Things I Thought I Knew:
An Exploration and Experimentation in Autobiography as Literature

by
Brittany Kay Sundberg

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Scholar)

Presented May 27, 2016
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Abstract approved: ________________________________________________________________

Thomas Bahde

Autobiography is usually categorized with essays and other technical writings, and rarely considered creative or artistic literature in the public eye. This project explores the elements of autobiography and two authors who break the barriers of conventional practices to create works that also function as creative and artistic literature. Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* serve as examples of such works, and this project examines the ways each author has strayed from traditional autobiography to create an artistic one – and the tools they each used to do so. The creative portion of this thesis is comprised of a draft of the author’s own autobiography with the goal of writing it as work of creative and artistic literature, using some of the same tools Angelou and O’Brien do. As an additional feature, this narrative includes present-day events in the form of journal entries, which are still being added to for a future project. The resulting piece combines elements of fictional craft to become an immersive experience for the reader and provide an accurate portrayal of the experience within the events rather than a reflective summary about them.

Key Words: autobiography, literature, art, Angelou, O’Brien

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

_____________________________________________________________________
Brittany Kay Sundberg, Author
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Exploration

Introduction

Storytelling is one of the oldest and most important forms of art that humans engage in. Even before written literature, oral traditions enriched cultures for thousands of years. Storytelling, in various forms, allows for connections between beings, within and across both generations and cultures. From myths to fables to songs, storytelling provides a window into another world, another culture, another person.

With the introduction of written literature, storytelling expanded and became more permanent than it had been in the era of oral tradition. Through evolution over the course of thousands of years, storytelling is now considered primarily entertainment, and the entertainment industry is one of the most well-known in the world.

Autobiography is one of the most recent developments in storytelling. Author Virginia Woolf writes that “not until the eighteenth century in England did that curiosity express itself in writing the lives of private people. Only in the nineteenth century was biography fully grown and hugely prolific” (Woolf 120). In the short time that the genre has developed, it has changed quite a lot.

What this project calls a “traditional” autobiography is written for a particular audience, reciting relevant events to serve as evidence for an agenda; for example, politicians write autobiographies to gain votes, actors’ autobiographies are often marketed to fans with a particular interest in their personal lives, scientists explain their discoveries and experiments to defend their methods and results, and entrepreneurs describe the factors that lead to their success. Many of these give insight to the subject
and often serve as an inspiration or guide to follow the same paths and reach the same successes. For this, autobiography is usually categorized alongside essays and technical writing. Rarely is an autobiography analyzed as a piece of creative literature.

The two works explored in this project are Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, specifically because they both break the barriers of traditional elements of autobiography. Both authors created works that double as artistic and creative literature that function similarly to fiction – a technique and product referred to as “artistic autobiography” in this exploration.

Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is the more traditional of the two. She recounts events of her childhood in chronological order from a first-person point of view. However, her poetic, narrative style and attention to detail cause some to categorize her work as literary fiction. While the events are true, some believe the thematic emphasis and particular attention to detail may be fictional embellishment.

Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* is autobiographical fiction, inspired by his experiences in war. He tells stories of his time during the Vietnam War as well as a few from his childhood and life before being drafted. He also jumps forward to comment on how his life is still affected by the war and the stories he tells about it. His work is autobiographical *fiction* because he states that many of the stories are false, claiming the fictional accounts portray a more accurate truth than his actual experiences.

This project examines both of these authors’ works as they function autobiographically – as a portrayal of the author’s life and experiences. The focus is on how these authors have strayed away from traditional autobiography, and how those differences have enabled them to create a unique and artistic product out of their
experiences. O’Brien could have written an autobiography with the facts he knew and the experiences he remembered, but he did not. He also could have written a novel and left himself out of the work entirely. Instead, he decided to merge the two and write autobiographical fiction. The tools of traditional autobiography were not enough to accomplish what he wanted, and that is where the interest lies: what his style has accomplished that traditional autobiography could not have.

Angelou also did not want to write an autobiography. Though hers is more traditional than O’Brien’s, a traditional autobiography would not have accomplished the goal she had for her book. She first resisted a friend’s suggestion to write about her life and responded with “Absolutely not” (Smith). Her editor, Robert Loomis was the one who convinced her, and did so with a challenge:

Mr. Loomis tried another ploy, phoning Ms. Angelou and saying, “‘It’s just as well, because to write an autobiography as literature is just about impossible,’ ” [Angelou] recounted. That did it. “I said, ‘I will try,’ ” Ms. Angelou remembered, in her majestically deep voice. (Smith)

Angelou’s autobiography became about more than just her own experience – her book combines poetic narrative with the truth of autobiography to appeal to any reader the way literary fiction does. She, like O’Brien, could have written a more traditional autobiography that did not feel like literary fiction. But she did not, and the effects of that choice have made her work both unique and quite successful.

For the purposes of this project, these books are considered as portrayals of the author’s lives, and fictional (or suspected fictional) elements are considered as tools to do so. The focus is primarily on the themes of authority, trust, truth, memory, and style, and how they differ in these works as compared to traditional autobiographies.
While Angelou and O’Brien are not the only authors who have approached their work in untraditional ways, they are two of a relatively small group. That could be, according to author Virginia Woolf, because “biography, compared with the arts of poetry and fiction, is a young art. Interest in ourselves and in other people’s selves is a late development of the human mind” (Woolf 120). Peter France and William St. Clair of Oxford University also agree that all forms of biography are on the rise:

[Biography] remains irresistibly attractive to all writers and readers alike… this must be partly because they are aware that this genre, more than criticism or theory, reaches out to a broad public, indeed that it is a form of literature in its own right, comparable (for better or worse) with the master-genre of modern times, the novel, and perhaps seen by the more naïve as possessing the added advantage of being ‘real.’ (France and St. Clair 3)

And for some, the “reality” of autobiography is an attraction and advantage over fiction—often at the cost of creativity and entertaining style.

Rhetorically, autobiography relies heavily on ethos. A traditional autobiography lies between the ethos and logos corners of the rhetorical triangle, and artistic autobiography falls closer to the middle, utilizing the pathos corner as much as possible without losing the utility of the other two. The traditional autobiographer seeks to portray a logical and clear image of themselves and certain events of their life as they pertain to their target audience or purpose. The artistic autobiographer seeks to tell a story that not only accurately depicts themselves and the events, but also portrays character development with elements of plot through the art of storytelling. The emphasis is shifted from the events and placed more heavily on the emotional and cognitive experiences – and recreation thereof within the reader. The work transforms from an informational lecture into an interactive experience of enlightenment.
The fiction-like framework of artistic autobiography, focused on character development, enables the reader to learn and gain perspective based on vicarious experiences. The plot and narrative take the reader along for the experience with the author rather than gathering the information about it from the author. Readers experience the confusion of growing up in the southern United States while young Maya Angelou does, and reimagine the conflicting war memories with the reflective veteran Tim O’Brien. The reader feels like a part of the process, like they have been given the opportunity to see the experience through the eyes of the author rather than being told what the view looks like. Reading narratives provides stronger senses of empathy, as the process of artistic and immersive storytelling naturally makes the reader fall effortlessly into the narrator’s shoes—which, according to James F. Veninga, is one of the purposes of biography, as described in his book *Biography: Self and Sacred Canopy*:

> A good biography can lead to a more thoughtful understanding of human life… [and] provides us with insight into how other people have given shape to their lives; our knowledge of human personality is deepened. (Veninga 59-60)

But in autobiography, readers often question the author’s credibility and wonder whether the author is telling the truth or telling a good story. The novelist is expected to invent reality and characters to portray any story imaginable. An autobiographer must maintain the truth, otherwise their credibility—and therefore their story—deteriorates. “The novelist is free; the biographer is tied,” says Woolf (Woolf 120).

In this, the autobiographer has a more difficult time. Reporting on the life of another for a biography requires research and provides sources, while self-reporting relies only on memory and style. And yet, both the biographer and autobiographer are expected to maintain the same kinds of credibility and truth within their works, and many authors
who experiment with style end up falling between the extremes of scrupulous reporting and fictional storytelling. Angelou created autobiography colored with fictional style, while O’Brien wrote fiction guided by autobiography. Both works are based in truth but framed artistically and creatively, and do so in ways that challenge the traditional themes of trust, authority, truth, memory, and style in autobiography.

**Trust & Authority**

Angelou does not explicitly state her authority or attempt to convince the reader of the authenticity of her book. Instead, she relies on the unstated agreement between author and reader that the content of the book is accurate and true. In fiction, this is called suspension of disbelief. Readers do not question the existence of dwarves and hobbits in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*; their existences must be accepted for the purpose of the story. The same can be said for effective autobiography. Much like suspension of disbelief, the reader, if he or she wishes to glean as much as possible from the work, must not question the narrative and allow the story to function as intended. Angelou relies on that and focuses on crafting her narrative artistically and poetically without trying to convince her readers of her authority or authenticity.

The only hint of that comes in the prologue, which takes place in church when she forgets part of a poem that she was supposed to recite:

I hadn’t so much forgot as I couldn’t bring myself to remember. Other things were more important… Whether I could remember the rest of the poem or not was immaterial. The truth of the statement was like a wadded-up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and the air would cool my palms. (Angelou 1)
Angelou’s choice to begin her prologue this way could be a deliberate statement to her reader: the experiences she could not remember do not matter. Whether the reader questions her story or not does not matter because the bigger picture is more important. Questioning her credibility means missing the message that “growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, [and] being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat” (4). Readers who get caught on evidence of truth lose sight of the point she makes. This prologue is her only version of a statement of authority, effectively saying she does not care whether readers question her authority or not—what we see is what we get.

By presenting her story with confidence, Angelou leaves readers no choice but to accept that this is the story. To reap the benefits of the narrative, readers must accept all aspects of it, much like a work of fiction.

O’Brien, on the other hand, explicitly addresses the issue of authority in *The Things They Carried*, and makes it much harder for the reader to decide whether to trust him. At several points he tells the reader what a “true” or “real” war story is. He attempts to prove his authority by telling readers that he knows what makes a war story true and what makes one false. In just pages 65 through 81, he makes a “A true war story…” statement six times, which all address a different aspect of war stories and instruct the reader on how to interpret them. A “true war story” is “never moral” (O’Brien 65), is one in which “it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen” (68), “cannot be believed” and is “just beyond telling” (68), “never seems to end” (72), “makes the stomach believe” (74), “does not depend on [the grounding reality] kind of truth” (80), and “is never about war” (81).
Telling readers what constitutes a true war story in the middle of his own (which he crafts with those same elements), is O’Brien’s attempt to convince readers to believe him. He does this so often that it even gives readers a sense of his desperation—of how badly he wants this story to be believed because he can’t stop himself from continuously repeating it. Through this metafiction, the story presents itself as a story, and the reader becomes aware that the narrative is being carefully crafted on each page. O’Brien describes Rat Kiley telling a story in which he continuously interrupts his own narrative to comment on the memory. Eventually, another character named Sanders gets tired of the interruptions and explains how he believes stories should be told:

[A]ll that matters is the raw material, the stuff itself, and you can’t clutter it up with your own half-baked commentary. That just breaks the spell. It destroys the magic. What you have to do… is trust your own story. Get the hell out of the way and let it tell itself. (101)

O’Brien’s approach is the exact opposite of what Sanders expresses. Not only does he fill the book with his own commentary, he openly admits to crafting and manipulating both the story and the reader. He explains that he tells the story of Curt Lemon’s death sometimes, and often women approach him and tell him they enjoyed it, but that he should find new stories to tell. He gets upset at these comments, claiming that the woman did not listen, and he confesses to the reader:

All you can do is tell [the story] one more time… making up a few things to get to the real truth. No Mitchell Sanders, you tell her. No Lemon, no Rat Kiley. No trail junction. No baby buffalo. No vines or moss or white blossoms. Beginning to end, you tell her, it’s all made up. Every goddamn detail—the mountains and the river and especially that poor dumb baby buffalo. None of it happened. None of it. (81)

O’Brien constantly asserts his authority by telling the reader what a true war story is, setting up his own as a parallel. But only a third of the way through the book, he admits
that much, if not most, of his book is invented. He actually dedicates an entire chapter to his confession, titled “Good Form,” where he attempts to correct the story about the boy he killed on a trail near the village of My Khe. He admits that “almost everything” is invented, and goes on to explain the truth of the story as the following: “Twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough” (171). He explains the burden of responsibility he felt by being present, and convinces the reader that the previous version of the story (in which he was the one who killed the man) came from that burden. But, true to his confusing and self-incriminating fashion, he states “But listen. Even that story is made up” (171). Though he admittedly lies to his reader, he also holds the power in the exchange by continually telling stories and then admitting their falseness. But he does it with such charm and finesse that he uses it as a tool to accurately portray the experience of trying to understand war. As a traditional autobiographer, this damages his credibility; as an artistic one, he influences the reader’s perceptions and claims absolute control over how the book is read.

**Truth & Memory**

Heavy reliance on memory (and the natural instability of memory) is one of the most substantial critiques of autobiography. In Angelou’s case, for example, it is easy to wonder whether she could remember so much detail about her early childhood, and some readers assume that how she presents these scenes are not exactly the way they happened. The way she writes her narrative makes it feel like a seamless journey through her childhood, but when the events are listed (see Appendix A), there are only thirty one
specific events in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The rest of the book is background information that fills the gaps between those specific events. Angelou uses that space to build characters, define and describe settings, and provide a framework for the life in which these events take place. She describes what life was like in Stamps, St. Louis, and California: everything from weather and food to rules she had to follow over the span of several years. That kind of information, along with characterization, does not require specific memories and details. Actions or people that have been present in a life for several years make a lasting imprint on memory that does not depend on specific details.

