

Summer 2017

## My Life is a Manifesto: From Rich, To Poor, To Teacher

Angela M. Pieniaszek

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd>



Part of the [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Pieniaszek, A.M. (2017). My life is a manifesto: From rich, to poor, to teacher (Doctoral Dissertation).

This dissertation (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu).

# MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: FROM RICH, TO POOR, TO TEACHER

by

ANGELA PIENIASZEK

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

## ABSTRACT

This inquiry travels through stages of my education and life in order to explore the following three questions: How do a teacher's values and personal experiences translate into teaching lives and teaching acts? How do teachers and students live counterstories inside and outside of the classroom? How do class, gender and place impact teaching and learning? Building on the works of critical theorists, (Apple, 2004; Ayers, 2004; Delpit, 2006; Freire, 2005; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991; Kozol, 1992; Watkins, 2001,2004), autobiographical studies (He, 2003, 2010; Miller, 2005; Pinar, 1994; Schubert & Ayers; 1990) and memoirs (Angelou, 1993; Ayers, 2001; Barrington, 2002; Karr, 2015; Lamott, 1994; Lawson, 2015; Sedaris, 2000; Walls, 2005) and others, I use memoir as methodology to recount passages that occurred during three distinct phases of my life: my life as a rich girl, my life as poor trash, and my life as a teacher. I illuminate how my personal experience of moving between socioeconomic classes, geographical places, and roles of womanhood shaped who I was and how I become who I am as a teacher and how class, place and gender impact the process of becoming educated.

This memoir engages in a pedagogy of liberation (Shor & Friere, 1986) that celebrates the voice of individuals and interrogates how personal experience affects the process of becoming educated and the development of any individual as a student, a teacher, and a critically engaged member of society (Ayers, 2004b; Freire; 2005; Kincheloe, 1999). My life manifests

how class, place, gender and race helps us understand who we are and how we become who we are but cannot define who we are in a constantly changing and contested world. My life manifests how education could be catalyst for greater understanding of ourselves, our world, and our choices in the world. My life manifests that teaching is personal and political. My life curriculum is a manifesto constantly in the making, and I hope that it will speak to my daughter, and son, and other people's children as they compose their lives in a contested and unjust world.

INDEX WORDS: Memoir, Autobiographical research, Place, Class, Critical theory

MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: FROM RICH, TO POOR, TO TEACHER

by

ANGELA PIENIASZEK

B. S. University of Georgia, 2002

M.Ed. University of West Georgia, 2012

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia South University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

© 2017

ANGELA PIENIASZEK

All Rights Reserved

MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: FROM RICH, TO POOR, TO TEACHER

by

ANGELA PIENIASZEK

Major Professor: Ming Fang He  
Committee: Daniel Chapman  
John Weaver  
William Schubert

Electronic Version Approved:  
July 2017

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family, my students, my colleagues and my teachers. Each and every one of you has made an impact on my life that I carry with me every day.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I must acknowledge my dissertation chair, Dr. Ming Fang He. I was scared to go personal, but she insisted that I had something to say, even when I didn't believe I did. She told me to "write my naked baby" and find meaning in my experience and in all the work and study I have pursued. Without her encouragement, I would have never reached the place where I am now. She is a force of nature, and I am thankful that she sees something in me.

I would like to acknowledge my committee members. Dr. Bill Schubert, I will never forget you explaining theory to students by taking on the role of the theorist and spinning your chair. You make theory applicable and understandable. Dr. Dan Chapman, you ask students to think for themselves and about the material and you always encourage debate and critical thinking. Dr. John Weaver, I learned from you that no idea is too radical; and that every idea deserves to be investigated, discussed, and considered. All of you have helped in these ways in more as I've worked through this dissertation, and I thank you. In all the reading, classes and time I have been fortunate enough to share with all four of you, please know you have made a lasting impact on my thoughts, my learning, my life, and my teaching.

I would like to thank my classmates: Allison Beasley, John Cato, Jennifer Fitzner, Marquez Hall, Yiming Yin, Sonya Jones, Julie Kimble, Beth McCall, Damita Robinson, Cabrala Reddick, and Yolanda Surrency. I have learned so much from all of you and will forever cherish learning and experiencing this journey together.



Thank you mis compañeras, Kelly Robinson y Polly Stewart Holder. I have the honor of teaching with you every day as we have shared our lives and our profession. Thank you hermanas for always knowing how to push me, always knowing how to comfort me, and always knowing when I need someone to listen. Thank you for sharing your time, your thoughts, your advice, and your work with me. I love you both.

A special thank you to Nickie Nolasco, you are my scholarly sister, and I look forward to making many Derrida jokes with you in the future as we sit on the porch and enjoy our lives as they unfold around us. You are a light that shines on everyone around you, and I am thankful that you shine your light in my direction.

I want to acknowledge my Uncle, who has been nothing but an unwavering support. We have struggled through mothers together; you are an unparalleled support, and I could not have completed this path without you.

My family is wonderful, loving and supportive. To my sister, my dad, stepmother, and mom, who always cheered me on, and to my Rich, Gail, and Deanna, to all of you, I love you.

Tim Pieniaszek, thank you for sharing your life with me, thank you for being my biggest fan, and thank you for always supporting me even when it meant time away from each other. I look forward to our years of wandering and wondering together. Lastly, this is for my children. Gavin and Daphne, you have grown into amazing people who I am proud to know, and I am honored you call me mom.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PROLOGUE.....	9
CHAPTER 1: THE MERGER OF ACADEMICS AND LIFE: AN INTRODUCTION.....	12
Why We're Here: Purpose of Study.....	13
Teaching Today: Context of Study.....	18
What Other People Say: Literature Review.....	24
How I See the World: Theoretical Framework.....	24
Life Curriculum As Autobiographical Text.....	28
Memoir, Fiction, and the Arts.....	31
How Imagination Contributes to Stories.....	33
Place, Class, and Gender.....	34
Why Memoirs Are Powerful: Methodology.....	38
Composing Memoir.....	48
Manifestos.....	51
CHAPTER 2: MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: RICH.....	55
Prelude: Rich Girl.....	55
Memoir: Rich.....	63
Getting Started: A Life Distracted.....	63
Passage 1: Mom and Dad.....	66
Passage 2: So Shy, So Sick, So in Love with a Puppy.....	69
Passage 3: School Time!.....	77
Passage 4: The O'Shunns.....	80

Passage 5: Public School.....	82
Passage 6: What’s Happening?.....	85
Passage 7: The End of the World As We Know It.....	88
Passage 8: The Aftermath.....	91
Passage 9: Batching It.....	93
Passage 10: She’s So Special.....	97
Passage 11: She’s So Special... Or Not.....	99
Passage 12: High School.....	105
Postlude 1: Pondering Privilege and Womanhood.....	112
<b>CHAPTER 3: MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: POOR.....</b>	<b>118</b>
Prelude: Introduction to My Poor Trash Condition.....	118
Memoir: Poor.....	124
Passage 13: ATL.....	124
Passage 14: Northern Accent in the Dirty South.....	126
Passage 15: Screwing Around and Screwing Up.....	130
Passage 16: Change Is Hard.....	134
Passage 17: Holy.Moly.....	138
Passage 18: Getting It Together.....	142
Passage 19: Making Amends.....	145
Passage 20: Starting Again.....	148
Passage 21: Baby Time.....	152
Passage 22: Baby Love.....	157
Passage 23: Back To School.....	161

Passage 24: Finishing Up.....	165
Passage 25: Where’s My Coat?.....	167
Postlude 2: Out of Place, In Place.....	170
<b>CHAPTER 4: MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO:TEACHER.....</b>	<b>176</b>
Prelude: Now I’m a Teacher.....	176
Memoir: Teacher.....	180
Passage 26: Where are All the Jobs?.....	180
Passage 27: Do You Even Speak Spanish?.....	186
Passage 28: Just Keep Going.....	191
Passage 29: RATS.....	194
Passage 30: Single and Loving It.....	201
Passage 31: The Saga of Tim Pieniaszek.....	204
Passage 32: A Bit of Backstory by Gavin Pieniaszek in (mostly) His Own Words.....	207
Passage 33: Tim Pieniaszek.....	212
Passage 34: Who Woulda Thunk It?.....	214
Passage 35: Nuclear(ish) Family Memories.....	218
Passage 36: Sometimes You Just Can’t Anymore.....	225
Passage 37: Baby With Baby.....	229
Passage 38: On and On.....	232
Passage 39: Family.....	236
Passage 40: Mom and the Aftermath.....	245
Passage 41: Here We Go Again.....	251
Passage 42: Going Down Hard.....	256

Passage 43: Rock Bottom.....	261
Passage 44: Hope.....	265
Closing: Distracted Again!.....	269
Postlude 3: Teaching Choices Meet a Teacher’s Life.....	272
Teaching Our Children.....	272
Teaching in Contested Space.....	276
Sharing the Storied Lives We Live.....	279
CHAPTER 5: OUR LIVES ARE MANIFESTOS.....	283
EPILOGUE: LETTERS TO MY DAUGHTER(S).....	312
REFERENCES.....	333

### **PROLOGUE: My Life Is a Manifesto**

I am a woman who lives in the South. Although I live and teach in the suburbs of a major metropolitan city, I was almost hit by a 30-year-old pickup truck that was flying the confederate flag yesterday on my way home. On the way to school today, I had to stop on a major state highway because there was a cow in the road making a break from a local farm. Yes, you read that right: a cow. I thought maybe I was just tired; the sun was just coming up and it was early in the morning. Just in case I didn't imagine it, I flashed my lights at oncoming 60-mile-an-hour traffic in my vain attempt to warn: "CAUTION. COW AHEAD." My reality was confirmed when I arrived at school and saw a Facebook post from another teacher stating that she too had encountered delays due to a very frustrated police officer trying to manage a lone cow in the middle of the road. I knew I wasn't completely hallucinating that cow. The weird thing is, this has happened to me before. Once it was a herd of cows, another time a horse, and this time a singular cow. Farm animals are fascinating and city folk (which is how I would categorize myself) think that rural living is idyllic and quiet. But I know firsthand that although that might be true, you never know when a farm animal is going to enact his long-awaited and planned attempt at escape and you better get out of his way.

I am White. I am a student, a teacher, a mother, and a domestic partner. I am a teacher in a devalued profession. I speak two languages: English, the language of the privileged, and Spanish, the language that is marginalized in the United States, a language of otherness. I teach one of them to high schoolers in a suburb of the same metropolitan area, although the high school is thirty miles away from my home. The last mass lynching in America (Wexler, 2003) was in the county where I teach. The place where I live and the place where I work are a far cry from the place I grew up, which was in a mid-sized Midwestern town in the North. When I

speak, people still inquire: “Where you from? You ain’t from around here, are ya?” I have lived in the South for more than twenty years now. I came of age in the South, although I don’t have the twang to prove it. Back in the Midwest, I grew up in a four-bedroom house. It had a formal and informal living and dining room, three bathrooms and a basement. A maid cleaned it every week because my parents were busy working. My father was the youngest general manager of an electric cooperative in the country and worked at the same job for about twenty years. We regularly took vacations to the South because that is where my mother and father’s parents still lived. My dad traveled a lot for his work. At least once a year, we would fly to meet him on a business trip in large cities such as Los Angeles, San Diego, Washington, D.C., New York City, and Chicago. I realize now, as my partner and I struggle to save enough money to take our family on a one-week vacation every other year, that I grew up materially privileged. The idea that I would attend college was never in question, at least not until I was older. Most of the adults around me every day had attended college, had stable jobs and incomes, owned homes and at least two cars, and went on at least one vacation a year. My mother, my grandparents, my aunts, and my uncles were the exceptions to this rule.

Using the methodology of memoir, I connect in this project my personal experiences to my learning, reading, and writing in the doctoral program. I search for how to connect my life roles as a teacher, mother, sister, wife, and daughter to the theories and ideas I have explored. Ayers (2004a) reminds me,

Each human being is a project, and the human project is a project of inquiry conducted in the world and with one another, a project of restlessness, a ceaseless struggle to know and to be—the primal struggle that begins at birth and only ends with death. We seek truth; we want to be free. (p. 53)

Working with this idea, I view this memoir as my contribution to the ‘human project’ and explore how the events in my personal story connect to theories I have explored in reading, writing, studying and research. In thinking about my life, I see it naturally broken into three major sections: My life as a rich White girl, my life as poor White trash, and my life as a teacher.

The wording of the title emphasizes the different stations and experiences of my life. While writing the memoir, I chose to use the word passage to describe the steps of my journey as I move through experiences on my way from where I started as a rich White girl to where I stand now as a teacher. The word manifesto is included to highlight a call to action for educators. Merriam-Webster (2017) defines manifesto as, “a written statement declaring publicly the intentions, motives, or views of its issuer.” Although this memoir focuses on the “views of its issuer,” it is intended as well to embody an element of critical theory that Freire (2005) insists educators work towards:

Another testimony that should not be missing from our relationship with students is the testimony of our constant commitment to justice, liberty, individual rights, of our dedication to defending the weakest when they are subjected to the exploitation of the strongest. It is important, also, in this daily task, to show students there is beauty in the ethical struggle (p. 99)

Within the context of a life there is not merely the experience, but the question of how that experience offers us insight to structures of power in the lived lives of our students and ourselves. Working within these structures, we must constantly commit to uncovering influences of power and work to move past how they limit our pursuit and commitment to equality for our students and ourselves.



## **CHAPTER 1: THE MERGER OF ACADEMICS AND LIFE: AN INTRODUCTION**

I stand at the crossroads of place and class. The American Dream is to grow up and attain more than your parents did and to possess more. By these standards, I have not realized the Dream. I live in a three-bedroom house about a third of the size of the house I grew up in. It's messy most of the time and dirty part of the time because both my partner and I work more than full time hours. We have two children, although only one for each is our biological child. I have lived in apartments in the city and shacks in the country and many places in between before I found my place in the middle. I now have the comforts of a bank account, health insurance, and a job I enjoy. I went from privileged to underprivileged in less than five years with the benefit of still being able to leverage some of my privilege to help me navigate the world and circumstances in which I found myself. I have been trying to work my way through and develop an understanding of my experience ever since. I have straddled the worlds of Northerner and Southerner, rich and poor, foreigner and native, educated and uneducated, professional and non-professional, daughter and mother, dependent and independent, wife, divorcee and partner, classy and classless, and student and teacher. I stand in between.

What I offer are the stories from in between. In this intersection lies the potential for exploring and uncovering understanding of the impacts of class, gender, and place that people face in the United States South and beyond. In this work, I offer a White woman teacher's voice to contribute a narrative of living in poverty, living in privilege, and living as a Northerner in the South. I have chosen the methodology of memoir as the vehicle to share this voice and stories from the in-between. I embark on this adventure to contribute to field of curriculum studies by demonstrating via a lived experience that curriculum is not limited to best practices and methods, or unit layouts or backwards design. This memoir works to expand curriculum beyond the

schoolhouse and to demonstrate and investigate how curriculum encompasses an intersection of educational experiences that occur not only inside the classroom but instead largely outside of the classroom. Using memoir, I share my voice and analyze my stories in order to explore the impacts of place, gender, and class on my educational and life experiences.

### **Why We're Here: Purpose of Study**

Pinar (1994) writes, “Understanding is understanding only when it evolves in the context on an individual’s life history” (p. 41). Through pausing to recount our life histories, one can come to understand the inward and outward power structures that influence the path one travels. Pinar (1994) continues to explain, “One comes to understand how the ‘great issues’ of the century—violence, oppression, arrest—achieve actuality not in the abstract, but in the context of one’s own life” (p. 42). I am a woman who has moved through socioeconomic classes in an uneven trajectory (upper class, lower class, working class, middle class), who has lived in multiple geographic locations that can be described as North, South, rural and urban, and foreign. I am a teacher who has continued to pursue traditional education in the context of a teacher and a learner and my experiences as counterstories challenge metanarratives that dominate the landscape of educational research and dialogues surrounding education today. In my educational experiences, I have consistently been challenged to question and explore multiple facets of education, the educational system and my own educational experience. In addition to focusing on public education, I have also been asked to study and question ideas of research, what counts as quality and meaningful research, and what acceptable forms research can take. This adventure has led me in a quest to identify my place in the world. As a student, I have had the opportunity to explore foundational texts that have helped uncover understandings hidden to me before thinking, reading, writing and discussing what the texts offer.

Ayers (2001/2010) teaches me, “Teachers must understand that even as they teach, they will also be taught; even as they help others develop, they will themselves change and grow” (p. 90). As I teach my students, I learn about them and myself in turn. I share the knowledge of my subject with them, but often this ‘prescribed knowledge’ collides with the personal; we learn from each other in a reciprocal dance. In the many spaces and places we separately occupy, we occupy one place collectively, bringing with us our understandings formed by the places, genders, and classes we identify with. By exploring race through fictional narratives, Bell (1992) teaches me about systematic racism and the violence it imparts on society. Bell (1992) tells me, “...racism lies at the center, not the periphery; in the permanent, not in the fleeting; in the real lives of black and white people, not in the sentimental caverns of the mind” (p. 198). With these words, Bell (1992) uncovers what I have suspected and observed, but he clarifies meaning through narratives that touch my mind and “arm me with knowledge” so that I can “accept the dilemmas of committed confrontation with evils we cannot end” (p.198). Casemore (2008) makes me pause to consider the impact that place has upon my life and the life of my students. Casemore (2008) challenges, “Our autobiographies of place can help us rethink and reintegrate divided spheres of experience: public/private, worldly/domestic, male/female, and black/white” (p. 126). The investigation of the geographical and public place(s) where we live our lives helps us develop a deeper understanding of the stasis that place can impart; or the liberation that its interrogation can accomplish.

Delpit (2006), asks me to think about language and power structures when I am teaching *Other People’s Children*. She acknowledges the difficulties of communicating across racial, class, and cultural lines in an effort to develop greater understanding for our students and our collective lives. She suggests that we move to find ways to celebrate and explore diversity in our

classrooms and open up spaces for learning that embrace and acknowledge the conflicting power structures that surface in the act of schooling (p. 66-67). This is particularly pertinent to me as an educator who teaches a foreign language; whether it be my own native tongue of English to students who speak other languages, or whether it be my second language, Spanish, which is the language in which I studied, read, and wrote during my time as an undergraduate student. I blame my training in writing *ensayos* for my love of run-on sentences in my English academic writing today. Without Delpit (2006) shining a light on power structures imbued in language structures I would misunderstand how, in English and in Spanish, the language of school is often at odds with the language used outside of school and the divide this creates for students (p. 69). He et al. (2013) teaches me about living and teaching in between contested spaces of race, class, gender, and power (p. 109). He et al. (2013) explain, “The power of teaching courageously in-between lies in educational workers’ strong advocacy on behalf of individuals groups, families, tribes, communities, and societies that are often at controversy, underrepresented, misrepresented, or excluded in the official narrative” (p. 116). He et al. (2013) reveals the idea of in-between spaces and what it means to live and teach in them while working in and simultaneously against power structures that limit our understanding of what it means to be educated and what it means to pass through the world. As a person who has been in between many places myself, I can identify with the ideas and questions of what it means to belong yet not; what it means to inhabit two worlds simultaneously, never quite embracing wholly or blindly the dominant values one or the other possesses. He et al. (2013) says to me,

...This expanded community embodies possibilities and creates hope that we can invent more in-between spaces, an invigorating gathering place for differences, where we might live more robustly, develop our human capacities more fully, and become humane and

peaceful in inquiry and life in an increasingly changing and diversifying world. (p. 133-134)

Working with the ideas of these curriculum workers, along with fictional texts and many others, I search to make meaning of their messages and how my understanding of their work evolves in the context of my own individual life history (Pinar, 1994).

In this memoir, I examine my personal journey and how I see and feel the messages of these foundational curriculum theorists reflected in that journey. In the subsequent manifesto, I bring together the lessons gleaned from the experience of writing memoir and lessons learned from studying theory to form a call to action for educators and share what I believe, what I love, and what I am committed to in my teaching and learning. In looking towards examining myself in this effort, I examine my personal experiences focusing on the themes of class, gender, and place. I offer these experiences this manifesto as counterstories to the dominant narratives that frame educational reality today. While sharing my personal experiences and looking towards the influences of foundational curriculum studies texts and theorists, I aim to do what Pinar (1994) describes, "...seek some liberation from abstraction through the recovery of immediate individual experience, or a lived-in contrast to an exclusively conceptual sense of self and the world" (p. 103). In today's teaching climate, schools are concerned with "Rac[ing] to the Top," constant evaluation due to the implementation of programs such as the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES), and the onslaught of never-ending administration of standardized tests. In this climate, it easy for a teacher to forget why they were led to teaching, what inspires them to teach, and what motivates them to continue. Palmer (2007) discusses the effects of losing touch with 'the teacher within,'

A vocation that is not mine, no matter how externally valued, does violence to the self—in the precise sense that it violates my identity and integrity on behalf of some abstract norm. When I violate myself, I invariably end up violating the people I work with. How many teachers inflict their own pain on their students, the pain that comes from doing what never was, or no longer is, their true work? (p. 31)

Adding to this violation of self, teachers are constantly forced to quantify their purpose with numbers and statistics. Teachers are discouraged from dialogue that embraces the wholeness of a student. When considering how to best serve students, the humanity of the student is replaced with data and discussions of standard deviations. A student's personhood is overshadowed with discussions of the validity of test questions and how to raise test scores. A teacher is not encouraged to look at their students, to survey their students, to speak to their students, to engage with, or work in an open environment with their students. In this climate, connection and humanity are drained from the experience of learning. By examining stages of my educational experience using foundational texts and rooting the work in critical inquiry, I connect the themes in the texts to my personal experiences in and out the classroom as a teacher, student, and human being. I write about and explore how these passages have influenced my teaching career and the development of my teaching self. I explore my own quantification as a student and a teacher and my struggle to find balance and break away from viewing learning outcomes as numbers. I acknowledge how social factors such as class, gender, and place influence my choices and place in the world. I recognize how these social factors influence the place of students in the world and influence their choices and futures. Autobiographical exploration is essential for teachers and researchers. In a field where one deals with people, one must know where they are coming from in order to foster love and intentionality in teaching and research choices. Looking towards the

influences of aforementioned theorists, I frame this memoir in critical inquiry and offer my lived experience in an effort to connect and demonstrate how such issues as class, place, and gender have shaped my educational journey, my choice to become a teacher, my teaching choices, my teaching and personal life, and educational outcomes of my own learning.

### **Teaching Today: Context of Study**

School has been the one stable thing throughout my life. It has rejected me, challenged me, questioned me, pushed and pulled me, and helped me discover purpose and myself. In an effort to gain a perspective on lived experience, I will reflect on my educational experiences as a poor woman, a middle-class woman, a White woman, a Northerner living in the South, a knocked-up unwed student, a mother, a daughter of a woman who suffers mental illness and battles addiction, and a teacher. The focus of my study will be based on the in-between of personal experience and educative experience. Themes I will explore in this writing include class, gender, and place. I have had educational and life experiences that provide a narrative with each one of these themes at its center. Therefore, in moving inward, my aim will ultimately be to move outward.

Life story and circumstances always play significant roles in one's education. Pinar (2012) reminds us, "Because the curriculum is that complicated conversation between teachers and students over the past and its meaning for the present as well as what both portend for the future, curriculum theory is focused on *educational experience*." (p. 2). Educational experiences are not limited to strictly the cinder block walls of the local school or the stone walls of the university. In contrast, personal experiences are brought into these spaces in the bodies and minds of the students that inhabit the desks and in the body and mind of the teacher that stands in front of them. Pinar (2002) expands on the idea of educational experience, "Through academic

and self-study we reconstruct ourselves and the world we inhabit” (p. 2). Personal experiences are regularly ignored in schools. Instead, schools favor a neatly-mapped curriculum designed to disseminate information with the ultimate goal of proving the worth of the student and the teacher by achieving an acceptable score on a test or grade in an online grade book. Educators are encouraged to employ the “banking method” of education that requires us to deposit our superior knowledge in our student receptacles. What we fail to acknowledge in this model are the individual and individual experiences and circumstances (Freire, 1970/2005). The idealism of this model is that if we fill up students well, they will achieve high scores on multiple-choice tests. These scores will then be used to justify the success or failure of our educational institutions. Changes in educational policy have shifted in the last twenty years, emphasizing testing and accountability. Ravich (2010) explains

No Child Left Behind-or NCLB- changed the nature of public schooling across the nation by making standardized test scores the primary measure of school quality. The rise of fall of test scores in reading and mathematics became the critical variable in judging students, teachers, principals and schools. (p. 26)

In the current educational climate, educators and student experience constant pressure to perform, perform, perform. The proof of positive performance lies in student test scores and data. If you examine the way that schools in Georgia are ranked based on the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI), there are eighteen factors that contribute to the calculation of the school’s overall “grade” (Georgia Department of Education, 2015). The school’s score is measured not only by how well students perform on standardized tests, but also in numbers for attendance, graduation, advanced placement classes, completion of education ‘pathways’ (completing a series of educational courses in one subject outside of the standard



curriculum), and promotion through grade levels.

As pressure to perform increases, teachers find themselves in the position of continually scripting the work they do with their students in order to bolster overall achievement. In the school where I teach, we are required to incorporate writing and mathematics across the curriculum. Regardless of the subject taught, all teachers must incorporate methods that simplify the ways in which students approach questions. As a result, we see students producing very scripted and formulaic writing that recites the question, answers the question, cites evidence, and explains an answer. Instead of encouraging students to think critically about their world, we are expected to script their thinking and make them fret about whether they pass the End of the Course Test. Watkins (2012) describes the value of test scores as follows:

The deliverable, knowledge, is positioned like a product. In the case of K-12, knowledge, which is presumed to be universal and objective, is to be standardized, measured, and tested. Test scores in this view are the ultimate arbiter of educational quality and, like units of commodity or money, can allow for the quantification of growth and progress. (p. 66-67)

The culture of high stakes testing and performance plagues educators and students today. It is a narrative from which we have no escape; it dominates the discourse of our interactions with our fellow educators, in meetings with parents, in justifications of our pedagogical choices to the community, and in the work we develop with our students. Performance pressure makes the already overwhelming tasks of meeting students where they are, recognizing cultural differences in the classroom, and breaking down barriers between class, gender, and place seemingly impossible. There is little space or time left to ask our students to critically address the roles we play in perpetuating societal systems and norms that reinforce inequalities such as classism and

sexism. As educators and students suffer with the challenges of a high-stakes testing environment, the opportunities to explore educational experience become few. Teachers are largely prescribed what to teach by their state and local school boards. In addition, often teachers feel the pressures of community interests encroaching on their classroom and fear challenging their students on issues of social justice because it might upset parents or administrators. In describing the impact that high stakes testing has on today's schools, Ravitch (2010) explains,

But the competition among schools to get higher test scores is of a different nature; in the current climate, it is sure to cause teachers to spend more time preparing students for state tests, not on thoughtful writing, critical reading, scientific experiments, or historical study. (p. 243)

Teachers are consumed with covering their prescribed material, afraid to branch away from it for fear of offending the powers that give them their job. As a result, students spend little time thinking and the majority of their time memorizing facts, clicking computers, and bubbling in circles on Scantron forms.

In an effort to work towards creating educational spaces that value educational experiences, it is important for educators to address issues of social justice in the classroom through the study of relationships between social systems and conditions, education, and power. Kincheloe (2004) contends, "The stunting of potential takes place in the pedagogy of low expectations where concern with disciplining the incompetent poor to create a more ordered and efficient society takes the place of a democratic social vision" (p. 7). This inquiry examines personal experiences to make them meaningful in light of larger social questions about gender, class, and place. The inquiry examines these three core themes in the context of the educational experience of the author and provides examples of how experience impacts the development of

her teacher values, teaching life and teaching acts.

To combat the issues of dormancy in education, educators need to address the influences that work against society in developing understanding about class, gender, and place. Delpit (2006) discusses this in regards to language education for socioeconomically disadvantaged and minority groups: “Both sides need to be able to listen, and I contend it is those with the most power, those in the majority, who must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process” (p. 46). In order to foster a deeper picture of ourselves, each other, and our worlds, it is essential that we identify our place in the world and actively engage in work that aims at developing a deeper understanding of our place from more than one perspective. Through discourse, educators have the opportunity to learn from their students and from each other. Freire (2005) reminds us, “Listening to all that come to us, regardless of their intellectual level, is a human duty and reveals an identification with democracy and not with elitism” (p. 71). It begins with open and honest dialogue about experience and then works towards framing these experiences into a collage of the human experience, a collective experience where all have a meaningful voice and place in the discussion.

Although standardization in education is a reality in which educators and students find themselves contending with daily, the threat that it poses to education is not singular. Standardization has laid the groundwork for increasing the presence and influence that private businesses have on education. Watkins (2012) suggests that students should be challenged to not simply restate official knowledge but instead develop tools to critically question the producers of knowledge, as well as examine this knowledge in the contexts of history, politics, and social structures. In contrast to this idea, standardization whitewashes education and reduces the goals of public education to simply a measurement of official knowledge. Freire (2005) challenges,

“We must dare to learn how to dare in order to say no to the bureaucratization of the mind to which we are exposed to everyday” (p. xxvii). By exploring the themes of gender, class, and place through the experience of a teacher, I dare to challenge the bureaucratization of study, language, curriculum, research, teaching, writing, and life.

Through my years as a student and a teacher, I have grappled with frequently occurring themes in all realms of my life. In particular, I struggle daily with the ideas of who I am, what I stand for, and whether my actions reflect the values that I hold dear. As a researcher, I am drawn in particular to writings of identity, social justice, and counternarratives. As a researcher, I am not seeking Truth from a positivistic standpoint. Instead, I am experimenting with ideas and offering my truths and my journey in an effort to connect what I have learned and what I have experienced in an effort to develop a deeper understanding of how this affects my personal life and my teaching life. In an essay about autobiography as a form of research Haynes (2008) notes, “As valid as the various existing stories are, they cannot speak for me” (p. 134). This is the reason I have decided to use memoir as the methodology in my search for a voice in research and education. In the process of writing this dissertation, I have worked towards an understanding of and for myself; I have (re)searched and offered my voice. Through this work, I search for an understanding of lived experience and I search to make meaning of these events with a voice that contributes to the larger lived curriculum and explores the themes of race, class and gender. This voice is the voice of a Northerner living in the South, who struggles with the roles of womanhood, teaching, and the influences and limitations of social class.

## **What Other People Say: Literature Review**

### **How I See the World: Theoretical Framework**

Theoretically my dissertation draws upon a wide array of works from critical theorists and curriculum theorists. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/2005) lays out a curriculum that aims at relieving the oppression of people by empowering them through their own education. This book condemns existing power structures and their influence on education, as well as offers hope on how a system can be restructured to relieve the oppression of a people. In its opening pages, Freire (1970/2005) states,

Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both. (p. 44)

By working towards freeing the oppressed from a combative relationship with their oppressors, Freire (1970/2005) uncovers the potential for the oppressed to free both. In discussing the power structures that create and maintain this system, Freire (1970/2005) uses critical theory to develop his idea of critical pedagogy that guides a curriculum that informs curriculum workers and inspires them to create a better world.

In addition to Freire (1970/2005), there are many other theorists within the field of curriculum studies that use critical inquiry as a form of curriculum inquiry. Many of these theorists draw on Marxism in order to examine the state of schools and the curriculum. In particular, Apple (2004) heavily incorporates critical and Marxist theory in his work to examine and uncover “The Hidden Curriculum.” Gottesman (2012) explains how critical and Marxist

theory influenced Apple, “Additionally, Apple (2004) turned to Marx as support for his engagement with curriculum theorizing, a move that Apple knew placed him on the margins of a field that had become woefully under theorized due to its fixation on practicality and management principles” (p. 575). In his work, Apple (2004) uses a critical eye to examine the state of the public school system by discussing the relationships and influences of capitalism. However, critical theory is not limited to examining capitalist structure as the only power structure that creates oppression. Hatch (2002) describes work framed in critical theory, “The object is to reveal for others the kinds and extent of oppression that are being experienced by those studied. With the exposure of oppression comes the call for awareness, resistance, solidarity, and revolutionary transformation” (p.17). Beyond Apple (2004) and Freire (1970/2005), curriculum theorists such as Ayers (2004a/b), Delpit (2006), Kincheloe (1999), Kozol (1992), Watkins (2011), Zinn (2003) and countless other educational theorists have used critical theory as their framework for examining curriculum.

In addition to examining the historical roots of critical inquiry, Crotty (1998) discusses more recent developments and writings in critical inquiry, specifically Freire (1970/2005). Crotty (1998) describes critical inquiry today:

Critical forms of research call current ideology into question, and initiate action, in the cause of social justice. ...researchers find themselves interrogating commonly held values and assumptions, challenging conventional social structures, and engaging in social action. ...Critical inquiry keeps the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice....It is a cyclical process (better seen, perhaps, as a spiraling process for there is movement forward and upward) of reflection and action. (p. 157)

In contrast to describing critical inquiry generally, Sirotnik (1991) describes a method for using critical inquiry more specifically as a form for researching curriculum. Sirotnik (1991) explains that critical theory is a framework that requires researchers and participants to work together on a project that ultimately requires action and also reflection, which is also a cornerstone of Freire's (1970/2005) methods presented in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Sirotnik (1991) lays out a form of critical inquiry that is guided by educational and curricular purposes. Sirotnik (1991) distinguishes critical inquiry from other forms of inquiry as an inquiry that is guided by action. It is a process of examination that does not simply present the problem or provide evidence that there is a problem; it requires the researcher and participants alike to take action against that problem. It can be informed by this action, and then the problem and action can be reassessed and reacted in a cyclical way that aims towards a grand goal: to uncover injustices and to improve education for all students.

Curriculum Studies is a field that emphasizes positionality and reflexivity on the part of the researcher. As the *studies* in the title implies, it is a field that embraces multidisciplinary approaches that are firmly grounded in a variety of theoretical and philosophical perspectives. As an example of all the things that curriculum studies embraces, in my coursework at Georgia Southern I have read foundational works in critical race theory (e.g., Bell, 1992), posthumanism (e.g., Snaza and Weaver, 2014), psychoanalytical texts (e.g., Britzman, 2011), historical texts (e.g., Kliebard, 2004), postcolonial texts (e.g., Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001), and beyond. Hoy and McCarthy (1994) point out, "Sociocultural critique is best thought of as a polymorphic, multilayered, and multidimensional enterprise. Not all critical work need be or can be done in the same way or at the same level of specificity or generality" (p. 18).

I am not concluding that all work in the curriculum field is done narrowly through the

lens of traditional forms of critical theory, but the field of curriculum studies is aimed at some foundational aspects of the critical, namely at doing what Crotty (1998) describes, “Critical inquiry keeps the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice” (p. 157). The curriculum studies field embraces multiple scholarly traditions that all speak to not only the greater, outer views of curriculum, but that also aim to shed light on individual voices, including the voices of the researcher. In fact, the field is so aimed towards giving voice to researchers that it has an entire part of the field that respects curriculum as autobiographical text.

As a teacher who is inundated with "data" and "analysis of data" and is constantly directed to the question "what do the data tell us?" to influence my teaching craft, I am drawn to the curriculum studies field because it allows a space and place for "I" in educational research. In this work which is framed in the critical perspective, I aim to give voice to the complexity of curriculum, respect the "I" of the researcher, and the "I" of participants, and reflect on how our experiences influence our perspective in research and curriculum. Pinar (2012) describes the work of curriculum theorists, “Rather, curriculum theorists in the university regard our pedagogical work as the cultivation of independence of mind, self-reflexivity, and an interdisciplinary erudition” (p. 34). Miller (2000) addresses the question of “What’s left in the field” [of curriculum studies]

If conceived and enacted as a recurrent and yet always changing project, curriculum studies would entail both recognizing and welcoming the need to constantly un-make and re-make the field. It would also require taking into account differing locations, social and cultural contexts, historical Moments, and individuals’ needs and desires. And, as a human project, the field of curriculum would require readings of identity and difference



as well as curriculum works-in-progress, rather than as pre-determined, unified and linear categories or processes. (p. 254)

Working as a curriculum ever in progress, this memoir grounds itself in critical theory and speaks about marginalization, localization, needs, desires, disappointments, frustrations, and joy. The themes of gender, class, and place are all rooted in critical theory. Hatch (2002) describes the critical/feminist paradigm

For critical theorists and feminists, the material world is made up of historically situated structures that have a real impact on the life chances of individuals. These structures are perceived to be real (i.e., natural and immutable), and social action resulting from their perceived realness leads to differential treatment of individuals based on race, gender, and social class. (p. 16)

This memoir explores the themes of gender, class, and place in the context of an individual lived life and the participants that have shared experiences with the researcher and contributed to that life. In writing about my life, I work to uncover situations and consequences of living in a world where these power structures do exist and how people's life choices are influenced by the structures of gender, class and place.

### **Life Curriculum as Autobiographical Text**

A cornerstone of the curriculum studies field is the examination of curriculum as autobiographical text. According to Pinar (1995), the field of curriculum had forgotten the individual and needed to move beyond concern for traditional curricular materials and instead move toward a process that examined inner experience (p. 519). Expanding upon the idea of *currere* and contributing significantly to the study of curriculum as autobiographical text are a multitude of authors. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) identify three major streams

in studying the curriculum as autobiographical text: autobiographical theory and practice, feminist autobiography, and understanding teachers biographically and autobiographically (p. 516). Autobiographical research has the potential to aid the individual teacher in developing a comprehensive view and understanding of personal history. In turn, by working autobiographically and moving from private to public, the reader of autobiographical research has an opportunity to interact with the texts and research in order to inspire personal understanding as a learner. Grumet (1988) makes the point, "...knowledge evolves in human relationships" (p. xix). Autobiographical research helps explore relationships on many levels, relationships such as: the relationship with oneself, the relationship with one's history, the relationship with one's place, the relationship with one's craft and relationships with others. Ellis (2004) comments on relationship development inspired by her autoethnographic work, "My stories stimulate others to tell theirs" (p. 35). Opening space and giving voice are two major functions of autobiographical research in the curriculum studies field. In an effort to continually foster understanding of educational experience, autobiography allows for individuals to contribute and expand conversations about learning via sharing experience.

As a teacher and a student, sharing personal experiences and voice allows space for uncovering truth that would remain hidden if not explored. hooks (1994) writes about sharing in the classroom

One of the ways you can be written off quickly as a professor by colleagues who are suspicious of progressive pedagogy is to allow your students, or yourself, to talk about experience; sharing personal narratives yet linking that knowledge with academic information really enhances our capacity to know. (p. 148)

When I ignore the places and life stories of my students and neglect to share my own with them, we find barriers in our efforts to move towards greater understanding of each other and our places and circumstances in the world. Autobiographical research requires the researcher to share their own stories, but also to situate them and acknowledge the power structures that influence their circumstances, their decisions, and their outcomes. As a White female Northern teacher in the South, I consistently work to understand myself and read and write autobiographically in an effort to develop greater understanding of others. For example, when I read Angelou's (2008) letter to her daughter, I find inspiration and deeper understanding of the world and myself through her experience. Angelou (2008) states her intention, "I have known that I wanted to tell you directly some of the lessons I have learned and under what conditions I have learned them" (p. 1). I hear voices of individuals that connect me in ways unknown to me before reading autobiographical research, autobiography and memoirs. They help me learn lessons or glean greater meaning and understanding of myself in and the world. Without the voices of others, I feel alone. I stay White, I stay middle-class, I stay teacher—I do not expand my worldview or develop deeper understandings of the world in which we all live. I do not understand the tapestry of humanness and human perspective. I slog through with a narrow vision, never interrogating spaces, places, decisions, people, or lives in the world.

Autobiographical research aims to connect us to each other so that we can investigate our individual worlds and our shared world. Miller (2005) describes its power, "... we need to listen to the voices of individuals and to consider possibilities as well as impossibilities of constructing a collective curriculum voice for change and social justice. To accomplish this, we must not work in isolation" (p. 32-33). In order to work collectively, we must hear each other's voices. In the work of He and Phillion (2008), we see scholars celebrating the multitude of voices that

autobiographical research offers. He and Phillion (2008) describe their work as

*Personal~Passionate~Participatory,*

This form of inquiry is “peopled” with characters, rather than filled with categories and labels. In some forms of traditional educational research, experience is seen, shaped and written about by the researcher using theoretically derived forms; in effect the experience is determined by the theory.” (p. 14)

In contrast to research that is determined by theory, research that roots itself in the autobiographical starts with the individual and asks them to make sense of theory in light of their own experience. Examining our own experience as we learn about theory helps us develop deeper understanding of theoretical concepts, our world, and ourselves. In connecting this to the greater purpose of teaching and learning, Ayers (2004a) writes, “I want my teaching to mean something worthwhile in the lives of my students and in the larger worlds that they will inhabit and create. I want it to mean something in mine” (p. 18). I share this sentiment; I want my teaching, my learning, and my research to mean something worthwhile in the world my students and I inhabit. Writing autobiographically gives space to develop meaning by examining the experience of others and my own, and by allowing me to offer my experience. My hope is that it in turn opens space for others to move toward a deeper understanding of themselves, their worlds, and what happens when we interrogate our shared world.

### **Memoir, Fiction, and the Arts**

Along with autobiographical examination exploring imagination in research also opens spaces for uncovering deeper understanding. Memoirs, fiction, and the arts offer researchers a place to interact and imagine in ways that is limited by examining strictly empirical research. When reading and engaging in text, the reader inevitably begins to connect the text to his or her

own life. When reading the lives of others, whether fictional or real, the reader has the opportunity to momentarily become other. The joy I find in reading is rooted in my ability to explore the world through imagination. Memoirs, fiction, and the arts interrogate, give voice and shed light on places and spaces otherwise inaccessible. Sumara (1996) discusses this as an experience of reading, “As I spoke to adolescent readers about their experience of reading *The Chrysalids* and *Forbidden City*, it became clear that, for a number of them, their relationship with the text had become an important referential experience—a reference text” (p. 206). Sumara (1996) distinguishes that the reading experiences of adolescents and adults are different, but at its core the experience of reading allows opportunity for the reader to identify with another (fictional or real) that they would not have otherwise. Individual stories open worlds and move the reader to another place and time. Including memoir as a curriculum inquiry opens up space to imagine more than is possible by limiting examination to experience. Greene (1995) describes the power of imagination

This is another way to imagine imagining: it is becoming a friend of someone else’s mind, with the wonderful power to return to that person a sense of wholeness. Often, imagination can bring severed parts together, can integrate into the right order, can create wholes. (p. 38)

As a classroom teacher, it is a struggle to inspire a group of students to maintain interest in the school day. Incorporating memoir, fiction, visual arts, and dramatic arts such as film provides students opportunities to explore subjects and frame them with the additional vivid contexts of history, politics, and personal relationships. Although not all art is aesthetically pleasing to everyone, incorporating multiple forms of narrative opens space for a discussion and gives the reader/viewer the opportunity to feel other and to intimately understand characters. One

aim of art is to inspire conversation and reaction, which does not always look pretty or feel good. If you react, then the art has served a purpose. It has made you think, question, and possibly criticize. It has stirred reaction. This opening of the curriculum is an example of what Greene (1995) describes

Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive. They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. (p. 43)

### **How Imagination Contributes to Stories**

Just as our classrooms ought to nurture multiple conceptions of humanness and aliveness, so should our research. Theorists such as Bell (1992) use the power of stories to develop this disruptiveness and interrogate social issues in the United States. Since many educators come from White, middle- to upper-class privileged backgrounds, it is crucial they are challenged to critically explore these issues for themselves. They must interrogate issues such as class, gender, and place in an effort to develop a multidimensional view of the world in which they teach and learn. It is essential that educators research in ways that open up spaces that cannot be reached by traditional forms of research. Bell (1992) paints an intricate picture of the issue of race in the United States by combining real statistics with fictional presentations. In his fictional work, Bell (1992) builds a bridge between imagination and reality that helps foster deeper understanding about racial issues. In describing his choice to use an imaginative dialogue for his curriculum work, Lake (2013) says,

...I explore how imagination permeates every aspect of life experience and helps develop personal and political awareness in students to look beyond what they take for granted, to

question the normal, and to develop various ways of knowing, seeing, feeling, and creating positive social and educational change in this time of increasing standardization in the entire global culture. (p. xix)

Research that employs imagination holds the potential to push boundaries in order to do some of the work curriculum studies aims at, which is uncovering of educational experience. Exploring the world through memoir, imagination pushes me as a student to identify and create characters that are real but at the same time beyond myself in order to question my beliefs and place in the world. Clough (2010) writes about developing understanding of others,

And my understanding of others-in this case Nick and his school-came not from the data spilling from the tea-chests, nor from any reading of the literature but, indeed, from a setting aside of those things; and from a simple act of imagination that could only have sprung from my own experience. (p. 77)

In using memoir as a research methodology, I am incorporating the traditions of autobiographical research and coupling that with the use of imagination to develop and analyze my experience as a rich White bitch, poor white trash, and teacher.

