaller versions of my father’s clothes allowed me to hide from his ridicule. I looked like a brightly colored box. Somehow I knew that I was scared of the way my dad treated women, so it would be easier to go along with him and look like a boy. I hated the Goretx jackets he bought me. I wanted to buy those frilly satiny nightgowns that Lizzy McMillan had. I wanted to have a pink dress made out of crinoline and lace. Whatever crinoline was, I knew I wanted it, and that it would never come in burnt orange Goretx.

I desperately wanted to be normal, a normal little girl, instead under the spell of my brilliant deranged father because of whom I warded off my sexuality as if it were a deadly disease. I had a crew cut, wore only red and brown clothing, and went by boy’s names from age four to age eleven. Colin publicly shunned lace but wanted desperately to take home one of Shelia Guzmans’s Barbie nightgowns. Julian threw a perfect spiral with a football, wanting to simply buy a cabbage patch doll. Mac publicly scoffed at strangers’ worries about such an odd child, and inwardly crumbled with humiliation. My existence was a shadow beneath my father’s manly presence. My mother related her child
to a bear cub in Artemis’ ancient pack of tomboy girls. To myself I was a lost daughter, an out-of-place child, misguided by parental love in the disguise of a tough poet child.

When I was with my mom, I accepted that her beauty was what I did not have. I looked like him. I had the dark hair and creamy skin, and I was strong. I could always lift more than my friends and carry bags of groceries as big as my body. My mom’s olive skin and long slim legs belonged to her and not to me. I would sit on her bed and watch her get ready to go out. I was usually going along, or going to a friend’s house. My mom very rarely made her own plans when she had me because she viewed her time with me as precious. So the times when I watched her were usually nothing special, just preparing for a dinner or for a day at the Children’s Museum with me, but she never threw on jeans like other people’s mothers. She had long soft skirts and rosy coral sweaters that fell carefully over her full chest and slender waist. She brushed her sheet of hair until it shone and applied a shimmery pink frost to her lips. For years she wore these short leather boots with fringes on the side and a scarf in her hair. We would leave our house in the red diesel. In the back seat I had a Northwest red blanket and a car shaped pillow made by my grandmother from Calico patches. I could fall asleep anywhere along our agenda.

Unlike my Dad, my mom never did her errands with me along. Our time was kid time. We visited my friend Lauren’s family for early lunches or went to an artist’s studio where I could paint or make bundle dolls. My mom talked to me, but for some reason I never said how much I hurt. It was as if I were in a protected daze when she had me. I could let go of my survival instincts with my mom. I always woke up after she did to a warm, softly lit house. She made me tea and oatmeal in the morning and asked me what I dreamt about. When I told her about the dogs, the wall, the blackness, and boys in my dream she
was silent. Her eyes seemed far away then as I continued to tell her about how glad I was
to wake up because I had been running for so long in my dream. She did not say what
was happening was wrong. She did not tell me I had to be too grown up for my six years.
She did listen to me. She did tell me that talking about what scared me was important. At
my Dad’s I often forgot my dreams.

In order to get to school on time when I was with my dad, I tried many tactics.
Getting up early to make him coffee was crucial. Even bringing him coffee I always had
to wake him up numerous times. Then I had to lie about what time I needed to arrive at
school. If my first grade homeroom started at eight I would say seven thirty and I would
be dressed and ready at seven, sitting in the truck waiting for him. Often he would not
come and I would perch anxiously watching the front door. By eight o’clock when he still
hadn’t come I knew he was not going to and I would slump back against the plush tan
seats and take out the lunch he’d bought the night before at an all-night grocery. Often it
was an entire package of something, like granola bars or pre-packaged muffins and a
half-gallon of OJ. I would unglue the serrated top to the granola bars and half heartedly
nibble on the bar, pretending not to watch the door in hope I could still get to school to
share my casel with Graham Munson.