The majority of any childhood is remembered like this. A select group of events and specific details are remembered, and the rest is the background information that we pick up without noticing. I do not have to recall every moment I spent in the house I grew up in to describe the floor plan, or remember every Christmas to explain that we opened the gifts from Santa on the morning of the 25th. That information is just there after those experiences and surroundings are repeated so many times during a period of several years.

In *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien muses: “What sticks to memory, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end” (34). I remember, for example, that I used to sneak into my brother’s room to keep playing after my parents tucked us in at night. I remember that our black cat used to sleep on his back. I remember that we used to play hide and seek outside after the sun went down in the summer. I cannot recall a *specific* day or time when we did these things, but they happened.

Part of the instability of memory is that those “fragments,” sometimes fill in gaps and memories with details that we do not actively make note of. And those details can
also change without us noticing. Every time we think of a memory, that scene that plays in our heads gets completely reconstructed, because the cognitive processes of perceptions and remembrance are constructions, not copies:

Reconstructive memory refers to the idea that remembering the past requires an attempt to reconstruct the events experienced previously. These efforts are based partly on traces of past events, but also on our general knowledge, our expectations, and our assumptions about what must have happened. As such, recollections may be filled with errors when our assumptions and interferences, rather than traces of the original events, determine them… Contrary to popular belief, memory does not work like a video recorder, faithfully capturing the past to be played back unerringly at a later time. Rather, even when our memories are accurate, we have reconstructed events from the past. (Roediger III & DeSoto 50)

While the errors can range from minimal to extreme, the concept is important to note because those reconstructions are just as impactful as the event itself. Current perceptions and assumptions color the way we remember events, and the memory has a more lasting effect than the original event. The way we remember the past guides and shapes our reactions and cognitive functions in the present and future. O’Brien recognizes this in his narrative:

As I write these things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening. Kiowa yells at me. Curt Lemon steps from the shade into bright sunlight… and then he soars into a tree. The bad stuff never stops happening; it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over. (O’Brien 31)

The remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future… Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story. (36)

O’Brien recognizes that the moment the event is finished, the reconstruction of the memory takes over and last forever, even if it constantly evolves. Each time that memory is reconstructed, the story becomes more prominent and eventually, when the solid, real
images are lost, the story replaces them entirely. Those memories and “rehappenings,” as O’Brien calls them, shape us into our current selves, beginning the very second after the actual event.

Memory can also cause blatant discrepancies when multiple people are involved, because truth is relative. Human experiences are formed by perceptions, and because humans are unique in that respect, so are the processes of observation and reaction.

People notice different things - just ask any police officer taking witness statements. My mom, after going through some police training sessions, decided to try an experiment with me and my brother when we were children. After my father left for work, she waited a while and asked us, “If your father went missing today and the police asked you what clothes he was wearing, what would you say?” I said jeans, my brother said khakis. I was relatively sure his shirt was yellow, but my brother thought it was blue.

The philosopher Nietzsche also addresses this idea in his essay “On Truth and Lying,” where he describes truth as a “mobile army of metaphors” and “illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions” (Nietzsche 263). In the essay, he discusses the urge to quest for an absolute, and points out the nature of perspectives:

Already it costs him some trouble to admit to himself that the insect and the bird perceive a world different from his own, and that the question, which of the two world-perceptions is more accurate, is quite a senseless one, since to decide this question it would be necessary to apply the standard of right perception, i.e. to apply a standard which does not exist. (264-265)

Those discrepancies in perception, however, do not make either observer any less honest, or either experience any less true for the individual. When children believe in Santa, he is just as real to them as he is fake to adults. The technical reality of my mom’s experiment
is that my dad was wearing a shirt of one particular color, but the way my brother and I each remembered him walking through the house that morning were valid for each of us.

Truth, then, is largely based on interpretation and experience. The sky is blue: “a truth” that most agree upon. And yet, for people who are colorblind, the sky is grey. For people who are blind, the sky has no color at all. The truths of the world, the truths of our lives, and the events that take place in them, are extremely relative due to the differences in our perceptions.

Memory is also affected by the different types of experiences we encounter: conscious and habitual. Conscious experience, also referred to as “mindfulness,” is a conscious effort to remain aware of surroundings and goings-on. Habitual experiences and perceptions are those which become automatic enough that they are no longer worth remembering. Viktor Shklovsky, one of the first thinkers of Formalism in the early twentieth century, compares the characteristics of thought to algebra, assigning either numbers or letters to experiences, and uses an example from Tolstoy to illustrate:

> Either objects are assigned only one proper feature – a number, for example – or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition: [from Tolstoy] “I was cleaning and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn’t remember whether or not I had dusted it… Since these movements are habitual and unconscious I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember.” (Shklovsky 15-16)

In the example from Tolstoy, habitual movements like cleaning “function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition” (16), while more unique and mindful actions would function as a specific feature, like a defined number in an equation.

Because individuals perceive events and surroundings with unique sets of assumptions
and expectations, the experiences that end up being either conscious or habitual will be different for everyone.

For example, there are memories in my own childhood that the rest of my family does not remember, because what for one person is memorable and noteworthy may be habitual and banal for another. No one else remembers when I was scolded for saying "Geez," because they all thought I had said "Jesus," which is a common expression to be scolded for using. I remembered that moment because it was a time of immense confusion and embarrassment. Later, my realization of their perceptions anchored that memory even more solidly. For the rest of the family, however, it was just another day with nothing particularly out of the ordinary that got lost in the unreachable chasms of their brains.

There is also an important distinction between what happened and seemed to happen, when it comes to telling the story. When I was in the motorcycle accident with my grandfather, he was not actually dead in that gravel driveway, but to me it seemed that he was. At the time, that was the truth of my experience because it was what I believed. Those minutes were no less true for the eight-year-old me than the unconsciousness was for him. O’Brien expresses this idea in one of his statements on true war stories:

[I]t’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed… The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. (O’Brien 68)

In fiction, this is called a point-of-view. When we follow one character through a scene, we get their limited perspective on the world and their experiences. Much like the eight-
year-old me, if a character thinks her grandfather is dead, the narrative continues as if he is until proven otherwise. The same thing happens in reality. We continue as if our understanding is the truth, because to us it seems like the truth.

To portray the truth in each of their narratives, Angelou and O’Brien have very different tactics. Angelou relies mostly on her inherent credibility as the author, while O’Brien addresses it explicitly and directly several times. In fact, he devotes an entire chapter to it, titled “Good Form,” from which comes the following excerpt:

It’s time to be blunt. I’m forty-three years old, true, and I’m a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through the Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented. But it’s not a game. It’s a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I’m thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough… But listen. Even that story is made up. I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth. (171)

Even in supposedly honest confession, O’Brien invents another false version of the story he has already told, and admits to deliberately manipulating the reader to portray what it was actually like to be in the confusing experience of war. The “happening-truth” is the real-world event that took place, and the “story-truth” is the version he invents to portray what it felt like to be there. As a traditional autobiography, O’Brien’s distortion of his own credibility would have destroyed any success this book may have had: it is impossible to tell which events come from memory and which have been completely invented. However, because he intentionally made this book autobiographical fiction, he does that on purpose and uses it as a tool to his advantage. He blurs the line between fiction and reality to make the story as unreliable for the reader as war had been for him – something he could not have done with a traditional autobiography.
Style

Both Angelou and O’Brien use their individual experiences to express universal ideas that appeal to a wide audience. Angelou sets up the beginning of her book with a prologue that demonstrates the essence of her narrative: “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult” (Angelou 4). Angelou’s narrative portrays a “coming of age” narrative that nearly any reader can relate to. Her individual experience is also particularly relatable for many young black girls growing up in a white-dominated American society.

O’Brien tries to paint a picture of the “true war story” with the memories and stories of his own experiences (though many may be invented). His stories within The Things They Carried appeal to larger themes of war, fear, death, love, and beauty.

This idea of appealing to a universal audience is not a new one. A contributor to New Critical Theory, W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. believes this is the purpose of all literature – “The business of the poet is not to number the streaks of the tulip; it is to give us not the individual, but the species” (Wimsatt 41). He also quotes Aristotle’s words to summarize that “poetry imitates action and… tends to express the universal” (41). Art, and specifically biography, accomplishes this through particular and individual accounts that can represent a shared experience. Veninga also expressed this idea in his work, claiming that “the average reader of true biography evidences a curiosity about the nature and meaning of human life as well as a special interest in particular lives” (Veninga 59). The main goal of most autobiography, it seems, is to reveal a universal truth through the unique perspective-truth of the individual.
Angelou and O’Brien approach this in different ways. Angelou’s highly poetic prose enlivens the narrative, and she approaches the retelling of her childhood memories in a way that lets the reader experience the narrative by going with her. The perspective is a combination of young Maya’s point of view with a select few comments by the adult, reflective Angelou. She saves this commentary for select moments, however, and rarely breaks the illusion of young Maya’s untainted perspective. When she does, the break is subtle and almost unnoticeable:

An older couple lived with us for a year or so. They owned a restaurant and had no personality to enchant or interest a teenager, except that the husband was called Uncle Jim, and the wife Aunt Boy. I never figured that out. (Angelou 219)

The last sentence is adult Angelou’s comment, not young Maya’s, through whose eyes we have been looking thus far. Only from an older perspective can she claim that she “never” figured it out. If those words had come from the child in the situation, she may have said something like “I didn’t figure that out.” Using the word “never” implies that the narrator knows that she will not figure it out even in the future, so this perspective has to come from Angelou later in life, who knows that she never ended up “figuring that out.” She refrains from doing this often, and lets young Maya be the point of view through which the vast majority of this narrative is told.

Chapter 35, for example, is entirely through the eyes of young Maya. At the time, she does not understand lesbianism or her own maturing body. Rather than writing from her current understanding to explain how she misunderstood her puberty and maturation as lesbianism, she writes the narrative from her confused and ill-informed point of view at the time.
O’Brien, however, does the exact opposite. His narrative does not come through the perspective of the teenaged foot soldier in Vietnam. Instead, he reminds us several times that he is “forty-three years old, and a writer now” (O’Brien 31). His assertions about what constitutes a true war story also interrupt the flow of the narrative, because the teenaged O’Brien before and at the beginning of the war does not have that knowledge yet. Even the sections about his time before the war are told as later recollections:

I saw faces from my distant past and my distant future. My wife was there. My unborn daughter waved at me… there was a young slim man I would one day kill with a hand grenade along a red clay trail outside the village of My Khe. (56)

While deciding whether or not to flee to Canada to avoid the draft, O’Brien has not even met these people yet, so he would not be able to hallucinate them because there is nothing about them in his memory to be reconstructed. The older, forty-three-year-old O’Brien, however, reimagines this moment with updated knowledge superimposed.

_The Things They Carried_ is decidedly interrupted, choppy, jarring, and highly unstructured. O’Brien skips forward and back to different times during his life that reference each other quite often, even if they should not be able to. He also uses repetition very heavily, often to serve as connectors between jarringly different experiences. In addition to repeating phrases like “I’m forty-three years old and a writer now,” he also repeats references to events multiple times. He mentions the man he supposedly killed on a trail, Ted Lavender’s death in the field, and Curt Lemon being thrown into a tree by an explosive several times at various points throughout the book, and it creates a both a sense of confusion because they are not in chronological order as well as a sense of wholeness because the scenes are reinforced so many times. However,
each time he repeats one of these stories, he tells a different version – the most explicit example that has been used in earlier sections is the grenade on the trail near the village of My Khe (118-124 and 171).

O’Brien uses this repetition to reflect the nature of the war he writes about. The structural choices immerse the reader into a narrative that is chaotic, jarring, and confusing in ways similar to his experience in war, about which he says, “The angles of vision are skewed… The pictures get jumbled up; you tend to miss a lot” (68). He uses the structure of his book to reflect that characteristic of war. The gaps in time, repetition, and various versions of events get his readers caught in a tailspin of doubt and confusion—which is very similar to the experience of war he tries to portray for his readers.

Both Angelou and O’Brien use form and style to craft their autobiographies as stories that can also be appreciated artistically by a wider array of audiences than a traditional autobiography. Through the use of fictional elements like plot, character development, point of view, and unreliable narrators, these authors have written their autobiographies as narratives that inform, entertain, and enlighten readers through an immersive experience.
Reflection: In My Own Words

Intent & Purpose

I have multiple goals for The Things I Thought I Knew. The idea of writing a book about my experiences came to me during my mom’s treatment for cancer in 2014. My family had been so blindsided by that experience that it really made us reflect on the things we thought we knew, and specifically the way we had misunderstood cancer.

Society portrays cancer as a rare occurrence that most people will never have to deal with. We had lived with the “Oh, it won’t happen to us” mentality, and we were extremely unprepared for the events and the emotional turmoil to come.

Over the course of that year and a half of treatment, we learned that cancer is not rare. At all. When I told people about my mother’s diagnosis, I cannot recall even one person who didn’t tell me about their mother, aunt, grandmother, sister, cousin, friend, or any number of people they knew who has or had cancer. And some of these people were people I had known for several years—but I had never known about their encounters with cancer. Soon I began to realize that as a society, we don’t talk about it. It’s a really hard thing to talk about, so we often comfort ourselves with the idea that “it’s rare,” and we stay quiet.