### **Place, Class, and Gender**

Although employing imagination in order to write creatively and passionately about experience is necessary, there are many structures that influence personal experience. In this memoir, the three predominate lenses from which I will view, analyze, and question the world are the lenses of place, class and gender. At the beginning of the memoir, I am located in the South, and then promptly move to the North, which is where I spent the majority of my childhood. I maintained a connection to the South through my grandparents and parents and spent weeks there at various times throughout my childhood and young adulthood. As a young

adult, I moved to the South and found that there were social codes and cues that I did not understand. Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) describe the South,

Not only does the South find itself inhabited by the living presence of a unique history, a peculiar literary tradition, and an unusual set of social relationships but Southerners might also be said to possess a distinctive way of knowing, an epistemology of place. (p. 10)

This tie to place is ever-present in my life in the South. This tethers me to that I do not feel connected to, but that I observe in the people that I teach, work and live with in my community. This epistemology of place is informed by its distinct history that includes the system of slavery and the perceived loss of a war that resulted in what many Southerners feel as an imposition of Northern values on their Southern lives. Pinar (1991) states, “Given the South’s particular history, and given its sharp sense of ‘place,’ the past figures prominently in the Southern present, despite protestations to the contrary” (p. 174).

As a Northerner living in the South, I must acknowledge, “The complexity of the contemporary South lies within the raced, classed, gendered, sexual, and religious tensions of place-in-time” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 62). I must also acknowledge that even though I have lived in the South for more than twenty years now, I view the South through the lens of my childhood experiences in the North. Pinar (1991) suggests,

Those of us who have been born and who have lived in the North but who live now in the South must participate in this examination, as our memory of and history with the South, while perhaps not repressed, is deformed. What is deformed includes our instance upon the exclusively moral character of the Civil War, contributing to our self-righteousness at our perceived moral superiority, our pretensions regarding the absence of racism in the



North, and our assumed cultural (including linguistic) sophistication and superiority. (p. 179)

The theme of the conflict of my Northern-ness and Southern-ness surfaces throughout the memoir. Exploring ideas of identity with regards to place I will work toward uncovering the deformity of my history and presence in the South.

Place is not isolated unto itself as a theme in the memoir. Being a woman raised in the North put me at odds with the predominant views of gender roles in the South. Pinar (1991) explains, “In behavior and in musculature, men and women exhibit more masculinized and more feminized characteristics respectively, than do many in the North” (p. 171). Although gender roles are observed as being hyper-gendered in the South, roles of gender also have a strong history in teaching. My pregnancy, need for a stable career, and my desire to care for my child and contribute positively to the world merged to lay the path to teaching. Miller (2005) speaks to this, “Teaching, then, while promoted as a desirable, acceptable, and even laudable ‘profession’ for women in the US from the 1860s on, also became a vehicle for replication and perpetuation of a dominant patriarchal order” (p. 72). In the memoir, I will explore not only how gender influenced my decision to become a teacher, but also how it continued and continues to influence my teaching life as well as my personal life. Miller (2005) writes about how gender affected her teaching and what she came to understand through autobiographical research, “I now understand that one conception of myself as a ‘good girl’ and ‘productive woman’ rested on my perceived abilities to give to others, to do something in some way to help, to enrich, to embellish others’ lives” (p. 73). In undergraduate teaching courses when asked, “Why do you want to be a teacher?” the typical response is usually a variation of “because I love children.” Although loving children is an important trait for a teacher to possess, it sits on the very surface of what

teaching actually means. Basing my work on others who have come before me such as Miller (2005), I will explore autobiographically the theme of gender in my path to teaching and teaching life.

Just as gender is situated in place, so is class. Issues of class are entangled with issues of race in the South. Pinar (1991) describes class in the South, “In the South, the issue is decidedly class, intertwined with race” (p. 170). Pinar (1991) describes how class and race are intricately connected in the South because African-Americans create a “permanent underclass status due to race” (p. 170). In my own experiences of living in poverty (more accurately defined as living in poverty with privilege), I experienced the discomforts that are ever-present in economic instability. Zweig (2000) discusses the separation in naming the poor as a class, “Calling the poor an underclass separates them from society in a way that allows and even encourages everyone else to treat them in dehumanizing ways” (p. 84). Issues of power sharpen when you experience different class statuses. Zweig (2000) continues, “But as different as the liberal and conservative agendas for the poor have been, one thing unites them. Each looks at the poor from the outside” (p. 85). In contrast to viewing poverty from the outside, I share my own experiences of poverty in an effort to shed light on living in poverty from the inside. When I lived in poverty I also lived in rural Georgia, and a person from a higher socioeconomic class who would have driven past the old house I lived in at the time would have easily identified it as a place where poor White trash resided. In their work *White Trash*, Wray and Newitz (1997) work to define what the term poor White trash indicates. They discuss the implication of the term White trash, “...the stereotypes of rural poor whites as incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy and stupid remain with us to this day” (p. 2). Often the faces of poor Americans are portrayed as minority, but in actuality the majority of poor people in the United States are

White (Henwood, 1997, p. 183). Although poverty affects people of color disproportionately to Whites, narratives of being White and being poor in America can contribute to understanding poverty for all those who live in this socioeconomic class. As Henwood (1997) describes, “The American poor are a wonderfully diverse assemblage” (p. 183). They are a diverse assemblage, yet the American poor also face obstacles to proper medical care, transportation, living conditions and educational opportunities. In highlighting class as a theme in this memoir, I hope to open a space for discussions about the life of the ‘underclass’ from the inside and what being ‘underclass’ or a ‘welfare Mom’ means for those who experience these social conditions.

Drawing on aforementioned works, in analysis I will continue to explore the themes of class, gender, and race uncovered in the autobiographical account of my own experience. Miller (2005) suggests,

If in fact we educators were to recognize constructions of our “selves” as mediated by discourses, cultural contexts, and the unconscious, then the uses of autobiography as one form of educational research necessarily could move beyond just the simplistic ‘telling of teachers’ stories’ as an end unto itself. (p. 53)

Beyond merely recounting my story in the form of memoir, I am challenged in the analysis to examine my experiences as Miller (2005) describes above.

### **Why Memoirs are Powerful: Methodology**

Postmethodological researchers are exploring ways of approaching research that are organic and look to the research to inform them of the theory and methods they can use to frame their studies. Childers (2014) writes about her struggles with following prescribed research methods, “Contrary to the desire for certainty, coding cannot save the researcher from the messiness and complexity of the material world...Coding, or any other systematic, *a priori*

structural process of analysis, is a failed attempt to discipline a world that is uncontainable” (p. 819). Similarly to how Pinar (2012) describes allowing space for “cultivation of independence of mind,” such cultivation is equally necessary in research. This is not to say misunderstanding or ignoring traditional theoretical frameworks or research methodologies is advisable for emerging scholars; on the contrary, in order to wrestle with any existing and accepted structure, one must first have a foundational understanding of that structure. However, as researchers our aim is not perpetuation of the status quo, but instead a constant working within, brushing against, and working outside of traditional frameworks of theory and methodology.

When writing about personal experience as research, Ellis (2004) reminds us, “It takes soul to create an unfolding drama with developed characters that pull readers into the experience and makes them care about what happens” (p. 99). Take the opening sentences of the following popular memoirs:

Memory is a motherfucker. (Ayers, 2001)

I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a dumpster. (Walls, 2005)

Anyone who watches even the slightest amount of TV is familiar with the scene: An Agent knocks on the door of some seemingly ordinary home or office. (Sedaris, 2000)

“You’re not crazy. STOP CALLING YOURSELF CRAZY,” my Mom says for the eleventh billionth time. (Lawson, 2015)

As I think over all the books and articles I have read and what I have studied and compare them or try to find their meaning in my own experience, I find memoir to be a genre that embodies all the things I love about literature and life. Over the last twenty years, memoir has experienced a surge, Karr (2015) discusses the popularity of the genre, “...memoir as a genre has entered its

heyday, with a massive surge in readership the past twenty years or so” (p. xiii). One might ask, “why?” Well, because as indicated by the title of this section, memoirs are awesome. Memoirs follow whatever structure the author wants, there are no prescribed formulas, writing rules, or rhyming necessary. In fact, many of the most inspiring and interesting memoirs I have read are not well-written by classical standards. Grammar? The memoir says, “*HA!*” Formal tone? The memoir says, “*I WILL MOCK YOU BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE STILL READING THIS.*” Keep your language clean and your purpose clear? The memoir replies, “*SCREW YOU. I’M GOING TO SAY WHAT I HAVE TO SAY! IN PLAIN AND DEROGATORY LANGUAGE THAT IS UNACCEPTABLE TO THE INSTITUTIONS THAT TOLD ME I SHOULD NEVER SAY WHAT I’M SAYING IN THE FIRST PLACE!*” Sometimes they leave us wanting more, they always remind us of ourselves, and they lay forth the raw and uninhibited thoughts of people who we might want to be or might want nothing to do with; but it does not matter, we still want to read them.

We are living in a time where the term “alternative facts” is popular and people are highly suspicious that everything that anyone tells them is probably not true. According to our president, we cannot trust the media, not even reputable news outlets such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. I recently read an article in *Business Insider* that proposed that when presented with facts and data, a person is less likely to actually believe anything you say; they will stick to their argument and beliefs *despite* what data tells them. The article stated, “When people don’t agree with you, research suggests that bringing in facts to support your case might actually make them believe you less” (Bridges, 2017, para. 6). All of a sudden all those data charts have lost their flair; now people are relying on their feelings. Bridges (2017) adds, “In other words, fighting the ill-informed with facts is like fighting a grease fire with water. It seems

like it should work, but it's actually going to make things worse" (para. 6). Memoir, on the other hand, offers an accessible and thoughtful (or raunchy, or humorous, or semi-fictionalized, or at least interesting), reflection on a life lived. Memoir gives the reader an entry point into life and experiences and allows the reader to witness through the writer's eyes.

Working in the methodology of memoir, the writer sets out to not only recount their personal experience, but also to critique and develop understanding of this experience. Ledoux (2006) gives reasoning for the power of personal stories, "When you tell your personal and family stories, you are filling a need that exists not only in your family but in the larger human community to receive reassurance and guidance" (p. 21). In memoir as a form of curriculum text, the aim is to do what Ledoux (2006) poses: to tell a personal story, but to offer that story to the world as a form of meaning making for all of us researching the human experience.

Using memoir as my chosen methodology gives me the freedom to draw from multiple intersections of curriculum text. Barrington (2002) describes the challenge of memoir, "Rather than simply telling a story from her life, the memoirist both tells the story and muses upon it, trying to unravel what it means in light of her current knowledge" (p. 20). This space for musing is what makes memoir a powerful methodology for researchers. Using memoir as my methodology, I draw from journals, photographs, documents, memories and personal experience, and interviews. I look to this data in order to craft stories that require me to incorporate personal experience and reflect on those experiences in light of the knowledge that I have developed through life and the many stations I have moved through in life: as a privileged white girl, a young lady coming of age living in the South, a woman, a daughter, a mother, a teacher, and a student of curriculum studies.

When a person reads about other people's experiences, they naturally want to make

connections to their own life. These powerful personal accounts offer an opportunity to identify their own struggles, ideas, and interests through the eyes of others. In discussing his work as a writer, Auster (2012) says,

Every novel is an equal collaboration between the writer and the reader, and it is the only place in the world where two strangers can meet on terms of absolute intimacy. I have spent my life in conversation with people I have never seen, with people I will never know, and I hope to continue until the day I stop breathing. (p. 69)

Creative writing also offers an opportunity to explore themes such as place, class, and gender via lived experience and examine these themes in a more candid way. Salvio (2007) reflects on exploring Anne Sexton's work in the classroom, "In tracing the patterns of her thoughts and her poetry and in treating her work as continuously open and in motion potentially creates spaces for students to explore the outposts of their unstable or forsaken identities" (p. 43). Although examining educators such as Anne Sexton through biography can create feelings of either admiration or disgust for the subject, it requires the reader to react and gives the opportunity for the reader to examine the reasons for said reactions. The value this brings to the educative experience is an opening of the opportunity for the reader to examine their self-constructs by identifying with others.

In reading about Anne Sexton, her personal struggles, and how they affected her practice, I think of other artists that pen or draw up their experiences about learning and life for examination. In describing Anne Sexton, Salvio (2007) states,

The figure of Anne Sexton constitutes the site not only of an unruly woman who is perceived as lacking academic taste but of one who embodies the despised and feared aspects of female subjectivity-madness, anxiety, and an unruly body that cannot be

contained, cured, or consoled by normative prescriptions. (p. 38)

As I read that description of Sexton, I immediately thought of visual artist Frida Kahlo. Similar to Sexton, Kahlo opened up space for examining life as a woman through her work. Although their mediums are different, Kahlo struggled similarly to Sexton not only with frailty of body and mind, but with addiction, questions of sexuality, and challenged the established norms of women in her time. In an article about her life and an exhibit of her work at the National Museum for Women in the Arts, Kaganskiy (2007) describes Kahlo's production of art, "It would become an almost therapeutic practice that would aid her in overcoming physical pain as well as the emotional pain of a turbulent marriage with muralist Diego Rivera and, years later, several miscarriages and abortions" (para. 1). Similar to Sexton, yet thirty years earlier, Frida Kahlo also embodied the figure of a woman who was crippled by her physical addiction and emotional states. Studying the work of Frida Kahlo creates opportunity to connect with her struggles through another medium: her paintings.

Literature also gives people an opportunity to explore themselves through the experiences of others, even if the other experiences are not factual. Sumara (1996) suggests that literature offers students an opportunity to identify with characters in fiction, and that this process can create ways for students to make connections to their own lives. Sumara (1996) discusses how literary fiction allows students not only the opportunity to explore and connect with fact, but also to identify with others, whether the characters are actual or factual. In the discussion of the importance of relations to others, Sumara (1996) states,

In coming to know others we learn about ourselves. It is important to note, however, that it is not a static or unified self that we come to know, for in the coming-to-know-in the understanding of other's perception of the world-we are changed. (p. 56)



Exploring research mediums beyond fact-based presentation opens spaces that acknowledge the voice of the researcher and provides opportunities to examine and construct personal experiences from various forms of art. Greene (1995) comments about incorporating the arts into education

At the very least, participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to *see* more in our experience, *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed. (p. 123)

As a form of creative writing, memoir embodies aspects of art, literature, and autobiography, and offers readers the opportunity to explore experience in a first-person voice. Defining memoir is no small chore, as it lies between an intersection of the inquiries of autobiography, fiction, personal essay, and narrative inquiry. In distinguishing between autobiography and memoir, Barrington (2002) describes, “An autobiography is a story *of* a life” and “Memoir, on the other hand, is the story *from* a life” (p. 22). Whereas autobiography requires the researcher to check facts, dates, times, and then double-check these and make a valiant effort to ensure a level of objectivity, memoir leaves space for subjectivity. Barrington (2002) continues to describe memoir by citing Vidal, “A memoir is how one remembers one’s own life...” (p. 24). As a researcher, I am choosing memoir as a form of inquiry in an effort to have the place and space to remember my own life. Although researchers often aim at objectivity, I will be veering away from this convention in writing a memoir. It is my own personal belief that researchers cannot be objective, so I have chosen an inquiry that gives me space to be reflexive and subjective. This is not to say that memoir is not or should not be based in truth. In fact, what makes memoir such a powerful genre is the vulnerability it creates in the pact between the reader and the writer. In the best memoirs, the writer’s brain opens to the reader, and the reader can actually feel what the

writer is feeling. You are right there in the moment with them and at the same time, you're reminded of your own vulnerability, the one time you did or said or felt x, y or z. Karr (2015) makes a case for the importance of truth telling in memoir, "unless you're looking at actual lived experience, the more profound meanings will remain forever shrouded. You'll never unearth the more complex truths, the ones that counter that convenient first take on the past" (p. 12).

Memoir offers many benefits to understanding curriculum as an autobiographical text. Barrington (2002) reminds us, "It is not the obvious landmarks of a life that hold the passionate Moments, the transformations, and the painful growth: those lie within incidents and relationships that are unique to each of us" (p. 41). This is demonstrated by examining current memoirs. In her memoir that details her struggle with mental illness, Lawson (2015) reflects, "This is a funny book about living with mental illness. It sounds like a terrible combination, but personally, I'm mentally ill and some of the most hysterical people I know are as well" (p. 35). Instead of reading a text about mental illness or rehashing therapy sessions and traumas, through her writing Lawson (2015) offers the opportunity for the reader to gain insight into her thought process and ideas as she struggles with her mental illness. While reading the memoir, no matter how informed or uninformed the reader may be about mental illness, the reader gains an insider's perspective of the writer's struggles with her conditions as she formulates coping mechanisms for dealing with her world. In turn, through Lawson's (2015) writing, the reader is able to gain a deeper understanding about those suffering with mental illness.

Other memoirs allow the reader to gain insight about a rich array of varied experiences. One of my favorite authors of autobiography is Angelou (2008). She pushes us with her prose and by sharing her life experiences she moves inward to outward, making clear her commentary on life in America as an African-American woman. She writes in *Letters to my Daughter*

I believe that every citizen [of the United States] wants to stand on the world stage and represent a noble country where the mighty do not always crush the weak and the dream of a democracy is not the sole possession of the strong. (p. 249)

Although Angelou (2008) writes in the first person, she speaks from this singular perspective in an effort to comment on the larger conditions and contexts in which her stories unfold. As an African-American woman who is well-educated and well-traveled, Angelou (2008) gathers her web of experience and recounts them for the reader in order to critique power structures that influence her movement throughout her life. Godfrey (2015) discusses Angelou's (2008) work, "On the one hand, writing her autobiography tends to singularize her experience. Rather paradoxically, by setting down her own story, Angelou also stresses that it might, too, resemble that of many other Black American young women" (p. 31). Memoir gives space for researchers to examine singular experience in the context of the outside power differentials pressing upon that experience.

In her own search for a methodology that could express the complex findings of her research, He (2003) reflects, "I, however, found that traditional methods could not help me develop a fluid way of thinking about our changing cross-cultural lives and cross-cultural identities. Rather, they block thinking by categorizing such experiences and stereotyping enculturation and acculturation process" (p. 120). In my journey to find a method that would express experiences, similar to He (2003), I found that traditional research methods blocked my thinking about autobiographical research. Karr (2015) discusses informational writing and memoir

Informational writing tells us, it doesn't show. ...It [information] yanks the reader out of scenes, away from drama and lived experience, where the reader can watch external

events and interpret them on his own. Getting fed bland information is like being preached to by a schoolmarm. (p. 123)

In my studying during the twelve years I've been in school, and in the personal learning I pursue as an avid reader, informational reading does not come to the forefront of my memory. Call me a slacker, a dreamer, or an adult with attention-deficit disorder, but beautifully formulated data sets don't invoke or inspire desires to continue reading. Just like a teacher who engages in the act of disseminating information but doesn't move beyond to engage in the act of human connection, informational presentation and analysis often leaves the reader wanting more. Most of us forget it the moment we shut the book or close the article on the screen.

I need the space that working with the methodology of memoir allows. Snaza and Weaver (2014) discuss the danger of what they call methodocentrism, "The current subject-object relationship has created what we call a methodocentrism in which the methodology of a researcher and their faithfulness to a method is the primary concern of most research" (p. 9). Even though the methodology of memoir fits into the space of curriculum as autobiographical text, since it is mediated through the author's way of remembering their life and experiences, it also has some characteristics of curriculum as aesthetic text: "...curriculum comes to form as art does, as a complex mediation and reconstruction of experience" (Pinar et al., 1996, p. 577). Memoir opens the space for me to draw from intersections of curriculum text in order to share my lived experience in the most real, raw, personal way I know how. Autobiographical texts hold great promise to give voice to experience. In the same vein, curriculum as aesthetic text holds promise to use lived experience and present it in a way that helps it come to form more organically. Instead of choosing to employ a singular method, I dare to work intertwining both to examine the themes and experiences I share in my writing and in scholarship.

## Composing Memoir

Memoir is a search for meaning making based in experience. Memoirists write on a variety of topics, but all write from the standpoint of the personal. This memoir is written for the purpose of exploring life experience in an effort to present it as research in a university setting. Many might think that writing memoir means simply sitting down and writing about your life and experience. However, as I have learned through this process, it involves researching your mind and memory, interviewing family members about the past, looking up events and years to check accuracy with your writing, and doing your best, at all times, to remain truthful to yourself and the story you are sharing. While writing the memoir I present here, I interviewed my parents, uncles, sister, children, husband and ex-husband, and friends; I looked up dates and times; I read old journals and unearthed boxes of memorabilia in the attic; I got dirty. I also asked my participants if they would like to read the story and give me their feedback. Only three took me up on the offer: my sister, my daughter, and my son. My sister asked me to change some details surrounding our stepfather's death and her mother-in-law's death. My daughter asked me to change some details about the relationship I had with her father. My son actually contributed to the work by offering some writing he had done about moving from living with his biological mother to living with his father. Those who write memoirs and write books about writing memoirs always suggest checking with friends and families who are characters of the memoir (Karr, 2015).

The importance of basing memoir in truth is paramount for the unfolding of a story that works to uncover what the memoirist is trying to say. Lamott (1994) instructs, "...good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are" (p. 3). Memoir works towards this goal of understanding by being based in truth and at the same time

allowing for the creativity of the author and first person voice. Lamott (1994) asks her students to “Write down all the stuff you swore you’d never tell another soul” (p. 5). When we try to make sense of our world, sharing the things you thought you would never tell another soul becomes an act that helps you derive a fuller meaning from the story. Said (1999) told us, “Much as I have no wish to hurt anyone's feelings my first obligation has not been to be nice but to be true to my perhaps peculiar memories, experiences, and feelings” (xv). The role of the memoirist is not to search for one objective truth, but instead to uncover meaning by exploring the subjective truths of how we view our lives. As I was composing the memoir portion of this project, the words of one of my favorite memoirists, Lawson (2012) continuously came to mind. Lawson (2012) says in her first memoir, “I couldn’t even make this shit up, people.” As you read the experiences shared within this text and wonder, “Did that really happen?” instead, ask yourself, “Could she really even make this up?”

In an effort to remain true to my participants in this endeavor, I not only shared the memoir with those who wanted to read it, I also asked for my participants to pick a pseudonym for the story. To my surprise, those who read it replied that they did not need a pseudonym (however I have changed their names and the names of towns and schools). It is common practice for memoirists to change the names of the people in their stories. Lawson (2015) warns the reader of this at the beginning of her memoir, “Everything in this book is mostly true but some details have been changed to protect the guilty” (p. 32). Of those who have not read the memoir but who are mentioned in it, I have asked them if they want to choose a pseudonym. Most refused, or, sometimes I was uncomfortably met with the question, “why, do you make me look like an asshole?” I always reminded my participants they were welcome to read what I had written, however, they still declined. For those who have not read the story but are part of it, I

have chosen a pseudonym for them.

One of the most challenging parts of writing memoir is to remember that you have the right to write your own story; you do not have the right to claim someone else's. This was particularly difficult when I was writing about my husband, my daughter and my stepson, and I don't know if I managed to effectively overcome this challenge. As everyone does, my husband and stepson both had some amazing life experiences before I knew them, and it was impossible to navigate making them close characters without sharing some of their stories in the text.

Although my stepson is not my biological son, we have lived together since he was young, and as I moved through the text I will refer to him as my son. As I have already mentioned, my son mitigated this challenge by sharing a piece of his writing and giving me permission to include it. Although I did write about my mother, ex-husband, father, and others, I offer my viewpoint of our interactions and make no claim to know or understand their viewpoints. Writing about your life, the people you love (or have loved) and the experiences you have shared together automatically comes with a minefield of bombs that could have been waiting to go off for years in your personal life. Luckily, that was not my experience in sharing my memories in writing with the participants, although it was a fear. Lawson (2015) describes how she deals with sharing stories, "There are a lot of stories I don't write because they aren't mine to tell, but I think telling my stories helps to encourage putting other stories out there" (p. 137). When I went to write the stories I have included in the memoir, I thought deeply about what was mine to share.

As I have previously mentioned, often family and friends who are characters in your memoir are concerned that you might make their character "look like an asshole." The best memoirists can write about the assholes in their lives and make you understand why they might be assholes, or at least develop their character enough to allow the reader to connect to their

assholishness. Memoirists often divulge personal truths that demonstrate times when they themselves were assholes. Although no one wants to be an asshole, at one time or another this is an inevitable part of being human. Updike (2012) advises writers, “We must write where we stand; wherever we do stand, there is life; and an imitation of the life we know, however narrow, is our only ground” (p. 10). As I wrote the memoir, just as I do when I teach, I wrote where I stand, and I wrote with love. I love and am thankful for every single experience that contained within it, without them, and without the people lived the stories with me, I would not be who I am today.

### **Manifestos**

Manifestos are scribed to convince, to call to action, and to shed light on structures that limit our current conditions in life, as well as our chance and choice. Manifestos can be short or long, and they are not limited to the literary or the political, although these are a mainstay of the tradition of the genre. Caws (2001) describes manifestos:

The manifesto was from the beginning, and has remained, a deliberate manipulation of public view. Setting out the terms of the faith toward which the listening public is to be swayed, it is a document of ideology, crafted to convince and convert. (p. xix)

This description of the genre also aligns with the genre of the memoir. It is not intended to be objective truth; it never claims such a high road. Instead it is the author’s truth; the memoirs filtered through her mind and heart, and intended to truth tell the past in order to glean greater meaning for the future. The author of memoir acknowledges that truth telling includes manipulating truth at times, although this is not the intention; it occurs when someone is recounting their own experience and speaking truth from their own first-person voice. Just as the



manifesto is interested in convincing and uncovering, so is the genre of memoir, and in this way they work as different mediums aimed at a similar goal.

There are many famous manifestos and, similar to memoir, the genre of manifesto is becoming increasingly popular in music, art, writing, and advertising. In the introduction to her video *Born This Way*, Lada Gaga (2011) states, “This is the manifesto of Mother Monster” (line 1). She goes on to describe her intention, “And thus began the beginning of a new race, a race within the race of humanity, a race which bears no prejudice, no judgment” (lines 13-16).

Although this might be a seemingly silly example of a “manifesto” to include in such a serious document, it does demonstrate that the genre of manifesto is all around us, in us, and speaks to us in many mediums. Lady Gaga’s manifesto is speaking to my students right now. They watch the video, they hear the song associated with it, and they *connect*. Many do not sit down and take the time to craft their own manifestos, perhaps because to do so is to define and to ask oneself what they know to be true about the world and what they want to change in the world. The manifesto, like the memoir, contains goals to remind us to demand, to point out, to uncover, and to articulate our intention.

My dissertation consists of a prologue, five chapters, and an epilogue. In the Prologue, “My Life is a Manifesto,” I trace back the origins of my dissertation inquiry. In Chapter 1, “The Merging of Academics and Life,” I lay out the purpose of study, context of study, literature review, and methodology. I work in this chapter to ground and frame this work firmly in the work of those I celebrate and study and explain my chosen methodology and the process of writing the memoir.

In Chapter 2, “Rich,” I write about my experiences growing up as a privileged White girl in the Northern United States. I describe my schooling and personal experiences from my earlier

memories until I moved out of my father's house when I was eighteen. I specifically worked in this section to name and claim my privilege as a White person living in economic comfort in the North. In the analysis of this section, I discuss the ideas of privilege and whiteness, as well as themes of gender and class.

In Chapter 3, "Poor," I write about experiences of being estranged from my family, coming of age in the South, experiences with poverty and living in between the world of privilege and poverty, and becoming a mother and a wife. In this section, I worked to demonstrate how possessing cultural capital is an advantage to an individual existing in the in between of poverty and privilege and grants access resources that without it would be unknown. Jaeger (2010) describes cultural capital; "cultural capital is a scarce resource which equips individuals with knowledge, practical skills, and a sense of the 'rules of the game' in the educational system which is recognized and rewarded by institutional gatekeepers and peers" (p. 1). In addition to this theme, I explore themes of place and gender to make sense of the experiences I had as a new mother on welfare in the South. I will analyze the writing and these themes using the foundational work of curriculum theorists and scholars.

In Chapter 4, "Teacher," I explore ideas of being a teacher and interplay them with ideas of moving from poverty back to a working class existence. In this section, I discuss the challenges of family, motherhood, mental illness, addiction, teaching, and life. Afterwards, I analyze the writing in the context of these themes, pondering what it means to be a teacher and how teaching lives affect teaching practice. In the analysis I connect how personal experience affects educational experience, and encourage teachers and students to work to share their experiences with each other in order to make education more meaningful.

In Chapter 5, I reflect upon and make meaning out of my dissertation inquiry. I discuss

overarching themes in the memoir and analysis, write about the current teaching environment, explain in depth my choice of entitling this work manifesto, and make connections between the genres of manifesto and memoir. At the end of this chapter, I share three main points of my own personal manifesto, and encourage everyone to pen their manifestos and live their lives as their manifestos. In the Epilogue, I compose my letters to my daughter and other people's daughters to share and inspire hopes and dreams to thrive in spite of all forms of oppression we face in an unjust and trembling world.

## CHAPTER 2: MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: RICH

### Prelude: Rich Girl

My educational journey began at a private parochial school in Ft. Myers, Florida. I was born in Nashville, Tennessee but all of my grandparents, aunts and uncles resided in Atlanta. When I was three, my father had gained employment at a large electrical company in Florida, and as a result the family moved to Ft. Myers, Florida. In school, I had many challenges. I had a rich imagination and often drew and read to myself, but rarely spoke to others. Palmer (1998) describes the silence students feel

Students are marginalized people in our society. The silence that we face in the classroom is the silence that has always been adopted by the people on the margin-people who have reason to fear those in power and have learned that there is safety in not speaking. (p. 45)

I entered kindergarten at the age of four and turned five in November, but my teacher felt that my social development was lacking and did not recommend that I move forward into first grade. My mother agreed, and felt that it would be better for me to one of the oldest kids in my class, instead of one of the youngest, as I moved through school. So I repeated kindergarten with the same teacher.

When he was 32, my father was offered a position as general manager at a small electric cooperative in Potterville, Michigan. He was the youngest person to become a general manager in his field, and he enthusiastically accepted the position. Our family moved to a small rural town in mid-Michigan, leaving our Southern family and accents behind. My family lived in Potterville, Michigan for about six months, and then decided to relocate to the more urban area of Lansing, Michigan. My parents chose the elementary school I attended in the West Lansing

School District because it was the affluent suburb of Lansing. I remember there being very few minority students in school. My fellow students were mostly White, and many were materialistically privileged. Of course, this is how I remember my school experience. I am sure there were students of color in the schools I attended, and I am sure there were students of differing socioeconomic class. It has not been until the experience of researching my past through studying and writing that helps me understand the absence of diversity in my memory. One form of diversity I did notice at the time was a different Whiteness and privilege that my schoolmates possessed and I did not. They were Northern; my parents had Southern accents. My father, although extremely successful in his career, had parents that only graduated high school. My father spent most of his youth traveling from school to school as my grandfather traveled from job to job. My father remembers having to leave rented homes in the middle of the night and to this day cannot explain why. My mother, who never found success in academics and never attended college, also came from a family who was working-class, and her parents never graduated from high school. Her parents were married at the ages of 16 (my grandmother) and 18 (my grandfather). By the age of 18, my grandfather had already served in the Navy in the Korean War and he worked the rest of his life in a glass bottle factory. I was raised the same way my parents were: that children were to be seen and not heard, and that everyone had a place, and you had to know your place.

In the earliest memories of my schooling experience, I sat in my desk every day dreading the times that my teachers would call on me. When they did, often I didn't respond quickly enough, because I was shy and nervous and afraid to get the answer wrong. I was tracked in the "Robin" group, because I was "not a particularly adept reader." I believe the "Blue Jays" group were the "advanced" group. Angelou (1969) describes her experiences with being called on in

school, "They [the White kids] never hesitated to hold up their hands in response to a teacher's question; even when they were wrong they were wrong aggressively, while I had to be certain about all my facts before I dared to call attention to myself" (p. 215). I identify with Angelou's (1969) memory; I never wanted to be called on, and I never wanted to be shamed or be wrong in school. At the same time, my younger sister in kindergarten was tested for the gifted program. She was the exact opposite of me. She was outspoken and determined, and loved the attention of our parents, her teachers, and her classmates. My mother told me at that time, "Angela, your sister is like your dad, she's just naturally smart. You—you are going to have to work at it." To this day, I'm still working at it. I moved through the next few years of school silently. By the time I was in fourth grade, my parents were experiencing marital troubles. My mother began to become more and more absent in the day to day lives of our family. Due to her absence, and in an effort to ensure I was capable and independent, my mom taught me to cook, clean, and do laundry. I would go to school and then come home and perform these duties while babysitting my sister in the evenings. My only escape from my family situation was books. I was an avid reader, often finishing several novels a week. I would relish in the stories of *Anne of Green Gables*, *the Hardy Boys*, and *Nancy Drew*. Greene (1995) describes how literature can help people connect to their present situations

The reading of literature may nurture all kinds of understanding of lived structures of meaning, although not chronologically necessarily, not in any particular logical order. But imagination may be released through the reading, and when it is, meanings derived from previous experiences often find their way through the gateway of imagination (as Dewey saw it) to interact with present-day experiences. (p. 76)

The person I interacted with the most at school was the librarian. At recess, I would sit on a bench and read.

By the end of my grade school career, reading was taking over all my free time. The teacher called my parents in for a conference and expressed that he was concerned that I read too much, and that what I was reading was not challenging me. The teacher proposed that he assign books to incorporate in my personal reading. To make me accountable for reading the books he suggested, he offered to sit and discuss them with me. The next day, he brought a collection of large anthologies to school and gave them to me. He first directed me to read *Huckleberry Finn*. I struggled through the reading of this, but loved the story. Sumara (1996) describes the importance of reading, "Telling stories, listening to them, and reading them (to oneself or others) opens a window to other worlds, other persons, and other experiences" (p. 85). I am not sure if the teacher expected that I could finish or understand what I read. After our first discussion, he said, "Wow, did you know that this was one of my college textbooks?" I didn't really understand what that meant or the implication of this statement, I just kept on reading. During this time my home situation was changing drastically. My mother had announced to me and my sister that she was in love, she was moving in with her love, and divorcing my father. We were to stay with our father, because "He has the resources to care for you, and my love and I will not." The man my mother fell in love with was the husband of my father's secretary. Shortly after my mother moved out, my father's secretary began coming to our house for dinner and to spend time with my father and they became romantically involved as well, eventually marrying.

As I moved into middle school, I continued to be withdrawn. In sixth grade, my teacher decided I wasn't very bright, and I again was relegated to a low reading group. When it came time to read novels, I had to read *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Advanced students read *Where the*

*Red Fern Grows*, my favorite book of all time. I had read *Where the Red Fern Grows* in fifth grade and cried uncontrollably through the last chapter because I was so touched by the story of the dogs and the boy. I was angry and sad that I did not have the opportunity to talk about my favorite characters, such as my love for Little Ann and Old Dan, or experience their adventure again in school. I will never forget reading the way Rawls (1961) describes what Billy sees when he goes to say goodbye to his dogs in the last chapter "When I walked up close enough to see what it was, I sucked in a mouthful of air and stopped. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There between the graves, a beautiful red fern had sprung up from the rich mountain soil" (p. 278-9). I knew I would provide excellent commentary and participate and write a meaningful and touching book report about *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Instead, I was stuck with the "slower" readers, and whereas I had finished *Island of the Blue Dolphins* in two days, it took them three weeks. At the end of sixth grade, my teacher called a meeting with my parents about the upcoming school year. She expressed that she thought I needed to be in a "different" class with "special" learners like me.

As I continued in my schooling, I noticed that my classmates had changed. I was in small classes; there were only about fifteen students in each class with me. They were all the same students, and two had been to juvenile detention. A few lived in the same trailer park and none seemed particularly interested in listening to the teacher or completing their schoolwork. Whereas in my previous years in school my classmates were all White, now they were a mixture of colors. There was dark skin, light brown skin, and white skin. I remember that every day, when we were told to take out our homework, the students would tell our teacher that they didn't have time for homework. My classmates were loud, mean to our teacher and each other, and rarely did what they were told. Much of our day was relegated to learning to be respectful and



quiet, and memorizing information. We did not change classes as much as other students, and did not attend "specials" (elective classes). Instead, the clock managed us, and we devoted our time to "catching up" to our counterparts in other classes. We followed a regimented schedule. It felt like what Foucault (1977) describes

As for the instruments used, these are no longer complexes of representation, reinforced and circulated, but forms of coercion, schemata of constraint, applied and repeated.

Exercises, not signs: time-tables, compulsory movements, regular activities, solitary meditation, work in common, silence, application, respect, good habits. (p. 128)

We had to learn to be good so that we could learn.

My freshman year in high school, I noticed that all of a sudden, I was in classes with the "smart kids." I started taking a foreign language, Spanish, at which I was terrible. The foreign language class was only offered to "advanced" students. I hated studying Spanish. However, I did like it when la Maestra (the Spanish teacher) would speak in Spanish and describe people. She used to describe Robert Redford as "muy guapo." I was enchanted with hearing (and sometimes even understanding) what she was expressing with these weird words. Nussbaum (2010) suggests, "All students should learn at least one foreign language well. Seeing how another group of intelligent human beings has cut up the world differently, how all translation is imperfect interpretation, gives a young person an essential lesson in cultural humility." (p. 90).

As I moved through high school student, I rarely read or studied. I had many friends and a boyfriend, my first love. I spent most of my time trying to figure out how to be with my boyfriend or my friends, and little time focused on studying. I was still in "advanced" classes for science, history and literature, but not for math. I had an American History teacher who was particularly interesting. Our class was a cohort of "gifted" students who were in the same class

and had the same teachers for literature, science and history. The teachers worked together to connect the three subjects in an effort to allow for deep exploration of the subject matter. In the first half of the year in American History, we read our textbook and finished it by Christmas. In the second half of the year, we read alternative history texts and were charged with comparing them to the standard text we had read the first half of the year. This exercise helped us realize what Loewen (2007) describes, "We have also seen that history textbooks offer students no practice in applying their understanding of the past to present concerns, hence no basis for thinking rationally about anything in the future" (p. 301). We watched documentaries about various historical events, and read literature from the time periods that we studied. We explored history and literature through the lens of the "the Other." Our teachers gave us the opportunity to do what Takaki (1993) describes, "By viewing ourselves in a mirror which reflects reality, we can see our past as undistorted and no longer have to peer into our future as through a glass darkly" (p. 426). However, we never addressed the fact that we were all White and we were all attending a mostly White high school, we came largely from homes of privilege, and we were sitting in a gifted class for "smart" students. What about the students sitting in the "regular" class? Did they have the same opportunity? Even still, we discussed oppression and how historical viewpoints vary depending on who is telling the history. For the first time I began to feel that people were all part of a machine, often played like chess pieces by those who had more power than we did. Saltman (2004) describes the importance of this type of learning for students, "In other words, democratic culture depends upon the built capacities for criticism, debate, and deliberation that critical intellectual public schools can develop" (p. 64-65). I read *Diet for a Small Planet* and became a vegetarian. I read Aldous Huxley and decided that I should experiment with "altering my state of being." I listened to punk, shaved half my head, and dyed

my remaining hair black and blue. I pierced my nose. I was going to be the rebel; I had been enlightened by my studies, what students today call “woke.” I moved through high school with this ideal at my helm, and had no idea where I was going or what I was going to do after high school. Luckily, I had the fortune to attend a privileged school where I was provided with the opportunity to engage on multiple levels with ideas, from the prescribed curriculum to my own interests.

**MEMOIR: MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: RICH**

**passage:** *the action or process of passing from one place, condition, or stage to another*

*(Merriam-Webster, n.d.)*

**Getting Started: A Life Distracted**

I was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1976. My mother eagerly awaited my arrival which would secure her position as an affluent White woman fulfilling her purpose, which was to reproduce in order to show off the child to family, friends and church members and to finally have an answer to the question of her more progressive working women friends (and my father) regularly asked her: What do you do all day? Now, she had a rock-solid answer that was noble and acceptable. She ran a household and cared for her beloved child. We lived in a small ranch-style house my parents bought for \$24,000 that had 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms and about 1400 square feet, surrounded by houses that looked the same. The yards were groomed and planted with flowers to line walkways. Our days were filled with attending church activities, shopping at the mall, and my mom trying her best to mask her frustration and pain in the world with her ever-bubbly and chatty personality. To this day, the woman can talk to a wall, a dog, a person--it doesn't matter, I don't even know how much she cares if anyone listens anymore. As I am writing this, my phone rings...my Mom has an uncanny ability to know when I am thinking or talking about her and always calls at that exact Moment to interrupt me.

“Hello Mom. How are you?”

“Well...you sound sick, are you sick again?”

“Yes, I have bronchitis and a sinus infection. I went to the doctor yesterday and got some medications.”

“You rest and take care of yourself. So, today I went to the grocery store. Did you put money in my account? I hope so, because I spent \$100.”

“Yes, I put it in there.”

“Good. I bought groceries, a trash can and a shoe rack for the back of my closet door. And remember when I called you the other day and you didn’t answer but texted and said you were in Savannah and couldn’t talk because you had lost your voice? Well, I needed someone to talk to. You know how I answer the phones for intake? Well, Brother Roger apparently records and listens to those conversations and he said I did something wrong and that I can’t answer the phones anymore! And he won’t tell Lillian what I did just that I did something. And I don’t know what it is. And Lillian doesn’t want me to talk to him but I think I’m going to anyways because it’s not fair. I do a good job and have brought a lot of people into this program.”