On the days I did not make it to school, I would go back into the house, slamming
the truck door with all my might, and stomp into the kitchen. Realizing he was not awake
to hear my anger, I would resign myself to a king sized down comforter in the loft room
less than six feet from where my dad slept. There were plenty of books for me to page
through, but I got bored. My dad’s snoring was the only noise that disturbed the silent
house. I felt too lonely to go anywhere else. The sun shone in the stained glass windows
and made my body too hot. Being buried in the down made me sleepy and listless. Bored with looking through books, I’d pull my small canvas school bag up under my chin and rummage through my paintings and cloth bags of precious stones. I turned the small amethyst polished stone around in my palm. My birthstone was clear and cold. My first year in kindergarten I was four. Every year the Waldorf School came out with a new organically artistic emblem for our canvas bags. One of my two kindergarten bags was a red canvas with rabbits on the front. There were many small, standing, rabbits that had their arms stretched above their heads as if to say, “I am this big!” The bags were about the size of a high-school math book, or a Betty Crocker cookbook, and turned into farmer’s market produce bags when all us Waldorf School kids grew up. On those many days I missed school, the school bag would make me miss my friends. I traced the rabbits with my fingers and thought about my dance teacher, the gray haired German lady. I thought about how I wanted to take my nap on Jesse Blue’s sleeping bag, and how he would trade it with Luke instead if I was gone. I thought about story time, about coloring, and about the warm tomato soup we had in wooden bowls for our snacks.

When my dad woke up he would be oblivious of me and make his way downstairs for coffee. I would climb out from the folds of goose down and search around for my coat, shoes, and box of granola bars. I would hear the swoosh of him pouring the earlier pot of coffee down the drain. In the afternoon he always made his own brew because I did not care enough to do it for him. I was embarrassed to go to school so late anyway. I would hear the click of the coffeemaker, meaning the water was beginning to drip through the filter into the bare glass pot. I put a granola bar into the pocket of my coat and slipped my hands into the red knit mittens my mom had clipped onto my
sleeves. My hat looked like a polar bear head, complete with black and white triangle ears. The water started for my dad’s shower as I made my way downstairs. He was naked, as always, and finishing off his third cup. I continued out the back door towards the barn. He never said, “Sorry you missed school again” or even “Good-morning.” Those days it was if we simply co-existed. I was so lonely sometimes I wouldn’t make it to the barn. I would just sit down and start crying.

I was five years old and should have been absentmindedly frolicking with other children my age. Instead I climbed up the rickety wooden ladder on the side of the barn into the hayloft and entered the dimly lit space that was a bit warmer on the cold days of late fall than the rest of the outside world. The October air was sharp, so I sat about six feet back from the A-shaped opening. The window was where the hay was thrown to the ground below to feed our horses Gypsy and Nochie. The light was always vivid that time of year. The cold seemed to slice away at the landscape, making the trees and fields into cookie cutter shapes. I usually watched the day evolve from the window, the high piercing whiteness of noon, the yellow shimmer of four, and the foggy hues of pink that came just before the onslaught of black.

To pass the time I made up families and told stories out loud. The hayloft was transformed into a bustling pioneer farmstead. There were cows to milk, babies to feed, and sod houses to build. I would argue with my brothers about who got to help Pa plow the field. Ma would ask me to make food for the visiting relatives, so I’d set up a stone to grind the corn into a fine flour from which to make fry bread. My fry bread was airy yet filling; “Just right” Pa would exclaim later that night. After I helped Ma I would do jumping jacks with all the Anderson boys who were training to be sailors and sail to
Antarctica where they could get many, many pairs of fur hats and mittens. At this point the cold had most likely worked its way through my thin mittens, and my stomach inevitably began to growl. I’d stop my calisthenics and perch on the ledge of the A-frame window to have dinner. Cinnamon oats granola bars are actually quite filling, although they are not nearly as delicious as homemade fry bread. During my playing my hands had become chapped from the wind blowing through the large gaps in the roof of the barn, so I kept my mittens on as I extracted the oat bar from the green package. I opened the package all the way up and press the green side on the hay-matted floor creating a shiny square plate for my dinner. I broke the bar into four pieces arranging them in a line on the wrapper. Watching the sky I would swing my legs over the splintery ledge occasionally dropping a shoe ten feet down to the ground. Bits of red fuzz from my mittens stuck to my lips as I ate my lunch/dinner. I was imagining eating at a table filled with all the people I had created throughout the day. “Sam, please pass the sweet potatoes,” Pa would boom from the other side of the jostling table, his eyes twinkling at all his brood. Ma would look at me and exclaim lovingly, “Child, eat that wildflower salad you spent all day picking! You were so helpful at home this day!” And I, sucking on a dry cluster of oats, would reply into the still night air, “I loved helping you and Pa today, Ma, but tomorrow may I go to school?”