But my mom decided to talk about it. She decided to share her experiences as a way to turn them into something more meaningful—to spread awareness of what cancer really is, and what it feels like to have it. So she went to Facebook and she wrote posts every month to update our family and friends about what she was going through. She named these postings her “Fight Like a Girl” campaign.
During the course of her treatment from 2013 to 2015, she updated her “Fight Like a Girl” postings regularly, and the responses she received surprised her. People told her that she inspired them. She looked sick—really sick, sometimes—but she always had such a positive attitude that some people thought she didn’t have any side effects from the chemotherapy, when in fact she had every known side effect and even some new ones. When she decided to be honest, and brutally so, in her Facebook posts, her friends began to understand her resilience and were inspired by her strength.

Many people thanked her for doing it. They had sisters, aunts, grandmothers, and various other people in their lives who had gone through treatment before, but they hadn’t told them what it was like. They too had kept their chins up and endured the experience, but had never talked about what they were going through. And what my mom was sharing about her own experience gave them an idea of what their own loved ones had gone through, and they said it was the first time they were able to begin understanding what it had been like for them.

The statistics and the experience of having cancer (or knowing someone who does) are both horribly misunderstood. So my mom and I both want to talk about it. We want to share this experience, from both her perspective and from mine, so that others can understand.

In addition to that, I also want to share what it’s like to struggle with anxiety and depression. The societal stigma around mental illness makes it really hard to talk about, let alone ask for help. Growing up in a world that’s both expanding rapidly and falling apart at the same time is difficult, and it’s becoming increasingly difficult to find a place in it.
What I want to tell other people, and what I wish someone had told me when I was a teen, is that it’s okay to feel lost. It’s okay to not know what you’re doing. And when my mother was diagnosed with cancer, depression and anxiety held a strong grip on me (and still do, if I’m honest), yet it felt wrong to admit it. It felt wrong to be falling apart, and I felt like I couldn’t ask for help. And through this narrative, I want to tell others that it’s okay to struggle. It’s okay to not be okay. And most importantly, it’s okay to ask for help.

I was in the middle of this project when my mother was diagnosed again in February 2016, but this time with stage 4, terminal cancer. I struggled significantly with processing that, and even considered discontinuing this project. But with time, I realized that I actually have an opportunity to make this narrative even more unique. Because one of my goals is to accurately portray anxiety and depression, I decided not to end the narrative after my mom’s treatment in 2015.

Instead, this story doesn’t have an ending yet. I decided to start writing my current experiences in the style of journal entries to include after what we had thought was the end of our story with cancer. Most autobiographies are written in a reflective period, usually several years after the author has processed the thoughts and emotions of the events he or she writes about. While that can add a more mature perspective to the story, it also puts the confusing, infuriating, terrifying, devastating experiences in a neat and tidy package that doesn’t portray what it actually felt like to be dealing with those experiences at the time. By continuing my writing during this time, I hope to give my narrative a more raw and genuine feel – a more accurate portrayal of these struggles and experiences than if I wait several years to write about this.
Style

For the style of my own narrative, I aim to fall somewhere between Angelou’s and O’Brien’s styles. I have always been fascinated with the way fiction functions and how a reader can become so immersed in the book that for a while they almost forget they’re not a part of it. My stylistic goal for this experiment is to create a narrative that allows the reader to fully immerse themselves within the experiences I show—with the younger version of myself presented in the text, much like Angelou does with her narrative. I want the “characters” and experiences to come alive on the page and in the reader’s mind.

The structure, however, is somewhat similar to O’Brien’s tactic – but only partially. In the earlier parts of the narrative, the style is closer to Angelou’s smoother, chronological order of events and background information. After my mom’s second diagnosis of cancer, however, the journal-entry style interrupts the tidy narrative to reflect the abrupt and staggering nature of the actual experience – an ongoing process about which I’m still writing journal entries on a regular basis.

However, I have not strayed from traditional autobiography to the same extent that O’Brien has. I have not invented content or stories to include in this narrative to portray a particular meaning, and I do not intend to. My goal is to tell the “happening-truth,” as O’Brien calls it, but tell it artistically enough to feel like a “story-truth.” I have not invented scenarios or characters or details. Everything within those pages is how I remember it. This book is not fiction, but I want it to read like fiction. I want to write my story as “creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders” so that “some scene remains bright, some figure lives on in the depths of the mind, and causes us…” to
start to feel a recognition, as if we remembered something that we had known before” (Woolf 126). Using creative styles usually reserved for fiction, like Angelou and O’Brien do, allows me to write a narrative that readers can experience, rather than just absorb.

**Issues**

One of the main issues I’ve had with this narrative is deciding how to structure the sections. These sections of narrative have many years and events between them that are not on the page, so it would not flow seamlessly as one whole section. Though some of the sections ended up being very short, I separated the narrative based on events, timeline, and theme.

The last section can only be called journal entries by form. I write them regularly to record current events and reactions, but it would be inaccurate to call them that. Journal entries are written for personal purposes, and not meant for an audience. These, however, are being written with the knowledge that they’re for readers’ eyes. That changes the way I write them because I have to include background information that I wouldn’t have included in a journal entry for my own personal use. But that form is the best choice because I want to present the information the same way I’m recording it, which is closest to journal entries.

**Future**

This project is the beginning of what I hope to eventually turn into something even bigger. I intend to continue adding to this narrative—both current experiences to
document the on-going events and those from my past to fill in the gaps between the sections.

I also hope to expand this narrative and make this book become more than just autobiography. I want to write about my mother’s perspective and weave her story in with mine, along with a few from other people in my family. Because one of my main goals with this project is to accurately portray the experiences in my life, I do not want to limit that to only my own perspective. My life is a convergence of many different people, believes, perspectives, and experiences, and I want to weave together all of those components.
Experimentation

Things I Thought I Knew

Brittany Kay Sundberg
For as long as I could remember, my dad had horrible eyesight. He wore gigantic glasses that were so thick and heavy, the little clear knobs left marks on his nose. He had more than one pair, and if I found one lying around I would carefully unfold the sides and slide the prongs over my ears. They pressed against dad's temples and made a dent, but on me they were too wide, and they rested against the tops of my ears. The lenses were so large they went from the middle of my forehead down to the bottom of my cheekbones, but it felt like my entire face was behind the glass. I opened my eyes to a blurry view of an already confusing world, and I wondered if this was what my dad saw when he didn't use his glasses.

He was almost legally blind because of his severe astigmatism, and he described his vision like looking through shattered glass. All the pieces were there, but they were askew, and the images behind the glass didn't line up. The glasses somehow fixed that for him, though I never understood how, since all they did in front of my eyes was turn the world into a blurry mush.

Even though it hurt my eyes to do that for very long, I did it as often as I could. I wanted to know what the world looked like from his perspective; I wanted to understand the way he sees things, the way he experiences things. What I didn’t know at the time was that trying to look through his eyes helped me learn to look through others’ as I grew older. I read stories to step into someone else’s shoes, and eventually began to write them too.
When my older brother and I were children, my dad would defy gravity. He was magical, and when I wanted to walk on the ceiling like Spiderman, all I had to do was ask. My dad used to pick me up, turn me upside down, and hold me up high enough so that my feet were touching the ceiling, and he'd hold me up there while I walked. We defied the rules of nature, and my dad was powerful enough to turn off gravity while I played on the ceiling. It became a game for us, like an obstacle course - avoiding the doorframes and light fixtures while navigating through the house.

In the beginning, I didn’t realize that it was because of my father's arms, not magic, that I was able to stay up there. Eventually, after I either figured it out or he explained it to me (I’m really not sure which), the walking on the ceiling became a more personal connection with my father. I knew it wasn’t magic, but I still played like it was, and when I knew it was his strength holding me up, it became a game of stamina. Could I hold off the blood-rushed dizziness and headache long enough for his arms to get tired? How long would it take before he got tired, and if I giggled enough and jumped the obstacles well enough, could I convince him to do just one more lap?

Knowing how exhausting that must have been for him, I grew to appreciate my father's willingness to play. He did that for both my brother and I for as long as he could possibly pick us up, which meant he continued with me longer than with my brother because he grew bigger sooner than I did. There were several times when I remember him being exhausted with heavy breaths, but still hoisting me up there with smiles when I begged, "Just one more time!"
When I turned four, we had a birthday party at Dairy Queen. All our family friends and my closer friends from school, soccer, and t-ball came to join us, and we took up a good portion of the restaurant. A whole line of tables, just for us. My mom went down the line to ask us what we all wanted, because she didn't want so many children trying to shuffle around the register at the same time. Everyone wanted a cheeseburger with French fries, and when she came to me, she asked me, "What does the birthday girl want to eat?"

"I want chicken nuggets," I told her.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "All the other kids are having hamburgers, and that's usually what you like to get. Are you sure you want something different?"

"Yes, mom," I said, even more determined now. "I want chicken nuggets this time."

"Alright then," she said, "but if that's what you're going to order, you have to eat them. If you decide you don't like them, there won't be more dinner at home after this."

I ate every piece.

I don't even know how long we talked and played in that restaurant before we got to the ice cream cake at the end. The moment we were all waiting for finally came, and my mom started cutting the birthday cake. She cut the big rectangle into small squares, and handed the first one to me. "You get the first one," she said, "but don't eat it yet until everyone has theirs too."

I looked at that piece in front of me and wanted to dig in. It was my birthday, so why couldn't I dig into my cake when I wanted? But I knew the polite thing to do would
be to wait for everyone, and it would be rude of me to ignore what my mother had told me, so I waited.

I didn't eat the cake, but when she was looking down, trying to slide the knife under the piece she had just cut, I slid my finger over the frosting and quickly ate it before she looked up. I giggled to myself for not being caught, but of course it only made the temptation even worse. So I looked up at my mother and held my hands in front of me so I couldn't see my cake on the plate. I studied her face. I studied the way her cheeks condensed when she smiled, and I watched her long blond hair while it kept falling in front of her shoulders when she leaned forward, and she kept brushing it back between cutting slices of the cake.

Days later, I got sick, and my parents thought I had the flu. After four or five days, though, it became apparent that this was more serious than just the flu. I didn't eat for days, and my ribs showed through my shirt. The doctor suspected that the chicken at the birthday party wasn’t thoroughly cooked and that I probably had salmonella. I didn't even want to try eating because I knew that the moment food hit my stomach, my body would reject it and force it right back out the way it came in. I rejected hunger, and wondered if I would ever be able to eat again or if I would feel this way for the rest of my life. And I wondered if maybe this was just what happens when you eat the frosting before everyone has their piece of cake.

4

When my brother and I each started kindergarten, my mom started a tradition for the first and last days of school. She would buy two disposable cameras on each of the
days and she’d give one to me and one to Ben so we could take pictures during the first and last days of the school year. The first picture on the cameras every year was always a group picture of me, Ben, and our best friends Brittany and Kevin McDaniel standing in front of the granite sign in front of the school. Those days were so exciting, and if not for those pictures, there would be so many things buried into the deepest parts of my brain that probably never would have surfaced again.

I think those photos may be part of why I love photography now. For years since she started that tradition, I've taken photographs of everything I possibly could, because I want to remember it later. Moments are fleeting, and we lose everything the second it happens. That moment is gone, never to return. The moments we care about, the ones we hold dear, the ones we've waited for, are lost to us the second they take place—come and gone in the blink of an eye. But photography captures it, even if only in part, and represents traces of the things I've lost. So, in a way, it means I haven't entirely lost it, if I still have a small piece of it left.

Taking those pictures at school was always so exciting, and made the first day of school something to look forward to. I would take pictures of my friends, my favorite teachers, and the classroom, but sometimes I'd take pictures of random things. I'd just point the camera in a direction, any direction, and click, and wait to see how it came out. Sometimes it was a random picture of nothing. But sometimes, it captured a view. It captured my view as a child, and when I see those photos now, it's almost like looking back through my own eyes, and seeing my own young perspective again. It's almost like remembering what it was like to live so freely, when things were far less complicated than they are when you get older.
When I started kindergarten, I cried almost every day. I didn't want to, but I couldn't control it. I remember wanting to go home, and nearly every day they had to call my mom to calm me down. Sometimes she even came to the school to give me a hug and see me in person, which would help me make it through the day. On some days, they'd take me to my brother’s classroom, and he would come out to the hallway to give me a hug. My poor brother never said anything mean to me on those days, even though I know how annoyed he must have been.

I was afraid I'd never see my family again. I was afraid they would die in a horrible accident while I was in school. I was afraid my dad would have a heart attack because of his blood pressure and struggles with his weight, or get in a car accident because he traveled so much for work. I was afraid my mom would get lung cancer because she smoked cigarettes.

As each school year passed, the crying slowly improved. For the next couple years it was still a regular problem, but at least not every single day. When I started third grade, my brother started sixth in the middle school one town over, and my teachers couldn’t knock on his classroom door to have him give me a hug anymore.

And though the crying was better than it had been, my mom needed a new game plan. She had two rings in her jewelry box, similar in design. They had flowers on them, and she put each one on a necklace chain. She kept one for herself and gave me one to wear when I went to school. She told me that any time I felt sad, scared, or wanted to cry, I should hold the ring and know that she's wearing the other one around her neck. If I was scared, and I channeled it through the ring, she would know because she was wearing the
other one. I don't know how quickly it worked, but I remember one day going to the playground for recess on the brink of tears, and clutching that ring in my hand so tightly I could feel it digging into my skin. I looked at the cloudy sky and took a few deep breaths, and I let all the fear in my chest run through my arm, into my hand, and into the metal I was holding. I imagined it flowing through the air, into the sky, and I imagined God taking it and then giving it to my mom, through her ring. He made it all go into that ring, and it lit up like a beacon, and she knew. Then I imagined that she took it in her hand, and she sent her love back through it to me the same way I had sent my fear, and it radiated through me with warmth that calmed the storm in my chest.