I figured that it was going to take awhile to listen to my Mom about this so I decided to pick up dog poop in the backyard while I was listening. My dog Mesa, a beautiful collie lab mix who I found in my garage three months ago and my 19 year old son’s girlfriend’s dog, Lola, a Chihuahua/beagle mix who was only three months old were romping while I was listening and cleaning up their poop. They were funny to watch, but I couldn’t watch, listen and pick up, so I divided my attention between the three tasks.

My Mom kept prattling, “And did you know that I have been eating at home a lot more since I have a new roommate? We’ve been making a lot of salads. The other day I bought this premade fajita chicken and frozen seasoned corn and I took lettuce, tomato, and cheese and the chicken and the corn and salsa and it was delicious! You should try it! Seriously it was so good. And can you believe that Brother Roger? You know what’s going to happen? Michelle is answering phones for now but she is getting a job and when she does there won’t be anyone to

answer the phones anymore and they're going to want me to do it and I won't. Just you wait and see. They can't make me. And then they'll be sorry. And I think that Brother Roger just likes for Koryna to answer the phones. I don't know why, he just likes the way she does it. Probably because she can do intake right over the phone and I can't. But she's teaching classes. And I'm great at witnessing to these people who have called. I've brought five girls in here in the last two months. I had one Mom who called me every day from Texas because her daughter was in jail there and we were trying to find a way to get her daughter out of jail and transport her here. It took us a month total but she's here now and safe and doing much better. Brother Roger should think about that."

Just about this time I noticed Lola, the puppy, was nowhere in sight. I interrupted my Mom, "MOM! I have to go, I've lost a dog." I dropped the poop shovel and ran around to the front of the house. Just as I had suspected Lola had slipped through a tiny hole in the fence. She is, after all, tiny. She came bounding to me and I scooped her up and brought her back inside. As I entered the house I remembered that I was also cooking bacon, which by this time smelled extra crispy, so I grabbed that off the stove and started the next batch and moved on to clean the fridge.

This is an issue in my life. I started out the day doggedly determined to write. Just as I finally started writing, I got interrupted by my mother, then the dog, and so it goes on and on and on.

So-back to where I started. Literally.

### Passage 1-Mom and Dad

As I mentioned previously, I was born in Nashville, Tennessee. I don't remember anything about living there because we moved away when I was three, the spring after my sister was born. All I have are the stories about Nashville. My mom says it was her favorite place to live. My dad says he enjoyed Nashville as well, that those were happy times. My mom's best friend, Maddie Rose, remembers that I was the easiest baby in the world. She tells me even now, forty years later, that I was the best baby because she and my mom could buy me a bag of popcorn and put me in a stroller and they could walk around the mall and shop ALL DAY LONG! Mom and Sarah Beth don't talk much anymore, but Mom always loves to brag that Sarah Beth was the first woman lineman for Southern Bell and that she worked her way up into management. Mom, in typical matronly fashion, loves to brag about the accomplishments of the people she loves.

My mom and dad met when they were in high school. My mom was sixteen years old and a junior. Dad was eighteen and a freshman at Georgia Tech. They met on a blind date. Apparently at a football game, Mom's good friend, Cindy, was sticking her head out of a bus window. She caught the notice of Dad's good friend, Dick, and he asked Cindy for her phone number. Dick didn't have a pen, so he wrote her number in the dirt with a stick and guarded it until someone brought him a pen and some paper. Dick knew he had to take Cindy on a date but he didn't have a car. So he called up his trusty buddy, Bob (my father) and begged him to be the driver for him and Cindy, and of course, Cindy would bring her friend to be a date for Bob. Mom said there were two distinct things that made Dad interesting to her. One, he was funny. She says, "he wasn't too much of a looker, that's for sure, he looked like a total nerd. That got better after we started dating though and I could instruct him on how to dress and cut his hair. But my

goodness...he could make me laugh. I almost peed my pants sometimes he got me going so hard.” The second thing that was attractive about my dad to my mom was “he was a freshman at Georgia Tech. And he was really smart. I had never, ever dated a smart guy before. He had goals for his life and was already working toward them. He was the only guy our age and the only guy I have ever dated, even to this day, that had big goals.”

Mom and Dad dated for two and a half years before getting married. Theirs was not a dramatic video worth proposal. The Vietnam War was going on and Mom says she was terrified that Dad was going to be drafted. Dad, on the other hand, doesn't remember that and says he had no fear of the draft. Trying to make his love happy, Dad gave in to Mom and told her, “Well, we'll just get married then.” So they used the money they would have paid for Mom to go to her senior prom and put down a deposit on her engagement ring. In October of 1974, freshly graduated from high school and just turned eighteen, my dad at the age of twenty a junior at Georgia Tech, my mom and dad tied the knot in a small church ceremony in Atlanta, Georgia. Georgia Tech was on a quarter system and Dad took advantage of the cooperative work program. He worked a quarter and used the money he made to pay for tuition and books. Mom worked a full-time job and the money she made covered the expense of them living in family housing and food. My dad's mother, Grandma Matinee, let them come over every weekend to do laundry and eat a home-cooked meal (and always sent enough for another meal for them during the week).

I've asked them both if they ever regretted getting married so young. Mom says, “Well, no. My mother got married when she was fifteen to your grandfather who was eighteen. Grandma and Grandpa Matinee were married in their early twenties. My mom's parents never graduated from high school. They made it to the eighth grade. Her father worked for Owens-Illinois Glass Factory for forty years until his health forced him into retirement. Mom's mother,



wife of my glass factory working grandfather, had five children and worked caring for other people's children, as a lunch lady, and in various shops or doing odd jobs whenever money got tight (which was often, especially when the older children were young). My dad's father worked as a printer all over the east and midwest of the United States from Virginia to Florida to Ohio to Michigan. My father attended fourteen different schools by the time he was sixteen and a junior in high school and they moved to Atlanta. Dad describes his parents as having a serious case of wanderlust, then tempers it by saying, "you know, they both loved to travel. We were always on the road." My father says that all in all he had a good childhood, but I know from talking to his sister and Grandma Matinee it wasn't a traditional "Leave It to Beaver" stable family life. My grandfather was a raging alcoholic who, like all addicts, couldn't fight through the need for another sip of whisky even if it meant no rent, no food, or no job. So they would move. And move. And move again.

After Dad graduated from Georgia Tech, he had six job offers. He took into account location, salary and proximity to Atlanta, where both Mom and Dad's families were. Dad loves Florida. In fact, when he retired last year, he sold his house in Tennessee and moved there permanently. It was the place he has the fondest memories of living as a boy and he was doggedly determined to go back there. Dad and Mom decided to move to Lakeland, Florida so that Dad could work for a company that manufactured parts for power plants. Dad was excited to be moving to his dream state, while Mom was terrified of leaving the only place she had ever lived. They lasted in Lakeland about 6 months. Although Dad loved Florida, he hated his job with a passion. He would come home and complain to Mom, "I've finished my apprenticeship for my electrical engineering certification, and I am using none of those skills in this job. I'm just drafting, drafting, drafting. A college intern could do my job. I am not using my skills and my

education and I will never advance to anywhere in this company!” Since Dad had moved so much with his parents in his childhood, he was never afraid of change, so he decided to look for another job. He interviewed at the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and Georgia Power. TVA offered him a job that would require him to live and train for six months in Chattanooga, Tennessee. After training, he would relocate to Nashville to begin his permanent position. His training required him to be gone at least one week out of the month. He traveled to rural electric companies all over the state of Tennessee. Mom worked at Miller’s department store doing her “favorite job she has ever had” as a credit approval specialist. After six months they were in Nashville, Tennessee and pregnant with their first child: me.

**Passage 2: So Shy, So Sick, So in Love with a Puppy**

Nashville is a place completely lost to my memory. My father worked for TVA for three years and earned his master’s in business from the University of Tennessee at the satellite campus they had in Nashville. My sister was born in Nashville too, and when I was three and she was an infant we all moved to Fort Myers, Florida. Dad had a better job offer and I suspect did not want to give up on his dream of eventually settling permanently in Florida. He loved the climate, loved the beach and the ocean, loved the flowers and the birds, and loved everything about it. Mom also loved the warm and sunny weather. She is a very petite person, barely five feet tall, and had always been thin and had difficulty with her health because of it (or, perhaps, she was thin because of her health). At any rate, she was young, a mere twenty-six years old, and she still looked good in a two-piece bathing suit.

We lived in a house with a mural of a huge palm tree painted on the outside. It was the first thing you saw when you drove up to the house. The yards were large and although we had neighbors, there was spacious ever-green expanses of sod and distance between us and them. It

was 1979 and my parents owned a Blue Chevy Mustang and another car that had four doors and was an ugly hunter green. When you walked into the front door of the house with the palm tree (which made it very distinguishable from all the other houses around), there was a wall of mirrors on the left wall, which led to the hallway and then to the bedrooms. It was a typical modest ranch home with three bedrooms and one bathroom.

Dad traveled a lot for his work, which meant Mom was left with us girls by herself in a strange city and strange state away from everything that she had ever known. Although she had managed to work at her favorite job she ever had in Chattanooga and joined a church in Nashville which gave her the opportunity to make friends, this was the fourth move they had made in five years, and the people in Florida didn't have Southern drawls. Coming from her large and lower-class Illinois-Georgia transplant family, she now found herself in a home bigger than the one she had shared with her parents and five siblings and had a bank account which maintained a positive balance even after she tried her hardest to drain it by outfitting us girls in the matching haute couture of the day. Similar to my father and what had attracted my mother to him, Mom had a life plan of her own that was formed by her by observations of her family and friends. She was a woman, which meant she was destined to have children and be a mother and a wife. As important as her desire for motherhood (since motherhood was an important way to solidify her relationship with my father and in society), Mom wanted to improve her station in life. She had grown up receiving one pair of shoes a year, if she was lucky, and wearing hand-me-downs from her sister that were originally bought at the Salvation Army or made by her mother. Sometimes all there was to eat were bologna sandwiches for dinner. A fancy special occasion dinner was meatloaf, mashed potatoes and squash casserole. She was now living in a

land and a society where people ate steak and bought pre-butchered all white meat chicken breasts instead of a whole bird, and where people paid someone to clean their house.

Since this was the fourth move in five years, Mom was becoming a pro at re-establishing herself and enlisting a friendship base and daily routine. She joined a church, put my sister and I in preschool part time, volunteered at the church to lead a youth group for teenagers and volunteered at the daycare my sister and I attended. She also joined a country club so that we could have access to a swimming pool to help us cool off in the tropical Florida climate and so Mom could lunch in the clubhouse. My mother was pragmatic, good looking, young and had a hyper-social personality that put most people around her at ease. She made up for her lack of education and worldly experiences by exaggerating her connections in Atlanta, dressing well and boasting about my father's intelligence and education. He was, after all, the first man to graduate from high school with honors (others had barely squeaked by if they graduated at all) in my mother and father's family, much less college. In the seven years they had been together, they had moved from eating ramen noodles in a Georgia Tech family housing apartment to now owning their second home and experiencing financial stability. Dad was, for all intents and purposes, a self-made man, and Mom was right there playing the good God-fearing wife, mother, and homemaker.

Although Mom was wearing her new station in life well, she still relied on strict disciplinary guidelines prevalent in working class families in raising my sister and I. In contrast to many of her peers who were reading books and centering all their attention and energy around their child and their children's whims, my Mom thought children were meant to be seen, not heard. Girls needed to be well-dressed in a dress, have bows in their hair, and cross their legs. Dirt was for boys, and good manners were mandatory above all else. Talking back to adults? Not

unless you wanted a stinging slap across the face. Saying no to an adult? Do it and get your ass spanked with a wooden spoon. Annoy your Mom by getting dirty (or God forbid, your clothes dirty or stained), or by making a mess, or by sticking your hands on that wall of mirrors in the living room? Punishment was what you earned. Since little girls needed to be clean at all times, they also needed to learn to clean up after themselves. Messes were not tolerated. No messy rooms, no messy faces, no messy art projects, no messy dirt, no messy hair, no messy feelings, no messy anger, no messy questioning. The answer to the question every child asks, “Why do I have to?” was always, “BECAUSE I SAID SO, THAT’S WHY! NOW!” Do what you are told or you would earn Mom’s wrath.

Although I was by nature a quiet and unassuming child, my sister by nature was a flame of fire that fought to contain her personality (no matter how much my mother struggled to break her unruly behavior). I was not only quiet; I was *painfully* quiet. I took the idea of being seen not heard to the extreme. I didn’t speak to strangers unless replying with a mandatory quiet and polite, “Yes, Sir or No, Ma’am,” I didn’t cry or yell or really make much noise at all. My sister, like my mother, was the complete opposite. Where I was quiet and observant, she was sharp, witty and fearless. She was also striking. She had blonde hair, beautiful blue eyes, an adorable round face and, like my mother, could talk to anything (and preferred that the thing didn’t really talk back, just listened to her chatter). She was the kind of child people stopped in public places to say “oh my goodness, she is SO CUTE!” My sister and mother would beam at the attention and Mom would graciously reply, “Well, she is a stinker sometimes, but she is pretty cute, aren’t you Stacey?” My sister would giggle and say in her two-year-old voice, “tank you.”

My preschool years were filled with church, swimming in the country club pool, part time day care, playing with my sister, trying to read books, drawing, silence, fear, and physical

illness. The only friend I remember was my best friend Brice, who, according to my Mom, would grab my hand and pronounce to the world-”we will get married when we’re grown up!” Even at that young age, we had apparently absorbed what society expected of us. I would squirm and shy away from the attention and any adult who witnessed the prediction would snicker and encourage our plan, then shoo us away to go play by ourselves.

There are only three distinct memories I have of spending time with my father during these years. Two are surrounding dogs. I wanted a dog more than anything in the world. I don’t know where my longing for a dog came from. Perhaps I needed a companion that I felt comfortable talking to. Perhaps I felt I needed protection from all the irrational fears I had of grown people and other children. Perhaps I wanted a living stuffed animal. Who knows what fuels the need for connection with a canine, but I had one burning a hole in my heart. Since Dad was often traveling and working long hours, when he was home he liked to dote on his girls, and I was his favorite. Of course, no parent could ever admit that, but sometimes you just can’t help gravitating to a human being, and Dad gravitated to me (as I did to him). Mom was reactionary, ever-talking, and ever-authoritarian, Dad was quiet, reflective, and gentle. Growing up in poverty with an alcoholic father and doting mother who referred to him as “her Bobby,” he was determined to make life different for his girls.

I begged and begged and begged for a dog. Dad and I were both allergic to cats. We were so allergic that two minutes after we petted one we would get welts on our hands, our necks and skin would start itching, and our eyes would start watering coupled with relentless sneezes. So, a dog was the only domestic animal option. Wanting his oldest to be happy, he brought home a basset hound. I don’t know where he got it; Mom thinks he got it from an advertisement in the local paper. It was the happiest day of my life. That dog ran in the house and we wrestled and

played and romped the day away. He went outside to go to the bathroom and came back in muddy and wet. He ran to my parent's bedroom and jumped in the middle of their bed that was outfitted with white linens. My sister had run after him and jumped up there behind him and he turned and growled at her. My Dad came running to answer my sister's cries (she was always so dramatic) saw the mess, saw the dog, and picked up my sister to soothe her. My Mom came in and saw her dirt-free home destroyed. Not just any part of the home, but her white bedroom comforter set. She proclaimed, "I knew this was a terrible idea! NO WAY. THIS IS NOT GOING TO WORK. THAT THING HAS GOT TO GO." At this proclamation, I ran out of the room crying, wondering how anyone could be so cruel as to give a child the only thing she ever wanted in life, a best friend, and then take it away on the same day. Within an hour a man came and put the dog in a cage in the back of his white truck. I never saw the dog again.

Mom and Dad tried to console my pain with a trip to Disney World the next weekend, and that distracted the desire temporarily, but I could not give up my obsession. I *needed* a dog. A few months later, what I had been waiting for my entire young life came home with my mom and dad. This time, Mom went with Dad to pick out the dog. It was a cream-colored Lhasa Apso, fully housebroken and about three years old, and his name was Max. He was everything I had ever wanted. Max and I did everything together whenever I was at home. We would eat, sleep, walk, color, play dolls, cuddle, read, draw, cut, paste, everything. Max helped ease the terrible nightmares I had and gave me a reason to wake up the morning. I was so happy to have his companionship in my life. I could tell him anything and he would always listen and never, ever tell my secrets.

These years floated away, days filled, as I mentioned, with church, preschool, and visits to the pool. My two favorite places in the world were the pool and the house with the palm tree

painted on the side, where I could play the hours away with my sweet puppy in solitude and comfort, free of the threat of others trying to speak to me. In the pool, my sister and I could play Marco Polo and dive for rings. We were brown-skinned with light eyes and sun-streaked hair. Mom seemed happy most of the time. She struggled a bit having to socialize with the debutante college-educated women who were the wives of my father's work associates and country club members. To counter her insecurity in one mandated social aspect of her life, she became increasingly involved with her youth church group, running sessions on Sunday and Wednesdays at church. When Dad was away, probably to ease the loneliness and lack of adult companionship with people she could feel like she had some authority over, she would run Bible studies for the teenagers out of our house on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Our house would be filled with teenagers talking about the bible and my Mom would cook them dinner. My mom took a particular interest in a young man named Toni, and often after the rest of the kids went home Toni would stay behind. He and my Mom would stay up into the wee hours of the morning laughing, talking, and doing I-don't-know-what because I was told to go my bedroom and go to sleep. I wasn't allowed to come out.

There were a few issues with me not being able to come out of my bedroom. I had terrible nightmares. *Star Wars* was popular at the time, and I don't know if I had seen one of the movies in the movie theater or if I had seen things advertised on television, but I knew about and I believed that Darth Vader lived in my mattress. I just knew the evil masked thing was waiting for me to slip into unconsciousness so he could kidnap me and take me to the dark side. I would lie there at night with all the lights on and my ear to the mattress and I could hear his evil breathing. When I would cry and come out of my bedroom, at first I was met with hugs. But after months of the same behavior night after night, my mother grew weary of my whininess. Hugs



turned into yells that turned into spankings and threats of taking Max away if I came out “ONE MORE TIME!” I would lay there listening to Darth Vader breathe in my mattress and stare at my Donald Duck lamp until the sun started to rise. I knew I would be safe if I could make it to sunrise; after all, Darth Vader wouldn’t risk getting me with the sun up. Thank goodness there is a lot of sunshine in Florida.

Another issue that was challenging about me not being allowed to come out of my bedroom was I was a sickly kid. Constantly sick. I was on antibiotics at least once every other month and was plagued with bad “female problems,” most likely due to the massive doses of amoxicillin the doctor kept prescribing. I had to go to the doctor every week to get my finger pricked and blood drawn to check and see if they could figure out why I so often had a fever, was losing weight, and why I complained of a sore throat all the time. When I was four or five (I don’t remember exactly), I went to a birthday party for a daughter of a woman Mom had met volunteering at the preschool. Mom and Dad took the opportunity to go to the dog track with a few couples from Dad’s work and bet on some greyhounds. They dropped me off at the party, and I was excited because the party was at the Holiday Inn that had an indoor pool! What four-year old doesn’t love an indoor pool in a hotel? I couldn’t wait to get my bathing suit on and get in the water. I felt at ease playing Marco Polo even though I didn’t know the girls well. I was an excellent swimmer due to all the days spent in the country club pool and was great at the game. After swimming for a little while, my tummy started to hurt. I got out the pool and asked if I could go to the hotel room for a few minutes. The birthday girl’s Mom said, “of course honey! Come with me!” She gave me a dry towel and left me in the room watching television so she could go serve cake to the other guests. The next thing I remember was her shaking me awake, screaming “OH MY GOD YOU ARE BURNING UP!” I responded by throwing up all over her.

She called her husband in there (who was the manager of the hotel) and he felt my forehead. I threw up again and again, and before I knew it I was being loaded into a car and driven somewhere for help.

Eventually I woke up in a hospital bed in an emergency room. My parents weren't there yet, and doctor and nurse were doing something with the bags attached to the needles in my arms. The doctor noticed I was awake and said, "Hello. Do you know your name?" I told him it was Angela Matinee. He said, "Very good. We've talked to your Mommy and Daddy and they are driving here as fast as they can. Before they get there though, we have to help you get better. You're going to go to sleep and wake up feeling much better, I promise. When you wake up your Mommy and Daddy will be here."

When I woke up, I didn't feel better--I felt worse! My throat hurt so bad I couldn't swallow, speak, eat or drink. My mom and dad were in the room. My mom was crying in a corner, and my dad was holding my hand. Apparently I had strep throat or a throat infection that did not show up on the seeming millions of tests the doctor had run in my weekly visits. As a result, the infection had entered my bloodstream and caused problems with my right kidney, which is why I couldn't stop vomiting. I had to wait for the infection in my kidneys and throat to resolve, but once I recovered from those, I had my tonsils removed. I haven't had strep throat in thirty-five years.

### **Passage 3: School Time!**

I started kindergarten at a private parochial school. My mother by this time worked part time at the daycare my sister and I attended. She was alone with us girls a significant portion of the time because Dad traveled often. She was lonely and was solely responsible for my sister and me, regardless of how she felt or if she needed a moment alone. She was in her mid-twenties

with two children under the age of five, away from her family, and thrust into a world of people who were nothing like the beer drinking, God-fearing, white trash she had grown up with. Of course, as I have said, my mom's goal was to improve her class status and give herself and her girls the life she saw when she watched television or read books. That consisted of a perfect family, comfortable home, loving mother, hardworking husband and provider. In many ways, by her mid-twenties, she had accomplished this goal. She just didn't realize it would mean trading a loving marriage like her parents' with large family dinners and spontaneous Saturday night gatherings (like her childhood home) for financial comfort coupled with a large dose of solitude and responsibility.

Mom chose to send me to a parochial school instead of to public school because, according to her, "the public schools in Florida stank. They did not have a good reputation. They did not teach good, they did not teach reading and writing until first and second grade. They had bad test scores for the early grades." I asked Mom if she knew if the public school system had a large minority population. She replied, "I don't think so. If I was to guess it was probably 70 percent White and 30 percent Black. You have to understand though, none of our friends or the people we went to church with sent their kids to public school. Private schools were much better."

I started kindergarten going half a day to school when I was four. They taught the alphabet, numbers, and beginning reading skills such as recognizing sight words. According to my mother, I loved school. In my father's absence, my mother had created a circle of security by making sure that I was properly socialized via daycare and church. Although I was very shy, Mom insisted I participate in play dates, church activities and birthday parties, and that I had lots of friends. I flourished in kindergarten. I loved to work on my reading skills most of all, and

according to my mom, I was the first person in my class to learn to read sentences. I did well on my schoolwork; exceedingly well, according to my mom. The only comments on my report cards from that time are, “Angela is timid to the point of extreme shyness. She plays well with her peers but often prefers to be by herself and work individually. Although she is a smart and capable student, I am concerned about her social skills, which seem underdeveloped for her age.” I finished kindergarten, but instead of moving up to first grade my teacher suggested to my parents that I stay in another year in order to allow me more time to develop socially. She felt that since I was currently the youngest child in the class, perhaps if I was a year older I would become more confident and comfortable. My parents agreed, so I repeated kindergarten. I did develop some socially, but continued to exhibit my nature, a quiet, observant child who got along well with peers but preferred to be alone.

What none of the adults recognized was that I was rarely alone. I was always surrounded by peers and teachers at school, and then went to daycare after school where my Mom worked and stayed until dinnertime. When I went home, my sister and I played well together (most of the time) and I always had Max, my mom, my dad, and my books. I was in first grade when my father got offered a job in Michigan. He wanted to be a general manager of an electrical cooperative and was burnt out from working his current job. He described his Florida boss's management philosophy, “hire them young, work them like dogs, burn them out and then get them out.” When Dad started at Lee County Electric, he was in a management position but had no employees under him. He was working in energy conservation and at the end of the four years he spent there he had created a department that conducted energy conservation audits with ten people under him. He searched for a position in the Southeast so we could stay close to our family in Atlanta, but he couldn't get an interview or a phone call back from any electric

cooperatives. Even though he had done well at TVA in Nashville and then created a new department at Lee Electric that had grown from one person (him) to ten and was a Georgia Tech graduate, Dad couldn't seem to find any opportunity in the Southeast. Dad explains, "well, I tried to get a job in the Southeast. A lot of those small electric cooperatives employed people that grew up in the small communities they served, it was all about who you knew not what you knew, and, well...I didn't know anyone." When Tri County Electric offered him a position as a general manager in Potterland, Michigan he knew it was an opportunity he could not pass up. So in October of 1983, the Matinee family packed up and drove from sunny Fort Myers, Florida to Potterland, Michigan for a new adventure.

#### **Passage 4: The O'Shunns**

My Grandma and Grandpa O'Shunn were working class people who had transplanted from Illinois to Atlanta in the fifties. They had purchased a modest home where they raised their own five children and invited countless extended family members, friends, neighborhood children, and grandchildren into their home throughout the years. I was in first grade when we moved to Michigan. My Mom took me out of school and Dad drove Stacey and I to the O'Shunn's house South of Atlanta, Georgia and dropped us off for a month. Mom had to stay in Florida to sell the house and Dad needed to get to Michigan to start his new job as the boss. Since everything had to be figured out, from where we were going to live to where we were going to school, Mom felt it was best if Stacey and I spent the transition time with my grandparents so they could figure everything out. Something I was unaware of at the time was that they were also trying to figure out their marriage. Being a young child, I didn't notice much, but I overheard Grandma and Dad talking about Mom. Grandma was saying, "Bob, just give her

time, you know Nannie. She gets crazy ideas in her head but she'll come around. She's always been too impulsive."

My grandparents' house was everything that ours wasn't. Grandma was a doting wife and mother, and she amped up the love for her grandchildren. The house had two bedrooms, a den that was often converted into a bedroom for spontaneous overnight guests, a formal living room with furniture wrapped in plastic, and one bathroom. It was located literally across the street from the Atlanta airport, so you could hear planes landing and taking off all through the day and night. The planes flew in so close sometimes I would reach to the sky to see if I could touch them. Grandpa had built a dollhouse out back for the grandchildren (all except two were girls) to play in while he and Grandma sat on the back porch after dinner.

Grandma watched the neighbor's daughter when she came home from school. She was my age and her name was Jenny. Her Mom, Judy, worked all day and stayed in the house in the evenings. I didn't know where Jenny's Dad was. When I asked Grandma, she replied, "Well, you know, Judy is kind of funny. She doesn't really like men." Grandma and Grandpa's house was better than Disney World. Whereas at my house days consisted of swimming in the country club pool, going to school, going to daycare, going to church, going, going, going; days at my grandparents' consisted of sleeping in, playing games, exploring the backyard, climbing trees, and eating dinner together at the dinner table. It was quiet, routine, and stable. My grandparents had a relationship like I had never seen between two adults. Every morning my grandfather would kiss my grandmother goodbye. It wasn't a short peck, either! It was a long, loving kiss that included an embrace. The first thing he did when he walked in the door was run to her to repeat the ritual. It made me feel uncomfortable and a little ashamed to look at them when they kissed, like I was spying on something I had no right to see. They, however, seemed totally and

completely unashamed. They would kiss and kiss, and hug and love, and they didn't care who looked.

My grandparents didn't reserve their affections just for each other. They had a large family of five grown children and eight grandchildren, and they all lived close to each other except my mother, Dad, Stacey and me. Saturday nights often consisted of impromptu parties or BBQs, Sundays consisted of a family sit-down dinner, and any day in between anyone was welcome to walk in the back door without knocking. Nights were filled with games of Yahtzee if the kids played and cards for the adults, beer, the Grand Ole Opry on the television, jokes, hugs, pops on the butt, and laughter. Sometimes one of my uncles would have a few too many beers and start a fight with his wife, brother; mother or father, but mostly the O'Shunns just enjoyed each other. Like my Grandparents modeled enjoying their partner, this philosophy extended and created an O'Shunn mantra: enjoy the people you love.

The month passed quickly and was filled with love, kindness and attention (as it always was at my grandparents' house). Mom sold the house in Florida and she and Dad found one in Michigan to rent in the small town of Potterland, where Dad's new job was. Before I knew it, Dad and Mom came to pick us up and off we went to the place I would call home for the next eleven years.

### **Passage 5: Public School**

Although I attended private school in Florida, my parents decided to send me to public school in Michigan. Apparently, the public school there were better than in Florida, and the only private options were Catholic schools, which my parents knew little about since they were coming from the land of Southern Baptists. To the public school! I was super nervous to start school in a new place. I didn't know anyone and was scared I wouldn't be able to make new

friends. The house that my parents had rented was a green ranch-style house on a quiet street across from the Potterland cemetery. The school was a nondescript building that could have been any building in any small town in the United States. I could walk to and from school. Moving from the Sunshine State to a state where it was below forty degrees six months out of the year was quite an extreme temperature adjustment. No more days at the country club swimming in the pool. It was the beginning of November, the leaves were off the trees and the world was preparing for the first snow of the season.

Everything was different in Michigan. The scenery was different, the sounds were different, and the air was crisp and cold. School was different. It was no longer a safe space for me to read and write my name, read books, cut and paste pictures (my personal favorite) and draw pictures. It was regimented and grouped by ability. It was textbooked. It was intimidating. You had to talk in front of the class when you were called on, and you were corrected in front of everyone if you got the answer wrong. All the kids already knew each other, seeing as it was already almost three months into the school year. Beyond knowing each other from being in class, they knew each other's families, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors...born and bred in Potterland, Michigan was the theme for this small community. Even as I'm writing this, I can hear John Cougar Mellencamp's hit song "Small Town" play in my head. If you don't know this song, I recommend you look it up. It's very catchy. It's a good example of an anthem of rural, working-class America. This song lays out the perfect description of the sentiments of the Potterland people.

As much as I felt different in this new state and new school, my mom felt even more isolated and sad. With no sun to go outside and enjoy, she spent her days alone with my sister in the green house gazing out the window to the cemetery, probably wishing she was out there



lying in it. Instead of worrying about a clean house, well-dressed daughters to present to club members, a schedule, church gatherings, or ladies' luncheons, she looked like she had just given up. Defeated. Done. After all the work she had done to build a life in Nashville, then Fort Myers, the daunting task of starting over for a third time was too much to face. Dinner turned from roasted chicken to cans of Chef Boyardee. I love me some beefaroni, don't get me wrong. But breakfast, lunch, and dinner became times when we had to start looking for something and figure out if we needed to cook it or not.

One evening, my sister and I were starving and needed to eat dinner. We had recently gotten a microwave, which was a big deal for some unbeknownst reason to my sister and me, but my parents seemed really proud and excited about the addition of the new appliance. Mom had showed me how to work it, along with our electric can opener, so that Stacey and I could microwave dinner for ourselves. Stacey was four and I was seven. Even though Mom had demonstrated how the microwave worked, I had never actually used it. Mom went out somewhere, maybe to dinner or to get her nails done, and Stacey and I were with a babysitter who also seemed enthralled by the microwave. At any rate, I decided it was time to put my knowledge to use so we could eat something. I grabbed a pot from under the counter because that is what Mom usually heated our beefaroni in when she made it on the stove. I opened the can, careful as Mom had instructed not to cut my fingers on the sharp edges of the top once it was open. I carefully removed the can, put the contents in the small pot, put it in the microwave, set it for two minutes (just about everything in the microwave took two minutes), and pressed start. I'm not sure where the babysitter was, she could have been sitting there observing us, I honestly don't recall. I do remember that within thirty seconds I was screaming, the babysitter was screaming, and Stacey was screaming. There were flames shooting out the microwave! It looked

like a dragon breathing fire. Luckily, the babysitter had the sense to open the microwave door, although I don't know how she managed without getting burned. This stopped the cooking and the flames went out quickly afterward. When Mom got home she was furious. Absolutely furious. "It's ruined! It was brand new! Your father is going to kill me!" I apologized over and over, and after Mom calmed down she said, "the important thing is that no one was hurt. It's okay." It was awhile before we had a microwave again.

**Passage 6: What's happening?**

My mother never quite recovered from our move to Michigan. My father worked and traveled, and often my mom would go with him. To replace the country club and volunteering at daycare and church, my mom's new hobby became acrylic nails and volunteering at the school. She loved to be in the inner circle of things, so she didn't just go get her nails done every few weeks and leave. No, she would go get them done and stay for hours and hours. She would chit-chat with other ladies who came in and ohh and ahh over pretty colors and new techniques. When Mom got nervous, she would push on her acrylic nails and they would pop off. It's been more than thirty years and she still wears them. After wearing them for a year straight, her natural nails had ceased to grow much anymore, so when they popped off they would bleed and bruise, and yet she would go back for more. I would find them all over the house-on the floor, in the couch, on the countertops in the bathrooms and kitchen. They disgusted me. They still do.

After living in Potterland for six months, my mom decided that she would never fit into that small-town life. She wasn't like John Cougar Mellencamp, nor did she aspire to be, so we moved to the closest larger town, the state capital, Lansing, Michigan. We lived on the west side of the city, a nice suburban area with a shopping mall, a Meijer superstore, and lots of very neat and established neighborhoods sprinkled off main roads. My parents rented a house at first, then

we moved into a duplex. In protest of her isolation, Mom decided that she was not a “typical house-mom,” but instead, she was a “modern woman” who would scoff at the idea that her sole purpose was to cook, clean and care for others. She was tired of doing this, and it hadn’t gotten her far in improving the way she felt about herself or her decisions in life or the fact that she had ended up in Lansing, Michigan.

In an effort to be a modern woman, she decided that it would be best to train me how to do laundry, clean, cook, and care for my younger sister. When I was ten, I was ironing my skirt for the Daddy/daughter dance at school. I ran over my arm with the iron, just totally and completely. I cried and Mom slapped me and said, “if you did it how I told you, that wouldn’t have happened. Now finish this so you will be ready when your father gets home.” Tasks such as ironing, washing, drying, folding, putting away, vacuuming, dusting, cleaning toilets and sinks were all in my purview. Which was actually okay, because I wanted to live in a clean house and have family dinners like my friends. I could cook and clean in order to make that happen. The only issue was, when we sat down to dinner at night, Mom and Dad were not there.

In school, I muddled through. My sister was gifted and my mom would tell me, “your Dad and your sister, they’re naturally smart, but you...you’ll have to work a little harder at it. They don’t cook like you do, though!” That coupled with compliments such as, “You know, your sister, she’s thin like me and always will be. You’ve got your dad’s body and your Grandma Matinee’s body. Make sure you pay attention to yourself because Grandma Matinee has so many health problems because of her weight. You’ll always have to watch your weight.” Perhaps in an effort to slim me down, Mom enrolled me on the local swim team, and we became obsessed. I say we because this endeavor involved the whole family. Someone had to take me to practice every day and pick me up. I had practice every day for two hours after school. The family would

have to travel to swim meets on the weekends where they would sit for two days in bleachers in the heat. I went to swim camp in northern Michigan in the summer and made good friends on the team that I felt at ease around. My sister swam a little too, maybe for a season or two, but decided that it took up too much time and that she didn't want to do it anymore. I loved to be in the pool, the silence, the movement, and the soft coolness of the water, the counting of strokes and laps and time intervals on the clock.

I say my mom spent most of her time on her nails (and I do remember her spending an inordinate amount of time grooming herself), but I don't quite give her enough credit. With my swimming and Brownies troop and endless sleepovers, our schedule grew to become as full and busy as when we lived in Florida. In about fourth grade, around the time of ironing and cleaning and cooking, my mother began to employ others to stay with us girls when she and Dad were out of town, or sometimes when just Dad was out of town and she needed some time to herself. She became increasingly less present and her presence was replaced by young twenty-somethings that would pick us up from school, shuttle us to swim practice, and drive us through McDonald's if Mom remembered to leave money. My nightmares began to increase during this time and I would sleep with my sister, since I was still not allowed to seek adult comfort.

One afternoon we came home from school and a man was sitting in our living room, drinking a beer. I had noticed a super cool car outside, a red Camaro, and the owner smiled as his gaze found us and he said, "hello girls!" Mom came downstairs and said, "Girls, I want you to meet my extra special friend, Danny." We muttered polite "nice to meet you's" and were then shooed away to go play. After Danny finished his beer, Mom called to me and said, "I'm going out for awhile. I'll be back. Watch your sister and make dinner." So I did. And thus the ritual of the extra special friend began. I watched through the window as the red Camaro eased out of the

driveway, Mom and Danny with beaming smiles on their faces, looking like they were escaping something and on a ride to freedom. I knew deep down that it was the beginning of the end of something, but my eleven-year-old brain couldn't quite figure out what.

**Passage 7: The End of the World as We Know It**

Mom and Danny spent increasing amounts of time together. The ritual was that around four o'clock, either Danny would come to our house and pick her up, or Mom would have to "run out" and would return usually after my sister and I were in bed. I don't really know where my dad was during this time. He was around but not very present in my memory. He would float in and out of the house, never a routine to it other than I knew he would be leaving for work by seven a.m., and sometimes he would come home and sometimes not. He was working to build himself a reputation as a competent manager and CEO despite his young age and his alien status as a Southerner in the North.

As Mom became occupied with Danny, she became increasingly less occupied with my sister and I. Things like my impending graduation from Brownies to Girl Scouts were not interesting to her modern woman sensibilities. Mrs. Childers, our Girl Scout troop leader, would scowl at my mother when she would drop me off and leave the meetings, as she was the only mom who did this. When it came time to share the progress we had made on badges for the week I would say, "Well, I worked on the cooking badge this week." Mrs. Childers would say, "what did you and your mom make?" I would look at her, confused by the question. I would reply, "I made chocolate chip cookies." Mrs. Childers wouldn't let it go, determined to shame my mother, "didn't your mom help you? She's supposed to help you." I would reply, "No, she was busy." Then we would move along and other girls with their mothers would discuss the steps they completed for the building badge and the campfire badge and the first aid badge. Outside of the

badges the troop completed together, I could only ever finish the cooking badge. It was the only one I could complete without adult supervision. The day we were inducted into the Girl Scouts, we all had to dress in our crisp, bright green uniforms and stand in front of all the parents of the girls in the group. My mom didn't sew, she told me, and "If you sew one thing people will expect you to sew all the time. I don't like sewing and I won't even sew a button on your father's shirt. That's what the dry cleaners are for." Problem was, Mom had forgotten to take my meager collection of badges to the dry cleaners or anywhere else to get them sewn onto my sash. Mom said, "don't worry! I'll fix it!" Standing backstage with minutes to spare before the big ceremony, in front of all the other girls and their mothers, my Mom pulled out a roll of duct tape and began duct taping the badges to my sash. She finished just in the nick of time, and as the parents clapped loudly and proudly for their daughters and all their hard-earned badges neatly and correctly sewn on their bright green sashes, we walked out single file. My badges were haphazardly duct taped and popping off my sash. It gave quite a 3D effect. I decided on that day that I wanted nothing to do with Girl Scouts ever again.

As Mom and Danny continued their special friendship and I gave up on the illusion of normalcy, I became obsessed with reading. I couldn't get enough. I would go to the school library every other day to check out more books. I read all of the old Nancy Drew series, then the Hardy Boys, then the new Nancy Drew Files, then Christopher Pike, then more Nancy Drew, and on and on. I would read at recess. At lunch. During any free moment I could find. My reading habits began to impede my ability to pay attention to anything else. During math instruction, I would read. Science? Read. Reading in our reading groups? I'd put my Nancy Drew book inside the textbook we were supposed to be following along in and read. My reading habits became so intrusive on my school performance that the teacher called for a special conference with my

parents. The group decided that they didn't want to discourage me from reading, per se, but that my behavior was contributing to my predisposition for being antisocial and distracting me from doing as well as I could in school. So, in a joint effort between home and school, they would limit the amount of books I could read. From then on, I was only allowed to read two books a week; I had been averaging five. The librarian was asked to only allow me to check out this limited amount. My parents suggested to the teacher (and the teacher agreed) that if I was caught reading instead of being on task, my punishment would be that I had to play with kids at recess instead of sit on a bench and read. I was devastated.

I rebelled from the reading restrictions by sulking and being even more quiet and antisocial. By this time my Mom and Danny were spending almost every weekday afternoon together, and my sister and I were left alone even more than before. One rare afternoon, Mom was home and not with Danny, and she was in the bathroom taking a bath. She called me in to hand her a towel. She looked at me, and I looked at her, and she said, "Ang, I have to tell you something. Your Dad and I were going to wait to tell you together, but..." and I interrupted her, "I know: you and Dad are getting a divorce, aren't you?" She burst into tears and so did I, and I leaned into the bathtub to hug her. There were so many questions to be answered: Where would we live? When would we see Dad? Would we move back South? Would Danny be living with us? Did Dad even know? Was he okay? What about my sister? Did she know? What was life going to look like now? All these questions, but I didn't ask one single one. I hugged my mom and cried. After a while, I stumbled out of the bathroom and my sister saw the look on my face. My little sister met me in the doorway and asked, "Ang, what's wrong?" I needed to tell someone. To talk to someone. So I said, "Let's go into your room." We went in and locked the door, and I told my seven-year-old baby sister that Mom and Dad were getting a divorce.

**Passage 8: The Aftermath**

That night, I heard Dad come in. Mom was waiting for him. She said, "I told Angela." Dad sounded frustrated, but he is not a confrontational or combative person, and he just said in an aggravated voice, "I thought we were going to do that together. Did you tell both of them?" Mom replied, "no, just Ang and I told her not to tell anyone yet. We'll talk to both of the girls tomorrow. For what it's worth, I'm sorry." With that, Dad came upstairs and Mom went somewhere, she might have even left.

The next day after school, Dad came home early. He and Mom sat Stacey and me down and told us all over again. Since Stacey and I already knew, there were few tears shed. It was time to ask the questions. The answers went like this:

Me: "Are you okay Dad?"

Dad: "Yes honey, I'm fine. It's going to be okay."

Stacey: "Don't you love each other anymore?"

Mom: "Well, I will always love your father, because he is a good man and he gave me you. Your father and I are going to try and keep this as normal as possible for you girls. We still get along, we're still friends." (As she spoke these very unconvincing words, my father stared off into space with a locked jaw).

Me: "Where are we going to live Mom? Is Dad going to move out?"

Mom: "Actually, honey, no. I am."

**\*\*This blow sent me reeling. Who does that? What mom leaves her kids? Especially their daughters? Dad was barely ever even home! My sister began sobbing.\*\***

Mom: "You see girls, your Dad can provide you financially with things I cannot. This is my doing, it's my fault, so it is only fair that I am the one to move out. Danny and I are going to get



a small apartment close to your school so you can walk to my house every afternoon. Your Dad can pick you up there. When your dad is out of town, I can come over here and take care of you. Danny is thirteen years older than me and has already raised his kids. We need some time alone, just the two of us. I have been your mom and always will be, but I need a little time to figure things out for myself. Plus, your dad is clearly the better provider.”

After this surprising declaration, my sister flung her arms around my mom’s waist and began sobbing. She cried and cried. I just sat there in stunned silence. Stunned. After some tears and hugs and reassurances, Mom took her prepacked suitcase and walked out of the door, away from a shared nuclear family home forever.