When it got dark I’d climb quickly down the wooden ladder and walk back towards the farmhouse. The big black Newfoundland dogs would come barreling toward me and startle me out of my imaginary world. Because they were so much bigger than me, I would end up in the gravel covered in slobber. By the time I made it back into the mudroom, I was annoyed and upset, my polar bear hat askew and my nose running. I was
upset because I was dirty and smelly from dogs that he took better care of than he did me. Upset because all my friends were at home in lovely smelling kitchens eating chicken enchiladas and talking about their day at kindergarten. Upset because I had to leave my pioneer family that had taken such good care of me all day long.

At my Mom’s house on Irvine I learned to be an artist instead of being lonely. When I came home from a friend’s house or back from kindergarten, she always had the art table set up. I would walk in the door and hug her as I tried to kick off my red rubber boots with the plastic handles. There would be a snack on my Webster’s definitions place-mat. We had four definition place mats that defined mushroom, fish, chicken, and black tea. I liked the chicken definition because it was red. On top of the linguistic definition I would find a bit of one of my favorites, usually plain yogurt with mashed up ripe banana. After my snack I would go to the wobbly blue table that was just my size and start gluing and pasting, cutting up egg cartons and lining up feathers and cracked robin eggs I’d collected from the yard. I always wanted coloring books, but that would have been too normal.

Both my parents told me I was special. I was told I was brilliant and unlike any other child. I cried at night trying to feel safe, trying to understand the pain in my heart. Some nights I would wake up and not be able to go back to sleep. When I was at my mom’s house, I would go and sleep in her bed or on the floor curled up by the post of her bed. When I was at my Dad’s house, he would come and sleep on my double futon. I often still did not sleep. He would be sprawled out half off the bed and I would inch up next to the window and press my hand against the cold glass. I knew the things that
should scare me, like the cold darkness, did not. What I feared was the unknown, the blackness in the unspoken.

I had a wooden box that I kept my markers and crayons in. I remember hiding behind the closet door in fading evening light and crying, clutching red and black markers. Before I could spell my name I would draw large black circles on my soft white body. I gently filled in the black circles with blood red. I would rock back in forth in the dark afraid and small, hoping the bruises I’d drawn would let the pain come out of me. He told me I was amazing and blessed. He told me I did not want to be normal, that normal people lead boring lives that end in lazy deaths. He told me never to accept the philosophies of the masses. I did not know what that meant, but I decided normalcy must be the road to my salvation. I wanted the mundane to come and save me. I longed for the common to lure me gently from the small dark closet with the slanting ceiling. As I pressed my hands together, making them feel separated by glass, I tried to comfort myself and establish the desire to live.