6

I also started playing soccer when I started kindergarten, and it quickly became my favorite thing to do. Jeff McDaniel, Brittany and Kevin’s dad, was my coach, and he was one of the biggest mysteries of my childhood. His wife Wendy was my mom’s friend and our babysitter, which is why their kids became my best friends – almost like siblings. Before he was my soccer coach, to me he was just Wendy’s husband, and Kevin and Brittany’s dad. And in that context, I could never figure him out. He worked, and was often not at the house during the hours I was there for daycare. When he was, he would spend his time in the garage-converted-den, smoking and playing his guitar. When he did come out, there was usually some kind of fight between him and Wendy, or because she would go get him to discipline their kids because she wouldn’t do it herself. If he wasn’t home, her response to her children would be: “You just wait, you’re going to regret that when your father gets home!” He never seemed mean, but there was a lot of tension when
he was around. I was filled with unease, waiting for the argument and yelling to start, since that’s how they dealt with their problems.

It wasn’t until he was my soccer coach that I realized the Jeff I saw in their house was not the same Jeff who came to the field as our coach. He was still serious and stern—he didn’t tolerate any misbehavior—but there was an entire other side of him that emerged on the field that I never saw elsewhere. He became encouraging and supportive in a fatherly way. He constantly rotated us through positions on the field and when someone said they didn’t want to play a certain position, he’d laugh and say, “That’s just because you haven’t practiced it enough yet. Let’s give it a try!” He didn’t want us to dismiss playing a field position without giving it a fair shot.

During the first season, I grew to know Jeff outside the role that Wendy put him in, and he was one of the most encouraging coaches I’ve ever had. He was also tough, and when someone was goofing off in the huddle we had to run two laps around the field as a consequence. And if we weren’t putting an honest effort into the running, he’d blast the whistle and run behind us. For the kids who didn’t know him, that was terrifying. Kevin and I thought it was hilarious. When we were in the huddle we’d make monkey faces at each other. I would flip my lower lip down, wrap the tip of my tongue over my top lip, fill my cheeks with air, pull my ears out to the sides, and cross my eyes. We’d make those faces for a silent and uncommunicated game, and the first one to laugh would lose. We kept this up until Jeff noticed, and when he’d tell us to run our laps we would intentionally lollygag, barely jogging along the sidelines. When we finally heard that maniacal whistle blowing, we knew he would be running behind us and we howled with
laughter. By the time he stopped chasing us around the field he’d be chuckling while he walked back to the huddle.

Soccer was the first thing I was really good at and proved myself in. I was the only girl on the team, and the boys constantly made fun of me for it. Kevin and I practiced together a lot, but the other boys wouldn’t pass me the ball, and laughed at me every time I messed up. Jake was their leader, and he recruited nearly every boy on the team except for Kevin. They all snickered and sneered at me on the field, and the evil smirk on his flat face fueled my anger at every practice. I hated his shaggy blond hair, and when I put our team picture up on my bedroom wall I pressed the thumb tack right through his face.

Jeff treated us all equally, but it didn’t matter how much he told them to include everyone, they all avoided me and my girl cooties. He would take me aside and kneel to talk to me.

“Don’t listen to what they’re saying,” he said. “You know how to play, and you know what to do. So if they need to pass that ball but they won’t pass it to you, then you go take it.” He clapped his hand on my shoulder. “And eventually they’ll learn that you’re actually the better player.”

I nodded and went back to the field, and from that day forward, it was game on. He gave me the opportunity to prove myself, but it also made me really good at defense. I learned to steal the ball from my own players, which helped me steal it from other teams on game days. I got so excited about proving myself that during one tournament game, Jake was advancing down the field and I could see there wasn’t anywhere else for him to go. I was open on the right side of the field, but he kept the ball for himself. I was so mad
when he looked at me and then promptly looked away, I charged for him in the center. I took the ball and rushed to a hole in the right side of the field. I shot for a goal, and my foot skimmed the right side of the ball, slightly off center in my rage-induced rush. The ball, however, still sailed into the net, and I scored what ended up being the winning goal.

Jeff put us in the positions that we liked best, and that he felt we were best at, which meant he put me in central forward position. I asked him why once.

“Because you’re not afraid to get hit,” he said. “You’re not afraid to go for that ball and get hit by it if they get to it first, and you’re not afraid of them kicking you either.” He clapped his hand on the back of my shoulder. “And that,” he said, “means we usually end up with the ball.”

And we did. For three years our team was mostly the same kids, and we remained the undefeated, undisputed champions in the league.

7

In that little notch in the coastal mountains were Reedsport was settled, we never got snow. The fog and rain were constant, and any change was worth discussing. The first day of third grade was sunny and warm, and I actually took a picture of the sun with my disposable camera. My brother and I had really only seen snow on television or way up on the mountaintops, but I had heard that some schools close when it snows. So every winter, I would hope.

Sometimes we got ice storms. I was born during the biggest one in the 1990s, but the absence of snow my childhood made me wish for it even more. The closest we got
was hail. The first intense hail storm I remember dumped enough ice to make the ground a crunchy layer of unflavored snow cone. Looking out the window and seeing the lumpy blanket of white, I thought it had snowed.

“No, it’s hail,” my brother told me.

But I didn’t care. I grabbed my coat, jumped into my shoes, and ran into the front yard, excited with each crunching step. My brother followed, and I wandered to the back yard to attempt building a snowman, even though I knew it wasn’t snow. I remembered my mom had told me that to make a snow man, I could start rolling the snow and it would stick to itself to make a ball. So I started rolling the hail, but it had already begun to melt in the cloudy lateness of morning. It mushed over itself, the little slippery spheres of ice rolling off one another and tumbling down to the layer below as I packed it as much as I could.

In the front yard, my brother packed hail into a ball, and wanted to see if he could throw it over the house. He packed it as tightly as he could, wound up like a baseball pitcher, flung the ball over the house, and waited.

In the back yard, I was packing the body of my slouching snowman when suddenly a ball of ice fell out of the sky and hit me on the top of my head with a painful thud! When the thud and the sound of my cries reached my brother’s ears, he laughed in disbelief at my dumb luck before coming around to make sure I was alright.

For the most of my childhood, my father drove a Dodge Ram 3500 diesel truck, and I could always hear the roar of the engine when he pulled into the driveway when he
came home from work. The sound of that engine was the signal that dad was home, and I welcomed it with joy every time I heard it. Every trip to Jerry’s and Home Depot, every trip to the lake with the camper and boat, every adventure we embarked on with my father, was in that truck. The noise of the engine was just as soothing as his deep voice.

My grandparents bought my dad his first motorcycle when he was three, and he has ridden them ever since. My maternal grandfather has also ridden motorcycles for nearly his entire life. During one of his visits when I was eight years old, he brought his motorcycle.

On a Sunday morning during Grandpa’s visit, my dad went to Sugar Shack and bought a box of donuts to bring home. Ben and I were outgrowing our motorcycle helmets, so he decided to take advantage of the nice weather and take us on a ride to buy new ones. We ate a couple donuts, kissed my mom goodbye for the day, and jumped on the motorcycles.

Ben rode on the back with my dad, and I rode behind my grandpa. When we got to the motorcycle shop, my dad plopped helmets on my head one-by-one, latched the strap under my chin, and made me shake my head from side to side to check the fit.

“Is it too tight?” he asked.

Since it was summer, the boys all wanted open-faced helmets to stay cool in the wind, but I didn’t. I felt naked when I wore those, and I wanted a full-faced helmet. My dad asked me if I was sure, and I insisted. Eventually, wearing our new helmets, we climbed back onto the motorcycles and headed toward home.
We took the winding country roads because they're always more fun. I used to sing my favorite songs by Backstreet Boys and N*SYNC while I was on the back of the motorcycles, because I thought no one could hear me over the roar of the engine. I had my own personal concert in the small space of the helmet, protected from the world outside. We leaned around the corners and I paid little attention to the road that my grandfather was navigating, focusing on the reflection of my lips in the clear visor. The curve of the clear plastic distorted my reflection, so if I moved my mouth the right way, it looked like a fish's mouth. I was belting out a chorus at my concert when the loud scraping noise of the left footboard jolted me out of my illusion.

Startled by the sudden interruption, I let out a short scream. My grandpa, startled, jerked the motorcycle upright. When he stopped leaning the bike, it stopped curving around the corner and we went straight into the ditch on the right side of the road. A gravel driveway ended the ditch with an embankment and a drainage pipe, and we slammed right into it. The impact stopped the bike entirely and bent the front wheel, and we were launched over the windshield. The speed cartwheeled the motorcycle into the air behind us, and landed just as we slid through the gravel and out of the way.

When I regained control of my body and looked around, I was laying in the middle of the road with no idea about how long I had been there. I leapt to my feet and ran to the gravel on the side, thankful that no cars had been coming to flatten me to the asphalt. I looked around and saw the wrecked motorcycle and my grandfather lying face down in the gravel. I wanted to go to him, but my feet were concrete. I stared, holding my breath so I could watch for his.

Nothing.
“Grandpa!” I screamed. I finally ran to him, not knowing what I would do when I got there, and I stood over him and began to cry. “Grandpa?”

Still nothing.

“Grandpa!” I screamed. And I cried harder and louder. When he still didn’t respond, I ran to the road and looked both ways. There were no cars and no sounds. It was just me, standing on the side of the road, surrounded by silence and the burning smell of hot metal. I looked back at my lifeless grandfather and I knew that he was dead. If he was alive he would have moved, he would have come to me, and he would have been breathing. I was alone.

I looked down the road in the direction we had been going, but the curves and trees hid the road.

“Dad!” I screamed, as loudly as I could. I cried, and waited. I screamed for him again and my throat became hoarse.

Only the silence responded. I knew if I screamed loud enough, he would hear me. It didn’t matter how many curves ahead of us he was, I knew my dad would come back to me if I only yelled loud enough.

I screamed again, but was interrupted by a grunt. I jumped and inhaled so quickly it hurt my throat. I looked over at my grandpa and his left hand moved up near his chest and settled on the ground.

“Grandpa!” I ran back and reached down toward him, but did not touch him. I knew he was hurt, but I didn’t know what to do so I just stood there with my hands held out halfway toward him. As much as I wanted to help him move, I knew my eight-year-
old arms weren’t strong enough. My hands hovered a few inches above him, and I
waited.

He pushed off the ground with his left hand and turned over, and then I wished he
had stayed the way he was. The front of his jacket was shredded, and, thanks to his new
open helmet, so was his face. With horror, I inhaled sharply and looked back down the
road and screamed “DAD!” as loud as my lungs would allow.

I felt pressure around my ankle and looked back down. “Please,” my grandpa
muttered. Then he coughed, and I could see the blood in his mouth. “Please stop
screaming,” he said. He began to wipe some of the gravel off his face, but most of it was
buried in his skin.

I don’t know how much time passed between that moment and when I heard my
father’s motorcycle coming back. When I heard it, I sprinted back to the road and waved
my arms above my head to make sure he wouldn’t miss us. As he slowed down and
pulled over to the side of the road I heard him say, “oh no, no, no, no.” It was exactly
four “no”s.

He told my brother to check whether I was hurt, then ran straight to Grandpa. My
brother took off his helmet and set it on the ground and made me sit down on it. He
checked my arms and my legs, and asked if I was hurt. I sat there sobbing uncontrollably,
hardly able to respond to his questions.

My dad told my grandpa not to move, and in a few minutes we heard a car
approaching. My dad ran to the road and waved his arms, just like I had done, and the
little red car slowed down and stopped beside us. The woman in the car rolled down her
window.
“Do you have a cell phone?” he asked. The universe must have been on our side, because miraculously, a random person on a country road in 2001 actually had a cell phone. Because my mom was an EMT, my dad called her first, and she knew the moment she heard his voice that something was wrong.

“Linda,” he said, and in an instant she knew what had happened. He never begins a phone call with her name.

“Which one?” she asked, not wanting to hear the answer. She knew either her husband or her father, and at least one of her children, had been in an accident.

“It’s your dad,” he said. “He’s awake, but I don’t know if he needs an ambulance or if you can bring the truck and we can drive him to the hospital.”

She asked him some questions about the situation, and she decided to bring the truck and take him to the hospital herself. She made the twenty-eight minute drive in less than seventeen minutes.

When she arrived, she looked at me for only a few moments, finding only the same scrapes and bruises my brother had already found. I was still crying, sitting on the helmet, and I couldn’t make it stop. She began evaluating my grandpa and asked him several questions. What day is today? Can you tell me what city you’re in?

“Do you remember where you were going?” she asked.

He was beginning to get frustrated. “Yes, we were going back to your house,” he said.

“What about before that? Where were you going on the motorcycles to begin with?”

“We got new helmets,” he said.
She checked his pulse and blood pressure with the tools from her medical kit.

“Have you had anything to eat today?” she asked.

He paused and thought for a moment. “No, no I haven’t had anything to eat.”

She glanced up at my dad and the concern deepened in her face. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, yes, I’m sure,” he said. He was definitely frustrated.