The days and weeks passed. Connections were made and lines were drawn between the dots and my sister and I tried to grow accustomed to our new reality. Danny, it turns out, was actually the husband of my father’s secretary. He and Mom had met at some function or another, I believe it was a work Christmas party (their spouses’ work Christmas party, to be specific). So, not only were my sister, Dad and I dealing with the loss of our parents’ marriage, but Dad had to go to work every day and work with another victim of this affair. Mom and Dad held true to their promise to be civil. I never saw one angry word pass between them or even through their lips about one another. My grandmother, my mom’s mother, came down for a month and stayed at the house with my sister and I while Mom moved out. She helped Dad a lot; with her around, I did not have to wash clothes, cook, or clean. Every day we would come home from school and another closet would be organized, another delicious meal would be on the table, and a homemade snack would be waiting. At night, she would make sure we took our baths, then make us stand on the bath mat while she vigorously toweled us off and checked behind our ears to make sure they were clean. She would put us to beds with clean sheets and read or tell us stories,

and she would take me to the bookstore several times a week and buy me new books. With Mom having moved out and Dad working, the restrictions on reading were lifted a little because they couldn't keep straight what I had read and what I hadn't (especially with Grandma sneaking me material on the side). Grandma saw but barely spoke to my mother. My grandfather had declared her disowned, and my grandmother was infuriated with her for leaving us girls. I'm sure it secretly pleased her to help me defy my mother by giving me books.

After a month of caring for us my grandma declared it was time for her to go back to Atlanta. Grandma said, "Baby, your grandfather will forget what I look like, I've been gone so long! You listen: you are a strong girl. You be strong for your sister and your Daddy, they need you to be strong. Your Daddy promised me that he will still bring you down to stay at Grandma and Grandpa's house. We love you girls so much. We will see you this summer for at least two weeks. If you need anything, anything at all, I am just a phone call away." With that, my grandmother went home, but she called twice a week to make sure that Stacey and I were okay. During these phone calls, I would always reassure her we were fine, but I think she could tell it was a hard transition for all of us. She would do her best to send love and reassurance through the phone line, making kissing sounds into the phone before we hung up. She reminded Stacey and me something of the utmost importance, she recognized that we were having a hard time adjusting and gave us the permission and a person we could talk to about our feelings. She reminded us that an adult cared what we thought and that we had a right to be sad about the events and loss of my parents' marriage too.

### **Passage 9: Batching It**

I spent my fifth grade year of school wearing the same Guess pink sweatshirt and jeans, developing boobs, making the closest friend I had ever had, and dodging interactions with my

mother. Stacey and I saw Mom often, because as promised, we walked to the small apartment she shared with her new husband, our new stepfather. I would go in, do homework, and try to meet up with Rosie Banta to play outside and away from Mom and Danny as quickly as possible. Rosie was a quick-witted outgoing girl with bright red hair that she hated. Her family was devout Calvinists, and things like bad words and dirty rap music and the book *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret?* were strictly forbidden in her home. Like me, she had a large amount of chores she was expected to complete. She was the only other child my age who knew how to do laundry, clean a sink, and cook a meal. She also had an annoying little sister who absorbed most of her parents' attention that she was expected to care for after school until her parents returned home. We had a special play fort and would take our sisters and ride bikes to our secret hideaway. I would often spend the night at Rosie's house. It was immaculately cleaned and decorated, and they sat down to dinner at 6 PM sharp every night at the dinner table. I'll never forget the first time I ate dinner with the Banta's. We were done and I was sitting there waiting to be dismissed from the table. I looked up from my plate and her entire family lifted their plates to their mouths and...LICKED THEM. I sat there in shocked silence confused by this behavior that I had never ever witnessed before. In that moment I realized that no matter how put together, scheduled and regimented a family seems, there are always some strange rituals that become part of you that you can never escape. So as not to offend my dinner hosts, I picked up my plate and started licking it, too.

Although I spent a lot of time at Rosie's house, every time I asked her to come into my Mom's house or stay the night at Dad's she averted her eyes and said, "I have to do \_\_\_\_\_." or "I have to go right back home but you can come with me." This went on for at least six months, so finally I asked her again, "Is there a reason you don't want to come to

my house.” She assured me that she did want to come, “but my parents say your Mom and step-dad are living in sin and are going to burn in hell. They don’t want me to be around sinners who are going to burn. And they say it’s not right that you live with your dad because he’s a man and men and little girls shouldn’t live alone without a mommy. That’s why they let you come over all the time! They say you need someone to model living in a way God accepts in your life.” I disliked my parents more than anyone and that was my right. However, at this declaration, my face turned red and something burned deep down inside of me that made me want to harm Mr. and Mrs. Banta. How dare they? Although I would play with Rosie after school when they were still at work, I discontinued the endless sleepovers and family dinners with those plate-lickers.

Where I attempted to avoid my mother and stepfather during the weekday afternoons by playing with Rosie as much as possible, usually Dad, Stacey and I spent the evenings and weekends together. Dad, a new bachelor with two young girls, was experiencing an adjustment period to the enormous shift his life had unexpectedly taken. In an effort to find something that we could do together, Dad bought us a Nintendo. He wasn’t much of a cook or a cleaner, but he was hilarious and fun. He also wasn’t much of a disciplinarian, so all the chores I used to have to do when Mom lived with us took a backseat to playing Nintendo. When I’d say to Dad in the morning, “I don’t have any clean underwear!” he’d reply, “No problem, just turn some dirty ones inside out and use the other side!” When Stacey would ask, “What’s for dinner?” Dad would say, “How about pizza? Or McDonald’s? Or Burger King?” We’d pick our fast food for the night, come home, and eat it while watching TV. Clean up? Dad would say, “Don’t worry, we can do it tomorrow!” At night when I had a bad dream, I would get Stacey and then go to Dad’s room and Stacey and I would cuddle up in a pallet on the floor. Before we knew it, my sister and I were spending our Saturday nights with Dad in our nightshirts playing Tetris and doing whatever we

wanted. We could sleep until noon, eat what we wanted, wear what we wanted, bathe only when we wanted. It was awesome.

After about six months of the “clean when you feel like it” philosophy of our house, I went to a birthday party at the house of one of my swim friends. Their house was SO CLEAN. SO, SO CLEAN. And I longed for the days of order instead of chaos, of clean underwear instead of dirty. I decided I would employ my well-earned cleaning skills so I returned home and I started to clean. There were old pizza boxes with old pizza still in them laying on the floor, there were so many dirty dishes you couldn’t see the counter or the sink, there was so much laundry that you couldn’t see the floor of the laundry room. I was vigorously dusting the furniture that had been neglected for at least six months when June, Dad’s secretary walked in. She had recently (within the last month) started to come visit with Dad and us girls on some Saturday afternoons and evenings. Dad said it was because she was lonely because Danny had left her after twenty-five years, and her kids were grown. I knew Dad secretly looked forward to her visits. His face would look a little less pained and sometimes even light up with his beautiful smile when she was around. She was nice and would try to hang in the bachelor pad with us. Most often though, we ended up all going out to eat or going to a movie, doing something out of the house. She noticed that I was dusting and had the vacuum out on this particular Saturday afternoon and asked, “Angela, what are you doing?” I looked at her and said, “I just want my house to be clean like my friend’s houses that have moms.” She looked at me, I think with what could be described as pity, and looked around. She said, “Here, let me help you.” By the end of that Saturday night, I had clean clothes in my closet and drawers, clean sheets on my bed (Mom had neglected to mention that changing the sheets is part of cleaning) and I could actually see the

floor of not only my room, but of the whole house. The week after that, a cleaning lady showed up and cleaned our house every other week for the next six years.

### **Passage 10: She's So Special**

After Mom and Dad's divorce, it took a while but eventually things evened out in life and we found a groove. The groove mainly consisted of Dad working a lot and Mom being around but focusing on her new job at Hudson's department store as the Shiseido make up specialist. Danny was obsessed with Mom and irritated with us girls most of the time when we were around. June moved in and out of our life and was a frequent yet unobtrusive presence. At school, I slipped back into my old reading-obsessed ways, reading during math class, reading a novel I was interested in during reading class, reading during science and social studies class. Reading, reading, reading. In fifth grade, Mr. Riser called another special parent conference with my parents to express his concern over my reading obsession. His approach to it was much different than that of my other teachers. He wanted me to be present at the meeting so we could all come to an agreeable solution. He was my homeroom, language arts and math teacher, and we switched classes for science and social studies. He said, "Angela is not doing her math work because she reads all the time. Her nose is constantly in a book. She doesn't want to play at recess. She doesn't talk much to the other kids. She pays attention during language arts, but when she's supposed to be doing her timed math worksheets she finishes them as quickly as possible, making a lot of errors because she's not trying very hard, and then pulls out a book. I'm not sure what to do with her. I don't want to discourage her from reading, but I notice she is reading a lot of Nancy Drew and other things that I think might be too easy for her and that are just entertaining." I averted my eyes because I knew what he was saying was true. He reminded me of my mother's father, big and strong with a boisterous voice and gruff exterior, but with

very kind and patient eyes. My Mom expressed her frustration, “I know-Angela! We have talked about this! You can’t read ALL THE TIME! You have to do your schoolwork!” My dad sat there in silence.

Mr. Riser offered a solution, “Angela, I’ve been thinking about this. It’s wonderful to read—it’s a wonderful gift to love to read. So...I’ll make a deal with you. For every two Nancy Drew books or whatever books you pick out, you have to read a book that I pick out. Then you have to discuss the book that I pick out with me. I will also ask you to write about the books I pick out for you to read. You will not get a grade for reading them. But, you will get to stay inside and read--if you choose, instead of having to go outside for recess. You also will have to finish ALL your other work before you read. You have to finish it and try hard at it; do your best, which I don’t believe you are doing now. If you work hard and put as much effort as you can into your math, science and social studies, you can read whatever you want during reading time, homeroom and recess. Once a week, you will eat lunch with me to discuss the books that I will pick out for you. What do you think?”

Thankful that I wasn’t in trouble and that this plan allowed me to read, not have to sneak my books, and would let me stay in from recess, I wholeheartedly agreed. The next day Mr. Riser brought in an anthology of American Literature. He laid it on my desk and said, “the first book you will read is Huckleberry Finn.” Although I had expected for the books that Mr. Riser picked would be boring, they were the furthest thing from boring. Instead of the same formulation of storyline offered by book series like Nancy Drew, these books were beautiful, engaging, and full of characters that were so deep, I actually felt like they touched my soul. They touched the deepest parts of me that I didn’t even know were there and gave words to feelings of anger, frustration, love, hate, confusion, and joy I experienced but couldn’t put into words

myself. As promised, every week Mr. Riser and I would eat lunch together and discuss the great heroes he introduced to me. He never said my ideas were stupid; he never even really talked that much. He asked me a lot of questions about the books. I finished my fifth grade year with stronger academic skills not only in reading, but math, writing, science and social studies. For the first time someone had taken the time to listen to my perspective about things I had read and demanded that I redirect my interests to serve me and feel successful in school. With Mr. Riser it wasn't, "your sister is gifted and your Dad is smart and your friends are in the highest reading group." It was a simple question: what do you *think*? How did it make you *feel*? Why do you think the character was motivated to do that? How do you see yourself reflected in the characters in this book? How do you *relate*? What do you think went wrong? If you were that character, what would you have *done*? And for the first time in my life, it made me feel like my perspective actually mattered.

### **Passage 11: She's So Special...Or Not**

Although I emerged from fifth grade feeling different about school than I ever had before, I landed in middle school to a cold slap in the face. My reading/language arts teacher, Mrs. Johnson, did not have the same kind and gentle manner toward my reading obsession that Mr. Riser had exhibited. My math teacher, Mrs. Booth, a woman in her mid-fifties with glasses, grey hair and a firm look on her face at all times, took a special disdain toward me for the fact that I paid her little attention because my nose was always stuck in a book. In fact, all my teachers expressed at the mid-year conference that they found me aloof, and they found my reading habits and disinterest in what they were saying annoying and disrespectful.

Even though I got in trouble at home for my behavior at school ("grounded," but let's be honest, Dad wasn't really going to enforce that very strictly, and by this time my mom was



working full time and often wasn't home when we went to her house after school anymore), I more or less continued my habits in both places. I got decent grades, As and Bs, and tried to be as quiet as possible at school. My philosophy was if I didn't make noise, maybe they wouldn't even notice I was there. This philosophy worked out well for me until I entered into seventh grade. I noticed that there were not any faces that I recognized in my classes. All my friends were in the advanced classes, and they let me know it. They asked me at lunch, "why aren't you in these classes? What classes are in? Who do you have for math? Science? Social Studies? English?" I had the same two teachers all day long and mostly the same students in my classes. The classes were smaller than they had been in the past, and I noticed the people in them were very different. Instead of talking about slumber parties on Saturday nights, they were talking about many things I did not understand. One tall boy in particular liked to harass me and called me "smarty pants." He asked my questions like, "Have you ever been to juvie?" or "Do you know what a blow job is?" I had no idea what he was talking about. Luckily, another girl in my class, Reba, would tell him to "Shut the fuck up and leave her alone." She seemed super tough, but she was the only person who I was friendly with in my classes.

My English, Math and Social Studies teacher, Mrs. Smith, was always very kind and encouraging. I got excellent grades and since the work was pretty easy, I always finished early and was allowed to go to the library. At the end of seventh grade she asked me to stay after class so she could speak with me. She said, "Angela, I'm not sure how you ended up in these classes. These classes are for kids that need a slower pace than other kids. Have you had trouble in past years? You seem to be finishing everything early and your work is always superb." I answered that I didn't think I had trouble in previous years, but that I did get in trouble a lot for reading in class the year before. She replied, "Well, if it's okay with you and your parents, I think you

should be in advanced classes next year. I don't think these classes are challenging you enough. That means the work will be harder. Are you willing to work harder?" I responded, "Absolutely!" and looked forward to being in classes with my friends again.

I was 13 years old during the summer between seventh and eighth grade. I spent a lot of time babysitting my sister while Dad was at work. We also went to stay with Grandma and Grandpa O'Shunn for a month in Atlanta. As always, we had the best time. Grandma would ask, "What do you want to eat?" then she would make it for us. She would also clean up. It was amazing. She said children should play and not have to worry about taking care of themselves. She would take us to the bookstore every three days and buy us new books. She taught me how to play gin rummy and we would stay up until two and three o'clock in the morning playing. She would beat me every single time. Even now at eighty-six and with Alzheimer's, she can still beat me at cards.

Even though Grandma pampered us because we were children, she also talked all the time. Her favorite topic of conversation was gossiping about family business. I never knew if her stories were actually true or not. Honestly, I didn't care because most of the time they were so entertaining and so grown up that I was sitting on the edge of my seat waiting to hear what was going to happen next. They had a soap opera or telenovela quality that made them fun to witness, and since I often preferred to read or listen over talking anyway, I made the perfect audience for Grandma and her embellishments. She asked me how I was and how Stacey and my mother were. She hadn't spoken to my mother much since the divorce. Although initially she and my grandfather had disowned my mother after the divorce, they had since softened. They met Danny once and were on speaking terms. Grandma liked to confide in me about family gossip, and also about what went wrong in my parents' marriage. One particular night she said, "Angela, in many

ways I should have known that your mother could have never stayed married to your father. She is selfish, she could never think of anything but herself. That's just how Nanny (that was what the O'Shunns called my Mom), is. Do you know that she had an affair with your Uncle James? (That is my father's brother-in-law). I just sat there shocked. Shocked. What do you say? How does a thirteen-year-old process this idea? My grandmother continued, "And she had an affair with that boy in Florida. Do you know he was only 18 years old? He was a boy from that Bible group. She tried to leave your father for that boy, but luckily the church and that boy's parents found out and sent him away so she couldn't find him. I guess if she was determined to leave your father for someone else, I can at least be thankful it is for a man like Danny and not a boy."

My reaction to my grandmother's confessions was shocked silence. I sat there thinking, "MY MOTHER IS A TERRIBLE PERSON. MY MOTHER NEVER LOVED MY FATHER. OH MY GOD MY MOTHER IS A SLUT." Again, I should have remembered that 95 percent of Grandma's stories were colored by her crafty and suspicious imagination. There was never any way for me to know if they were true or not, especially this type of story. What could I do, ask my Mom if she had the affairs or ask my Dad if Mom was a slut? That wasn't going to work out very well. I didn't have the guts to do that anyway; I still don't. In the long and short of things, it doesn't really matter anyway. It doesn't change what actually did transpire. At best, it adds another dimension to the narrative that is my mother's life. Even still, it hurt me somehow to think about my mother being unfaithful to my father. I started to cry and my grandmother hugged me. Luckily, she knew how to talk to me about anything, and probably realized perhaps sharing this information with a thirteen-year-old might have been overstepping her bounds. She comforted me, "Angela, we never know why people do what they do in life. Lord knows I am not perfect, your grandfather isn't perfect, none of my kids are perfect, and your Dad isn't

perfect. Nanny just needed something she could never find. I know that she loves you and your sister. I know that you love her. When you love someone, you have to take the good with the bad and remember the good is what makes them worth your love. Everyone deserves to be loved.” I cried myself to sleep that night and many nights afterwards, trying to reconcile how to understand why and what I felt about the secrets I knew about my mother.

That time with my grandmother uncovered a lot about my mother’s actions. Something else happened that summer at Grandma and Grandpa’s house. I “became a woman.” I woke up one morning sick to my stomach and vomited. When I was done, I sat down to use the bathroom, and I was bleeding everywhere. I had read *Are you There God, It’s Me Margaret?* and had sex education since fourth grade, so I was aware of how babies were made and changes in a woman’s body. My grandmother was there; modesty didn’t exist between the women of our family. (Grandma still towel-dried me after a shower and we never closed the door to the bathroom unless Grandpa or company was there). She started crying and said, “OH MY GOD. YOU ARE A WOMAN TODAY!” I mostly just felt nauseous. Grandma didn’t have any necessary products, so she packed my sister and I up in the car and we went to the local pharmacy. She selected the necessary Kotex and talked about how I needed a belt to hold them into place. She asked the pharmacist and he replied, “We have some, but women don’t really use those anymore. They use tampons or the new pads have adhesive on the bottom so you don’t need a belt.”

When we got to the checkout line my Grandma announced to the cashier, “my little granddaughter is a woman today! She’s started bleeding!” I was mortified. I wanted to crawl under the counter. I felt awful: sick, crampy, and deathly embarrassed. We shuffled out of the store and went home, where my grandmother took to the phone to spread the good news to the

family. She called my mother, who cried because she wasn't there. My father, who asked if I was okay. My aunt, who congratulated me. My uncles, who also insisted that Grandma put me on the phone to congratulate me. I would have welcomed death in those congratulatory moments, because I didn't want anyone to know I was bleeding! It was disgusting! My father came the next day to pick us up and when I got in the car he said, "Are you okay?" I started crying and told him all the people Grandma had told and how I was so embarrassed. He said, "Well, that's your grandma for you. She can't keep anything to herself." I thought about the stuff she had told me about Mom and her affairs, and realized Dad was absolutely right.

I returned to Michigan as a "woman" and went into my eighth grade year. While we were in Atlanta, Dad had bought a house and moved into it. It was large: four bedrooms upstairs, two and a half bathrooms, a kitchen, formal living room and formal dining room, eat-in kitchen, den, and a fully finished basement. In the fall of that year, my Dad married June. June had quit being his secretary the year before and worked for the city of Lansing doing data entry. My mom and dad had officially switched partners. Danny and June who were married for 25 years, my Mom and Dad who were married for 13 years, and now they were married to each other. My stepbrother and stepsister were the children of both my stepparents, as my sister and I were the children of both of theirs. When I would explain this to my friends, they would look at me shocked and say, "Man, that's like something you would see on Oprah. Seriously, that's so weird." I didn't think it was weird, just like the Bantas didn't think it was weird to lick their dinner plates. It's my family, after all, and families often define for themselves what they do and what they accept as normalcy. The fact that all my parents had been married to each other seemed normal enough to me.

**Passage 12: High School**

Although we had what I suppose others viewed as an usual family structure, all the parents got along most of the time and we celebrated Thanksgivings and Christmases together all in the same house. I started coming into myself a little bit in my eighth grade year, making new friends and enjoying my (now) “advanced” classes, and even taking Spanish and joining the Forensics team (where we went to oratory competitions) and I also joined the model UN. In high school, I found myself in that teenaged angst that many find themselves in during puberty. I wasn’t angry at anyone in particular; I was just confused about the world, my place in it, where I had been and where I was going. I joined the swim team my freshman year and my days were again consumed with two hours of practice in the morning and three after school, as well as my classes from 7 - 2:30. I started meeting new people and fell in with the “artsy” crowd: we called ourselves “the freaks.” We collectively enjoyed music like Morrissey and the Cure, participating in band and plays, and hanging out in each others’ basements on the weekends, skipping from house to house depending on whose parents would tolerate 15 kids in their basement on a Friday or Saturday night. Socially, for the first time, I felt like I belonged. We began dating each other and forming partnerships amongst us, many of us falling in love. “Allie likes John and John likes Allie. Marcus likes Angela but won’t tell her. Julie likes Dave.” So the era of love and groups of friends grew.

As my social life became more active, my interest in school declined. I still got good grades, A’s and B’s, but I didn’t try that hard and most of my school hours were spent writing notes and folding them in cool shapes to pass to my friends in the hallway when we switched classes. June was kind and comforting and it was nice to have a woman in the house again. For the first time our dwelling was filled with family photos and artwork on the walls, decorated

tastefully, organized and clean. I did things regularly that I had never done, things like go to the dentist. My Dad adored June, and she imposed new rules that my sister and I were not used to and resented. Dad paid attention to her, they traveled a lot together, and my sister and I, being spoiled-rotten girls who were used to receiving the majority of our father's affection and attention when he was home, found that he agreed with June more than he did with us now.

When they traveled, Mom would come over and spend the night at the house sometimes to make sure that we were looked after. In my sophomore year, we noticed that Mom was becoming increasingly detached and forgetting important things and conversations. She often made promises she did not follow through with. At night, she would be so fucked up she could barely walk, but we couldn't figure out why because we never saw her drink a drop of alcohol. We began to dread nights she would come and stay at our house, because often we'd find her passed out on the floor somewhere in the house and we'd have to try to smack her into consciousness long enough to drag her ass to bed.

My junior year of high school, I decided to experiment with cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs. I began smoking cigarettes and pot regularly, and by senior year a few days a week friends and I would leave campus at lunch, go get a Slurpee at the 7-11, drink half of it, fill the other half with alcohol, and return to school for the afternoon. I was in a special class called "Kaleidoscope." It was created for "gifted underachievers," those whose aptitude tests showed they were intelligent, but whose performance in school did not show high levels of success. I didn't really give a shit about high levels of success in school, I cared about the band party/kegger I was planning to attend on Saturday night at Michigan State. Unfortunately the teacher for Kaleidoscope was also a gifted underachiever, and he allowed us to "go to the library to get him a doughnut" during class, which also happened to be right before lunch. Therefore, we

had two hours of the day free, and you can't imagine what kind of stupid shit a bunch of gifted underachievers can come up with to do with two hours of their day free from adults, school, and any responsibility whatsoever. Sex, drugs and rock and roll, baby.

As the time and days in which I was under the influence of drugs or alcohol increased, my mother's use increased exponentially to the point that I rarely saw her when she was sober. I talked to my stepfather about it, and he said she was taking a lot of medication that her doctor had prescribed her. I went to her doctor who was also our family doctor who I had known since I was seven and told him that Mom seemed messed up all the time. He sternly sat there with crossed arms and told me I was a silly young girl that didn't understand anything about my mother's health. He informed me that he could not discuss anything about my mother or her medication regimen because of privacy laws. He then politely asked me to leave. His receptionist made sure I paid the \$15 co-pay on the way out for taking the doctor's precious time. I decided I hated that bastard and switched doctors. No matter that I had "little understanding of my mother's health," I knew that her passing out all the time was not normal. I was terrified to ride in the car with her because she was fucked up all the time. She often called in sick to work and spent days watching meaningless shows on television in a dark room under the covers. As much as I loved her, I needed to distance myself from her and shield my sister from her behavior.

When I was 17, June came home for lunch one weekday and some friends and I were smoking pot and cigarettes in the garage. We tried to hide it, but surely she could smell it. After my father got home that day, he confronted me about my behavior. He wanted to know what I was doing at home in the middle of the day, and why June smelled "something funny" and said cigarettes "are disgusting, give you cancer and make your teeth rot out of your head." He was so pissed, and rightfully so. I was experiencing spoiled rotten suburban brat syndrome, and thought



I had the right to do whatever the fuck I wanted at any time. In my lofty position of privileged White girl, I justified my behavior by blaming the adults around me for their inattentiveness. Most of the time, no adult knew what I was up to, they were too busy working or having fun with their new husband or wife or getting fucked up and falling on the floor or traveling to exotic places and leaving me behind to take care of my sister. Plus, I was pissed that my Dad loved June more than me. So I replied, “June is a stupid bitch who just wants to get me in trouble. She doesn’t know what the hell she is talking about.” Before I knew it, I was doubled over because my father smacked me across the face so hard I couldn’t feel my cheek. My father had never, ever raised a hand to me in my 17 years of life. Not once. I started crying, yelled “FUCK YOU”, stormed to my car and drove off. I went driving around, listened to music that fueled my poor, mistreated, isolated, misunderstood soul and smoked cigarettes. I hated everyone, including the one person who I used to love the most.

Although that episode signified the beginning of a split between me and my dad that would manifest itself as a rift as I grew into young adulthood, my dad continued to provide me with opportunities that many people who were not as privileged as I was could have had. I worked ten hours a week during the school year at the YMCA after school program and forty hours a week during the summer. I did not have to pay for gas, food, clothes, or really anything, so I had plenty of money to continue to fuel any bad habits I wanted to develop. When our school offered a trip to Europe, my dad insisted that I go. He said that he had always wanted to travel abroad and he wanted to offer that opportunity to his daughter—and I did love to travel. Even though I HATED Spanish class with a passion, I reluctantly agreed to go. Little did I know the trip would change my life.

When I stepped off the plane in Madrid I felt confused and disoriented. I knew one thing about Spain I was looking forward to: I could smoke and drink legally. I was cute, thin, White, privileged and by this point adept at being sneaky and doing what I wanted when I felt like it. I spent most of my nights in Spain in bars, sneaking out to meet guys I had met in the afternoon or that were from the other schools on the trip with us. I climbed down balconies and walked out lobby doors after the last room check the teachers made. The next morning at 7 am, I would get up, still drunk from the night before, and tour places like the Alhambra, the Prado, castles and the Royal Palace. By the end of the trip, I was in love. Everything was old and the people were friendly. I could speak just enough Spanish to get myself in trouble, and decided I had found my purpose in life: to return to Europe, to travel the continent and to live there. How was I going to afford this or make this happen? Who needs to figure out that part of the plan! I just knew I wanted to go back and I would figure out some way to do it.

I returned to the States with a new infatuation and decided to take Spanish and French my senior year. My interest in school was slightly renewed because I knew it would be the ticket for me to get back overseas. I excelled at studying both languages and as the time to make decisions about the next year of my life loomed, I had formulated a plan of what I wanted for the year after I graduated high school. I wanted to go to either Lake Superior State or Northern Michigan University, both of which were in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, or Central Michigan University. If I couldn't get into any of these colleges, I wanted to go to Lansing Community College for a few years and then transfer.

My dad had other ideas for my future. He wanted me to move South. I did hate the cold weather in Michigan, and true to a teenager's form, had said that I was going to move South when I got older and live someplace warm. Dad, June, and I had many discussions about what I

would do the next year. He consistently repeated, “you just need to make sure you can support yourself. Since you can’t measure anything accurately, I think you need to go to college. I want you to be able to support yourself and be able to fund a life similar to the one you’ve become accustomed to. You can’t ever depend on anyone to do it for you.” Finally, Dad laid it out there. He sat me down one Saturday afternoon and said, “Angela, I can’t afford to send you to a four-year university and I make too much money for you to receive any financial aid. I had to work my way through college and don’t think that it is too much to ask you to do the same. I propose you move to Atlanta, live with my mother, and attend community college there. After you establish residency and can receive in-state tuition, you can transfer to a university there. There is Georgia State and Georgia Tech close by.” I had never been particularly close to my dad’s mother. I loved her and she was sweet, but she was handicapped and spent her days sitting in her recliner watching soap operas and baseball. I told Dad what I wanted to do, that I wanted to go to school in Michigan and live at home. He said, “No. Once your sister graduates high school, June and I are moving South. You won’t be able to live here. It’s time for you to move on. I’ll help you get a car and move down there and enroll in your first semester of school. You’ll need to get a job, pay rent to Grandma, help her with things like grocery shopping, cleaning and cooking, pay your car insurance and starting your second semester, your tuition. Living here is not an option.”

Although I was a little taken aback that I was no longer welcome to live with dad, I agreed to move to Atlanta. What other choice did I have, really, if I couldn’t live at home? I did like the warm weather and Atlanta was a big city. I was up for the adventure. I took the summer off after I graduated and traveled. I went to California with a friend of mine for two weeks, Hilton Head for two weeks, Lake Michigan for a week, and Florida for three weeks. After being

away most of the summer, I came home, packed all my worldly possessions into Dad's minivan, and we drove South.

## **Postlude 1: Pondering Privilege and Womanhood**

I chose to entitle the first section of the memoir is entitled Rich Girl because during this particular period of my life I was privileged and immature. Although I attempt to name my privilege and claim all that comes with it by using the title Rich Girl, I wouldn't say that childhood, no matter how privileged, is ever an easy experience for any individual. As Lamott (1994) reminds us by citing one of her influences, "Flannery O'Connor said that anyone who survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his or her life" (p. 4). Most people's childhood is full of contradictions and inexplicability. Children grow up in many different ways and in many different circumstances. In my own story, I consider myself materialistically privileged, even if I was not as privileged as some of my peers because I did not always have stability or my parents' attention.

My mother's choices and experiences are not my own. I cannot claim to always understand them, nor will I deny that the choices she made in regards to her family and children were hurtful at times. However, the process of interviewing her and writing about her choices as I viewed them through this time in my life uncovered a deeper understanding for me of her own struggle to make a life for herself, and to define her life not by what other's thought it should be, but instead by what she could live with. Bateson (1989) speaks to the conditions in which women live, "Society is casually unfair to women, expecting to pay them less and treating their work as intrinsically less valuable than the same job done by a man" (p. 81). My mother's purpose during this time of her life was to ensure my father's success. Expecting to find success in his success and respect for her sacrifice, she waited for the ultimate recalibration that would bring balance and peace to her: recognition and satisfaction. However, she never achieved that balance. Instead, she found increasing frustration as she and her spirit were silenced; she found

discontent and dissatisfaction. Heilbrun (1988) tell us, “There will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men” (p.47). My mother was unable to move her story outside the house of a man. In fact, that is what she has struggled to do her entire life but now, at 63, has found herself living alone for the first time and relying on me to tell her when she’s spent too much money or to tell her when I will come pick her up.

Everyone’s struggle is not isolated to one force that contributes to the places they find themselves in throughout their lives. My mother and father were unequally rooted in their place. Although both of their families were living in the South, only the O’Shunns felt deeply rooted there. My father’s family, the Matinee’s, had lived in many places throughout the United States when he was young, and he mentions the difficulty this posed for him as a young professional seeking a position of management in the rural South. He told me in our talks about the beginning of his career, “I wanted to find a position in the South, but I didn’t know anybody. Most of getting hired depended on if you were from there or if your wife’s family was from there and if you or your wife’s family were a family of professionals.” Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) describe people from the South, “Southerners are wary of individuals without place. In the Southern oral tradition, the traveling salesman is an exemplar of placelessness, and, as such, he is viewed with suspicion” (p. 13). My father, not having the Southern advantage of being able to claim a particular place, found it difficult to secure a professional position in the South. Perhaps he felt he was viewed with suspicion, or not viewed at all because due to his lack of ties to one particular community.

Although lack of place was a particular frustration to my father, my mother felt strongly rooted in her community in the South. She recalls many memories of being a young woman

growing up in the segregated South. Her family was at times active in church, and both she and my uncle have the same memory of a cross being burnt on their front lawn because of their father's involvement in teaching a Sunday school class that openly embraced both Black and White children. Finding herself in the North and under the scrutiny of Northern suspicion because of her Southern accent has remained a point of contention in her psyche. She has described to me, "You know, everyone in Potterland didn't like me because I was not from there. Then they hated me because I stole Danny from June and left you girls and your father. What they don't know is, I never liked them either. I don't care what they did and do think, because I knew I would never belong there."

Contrary to my mother's experience, I now find myself in midlife feeling like I will always belong, yet don't ever belong in the North or the South. If I go to Michigan, people ask me where I'm from; they say I have a Southern accent. Today as I was teaching class in Georgia, the only place I've ever taught, I had a student ask me, "Mrs. P--where are you from? I notice you always say you guys and not ever y'all." I live in a place of binary worlds: holding a Southern accent to Northerners and a Northern accent to Southerners. Yet, as the years go by, I feel myself increasingly rooted in the South. My children both have the softness of the Southern accent. After living in the same small community for almost twenty years, I now go to the grocery or the car tag office or the local restaurant and recognize people I know. Yet, I am not firmly rooted in the South, not in the way many of my students are or their families are. When I am in Michigan I see similar themes of place, if I mention that I am related to a "Teal" (my stepfather's name and the name of my step-siblings), I am inundated with questions about people and relationships I have never had. Place follows you wherever you go, and in many small

communities in the United States, if you or your family have a name tied to that place, it is assumed you belong.

In this first part of my life, I see another thing that plagues my educational experience: fear. Fear followed me throughout school and I retreated from the things I feared in life: people, dealing with my parent's divorce, talking in class and forming relationships with others, fear of exposure of my thoughts and ideas because I felt they weren't good enough, and existing in a family whose child-rearing philosophy is "seeing children and not hearing them" by reading excessively and shying away from academic engagement in school. Palmer (2007) reflects, "From grade school on, education is a fearful enterprise. As a student, I was in too many classrooms riddled with fear, the fear that leads many children, born with a love of learning, to hate the idea of school" (p. 36). Although I had the privilege of having some wonderful teachers who worked hard to make me feel at ease in the classroom, just like any students, there were others that made me fear to speak up. As a younger student, particularly in elementary and middle school years, the idea of being called on was one that would freeze my mouth and I often found it was easier to give up or claim I didn't know what the answer was because the object of school is to be correct. Sedaris (2000) describes fear as a student of a foreign language, "Before beginning school, there'd been no shutting me up, but now I was convinced that everything I said was wrong" (p. 171). In looking back on the schooling years, my fear was rooted in the idea of being incorrect, and my coping mechanism for dealing with my fears was to ignore what was going on in the classroom altogether and reading books to escape the reality.

In addition to the themes of place and gender in this first section, I also attempted through writing about my life as a Rich Girl to name my privilege. Only now, looking back upon those years, do I realize how extraordinarily privileged in the material sense that I was. I never



wondered if I was going to eat, have electricity, have clothes to wear (even if Dad did tell me to turn my underwear inside out), have a home and a bed to sleep in at the end of the night. I never wondered about the differences between Whiteness and Blackness; being White and privileged meant I never had to. These were never questions that I had to explore. Angelou (1993) describes how she saw White girls, “I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right with the world” (p. 1). I was, for a period of my life, one of those “sweet little White girls.” Despite this, I can identify with Angelou’s (1993) desire to look like them because when I walked out with my duct-taped badges to be inducted to a little girls’ organization (the Girl Scouts), although I looked like the other girls, the duct tape betrayed that I was just a little bit different. Even still, I have the privilege of seeing that as a slight and an embarrassment of my childhood. In contrast to my experience, I was unaware during this time in my life that there was any other childhood different from my White middle/upper-class existence. Coates (2015) describes his childhood

Before I could discover, before I could escape, I had to survive, and this could only mean a clash with the streets, by which I mean not just physical blocks, nor simply the people packed into them, but the array of lethal puzzles and strange perils that seem to rise up from the asphalt itself. The streets transform every ordinary day into a series of trick questions, and every incorrect answer risks a beatdown, a shooting, or a pregnancy (p.21-2).

Coates (2015) description of his childhood stands starkly against my own; I did not suffer the risks of a beatdown or a shooting. I had the privilege of telling my father, “I don’t want to go to Europe,” even though he insisted I did, and I went. I had the privilege of travel. I had the privilege of material things. I had the privilege of defying my teachers by reading when they

didn't want me to, and the privilege of being accommodated with their efforts to appease me. Kendall (2002) describes White privilege, "While each of us is always a member of a race or races, we are sometimes granted opportunities because we, as individuals, deserve them; often we are granted them because we, as individuals, belong to one or more of the favored groups in our society" (p. 2). I am privileged because I was born into the family of a professional who realized his version of the American Dream by achieving success in his workplace. I am privileged to have grown up with not only two parents, but also two loving step-parents, and extended family that, despite their personal challenges, were committed to raising and providing for their children financially and emotionally in the best ways they knew how. I am privileged to have gone to a "good" school system. I am privileged because I did not have to think about my race or my difference. I looked the same as the majority of the people sitting in classrooms with me. I am privileged and admit that even if I wrote a thousand pages, I could never name all the ways in which I am privileged. During this time in my life, I was privileged enough not to know what privilege is. I was a rich bitch.

## CHAPTER 3: MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: POOR

### **Prelude: Introduction to My Poor Trash Condition**

By the time I graduated high school, I had decided I wanted to move somewhere warm. My grandmother was handicapped and needed assistance, and my aunt was living with her in Atlanta. It was decided that I would move in with my grandmother to offer her support, go to community college to establish residency in the state of Georgia, and work full time. I knew no one my age in Atlanta. At community college, I studied French, Spanish, and English. Since I had studied foreign language in high school, instead of attending the traditional French 102 class I was assigned to a tutor who was a native French speaker. I would spend my class time attempting to converse with her in French. I took all the tests that the regular class took, but did not learn about verb conjugation and tenses. I did, however, have to study vocabulary.

After one year in Atlanta I had made a few friends. We decided to rent a house together. When I lived with my grandmother, I had to pay the power bill and buy food as well as pay my tuition for school and buy my books. When I moved in with my friends, I suddenly was responsible for rent, my portion of all utilities, car insurance, tuition: in short, all expenses. I worked full-time and went to school full-time. I stayed up and out late with my friends. I was offered a job as an executive assistant to a technology company owner, which increased my pay significantly. I took the job. My attendance in my classes began to decline. I worked more hours. By the middle of the year, I decided to quit school.

I was nineteen, living in a house with three friends, I had a boyfriend and was working full time. Once I quit school, I had many hours free to play, attend concerts, and stay out late. One Monday morning I went to work, and there was a sign on the door, along with a congregation of employees. It read: Business closed. No phone numbers worked. The office was

cleaned out. No one knew what had happened. I found myself with no job, and bills to pay. I was unemployed for one month. I ate spaghetti every day because I could get a box for 99 cents and jar of sauce for 99 cents, and it would feed me for a week. I asked my dad for money, and he told me that I was on my own. Thus began my move from privileged White girl to the welfare line.

As I searched for gainful employment, I found it increasingly difficult to encounter work that would pay a wage on which I could live. I finally found employment as a waitress in a chain restaurant. I was good at my job because I had a good memory—which is great for waitresses. I worked nights and weekends. Anyone who has ever worked in the service industry, especially when it involves working late hours, knows that the use of drugs and alcohol is a staple. I sometimes worked twenty hours straight for days at a time, and learned what it meant to be a workhorse. Kincheloe (1999) describes a similar experience

As a construction worker during my years in high school and college, I came to understand on a variety of levels the brutality of the workplace. I learned that any attempt to question the sadomasochistic male culture of the construction site could be construed as not simply misdirected but dangerous. (p. 15)

Although a restaurant is not a construction site, there is definitely a hierarchy involved in the business. Dishwashers are at the lowest end, cooks at the highest. Luckily my nature was to be observant before I spoke. Other waitresses who questioned cooks learned that it was not their place.

I don't remember much about the years between nineteen and twenty-two. I remember working in a restaurant. I remember months of not paying rent and waiting for eviction notices. I remember power being shut off and rigging extension cords from my neighbor's house. I remember living in a series of ramshackle apartments with my boyfriend. I remember waking up

one day and deciding that I couldn't live in this way anymore. I felt, as Frisch (2011) describes,

There are moments when you feel like leaping up and thumping the table with your fist, making everyone start! And then asking them if they know why they do this or that?

Moments when you feel like tearing off their faces, with their calm, confident expressions, just tearing them off like paper masks! And asking them if they have any idea why they bother to put on an expression in this world, why they get up and get dressed in the morning, why they read and work and play, what is the point of all this?

(p. 28)

I decided I needed a change.

In an effort to find a point and begin to make sense of my own life, I turned to education. I applied to the University of Georgia and planned to pursue a degree in the sciences. I still worked in the same chain restaurant, but I had a plan. At the age of twenty-two, one week after I received my acceptance letter to the University of Georgia, I discovered I was pregnant. I knew a single mother that was attending the University. I called her and asked how she was affording everything-from tuition-to rent-to medical bills. She said, "Angela, you can apply for welfare!" I knew that I had to pursue my education, because I knew that I had to be able to provide for myself, and now also for the child that I was going to mother. In order to forge a path that would ultimately shape a way to provide for the child I was carrying, I went to the Department of Family and Social Services and began the process of becoming a welfare recipient. Zinn (2003) describes the 90s

All of these groups, and the people they represented-the homeless, the struggling mothers, the families unable to pay their bills, the 40 million without health insurance and many more with inadequate insurance-were facing an enormous barrier of silence in the

national culture. Their lives, their plight was not being reported in the major media, and so the myth of a prosperous America, proclaimed by powerful people in Washington and Wall Street, persisted." (p. 671)

The America I was living in was a dichotomy of sorts: I was a non-traditional student preparing to attend a large University, yet I was a welfare recipient living in the rural South who was unwed and pregnant. When I sat down with my advisor to decide on a course of study for my time at the University, I shared my intention to study something in the sciences. "Didn't anyone explain to you how this works? Let me suggest something to you: I can tell that you are going to need to have a job when you finish college, correct? Why don't you study education? You are not a strong student in the math and sciences and it has been five years since you have taken courses in either of these subjects. I think you would be more successful pursuing an avenue of study you performed well in at the Community College." The decision was made: education was my major. I am eternally grateful for her suggestion, because I now could not imagine working in any other field.