My coloring box was most likely an old coffee crate box. It was a rectangle the size of a cinder block that had a sliding top. When I was old enough, about five, I wrote my name in a fuchsia marker across the top of the box. My name started with a large D the width of the box and grew progressively smaller having to fit all the names. My dad read me parts of the legend of Deirdre when I was very young. “How fierce must be the anguish of the spirit when even its enemy the body grieves! Are sorrows greater than waking has ever known? Than Deirdre dead, or the crucifixion of the saviors,”(p5 A.E.). The image of killing myself after the death of a lover scared me. After Deirdre I wrote Aine, the name my father used as my middle name. Aine is pronounced Ah-n-ya, and is
the Irish form of Anne. Then I wrote my middle name, McCarrell, that would later become my last name. After McCarrell was my mother’s name Hall, and then a hyphen and Criqui. C-r-i-q-u-i. My dad would spell the name every time we went to the bank; it was like an odd song in my head when I tried to think of who I was.

The days of soft silence at my mother’s did not heal me completely. My mother was a person who knew why I cried because she cried for the same reasons. She was in too much pain to comprehend that her five-year-old daughter understood her. As I sat and watched her comb her hair, I knew she wanted him out of her body. As she raked the leaves, fiercely scratching the earth, I knew it was his skin she wanted to tear. As my mother slept I knew what she dreamt about. We had the same dreams. The dreams of him telling us how much we had hurt him and how selfish we were. Although our experiences were physically different, I did not feel that difference. To me she was in pain as was I.

My mother escaped from him but did not know he would treat me as he had treated her. She did not know he would love me with the same fierce passion. She did not know he would compare me to the most pristine object of adoration. She did not know he would cut me down to nothing. She did not know he would tell me lies until I would scream to make him stop. She could not understand that I would always love him. She did not know I would hit my own gentle head against the wall until I bled in order to stop the guilt I felt for not being what he wanted. She did not know he would love me the way he had loved her.
For we do not, after all, simply have experience; we are entrusted with it. We must do something—make something—with it. A story, we sense, is the only possible habitation for the burden of our witnessing. ~ Patricia Hampl

Conclusion

Considering the explosive popularity of memoir writing, I think it is necessary to explain why I chose memoir. I chose to write in the form of memoir because it was the only way I knew to tell my story. To write about my father in a fictional light would have allowed me to fill in the parts of my life I do not remember. To fictionalize his life would have allowed me to speculate on his actions rather than simply articulate those actions. To fill in those memories would further conceal the pain I am beginning to be able to vocalize. My desire to write about my father happened after he committed suicide. I had to find a way to tell people how he died. My desire to write about my childhood happened as part of the initial writing process. Writing about the reality of my love/hate relationship with my father could only be as blunt in this non-fictional form.

The books I chose as an accompaniment to my writing fit into three categories, each with very different narrative voices. The first, ‘how to’ books included narration on the actual process of writing memoir. The second type of reading, and the most extensive, were actual memoirs. The last type of reading focused solely on suicide.

The first, books about how to write memoir, specifically helped me balance truth and fiction. I know I have not achieved the balance between truth and fiction that I would have liked. I have been so determined to tell this story as it actually happened that I have ignored the fact that much of what is true to one person is fiction to another.
We all have those spaces, those smells, those songs that bring us back to a moment so profoundly, we feel lost and covered by the remembrance. Jim Grimsley’s writing taught me how to capture memory as part of a space. I thought about the spaces that I created, and the spaces my parents created. I thought about the difference between the homes they gave me and the places in those homes that became my own. I remember the piles and piles, of books that I made forts out of. Other children used Strawberry Shortcake sleeping bags and dining room chairs; I used graduate dissertations, books of Irish folklore, and Anais Nin. Grimsley made me recollect the feeling of lightly woven wool blankets covering my naked body, never quite feeling comfortable, and never quite feeling warm. Grimsley remembers houses like relatives and speaks of places like characters in a small town.

The second type of reading, and the most extensive, were actual memoirs. The memoirs that meant the most to me were those that spoke to the reader about how it felt to be an outsider. Julia Alvarez tried to change not only her accent, but also the past she came from. Paul Monette was afraid of society’s wrath, and hid his homosexuality every way he knew how. I did not have an accent, nor am I gay, but these authors spoke to me in a way other authors did not. They reached the child in me who still feels rejected. These authors reminded me of how alien I felt acting like a little boy as a child. They reminded me of how desperately I wanted to be a little girl. My goal was very mainstream, and yet as a six-year-old it seemed impossible.