“Do you remember eating anything this morning before leaving the house? Do you remember Aaron bringing the donuts back? You ate a donut before you all left on the motorcycles.”

He gasped lightly and lifted his hand and pointed at her. “No, no,” he said. “That is not true.” He wagged his finger. “I did not have a donut.” We all stared at him. The silence was weighing on us all and I could see that my mother was holding her breath. “Everybody else had a donut... I,” he paused... He looked at her so intensely that we all hung in the balance of the missing words. “I,” he whispered, “had a maple bar.”

Eventually my parents got him into the truck with me in the backseat. Somehow, my dad rode that broken and twisted bike back to the house, crawling at slow speeds. At the hospital, they took my grandfather to the back and my mom and I waited in the lobby. I began to cry uncontrollably again, and she leaned down and asked me why I couldn’t stop.

Between involuntarily inhaling, I asked, “Is grandpa going to die?”

“No, honey,” she reached down and hugged me tightly to her. “No, he’s going to be just fine,” she said.
I don’t know how many hours went by before we went back and saw him. His bed was separated from the others by a curtain that went all the way around his bed. My mom stood by his hip and held his hand. It was the first time I had ever seen anyone in a hospital in real life. I was afraid of what his face might look like, and I was afraid to see him in a hospital bed, so I stood behind her. I heard him talking, and I finally peeked my head around my mom to look.

He was pale, and the skin on his face was still torn up from the gravel. I felt the floor begin to swing under my feet and I gripped the railing on the bed to make it stop. My face felt hot and I couldn’t slow down my breathing. I could feel my head growing, inflating, and the floor began to sway more violently.

“Mom,” I said, and I tugged on her shirt.

She took my hand and gently removed it from her shirt and continued her conversation.

“Mom?” I asked again, and touched her side. Everything began to look fuzzy around me, like the air had been filled with smoke.

She turned half way around and scolded my rudeness. “It is rude to interrupt a conversation,” she said. “Wait until I’m finished.”

“Mom…” I said one more time, and the lights of the world went dark.

When she turned around, I was halfway to the floor. She grabbed the front of my shirt to catch me and set me on the ground, then sat down with me and asked some nurses for help.

I woke up on the floor with my mom on one side and a nurse on the other, holding a juice box.
“… I need to sit down,” I said.

“You’re already sitting down,” she told me, and I didn’t know what to say.

10

The summer after my third grade year, my parents told Ben and I that we had to move from Reedsport to Dallas, it felt like my life was being ripped out from beneath me. My home would belong to someone else and my room wouldn't be mine anymore. All the people and places I had known for my entire life would become distant, and replaced by strangers in an unfamiliar town. I only had a few friends in school, because I was shy and afraid to talk to people I didn't know. I felt like they were judging me. I was a young, overweight girl, with very low self-esteem. Why would anyone want to be friends with me? I always felt like I was a burden on others – that they would be doing me a favor if they would hang out with me so I wouldn't be alone. After I had finally started to feel comfortable at school, made some friends, and the crying had slowed, it was time for us to move. I didn’t want to leave my world behind. This was my home, the only place I had ever known. This was my room, my playroom, my house. This was the playhouse in the back yard that my dad had built just for us, the house that I helped my dad rebuild. The memories of the things we did together as a family were tied to this house, and now they would be left behind.

That home was a part of me. My hands had helped dig out the crawl space beneath the house. My hands helped mud and tape the sheet rock. Those were my holes in the wall from posters, my breath that fogged up the window in the evenings. Those were my footprints on the lawn, my drawings on the playhouse walls, my tears in the concrete from many a scraped knee. Those were my etchings in those attic access doors,
my bruises on those stairs, my birthday parties in the kitchen, my Halloween candy stashed in the cupboard behind the cereal. My goldfish was the one flushed down the toilet, my nose prints in the time-out corner. Those were my hand prints in the concrete on the porch. This house was not just part of me, I was part of it. Leaving my friends and my house behind was one thing, but how was I supposed to leave myself behind too?

Our three cats also had to be left behind, but my mom promised us that she had already found homes for them. Hershey was going to a family with young children who wanted to play with him, Nala was going to a quiet old man who needed a friend, and Sherman was going to live on a farm and hunt mice. They had lived together for their whole lives, and it wasn’t fair they had to split up. Hershey and Sherman were brothers and Nala was their mother. I always wondered if my parents had actually just gave them to the pound and my mom just told us those stories so we wouldn’t be upset about leaving them behind. I always wondered, but I had prayed to God to tell them that I loved them, wherever they were, and that I was so sorry that they couldn’t come with us. I didn’t want them to be mad at me for not bringing them, so I asked God to make sure they knew that I loved them.

When we moved to Dallas, we hadn’t finished remodeling the house in Reedsport yet, so for months we drove back there every weekend to keep working on it. We spent three hours driving in that Dodge truck with my dad, listening to music, playing games, and it was like a weekly vacation. A road trip with my dad every weekend turned that truck into another home of its own, and the roar of that engine comforted me.
One of those weekends, we passed a heavily logged section of the forest on the way back home to Dallas.

I asked, "What happened to all these trees?"

"They were cut down," my brother said.

"By who?" I asked. "Who could cut down so many trees?"

"Humans," my dad told me, looking at me in the rear-view mirror. "It's called logging," he said, "and it's how we get things like paper and two-by-fours."

"Geez, us!" I said about humans, abashed by the destruction we could bring upon nature.

My mom, who was in the passenger seat, turned around faster than lightning and stared at me agape. I was baffled. What had I done? My father’s eyes in the rear-view mirror burned with an intensity that could have melted me if I hadn't been in the back seat.

"I do not ever want to hear that word come out of your mouth again, do you understand me?" he said.

Their responses were so sudden, I didn't even know what to say, or what I had said that was wrong, but I knew I didn't want to make the situation worse.

"Okay, I'm sorry," I said, and slunk down into my seat with a red face.

"Okay," my dad said, and we rode in the car in silence.

What had I said? I knew that "us" wasn't a bad word, so by process of elimination I knew that “geez” must have been the culprit of my sudden wrongdoing, and for the next several years I thought it was a curse word.
It was years after that before I gained the courage to bring up that car ride again, after I had figured out why they were so upset. The two words I had said sounded like "Jesus" to my parents, and my father, who was raised by a Christian pastor, wouldn't stand for his children taking the Lord's name in vain. When I brought it up, though, no one else had remembered the incident. It’s funny how memories can be so different.

12

In fourth grade, when I started school in Dallas, the crying was getting a lot better. I was worried that starting at a brand new school would make it worse, but it was actually much better. There were a few days in the beginning where I cried, but for the most part I managed to get it under control.

But the feelings were still there. I hoped and prayed that my mom would be there at the end of the day to pick me up. I walked out the double doors that led to the parking lot and I'd hope to see that bright red mustang sitting there. If she wasn't there, what would I do? What would I do if she never showed up? Even if I managed to find my way home, how would I find her? I'd have no way of knowing if she had gotten in an accident, been kidnapped, or God knows what else. On the days she was late, it only took a few minutes before I could feel the pressure in my chest as the tears welled in my eyes.

The tears had mostly been replaced by an internal dialogue of silent worry and fear. That cooped up anxiety would escape at night. I used to lie in bed and cry every night because I knew that someday my parents would die. My father would come into my room and tell me I wouldn’t have to worry about that for a long time, and I would be
middle-aged before anything like that would happen. Then he’d sit with me until I fell asleep, or at least until he thought I had.

After my dad left the room, if I was still awake, I used to pray to God and ask Him to protect my dad from having a heart attack and protect my mom from lung cancer. Every night I’d pray that they wouldn’t die in their sleep, and every morning I prayed that they’d come home at the end of the day. I did that for a few years, and eventually the praying became once every couple days, then once a week, then only when I’d get scared again.

13

After we got our first dog when I was ten, I realized that I had stopped praying for the cats’ forgiveness. I was curious about whether my parents had actually found homes for them or not, and eventually I worked up the nerve to ask. It had been the truth, but the conversation brought up how much I missed having them around.

"Hershey was the most trusting cat ever," I said.

“He was!” she agreed. “He liked belly rubs. I used to pick him up and lay him on his back, resting him out on my arm and he’d just be totally relaxed and let his legs hang down and wait for me to pet his tummy.”

"I don't remember much about Sherman, though," I said.

She looked over at me with surprise.

"Well," I said, "we have that picture of me asleep on the couch and he's curled up and sleeping on my head, but I remember him being really afraid of everything and always running away from us. But that's all I can remember."
She raised her eyebrows at me. "That's all you remember? You're the reason he was scared all the time."

"What?"

"You loved to play with that cat, but you liked to play with him like you'd play with a doll. You treated him like a baby. You'd wrap him up in a pillowcase and tuck him into bed by putting him in your dresser drawer."

"I WHAT? I did not do that!"

"I'd be wondering where he was and hear noises coming from your room, and when I'd go open the dresser drawers looking for the noise he'd fly out of there like a bat outta hell."

I didn’t remember that at all. Surely, I thought, she’s playing some kind of joke.

"You also wanted to give him roller coaster rides,” she said. I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear the rest of the story, though. “So you'd put him in a box and let the box slide down the stairs."

"OH MY GOD!"

She laughed. “You never hurt him, though. Just scared the shit out of him.”

"You have to be kidding. You have to be making this up."

"No,” she said, “I'm not."

"I was really that mean to him? Why was I so mean? I don’t remember that"

"Well, you weren't being mean. To you, you were playing house. He just didn't like it very much."

But I didn’t remember any of that. It felt weird to have a portion of my childhood that was so clearly distinctive to other people but completely lost to me—the opposite of
what had happened with “Geez.” It made me wonder how many other things in my life have been lost in the recesses of memory.

14

My first experience with real snow was in fifth grade, the first winter in our house in Harrisburg. A winter storm blew down the western states from Canada and dumped nearly three feet of snow on us, closing school for almost a week.

The day it hit, our house was in the last pocket of the valley that was untouched. My brother and dad went to town, and they had only been gone for five minutes before coming back with giant smiles.

"You have to come with us!" my brother said when he came in the house.

"It is snowing everywhere but right here," my dad said.

We all loaded up in the truck and drove to town and I had my face plastered on that window the entire time.

In the next twenty-four hours we got a thick blanket of snow and even freezing rain on top of it. The next day my dad put chains on the truck and we all climbed in to drive to the market in town.

About half way there, we found an old blue truck crashed nose-first in the icy water-filled ditch. The water filled the bottom part of the cab, all the way to hip level on the bench seat, with an old man sitting inside it with soaking wet jeans.

My dad stopped the truck, and both my parents got out and approached the man, who climbed carefully out of the cab.

"Thank you so much for stopping!" he said in a surprisingly warm voice. "I tried knocking on the door at that house," he said, pointing across the street, "but no one
answered." He pulled his jacket tighter around him and looked at my dad. "Thank you so much," he said again. "Three cars have driven by and none of them even slowed down."

"Are you alright?" my mom asked, and seeing his freezing and wet clothes, her EMT brain activated. She asked him if it was okay to check him out, and she made sure he hadn't slipped into hypothermia yet, though she knew he was at least on the verge of it. She took an extra jacket from the truck and asked my brother to get out and help my dad with the ropes and tow straps.

I watched while they connected the backs of the trucks so my dad could pull the old blue machine out of its watery grave. When they were ready, my brother and dad got back in the truck and my mom helped the man get to the nearby driveway to watch from a safe distance.

My dad put the truck in gear and slowly began to pull the other truck out of the ditch. I was so proud of my dad in that moment, I felt a lump in my throat and I began to cry. I tried not to show it, though, because it felt stupid to cry because he was towing a truck out of a ditch. But I couldn't have been prouder without my heart bursting from my chest and into a thousand pieces.

"You're a hero, daddy," I told him while he was pulling the truck out of the ditch, choking back the cries in my throat. "You're a hero." A few tears escaped and fell down my cheeks, but I quickly wiped them away.

He smiled at me briefly, but had to concentrate to make sure that our own truck didn't end up sliding into the ditch on the other side of the road. When both were safely on the road, the old man climbed in and tried to start the old blue hunk of metal. None of
us thought it would work, but he turned the key and that old Ford roared to life. But the seat and interior were soaking wet with icy water, and the man's hands were shaking.

My mom walked up and put a hand on his arm. "Would you like us to give you a ride?" she asked him. The relief on the man's face was one that I'll never forget: he looked at my mother as if she were an angel sent from heaven, and the joy with which he took her hand in both of his and said, "Yes please, I would like that very much," could have melted the snow around them, and it melted my heart.

As the man climbed into the truck, my dad looked into the backseat and told me to hand him the blankets we had brought. I did, and mom turned on the heater as high as it would go. He was shivering, but he and his wet clothes slowly began to warm up as he held his hands in front of the vents.

"You saved my life," he told my parents when they dropped him off in town. He even said, "I love you all," and asked for a phone number because he knew his wife would want to thank us too.

15

When I was eleven, I started working for a neighbor in trade for horse-riding lessons. I'd dreamed about having a horse for as long as I could remember, and this was finally my chance. My parents encouraged the idea that I had no limits, that I could achieve anything I wanted—if I was willing to work for it. So they told me I could learn how to ride, especially considering it was something I was passionate about, but they also said that if I was to take on this responsibility it would be mine and mine alone. All
expenses had to be paid out of my own earnings, and I had to do all the chores and animal care.