My daughter was born during finals week of my first semester at the university. As I sat in my education classes while reading and discussing social justice themes as well as power and language, I looked at all the White twenty-somethings around me who stated, "This is America; everyone has a chance if they try." In the meantime, I was working nights six days a week, paying my tuition with student loans, and hoping my power or water wasn't shut off when I got home. I was cold in the winter and hot in the summer. I hated windy days, feeling the draft through the floorboards of the house. I paid for groceries with food stamps. And I thought "Aren't I working hard? Aren't we trying? Aren't we doing what the other students say should pay for everything?" Friere (2005) describes this phenomenon of shame of the oppressed,

It [the subjugation and passivity of the oppressed] is accomplished by the oppressors' depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo: for example, the myth that the oppressive order is a 'free society'; the myth that all persons are free to work where they wish, that if they don't like their boss they can leave him and look for another job; the myth that this order respects human rights and is therefore worthy of esteem; the myth that anyone who is industrious can become an entrepreneur-worse yet, the myth that the street vendor is as much an entrepreneur as the owner of a large factory; the myth of the universal right of education, when of all the Brazilian children who enter primary schools only a tiny fraction ever reach the university, the myth of equality of all individuals, when the question: 'Do you know who you're talking to?' is still current among us....(p. 139)

At the age of 24, I decided to marry my child's father. I found myself married to someone I didn't love, a mother to an amazing daughter, a student, a welfare recipient, and a woman straddling two worlds. In one world, I was White trash. I prayed I wouldn't see my classmates at Wal-Mart when I handed over my WIC coupons or had to put groceries back because they weren't covered by my food "coupons." I sat ashamed through discussions because I was the "low class" that was being discussed. Malott and Pena (2004) explain how these concepts of the poor are developed

Through the social institutions we encounter in our everyday lives, we receive subtle and not so subtle messages that it is not criminal to exploit and enslave people, but it is criminal to play rap music, to be black or brown, to be a skaterpunk, or to be poor. (p. 8)

Even in the context of my own family this criminality of poorness was expressed to me. Yet, I had been a successful, privileged White girl that grew up in the suburbs in that big house. I had

traveled to Europe! I spoke three languages! I realized the difference between what is given to you and what you work for—and the advantages I had simply by once being part of a class that was privileged, even if I wasn't anymore.



**MEMOIR: MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: POOR****Passage 13: ATL**

My first six months in Atlanta were hard. I lived with my Grandma Matinee who was handicapped and my dad's sister, Aunt Pat. I of course would never talk to her about this, how could I? I also knew that my Grandma O'Shunn had what my dad called "a wild imagination," so I would think to myself, "who even knows if it's true?" I always did feel a little uneasy around my Uncle James (Aunt Pat's husband) after that though. Especially when Uncle James asked about my mother with what I swear I seemed like a shine in his eye. I didn't see Uncle James much because he lived in a house on the other side of town. Aunt Pat stayed with us during the week and then stayed with him on the weekends. She said it was because her commute to the Avon distribution center where we both worked was much shorter if she stayed at Grandma's. (She worked the day shift, I worked the 3-9 shift.)

So here I was, a 19-year-old girl living with a handicapped woman in her 70s and a woman estranged from her husband in her 50s. I had no friends my own age. I talked to people at work and at school, but they all had their own lives and circles of friends, so I didn't get to know them very well. My life was routine: get up, go to class, come home, take a nap or watch TV with Grandma, go to work, come home and do my homework, go to bed, repeat. I did well in my classes because they were easy (Spanish, French, psychology and math), and because I didn't have anything else to focus on. I learned a lot during this time about my Grandma Matinee. I spent more time with her in those six months than I ever had in my whole life. She was witty, smart, insightful, kind and joyful. She was raised poor, the youngest of eleven (I think it was eleven; could have been a few more or less) children on a farm in West Virginia. She taught me how to cook chicken and dumplings and fried bologna sandwiches. When you walked into the

house, it always smelled faintly of bacon grease, eggs, and dusty old printed newspapers and magazines. She was a bit of a hoarder, and her handicap made it difficult for her to clean anything. Luckily I was decently trained in the cleaning department, so even though she wouldn't let me throw away anything from the piles of newspapers she had stacked around her recliner, I could at least vacuum the carpet that hadn't been changed since the 60s and clean the bathroom. She loved my father to no end. Adored him, in fact--he was her Bobby! She would refer to him as such and ask questions like, "Do you know what my Bobby did" with a grin on her face. He was clearly her favorite, even though Aunt Pat bore the brunt of the day-to-day burden of caring for her. I had brought Max with me to Atlanta (yes, he was still alive at fifteen years old) and my grandmother would sneak him food off her plate. He would sit at her feet with admiring eyes. I never met a dog that didn't love the woman. Although I loved spending time with my grandma and aunt (we called ourselves the Golden Girls), I was desperate for company my own age. I missed the familiarity of home and comfort of the people I had grown up with. I felt so alone.

That Christmas, when I was driving up 85 north on my way to work, I heard a terrible noise and my car started swerving all over the highway. I put on the brakes and pulled over. My tire had blown out. There were no cell phones. Aunt Pat and Grandma Matinee had already left to drive to Michigan for the holiday and I was supposed to leave the next day on a flight. I had no one to call and no idea what to do. I got back in my car and started crying. After a few minutes of sobbing, I noticed a dump truck pulled up behind me. A man got out and approached the car. I continued to sob, I knew that he was going to try and kidnap me. He knocked on the window and said, "honey, do you need some help?" I looked at him with fear and said..."no. I'm fine." He replied, "you don't look fine. Listen, I've got a wife and two daughters and I would

hope someone would help them if they were on the side of a busy road. You don't have to roll down your window; you don't even have to get out of the car. Just pop your trunk." The man changed my tire and off I went to work. While I was sitting in the car on the side of the road I decided one thing for sure: I was moving back to Michigan. At least if I was there, I would have someone to call. I decided something else too. I needed to learn how to change a tire.

#### **Passage 14: Northern Accent in the Dirty South**

Aunt Pat called Uncle James and told him about the tire blow out. He met me the next morning and we went to a tire store, where he helped me pick out some new tires I could barely afford but needed so the incident didn't happen again in the near future. We occupied our time with small talk about family members like my aunt, grandmother, cousin, and work. I drove to my grandma and grandpa O'Shunn's that afternoon and dropped off my car, and my grandpa took me to the airport, a mere ten-minute ride from their house. When I got on the plane, relieved to be headed home to the comfort of family and familiar surroundings, I heard two women having a conversation behind me. I thought to myself, "Where in the world are they from? Canada? My god their accent is hilarious! They just said bagal instead of bagel! What the heck? As I continued to eavesdrop I realized that they were talking about the best restaurants in Detroit, Michigan. Then one of them stated, "I can't wait to get home!" I had a moment of realization. They were Michiganders, just like me. They were from the Great Lakes state. I sounded like them! No wonder people incessantly asked me where I was from when I was in the South.

Returning my thoughts to future plans, I knew that regardless of what my father had told me the spring before, I had to move back to Michigan. I missed "bagals." I missed hamburgs. I missed knowing where I was going and interstates without spaghetti junctions. I missed sub sandwiches and grinders. I missed the flat, dirty snow landscape. I missed the comfort and

familiarity of the place I had called home since I was a child. I missed understanding social cues. “Bless your heart.” What the fuck was that? What the hell? Midwesterners didn’t ingratiate someone’s stupidity or bad judgment or misfortune by prefacing their description of it with “Bless their heart” or “Bless your heart.” They’d just say, “Well, that’s different” or “God knows they’re not that bright” or simply, “Isn’t that terrible?” I missed people saying they were going to Mass instead of Sunday services. I missed my mom, dad, sister and friends. I missed being able to do what I wanted and not having to worry about money. I missed my super-spoiledness. I missed my privilege, some of which I had lost (or so I thought; little did I know I really carried it with me everywhere I went). I didn’t know how I would pay for it, but I was going to finish out the year in Atlanta, apply to the University of Michigan and move to Ann Arbor and in with some friends from high school that were already students at the University. When I returned to Atlanta in January, I felt less lonely and not quite as isolated because I had a plan (even though I hadn’t shared it with anyone else) to go home. I was tired of everyone asking me, “Where you from?” or “You not from round here are ya?” Often I couldn’t even understand two people having a conversation in front of me at the grocery store if their Southern drawls were too thick. I knew that I didn’t belong in the South, because even though I loved the warmth, I hated almost everything else.

I continued to attend my classes at the local community college and go to work every day. At work, I began to make friends with a couple of people who asked me to do things after work. One was named Shauna. She had two kids and was in her 30s, but she was from Michigan too and we always had a fun time talking together. She invited me over to her apartment and after she put the kids to bed, we did boilermakers shots and she invited some neighbors over to partake in the festivities. We ended up throwing darts in a bar down the street from her

apartments (her sister had gotten home from work and was at the apartment with her sleeping kids). There was Shauna, Tydre, and I drinking beers, listening to the loud music the bar was playing, and hitting the wall more than the dart board. I was the only White person in the place, but I didn't really notice or mind much. When I recounted the night to another friend I had made at work, Erika, and told her where we had ended up, she replied, "you better be glad you didn't get shot or raped! My God, that's Black town down there!" I was taken aback by her comment. Being a privileged White girl and being from the North, I was extremely naive about race in general, and especially naive about race in the South. Shauna and I never hung out again because less than a month later, she packed up and moved back to Michigan.

Erika was my age. Her mother worked in the warehouse packing orders while Erika and I worked the customer service phone lines. She had long, thick, curly hair down to her waist and was taking classes to become a certified accountant. She had a boyfriend and they had been dating for five years or more, all through high school. Her boyfriend lived in an apartment with a roommate and she stayed at his apartment on the weekends. She asked one Friday afternoon, "Do you want to come over and have drinks with us tonight?" I gleefully agreed that I would. I was finally starting to make some friends and spend time with some people my own age.

After that Friday night, Erika, her boyfriend Patrick, his roommate Todd, and I were inseparable. I spent almost every weekend over at the apartment and even had a few sexual adventures with Todd (though we agreed to keep our relationship friends with benefits). Todd and Patrick were super cool, but I quickly learned Erika had a hot temper with Patrick and could easily become angry and start throwing things over the smallest offense. Crying coupled with rage was her typical response, and usually it had to do with him leaving dirty dishes in the sink or forgetting to take the dog for a walk. She had bought Patrick a beagle puppy they named

Bailey for Christmas. Bailey was...spirited. He was energetic and not housebroken and loved to chew things up. Every time Bailey would misbehave, Erika would go after Patrick, yelling that he was lazy and mean and not taking care of his dog. She wore the pants in that relationship for sure. When she would have an outburst, Patrick, Todd and I would sit there dumbfounded and confused, wondering exactly what Patrick had done this time to make her mood change so quickly. Storming out and speeding away occurred often, so it would be me and two guys left to finish the 12-pack of beer that had been purchased for the evening.

As my second six months in Atlanta continued, the plan to move back to Michigan was abandoned in favor of moving in with Patrick, Erika and Todd. We rented a house north of the city and north of my Grandma Matinee's house. I quit working for Avon because I had catered a few parties and got a job as a secretary for a technology company in Dunwoody. The commute was a pain, but the money was awesome. I was making \$15.00 an hour as opposed to \$9.00 an hour at Avon. For a 19-year-old single girl who only had to pay \$400 in rent a month the \$6.00 an hour increase made a big difference in my ability to afford things. My days were spent working 9-5 and my nights were spent getting high on marijuana and drinking alcohol with the guys. Erika decided after living with us for a few weeks that she couldn't handle the excessive mess we were too lazy to clean up or the excessive partying that was dominating our nights. She moved back in with her parents and she and Patrick went through a nasty break up that involved a restraining order, a court order and some lawyers.

In the middle of the fall of that year, I went to work one Monday morning and everyone was standing outside. The doors were locked. There was a sign on the door that said, "Closed effective 5:00 pm Sunday." All thirty of us employees were standing outside wondering what the fuck had happened. Apparently the owner had closed down the business and this was his way of

informing his employees. I was officially out of work, doing poorly in my classes because I had abandoned studying and attending school for having fun and making money, and had rent, car insurance, and utilities to pay. I was officially fucked.

I was unemployed for a little over a month, finally managing to get a job waiting tables at a TGI Friday's. I had survived the month eating ramen noodles, Ragu jarred spaghetti sauce and pasta noodles. I now had about a week to get together enough money to pay utilities before they started getting shut off. I donned my flair, hat and stripes and got to hustling. While I worked between 50 to 60 hours at the restaurant, I got other odd jobs doing things like cleaning houses, catering, working at an office supply company as an account collector, and working at a veterinarian's office cleaning animal kennels and giving baths. Everyone I met still asked me, "Where you from? You're not from around here, are ya?" I sometimes missed home, but I had dropped out of school because I couldn't afford to pay tuition and pay my bills. Also, to be completely honest, I was busy working a lot but playing a lot as well. When I got a minute, I would go camping, go to concerts, go to parties. I worked most nights closing which meant I stayed up or out until four or five o'clock in the morning and slept until one in the afternoon (unless I had to show up at a side job). None of my friends were going to school, not Patrick or Todd or the girl we had gotten to replace Erika as our roommate. They were all just working and doing the same thing I was, which, I know now, was wasting time.

### **Passage 15: Screwing Around and Screwing Up**

After Erika and Patrick broke up, actually shortly after, Patrick and I started a romance. I was smitten with him and we would stay up until the wee hours of the morning talking and partying. He started having a harder time getting up and going to work, most likely from the late nights and a hangover. I was fine because my schedule was nocturnal, but before I decided to

quit school my burning interest in him and disinterest in going to class surely clashed and contributed to my decision as much as working crazy hours and not being able to afford tuition. I also was not gifted in the money management department. The first nineteen years of my life, I had everything I needed completely paid for and never wondered where the money came from. I didn't have to worry about paying not one single bill and the money I made went to whatever whim I had at the time. This did not transfer well into all of a sudden finding myself responsible for paying bills--actual bills, that if they did not get paid, meant that we did not have water or electricity or food to eat (which did happen several times.)

In December of that year when I went home for Christmas, I told my Dad about my decision to quit school. He was infuriated. He expressed valid concerns such as, "if you quit now you'll never go back" and "you're going to waste your life" and "why are you acting so stupid?" He also said things that made a lot of sense that I was unable to absorb at the time, such as, "I JUST WANT YOU TO BE ABLE TO SUPPORT YOURSELF IN THE WAY IN WHICH YOU HAVE BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO." In turn (and in retrospect) I was equally upset with him. He had incessantly called me over the year and a half since I had left Michigan asking me advice about how to handle my "out of control, pot smoking, rule breaking, talking back, brat" of a sister. My mom was increasingly checking out of parenthood and instead favored enjoying a nice Vicodin for dinner and going to sleep. My step-mom had "raised her children" and was just trying to survive the wrath of teenage angst doled out by my sister on a daily basis. Although I didn't know it then, I was pissed at Dad. I felt he had abandoned me and put me in a situation in which it was impossible for me to succeed-one in which I was expected to pay living expenses, pay for school and be successful at both. I was not thriving. I was far from successful. I had little family support in Atlanta, so I turned to my friends for support and collectively we led



a very misguided lifestyle. I felt if Dad expected me to be an adult, I could make adult decisions, and my (un)adult decision was to quit school in favor of doing what I thought I wanted and what felt good at the time.

Dad and I did not talk much over the next several years after my decision. We saw each other and remained cordial, I went home for Christmas and he visited Atlanta a few times a year. When my sister graduated high school, true to his word, he moved South. My sister got into the University of Tennessee, and Dad had gotten a job at a large Electric Cooperative in a small town north of Chattanooga, Tennessee. He moved South and we all lived very separate lives, my sister headed to Knoxville, Dad in his new residence, and me in Atlanta. After living a year in the rented house the roommates decided to break up. Todd moved in with a couple he was friends with. Tammie (who had replaced Erika) moved back to her parents' home. Patrick and I moved into a one-bedroom apartment. We had acquired a dog in our eight months of dating and being roommates, and the three of us fit snugly in the new place. We were still more focused on playing than working, working just enough to get by and pay the bills (barely) and often spending rent money on beer or dime bags of weed.

In the spring after living with Patrick in that apartment, I came to the conclusion that I needed a change. I needed a change of scenery, a direction, a path. I felt bored and floundering and hated myself more and more each day. I loved Patrick very much: he was my best friend and easy to be with, he was funny and easygoing, he was caring and I knew he loved me, too. However, as much as all of this was true, he was beginning to drive me crazy. I wasn't reading books, I wasn't traveling, I wasn't meeting new people, and I was doing the same thing day in and day out: working, smoking, staying up all night and sleeping increasingly later in the day so that I had little time to do anything, much less anything healthy, productive, or enjoyable. Our

apartment was a disgusting, garbage-filled mess. Complaints from the apartment complex for excessive barking of our dogs (yes, we had acquired another by this time, which I had rescued from the vet's office I was working at) or leaving rotting trash on the stoop instead of taking it to the trash bin were piling up on our door. Our neighbors hated us, and rightfully so; we were slobs and our slovenliness leaked out of the doors of the apartment to the back deck and the front door. Patrick had gotten fired from two jobs for poor performance and thin attendance and was now delivering pizzas. Our messiness wasn't reserved to our surroundings. We were truly messes, inside and out.

When we received notice that the apartment complex did not want to renew our lease and we would have to find another place to live, I knew it was time to do something. I needed a change. I needed to get my life together, to do SOMETHING. What I was doing had ceased to feel good. It felt sad and dirty and boring. I felt empty. I had forgotten the dreams I had of traveling in Europe or living there and the idea of university and degrees were so far out of my purview I couldn't even see them anymore. When I quit school, I did it under the premise of returning one day. I knew that waiting tables and washing dogs wasn't a sustainable career path for a life. I didn't want my life continuing on the same path, it felt like a path to nowhere. A path that stank like the apartment I lived in. I needed a drastic change of circumstance and surrounding. I needed to go home to Michigan. I needed stability, familiarity, and understanding. I needed a break in routine. I needed support. I needed guidance of some sort. I wasn't doing so many things right. I saw the years stretched out before me, twenty or thirty years later would I live in a house that I owned like my father, or would I still be in this stinky, cramped apartment? Would I be able to wear nice clothes to work, or would I have to don flair and stripes and a hat? My dad wouldn't let me come to his house. He said it was because he didn't want the dogs living

there (In Dad's defense, one weighed 90 pounds and the other 75 pounds, and they were a handful). Shockingly, my mother, in a moment of matronly pity, said I could come stay with her and my stepfather. I got a transfer to a TGI Friday's in my hometown in Lansing, Michigan, packed up my Volkswagen Fox that had some electrical problem that at times required me to beat on the battery to get it to start, and drove north with a 90-pound and 75-pound dog.

### **Passage 16: Change is Hard**

Making a clean break with Patrick proved to be more difficult than I expected. Although I knew in my heart it was over, he had been the only solid support I had for two years after moving out of my grandmother's house. Even though we were living in different states, I was planning on coming back to Georgia in the fall, and we kept in touch by talking on the phone regularly. I spent the summer in Michigan, from May until the end of August. I didn't work as much as I had in Georgia and I didn't have to. There were no bills to pay! I would have water, electricity and food! It was glorious. I hung out with my high school friends who were home for the summer, most of them looking forward to their senior year in college in the fall. I watched my sister graduate high school. I helped her through a predicament of her own, one my parents could never deal with and that she still thinks about to this day. I mention this but will not elaborate; my sister's story is not my story to tell.

During those months at my mom's, I formulated a plan. I decided to move back to Georgia and move in with my friend Kory. Her parents had bought a retirement home in Rome, Georgia, and she was living in it until they retired and moved there permanently. She needed a roommate because hers had recently moved out and her parents were pet lovers so the dogs were welcome. Since Rome was a university town and I knew I didn't want to wait tables the rest of my life, I would apply to the University of Georgia and start in the spring. I would live with

Kory, transfer back to the TGI Friday's where I had been employed for almost two years now and work there until I could get a job in Rome. Rent was going to be cheap, only \$300 a month to live in a nice house in a nice neighborhood, one very similar to the one I grew up in, and I was going to be a student again with a much more affordable living situation.

My dad was thrilled with my decision to return to school, even though it was the University of Georgia, which he hated. He even offered to help pay my tuition. He and June spent that summer packing up and preparing for their move to Tennessee. While they were busy preparing to move their lives South, they were also busy getting my sister prepared to attend the University of Tennessee in the fall. I know you might think it's strange that my sister is, at this point in the story, going off to UT and I am playing around. The worst thing about all this, is Dad was going to pay for everything. Please don't judge him for this. After my failure and his misstep in expecting me to be able to handle my shit as an adult, maybe he learned that the reality of his experience and the time and climate in which my sister and I were in were two very different things. Perhaps he needed to have a child in college, truly in college, not worrying about out-of-state tuition and establishing residency and all the things in between. Perhaps Dad was making more money or was relieved from not having to support me and that afforded him the economic means to send my sister to UT for a more traditional college experience. Honestly, I don't know and it doesn't matter. I was excited (even though I might have been a little jealous) for my sister and her new adventure. My sister had suffered through all the things that I had, but she and I are very different people. You know how they say, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease?" Well, where I was compliant and quiet, my sister was in your face and asking "what the fuck?" In fact, I admire her for this. I admire my Dad too, parenting doesn't come with any kind of handbook and I have yet to meet someone who says they know/knew 100 percent what they were doing

raising their child (actually maybe I have met people who claim that, but I'm just going to lay out there that they are delusional). None of us really know shit. Every kid is different, every experience is different, we all do the best with what we have at the time. So, yes my sister was going off to have a "traditional" university experience that summer, while I was donning flair and trying to make a plan to scrap my way back into the possibility of any university experience. However, at least we were closer together. At least I could see her, Dad, Mom, June and Danny. It all felt whole again, just for a little while, as we all planned to blow it up and make some drastic changes in location and position.

During that summer, I spent time reconnecting with my Mom, who was shockingly sober most days, except at night when she would pop an Ambien but still not sleep. I also spent many nights drinking beer with my stepfather Danny. Although I remembered Danny in our younger years as often gruff, rarely affectionate, and mostly irritated with the presence of Stacey and me, that summer we connected in a way that my anger with him for splitting up my parents and my spoiled brattiness of youth had prevented before. In all honesty, I know Danny didn't cause my parents' divorce. I know he was a hard-working, "salt of the earth" kind of guy. Honestly, as an adult parent, he offered more love, support and understanding than Dad knew how. We would take the dogs for a walk and we would talk about the day. We would meet the neighbors in the backyard for happy hour. He would tell me in moments to ourselves, "you're a smart girl. You'll be fine. I know out of all you kids, you'll be okay. Out of Jed and Summer (my step siblings), you and your sister, I've always worried about you the least. You've got the most common sense and you'll be fine." I wish I had the same confidence in myself that he bestowed upon me in those conversations. He was giving me way too much credit, and future events would prove that. Even still, I appreciated the show of love and support all the same. I thanked him for letting me

stay with him and Mom. I thanked him for letting the dogs come. It's a lot to ask of a person, no matter how close you are to them or if they are your parent or not, to let you come with two huge dogs and camp out for a few months. Mom, Danny and I made a plan for my return to Georgia. They reminded me that I did have a place to come home to, even though it wasn't the place I had grown up with Dad. My family was changing, half of us going South and half staying in the North. However, it needed to be done. I was no longer a resident of Michigan and my opportunities in Lansing were no longer as bright as they had seemed a few years before. In August of 1998, I packed up that Volkswagen again and headed back South, a plan in place for a brighter future and lifestyle change and hope in my heart again.

When I arrived in Rome, Georgia, I fell in love with the town. Although I still worked late into the night, I did not drink, smoke weed, drop acid or pop pills all night. Instead I spent my time cooking, cleaning, and taking my dogs for walks, reading, and waiting to hear if I had been accepted to the University of Georgia. Patrick and I still would spend a couple nights a week together and we still called ourselves a couple, but we were living over an hour away from each other which provided some much-needed distance. I noticed that when we did spend time together, we would fall back into our old lifestyle, of which substance abuse and partying was a large part. Even though I knew that was not the life I wanted, and I knew that I was tired of spending my time or fueling that part of my existence, I couldn't seem to make a clean break from it.

In the middle of October I got really sick. I was nauseous all the time, I couldn't keep anything down. I was throwing up non-stop, at work, at home, morning, noon and night. In November, I noticed it had been about five weeks since I'd had my period. I had been throwing up for two weeks. I had lost almost ten pounds. I had been on birth control but I must confess, I

wasn't always faithful about taking them as recommended, and I had been on antibiotics for a sinus infection in September. No period. Throwing up. Not taking birth control as prescribed (I would miss several pills and then take them all at once or a double up over a series of days). Fuck. Motherfucker. It couldn't be.

**Passage 17: Holy. Moly.**

Patrick spent the night on a Friday. I was wearing a pretty nightgown and woke up Saturday morning, still sick to my stomach. I decided to go ahead and do the inevitable, to take the plunge, to possibly solve the mystery of my illness. I peed on the stick. I waited two minutes. I saw the line. The positive result. I woke Patrick up by sitting on top of him and hitting him, eventually throwing the urine soaked stick in his face. I got up, locked myself in the bathroom, and cried. And threw up. And cried. And threw up. Later that day, I got my acceptance letter to the University of Georgia in the mail.

I knew I had options. I could have an abortion and forget that I ever saw the line. I could totally do it, no problem. I could have this mistake erased. Removed. Finished. Wiped out. I thought about it for several days. Patrick said he would support whatever I wanted to do. He said it was one hundred percent my decision. I talked to my roommate Kory, who was also a good friend, about it. I talked to Patrick about it. Mostly I just thought about it. I knew that people would think I was crazy, but I also knew, for me, that I couldn't have an abortion. I don't know why. I'm a solid agnostic and have absolutely no moral objection to abortion. None whatsoever. I had taken friends to get them. There was just a feeling, so deep down in my conscience that it was visceral, it was not a cerebral decision, and I don't know why, but I couldn't do it. I didn't *want* to. I didn't want to particularly chain myself to Patrick forever; I didn't even know if I wanted to be with him. In retrospect, my actions of moving out and away from him showed quite

clearly that I had no interest sustaining our relationship. I think I kept seeing him because it was comfortable and easy, and because he was one of the few people who had continued to support me emotionally since I moved to Georgia. You never really break from those you love or have loved. No matter how much accumulates to cause the break before it happens, or no matter how much you might consciously know that it's better for you not to be with a person, the fact is they are always part of good memories and the comfort and love you felt or even feel when you are with them are still part of your relationship with them. Even though I had moved away and moved out of living with Patrick, he was still a part of my life. He was still my best friend. I moved away because it had seemed like we had different goals and different ideas about how we wanted to live our lives. Now though, now there was an *x*-factor involved. In an instant, another huge thing to consider. As much as I didn't know what I wanted to do about my relationship with Patrick (be with him, not be with him, live with him, not live with him), I knew that I didn't want to abort this baby. For some rationally explainable reason, I couldn't commit to erasing this gift. I am in no way shaming anyone who does have an abortion. In witnessing people close to me go through the experience, I observed that it is a choice that is hard, and hard doesn't even begin to describe it. It is beyond hard. It's a "damned if you do and damned if you don't" situation. Even still, I knew subconsciously for me that this was a gift, a chance, and although I knew it would be hard, it was a new adventure. I'm kind of an idiot when it comes to these things. I didn't think about all the insanity and difficulty and challenges and ways that motherhood would complicate my life. I just made a decision and braced myself for the consequences. The decision made, I had to reformulate the life plan. I could still go to university, I knew I could. I'd have to make a new living arrangement. Although my friend had agreed to have me as a roommate an infant was not part of that deal. I had to figure out what to do with Patrick.



Patrick was thrilled with my decision. He immediately assumed that we would make plans for us to move back in together. He said he supported my decision to go to school. His mother and stepfather were also thrilled with the news that they would be grandparents. I was expecting some shaming to occur, some rolling of eyes and sighs of “you’re crazy,” but instead the news was met with smiles and warm hugs and kind words. My mother was supportive, understanding, and respectful of my decision. She was looking forward to playing the role of Nana for the first time in her life. My sister was lost in a world of freshman dorm living. She was partying her ass off and barely making it to classes, so her head was in a bit of a different space that thinking about being an aunt was not a part of. My grandparents were all supportive and loving, vowing to help in any way they could. My mom’s parents had married young and had a family at a young age, younger than I was, and with little money and factory jobs. They were confident that I would be a wonderful mother and could make everything work. That’s why grandparents are so awesome. No matter how much you feel like you fucked up, they look at you wisely, hug you, and assure you that you are and will be fine (at least that was the relationship that I had with my grandparents). I felt a rally of love and support from all the important people in my life. Well, almost all.

When I made the dreaded call to my father, the outpouring of support and understanding I hoped for was not the reality that I was faced with. I have to preface this with saying that this is my memory of our conversation. Of course, I didn’t record it or anything, and I didn’t write it down, so this is simply pulled from my memory. As a wise man once said, “memory is a motherfucker.” Remember Dad and I weren’t close like we had been when I was young. We talked every few weeks about mundane things, nothing very exciting. He had just moved to Tennessee and was learning his new job (which I now know was a super stressful experience for

him). My account of the phone call goes like this: first there was measured anger from Dad. Then there was the question, “Do you need money to have it taken care of?” Which in turn produced an outpouring of anger from me. I said, “Dad, what the hell?! If I had not already made the decision to have this baby, do you think that I would be telling you about it?!” Then there was the hurling of accusations and doomsday predictions, “Well, Ang (that’s what my family actually calls me), I guess that going back to school is out. I guess you’ll just be a secretary or waiting tables for the rest of your life. I don’t even know if my insurance will cover this, I will probably have to lie to them and tell them you’re going to school still. How could you let this happened? You have ruined your life, and what type of life could you possibly provide for a child?! You’re crazy for doing this. You’re throwing your life away. You have no idea what you’re doing. I think you’re a crazy idiot for doing this.” Which, in turn incited another outpouring of anger, frustration, and pure pain from me. “Dad! Would you listen to me? I don’t want anything from you. NOT A DAMN THING. If you want to be a part of my life and this child’s life then I would welcome your love and emotional support—but that’s all I want. I don’t want your money. I don’t expect you to pay my tuition or help me go back to school. I understand that this complicates everything, but I did get accepted to UGA, by the way. I’m going back. I don’t expect your insurance plan to cover it. I will figure it out. If you can’t find it in your heart to still love me or this baby and support my decision, then fuck you.” To which I hung up the phone and it dawned on me, shit just got real. What the hell was I going to do? How was I going to do this? I had no clue. Insurance? Tuition? I had a little bit of a plan for that, I had planned on applying for financial aid anyway, even though I didn’t know how all of that worked. But INSURANCE? MEDICAL BILLS? Hadn’t thought that one through. I waited tables. They didn’t offer an insurance plan at TGI Friday’s. Besides all that, I didn’t even know if my baby

was going to have birth defects or be intellectually or developmentally disabled from the acid I had dropped at the Beastie Boys concert the month before, the pot I had smoked the week before in hopes of stopping the nausea, or the beers I had consumed before the puking had started. I could win the fucked up mother of the year award already. Holy shit. Holy.freaking.shit.

### **Passage 18: Getting It Together**

As fate would have it, my roommate had a friend who had recently had a child who was in a similar situation to me. She was in her 20s, she had no financial resources, no insurance and no partner. In fact, she was bipolar, so even when you think you're in a shit storm there are always intense reminders out there that others have it worse than you do. She came over to the house and told me, "you CAN have this baby! There are lots of programs that can help you. Apply for Medicaid and financial aid for school. That's what I did, and I was approved and I know you will be too." I had no idea what that was or how to do it, but she assured me that although the process was not easy, I would be eligible and it would help pay for the health care I needed to have this child. I felt a little skeezy for considering it, but what options did I have? Motherhood isn't about your pride, and if you think it is, you'll learn in a skinny minute that having a child will make you do shit you never dreamed you would. Like apply for welfare. Even though I grew up in a suburban house with all the food and designer clothes and White privilege and advantages anyone could ask for. She also told me about Pell grants and student loans which would help me pay for school. She told me where to go and what to ask for and helped me fill out the papers and call the right people. Turns out I was eligible for Medicaid and WIC, but not food stamps, which I didn't think I really needed anyway. Honestly, looking back, I have no idea what offices I visited and what forms I filled out and who I had to talk to. I do remember receiving a yellow paper in the mail each month and filling out paperwork every few

months (I think quarterly) to continue coverage. I hustled through it though, and within two weeks I had secured financing to begin my first semester at UGA, made an appointment with the midwife office for my first prenatal visit and had the yellow paper that proved I had insurance coverage ready to go in my purse.

There were many firsts in a very short period of time that November. The first time I applied for government assistance. The first time I visited the financial aid office and filled out a promissory note. My first visit with the midwife. This is the one I remember most vividly because it was like going to confession. I'm not Catholic, but imagine the feeling is similar as sitting in front of a medical professional who is a stranger, looking the person I was confessing to directly in the eyes and admitting I had smoked cigarettes, dropped acid, smoked marijuana, and drank alcohol while I was pregnant. I was that deep down hold your head down can barely breathe hating myself ashamed. Luckily the midwife didn't reflect my mood and instead offered her opinion. She chuckled and told me, "Well, if this little thing has survived all of that already, I'm confident that it will be a strong and healthy baby." Thanks to her soothing (I think she hugged me as I was sobbing at one point), I did feel much better after it was over. She told me about books I should read and scheduling appointments and when I could find out the sex of the baby (which I had already decided I didn't want to know) and eating healthy. I walked out much more informed than when I had entered and soothed by the idea that I hadn't doomed my child already—at least, hopefully not.

In December, I had my first appointment with my advisor at UGA. I was starting to show a little bit, and she said, "So, what do you plan to study?" I replied confidently, "Animal Behavior." She looked at me and said, "Ummm....we don't have that as a major here at this university. There are only a couple of animal behavior programs in the US. Do you want to be a

veterinarian?” I said, “No, I want to be a dog trainer or work with animals in some way.” She replied, “Well, all we have here is animal husbandry, some various agricultural majors that have to do with livestock, and pre-vet.” My eyes fell and she must have seen the disappointment in my body language. She looked at my belly, then at me, and suggested, “You need to have a job when you graduate, right?” I said, “Yes.” She looked at my transcript and gave advice that would change my life forever, “it looks like in high school and community college you studied both French and Spanish and did quite well. Why don’t you consider going into education?” I shrugged my shoulders and said, “Okay. I really don’t want to be a teacher.” She kept pushing, “Just take one education class and see. You still have several basic classes to finish, so you won’t take it until the fall.” I agreed, we developed a program of study, and I went to register for classes.

Patrick and I figured out where to live, because although my roommate was happy to be living with me, living with me and a baby and two large dogs was a bit much. Patrick was convinced that the best thing was for us to move back in together, and I agreed. If we were going to have this baby, we had to give us a chance too. I had already gone from a rich White bitch to what I had always heard described as poor White trash because I was unwed, young, pregnant, irresponsible about being pregnant when I didn’t know I was, on Medicaid and receiving WIC so the government could feel more confident that I was eating well for the baby. I searched for a house we could afford and found one: it was a 100-year-old house in Oglethorpe County, about 15 minutes from downtown Rome. It had no central heat and air. It had hardwood floors that were original to the house and had mason jar lids nailed down where holes had been worn through them. If you walked on the floor you would get splinters in your feet. It was November and we planned on moving in the first of December. Patrick’s parents wanted us to

get married, but I refused. Even though I knew that it added to my trashy image to have a baby out of wedlock, I didn't want a shotgun wedding while I was pregnant. We did decide to live together and try to build a family. He was a pizza delivery guy and still worked in Atlanta, commuting back and forth to Rome every day. I waited tables in Atlanta still, planning on quitting my job when we moved in together and going back to school full-time.

Plans in place, insurance secured and classes registered, I gave notice at work and we moved into that old house. We had to pay \$350 to get the propane tank filled, and between putting deposits down for other utilities and the house there was no way we could afford it. It was almost Christmas time, we had no heat and it was 20 degrees outside. We did go to Walmart and buy a space heater for \$10 dollars. I would turn on the oven, let it heat up, and then open the door. The space heater worked great as long as you were close to it and closed the door. I spent about two weeks in either the bedroom or kitchen, but nowhere in between, because it was so cold! The mason lid jar speckled floor had cracks between them from age and when the wind blew, if you were wearing a skirt, you had better be holding it down. It was a little miserable (looking back, a lot, but when you're down, you have to contribute to your circumstance by combating it with cheer and ignorance,) but we made it to January and finally got that propane tank filled. Little did we think about what it would be like in May, June, or July with no air conditioning. That would be think too far ahead and one can only handle so much at one time.

### **Passage 19: Making Amends**

After the initial shock of the fact that I was uneducated, single and knocked up at 22, my father decided that we needed to take "one last family vacation together, just him and his girls." He booked a cruise for us to take between Christmas and New Year's. I flew from Atlanta and met the other three in San Juan, Puerto Rico for the seven days on the boat. For me, this was this

was a perfect reflection of the conflict I was living: I was going on a seven-day cruise where I was expected to dress up for formal dinners and I was leaving a house where I didn't have enough money to fill the propane tank so we could have heat. Although I appreciated my father's efforts to maintain the facade that "there were no problems here" and everyone in his family was completely middle/upper-class normal, it was hard to hide my belly or ignore the fact that my ankles were so swollen the only shoes I could fit on my feet were flip-flops. Or that I didn't wear a wedding ring. Or the fact that I was on a cruise with my Dad instead of at home with my partner. All that stuff was fun to attempt to sugar-coat during the fancy sit down dinners where we were assigned to a table with other families.

My sister and I shared a room and Dad and June had their own room. We planned our excursions together, went to the casinos and the shows, and sipped daiquiris (mine virgin, of course) by the pool. On one particular day in port, we decided to forgo the cruise line's outing offer and go out on our own. We rented a car and drove around the island looking at the beautiful scenery, stopping at abandoned beaches along the way. When we were on our way to return the car and get back to the port, on an off the beaten path road with little traffic and monkeys everywhere, we got a flat tire.

Dad freaked out. He didn't know what to do. After my flat tire experience my first year in Georgia, after Patrick and I became involved, I had Patrick teach me how to change a tire. He made me take the tire on and off of my car four times to ensure that I knew exactly what to do. I saw Dad in the back of the car with the jack and tire iron, looking at the flat, saying, hmmm...it's been a long time...how does this thing work? Although I, like many daughters, held the strong belief that my Dad was an intelligent and competent adult who knew how to handle himself in any situation, it was clear he was a bit flustered and flabbergasted with the situation we were in

now. I said, "Dad, don't you know how to change a tire?" He said, "OF COURSE I DO! I just haven't done it in probably 20 years!" I said, "well, it's been a few years since I've had to do it to, but I can do this." He said, "NO YOU CAN'T! YOU'RE PREGNANT!" I said, "Dad, pregnancy doesn't prevent me from being capable to change a tire. It's not like it is making me forget how to complete this task. We can do it together." I showed him where to put the jack and turned the handle to elevate the car. I took the tire iron and pulled off the hubcap. I told Dad to take off the bolts. He couldn't get one of them loose, so I showed him how to jump on the tire iron with his foot until we loosened it up. After about 30 minutes, we did it. That tire was changed and we were on our way. As I sat in the backseat on our way back to the boat, I realized that I knew how to do something that Dad didn't. That Dad DIDN'T know everything. That I didn't know anything, but that he didn't know everything. That he didn't know me very well anymore. He saw me as a disappointment, as immature, as incapable, just like when he dropped me off in Georgia, just like when I told him I dropped out of school, just like when I told him I was pregnant. He saw the spoiled brat teenager that he knew from when we had lived together. Complicating the picture, he saw the little girl who he brought a dog home to, he saw the girl he took to the Daddy daughter dance, he saw the little girl who would sleep in his floor when she had nightmares, he saw the Mork and Mindy suspenders I wore for three years every day, he saw the girl that surprised him at three in the morning from the other side of the kitchen when I yelled "boo" (we had both gotten up with a middle of the night need a snack attack-we both went for the doughnuts). He saw his child. He saw his baby. He saw the person who he had held when she was her most vulnerable self, he saw the baby who almost died during childbirth. All those faces I had worn as his daughter, and he didn't see the one in front of him now, they were clouded with all those that he had known. He didn't know I had been attending the school of life (the bad



choices, consequences, fucked up hard) experiences that had forced me to become independent and capable of handling some pretty fucked up situations. Flat tire? That was easy. The rest of the circumstances I had created in my life, that was harder to navigate, but what I wanted to say to him was “WATCH ME.” It was starkly apparent to me that I was no longer only that little rich White bitch I was four years ago. There was more to the story of me now.

### **Passage 20: Starting Again**

I started my first semester at UGA when I was six months pregnant. I had to park and walk up a steep flight of 100 stairs to get to class or to catch the bus to class. Every day I would schlep up the stairs with my backpack on as the heat increased in proportion to the size of my belly. As I collected syllabi and noticed the schedule, I realized my finals dates were the week of my due date. I was taking basic courses like many sophomores, except I was 22 and pregnant and my classmates were 19 and 20 and couldn't legally buy beer. Most didn't speak to me, two of the classes were lecture classes anyways. I did find it helpful to let people pay me to use my student ID to buy extra football tickets in the student section (hey-I had to hustle, what can I say?) while I was taking weather and climate, English 1102, art history and Spanish 1001. Even though I had studied Spanish for years I decided to go back to the beginning because I hadn't practiced it much in my two-year hiatus. Art history and weather and climate were lecture classes. I often skipped weather and climate because I could; however my grade reflected my poor attendance. Around midpoint, I went to office hours of my professors and spoke with them about my dilemma. They didn't want to give the final early because it could compromise academic integrity so we decided we would see how it went and hope that I made it through the semester. I hated most of my classes. I thought I would love English because I had always done really well in every English class I had ever taken. I got a 57 on my first paper. There was a sea

of red all over my paper, the TA wrote that my ideas were undeveloped and unsupported, and I went home and cried. Was Dad right? Could I even do this?

Patrick and I got along well when we were together, which was not often. I went to school during the day, while he slept most of the day because he left for work in the afternoon and didn't get home until the middle of the night. Even though he stopped doing it around me or with me, I knew he was still smoking pot regularly and possibly doing other drugs. Sometimes he'd be gone for a few days at a time and I wouldn't know where he was. When he came home he would say, "I was at Orion's" or "I stayed with my brother because I was so tired from work and I was afraid I'd fall asleep at the wheel if I tried to drive home." I accepted the excuses, no matter how isolated it made me to be stuck in the country alone for days at a time. I needed to accept the excuses. I needed his support and love, even if it was disconnected and only available when he wasn't distracted by a better deal. Much like my mother, I could ignore the indiscretions in the story. I HAD to. I needed someone. I didn't have many friends, most of them were still getting ready to go to the bar at 10 at night or working real jobs or getting ready to graduate college. It's amazing what happens to friends when you all of a sudden find yourself in very different places and circumstances in life. Most of the friends I had made in Georgia were party friends. Our friendships depended on the shared experiences of fucked upedness we created daily, and beyond that on who was dating who and who was working where and who puked last night. My Michigan friends were mostly gone to me, with the exception of a couple that often couldn't reach me because my phone was disconnected because I couldn't pay the phone bill. Although I spoke to my family, it was usually a monthly update to make sure that I was still alive; not surprisingly, not having a phone often got in the way. There were two exceptions to this isolation: my Mom, who I spoke to almost every day when I had a phone, and Patrick's

mother. My mother truly was one of what I felt like was a few of my supporters. Patrick's mother, as well, rallied to become a source of support. Going to her house was much like the experience of going on a cruise with my father. She didn't work, she had married a man who sold office supplies but who had done quite well for himself. In contrast to my dad's house, her family sat around and smoked a joint after dinner together (again, except for me, due to my status, but I had been known to participate pre-pregnancy). Her home was in a cushy suburb of Atlanta. It included a pond and four bedrooms, a full basement, and lots of boxes of merchandise she ordered daily by mail. Although she very kind to me during this time, it was hard not to notice the fact she didn't drive because it scared her. She would only leave the house with her husband, and she had a list of things she was terrified of: you could sum the list up by saying she was terrified of leaving the house.