Paul Monette speaks of cruelty and teasing. It was not on the playground that I was teased. It was not my classmates who were cruel. My father taunted me for wanting to be a little girl. He wanted me to be alienated from others so I would be further
connected to him. These memoirs made me think about social regulation, peer pressure and how mean people can be. It felt so much easier to be what my father accepted than fight. Paul Monette did not choose to be in the closet for as long as he was, rather he was terrified to not be hidden. I did not choose to wear the mask of a boy, rather, it was less painful than having my secret femininity ridiculed. These authors understand that, that which is ‘elsewhere’, a space beyond hegemonic discourse is deeply sacred and often easier to hide, than to embody.

An element of many of the memoirs that fascinated me was the topic of the physical body. The way the body is constructed, the way we accouter our bodies, and the way we present our bodies to the public sphere. In Memoirs of a Geisha I read about the age old rituals surrounding the sexuality of women. Geisha’s had white faces, heavy robes, and intricately detailed underclothes that hid their exploitation. This brought me to think about my own constructed femininity. I remembered the joy I felt wearing my first flared pink mini skirt, like the joy young male cross dresser might feel walking around in pumps in his mother’s closet. I thought about standing in the smoke as runner up for Prom queen, the banner, the rose, and the little boy I once was. I thought about learning to paint my nails in sixth grade at Jenny Holzer’s house and having to hide my hands in my baseball glove because my Dad humiliated me in front of all the neighborhood boys for being ‘girly’. I thought about how the ritual of putting on makeup is not that different in the Tokyo teahouses from dorm rooms in Central Minnesota.

Natalie Kusz had half her face bitten off by sled dogs in Alaska. Her face, her body, and her relationship to the unknown were mutilated. In her memoir Road Song I thought about how I wished my father had mutilated my face. As a child I used to beg...
him just to hit me, to hurt me, so people could see the pain I was in. On the flip side after reading Sue William Silverman’s book about childhood incest, I thought about how my father had managed to stay behind a very gray line of incestuous behavior. I thought about how disturbing Silverman’s book is because not only is it horrifying, it is erotic. This made me further ponder the sexualization of children, the soft boundary that surrounds a child body, a protective shield that is so often ignored and carelessly destroyed.

The connection I feel to Paul Monette’s words is what I had expected from Hesse’s Siddhartha, D.H. Laurence’s Women in Love, or the various works of Blake and Annie Dillard. Instead, I find myself open and exposed by a gay man’s memoirs of childhood. I loathed the mask I wore throughout childhood. Sexuality was a term I understood to be connected to my forced identity. If it were not for the deep-rooted love of my mother I would have given up. Trying to explain why I wore boy’s underwear, had a Marine gutting knife under my pillow, or why I always won ‘king of the mountain’ feels not only impossible, but painful to articulate.

What does it mean to say “I was a little boy”? Was I transgendered or gay? No, I was neither. Does it mean I was forced, each morning, to change from a dress into overalls? No, I was not forced to wear certain clothes. Rather, I learned how I was accepted. I learned that being ambiguous in my gender was more acceptable than being girly. Both my parents were part of an alternative, hippie movement of parenting that sought to value children as people not as gendered objects. Unfortunately my father’s commitment to my gender neutrality went deeper and caused damage my mother did not foresee. He wanted a girl initially, but soon realized he did not know how to treat a girl.
Women were sexualized objects. If he did not have sex with women he engaged in academic discourse. So my best bet, as I sadly perceived so early on, was to be a very academic little boy. Thus my male shield was born and I wore it as loathed protection from the destructive nature of my father.