I agreed, and began taking lessons from our neighbor Rene. She let me ride her horse Jane, and she started teaching me to ride. In return, I mowed lawns, cleaned barns, painted fences, fed animals, and pulled weeds. The more I learned about caring for horses, the more tasks I took on with the livestock she had on her property.

It’s important to note that no one thought this would work. I was only eleven and why would a child want to work on a farm rather than play sports and hang out with friends? Jane was a sixteen-hand tall thoroughbred bred for the racetrack. Her energy levels were so high that Rene had endless frustration and fights and just wanted to sell her to get a small Icelandic horse instead. How could an eleven-year-old possibly be able to handle a large, high-strung thoroughbred?

But I was determined, and it wasn’t long before I was taking care of Jane entirely by myself, and even helping exercise some of the other horses on the property. By the time a year had gone by, we worked out a plan for me to buy her.

That year I learned I could prove the world wrong. Not only could I handle the horse, but our personalities clicked so well that she would do anything I asked. I had learned, through my own experiences and trials and errors, what my parents had wanted me to learn: that I could accomplish anything, no matter how unlikely or daunting, as long as I was willing to work my ass off for it. And I did. I worked for Rene for a year to pay off half the price of the horse, and I used my savings from allowances and birthday money to buy her. The summer I was twelve I handed over the money, we signed the
papers, and I officially had a horse.

16

Over the next six years, I started working for Carrie, the trainer that Rene sent her horses to occasionally. I worked for Carrie every day I wasn’t in school. Often on the weekends we (myself and the other kids who worked for her) would spend the nights at her house so we could go to the barn early in the morning for sunrise trail rides. In the summer, we’d even sleep at the barn in the stacks of hay. I worked hard during my teen years, and I had great horses and countless trophies and ribbons to show for it.

Those years defined me, and they still do, to an extent. Those years, and specifically the horses I worked with, taught me more about myself and about life than anything else could have. I learned about responsibility and dedication. I learned about kindness, about making a connection with another living being that I couldn’t speak to. It taught me to depend on another but also to be depended on. I learned to communicate with a thousand-pound beast when I was eleven, and by the time I was eighteen I felt like I could understand her more than any human being I met. It taught me patience. It taught me to keep my attitude in check, which is amazing for a teen going through puberty: that thousand-pound horse is often like a mirror. If I gave her attitude she threw it right back at me. I had to learn to read her, but also to read myself and understand how to deal with my own emotions.

After years of this, I thought I had life figured out. I knew who I was and what I thought about the world. Working with horses taught me about love and acceptance,
patience and kindness, and even influenced the way I thought about religion. I felt a connection to a higher power in the barn that I never felt in church.

Though my parents raised me as a Christian, we had never gone to church regularly. I can count with my fingers the number of times I’ve been in a church. But that was never because of a lack of faith, but more that my parents thought religion should be a personal connection to God. A church, to me, seemed like a business, an organization. It felt artificial. But the faith I felt in those horses, seeing the sunrise from the top of the mountain on an early morning trail ride, having my horse nuzzle her nose against my side to say hello, felt more real and more powerful than anything I had ever experienced before. If there was a God, this was my connection to Him.

By the time I graduated high school I thought I figured out how I felt about religion. I had decided that I was open-minded about God. I wasn’t decidedly religious, but I still identified as Christian, because that’s how I was raised and what I hoped was true. But I also understood that there’s no definitive proof to solidify any argument about any religion. There’s no proof either way on any religion. So, I was open to the idea of being wrong, and I was okay with that. I hoped for a heaven and a God, but I couldn’t know for sure and I would doubt it sometimes. And I was okay with that. So when people would ask me what I believed, my first response was usually: “That’s a good question.”

At the end of high school, I went to my childhood friend Kaylee Anderson’s graduation in Reedsport. When we got there, we found our seats in the basketball arena,
and my mom jabbed her elbow into my side. I looked at her and she leaned in, beckoning me to lean and meet her half way.

She whispered into my ear, "Is that Mrs. Murphy behind us?"

I turned, and sure enough, there was one of my kindergarten teachers. She was exactly as I remembered her, with her short grey hair and soft face. I looked back at my mom and nodded.

She smiled hugely and as soon as she turned to say hello, Mrs. Murphy recognized her. That's the advantage of a small town: even when you moved away and haven’t even lived there for ten years, your kindergarten teacher remembers your family.

They exchanged a few greetings before the ceremony started. My mom told her where we moved, that I had just graduated, and she began to recite the list of accomplishments: the honors and AP courses, the equestrian team, the part time job, my plans for college. When the principal began to speak it cut their conversation short.

After the ceremony, we turned again to say how great it was to see her and her family again. "It was good to see you, dear," she told me.

"I'm surprised you remember us, considering how long ago it was that we lived here," I told her.

She looked at me and chuckled. "You used to cry SO MUCH," she told me, and my mom roared with laughter. It surprised me that the crying was what she remembered as my defining feature. I remember that it had happened, and that it had affected me, but I had never defined myself by it. I laughed with red cheeks and we said our goodbyes. As we went our separate ways in the sea of proud parents, I wondered what she would think of me now—now that I wasn’t the girl who cried anymore.
During the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college, my mom told me that she had found a lump in one of her breasts that she needed to have checked. She was pretty sure it was just a cyst though, since she had always had many of them.

As time went by, though, she slowly started worrying more about it. I asked her multiple times to go get checked out, and while she said she would, she never really got around to it. It didn’t seem to get any worse, and she had always been lumpy anyways. By September when school started, she started noticing more changes. Her skin started turning red, and the lumps were slowly changing, so she made an appointment for a mammogram in late September.

My mom has a twin sister, and on their birthday in early October, we all drove to Vancouver, Washington and they ran the Girlfriend’s Half Marathon, which supports breast cancer research. They had done several runs to benefit the cause in the last few years, and had even done that one the year before. This time, though, we all knew she wasn’t running for the cause, but she was running for herself.

On Halloween of my third year in college, a pirate diagnosed my mother with advanced, aggressive, stage 3B breast cancer. We had known earlier that month that something was wrong, but we didn’t know how bad it actually was. She’d had a mammogram and two ultrasounds but the doctors had been pretty sure before these biopsy results.
When her doctor said the actual words for the first time, “You have breast cancer,” it was like someone took an anchor and hooked it into my chest. I was instantly yanked forward by thirty years to the middle aged version of myself that my father had told me about, and I was simultaneously thrust back to a small nine-year-old girl who cries herself to sleep at night because she knows that someday her parents will die.

Her treatment was the harshest and most intensive chemotherapy available: two months of chemotherapy called the Red Devil, which severely damages the heart. So much so, that the risk of heart attack and failure increases immensely both during and after treatment, for the rest of her life.

I still remember the very first treatment and how she was trying so hard not to cry. But the moment the nurse came over with the bright red chemicals in the syringes, she couldn’t keep it in anymore. I learned what real anxiety, real sadness, real fear felt like. I’ve seen my mother cry, I’ve seen my mother under stress. But the fear of dying is unmistakable when it consumes someone’s face, and it’s even more so when you can see they’re convinced it will happen.

20

The hardest part about the beginning of her treatment wasn’t just the fear of loss and death. Through my horses, I had learned that I could achieve anything, as long as I worked for it. But this time, there was literally nothing I could do. Nothing any of us could do. Not one damn thing. I realized how underprepared for that I was when I found myself walking around the house in the middle of the night because it felt wrong to just go to bed, but I didn’t know what else to do.
I wanted to do something to make it easier for her. I wanted to do something that took away her pain, something that would fix her. But I couldn’t. This time it didn’t matter how much I wanted it or how hard I worked. I realized that everything I thought I knew about life was wrong. Life itself is completely out of control, and no amount of hard work or dedication could give me what I really wanted: to not watch the people I love die.

But in those first few weeks of chemotherapy treatments when the side effects worsened, I realized that was inescapable. For the first time, I started to understand the alcoholic’s point of view. I knew that alcohol wouldn’t solve anything, but I wanted it because I knew that nothing could solve anything. And I wanted to forget that for a while. I knew it wouldn’t actually change anything, but I wanted something to make it stop. I wanted something to make my thoughts shut up, to calm the storm for long enough to sleep without having a nightmare. If I could have, I would have consumed an entire liquor store.

After she started treatment, the first time I was alone was when I was house-sitting. I was only alone in the house for a few minutes before I had a real breakdown for the first time in my life. I cried, I hyperventilated, I vomited, I nearly passed out, and I had the first of several panic attacks. And all I wanted was for it to stop. I wanted to make it stop, but I knew that there was nothing I could do. That night I had no hope left, and all I wanted was to stop thinking, to stop feeling.

I thought maybe if I drank enough, that might happen. But I was only twenty, and I couldn’t buy alcohol. I knew that if I asked my older brother, he’d let me have a drink or two, as long as I stayed the night at his house and he could supervise. But I knew he
wouldn’t let me drink myself to oblivion like I wanted. The woman I was housesitting for had a wine cooler filled with over a dozen bottles of wine. I took three out and set them on the counter and got a glass from the cupboard. I stood there and stared at those bottles for a long time before putting them back in the cooler.

I hadn’t changed my mind, but I didn’t want to also become a thief.

That night I also promised myself I wouldn’t believe in God anymore. If He did exist, I blamed Him for doing this. And if He didn’t exist, I was angry at Him for that too. For months I had decided on that, and I stuck to it. I still prayed sometimes, but it felt like I was praying to a God I didn’t believe in.

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The winter term after my mom was diagnosed, I failed a class for the first time and ended up with B’s and C’s. Though I managed to recover with a counselor’s help and improve my grades, I learned what it means to really struggle. Nights were sleepless between taking care of horses, scrambling through homework, and doing chores while my dad took care of my mom. For the first several weeks of treatment I got up every couple hours to check on her so he could finally sleep.

In the days before her surgeries, sleep was impossible. The stress and amount of coffee I consumed to get through those months turned my stomach so sour I had to start taking antacids.

I endured it, though. She was the one in danger and in fear of dying, and she needed the comfort more than I did. Though she tried to hide that fear as much as she could, I could hear her crying in the bathroom when she locked the door. I saw how red
her eyes were when she’d come out of her room in the morning. Her hair was gone, her skin was pale, and her fingernails were black. Nausea and indigestion kept her from eating. The pain made it impossible to sleep, and soon the exhaustion showed. Seeing her fear was difficult, but seeing it validated was even harder.

Trying to make it a little bit easier for her, we all stayed as strong as possible. I tried my absolute best to never break down in front of her. I knew my father was struggling too, so I tried not to make it worse for him either. Not once did I ever see him cry, but I know he did. Sometimes I could hear it in the other room, and sometimes I could see how puffy his eyes were when he’d come back. I wanted to help him, but I also wanted him to just magically be okay. I wanted to not have to worry about him, but I had to realize that while I’m afraid of losing my mother, he’s afraid of losing his wife.

During her treatment, we all learned that she is, and we all are, much stronger than we ever thought or gave ourselves credit for. We all endured that hell, and she endured a hell much worse than any of us can even imagine. She told me once that it was the hardest thing she’s ever done in her life, to drag herself out of bed and go to work when she felt like she was dying. But she also told me she did it because she knew we needed her to fight. She endured that not just to save her own life, but to save the rest of us too.

We all learned that when you’re faced with something like this and have the odds stacked against you, you can push yourself through a lot more than you thought you could. She endured the harshest chemotherapy treatment that exists and had to drag
herself to work and fight through the side effects to not lose her medical insurance. And somehow, with her leading at the front of the pack, we all made it through. We watched each other fall, picked each other up, and we pushed on as best we could. And somehow we made it to the end of the tunnel without being crushed by the train.

The chemotherapy shrunk the tumor much more effectively than expected, and every surgery went entirely as planned. After the radiation, double mastectomy, and complete reconstruction, her prognosis looks better than the initial 50/50 chances she was given, and all her tests are coming back with good results and there are currently no signs of cancer.

I didn’t expect it to be just as difficult to take the weight off my shoulders as it had been to bear it for over a year. When we were in the thick of it and I needed to push forward for my family, I could make that happen. But when the need for immediate concern was over, when she wasn’t in treatment anymore and the prognosis was good, I didn’t know how to function normally again. I didn’t even know what “normal” was anymore.

I still don’t know.

It had been a year and a half with a heavy anchor stuck in my chest, and now it was suddenly ripped out and I didn’t know how to stand up without that weight anymore. I had made room for it. I had learned to use it. But when it was gone, I didn’t know what to do.
I still had panic attacks after my mom’s treatment was over and she had a good prognosis. My mom’s twin ended up in the hospital a stomach ulcer and extremely high blood pressure from excessive stress.

That weekend that my aunt spent in the hospital was quite a culmination of things in my life. In addition to my aunt being sick, my mom was recovering from a major surgery, but was also sick with a nasty cold. I had four papers and three midterms spread over that week and the next, my horse was lame, and our family dog was hurt so badly we were afraid we might have to put him down.

During that entire weekend I was on the brink of a panic attack, and finally when I couldn’t handle it anymore, I prayed. When we went home for a change of clothes, I had a moment alone, and I genuinely prayed for the first time in months. I cried and I begged for help from a God who I actually hoped was real and listening.

Later, when we got back to the hospital and were walking back to my aunt’s room, my mom stopped at the bathroom, which was right next to the hospital chapel. There was no one inside the little chapel, and there was a cabinet in the corner with several donated blankets that people had either knitted or crocheted. I stepped inside to look around.