I rationalized it as being okay though; I was used to ignoring or explaining away people's challenges with ideas that mostly included, "that's just how she is." My Mom trained me well in this ability. Patrick's mother's name was Pat. She had married at 16 and went to Germany with Patrick's dad. She had Patrick when she was 17. Patrick's Dad became a cocaine addict and fathered many children. Patrick just found one of his half-brothers after his father died. She had been a single mother and she had lived a hard life. She had found her way was able to live in a way that accommodated her needs in a nice and expensive suburban house in Atlanta.

Other family members were much more elusive. My sister was busy failing out of her freshman year at the University of Tennessee. She didn't work, lived in the dorms, and was trying to get along with her super-religious roommate and figure out how to tell our father that she was going to be kicked out if she didn't pull her grades up by the end of the semester. We were in very different places in life: she was recovering from her traumatic summer and she

looked at me as the one who made the decision that she couldn't but wished she could.

Ironically, we were both envious in one way or another of each other's choices and the different relationships we had within the same family.

That first semester at UGA was a blur of doctor appointments and class and a growing body. I decided after much reading that I wanted to attempt a natural birth. I read many books and felt very strongly that since I had unknowingly put my baby in such significant danger before I knew that it was there, the least I could do was decide to be as safe and drug-free as possible throughout the rest of my pregnancy and the birth. I went to Bradley birthing classes every Wednesday night for ten weeks. A group of mismatched people came together to discuss assigned reading, breathing techniques, birth plans and the evils of drugs and Cesarean sections. There were the vegans (who farted ALL the time while they munched out of their baggies of nuts-seriously, it was super distracting); the couple from Wrens, Georgia (they seemed the most normal of all of us); Elizabeth and her mom (who was my age and in a similar circumstance to me, although we didn't know it until after our babies were born and we became friends); and Anne, our fearless instructor. We would sit on the floor "criss-cross apple sauce" and engage in our work. We watched birthing videos and discussed breastfeeding techniques. So many birthing videos. I saw more vaginas and naked breasts in those classes than I have seen in my entire life. It is odd to see so many vaginas on television, while you're sitting on the floor with a group of strangers. It was even more odd that we cried after most of the videos, even after the initial shock of what our bodies were expected and going to do, because it is beautiful to see a new life come into the world. Patrick thought the group was weird and often lobbied to skip class, but I was searching for support wherever I could find it.

**Passage 21: Baby Time**

Towards the end of my pregnancy the midwives informed me that my baby was breech. They referred me the OB/GYN practice that they worked with and informed me I might have to have a cesarean section. You have to know, I'd spent ten weeks and thirty hours being indoctrinated by the Bradley method, and that method insisted that Cesarean section as a method of birth was the root of all evil. I called my Bradley birthing teacher and she told me to stay strong and that I could still stick to my birth plan. We had read about how labor, like breastfeeding, was the best thing for baby because it prepared them to emerge into the world. She told me many OBGYNs would allow women to go into labor naturally because a high percentage of babies flipped at the last minute. Armed with this knowledge, I went back to the midwives and they tried manipulation, which left bruises up and down my stomach and sides. In retrospect, bruising the outside can't be good for the inside. I was committed, though; I HAD to birth this baby naturally, it was a rite of womanhood, and most importantly a rite of passage for my baby. I went to the chiropractor. I stood on my head for an hour or more every night. I took up yoga via videos rented from the library and \$10 classes once a week. The \$10 came out of our food budget. Ironically, I was what society would define as a "welfare mom" showing up at the whitest of White lady pastimes, prenatal yoga classes. I almost burst out laughing the first time the instructor told me to "feel my baby light shining," but that didn't stop me. I HAD TO FLIP THE BABY. Cesarean=FAILURE. No matter my determination, nothing seemed to flip baby. My mom came down to stay with me the last two weeks of my pregnancy to help me. Since I had spent the majority of my pregnancy alone because Patrick was working and my friends were busy being single and fabulous, it was a huge comfort knowing that someone would be there when the time came. She was 100 percent supportive of all my efforts, which is something you

have to admire about my mom. When I expressed the depth of my commitment to natural birthing or the importance of massaging baby with labor contractions to my grandmother, my dad, or Patrick's mom, they replied, "you're being ridiculous. Just do what the doctors tell you." Mom, on the other hand, just kept saying, "I'm with you! Go stand on your head while I make dinner."

When I met with the OB/GYN, Mom came along with me. The OB/GYN told me I had to have a C-section. She got frustrated with me when I asked a lot of questions. She then proceeded to berate me for being, "stupid and trying to kill my baby." I tried to explain that I was just trying to do what was best for my baby, to which she replied, "you're being selfish. No OB in their right mind would let you have this baby naturally. You need to schedule your C-section. This baby is over eight pounds already and you can't have it breech." I left the office sobbing in anger and seething in frustration. I began calling other OB/GYN practices in Rome and all told me they won't take a new patient that was as far along in pregnancy as I was (I was two days past my due date). I called the friend who helped me apply for Medicaid and financial aid. She was in a medical program at Rome Tech and her roommate was in the nursing school at UGA. She talked to her roommate and her roommate said, "Let me make a call." She called back in 10 minutes and said, "Call this number. The doctor's name is Dr. Loggin. He usually doesn't accept Medicaid patients but says he is willing to make an exception in your case. I've known him for years and he is my OB and is a wonderful doctor." I called and made an appointment for the next day. The office informed me he had deliveries scheduled for most of the day, but if I was willing to wait he would try to run over from the hospital and meet with me. I was willing to do anything. Even if I did have to have a C-section, I didn't want the first hands that touched my baby to be attached to a person who thought I was stupid.

Mom and I arrived at the office at 9 a.m. and we waited. And waited. All day we waited. We tried to keep it light. We watched the TV that looped the same ads over and over again in the waiting room. We read the magazines and commented on celebrity events, discussing our personal opinions of the celebrity's actions and life choices. At 4 p.m. the doctor finally showed up. He apologized and told me that he had a few unexpected ladies go into labor. He took me back and examined me and did an ultrasound. I had my records faxed over from the other doctor and midwives (for a fee, of course, which Mom paid). He studied them and then asked me why I wanted to have the baby naturally. I made my case and concluded that I understood if he thinks I need to have a C-section, I was willing to do that as long as he delivered the baby because I had such a horrible experience the day before. He thought for a moment and put his hand to his chin. Then he said, "okay, here's the deal. First of all, I don't take Medicaid, because frankly the payouts aren't enough to make it worth my time. You have to see so many patients to make enough money to even keep your practice in business, that I've found it not to be worth it, I prefer to give each woman who is my patient as much time as they need. However, in your case I am going to make an exception. I'll have my office handle billing Medicaid and accept whatever payment they offer. Now, here's what I recommend, and I don't want to say that I disagree with the diagnosis my colleague shared yesterday, however I believe you have the right to do what you believe is the best for your baby. So, I will let you labor. However, there are two contingencies.

1. I don't believe this baby is more than 6.5 pounds. You have gained way too much weight this last month, almost 30 pounds. Your blood pressure is high. I don't believe that you are yet, but I think you are headed to pre-eclampsia and I don't want to risk it. So, I will deliver this baby, but I will not wait for you to go into labor naturally. I want to do it tomorrow morning.

2. I will induce you. If labor goes smoothly then I will try to let you have this baby naturally. However, if it does not, or if I have any concern whatsoever, if I say it's time for a C-section, you won't be disappointed or fight me on it. You have to trust I only have the interest of your baby and your health in mind. Do you agree?"

I vigorously nodded my head, then jumped up and gave him a hug. I thanked him profusely. He told me to go home, take some castor oil, go for a long and vigorous walk, eat something spicy and greasy, and have sex because all of those acts have helped women go into labor. If I didn't start labor during the night, I was to report to the hospital at 4 a.m. for induction. I called Patrick and told him to get home from work because it was go time. I picked up a pizza loaded with tomatoes and spinach and wings from Mellow Mushroom, and got some castor oil at the grocery. I decided that if a teaspoon helped that I should take a tablespoon. I walked. I stood on my head. I had sex (even though I didn't really feel like it and logistically it was a little complicated). At 3:30 a.m. I headed to the hospital without having one labor pain at all.

The induction started at 5 a.m. By 7 a.m., I was puking my guts out. I couldn't tell if I was having labor pains or gas pains; remember, I ingested an excessive amount of castor oil. I was hooked up to IVs and everything was coming out of every part of my body-except the baby. At 8 a.m., Patrick disappeared. He went downstairs and outside to smoke a cigarette, get coffee, and find something to eat. He still wasn't back at 11 a.m. At 11:30, he was still nowhere to be found and the doctor was delivering the news: "you have not dilated much, I see you are laboring hard and having intense contractions, but I think since the baby is small and is bottom down it is not putting enough pressure on your cervix to make you dilate. The baby's heart rate is increasing when you're contracting and you're in a lot of pain. I am going to break your water and see if that helps." So he broke it. Unlike the movies where a puddle comes rushing out, just a



few drops of blood came out. He said, "You have to have a C-section." I replied enthusiastically, "That's fine! I just want the baby here and I want the pain to stop!" My Mom went to look for Patrick because one person would be allowed in the operating room with me. Someone came and shaved me, pushed a huge needle into my spine (it made a super loud pop when it was inserted), and the pain meds started flowing. I was nice and relaxed by the time they wheeled me into the operating room.

Patrick and I didn't want to know the sex of the baby before it was born. We were just hoping for a healthy, happy child, no matter if it was a boy or a girl. They lowered the curtain and I watched them pull her out of me. It was surreal, like watching an operation show on TV. She came out and wasn't crying, I looked at her and started laughing and said to the doctor, "SHE'S PEEING ALL OVER YOU!" And she was. He looked down and said, "I guess she is, isn't she?" She was so beautiful. The most amazing and beautiful thing I had ever seen. She started to cry, was weighed and cleaned, and the doctor narrated what he was doing to me. "I'm going to clean out your uterus. I'm sewing it back up. You'll just have a tiny scar that you won't be able to see unless you know it's there. You're young, you'll heal quickly and nicely."

Finally, I was back in the room with the baby. I couldn't stop crying, I was so disappointed in myself that I could not birth her naturally, but I was so elated to finally meet her. Patrick and I had a name picked out for a boy since I was six months pregnant, but it took us a lot longer to pick a girl's name. I was sitting in art history listening to my professor lecture and looking at a slide and a sculpture appeared on the screen named Daphne and Apollo by Bernini. The sculpture was interesting, but the name Daphne was more interesting to me. I went home and discussed it with Patrick, and we finally agreed. Daphne was her name (even though we didn't know it was going to be her at the time). The words of my father, the statement he'd

been making to me over the years came roaring back, “I JUST WANT YOU TO BE ABLE TO SUPPORT YOURSELF AND LIVE THE LIFE YOU’VE BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO.” It made so much more sense. I wanted Daphne to have all the things I had growing up: financial security, nice clothes, family vacations, and a trip to Europe. I wanted her to have all the advantages I had but even more, a stable life with a Mom and Dad who loved each other. I wanted the world for her and more. How was I going to figure that out? I was on welfare, financial aid, and living in a dilapidated house. I HAD to figure it out, because I knew in my heart of hearts Patrick wouldn’t. It wasn’t even on his radar. He was totally okay with everything. Change scared him. Goals were not on his radar. That was unacceptable. Dad always told me during nights of playing Nintendo, “you can’t depend on anyone. You have to make sure you can take care of yourself and be okay with yourself.” All of that weight and responsibility pressed on my mind as I looked at beautiful Daphne Alexis Matinee-Laugherty, who I had given life to but who actually saved my life.

### **Passage 22: Baby Love**

There is a certain period that every new parent goes through, usually through the first year that helps him or her deal with the demands of caring for an infant that I call baby love. There’s nothing like a baby. So sweet. So cuddly. The amount of contact you have with them physically is unprecedented by any other relationship in your life. You hold them constantly; they have access to your attention, devotion and adoration 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Even our partners don’t have that kind of unlimited access to your attention and your body. Although I couldn’t have a natural childbirth, I could breastfeed like a champ. Every three to four hours twenty-four hours a day. Daphne was an easygoing baby. The sweetest of the sweet. Never sick,

rarely angry, let anyone hold her and comfort her and play with her. She was precious and perfect.

My mom was there, my dad and June came, Patrick's parents came, and my sister came the day after Daphne was born. We rejoiced. No matter the reservations my father had about my choice to become a mother, all of those reservations dissolved the minute he set eyes on her. How could they not? This is part of the effect a baby has on people. After a few weeks, my mom went back to Michigan, my sister went back to school, and I was alone in Oglethorpe County in that old house. It was June with no central air, but it was lovely. We were soon rescued from our sweat by a window unit air conditioner that Pat (Patrick's Mom) insisted that his stepdad purchase for us as a baby gift. She was adamant her granddaughter wasn't going to suffocate in the Georgia summer heat. We had a garden and Daphne and I would spend our days reading, cooking, pulling weeds, walking, listening to the radio, and just enjoying each other. Patrick got a job at a local tire shop retreading tires and worked from 9 to 5 instead of in Atlanta all night long. He made \$10 an hour and had no benefits. Daphne was on PeachCare, an insurance plan for low-income families. Patrick's parents were still pushing us to get married. One night sitting on the back porch he said, "Mom and Bill really want us to get married. They're even offering to pay for everything. We have a child now. What do you think?" I replied, "I guess we should." And the decision was made: we were going to get married.

The wedding was a whirlwind. We decided to get married on the 5th of November, on my best friend and stepfather's birthday. What changes a year brings. I took the next semester off of school and never did take my finals. I was put on academic probation but I was still determined to go back to school. When I called my dad to tell him about the wedding, he said, "Angela, you don't have to do this. You know you don't have to." All of the hurt from his

reaction to my decision to have Daphne was still there, unspoken. He never apologized for anything; we never really discussed it again. We just ignored our reactions to each other and politely shifted our conversations to current happenings, such as how I was feeling, how my sister and stepmom were doing, and mostly how Daphne was doing. Although our interactions have improved over the eighteen years since the initial demise of our relationship, we had acquiesced to confining our relationship to brief visits and stick to mostly small talk. We're still trying though. We've come a long way since Daphne came into our lives. He showed up when she was born and calls every few weeks since to check on her. I knew that he loved her and me, but I was again offended, frustrated and angry with his questioning my ability to make a major life decision, such as marrying the father of my child, I was again offended. I told him, "Dad, I WANT to do this. I think it would be best for her and for Patrick and I. I feel like it's something I have to do. I have to give it a try." He sighed and said, "Okay. What day is going to happen? I'll pay for the rehearsal dinner, but that's it." I told him again he didn't have to pay for anything, that I didn't want his money. I hung up from that conversation with a heavy heart. It was heavy because in my heart I knew he was right. One thing I can say about dad is that over the years he has made depressing predictions about the consequences of my bad decisions, and most of the time he has been right. When I told him I had joined the roller derby team he proclaimed, "you're going to kill yourself!" I didn't actually kill myself doing roller derby, but I did suffer two major surgeries and the ability to never run as a form of exercise again. (Being unable to run again actually isn't such a bad thing.) The older I get and as my relationship with my dad changes, the more I realize that he is often correct. His track record failed in his predictions about my decision to have Daphne, but other than that it has been pretty solid. There's nothing like having a know-it-all to predict your future, especially when that person is your parent.

On the day Patrick and I got married, I got my hair and makeup done. I was standing in line at the bank in a ratty button down shirt and jeans with full on makeup and a fancy updo and the lady behind me exclaimed, “I love your hair!” I burst into tears. I said, “I HATE IT!” I started blubbering to her about how I was getting married and I didn’t know if I was doing the right thing and I was running late for my own wedding and I forgot the something blue. That poor lady, she gave me a hug and told me it was normal to be nervous and that I already looked beautiful and that needed to stop crying because I was going to mess up my makeup. Thank you, lady, for being a kind soul.

I arrived at the wedding venue to learn that our wedding coordinator had gone into labor. The preacher called and said he was stuck in traffic and was running about forty-five minutes late. Since he was late and we had no wedding coordinator, my lateness didn’t matter anymore. Daphne and I wore matching gowns and we decorated her stroller with tulle. I was strictly breastfeeding her and she refused to take a bottle, so our wedding night would involve infant care. Patrick’s parents had made us a reservation at a hotel down the street called the Whit’s Inn. It looked shady as hell from the street, and proved to be even shadier when we actually had to spend the night there. The best I can say about the place is I didn’t leave with bed bugs (that I know of). Eventually everyone arrived to the wedding and got into place, and in front of fifty of our closest friends we legally became a family. During the reception, Patrick disappeared with his brother and his friends for about an hour. We finally found them smoking pot in a corner outside and dragged them back to the party. I was furious and embarrassed because I had been asked, “Where’s your husband” about thirty times. I should have seen it as a foreshadowing of our married life, but I wasn’t ready to give Dad that much credit yet.

**Passage 23: Back to School**

Now 23, married, and with an eight-month-old, I finally went back to school. I went back with a vengeance and threw myself into my studies. I did well in most of my classes, math being the exception. Within the spring and summer semesters, I had completed my required classes and started studying strictly Spanish and education. For the next two semesters, I studied Spanish literature. I hated reading medieval English literature, but throw in the twist of a limited vocabulary and speaking proficiency and the act of reading medieval Spanish literature and you can imagine how enjoyable I found my classes. The only difference was that all my classes were in Spanish, so I spent the majority of my day listening, reading, writing, and speaking Spanish. I could see little improvements as I progressed through the courses and moved from completely confounded to getting the gist most of the time. There's no satisfaction like walking out of a two-hour class where you managed to answer questions and the professor seemed to understand your point (or at least didn't shame you for muddling up your verb conjugation). I could give them some grace and say they were probably just being nice, and I probably had made glaring mistakes in my responses, but I hadn't seen any of them give mercy to anyone throughout the experience of my classes, so I think my Spanish actually did improve. Any self-esteem gained by keeping up in my classes was deflated by my meetings with my conversation partner. He would make me read the newspaper out loud to him in Spanish and corrected every other word of my super gringa accent. (I just can't escape my Midwestern accent, it follows me when I speak French and Spanish and rings out just as starkly as it does against the Southerners I live around). It would sometimes take us an hour to get through just one article, but we persevered. When Daphne was two, I studied abroad for a semester. My now mother-in-law did not understand my decision to pursue a bachelor's degree, and she wholeheartedly did not support my decision to

leave my child and go study at a university on another continent. She didn't speak to me much after I told her I was going and she voiced her objection, which included a slew of profanity and the turning over of a glass top table on her back porch. She was a character, that one. I was gone for eight weeks. I lived with a family for six weeks and traveled for the other two. I attended the University of Salamanca and studied Spanish art history and grammar (which sounds so much better than what I actually did, which is travel with forty other college students from around Georgia on a trip coordinated by the Augusta University). I missed Daphne every day, but enjoyed getting to know the people I lived with and annoying my uptight roommate. Once I asked the family that I lived with if they liked hosting students from the U.S. attending the university. Forks froze midair during that dinner and I could tell I had hit a nerve. Eventually the senora politely forced out that yes, they enjoyed meeting people, but if they could afford it they would not host students. In all my privilege as an idiot abroad, I hadn't considered that the family I stayed with here was like any other working family anywhere and that they didn't live to cater to travelers who butchered their language. It's funny how you can be so privileged while being underprivileged, as I'm sure they had assumptions I was a well-to-do American and would have been shocked had they had the occasion to visit the house in Oglethorpe county or caught a glimpse of the meager grocery budget I had to adhere to when I was home.

Daphne stayed with my mom while I was gone for most of the time. She spent two weeks alone with her Dad, but the rest of the time was with her Papa Danny and Nana. She got her first (and only) black eye by falling into the edge of the coffee table and was potty-trained by the time I came home. I missed her terribly. In the two years since she had been born before I left for Spain we had never been apart. We were inseparable. She was an easygoing child who turned into an easygoing toddler. She had a stint of defiance after she learned to walk and climb things.

When she was 11 months old, I woke up from a dead sleep to find her on top of the refrigerator. I put her back in her crib that night and contemplated if it would be considered child abuse to put a Plexiglas locking lid on top of it to make sure that she would stay safely in a contained space throughout the night. Other than the challenge of trying to keep up with her, she was sweet, loving and affectionate. She loved animals, she was quiet and observant, and she endured the 14-hour ride to Michigan like a champ. I missed cuddling with her and her clinging to my leg when she wanted something and suddenly realizing she was out of eyesight. In contrast to feeling like a piece of me was missing without seeing her every day, I noticed I did not miss my husband. In fact, I felt liberated. I should say LIBERATED. I didn't have to make anyone's lunch, arrange, shop, and cook meals, wash clothes, or worry about someone spending our food or rent money on weed. Plus, I was in Europe, which is a happy place for me. It feels so different there, the vibe is so enticing, walking down the street you see something new every day. Speaking, listening, reading and writing in Spanish 24 hours a day. It was GLORIOUS. Patrick and I spoke only once a week and he would tell me how he was spending a lot of time with my friend Yvette who had helped me so much with Medicaid, financial aid and the doctor that delivered Daphne. I thought it was a little odd because although we were friends we weren't necessarily close, but every time Patrick and I spoke he would tell me about them hanging out with Yvette and her son or with both the kids when Daphne was there. I was just happy he wasn't acting angry with me for going on the trip, even though I could tell he was keeping his anger to himself. He thought it was selfish of me to go and leave him at home by himself and make him take care of Daphne for two weeks alone.

I came home determined to talk to my husband about changes that needed to happen in our relationship. Having a moment to myself allowed me to see there were several things I didn't



like about the way I was living and what role I had taken in our relationship. I felt like I was his mother, and he was a coddled man-child. Cut the grass? I did it. Pay the bills? Done. Arrange for childcare? Got it. Cook? Clean? Sure, no problem. He would come home and say, “Oh yeah, my brother is coming over this weekend, is that okay? If not you have to call and tell him no.” My brother-in-law and several of his closest friends would descend on the house, eat the \$50 worth of groceries I had very carefully budgeted and purchased, and leave Sunday night. Daphne and I would play in the living room and they would plant marijuana plants in the woods behind the house and sit around and smoke it. In Patrick’s defense, I had, as most women do, assumed the aforementioned responsibilities and told myself that this was normal. Everyone around me confirmed that the role of mother meant that you took all responsibility for everything from keeping a clean house to nourishing your partner and child, and that when shit went wrong you also had to take all the blame. I didn’t question this lifestyle, I didn’t know much different and had seen my grandmothers, my mothers and other mothers around me describe these daily duties and complain about finer frustrating points of them at family dinners while men ignored them or cooked meat on the grill. The only exceptions to the women as mother of everyone in the family rule were my single friends, and as I described to them the frustrations of marriage they always managed to interrupt and remind me “that’s why I’m not married.” Which implied that if and when they did get married, they assumed that they would relinquish themselves to the inevitable daily struggle of the oppressed women everywhere. I don’t want to pretend that I was holier than thou. After the dishes were done and Daphne was safely snoozing sometimes I would join Patrick and his friends in the all weekend, every weekend party at my house (but usually just for Saturday night). The difference was that they would wake up and party all day long any chance they could. I couldn’t get my work done if I did that. I had lived that way before we had Daphne,

before I decided to go back to school, and it didn't make me happy. I had a hard time looking at myself in the mirror then. I wasn't going back to that head space. It seemed like although I had ignored this up until now, Patrick never left that place.

### **Passage 24: Finishing Up**

When I returned from Spain, Patrick and I did talk about our relationship. I told him that I couldn't keep going on the same as it had been. Our bills were always past due, we had our phone shut off, water shut off, and electricity shut off constantly. I knew how to take bolt cutters to the water meter and cut off the lock they would put on there when they shut it off. We ran out of propane in the winter and we would sit in a cold house with our child until we could afford to get it filled; it usually was a few weeks before we could save enough cash. Meanwhile, there always seemed to be a steady stream of beers, joints and bros around just hanging out. I couldn't put up with it, which was why I left and went to Michigan before I got pregnant. Patrick said he would try to help out more and try to curb his enthusiasm on spending money on perishable items (drugs). He cried and asked if I wanted to leave him. He yelled, "I knew that if you went on that trip you would do this! Are you going to be like your mother and leave me and Daphne? That's what it felt like you were doing!" That was a low blow, and perhaps a deserved one.

I got a job to help pay the bills and have some spending money working at Chili's waiting tables. I waited tables four or five nights a week for the extra cash and Patrick would have to pick up Daphne from daycare and feed her and care for her. One night I walked in the door about 10 p.m., exhausted from being in class all day and then on my feet all night. Daphne was in a diaper with a sharpie. She was sitting on top of her father who she had turned into her own personal sharpie canvas (as well as herself) and smiled at me with big bright, blue eyes that seemed to be saying, "look Mommy! Aren't we beautiful?!" I was furious. He was passed out on

the couch, dead asleep. She was unsupervised with a permanent marker. Thank God it wasn't with a source of flame or a chemical that could kill her. I woke him up yelling, screaming and smacking his shoulder. He was in a stoned daze, confused about what was happening as I hurled obscenities at him. He spent hours trying to get that marker off of her and off of himself. Looking back, I wish I had taken a picture, because Daphne did manage to create an artwork that would make most people roll over laughing.

We decided to try couples counseling. There was a practice that used a sliding-scale fee so we could afford the sessions. We went about five times. I tried to talk, Patrick sat there stone-faced, the therapist would give us advice and exercises, and Patrick accused the therapist of always being on my side. We stopped going and things would get better and worse. We kept trying day to day, but we both seemed to be at a loss for how to fundamentally change the roles we had created for ourselves in our relationship coupled with an inability to fundamentally change who we were as human beings. As history grows between two people and maturity changes life goals, it gets harder and harder to ignore what you want and expect from your partner. Either you were lucky enough to share ambitions and values of what life should look like from the beginning, or someone (or both) had to give up or at the very least drastically change their vision. Patrick and I were engaged in a daily struggle for who that person was going to be.

Despite the working, mothering, and false start at university, I managed to graduate from UGA in May of 2002. My sister graduated from the University of Tennessee the same day. I went to watch her walk at commencement and skipped my own. My uncles threw my sister and I a swanky graduation party in the clubhouse of their Decatur condo. Everyone confessed, "Ang, I didn't think you would do it. I didn't think you would ever finish. I didn't think it was possible,

especially after having Daphne.” I did do it. It didn’t feel as good as I thought it would. What was I going to do now? I owed about \$50,000 in student loan debt that had helped supplement Patrick’s \$21,000-a-year income and pay for things like day care and car insurance and sometimes even food. Guess now I needed to get a job.

**Passage 25: Where’s My Coat?**

Raising Daphne was the only joy that I had during this time. I looked at her and my dad’s words came back to me, “YOU HAVE TO MAKE IT ON YOUR OWN. DON’T RELY ON ANYONE ELSE!” Now, being a woman who has had many friends, met many married people, and witnessed how they live in their lives, I know this is a unique message to a young woman by a man scorned. This message contrasts the one that many women receive from their fathers, mothers, and the world. Daphne was an easy, beautiful, loving child. The cuddles she had to offer were all that were needed to melt your heart, or make you forget that you didn’t know if you would be able to pay rent or throw a birthday party for her, or...anything. She would smile and run to me at the end of the day and say, “MOOOOMMMMMMYYYYYY!” and envelop me in a hug and although the worries didn’t go away, they would make all the worries worth it. Daphne was a special child. She was kind. She was loving. She was open. She was willing to try new things, but she was unwilling to let things go when she had her mind made up. One day we were at a flea market, and she had to go to the bathroom. She was an experienced camper by this time, it was the only vacation Patrick and I could afford, and we did love the north Georgia woods and tent living, so we had ventured out there regularly since she was six months old. Hiking and camping--what better way to spend your time but out there in the wilderness? Anyways, Daphne and I were at a flea market in Rome. She said, “Mommy, I have to go potty.” We headed to the outhouses and I picked her up while we were waiting in line waiting. She was a little thing, with

ringlet curls and a cherub face. Our turn was up, I opened the door, she saw what was inside, and while in my arms, she lifted up her lower half, and put one leg on either side of the entrance. I said, “DAPHNE, what are you doing? Don’t you have to go potty?” She vigorously shook her head and whimpered. We repeated the actions three times. I opened the door, attempted to enter, she would incapacitate our ability to enter by putting a foot on either side of the door. Finally I asked her, “What is your problem?” She said, “smells so bad.” I asked, “do you want to go potty outside?” She looked at me and shook her head to affirm my assumption. She was a child who had been in the woods since she was a tiny baby, being poor White trash camping was one of the few escapes we could afford. We didn’t pay for our camping spots, we went out in the woods, no bathroom, no contact, no electricity or facilities camping. Being used to the outdoors and being outside, to her going potty against a tree was more comfortable than in an enclosed stinky space. We stopped attempting to enter the porta potty and went to the woods to let her relieve herself. She gave me a hug when she was done and said, “thank you Mommy.” I responded, “I understand. It did smell bad.”

Although Daphne was perfect to me, and as her mother I couldn’t see imperfections, her language was not as advanced as her peers. The woman who owned the home daycare Daphne attended suggested, “you need to get her evaluated by a speech pathologist. You can understand her, I can understand her, but most people can’t understand her.” I dismissed this idea; she and I had no problems communicating. Maybe she had a lisp. Maybe she wasn’t very verbal. I could FEEL HER. I knew what she wanted, I knew how she felt, WE WERE FINE. However, being a young mother with little support, no mom friends, working full-time waiting tables and going to school full-time, I could admit I was no authority on child development, even if I had taken educational psychology at UGA.

One morning I was in a hurry to get going. We had to leave for whatever reason, I don't know why. We had to GO. I told Daphne to go get her coat, and she came back to me and said, "mama, WHEREZ MY FOUCKIN GOAT?" I looked at her and asked, "WHAT? WE HAVE TO GO, WHY AREN'T YOU READY?" She repeated, "WHEREZ MY FOUCKIN GOAT?" I looked at her realizing what she was saying and tried my best not to burst out in laughter (mixed with tears that she would repeat the profanity I often spewed). She was asking me, "where's my fucking coat?" We found that fucking coat, and I decided that Liz, the woman who Daphne spent the majority of her waking hours with, the woman who operated the at home daycare, was right. Daphne needed to be evaluated by a language pathologist. She was, and went to speech therapy for a year. Luckily the state provides these services to children, because I still didn't have insurance.

## **Postlude 2: Out of Place, In Place**

In this section, I write about the stage of my life that highly influenced my interest in curriculum studies and education. At the beginning of this section, I moved from living in the North to living in the South and began to recognize the discontinuity and disruption of place. Similar to what my mother experienced in moving from the South to the North, I began to develop an understanding of myself as other—other in that outside markers of my identity, particularly my accent, signaled that I did not ‘belong’ or ‘was not from’ the South. When I first moved to the South, I longed for the comfort and familiarity of the place where I had grown up. I still had strong connections to Michigan at this time, as my nuclear family still resided in the north, and even though I had extended family in the South, I felt isolated and other living in the South. Similar to what hooks (2009) describes, “Living away from my native place I became more consciously Kentuckian than I was when I lived at home. This is what the experience of exile can do, change your mind, and utterly transform one’s perception of the world of home” (p. 13). Although when I lived in Michigan, I felt that was not my place, when I moved to the South I realized all those years of studying Michigan state history and growing up there gave me not only the accent, but the psychological comfort of belonging. I understood subtle things that I did not understand about the South. I knew that milk was usually bought at the Quality Dairy in a bag from local farms that produced it. I knew that pop was what we called soda or Coke. I never felt the frankness of manner and the desire for personal space was rude; it was comfortable. Whenever anyone asked me in the South “where you from?” I didn’t understand what markers I wore to indicate my otherness.

Things I did not understand about the South were plentiful. I did not understand the damage that the racialized history of the region had left on Blacks and Whites who resided in the

South. I am not claiming that a racial divide doesn't exist in the North; but I never saw anyone in the North flying a confederate flag or calling black people "*niggers*." I had witnessed my maternal grandparents discuss on multiple occasions "the difference between a black person and a nigger." Crowder et al. (2016) reminds us, "Racism is a deep-seated, widespread, and systemic issue, still, in the South" (p. 189). Racism is a systemic issue across the United States, but it manifests itself starkly in the South. The history of slavery and Jim Crow still burn strong here, whether the individual Southerner claims to be proud of it or ashamed of this history.

Beyond racial tensions, there are subtle differences in the mannerisms of relationships in the South. As I have continued to live here for years now, I have noticed that I am isolated not only by the accent; but also by mannerisms and in ways of speaking about and with others. I also struggle with understanding the paradigms for which many Southerners see the world. In particular, I find it difficult to interact with those from the South because I cannot understand the codes of Southern social behavior. It has taken me years to develop a basic understanding of these codes, but it is a lifelong learning effort. It took me about ten years to understand that when someone was saying, "Bless her heart" or "Bless his heart" that what was being expressed was not necessarily a term of endearment. Instead, often it can be translated as not pity but instead insult. For example, take the expression, "Bless her heart, she tries so hard." Coded in that language is actually the message, "this person tries hard, but they aren't very smart. Or "Bless his heart, that is awful. I'm sure he didn't mean that." Translation: He meant that but didn't even try to make it seem like he didn't. What a jerk. This vernacular comes in strong contrast to the frank Midwestern style of speaking that I grew up with, even if my biological parents were from the South. There are no 'bless your heart' allowances in Midwestern dialogue. The best equivalent I can think of to "Bless her heart" in Midwestern vernacular is "Well, that's



different.” In addition, there is, “what an idiot” or “he should have know better” or “what the hell were you thinking?” The phrase “Well, that’s different” doesn’t have a connotation of kindness, as “Bless her heart,” instead it distinctly imbues the sentiment of disapproval. As I established myself as a resident of the South, I found it challenging to navigate the two different forms of communication and was often confused about what made people uncomfortable in interpersonal communication.

Beyond the discomforts of acclimating to communication styles and an unknown, strongly felt and contextualized history of the South I did not understand, in this section of the memoir you also witness the ‘demise’ of my place in regards to class. Growing up in an affluent household stands in stark contrast to the places and stations I found myself in as a young adult and expecting mother. Even though affluence stood opposite to my lived reality after I decided to have a child, I could not escape the experiences of standing between being poor and being middle/upper-class. Although I was poor, I was able to use my assertiveness, my Whiteness, and my middle/upper-class upbringing to my advantage as I navigated what it was to have an empty bank account. I had no heat in the house, but I was taken on a vacation cruise for the week. I did not have private medical insurance, but I was able to use my network in order to find a physician who would make an exception for me which enabled me to have the birthing experience I felt I deserved. I had no way to pay for higher education out of my own pocket, but I was able to navigate the system of financial aid, applications, and my previous schooling in order to gain admittance to attend a university and secure a degree.

During my time at the university, I felt the stark contrast of being poor in the midst of an institution dominated by middle/upper class norms. In reading other accounts of working/poor students navigating university, I identify with the feelings expressed of being shamed by my

socioeconomic status. In her book *College and Working Class: What it Takes to Make It*, Hurst (2012) writes composites of poor/working class students attending university. Through the narratives of her subjects, I can identify with the sentiments of feeling out of place in the University setting. Hurst (2012) describes Serena's feelings about sitting in a university classroom

She felt that she had to be continually on guard and ready to jump hurdles in order to succeed. She was especially careful to avoid getting into discussions about poverty or welfare, because the embarrassment she felt about coming from a poor family was sure to manifest itself. (p. 77)

Similar to Serena, I also felt continually on guard and was careful to avoid discussions of poverty or welfare with my classmates. I felt that I carried a deep, dark secret and that if I shared my secret in the university classroom, I would be instantly considered a student that did not belong. At the same time, standing between poverty and privilege at times created frustration with my circumstance and I began to develop an understanding of the power of White privilege in society. Dunbar (1997), a student from a working class/White trash background who attended university, describes her similar struggle, "The most painful part of my quest for identity has been the juggling of my poor white experience and my knowledge of the power of white privilege in this society" (p. 79). Attending university classes bearing the shame of being poor created barriers to my experience in some respects; however it also gave me insider knowledge of what it means to be poor in the United States. This knowledge fueled my interest in education and as I read texts about teaching students who are poor, I could identify with the struggles of poverty in a way my middle/upper class classmates could not.

In the context of gender, this chapter highlights struggles that mirror but also go beyond my mother's: it highlights the struggle of my father for economic stability and a desire to move from one class to another (believing education would be the answer to financial stability) and the struggle of my mother attempting to find an identity for herself beyond motherhood and wifedom. Bateson (1989) categorizes the stages of women's lives, "Marriage, divorce, and childbearing become chapter headings in women's lives because of the way they produce—or demand—an entire restructuring of life around commitments to others" (p. 75). Like many women before me, these have also become chapter headings in my life, and in my mind are ways in which to sort the stages and responsibilities that required restructuring of my habits, needs and desires.

I mentioned in the first chapter that Daphne, the child born during this section of the work, read the memoir in its entirety. After her reading the biggest critique she gave was, "Mom, it's like after the second section I just drop off." She was not isolated in her voicing of this critique; others have mentioned it as well. One suggested, "If you don't make Daphne a more central and permanent character in the third section, maybe you need to change the statement that Daphne changed your life?" I struggled with this idea, because Daphne did, of course, change my life. What I realized that I failed to communicate in the memoir is, besides changing my life in the sense that I was a mother and she was the focus of my efforts and the inspiration for me to complete my education and to get married, the main way that she changed my life is that my Dad's words came back to haunt me, "I WANT YOU TO BE ABLE TO SUPPORT YOURSELF AND LIVE IN WHICH THE WAYS YOU HAVE BECOME ACCUSTOMED." These words haunted me because my life and need to attend the university was no longer a matter of supporting myself, as Bateson (1989) described, it was about supporting my daughter.

Even still, when I discussed this with Daphne in detail, apologizing to her, I told her: This is a graduate school project where I have to discuss and justify themes of gender, place, and class. Although my role in your life is as your mother, that is not the only role in my life. My roles are many and fragmented, they are not only a mother (although that is the most important one); I am also a daughter, a sister, a wife, a teacher, and countless others I cannot list. Despite the conversations and work we do as parents, as women, and as teachers, even our own children cannot escape the definitive roles of women. Similar to Bateson (1989), Heilbrun (1988) notes, “Women’s stories always end with marriage, with wifedom and motherhood...” (p. 58). However, just like with my mother’s story, I work to break free from this idea. If my story ended with marriage, wifedom and motherhood, I would not be writing this today. I don’t know where my story ends, but I have done all of these things (some more than once), and the story keeps on going.

## CHAPTER 4: MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: TEACHER

### Prelude: Now I'm a Teacher

Now a certified teacher, I moved into the profession still living in an old house in the rural South. I secured a position as an ESOL teacher and my classroom was in a trailer out in the back of the school. The majority of the students in my classes were from Michoacán, Mexico. There was a large variance in their English (and Spanish) language abilities, from those who spoke no or very little English to those who spoke English well but were not successful using academic language. The first day I had to break up a fight between two girls. The second month a student poured Windex in my tea and watched me drink it. I learned that many of the students were involved in a gang called Sur 13. I had to do home visits to find out what happened to students that would disappear for weeks at a time. At the age of 26, I found myself a first-year teacher, a single mother, and a divorcee. However, I was a college graduate! And I made enough money to pay my rent and utilities, as well as daycare. I had healthcare! I was on my way up in the world.

I loved my work. My students and I began to work together to improve our language skills (Academic English skills and my Conversational Spanish skills). My colleague was working on her Doctorate in the Georgia Southern Curriculum Studies program, and would talk about her experiences in class. I started considering continuing my education as well, but did not know how to go about doing so. In addition, in my capacity as a teacher and a single mother, I knew I would have little time to devote to another degree. My time spent teaching ESOL was a highlight of my career. What made the time memorable is that I had the opportunity to do what Delpit (1988) calls "being honest" with my students about language and power and the social structure and system. Delpit (1988) suggests

I prefer to be honest with my students. I tell them that their language and cultural style is unique and wonderful but that there is a political power game that is also being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games that they too must play.” (p. 292)

When we discussed the complex issues my ESOL students faced, they were the most engaged of any group of students I have taught. However, this did not convince them to buy into the idea that education—and due to my own experiences I can't say that I blame them. As a recent graduate from university, the memory of being a White trash university student was fresh in my mind and helped me identify with their feelings of inferiority in school. I saw that society did not provide them the opportunity to succeed in an educational realm; instead, the majority of them were expected to not return to school after eighth grade. Many of the students mirrored the image that society reflected to them: they expected to work as gardeners, caregivers to young children, farm laborers, construction workers, and in service jobs.

After four years as an ESOL teacher, I began searching for a new position, and found one at a school that was 99 percent White in a suburb of Atlanta. I began my new position as a Spanish teacher in the all-White high school. The first day of class I yelled at students to "sit down and shut up!" I was met with a sea of White faces with combinations of shock, surprise, and fear written on them. So far in my teaching career, I had always been the only White person in the room while teaching. Now I looked at mirrors of myself at that age. The mirror reflected thirty-two teenagers who were largely middle and upper-class, who lived in a comfortable suburb, and who attended a suburban school. My colleagues mirrored the students. Out of sixty teachers on staff, forty had graduated from the high school where they taught. I enjoyed teaching my first love, the Spanish language. I enjoyed hearing students improve throughout the year and

change their pronunciation of "tor-til-la" to "tor-ti-ya." When the opportunity presented itself, I moved to a new high school that was opening in the district. I was to be the "foreign language department head" (by default, because I was the only teacher in the foreign language department).

After teaching for seven years, I decided I wanted to pursue graduate studies. I graduated with a Master's in Media with an emphasis in instructional technology from a state university, and then decided to go all the way and pursue a doctoral degree. I have yet to attend a commencement ceremony for either of my degrees, and I have a goal to one day be at a ceremony to share the earning of a doctorate degree with my family. Although I do not know how I affect my students, I know how this vocation of teacher affects me. Where would my life path have led if I had made one different decision? When I stand in front of my classes, I see pieces of myself in my students, and pieces of them in me. Some are privileged, some have families on food stamps, and some have a propensity for the study of language and culture, others for math and science. Some have broken home lives, some have been told by a teacher that they are "not bright" or need "special help." Some are planning to go to college, others to work. Some have parents who pay for their groceries with an EBT card, others have no electricity, heat, water, or air conditioning. Some listen to their classmates and think, "My mom is on welfare, does that mean she's no good?" Others look at college applications with confusion and dismay because there is no one in their family to guide them through the world of academia. Some live in a big house, others in a house where when the wind blows in and comes up through the floorboards. Some are shy, others are angry, and still others completely clueless of their privilege.