Monette writes, “We are creatures of the cruelties we witness”(37). I knew how cruel people can be from birth. In that way I was never a child: I do not remember trusting anyone. My identity was constructed and false, always under the scrutiny of society. My father never directly sexually abused me, it was all an intellectual maze, in which I learned being a boy was safer than trying to emulate the woman he desired.

My connection to Paul Monnet’s childhood is much more than feeling equally singled out as a “queer child”. I understood I was not the child I was supposed to be and that my identity was hidden. My father never meant me to be a child.

In writing about my father, I was forced to think about ethical representation. Of her multi-ethnic world, Alvarez writes “It’s a world formed of contradictions, clashes, commingling – the gringa and the Dominican, and it is precisely that tension and richness that interests me. A duality that I hope in writing transcends itself and becomes a new consciousness, a new place on the map, a synthesizing way of looking at the world”(173). Representing my father in his true paradoxical self required painting an accurate picture of both a larger than life man who loved each day, and a boy afraid of the world who took his own life. No one else will tell his story. That places a burden of accurate portrayal upon my work as not only a writer, but as a daughter.

The last type of reading focused solely on suicide. Understanding why my father committed suicide requires understanding why anyone commits suicide. He always
wanted to be singular, amazing, and un-categorized. What I have learned from my reading about suicide is that he was not singular, the desire to commit suicide is not a new phenomenon, my father was not amazing in his death. James Hillman tries to take the mystery out of suicide, as well as the stigma. Hillman looks at it as a form of death, a way to die, rather than a way to be shamed. I realized the idea of treating my dad's death as unspeakable gave him the power he desired.

Reading about depression, anger, and loneliness gives me a view of my father as not mysterious and in control, but instead, as lost and afraid. This realization is painful but allows me to connect with other people who feel grief instead of claiming 'no one will understand, he was different'. Kay Redfield Jamison made me cry, and made me let go of a sense of responsibility. I still feel compelled to understand my father, to maintain his autonomy, and to respect his decision; none the less, it was cruel to leave me with the legacy of self-destruction.

Reading about suicide did not guide my actual writing as much as it gave birth to a new sense of self-preservation. It let me universalize his action enough to take it off my shoulders. Suicide is a darkness that is in the shadows of untreated depression. Suicide is a way out that is irreversible, a way to calm a chaotic mind, and unleash grief upon those you both love, and hate. I wish I did not have an interest in Suicide. I wish Jamison's book had left me confused instead of crying in understanding. I did not choose to have my father die after telling me I was the only person he loved. I did not choose to have him tell me he would keep living if I moved to California to be with him. And I did not choose to lose a man I truly did love, a man who regardless of all else, is inherently a part of who I am.
Kay Jamison’s book was the most influential concerning suicide. She writes;

“Those who are left behind in the wake of suicide are left to deal with the guilt and the anger, to sift the good memories from the bad, and try to understand an inexplicable act. Most of all, they are left to miss a parent or child whose life was threaded to theirs from its very beginning”(291). I could never be good enough for him. And even after his death I try to live up to all his dreams. Like the Judo lessons, his abuse would come suddenly, violently, and end with him helping me back up praising me for my strength.

As the survivor, my desire to understand suicide is inevitably a part of who I am. His life was intertwined with my own; he had no boundaries with me. Although I was never molested, I had no privacy, no security of knowing it was wrong to touch my body, and I never trusted him to not hurt me. His inability to treat me as a child was selfish, his suicide was not. Suicide is not selfish; rather, it is self-less. I did not write an account of my father’s suicide, but his death allowed me to speak of my childhood, and un-silence my stories.

This is only a piece of my story. There are many images that have not yet re-surfaced, or that come later in the timeline of my life. In later works, maybe I will be able to describe the smell of a morgue and the feeling of ash and bone against the bare skin of my face. In later works I might be able to explain why I still think of my father as a beautiful man, as a man lost and saddened by life, as a man whom I truly loved and hated in the same breath, and a man who now lives only in my representation.
Bibliography