I can’t explain why, but the air felt different in there. This didn’t feel artificial, like churches had for most of my life. This tiny room felt both enormous and comforting at the same time. I looked at the blankets in the cabinet, and then I walked to the stained glass picture of Jesus in front of the small pews. I just stood there and looked at it for what felt like several minutes until I sensed someone enter the room through the door.
behind me. I figured it was my mom, done in the bathroom and looking for me. I didn’t want to be in the way of someone who needed God, so I turned to leave.

But there was no one there. The hair actually stood up on the back of my neck. I knew someone had been in that room with me. Sort of the way you can feel someone staring at you from across the table. But no one was there.

I turned back to the stained glass picture. I don’t even know what prompted me to say it, but I whispered, “I hope you heard me.” It felt foreign. Those were my words, but it felt like someone else had compelled me to say it. Like someone pulled a string in my back and the words had just happened.

A few seconds after that I heard footsteps in the hall, and I turned to see my mother walking in. We left that chapel and went back to my aunt’s room.

When my dad got home to our dog, he was completely fine and didn’t show any signs that he’d been hurt and in pain all week long. That night, her symptoms improved and they sent her home the next day. Two of my professors even extended paper deadlines.

That could have easily been complete coincidence. I know that. But it makes me wonder. I learned that it feels better to believe there might be a divine influence. I learned that wanting there to be a God, the way I had before my mom’s diagnosis, was a much brighter and more hopeful way to live than just scrambling for meaning in the panic attacks and anxiety I had without it.
As of now, we’re still on the tail end of that experience, still learning how to get back to a normal life. I know that the anchor isn’t entirely gone. There’s still a chance of recurrence, and the chance of it being harder the next time. We met several other people going through treatment during all of her doctor’s appointments and treatment sessions, and many of them died. One woman was only twenty-seven. The anchor isn’t lodged in my chest anymore, but it’s not just gone. It’s not the fear of an immediate threat, but the fear of a potential future one. I like to think that I’m slightly more prepared to deal with it than I was the first time, but I also wonder how long it will be before I have another moment that makes me rethink the things I thought I knew.
January 10, 2016

Well that was one hell of a surprise birthday party. I was really excited to finally have Marc here for my birthday – he decided to miss the first couple weeks of class in Montréal and stay for my birthday before going home. So we made plans to go mini-golfing.

I knew we weren’t really going mini-golfing. Everyone was way too excited for it, and kept asking me every time they saw me “Are you excited for mini-golf?? I’m excited for mini-golf!” and it got weird. Marc would be having a conversation with someone and they would immediately stop talking as soon as I walked into the room. A couple times they even asked me to leave the room so they could talk. It was obvious they were up to something.

I knew there was a surprise coming, I just didn’t know what it would be.

We met at my house to all go together to Putters, and everyone showed up in nice clothes. Then Marc disappeared into the bedroom and he came out in a button-up shirt and tie, but was trying to hide them under a sweatshirt. He and my dad even exchanged giddy glances. My mom wanted to help me find something to wear that was nicer than my jeans and t-shirt. “It’s your birthday,” she said, “so lets play dress up!” I already knew we weren’t going to Putters, but I wanted to play along.

“Why would I curl my hair just to go play mini-golf? Jeans and a t-shirt are fine – why do you want to get so dressed up just for Putters?”

It was kinda fun to watch them scramble for answers. But I let my mom choose a nice shirt and shoes for me, and I let her curl my hair. I knew it wasn’t just mini-golf, but I wondered if they had invited a bunch of other friends to meet us there as a big surprise
or something. While we were getting ready, Brenda asked where we were going and Mom blurted out “Corvallis.”

There is no mini-golf in Corvallis.

We got in the cars and we drove. Ben drove with me, Marc, and Kilee. Mom drove the car with aunt Brenda in the passenger seat and Dad in the back. We took the lead, and they followed behind.

We drove north, and when went through Corvallis and merged onto I-5, I knew I was definitely right. I didn’t say anything, though. I just enjoyed that they had planned some big surprise, and that they all seemed pretty excited about it. I’ve never really liked being the center of attention, but it felt really good to know they cared enough to plan whatever it was we were going to.

When we got past Salem, Marc gave me a short letter that he had written. They had all pitched in to buy tickets to a murder mystery dinner in Portland. When I was in high school, I made myself a bucket list. I put it on Facebook, and he had found it and decided that he didn’t want it to end up being a list of things forgotten about. Going to a murder mystery dinner was on it, so he found one for all of us to go to.

I had this weird feeling like we wouldn’t ever get there. But I’ve always been a worrier, so I just told myself to shut up and enjoy the fact that all my family and my best friend were all together for my birthday. I pushed the thought aside.

When we were about five minutes from the place, and rush hour had stopped traffic, there was a loud screech behind us. Ben looked in the rear-view mirror right as the screeching ended with a loud bang, and said “Really?” as he watched someone rear-end Mom and Dad.
“Was that my parents? Did they hit my parents?” I heard myself say, and my voice was higher than I meant it to be.

Ben said yes through gritted teeth. He was trying to pull as far off the road as he could, and I had the door open and started to get out before he stopped. My legs felt like jello as I realized that Brenda wasn’t moving and Mom was crying and holding her chest.

I was relieved when I saw Dad get out of the back seat. He opened Mom’s door and talked to her for a second, then walked to the back of the car.

I walked to Brenda’s door, and the guy who hit them was at the back of the car, leaning casually against the concrete barrier. He asked if everyone was okay, but he showed no real concern, just standing there with his hip leaned against the barrier. I stared at him for a second and considered all the things I could say, but said nothing as I turned and opened the door to check on Brenda.

She was in so much pain she just closed her eyes and cried. She had been holding the handle above the door when they got hit. Her shoulder and hip hurt and her right side was numb. She wasn’t bleeding, and I knew there was nothing else I could do.

Mom was also crying. Her neck and back hurt, but what scared me more was that she was having chest pain. I remembered that the red chemo she had damaged her heart, and I was afraid she was having a heart attack. I didn’t know what to do – so I started crying too.

I closed Brenda’s door and went to mom’s side. The back of the car on the driver’s side was smashed all the way up to the wheel well. I looked around for Dad, but he was talking to the guy who hit them. I found myself glaring at him, and took a second to compose myself before I knelt down to talk to Mom.
The first thing she said was, “I’m sorry I ruined your birthday.” I smiled and wiped the hair from her forehead and told her that she didn’t ruin anything. I actually felt bad that it was my birthday. If I didn’t have one—or if I had told them not to do anything special like a surprise party—then maybe we wouldn’t even be here.

She said her chest hurt when she breathed, and she kept asking if dad was okay. I told her he was fine, but she just kept repeating, “But he was sitting right where the guy hit.”

Kilee was already on the phone with 911, and told them we wanted an ambulance. Mom and Brenda were freezing, so I took the blanket out of the back seat and stretched it across them. I knew they were already in shock, so I also put my sweatshirt and Marc’s jacket over them to try to keep them warm.

By the time I stood up to take a breath and look around, Ben had already put flares out, the first few police officers were already there, and the paramedics were getting out of the fire truck. I stepped out of their way to let them take care of Mom and Brenda, a little confused because it didn’t seem like that much time had gone by. It had only felt like a couple minutes, but so much had happened already.

I backed up and stood in front of the car and just stared.

I stood there trying to breathe. Marc and Kilee walked up and stood beside me. Marc took my hand and Kilee started to hug me and it was enough to release the pressure that had been building up. I tried not to, but I cried.

I hate that my automatic stress response is crying again. I haven’t been that way since elementary school, and I thought those days were behind me.
Ben came over and asked if I noticed who hit them. It was the guy who had been
going 55 in the fast lane for several miles without letting us pass. It was clear he hadn’t
been paying attention. The whole time we were behind him he had been looking at the
girl in his passenger seat a lot, and he even drifted out of his lane several times.

I don’t know how long we stood there, but eventually they got the cervical collars
on Mom and Brenda and put them in the ambulance.

We stayed at the OHSU emergency room all night. Mom and Brenda were in
separate areas, because they had brought Brenda in as trauma (which meant they cut all
her clothes off and wow she was pissed about that). We were going back and forth
between them to make sure neither one was left alone.

They did a CT scan on mom to make sure her spine wasn’t injured, and to make
sure nothing had been damaged to cause the chest pain. When the doctor came in with the
results, we were all in her room because they had taken Brenda for an MRI. They didn’t
find anything related to the accident, but there’s a small spot in her liver that she needs to
see her oncologist about.

The room got really quiet, and I could feel all our glances shooting toward each
other but no one made eye contact.

The doctor also said not to panic, because women at her age often develop spots
in their livers that are nothing, and this one is relatively small. I think I heard her say it’s
about two centimeters across.

They discharged her at midnight, but she didn’t want to leave the hospital without
Brenda, who was still gone for an MRI. We all went out to the waiting room, and Ben
called his friend Devin to see if he’d be willing to drive some of us home after the doctors
release Brenda. He agreed and said that until the, we could get some sleep at his house if we needed it. Mom and I didn’t want to leave Brenda alone, and Marc and Kilee said they wanted to be wherever I was, which I felt bad for and was also really thankful for. I didn’t know if I could do this without completely losing it, but having them close made it a little easier.

So Dad and Ben went to Devin’s to sleep for a few hours, and we waited for Brenda. When we had a moment alone, Marc told me he felt bad for the whole evening, like it was his fault. “If I hadn’t planned this party thing…” and he looked down at the floor. I assured him it wasn’t his fault, but I was also feeling the same type of guilt about my birthday. My birthday was the reason we ended up with plans to go there in the first place, so I felt like it was my fault. Later, Ben ended up telling me he wondered what would have happened if he hadn’t passed the guy a few miles before the accident. “Maybe if I had just stayed behind him…” At least we’re not blaming each other, I guess. I don’t know if this is normal, but we all feel like we’re the ones responsible and our emotions are guilt and regret rather than blame.

Eventually everyone fell asleep in the waiting room, and I sat there looking around with eyes that begged for sleep but a mind that wouldn’t slow down enough. It gave me time to reflect. Bad things happen on my birthdays. The ice storm, the food poisoning, Uncle Don’s death. I see a trend.

From then until sunrise, I went back and forth from the waiting room to Brenda’s. When I told her about mom’s CT scan, she said, “Well, I really do believe everything happens for a reason. So if that’s why this had to happen then I guess it will be worth it.” “Yeah,” I said, “I guess so.”
For Brenda, they did more tests, exams, and another MRI and still couldn’t find a reason for her right side being numb.

Around 7 this morning, they gave up and let her go. Devin brought his car and loaded up Mom and Dad and Brenda. We all fell asleep on the way home, though I tried to stay awake as long as possible to keep Ben company while he drove. But eventually I couldn’t keep my eyes open anymore.

When we got home, Mom still felt guilty that my birthday had been derailed, so she insisted that we get a cake to have some sort of “proper” celebration.

So we celebrated my birthday today instead of yesterday.

I don’t want birthdays anymore.
Can we not catch a break?

I left work early yesterday, and Marc and I got Chipotle on the way home. We were only home for fifteen minutes when Mom called me to ask if either of us were sick.

Dad was nauseous and in so much pain he couldn’t even stand, and it had gotten worse over the course of a couple hours. I have never seen my dad in so much pain he couldn’t even move. I’ve never even heard any stories of him being that sick before.

She took him to the emergency room and Ben picked Marc and me up to go to the hospital together. He basically slid the truck into the driveway. We piled in and he took off before we even had seatbelts on, and I could see the stony tension in his face that I felt crushing my ribs. I reached behind Marc, who was sitting in the middle, and I patted Ben’s shoulder and realized that I have no idea how I’m supposed to comfort my big brother. In the years we dealt with my mom being sick, he was the one who had his shit together. But this time it was dad and it was different for him, and I didn’t know how to help him. I didn’t even know if I could help myself.

I cried, as silently as possible, the entire way there. All I could think was that if he was having a heart attack, this could be it. What if we didn’t even make it there in time?

When we got there and went inside, where Dad was laying on a bench in the waiting room. Since his vital signs were stable, they put him lower on the list and he had to wait to be seen. So we waited with him while he laid there in pain, trying (and failing), to get comfortable. At some point, Ben said, “Dad, we’re not supposed to come to these places for you.” We all kind of laughed, but in a way it also wasn’t a joke.
In a couple hours they finally took him back to a room, and for the first time, I saw my dad in a hospital bed. I wanted to turn and leave the room. My heart said stay, but my legs said run. I realized that the older he gets, the more this will happen.

It felt like there was a tornado inside my ribcage, but I forced a smile on my face and I held his hand while he lay in the bed. I’m still not sure if it was more for my comfort or for his.

The doctors were sure his appendix was either enflamed or had burst, so they said they’d keep him overnight and do surgery to remove it in the morning.

Mom’s surgery for her implant adjustment is on Wednesday, so she has that special soap that she has to shower with twice a day until surgery. She was overdue for it last night, so Ben said he would drive her home so she could take that shower, and so he could change out of his work clothes and into something more comfortable of dad’s. We knew it was going to be a long night.

Mom wanted to be there when they took Dad in for surgery. I could see it in her face that she was scared, but since the surgery wouldn’t be happening until morning, she agreed to rush home for the shower. Marc and I stayed with Dad.

About fifteen minutes after they left, the surgeon came in and told us how the surgery would go, and said a nurse would be there to take him shortly. “Uh, tonight?” I asked. He said they had no reason to wait until morning, since he was free and there was a room available now. He left to go get ready, and a nurse came in to get Dad ready to go upstairs.
Even if I could have called Mom that moment, there wasn’t enough time for her to get back. So I gathered Dad’s things, and right as the nurse started rolling the bed, he said “Oh, wait” and took off his wedding ring. He held it out for me to take.