My life and experience is a testament to how education has the power to help you discover your destiny. By having the opportunity to study languages and earn higher degrees, coupled with my personal experiences, I have had the opportunity to discover how to navigate the world—and how I can help students do the same. Education had a way of helping me discover who I want to be as a human being, and has given me the ability to participate in the world in a meaningful and authentic way. Even though I believe in my profession, I also recognize that it comes with the burden of being in a position of authority. As Said (1994) describes, "The third pressure of professionalism is the inevitable drift towards power and authority in its adherents, towards the requirements and prerogatives of power, and towards being directly employed by it" (p. 80). This is forever in my mind as I stand up in front of students each day and ask them to engage with me—and a subject. Although it has been mentioned that it is hard to sit between the world of academia and the world of public education, I find that the injustices that people face have always been there, and I have experienced some of them firsthand. I am committed to being in the classroom because it is the place where I can share, debate, and ponder with young people about how things work in the world and how the world can be a better place.



**MEMOIR: MY LIFE IS A MANIFESTO: TEACHER**

**Passage 26: Where Are the Jobs?**

In university they tell you that you will easily be able to find a job when you're finished with school. I wasn't close to any of the people I went to school with, probably because I was the oldest one and the only one with a child and a man-child husband. My struggles were in keeping the lights on and only having \$50 a week to spend on groceries, not on who I was going to the game with or what I was going to wear to the bar. I didn't have extra money to have fun and wore clothes from the thrift shop. I started looking for gainful employment but couldn't seem to secure a job for the upcoming school year. When school started, I was a substitute teacher for a few months and then through a friend got a job as a Head Start teacher in Greene county. They needed certified teachers to be lead teachers for the Head Start program and I desperately needed a paycheck as the threat of the first student loan payment loomed. I showed up on my first day in a skirt, blouse, and suit jacket, and within thirty minutes twenty little three and four year olds were running around the room. I had an assistant who had been the lead teacher but was demoted because she didn't have her education degree or state certification. She had worked for the program for ten years and, understandably so, was not happy to have what appeared to her to be a preppy little White girl in a suit take her job.

I was the only White person who worked in the building. All my students were students of color. The school was located in Redboro, Georgia, a town that was strictly racially divided and it was apparent when you did home visits that mixing of races was not common nor acceptable. The student's houses were largely dilapidated and falling down (which reminded me of my own home). The parents and people that worked there did not understand was that I was living in that same house in Oglethorpe County, still cold in the winter and hot in the summer. I

too struggled to pay my bills and clothe and feed my daughter and me. I had so much fear. I was afraid that I wasn't good enough to hold the position of power that the title teacher brings. I worked tirelessly to plan lessons and wipe snot off a little one's faces. Although I did not potty-train my own daughter, karma got me in the potty department with all those little ones who struggled to hold their bodily fluids.

Only one woman would speak to me kindly at Head Start and that was the other lead teacher, Mrs. Ruth. Thank goodness for her. She was smart and kind; she was a wonderful and patient human being. She showed me the ropes and gave me advice for dealing with the children, co-workers and the director. She told me honestly and openly, "Honey, there are several issues the people that work here have with you. You're White and represent all the White people that we have survived for centuries; our landlords, our bosses, they're all White; especially in this tiny community. You're college educated which none of these ladies, even the director, ever had the opportunity to pursue. You're from the North, my goodness honey, that accent. Can't you try to say y'all once in awhile? You gotta work on that. You look and sound like all the other people with a white savior complex who think us Black folk and poor folk need their help. Those White saviors are ridiculous. You don't be one of those. When you look at these children, if you don't see beautiful, smart, Black, poor children who deserve an education and proper start in this world then don't do it. Don't look at them colorblind. Just don't, because that is not honest and true. Be honest and true about the fact they are Black and they are going to have a harder road than you've ever had—not that your road hasn't been hard. Read Martin Luther King. Read Malcolm X. Read James Baldwin. Read *The Color Purple*. Read Maya Angelou. Read Zora Neale Hurston. Read about our history and our leaders. Pay attention to the way the coordinator who is a White lady looks and talks to you in comparison to how she speaks to the rest of us. Pay

attention to how we talk to each other and how these mommies talk to their babies. Don't feel sorry for these little ones. Push them, they need it. Acknowledge them. And don't go pussyfootin' round here with your White lady niceness. If one of the people you work with is being difficult, tell them so. Let 'em know you got a backbone. Without a backbone here, you'll never make it." Her advice was the foundation for my now fifteen-year teaching career and has helped me not only survive but also flourish and enjoy standing in a room of students every day.

Working in a community where I didn't belong (and that is not a reflection of my insecurity, it had been made obvious to me and acknowledged by Mrs. Ruth that the majority of people who worked there believed I literally didn't belong or deserve my position) was compounded by the challenges that the commute and my other experiences with Greene County presented. One morning on my way to work at 5:30 a.m. (school starts early people), it was dark and pouring down rain. I was moving along at about 50 miles per hour on a country back road with the music loud in an attempt to drive out the sound of the rain. Luckily the headlights hit the white and black spots in time, and my brain recognized danger and commanded my body to step on the brakes. As I screeched to a halt, I realized what was in front of me. A sea of cows. COWS. I honked the horn, rolled down the window and attempted to yell at them over the heavy downpour. The cow in front of the car looked directly at me and mooooded in protest, as if to say, "make me move lady!" I could tell he was a stubborn asshole. I had to wait for the police to show up to move the cows out of the way. I had attempted to navigate around them but to no avail and found myself trapped in the middle of a herd with no escape unless I had a four-wheel drive. The officer had a megaphone that he used to play all the loud annoying sounds coupled with slaps on the asses of the cows, as well as screams and yells in an attempt to make them move. He explained to me that the storm had deactivated the electric fence when the power

supply went out. The cows took full advantage and plotted their escape, but they didn't seem to be in any bit of a hurry to go anywhere. It took 45 minutes to clear the road and I was late for work that morning. I learned if you're facing down a herd of cows, even if you are in a car, you are at a serious disadvantage. It was a reminder that I lived and worked in the rural South, and that I came from a place where cows were never an obstacle to overcome on my way to work.

One afternoon Dad called and said he was going to be at a meeting "kind of close" to where Patrick and I lived. It was a 50-minute commute from Oglethorpe County to the Redboro head start, and Dad and June were going to be staying at a Ritz Carlton at Lake Summer. He asked if I could come with Daphne for dinner one of the nights they were staying. I told him I could but might have to stay over. He denied that possibility, stating that "the room only had one king-size bed." I also told him I worked in Redboro, where Lake Summer was located, so if he didn't mind I could just come by myself and then go home afterward. He humphed at the idea of showing up without Daphne, I should have known that after grandchildren are born no one really wants to see the parents anymore. To alleviate the challenge of having to drive home, pick up Daphne, then drive back, I asked if she could come to school with me one day. She was only two and we had a two-year-old room. Reluctantly my boss agreed, and Daphne spent the day with Mommy at the head start so we could go visit Grandpa and dine at the Ritz Carlton afterwards.

We tooted up in our too-old car and were admitted into the luxury resort with a look from the gatekeeper that said, "you don't look like you belong here." Dad was at an annual meeting for one of the boards of director's things he served on, so each night there were social events planned. On this particular night it was casino night. We ate dinner in and listened to speakers talk about something I don't remember, then commenced to play casino games. In between free glasses of champagne and dodging questions about myself from Dad's colleagues in suits and

their wives asking if I stayed home with Daphne, I learned I would be dangerous in Vegas and that craps is super fun, but had to duck out by 9 p.m. to get home and get Daphne and me to bed. Leaving the grand and fancy stone structure of the hotel, we drove home to our two-bedroom shack. Luckily we didn't encounter any cows on the way.

I worked at Head Start from October until December. The last day before Christmas break, I planned a Christmas party for my class complete with cupcakes, games, and Christmas craft stations. I bought grocery store cupcakes that had green and red icing piled on as much as possible without the closed lid damaging them and a cute plastic decoration of a candy cane, Santa, or a reindeer stuck in the top. We were having a great time in our festive environment gorging ourselves on sweets and attempting to use safety scissors and glue. One young little guy, Al (short for Alvin) asked if he could have another cupcake. Al was a round young boy with a sweet and beaming smile, and when he shined it in your direction it was hard to deny any request he made. Little did I know that I had allowed him to have an extra cupcake, but so had the co-teacher who hated me and grumbled under her breath about how I was trying to get the kids on my good side throughout the entire party. I don't know how many cupcakes Al managed to get, but about an hour into the party he proclaimed he didn't feel so well. As he was telling me, icing spread across his mouth, he opened up and gave me my Christmas gift. He vomited all over me. All over the table and the floor and the remaining cupcakes and the craft station. Not only was it barf on an epic scale, it was green and red barf. I left for break covered in glue, paint and crusty red and green vomit. Whoever says teaching isn't a glorious profession? When I decided to become a teacher I did not understand that the vomit and urine and other bodily fluids of children would be part of my responsibility; however I accepted my position as their caregiver and marched on.

On our Christmas break; I got a call from the principal of Colin Middle School. His ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) teacher was leaving suddenly, and he asked me to come in to interview for a full-time teaching position as a middle school ESOL teacher. Instead of ESOL, the acronym now used is ELL: English Language Learners. At any rate, although it was not a Spanish teaching position, I had earned my ESOL certification in addition to my Spanish teaching certification, and I was excited at the opportunity to teach at a public school full-time with older students. The school did not have an “good” reputation. It was noted in the community as being the “worst” of the middle schools in Rome-Clarke County, Georgia. I was young and naive, broke, and desperately wanted to start my career in the public school system. I eagerly agreed to an interview and came in the next day.

Since I had substituted in Clarke County and interviewed for a job as a parent-liaison for migrant students I had made connections with the gifted and ESOL director at the board office. I had gained a reputation as a sought after, hardworking substitute in the two months before I started at Head Start. In a community, never underestimate the power of connections and reputation. I got the interview despite my status as a peon Northerner and outsider living in Rome, a college town of outsiders, because my time working in the community as a volunteer for Catholic Social Services and my short- lived career as a sub gave me some credibility. The principal was young, his name was Gage Jarbone. The school was 99 percent minority: 70 percent African-American, 29 percent Latino, with 25 percent of the 800-student population receiving ESOL services. The ESOL teacher had struggled and hated her job. When she was offered an opportunity to leave teaching altogether and relocate to another state, she took it. They needed someone who was motivated, naive about the situation they were stepping into, and willing to work hard to ensure that the students received the services they were provided by the

federal government funding. Two hours after the interview, I was offered the job. I was finally going to be a real teacher! I would have health insurance, dental insurance, and a retirement plan. I would have some financial security and stability. After what felt like a long struggle, I was able to move into a position I felt that I was meant to be in.

**Passage 27: Do You Even Speak Spanish?**

I started the second semester as the new teacher. I had two days of pre-planning to prepare to teach six classes a day. I taught 6th, 7th and 8th grade ESOL, which I envisioned as a second English Language Arts class for the students. I had no resources, no books, no idea what they had done before, and I was unfamiliar with the standards and curriculum of middle schools. I had done my student teaching in a high school as a Spanish teacher in a different county. The school secretary showed me my room, which was a trailer in the back of the school. She explained they had to lock the building during the day and that I was in one of three trailers. Outside with me were the health classes and the behavioral disabilities trailer. I met my colleagues. One was a veteran science teacher who had taught 7th grade science for 20 years and was now teaching the state mandated health curriculum. She was smart, witty, and 30 years my senior. She was amazing and charismatic and friendly. The other gentleman who taught the behavioral disorders class was handicapped-he needed a cane to walk. I never saw him without suspenders on. He was also kind and friendly, but seemed to be tired and often annoyed by his circumstance.

I tried to redecorate. On the first day, I welcomed my students with enthusiasm. I gave them a syllabus and explained what the class was going to be about. I told them I was there to help them. There was no communication to the outside world out there. Our students were locked out of the building, just as we were; we couldn't have keys for security reasons, and the

intercoms/emergency buttons didn't work. In retrospect, it is telling that these students and their teachers were locked out of the main building; it symbolizes in so many ways the idea that these students are locked out of the mainstream, and their teachers are locked out from the support of the educational system. Many students had similar names, with a lot of students named Yesenia, Maria, Jesus and Francisco. To my naïve surprise, the students in the classes had a wide range of English speaking ability. I expected that most of them would be mostly low-level English speakers and recent arrivals to the United States. I found that in actuality, three-quarters were born in the United States and the other quarter were recent arrivals. I noticed the first day that in the 7th grade class there was a lot of banter between a couple of the girls, a Yesinia and a Maria. I decided what we needed was to take a five-minute walk outside. They were children after all, and it was hard to blame them for being restless when they had been sitting since 8 a.m. and it was now 1 p.m. I directed them all to get up so we could walk around the parking lot for five minutes, then return to the trailer to continue our business with clear heads and stretched limbs. We walked for about two minutes, and before I knew it, Yesinia and Maria were fighting. One had a fistful of the other's hair, both were screaming obscenities I didn't understand in Spanish, and the other students were forming a circle around them. I had no access to the inside of the building, the resource officer or administration contained within it, and I knew the fight needed to stop. I stepped between the girls, untangled the long hair of one from the fist of the other, and directed all to return to the trailer. They all sat down in their desks, and I lectured them in Spanish about acceptable behavior and my expectations of love, acceptance, and civility. Many averted their eyes while several others snickered at my Spanish. When I asked why they were laughing, they replied in Spanish, "you speak Spanish so funny."



I left that day confused and upset. What in the world was I going to do? They must have seen the fear in my eyes, especially when the fight broke out. When they spoke Spanish, I could sometimes understand what they said, but their accents and vocabulary were so different from the very academic Spanish I had been exposed to in motherland Spain. Most of the time it was too fast, they r's too rolled, the vocabulary words I'd never heard. They laughed at my Spanish! I couldn't connect to them because I am not Latinx I couldn't connect to them through culture, I had no basis for understanding their experiences. They knew it. They called me out on the first day. They didn't care about me, another White, boring, ignorant authority figure they didn't respect. I was a fool and I knew it. A scared, lost fool. One of the very few advantages to being young, ignorant, and stubborn is that you don't know when to quit. Like finishing college, like having Daphne, like marrying my husband (even though the marriage was crumbling before my eyes), like moving away from my family and everything I had known, like challenging doctors when I was a welfare recipient, I was determined to make this work. I had to make this work. Everything was riding on it. All the, "I didn't believe you could" and "I never thought you would" came rushing back. I would. I could. I had to. I was going to teach. I was going to work as hard as I could to do something for my students. I was going to make a living wage. I could do this. Fight on the first day? No support? On my own? I mustered up all my optimism and my ability to ignore difficult circumstance and showed up the next day ready for round two.

At home, Patrick and I became increasingly divided. He was gone a lot. I didn't even know where. I was preoccupied with caring for Daphne and surviving the day, often bringing my work home with me. In the spring of my second year of teaching, I finally said the words, "I want a divorce" to Patrick. He cried. I cried. He begged me to give him another chance, said that he could change and be more helpful. I begged him to let go, to give up, because in my heart I

knew I hadn't been in love with him for a long time, possibly even since before we got married. We were both in love with the idea of being a family and ignored the fact that we had vastly different interests, goals, and fantasies of what a "real" family looked like. To him, it looked like the one he had grown up in, the father providing whatever he could with whatever he could, proving his worth by showing up at work every day and coming home every evening to a home-cooked meal. I wasn't really sure what my fantasy looked or felt like, but I knew it didn't look and feel like our relationship. I was past the point of pretending any of it felt good anymore. It felt like I was lying to him, to Daphne, to myself, and to the world. I called my family to tell them the news and they were all supportive. My dad asked me how he could help and asked me if I had money for a lawyer and to move. I told him I didn't, and he said, "okay, you're going to need a car since neither of the cars are in your name. You're going to need a place to live and you're going to need a lawyer. I'll pay for it. I just want you to be free of him and to start your life. You've done so much to make a life for you and Daphne, but he is exactly the same as he was when you met him. He works at the same dead-end job. He plays with his cars and his friends and expects you to be the adult. He will never change, and it's time to move on." Dad might have been slim on the financial and emotional support throughout my young adult life. However, now he was determined to support Daphne and me because I had made a decision that he wholeheartedly approved of. In March, Patrick went to Hawaii with his brother (paid for by his parents) and I moved out of the house. It's funny that we both had solidly middle-upper-class parents who would occasionally bestow their financial privilege upon us, while he still worked at the tire shop and lived in the country in an old house.

In Patrick's defense, I paint him as one who had few ambitions and little willingness to accept responsibility, but to be honest, that is not entirely true. I was not perfect. I was silly and

my blind and stubborn determinedness often left a mess for him to clean up. He was gifted at fixing things, even if he might take years to do so. He maintained a beautiful garden that yielded fresh vegetables in our backyard. I always thought it was me who had the green thumb, but I learned after my thrice-failed attempt at planting gardens after we were no longer together that I don't have the attention span for it. Once, I was determined to plant sunflowers along the side of the Oglethorpe county house to give it a romantic appearance. I fired up the rototiller while he was at work and ran over the main water line that was buried underground next to the house. I didn't know how to turn off the water to the house (I didn't even know that was possible to do), so as I called him in a panic, he schooled me on the steps. When I proved inept at following his directions, he instructed me to go next door and see if our neighbor was home because he was a plumber. Luckily our neighbor was home and had only consumed one of the twelve Bud Lights he had planned for the evening. He walked over, saw the geyser spraying over our heads in the air and began to laugh so hard I thought he would pee himself. He patched the pipe, chuckling the entire time. When I offered to pay him he said that he hadn't laughed that hard in years so the laughter was payment enough. I did many things to complicate life and our relationship all the five years we were together and Patrick took it with mild manners and a good nature. He was determined to be a father to Daphne, and has followed through on that commitment. We just couldn't seem to find a groove that we could maintain that made both of us comfortable, secure and happy. I'd like to give us both some grace in the fact that we tried marriage, and that today we can have friendly conversations about what is best for our daughter (even if we often agree to disagree on what that means). I had managed a career change from server in chain restaurant to a teacher, and although I had resources such as health and life insurance now, it was still tight to when it came time to pay bills. I rented a two-bedroom cinder block house in Oglethorpe County,

close to the old house and next door to Daphne's babysitter. I was independent for the first time in my life. I ended the second year of teaching dealing with moving, personal trauma between me and Patrick, meeting with a lawyer, and being a single mother.

### **Passage 28: Just Keep Going**

I learned more than I taught in the first year and a half of teaching. Since my students all spoke Spanish, I decided to employ the tactics I had learned to teach Spanish to English speakers in reverse. I often spoke Spanish in the classroom to explain grammatical concepts and vocabulary. I leafed through the few old Spanish texts I had collected and used the vocabulary lists I found in them as a basis for themed units. In class the students and I would read books together and act them out, graphically organizing them and writing about them as we worked through. The students wrote a lot about their lives. If they couldn't express what they wanted to say in English, we used Spanglish or just pure Spanish for those who were new and trying to acclimate to the United States. Through their writing and conversations, we learned about different dialects in Spanish and English. We talked about dirty words and shared slang terms. One day I used the word "coger" (to take) to talk about taking the bus. Eyes averted away from my face and giggles spread like wildfire. I kept repeating it, thinking I had said it wrong or my accent had rendered it unrecognizable. Finally, a student surrendered the information everyone else in the room besides me seemed privy to, and that was that the translation of the word "coger" meant "to fuck." He then explained through a mouthful of laughter, "you keep saying you are going to fuck the bus!" I looked it up in the Spanish dictionary to prove them all wrong, but to no avail. I finally gave in and decided to select a different verb for taking the bus. When I finally had the opportunity to ask a Spanish speaking adult about this translation they affirmed the translation the student had offered: "in Latin America and especially Mexico, 'coger' means

‘to fuck.’ You told them you were going to fuck the bus?!” Verb tenses and vocabulary are easy; dialects vary widely and present a multitude of complications. In addition to being continuously schooled in the Spanish language by thirteen-year-olds, I attempted to remember and include what I had learned from reading writers who spoke about educating minority children. I tried my best to be honest with students about my privilege and share with them that this was just one dimension of my experience. I attempted to incite discussions about how our societal privileges and restrictions were just one part of our stories. I would joke that I was “maestra gringa.”

Although I improved my Spanish and learned about my student’s lives and stories, I also learned a lot about the politics of teaching. About three months in, I had a student pour Windex in my drink. Luckily I tasted it and all the other students in the class yelled, “Don’t drink that!” When I found out who had done the deed, I went to the administration for support. They suspended the child for a few days. They informed me, “you can press charges, but we don’t think that is necessary. If you press charges we will have to have a hearing and probably nothing will come of it anyway. It would be easier if you just let it go.” I was incensed. Although I did not want for any child to drop out or get kicked out of school, this child could have seriously hurt me. He was going to get away with his intent to poison me without suffering any significant consequence. He probably just thought it was a funny joke on his teacher, but I was feeling sensitive due to my inability to maintain a marriage, control a classroom, or speak Spanish. He hated school and was happy to be suspended. I went on a home visit to his house to speak with his mother. She was kind enough, I suppose, but she didn’t stop him when he called me a gringa bitch and demanded to know what the hell I was doing there and why I couldn’t just leave him alone (my Spanish was improving—I understood all of the commentary he directed at me during that home visit). He took his suspension, came back to school and finished out the school year.

He was a 7th grader. He didn't come back to school the next year and when I asked the students what had happened I got answers varying from, "I heard he went to Mexico" to "I think he's in jail" to "he's working with the 13s now and never coming back." I was secretly relieved to know he was gone, even though I knew I shouldn't be. About four years later, when reading through the local paper, I saw his face pictured and an article titled, "Local Teens Arrested for Bludgeoning Elderly Man to Death."

In my second year of teaching, I learned about a plague that many of my students dealt with on a daily basis: the Sur 13s. The Sur 13s were a gang involved in the drug trade and who knows what else. I learned that many of the students were being pressured to join, children as young as 11 years old. My very limited understanding of process is this: another student, often a student who was older, would approach a young student. The children would hang out together and become friends. They might commit petty crimes together such as theft. The older student would talk about the system: school, parents, work, being a minority. They would talk about getting out of the trailer park or going back to Mexico. They would talk about how other people have things they could never have. The younger student would identify with this narrative because they felt it in their bones. They saw it every day. At school, they were strictly divided by their race and fought against "los negros" who hated "los mexicanos." The kids would become closer and the younger one eventually would be invited to join the gang. The initiation for both boys and girls was to be beaten into the gang. For older girls, the 8th graders, often the initiation would include performing sexual acts on other gang members in a public setting. This regularly happened at the school bus stop after the kids got off the bus and the driver drove off. I spent many hours and days talking to the School Resource officer, the Administration and the bus drivers when I heard about planned initiations. I know that there were countless initiations I did

not hear about, but often I would overhear students talking or collect a note they had unknowingly left behind in the classroom. Sometimes the information I was able to obtain was accurate; often it was not.

Besides preoccupation with gang activity, I kept plugging along in the classroom and did my best to create a curriculum, gather and develop resources, and earn the respect and trust of my students and colleagues. Our program was on its way, and the administration decided to use Title I funds to pay for a second ESOL teacher who would be certified in ESOL and a content area. After one year of the school funding the position, the federal government would take over and fund it (you had to show need for a teacher and ability to serve students two units of ESOL services a day for one year and the second year the government would allot funding via FTE—full time equivalency counts from the previous year). We hired a woman working on her doctorate who was certified to teach Spanish, Social Studies, gifted and ESOL. She was a powerhouse of a human being, an awesome force that worked as hard as anyone I had ever seen. My colleague's name was Molly Branch. We planned and worked closely together, conferencing about student progress, strengths and weaknesses. We ate lunch together every day and shared our common struggles in the classroom as well as our personal struggles. She had taught Spanish at a rural high school for many years and was excited to change subject areas. She was wicked smart, organized, and kind. She didn't really know what she was getting into and was surprised by our location in the school (trailers locked outside the back of the building). We became fast friends.

### **Passage 29: RATS**

One morning I drove up to my trailer, parked beside it, and unlocked the door. Although by this point I had experienced “great success” in my two years on the job; according to the

principal the ESOL “subgroup” had made significant gains in their standardized test scores after year one—I was still isolated from the rest of the building. Fortunately the three other teachers who taught other isolated groups housed in the back of the school were warm and supportive.

Due to circumstance and the need to collaborate about students (and a need to commiserate), Molly and I were in and out of each other’s trailers all day long. Our experiences were similar yet vastly different: I was from the North, Molly from rural middle Georgia. I was in no way religious, whereas Molly was pious. However, the intersection of our differences did not dictate us being incompatible. We were able to work well together, along with other staff members, for a common goal: to improve the lives and graduation rates of our students. As I looked around that morning, I realized the desolation of being housed in back of the school in the trailer park. The trailers were falling apart. Often neither the heat nor the air conditioning worked. There were holes in the floors. It reminded me of the house Patrick and I took Daphne home to. Since the back doors to the main building were locked and no teacher in the trailer park was allowed a key, we had to bang on the door and pray someone would hear and grant entry. Although I felt that it was immoral to house specifically the populations out in the trailer park that they did (special education and ELL students) I recognized there were some advantages to this location as well. I rarely saw administrators; in fact, few bothered to visit more than the one time required per year for observation. I was able to control the climate of my trailer (when the climate controls worked). I was also able to do what I felt was the most valuable work in this isolation: I was able to focus on students and on creating lessons that were engaging .

One morning, I opened the car door and gathered the papers I had spent most of the previous evening grading as well as the books for the prepared lesson and proceeded towards the door of my trailer. The trailer was gray from the outside. It was approximately 20 years old, and



the dull wooden steps that hadn't had attention in as many years creaked as I ascended into the space. I unlocked the door. I entered the trailer, illuminating it by turning the lights as I walked in. I heard a quiet rustling from the far side of the room, over near my desk and stood still. "Not again!" I thought. As I walked towards the sound, I saw the evidence of its maker: the rats were back. "NO!!" I thought. As I was examining the droppings on the floor, a rat ran across my foot. I screamed and jumped up onto the nearest chair. I saw two more critters-three in all--reacting to my screams by running around aimlessly. I immediately jumped off the chair and ran out of the trailer.

At that moment, Molly pulled up in her car. "Are you alright?" she asked me as she shifted the car to park. "They're back!" I yelled (probably with a panic-stricken look on my face). I hate rats. I know it's so super girly to say that, but they are just nasty. Maybe the images of Indiana Jones wading through a rat cave and getting bloody and bitten by them truly did scar me for life. I am not ashamed to admit it; I hate rats, bugs and snakes. Molly said, "Oh no-I better go check my room." Molly exited her vehicle and carefully approached her trailer with a look of concern and disgust on her face. Our shared dislike of rodents was one thing we could rally behind. As she approached her trailer with caution, she repeated what we had discussed at length when the rat problem first surfaced, rattling the questions that neither of us could answer: "How are we supposed to teach children when there are critters runnin' round on the floor? What does it tell these children when they come to school and not only are they isolated back here and locked outta the building for half a day, but they are learning in conditions most people wouldn't conceive of living in, much less sendin' their kids to..." and on and on the questions poured out. As Molly approached the door with me behind her, she hesitated in unlocking it. Students were due to arrive in the next 15 minutes, and we had learned when we had this problem previously

that the administration expected us to “teach through it.” According to the administration, the reason that we had to teach in a trailer was because the building was overcrowded. There was no extra room for classroom relocation, even if the relocation were temporary while critters were being exterminated from the trailers.

We held our breath as Molly unlocked the door. She entered first and turned on the light and filed in behind her. We both breathed a sigh of relief as silence met us. At least one of our two spaces was safe--for now. Together, we formulated a plan. I would remain in my room and hope that however the critters found their way into the space they had found their way out in my absence. Having the clear room of the day, Molly would go about business as usual. I left Molly to prepare and returned to my infested space. Although the coast appeared to be clear, I had to clean up the gifts so generously left by the vermin before the students came in. Like Molly, I was enraged at the conditions in which my students had to learn. I felt that no child should sit alongside feces as they read, wrote, and attempted to improve their English with the hope of improving their station in life. With all the frustration of the situation, I knew from previous incidents that I had little power in solving this situation. I had informed administration time and time again, and each time it took longer and longer for someone from maintenance to appear and offer solutions. The solutions always involved traps, because it was unsafe to have poison in the same space as children. Due to slow response and pleas that fell upon deaf ears, I took a deep breath and completed clean up. I mustered up my brightest smile and welcomed the first students of the day to class.

First and second period moved along smoothly. The lesson was well prepared and the students interested. Everyone was in a good mood for a Tuesday morning, even though the reality of returning unwanted visitors was ever present in my mind. During the third class of the

day, a loud scream interrupted the concentration of our classroom. All of us jumped up to look outside just in time to witness a flood of students and Molly running out of the trailer next door. I opened the window that faced the view and yelled, “ARE YOU OKAY??” The students were demonstrating a variety of reactions, from shivering and hugging themselves, to frowning, to giggling excitedly. Molly responded, “Yes, we’re fine. But those nasty little things are in my trailer now!” I know it sounds unbelievable because I had always heard that rats and mice avoid all contact with people, but apparently we had an infestation of Indiana Jones rats or Cinderella's mice, critters that sought out the pleasure of our company or aimed to scare us out of their territory. I opened my door and welcomed the students and Molly into a safer place. One enthusiastic student named Carlos who was always trying to prove his manliness and worth approached us and said, “Me and Jose can catch them. We can get the ratónes. Pleeassee? Can we try get it Mrs. Branch?” Molly and I exchanged looks. Knowing that this went against our beliefs about what children should be doing in school, we decided: why not? We couldn’t relocate the students. We couldn’t rely on support from administration in solving the problem. We couldn’t teach two classes and two lessons in one trailer. And we couldn’t catch the rats themselves—at least not until we visited a store and bought some traps. So we gave in to Carlos’ request. Upon being granted permission, Carlos picked up a box, grabbed Jose by the arm and re-entered the infested trailer. What ensued was nothing less than comical. As the rest of the students, Molly, and I viewed from the windows of one trailer, we witnessed two adolescent boys running around the other trailer with their arms stretched over their heads and a box ready for capture. It was impossible not to laugh as the scene unfolded: desks and chairs were overturned, yelling was passed between the two boys, books were thrown aside and after about thirty minutes they declared the pursuit a success.

The boys returned to us, triumphant in their hero of the day status. The rats (two of them) were contained in a box. The box would rustle around as the rats scurried inside of it looking for escape. Molly breathed a sigh of relief; in contrast, I was fuming with anger. This was the juxtaposition of our personalities: I had in the past two years been through a divorce, began teaching and became a single parent. I am also a Midwesterner who struggles with the customs of the South. In the Midwest, where I was raised by my single father, people did not say "Bless her heart" when someone made a mistake. They said, "What an idiot." Molly was, it seemed to me, perfectly content to be considered second to her husband and his whims in life. Molly was a vegetarian, but she cooked a meaty meal every night before her husband got home. Her husband was a full-time student and worked part-time, Molly worked full-time, taught in the after-school program and was pursuing a doctorate degree. Despite the fact that Molly was well educated and intelligent, from what I could tell, Molly was also stuck in some old world value system that somehow defaulted to the man always being right. This was a difference in our life experiences and our places in the world—I am sure that Molly was not stuck in an old world value system, just as I was not the perfect role model for the modern woman. We just found different ways of working within our circumstances.

Molly, although thankful, was also completely disgusted with the box Carlos presented. Recognizing the look of confusion and dismay on my colleague's face, I accepted the gift Carlos gave and thanked him. The students, Molly and I applauded loudly and yelled—¡Viva Carlos y José-Matadores de Ratonés! In the midst of this excitement, the bell rang, and the students shuffled onto their next class. Although Molly had to recover quickly and greet another class, I had the gift of a planning period. Molly asked me, "What are you going to do with the box of critters?" I carefully attempted to keep my cool and answered the question honestly, "I have no

idea." Molly vacated the premises and returned to her day and her students and I set the rustling box on my desk and took a seat. As I listened to the cries of the imprisoned the anger and frustration that Molly had expressed with her questions at the beginning of the day replayed in my head. I thought to myself, "What the heck? My students have to sit out here in rat-infested rooms and be locked out of the building? I have to spend my time picking up feces and cleaning the room and disposing of vermin? What kind of message are these students receiving? That they are worthy, beautiful beings who are getting an "equal" education? Does equal mean sitting in poop? Spending class time catching rats? I never had rats in my classroom when I went to school! I never had to walk outside and be locked out of the building! This is crap. I am going to fix this right now."

All the challenges of the past two years--the shame of admitting my failure at being married, the divorce lawyer I was only able to afford thanks to Dad's help, the moving, being new to teaching, the fight for my degree in the first place, the passion of advocating for students—welled up and immediately I knew what I had to do. Sometimes you don't think about consequences—a trait for which I was well-known--so I picked up the box. I walked out of the trailer. I pounded on the building door and was granted admission by a social studies teacher. The teacher looked at the rustling box and then at me and said, "Are you okay?" "Fine" was the only thing I could squeak out. I proceeded on my mission, charging forward through the hallway, rats squeaking protest all the while. I opened the door to the office and asked, "is the principal in?" His secretary responded, "Yes, but he's in a meeting...." The voice trailed off as I heard what I needed and continued on. I walked in on meeting principals that included my principal and the three other principals from the three other middle schools in the county. There was a look of confusion on their faces and they set up straight in the face of the crazy-looking woman with a

squeaky box. I continued forward on autopilot knowing my mission was nearing completion. Without a word, I faced the principal and set down the box in front of him. He looked at it, looked at me, and asked, "What's this?" I smiled and said, "Oh, just a little gift from us out in the trailers." I turned on my heel and walked out. I could hear the scream as I sauntered down the hallway, feeling smug, self-assured and entertained, as I returned to my relegated place in the school-outside the main building.

I had a giant plastic black rat with huge teeth at home from some Halloween festivities. The thing stood about a foot or more tall and was holding a piece of bloody flesh. I asked Daphne if she minded if I took it to work and she responded, "I don't care. That thing is ugly." Molly and I taught in the trailers for the remainder of that school year. At the end of the year, we were informed that we would have classrooms inside the building in the coming school year. The remainder of that year I would hide the giant plastic rat in various places in Molly's trailer just to hear her scream and laugh when she eventually moved the object. The next day I would find the giant plastic rat somewhere in my trailer. The students, Molly, and I found this exercise hilarious.

### **Passage 30: Single and Loving It**

In the fall of my third year of teaching something completely unexpected happened. (It may not have been the third year exactly; give me some memory latitude, sometimes it's hard to get the timeline exactly right.) I had dated a few people, usually just one date. My heart wasn't really into looking for a romantic other. I was still depressed about the divorce. Even though I wanted the divorce, I felt like a complete and utter failure. I had always told myself I wouldn't put Daphne through a divorce, that when I got married it would last forever. Even though I knew on my wedding day I was making a mistake, admitting to the world that you had failed felt

shameful (and in my case, I felt like I was just beginning to balance the scales of failure and success in making adult decisions.) You would think I would be used to explaining uncomfortable and personal family situations by now; I had been explaining them to others and myself as long as I could remember. It is never comfortable admitting your own inadequacies and it is much easier to blame other people for theirs, but I did my best when others asked. People would question, “Well, what happened?” This is the most loaded question of all. How do you explain to anyone in a few sentences the demise of a relationship that had lasted more than seven years? How do you sum up the profound disappointment you feel in the entire situation, the failure of you, the shortcomings of your partner? No matter how you paint it, both of you are at fault, but most people feel like their former partner is more at fault than they are. This is human nature, and somewhere in the middle lays the truth. It took more than seven years to begin and end our relationship and there were too many complicated situations and circumstances that build up and contributed to its demise. I couldn’t narrow it down to just one thing, I just knew in my heart that I was miserable and couldn’t keep on going. I knew that I had to make a change and couldn’t give a concrete reason for how I knew. I just knew. Most people are looking for something more sinister or concrete, but even if there are sinister circumstances, you cannot be expected to explain that in passing.

Patrick was not happy about the divorce. He threatened to sue me for custody of Daphne; he was angry and bitter that I didn’t have any “reason” to want this. He was furious and we had a few instances where police were called and restraining orders were considered. He told all of our mutual friends what a terrible person and that I was going to regret this decision and come running back to him. He sent me lists and called me to rant about how I was destroying our family, his life, my life, and most importantly Daphne’s life. He refused to sign the divorce

papers on multiple occasions, prolonging the procedure and legal fees for us both, and sent them back to the lawyer for some tiny minor adjustment seven different times. I went on antidepressants to help me make it through. In five years, I had a child, got married, got a college degree, traveled and studied abroad, secured a position in as a teacher, and broken up with the person I had been in a relationship with since I was a very naive 19-year-old.

I had a few friends at the time of the divorce. Although I had spent the majority of my time caring for Daphne, working and going to school, I had managed to maintain a few friend relationships with people who were content to see or hear from me every few months. One was my old roommate Kory; another was Rylee, Kory's friend and new roommate. Rylee was an aspiring photographer and artist who worked at a vet's office and UPS and had an art degree from the University of Florida. The first time I met Rylee had been when Patrick and I lived in our apartment north of Atlanta. Kory, Rylee, and I met for drinks at a Ruby Tuesday's close to our apartment. Rylee and I became instant friends and we had rekindled our friendship when she moved to Rome. Rylee helped me move out when Patrick and I were separating, and she had been an amazing support on the occasions we could meet for drinks or when I had to make late night phone calls crying about my inadequacies and failures. We were great at commiserating and laughing together. She had moved to Rome hoping to build a career as an artist but found herself having to work all the time to pay her bills, which left little time for imagination and art. I had met her parents once, they actually came to the Oglethorpe County house that I shared with Patrick a few years before when they were visiting Rylee for Christmas. I gave them a tin of homemade Christmas snacks, the kind you give out to your friends and neighbors as gifts to enjoy over the holidays. Daphne had loved helping me make the confections, her favorite part being when she rolled the orange balls in powdered sugar. Rylee's parents loved me; they



exuded kindness and acceptance as they toured the garden and the sorry little house. They insisted I saved their lives with my tin of goodies because every restaurant was closed on Christmas Day, which was the day they had traveled back to Florida after their visit with Rylee.

One Saturday afternoon in October, I was at home by myself because Daphne was with Patrick. Rylee called me and said, “I have to ask you a huge favor. What are you doing right now?” I was reading a book, not doing much of anything and no plans to speak of. By this time Rylee had started shooting weddings and that had allowed her to quit one of her day jobs, but also occupied all of her Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays throughout the months of April until October. I told her I was just relaxing and didn’t have anything going on, and she said, “Can you do me a huge favor? I don’t have anyone else to call. My brother is in the hospital. They think he might have had a heart attack. My stupid brother is such a pain in the butt! I don’t know where the kids are. I don’t know who is taking care of them. I have a wedding to shoot. It’s not like I can just not show up to photograph a wedding. This is their wedding! I have to go, I can’t find anyone to sub in for me. Can you take care of my brother? Find out what’s going on with him? Find out what’s going on with the kids and where they are? Feed them and make sure they are taken care of? Pick him up if they release him? I will come over as soon as I’m done with my shoot, but it will probably be 10 p.m. or later.” I said, “Sure Ry, I’m on this. Don’t worry about anything; I will take care of it. I will keep you updated, I will leave messages on your phone so when you have a chance to check it you will know what’s going on.” Off I went to perform a “huge favor” for one of my closest friends.

### **Passage 31: The Saga of Tim Pieniaszek**

It might sound harsh for Rylee to call her brother stupid when he might have just had a heart attack, but you have to understand the saga of Tim Pieniaszek. If I had disappointed my

family for getting knocked up and myself for getting divorced, this guy's entire life was a disappointment to his family. I had met Tim a few times: once at Rylee's with Patrick after Tim had just moved in with her, twice I had watched his kids for an afternoon, and he had babysat Daphne when Rylee helped me move out while Patrick was vacationing in Hawaii. Tim had also watched Daphne one evening when I went out on a date. Daphne loved playing with his kids. He had two kids, one was his biological child and the other was his ex-girlfriend's child who he had raised since she was two. She was now ten. Tim and his ex had been methamphetamine addicts. She rarely worked and he was a welder. If my divorce from Patrick was contentious, their breakup was a disaster. It had ended with Tim in jail on kidnapping charges (which sounds terrible, I know).

Tim and his ex had been together for many years. When Tim decided he had to quit doing drugs and asked her to do the same, she just couldn't stay away from them. They decided it would be best to separate. She went on a bender. She started moving and lived wherever she could while still fueling her meth habit. One afternoon, Tim arrived at her current place, a dilapidated trailer, to pick up the kids. He noticed there was an extension cord run from the trailer next door into her trailer and learned upon entering that it was because the electricity had been turned off. He walked in and found the kids dirty and hungry and sitting in filth, and asked, "where is your Mom?" Tiffany responded, "in back with the neighbor." He went to the bedroom and found them in bed together. She began raging at Tim, and he raged back. He picked up Gavin because he knew that legally he could not take Tiffany because she was not his biological child. He planned to get Gavin, his son, out of the situation and call child services and the police about Tiffany. He put Gavin in the backseat and the neighbor ran outside yelling and screaming. Tim started the car and the guy jumped in the passenger side window, which was down, and half

of the guy's body was in the car and the other half was outside of the car. Tim didn't stop. He tried to push the guy outside of the car while driving away. He eventually succeeded but had made it about a half a mile or so before relieving himself of his unwelcome passenger.

Tim drove to the nearest gas station and went to the pay phone to call the police and child services about Tiffany, and to calm down for a minute. He took a few deep breaths and tried to comfort Gavin who was crying in the backseat. Within minutes, the police surrounded him. As it turns out, the guy who had jumped into the window was a minor. A neighbor had called the police and the young man was pressing charges; he claimed Tim tried to kidnap him. Tim was arrested and put into jail. He was charged with kidnapping, which is a federal charge. He was denied bail and was in jail for six weeks before his case was finally dismissed for lack of evidence. Apparently, none of the witnesses could be located and would not show up for depositions so the prosecutor could not move forward with the case.

During those six weeks, Rylee was Tim's lifeline and she was still angry with him for it. She had to hire a lawyer for him and put money in his commissary account. She had to drive to the jail on countless occasions and send him things like socks and underwear. Rylee was profoundly disappointed in her brother, and this was not a new feeling, Tim had been estranged from his family since he was nineteen and quit the University of South Carolina. Rylee had heard the ballad Tim's mother sang about Tim for fifteen years: "Tim was so smart, he was so smart, he could have been anything. Instead he married the stupid woman, divorced her, and then knocked up an even stupider woman. He can't escape the power of the punani and it has ruined his life. He lives in a trailer for goodness sake! I just don't understand how this happened. I don't know what I did wrong..." and on and on it went.

So, now you understand a little history about the saga that was Tim Pieniaszek. Now to understand what that saga has to do with Daphne and me. When Rylee called me to pick Tim up from the hospital, I knew that was my day to be a good friend to Rylee. She had helped me through my divorce and she needed me, so I was going to be there. She called me back as I was putting on my coat to walk out the door and said, “Okay, update. He did not have a heart attack and they are releasing him right now. The kids are with a neighbor for now but she has to work tonight. She’s a nurse. So, if you’ll go pick him up and then take him home and get the kids, that would be great.” I just replied, “Got it!” and went to complete my mission.