I didn’t want it.

I didn’t fucking want it.

But I cupped my hand beneath it and when he let it go, it fell into my palm with the weight of a fatherless future. If something went wrong, I’d have to be the one to find out first and then tell my family. I was holding potential widowhood in my hand.

I hugged him and told him I loved him, and then the nurse wheeled him away. Marc and I went to the waiting room again, and I called Ben. They were almost home. I told him that they had taken Dad for surgery now, and that Mom would be upset about it. I’m not sure he believed me, because when he called back to say they were on their way back in, he said “You were right about what you said before… no bueno.”

Marc and I found our way to the surgery waiting area, where everyone was already gone for the night. A nurse came out of the “employee only” double doors and looked a little surprised to see us. I told her I was looking for my dad, and thank God she was nice enough to go check. I felt like I was about to snap. She let me come back to see him while they waited for the staff to finish prepping the operating room. Marc stayed out in the lobby to watch for Mom and Ben, hoping they’d get there before surgery started.

When I got back to him, he was wearing the little surgery cap, and some of the drugs had started to kick in. It was hard for him to focus, and it pained me to see my dad like that. He wasn’t supposed to be the one who got sick. Dads aren’t supposed to get sick. They’re supposed to be heroes and have super powers.
Mom and Ben showed up just a few minutes later, and since they still had a few minutes to wait, the nurses let them come back to see him. So all of us, my mom, Ben, Marc, and I stood out in the hallway with my dad, who was about to have a surgery for the first time. I started to feel a little better about it with everyone else back there with me.

When they were ready to start surgery, Ben practically ran out of the area and into the lobby, then disappeared. We figured he went to the car, or to get something to eat, but when he didn’t come back after forty-five minutes, we started wondering. I called his phone, but he didn’t answer. I got the feeling he wasn’t okay, and I know that he usually prefers to be alone when he’s upset. Mom started looking for him, so I sent him a text message that said “Don’t know where you went, but just want to make sure you’re okay. Mom’s walking around looking for you.”

It only took a minute or two, and he came walking across the sky-bridge from the café, which had long been closed. Mom walked up and hugged him, and he clung to her like a child. It almost looked like he started deflating as soon as she held him and he let himself melt into her embrace, in a way that I had never seen him do before. I waited until they were done talking, and when she came back to us, he went the other direction toward the parking lot. She motioned that he was crying, and told me he was getting his backpack from the car.

I got up and waited inside the door for him. When he came in I asked him for a hug. I’m still not sure if it was more for me or for him. We hugged for several seconds, and I could feel him trying to stop his crying – those little chest heaves that come right before a deep breath. When he tried to let go, I hugged him tighter.
“It’s okay,” I said quietly, and patted his back. For the first time in my life I took care of my big brother. I don’t know how long we stood there for, but eventually I let him go and we sat down on a bench near the door.

“I was fine until we went back there,” he said, pointing to the surgery area. Just seeing him in the bed in that state was enough to make him realize that someday our parents are going to be gone.

He had left because he didn’t want to cry in front of Mom – I guess we both wanted to be strong for her. “I went over there, and then of course I couldn’t find a bathroom to clean myself up before I came back.” He wiped his eyes and kind of laughed.

“When we got to the house, mom got in the shower, and I looked for some of dad’s shoes to wear instead of my dress shoes, since they hurt my feet so much.”

Then he looked down at the tennis shoes that were now on his feet, and he tapped his toes on the floor twice.

“And you know, it doesn’t matter how big I get,” he said, staring at Dad’s shoes, “I just can’t fill them.”

I reached my arm around him and leaned against his shoulder. We just sat on the bench in silence. It was hitting him hard. I started struggling with the realization of our parents’ mortality two and a half years ago and it’s been building ever since. But this hit him unexpectedly with a sudden and violent intensity that he really wasn’t prepared for. I know exactly how he feels, and I also know there’s nothing I can do to make it better. So I sat there with him in the silence until he sniffed, wiped his eyes, and stood up to go join Mom and Marc at the other end of the waiting room.
The surgery went well, and after a few hours they moved Dad to an overnight room. When we got to his room, he was in and out of consciousness and pretty loopy. And of course, after several surgeries of her own, Mom was excited to be on the observing end of the anesthesia high. In the moments he was awake, she’d talk to him to see what he said, and she seemed a little disappointed that he was actually pretty grounded in reality. But when she jokingly asked him what his name was, he said, “My name is Rumpelstiltskin,” and then he went back to sleep.
January 29, 2016

Mom and Dad stopped by this afternoon on their way home from visiting Grandpa. Mom had her biopsy a few days ago, and we’re waiting for the results. While we were all talking, she asked me to come out to the porch for a minute. She told me she didn’t want to say it in front of everyone, but she’s trying to prepare herself for “round two.”

I won’t lie, I’ve been worried since the doctor in Portland told us there’s a spot in her liver. But so far I’ve done a pretty good job of telling myself that we don’t ACTUALLY know anything yet, and it could be nothing. So I said that on the porch. I told her that I was scared too, but we shouldn’t get too far ahead of ourselves.

Then she told me her doctor compared this CT scan with the one they took at a checkup in August. Whatever this spot is, it wasn’t there in August. So it went from absent to two inches across in less than five months.

I stopped her there when my stomach plummeted to my feet. “Two INCHES?” She nodded. I felt the oxygen fleeing from my lungs. “I thought it was two centimeters…” I tried to push my ribs back out to where they’re supposed to be, to stop them from crushing my heart and lungs, but it wasn’t working.

She shook her head gently and said “No, it’s two inches.” And for the rest of our conversation I felt my chest try to implode and explode at the same time. I felt my lungs expand but fail to actually breathe. I needed to vomit.

But I could tell she was going through the same things, and had been for weeks. So I swallowed all that and forced myself to smile, knowing she probably saw right through it. I told her that whatever happens, we’re all here with her, and that’s never
going to change. I told her I was also scared, but that I was going to try really hard not to
assume before we know for sure.

When we went back into the house, they said they needed to get home to feed
animals. I stood on the porch while they drove away, and when I walked back in, Marc
was standing in the dining room looking at me.

I closed the door behind me and leaned against it, and in an all-encompassing
wave, my chest caved in, my lungs exploded, my face twisted into a mess. I covered my
distorted mouth with my shaking hand and I sunk to the floor and began to violently sob.

Marc hadn’t been a part of the conversation outside, so I had to say it. I had to say
it out loud. My lips had to say the words and tell him that the thing in her liver was a
gigantic two inches across and it was new since August. The rest didn’t need to be
explained.

He sat with me on the floor for a while and eventually got me to move to the
couch instead. He tried to tell me that we didn’t know for sure, but I know. What else
could grow that fast?

The pain in my chest became a deeper ache throughout my entire abdomen and I
couldn’t breathe. I took longer and longer breaths but nothing worked. It felt like my
lungs were trying too hard and my throat was still closing. I cried so hard I couldn’t even
speak and I could only barely breathe, and I dry-heaved and nearly vomiting several
times. And all I could say the whole time was “I don’t want my mom to die. What am I
supposed to do?” over and over again.

We have to do this again, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. She has to
go through hell again, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. If it didn’t work last
time, it’s not going to work this time. I’m going to lose her, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.

She’s going to die.

I don’t know what to do.
January 31, 2016

We get the results of the biopsy tomorrow, and I’m trying to pretend like I’m not falling apart.

Mom and I walked out to the barn to feed horses, and on the way back to the house she stopped in the driveway and asked me to use my cell phone to take a video of the appointment tomorrow. She doesn’t think Dad will agree to do it. When we got bad news before, it was hard for us all to remember what the doctors had said because we were so upset. If we end up getting bad news tomorrow, she wants a record of what he says because she knows none of us will remember it very well.

Then she asked me if I believe in God. I really didn’t want to talk about that. Not now. I know what she wants to hear and I know I’d be lying if I said it. I wish I had the answer to that. I wish I could believe in a God so intensely that the answer we get in the morning won’t matter. I wish I genuinely believed that there was someone actually listening when I pray. I want to know, but I just don’t. And I know she’s asking me because she is thinking about what it means to die. She’s preparing herself for the worst possible outcome for tomorrow’s appointment and I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to think about that. I’ve been holding my breath for so long that I can feel myself about to burst and thinking about whether or not there’s a God who gives a shit makes it even harder to breathe in the absence of undeniable evidence.

I kind of smiled and winced at the same time, and said “On most days.”

“I’m serious,” she told me. And I wanted to tell her that it’s complicated, and that I didn’t even know the answer to that question. I wanted to tell her that it’s just not that simple, but then she said, “It’s a simple question. Either you believe or you don’t.”
I tried to speak but I got stuck on my words. I don’t even know what I believe, really. Some days I think I do, some days I know I don’t. I want to, but sometimes I just don’t feel it. Some days I just can’t.

“Aside from probably being angry at Him right now, have you accepted Christ into your heart as your savior?” she asked.

I didn’t know what to say. I know what she wants to hear, but I know it’d be a lie if I told her that. “I hope there’s a God,” I told her. “But some days I’m not sure.”

“Well,” she said. “Can you figure it out? Because we didn’t take you to church when you were young, we didn’t make you study the Bible, so I don’t know how you feel about God. But before I die, I need to know that my babies have taken Christ into their hearts. I need to know that you are saved before I die.”

I didn’t even know how to respond to that, so I just looked down at her feet and nodded my head with that weird smile/wince on my face.
February 1, 2016

Terminal.
Appendix A: Events & Background information in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Background info</th>
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<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>Church, grandma made dress, peeing in church after can’t remember poem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>Being shipped on train to Arkansas</td>
<td>Establishing setting by describing Grandma’s routine and the overall appearance of workers in the store in mornings and afternoons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>Two white people come into the store and Uncle Willie pretends to not be crippled</td>
<td>Background on interests at he time</td>
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<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>Old sheriff tells them they KKK will be looking for black man, so they hide uncle willie under the onions and potato bin</td>
<td>Description of the store and setting</td>
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<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>“Poor white trash” children experience on porch</td>
<td>Characterization for Bailey, annual rituals for meat preservation, perspective on white people in that part of town</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>Reverend Thomas and Sister Monroe in church screaming “Preach it!”</td>
<td>Backstory on Momma</td>
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<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>Get Christmas presents from parents for first time</td>
<td>Depression hitting stamps</td>
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<td>Chapter 9</td>
<td>Father shows up and takes them to St. Louis</td>
<td>Life in St. Louis, new family members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter 11</td>
<td>Mr. Freeman exposes himself and masturbates in front of Maya</td>
<td>Changes in life in St. Louis</td>
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<td>Chapter 12</td>
<td>Mr. Freeman rapes her</td>
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<td>Chapter 13</td>
<td>She tells Bailey, Mr. Freeman is found guilty, but released early and then found kicked to death. She feels bad about this and decides to stop talking, which makes her family send her back to Stamps.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapter 14</td>
<td>Mrs. Flowers gets her to speak again through literature and poetry, she’s punished for saying “By the way”</td>
<td>Characterization of Mrs. Flowers</td>
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<td>Chapter 15</td>
<td>Maya becomes a maid for Mrs. Cullinan, she purposefully breaks her favorite casserole dish to get fired.</td>
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<td>Chapter 16</td>
<td>Bailey mysteriously returns home late from the movies</td>
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<td>Chapter 17</td>
<td>Revival church service</td>
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<td>Chapter 18</td>
<td>Joe Louis boxing match &amp; win</td>
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<td>Chapter 19</td>
<td>Meets first friend Louis Kendricks, gets first valentine’s letter and crush</td>
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<td>Chapter 20</td>
<td>Joyce convinces Bailey to actually have sex.</td>
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<td>Chapter 21</td>
<td>Mr. George Taylor’s ghost story</td>
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<td>Chapter 22</td>
<td>8th grade graduation</td>
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<td>Chapter 23</td>
<td>Maya’s first cavities, and being denied by a white dentist based on race (first occurrence in the book)</td>
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<td>Chapter 25</td>
<td>Bailey sees the dead black man who was murdered by whites, Momma decides that it’s time for them to go live with their parents</td>
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<td>Chapter 26</td>
<td>Describes general life in California with mother, background and characterization for mother</td>
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<td>Changes in San Francisco after war begins. – racism, prejudice</td>
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<td>Scholarship to get into California Labor School Background on school in California compared to Stamps</td>
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<td>Conman’s story. “Daddy Clidell” characterization and background</td>
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<td>Chapter 30</td>
<td>Terrible trip to Mexico with Daddy Bailey</td>
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<td>Chapter 31</td>
<td>Dolores (Daddy Bailey’s girlfriend) attacks Maya</td>
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<td>Chapter 32</td>
<td>She runs away and lives in a junkyard for a while</td>
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<td>Chapter 33</td>
<td>Bailey is kicked out of the house Bailey’s change into “gangster”</td>
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<td>Chapter 34</td>
<td>First real job - as the first black conductorette in SF Maya’s characterization and new description of how school is changing</td>
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<td>Chapter 35</td>
<td>Decides to have sex with the popular boy in school to prove to herself that she’s not a lesbian, ends up getting pregnant</td>
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<td>Chapter 36</td>
<td>Keeps pregnancy secret until finishes school, gives birth, and the first moment she realizes that she actually can take care of the baby</td>
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Works Cited