**Passage 32: A Bit of Backstory by Gavin Pieniaszek in (mostly) His Own Words**

After getting out of jail, Tim moved to Rome and in with his sister. He didn’t have a job, but wasted no time finding one. They moved from a two-bedroom duplex on the east side to a two-room shotgun house in Normaltown. After they had lived together about six months, Tim got a call from social services on a Saturday night. He needed to come as soon as possible and pick up his son and his son’s half-sister. Child welfare protective services had taken custody of Gavin and his half-sister Tiffany after a S.W.A.T. team had raided a residence in which they resided with their mother and others. Gavin remembers the incident vividly even though he was only five (but about to turn six) at the time. He’s even written about it. Here is what he says:

***The Calm before the storm***

*The aroma of biscuits spread throughout the house on the hill as my sister of nine years old began cooking breakfast.*

*“Go play your video games while you wait for your breakfast,” my mother told me as I stood in her room full of friends. I scanned the room looking at everyone while they laughed hysterically at their own conversations. An unfamiliar smell entered my*

*nose the way a burglar enters a house, so I shut the bedroom door and ran happily to the living room where my play station and my favorite racing game was. A few minutes passed by. I looked over at my sister, Tiffany, as she pulled an egg out of her apron and cracked it on the side of the frying pan. I stared closely at the yellow yolk that slithered its way out of the shell onto the hot pan. I was almost mesmerized by the way the egg white bubbled and danced as it was being cooked. Then, I quickly became distracted when three booming knocks on the front door roared throughout the house.*

*“Who’s that, Mommy?” I asked my mother as she walked out of her bedroom and started towards the front door.*

*“I don’t know son,” she told me while she unlocked and opened the door. My eyes were peeled wide open when I saw a S.W.A.T. team of five burst through the door and tackle my Mom like a stampede of angry rhinos. My mother hit the hard and landed on the linoleum ground with force that would have topped the Richter scale. Two more S.W.A.T. members followed after their team with firearms locked and loaded. They scanned the area, pointing their guns as a warning. A tall, muscular black man turned in my direction and looked me right my eyes. For those few seconds of my life, I was staring down the barrel of a black pistol with a finger over top of the trigger. The finger quickly left the trigger once the man saw my young age and innocence. Like a deer in headlights, I stood in front of that officer for a second. Then, I hit the floor faster than a football player doing up downs. The officer left me to search the rest of the house. I looked over at my sister who was lying in egg yolk from the crushed eggs in her apron. I crawled over to her as fast as I could and surely, the carpet left its tender, red marks on my knees and elbows. When I made it over to my sister’s side, we held each other tight, reassuring that*

*all was going to be ok. We both looked down and closed our eyes to escape whatever reality we could, but that was mission impossible.*

*It seemed like time was moving in slow motion, but that couldn't be. By the time I looked up from the floor that had grown warm underneath me, every adult in the house was sitting in the hallway with their hands cuffed behind their backs. My Mom was crying. I watched as her tears fled slowly from her eyes and crashed onto her dark, almost black, jeans. I still wasn't sure what was going on, but I cried for a second too. Then, I realized it was doing no good, so I wiped them up.*

*A heavier set woman with blonde hair showed up at the house. Her name was Bridget. She was wearing all black and was dressed up rather nice. Her hair was in a tight ponytail and it bounced back and forth with every step she took. She walked up to Tiffany and me and picked us up off the ground. She was very nice and had a way of making all of our surroundings just disappear. She talked to us about school, our favorite TV shows, and our parents.*

*"Where is your Daddy?" Bridget asked us.*

*"Mommy and Daddy don't love each other anymore. He lives in a place called Rome," I replied to her.*

*"I'm sure they still love each other sweetie. Sometimes grown ups just need some time apart, even if it doesn't feel right at the Moment," she said while patting my back and smiling. "Do you know his phone number?"*

*I knew it like the back of my hand, but Tiffany beat me to it. Bridget stepped out of the room and called my father, who was at a Christmas party for work.*

*While Bridget was outside, the house seemed to empty out one by one. The only people left in the house were my sister, my mother, a few policemen, and I. The police allowed Tiffany and me to go into the bedroom with our mother. I opened the door to see my mother's red, puffy face. Her eyes were raccoon like because of all the mascara that was lost during all the tears she had shed. She smiled at us and pulled us both in close and tight, as if she would never see us again.*

*"What's going to happen Mommy?" I asked her as a lump began to grow in my throat. I looked over at my sister. She must have been feeling the same thing I was.*

*"I have to go away for a while kids," she said to us as a diamond of a tear traced down the side of her cheek.*

*"But why? For how long?" my sister asked.*

*"I.. don't know.. But I.. I love you both very much. I'm so sorry I did this to you," my mother replied in between sobs.*

*I lost it. The lump in my throat grew bigger and bigger with every breath I took. The tears in my eyes built up like a giant water balloon, then it exploded. I clinged on to my Mom for dear life. She held me back as tight as she could. That's when the cops came in and pulled me away from my mother. They put her in handcuffs for the last time and began to walk her out the door. I ran after them through the house. I passed the living room and saw the lit Christmas tree and for once, I felt no cheer. I found myself running out the front door yelling for my Mom the whole time. I stopped in the grass once they made it to the police car. My mother looked back at me as she was being put into the back seat.*

*“I love you,” she said, but no sound came through the glass window. I looked her in the eyes as her car began to pull off. I felt as if my whole world was taken from me. I was five years old. I wondered what I did to deserve that.*

*That’s when Bridget walked up to me and said, “C’mon sweetie, let’s go.”*

*“Where are we going?” I asked her, sounding pitiful.*

*“Your new home,” she replied.*

***By Gavin Pieniaszek***

According to the police reports and case manager’s report, the S.W.A.T. team had found a lab for producing methamphetamines in the basement of the residence. The mother was charged with producing and possessing methamphetamines, child endangerment and intent to produce and distribute methamphetamines. The children were in emergency foster care until Tim could get there (which was late the same night that he got the call). A judge would award him temporary custody of Tiffany and the case manager and him would work together to create a permanent plan for her care. Tim and the kids lived with Rylee for a few months, but the space was much too small for four people. When Tim got his tax returns, he moved into a two-bedroom duplex where Gavin and he shared a room and Tiffany had her own. I hadn’t seen Tim since he had not lived with Rylee. He made me nervous. He was always nice, but I knew from Rylee the baggage that he had and the burden he had been to his family. He had been in jail, for goodness’ sake! He had done meth! I hung out with many questionable people, and Patrick with even more, but I avoided meth and coke addicts like the plague. I was not “that type” of person. I might have lived in a house across the street from a trailer, but I always lived in a house (even if the trailer was nicer than the house). Tim looked tough, and when I imagined what people who had been through that experience were like, I felt uncomfortable. I had entrusted him to take care



of Daphne because he was a single parent, like me, and because I knew Rylee was always around when I left her at their place. Daphne loved playing with his kids and always seemed to have fun. She was an only child and lonely often, so I enjoyed hearing her joyfully tell stories about what Tiffany or Gavin did during her visits. She called Rylee “Ciocia Ry” because that is what Gavin and Tiffany called her. On the rare occasion you needed someone to watch your child, why not a single father and “Ciocia Ry”?

**Passage 33: Tim Pieniaszek**

After Rylee’s frantic calls, I picked up Tim. He was waiting outside of the emergency room with his arm in a sling. He explained that his arm had drawn up and was paralyzed and he was scared that he was going to die. In actuality, the doctor said it was due to stress. They gave him a sling to help support his arm, prescribed him muscle relaxers, and told him to take it easy and possibly visit a therapist. He asked if I could take him to the liquor store and to get his prescriptions filled and I agreed. He was obviously having a tough time. I asked about the kids and he said, “Well, Amani was going to spend the night tonight, but now my other neighbor Dianna has all three kids and is going to take them to the movies and out for pizza.” I replied, “Okay, great. I’ll make sure you get something to eat and get settled.”

We went to run our errands and then I went to drop him off at his place. I went in intending to stay until Rylee got there as she had requested. Tim poured himself a vodka and soda and asked if I would like one. I agreed. Why not? Daphne wasn’t home and I didn’t have anything to do. Tim and I started listening to music. I didn’t know this, but he played drums in two bands and loved music. I was also a bit of a music connoisseur, and I didn’t have cable (couldn’t afford it) so the radio was my main source of entertainment. We discovered that we had the same taste in music and one drink turned into a few, and a music conversation turned

into a conversation about single parenting and relationship trauma, which turned into conversations about family and on and on it went. The neighbor popped her head in about nine and asked if the kids could spend the night at her house. Tim enthusiastically agreed, and we kept talking. At ten Rylee called and I gave her the update. She said, "I'm surprised you're still there!" I replied, "I told you I'd wait for you. But the kids are taken care of and your brother is doing better. He says he's fine and you don't need to babysit him." Tim and Rylee talked for a few minutes and then Rylee got back on the phone with me and profusely thanked me. I told her it was not a problem. At 1 a.m. I decided it was time to go home. Tim asked if there was anything he could do to repay me. I had told him how my house had cinder block walls and that I hadn't been able to hang any artwork up on them. He said, "Why don't you let me come hang up those pictures for you? It's the least I could do?" I agreed. The next weekend he was there on a Saturday with the kids and hanging pictures. We made dinner for the kids and they called it an early night, off to bed and home, while I was left to admire his work in my home.

Tim then offered to watch Daphne when I had to work late the next week because of parent teacher conferences. I went to pick her up and found her already showered and in her PJs, happy as could be playing Barbies with Tiffany. I also found a dinner plate made for me; Tim said, "I thought you might be hungry." I was starving. When we were cleaning up the dinner dishes, he asked me out on a date. He said, "you know, like a real live date, without the kids. What do you think?" I agreed. Before I went to collect Daphne so we could get home and to bed, he stopped me and kissed me. Just planted one on me. I had heard people telling stories of their knees feeling like they're melting, or becoming flush from being kissed, but I had never experienced that. The relationships I had were first friendships so physical contact was usually

cuddly and comfort and not very hot and steamy. The more times I saw Tim, the more I knew that he was dangerous, and not in the way that I had expected him to be.

### **Passage 34: Who Woulda Thunk It?**

Things were going along for Daphne and me. We had a few bumps in the road, but we made it through. I worked and managed to get home in time to get her off the bus. Although one day I was late and found her tiny little five year old self in the carport crying. After that I spoke to the bus driver and she agreed to keep Daphne on the bus and drop her off last, which bought me about a 30-minute cushion in case I ever ran late again. One Saturday morning I walked out of my bedroom and found Daphne was already awake. I looked over at the TV/VCR/DVD combo that Dad had bought us for Christmas and noticed that there was a wet substance dripping down it. I asked Daphne, “What are you doing?” She said in her sweet still present lisp, I’m cleaning, mama!” I was enraged because I thought our new asset was ruined since it was soaked in Windex. Instead of thanking her for trying to help, I berated her for her cleaning work. In actuality it was my fault that she was using a poisonous substance to perform a job that was not age appropriate for a five year old. I should have been awake before she was. To this day she hates to clean and I am constantly nagging her to pick up after herself. Definitely one of the many “parent fails” on my part.

Tim Pieniaszek and I had been dating for about four months. Dating a foster parent is a challenge. There are many rules that need to be followed to ensure the child is in a safe environment and well cared for. There are classes that have to be taken and regular inspections that must occur. I had to be vetted and meet the caseworker, as well as have a background check performed. I know that social workers receive a lot of “bad press,” however, in my experience it is a job that involves many agencies and many people, and they perform that job with

professionalism and care with the child as the center of concern. Tim and I decided to get away without the kids one weekend and rented a cabin in Hunting Island, South Carolina. It was where they filmed the Vietnam scenes for the movie *Forrest Gump*, which gives you an idea of the scenery. We spent our first night going out to eat at a dive bar we had read about and that was recommended by the locals. We were discussing love and being in love and marriage over beers. I told him, "I don't ever think or expect to ever fall in love again. I've already fallen in love twice, possibly three times, and every time it hasn't ended up where I had hoped. I'm done. And marriage? That is an archaic institution that I never want to be part of again. I really don't. I'm so thankful to have met someone that I just enjoy spending time with and that seems to GET me." He told me, "I NEVER thought I would fall in love again either. You and I have separately had some hard relationship experiences. I just want to be able to enjoy spending time with an adult." We cheered and clinked our beers together. "HERE, HERE," we toasted. And then he said, "I never thought I could actually say that I love anyone ever again. That's until I met you." WHAT? I thought for a minute I had misheard him. I didn't know how to reply. I stammered a little and told him I enjoyed his company more than any other person I had ever met, more than any other person on the earth, besides my daughter. We spent that weekend in the bliss of him and I, isolated in a jungle like environment, eating well, enjoying great company, enjoying nature, enjoying the moment, which as single parents we had a rare occasion to do. I never told him I loved him in return that weekend. He wasn't discouraged. He just kept being him, thankful to be with me, kind, gentle, thoughtful.

We dated for another year, and Tim asked me to marry him. I hated the idea of marriage; I did not want to go through a divorce again, I was in no hurry to experience relationship demise. You should know by now that self-control and rational thinking are not my strongest qualities.

However, I was happy in my relationship with Tim and the time that we spent together separately and with the children. My friends call Tim a feminist. He calls himself one too (now, after years together). When my friends said that at first, I was like, “What? What does that even mean??” Tim knew and knows I have plans and dreams. He doesn’t expect me to cook, clean, work and care for him and the kids. Ours was and is, the only one I have ever known, a rarity that I know of: a partnership. He is my partner. While I’m writing this, as I’ve embarked on the seven years of graduate school that have gotten me to this place, we have raised two children together and worked and done what we do, and he’s making dinner. And doing laundry. Which I know that sounds really trite, like it’s a tribute to him as a human being where it wouldn’t be to me because I am a woman. The reality is, even today, that expectations are still different for women and men. However, people are working to find a balance in their home spaces and family routines. We work every day to maintain that balance, which is sometimes out of balance, and then moves back toward equilibrium again.

So, as I’ve been sappily confessing my love for one Tim Pieniaszek, I’ve given the illusion that things have been super easy. When we first started dating, Tim still had custody of Tiffany, Gavin’s half-sister. He intended to raise her. We intended for her to be a part of our family. We messed up. Or maybe we didn’t mess up, per se; sometimes there is nothing you can do to bend a situation and make it conclude in result you want. A year after we started dating, a year and a half after Gavin and Tiffany’s Mom had been raided by the S.W.A.T. team, after Tim had been to three months of classes to certify him as a foster parent, after...whatever. The court decided it was in the best interest of Tiffany to be returned to her biological mother. Since the only biological tie to Tim that Tiffany had was through Gavin, they courts decided when she was thirteen that it was time for her to go back. Her mother was pregnant again and they were living

somewhere in Dalton, Georgia. Tim is Gavin's biological father, and given the mother's history, the courts decided that it was in Gavin's best interest to remain in the full custody of Tim. I have to say; one of Tim's biggest regrets (and mine as well) is that we lost touch with Tiffany. She feels like we abandoned her. We didn't know where she was most of the time, but these are only excuses. The only time we heard from her was when she needed money, which sometimes we gave her and sometimes we did not. Tim took both Tiffany and Gavin to visit their mom when she was in jail as often as he could because he had learned in foster parenting class and through the social worker that it was important the children maintain contact with their mother. However, maintaining contact with a woman who had not demonstrated that she ever had the best interest of her children in her heart and mind was difficult. Gavin's mother was a strong presence; he always wanted to see her, he hated my guts, he said that I "stole" his mother's place and Daphne "stole" Tiffany's. One thing I could understand about Gavin's relentless desire to have a relationship with his mother was that through the years, I always had a burning desire to have a relationship with mine, no matter what Grandma told me about her. Despite what had happened in my childhood and how her decision to move out and live with her lover affected me, I was more interested in being a part of her life than I ever was in being angry with her. Now, as an adult who had gone through a divorce and being a single parent, through all of those things, my Mom was my biggest cheerleader. We talked and visited often and I was and am thankful to have her in my life. As a child I wanted her to be what the television and society told me a mother should be and what the people around me who mirrored the ideas that motherhood was all about warm cookies, clean houses, goodnight kisses and chicken soup. However, my mother was incapable of this. She was actually way more interesting in many ways. Gavin wanted his Mom to be what I had wanted my Mom to be. He would never have it, but that doesn't quash the desire

for it. So I tried to fill that void as best I could. Throughout the young years of Gavin and Daphne's life and the beginning of my life together with Tim, we tried to glue back together normalcy from what had been anything but normal. In some families plate licking is normal, in others mom working and dad staying at home is normal, in others both parents working is normal, in some living with grandparents is normal, and the list goes on. All of us were slowly learning that we are the ones who define what normal is for ourselves.

### **Passage 35: Nuclear(ish) Family Memories**

I know I started this memoir and stuck to a chronological timeline and now this section is just messing that all up, but bear with me. Life is often viewed in chronological timelines, but as you get older and hit the ages where you raise children and own homes and do your thing day in and out, chronology starts to run together and it all gets jumbled in your memory like a painting with a lot of vibrant colors and highlights. A lot gets lost in the day to day, but there are always highlights.

Tim and I married and went on a honeymoon to Mexico. After that, our trips were partitioned out as family vacations with a few adult getaways stolen when the timing was right. Raising children and paying bills is a day-to-day struggle unto itself, much like the struggle of teaching when you stayed up too late the night before or the struggle of standing in line for Medicaid and admitting you were one of "those people" your parents had warned you about. Although now Tim and I were fully (mostly) functioning adults; bona fide members of society that held professional jobs and had two children, one a boy and one a girl, the haunts of our past were always close behind us, reminding us how easy it was for us to mess that up. The children were particularly adept at being this reminder. One night when Tim and I were still dating and Tiffany still lived with him, Tim picked up dinner for me and the kids. On this particular night,

we had inherited a few extra kids, one a neighbor and one I don't know from where. Daphne was about six years old. Tim had gotten us Arby's, and he was settling the kids at the table with sandwiches and fries as I grabbed drinks and condiments out of the fridge. Tim was preparing Daphne's sandwich and she was ready and hungry. She asked Tim, "what is that?" He replied, "a roast beef sandwich, that is what your Mom says you like." She said, "I don't like roast beef, I like ham." Now I'm stubborn, but Tim has me beat when it comes to that character description. I am stubborn, but he is tenacious. Daphne kept insisting she liked ham, he kept insisting her Mom had told him to get her a roast beef sandwich, and when I entered the room with arms full of drinks and ketchup she said, "Mommy, what is this?!" I told her it's a ham sandwich, like she always gets. Tim, not in on the deception and thinking about how he was right and the six-year-old was wrong exclaimed, "that's not ham, that's roast beef!" Daphne looked at me with her big blue eyes full of tears and yelled, "YOU LIED TO ME! MOMMY! YOU LIE!" She ran out of the dining room and into the bathroom incredulous that I had the audacity to lie to her. I had just always wanted her to eat her dinner. I thought right then and knew it was true, "I am such a jerk."

Once Tim and I got married, we rented a house in Summer County, Georgia. It was a suburb of Rome, a place where many of the professors and professionals from Rome moved to ensure their children didn't have to go to school with the other brown children of Rome who populated housing projects and seedy parts of the small Southern town. "Separate but equal" is still the motto in the South, and it is easy to observe if you live here for any period of time and you know a bit about little history, sociology and current events. You also have to be willing to be honest with yourself and examine your own prejudice, which seems to be the hardest part for most people. Dad's words come back and back again, "I JUST WANT YOU TO BE ABLE TO



SUPPORT YOURSELF AND PROVIDE FOR YOURSELF *IN THE WAYS IN WHICH YOU HAVE BECOME ACCUSTOMED!*” The last part is particularly applicable to living in Summer County because it was viewed as the area of Rome that had “the best schools” and “the best neighborhoods” which also was code for “better than inside the city.” After we lived there for a year and a half, we decided we needed to buy a house. Tim was in his mid-thirties, I was in my early thirties and we never thought that we could afford to own a home. As luck would have it, I met a woman at open house for Summer County elementary school. We instantly bonded as we witnessed an argument about who was going to be room Mom when the teacher was trying to describe the school supply list and duties of a room mom. I don’t know what gave me away as someone who could be an ally, perhaps it was the bags under my eyes or the shock on my face, but a woman leaned towards me as we watched the two moms tout why they were uniquely qualified to be the room mom and she whispered to me, “these women obviously don’t have a job.” We became friends, and our sons became great friends. She happened to be the vice president of a bank and her husband was the vice president of the mortgage division of the same bank. They were kind people. Tim, Gavin, Daphne and I were way out of our element living in Summer County. We lived in what I call “the ghetto” of Summer County, which in actuality was a four-bedroom, two-story house in a quiet neighborhood. I called the “ghetto” because in contrast to most places in Summer County, our house and neighborhood didn’t have more than 3,000 square feet and was not brand new. Luckily the vice president helped us through the process of buying our first house. They put us in contact with a realtor friend who was obviously doing them a favor by letting us be his client. Quickly realizing all we could afford in Summer County was a trailer on some land or a home that was too small for a family of four, we widened our search to neighboring counties. We found a dilapidated house in a neighboring county where

Tim's parents had moved to from Florida to be closer to the kids (yes, I have an unexplainable thing for houses that need serious work). We managed to purchase the thing from the bank. It was 2008 and the financial crisis was coming to a head. The day before we closed on the house, Tim lost his job. I was determined that we would be fine, that we would make it through. We did. It took him six months to find another full-time steady job, but he worked as a temporary employee doing whatever he could to keep us afloat in the meantime.

It's funny how everyone in a family remembers things differently. After living in the house we purchased for two years and replacing flooring and drywall and toilets and paint and a pool liner (yes, the thing had a pool), we were finally in a place to take a family vacation, thanks to Tim's parents. We had secured a place in Florida right on the beach via the gift of use of time at Tim's parent's timeshare. We also borrowed their conversion van because the kids always complained about not having enough room in our family sedan. In the van, they each had their own seat—actually their own entire row of seats--and they had a black-and-white TV equipped with headphones and a VHS player. This was 2009. The iPod was released in 2001. So the technology was a bit out of date, but it was more than the 2003 family sedan could offer. The van didn't have a CD player, just a cassette player, and Tim and I were delighted to find his parents tape collection included Air Supply's greatest hits and Kenny Rogers greatest hits—anthems of our own youth and family vacations past. We would pop those babies in and sing along at the top of our lungs, much to Gavin's annoyance. Gavin was annoyed by everything: he didn't have enough room, the music and our singing was too loud, Daphne wanted to watch something he didn't, we ate lunch at the restaurant he didn't pick. In his defense he was prepubescent, but that doesn't make incessant complaining any easier to endure. When we finally arrived, we emerged into our one bedroom and pull-out couch in the living room condo at the Driftwood Inn. Gavin

said, “Is this it? This is tiny. This place sucks.” That was when I ran into the bathroom crying, Daphne sat silently trying to figure out why she was so annoying to Gavin, and Tim yelled at him for being so difficult. During that vacation, I had to visit the hospital for a staph infection, Daphne got so sunburned she had to wear a long-sleeved t-shirt to go outside and Tim ate ice cream everyday trying to hold his frustration together. Now, when sitting around and reminiscing, Daphne, Tim and I name that as our “worst family vacation ever.” Gavin *insists* it was our best. How does that happen?

Once Tim and I bought our house and as he worked temporary jobs in an effort to become gainfully employed, jobs that required him to work night shifts and day shifts and any shift in between, I became in charge of the day to day at our house. I managed to forge a friendship with a neighbor that lived behind us. She was a single mom that had four kids, teenage twins who were hellions, and then a boy and a girl that were each one year younger than Daphne and Gavin. Her and I made a deal: I left for work too early to get my kids to the bus. She came home too late to ensure her younger ones were doing homework and eating dinner. So I got my kids up and sent them to her in the morning and she made sure they ate breakfast and got to school. In turn, when the kids got off the bus in the afternoon they came to my house and I was in charge of them doing their homework, eating dinner, showering and getting ready for bed. In the summers I watched the kids all day long. Our families were entwined for years. When you multiply your household by two children (essentially doubling the responsibility you’re used to), all sorts of fun and crazy adventures occur. One summer afternoon, Daphne had a friend over and we had the standard five at our house: Gavin (13), Seth (12), Daphne (10), Haylee (10) and Grayson (9). The girls were playing in Daphne’s room, the boys were playing outside. I ran up to the store (which is one mile away) to pick up a few things and entrusted them to behave for the

30 minutes I would be gone. When I came back, upon entering the house, I noticed a strong smell of air freshener that took my breath away. I walked in and yelled, “What in the world is going on?!” The girls came running out to explain, Daphne their designated spokesperson, “well Mom, we were minding our own business. Then Luke kept throwing rocks at my window. I opened it and told him to stop. Then he threw a balloon through the open window and IT WAS FULL OF PEE! It busted all over my carpet and it stunk so bad, so I used some air freshener to clean it up. It smells so much better now, seriously.” I could barely breathe through the strength of Febreeze ocean air that was making my eyes water. I asked as calmly as I could, “Where did you put the air freshener?” She brought me to her room and showed me, and of course she put it in the most logical place possible to her, DOWN THE AIR VENT IN HER ROOM. Her reasoning was, “that way it would make the air coming out of the vent smell fresh.” She also decided the carpet needed extra special help, so she broke open another air freshener and poured it on the carpet. These are the air fresheners that go into Glade Plug-Ins, so they are concentrated scented oil like substances. It smelled so intensely of chemical air freshener in the house that my eyes were watering.

I called the boys to the carpet and said, “Guys, what have you done? A PEE balloon? Why in the world would you think that was a good idea?” They averted their eyes and finally Seth spoke, “Well, we didn’t MAKE the pee balloon. We just found it.” I stared him down in my best Mom stare that intended to communicate, ‘I’m calling you on your bull, kid’ and inquired, “You found it *where*?” He stood his ground and kept his eye contact and said, “I found it just lying on the ground next to the woods. I didn’t know it would be filled with *PEE*. I mean, *who does that*? That person must have been some kind of sicko to leave a pee balloon hanging around. People are crazy. Maybe it was crazy Teddy, Annie’s son, you know he’s had a lot of

problems. Or Jason, you know he's the one who breaks into cars and lives on the cul-de-sac behind you. Honestly, it could have been anyone. I really could have never imagined it was a pee balloon. I just thought it was a water balloon and would be funny to throw at the girls." I sent them to Gavin's room to think about their punishment. I needed to use the restroom and went into the kids' bathroom to relieve myself. I sat down on the seat and as I sat down a brown, sticky substance shot all over my legs and nether regions. I was still reeling from the idea of a mysterious pee balloon and slightly high from the strong stench of concentrated air freshener pumping through the vents. The air freshener was so powerful that I could not identify the smell of the brownish, orange-ish liquid all over my naked bottom. I cleaned up as best I could, got up, lifted up the toilet seats, and found about twelve Taco Bell packets underneath the toilet seat. Thank god only half of them had exploded on me. During the next inquisition designed to discover the culprit of this next amazing prank, the girls admitted they placed the packets there to get back at the boys. When Tim got home and complained about the horrible smell of air freshener, I said, "oh buddy, you don't know the half of it." He was reeling with laughter as I tried to recount the day's events.

I can recount a bajillion times when as a parent I wondered, "what in the world were they thinking?" I can also recall a bajillion times when they reminded me that no one has this parenting gig right, no matter how hard you try. As a teacher, I get a double dose. From being puked on, cussed out, lied to, confessed secrets to, and called out on making mistakes myself, kids are always there to remind you of the insanity and playfulness in which we exist. In between there are the times when you hug them when their first love dumps them, or you tell them (or maybe yell) that they are smarter than their grades reflect, or you help them fill out their first job applications or tax returns. The devil is in the details, the struggle is in the day to day. Kids will

always remind you at the moment that you forgot that we are all just crazy, messed-up beings trying to figure it out, and that no matter how much any of us profess we have, the moment we're faced with a pee balloon we have no words. A pee balloon. Seriously, *WHO DOES THAT?*

**Passage 36: Sometimes You Just Can't Anymore**

Just like I knew when I couldn't stay married anymore, I knew when it was time to leave my first teaching position as an ESOL teacher. It was not a decision I made lightly, it was one that I came to after much thought, soul-searching and conferencing with my mother, friends, and Tim. The November after Tim and I got married, I had a bit of an accident. I had joined the local roller derby team with Rylee in hopes of finding an exercise I could enjoy and hanging out with some cool ladies. During practice one night we were in a pack skating the track, and the new girl next to me lost control of her footing and fell down. On her way, her skate slammed into my ankle joint and I went down as well. She got back up, and I tried to, but for some reason my leg just crumpled right underneath me. I fell down again, and looked at my foot. It was surreal. I saw my leg lying there straight, but my foot was not attached to it! It was attached by flesh but the skin was contorted in an unnatural way. I assured myself the ankle was fine, it was "only dislocated" (even though this isn't possible for an ankle) and Rylee and some other ladies helped get me up and into the car. Rylee took me to the emergency room, where they made me walk in the door, because wheelchairs were for patients only and could not go past the ER doors. I hobbled inside the door on the one foot I could put on the ground with much support from my friend. I filled out the paperwork and waited for what seemed like forever to be seen.

After some x-rays and pain pills (I swore I didn't need them, but the nurse insisted that I was in shock and when that wore off I would thank her), I heard the news. I needed surgery to screw my anklebones back together because the bone was broken on both sides. I probably

would not be able to work for six or more weeks. I just sat there and cried. You never realize the fragility of your body until something like this occurs. One minute I was at roller derby practice, skating and having a good time, the next I had to have surgery and was out of work for six weeks. What were my students going to do? They put a soft cast on the ankle in the emergency room, told me to call the orthopedic doctor first thing in the morning, gave me a prescription for pain pills, tutored me on walking with crutches and sent me on my way.

I spend the first few days in a complete blur. I don't know who scheduled my doctor appointments, who made food, who made sure the kids were fed and went to school. Three days after the incident, Tim had to leave me to go play a gig, and I was at home in the soft cast and responsible for knowing where our children were. Someone called on the phone, and he said, "Hey, we haven't talked before, but you know my wife Lisa? The kids told me about your broken ankle, and I was wondering if I could help and take them off your hands this evening? I was going to take them to the park and then grab something to eat." I replied from my drug-induced fog, "You're Lisa's husband, the police officer?" He responded, "Yes, that's right." I said, "Do you promise not to harm my children? I couldn't pick you out of a lineup, but I know you work for the sheriff's office. I'm so confused, and I probably shouldn't be taking care of children." He laughed and said, "I had surgery about six months ago, and you probably don't remember this but you took my son Josh for the weekend. I'm happy to return the favor." I agreed. The kids came home later that evening and recounted the great time they had.

While the kids were gone, I noticed I didn't smell good. I hadn't showered since the break, and I couldn't submerge my ankle. I tried to get up, then promptly fell over hitting my foot against the floor. Laying on the floor and crying, I managed to call Rylee and asked her to help me. She rushed over, and held my foot out of the water as I took a bath. I'm not known for

asking for help, but I realized in my drug-induced fog that I was lucky to have good people in the world willing to help care for my children and an amazing friend to help me wash my lady bits. It takes a village--even if you couldn't pick some of the villagers out of a lineup. I had the surgery and spent six weeks at home in blur induced by pain pills. I remember a few things. My Dad and June came down for the surgery. The night after I was released from the hospital, Dad came in and asked, "Are you hungry?" I answered, "I think so?" He fed me strawberries since I was still too drugged on Lortabs and morphine to stab the strawberry and navigate it to my mouth. He rubbed my head and assured me I was going to be fine. Other than that memory, and the memory of trying to carry anything in your hands while you're on crutches, mostly I stayed in bed, and sometimes I would hobble to the couch. When all three other limbs are occupied with just trying to support you, menial tasks like having a drink of water become monumental challenges. It was extremely painful all the time. After lying in bed for a few weeks, the pain was not limited to my ankle. My back hurt from laying down all the time, my leg and ankle hurt from the trauma, my other leg hurt from having to support all my weight, my armpits hurt from using crutches. I tried to read books but the pain pills made it hard to focus. All I could do was survive and all I saw were the walls of my house, the yard outside of the kitchen window and the smiling and sweet faces of my family.

I still had to use a cane when I returned to work after eight weeks. It was hard to stand, so I had to sit most of the day. My long-term substitute had been a guy who preferred to take the kids outside to play soccer instead of following my lesson plans to read novels, have unit vocabulary lists and grammar practice, and to work on essay writing,. The students talked about how they missed him and how much fun he was. Getting them to work for the rest of that year was a battle. We had also had a change in administration that year. The new principal, Silvanus



Jenkins, was an African-American man in his mid-thirties. During my annual review, he called me in and spoke with me about the ESOL program and what Molly and I were doing in our classrooms. I offered to show him my lesson plans and explained the basic philosophy that we had—that I supplemented the English Language Arts curriculum and focused on the acquisition of the English language, and Molly taught the Social Studies curriculum and modified it for language learners. He then posed a question that I did not expect and that made me think long and hard about my position at the school. He said, “Just what do you, as a White lady, really think you can do for these brown children? What type of connection to you even think you can have with them?” I stammered for a minute, then did my best to conjure up a response, “Well, I speak their language. I’ve been here four years now. I have been to many of their homes for dinner. I have taught a lot of their brothers and sisters. I work with them on learning English, but we also discuss how race and language and prejudice will play a role in their lives, their paths, and their choices. I know I’m not Latina, but I try my best to offer them what I know and advocate for them as much as I can.” He stared at me sternly and suggested, “Perhaps someone that was more like them could be more effective.”

I had standardized test scores to “prove” my effectiveness, which educators were all obsessed with at the time. We also had two teachers, which made our program the bigger than any other middle school in the county. In addition, we had created a curriculum, and we had won a technology grant that brought \$50,000 worth of computer equipment into our program. We had been on the news after we won the grant. The program was a far cry from the rat-infested trailer out back with nothing inside it but determination and idealism, which was where we started.

However, it wasn’t just the meeting with my principal that made me uncomfortable about continuing work at the middle school. It was the hardness of it all. The gang activity. The

reporting to the counselors about terrible things students had disclosed in cries for help. One thing in particular hit me hard that spring was that one of my 7th grade students, Patricia, got pregnant. Now, I was not so naive to believe that some of the students were not already having sex. The idealistic childhood many people like to envision is always short, but many of the students I worked with dealt with experiences beyond many people's years, which meant their childhoods were even shorter. Many were already working to help support their families or had significant responsibilities at home to help support their working parents. It wasn't simply that Patricia was pregnant, which was a tragedy. She was twelve. Even more tragic was that she was carrying her stepfather's child. She was convinced she was in love with him and that she was going to keep the child and move back to Mexico with him.

### **Passage 37: Baby with Baby**

I spent the last semester at Colin Middle School experiencing different levels of brokenness and healing. Like most of us, things are not all right or all wrong at the same time. There is a give and take. A balance. For example, as I was getting ready to go back to university, I learned I was pregnant. Not that either of these items in isolation was bad, I was thrilled about both developments, however, them happening simultaneously presented a...challenge. Now, I was married to the love of my life, which I know is the most cliché thing in the universe to say. However, the truth was my home life was going well. Stable. Surrounded by children, a secure home, people that I wanted to come home to at night. I went home to a beautiful little boy, who, granted, struggled with the cards life had already dealt him. I also went home to a beautiful and loving daughter who smiled and sat on her Mommy's lap and who hugged Mommy and held her hand. We filled our evenings and weekends with karate practices and home improvements and discussions of family summer vacations and dreams for the future. I had a partner who was kind

and supportive, and although having a blended family was sometimes stressful, my partner and I had each other to share the stress, which brought with it a security that neither of us had felt since we were children ourselves.

Then there was teaching. The job I used to love, used to willingly spend sixteen waking hours a hundred and ninety days (actually more) thinking about, working at, relentlessly and doggedly determined to be my best at, dreamed about, smiled about and cried about: suddenly, it had become a chore. I hated going to work. I left early and came late. I only had three colleagues that were still there from when I started four years before. The feelings of working together and virtue and interest and perseverance had turned into feelings of hopelessness, boredom, and frustration. The students were still wonderful young people with goals and dreams and ambitions of their own. However, honestly I don't really know them much anymore because I stopped seeing and hearing them. They became whiny and apathetic, no doubt mirroring the behavior they saw in their teacher. Tolerance became more and more of a chore. Home visits became a chore. Speaking with families and translating for parents to guidance counselors, bus drivers, and other teachers became a chore.

Now there was Patricia. I was on the outermost circle of people doing anything for her. I became her hospital homebound teacher because I felt so deeply devastated for her situation. She never was a particularly bright child, more naive and often careless, but she was a baby. A child who was violated. She was put on bed rest because she was having regular contractions and the doctors were concerned about her going into preterm labor. She was under an undue amount of stress because her stepfather was arrested for his crime. She was being inundated with caseworkers and police officers and a profound guilt for causing her and her stepfather's circumstance. Her mother was angry with her, deeply angry, infuriated in fact, because "NOW

WHO IS GOING TO PAY THE BILLS?!” She was a small girl dealing with many adult and criminal problems, severe problems, problems no one she knew could relate to.

I went to visit her in the hospital a few times. I would ask her who had come to visit her, and she would look down and reply, “no one.” I would continue to probe, trying to be uplifting and share an aura of love and acceptance to a person who needed every crumb of humanity anyone could throw at her. “When was the last time you saw your Mom?” Her eyes would divert from mine, she would cast them towards the floor and say, “I don’t know. Maybe a week?” What do you say? What do you say to this small person who never had a chance to be whole and possibly never would? I would ask her if she needed anything, if there was anything she missed while she was in the hospital. She would reply, “papasas.” I tried to visit her every day, but I didn’t. I am flawed. It is one of the most difficult things to do to look at all that brokenness day after day and think about how lucky you are, have been and will continue to be. She was so young, beautiful and broken in heart, mind and spirit, and she was going to be a mother (which I knew would fill you up one second and bring you to your knees the next). I would cry the whole way home for her, and I know my crying was a mixture of pity for her circumstance and shame in myself for not knowing how to help her more. Which sounds so self-centered, because I had a life that was a long cry from days in the welfare line.

I’m sad to say I don’t remember if Patricia had a boy or a girl. I don’t remember what she named it. I did visit her after the baby was born. She was planning to go back to middle school for the next school year. Her stepfather was convicted and was going to serve many years in jail. She said she knew now that he had taken advantage of her and that she did not love him, however she expressed thankfulness that he gave her a child. She and her mother had reconciled and her mother was going to watch the baby while she went to school. That was the last time I

saw her. I finished out the semester at Colin and went into summer looking forward to the new teaching job I had secured for next year. When you feel pity for students but can't feel empathy, when you feel defeat and lackadaisical about the gang initiations and arrests and deportations of your students, when you feel resentment towards them for the hard circumstances they inherited from society, when you feel numb, it's time to move on. Perhaps I am just a coward, a selfish bitch, or perhaps a little of both. I have been selfish to the core many times in my life, and this was one of them. I knew I couldn't take another year or another Patricia. That was not her fault; that was mine.

**Passage 38: On and On**

I noticed something when I started the next school year at a high school in a suburb east of Atlanta almost halfway between Atlanta and Rome, Georgia. It is situated so "in between" a few towns east is called Between, Georgia (because it is exactly between Atlanta and Rome). It was a community that had experienced unprecedented growth over the previous fifteen years. It had once been farmland as far as one could see, now it was a stark mixture of farmland, strip malls, and newly constructed neighborhoods. Drive a mile North, South, or East of the school and all you would see are fields, cows and crops. Drive three miles east and it felt like you were in the middle of any nondescript suburban area of Atlanta, a four lane highway running through it with a Chili's, a Home Depot, a Wal-Mart, a Kroger, a Ingles, a Publix and a Starbucks. At the staff meeting at the beginning of the year, the principal was giving his welcome-back speech and puffed up his chest as he announced that he had graduated from Lutherville High School, his wife had graduated from Lutherville High School and their children had graduated from Lutherville High School. Then he asked, "Anyone else in here that graduated from this high school, please stand up." I looked around and half of the people in the auditorium were standing.

Then he said, “If your spouse graduated from Lutherville High School please stand up.” Half of those who were previously seated stood proudly. I gawked and thought to myself (with a smile of wonder and political correctness plastered on my face), “what the heck? That’s weird? Isn’t it? Is it just me?” He then directed us all to clap loudly and proudly for a community that “is so successful and such a wonderful place to live that most people never leave because we know there is no place better to be.”

I had another experience the first day at Lutherville High School that made me think in my mind, “that’s weird? Isn’t it? What the heck?” I was trying to get students settled down and into their seats so we could start. I felt very nervous. As an ESOL teacher, I had students that came with some challenging behaviors, but I only had 11 students in a classroom at a time. As a Spanish teacher at Lutherville, I had thirty-plus students in the room. They were not little either; most of them were taller than I am (I’m a whopping 5’3”, although people often think I’m taller because I’m stocky.) They were swarming, the energy was high, everyone seemed to know one another and seemed happy to see each other, it was loud, and I mustered my best and biggest swim cheer voice and yelled, “EVERYONE! SIT DOWN AND SHUT THE HELL UP!” My Yankee sensibility thought nothing of raising my voice, saying shut up or including the emphasis of hell in my demand. Instantly, everyone in the room turned eyes to me. The looks on their faces were a mixture of shock, offense, and confusion. They sat down and shut up. They regarded me with a mixture of fear and interest. After I had introduced myself in Spanish, then English, distributed the syllabus and began going over the overview of the course, I paused to ask if there were any questions. One of the students raised their hand and asked the question that I had heard a million times since I had moved to the South. With their best Southern drawl, the student asked, “Ma’am, where you from? You ain’t from around here are yeh?” To this question I

heard snickers and saw downcast glances. I also noticed something else. There was only one student of color in my class. I had never taught in a room where there were not only brown eyes staring back at me with curiosity. Now there was a sea of snickering, White, obviously tight faces looking at me. I realized my missteps instantly. These kids weren't used to a Yankee accent (which I still don't think I have, but apparently everyone else still hears). They were not used to people yelling at them. They were wearing outfits I couldn't afford on a good day; I was wearing a thrift store dress and blazer I had picked up at Ross for \$9.99. We all regarded each other with interest, confusion, and maybe the tiniest bit of intrigue.

During the first year at Lutherville High School, teaching invigorated me again. I was excited to plan lessons and dove into the new role of learning about students, working on a curriculum, and finding techniques that worked best for me. It was totally different from teaching ESOL, there was a lot less paperwork but a lot more students. This wasn't a "failing school" according to No Child Left Behind, instead it was considered a thriving school. Most of the students walked in with the same ability level in Spanish: they had never had a language class before. It was interesting and completely opposite from being at Colin.

Although I enjoyed working with the students, my colleagues were a different story. It's not that they weren't kind or supportive in their ways, it was just apparent that our worldview was very different. At lunch one day, while discussing the noises one of the teachers heard from the self-contained autism room, the teacher commented, "I don't understand why they don't just round them all up and put them in their own separate building. They don't belong in a public school. They're gross and their behavior is out of control, they scare other students, and frankly, they make me nervous and are distracting with their screaming and banging their heads up against the wall." I silently chewed my sandwich that was getting stuck in my throat on the way

down. I was choking down the sandwich along with shock and disdain for what my colleague was proposing. My sister by this time was an autism specialist for Metro Nashville Schools. Her role was to advocate for autistic children and consult with their classroom teachers to create behavior plans. The plans aimed to modify behavior with the goal of including these students as much as possible in the regular classroom. The underlying belief in the work my sister did was the belief that autistic children could lead a life that was fulfilling and meaningful and that they could contribute to their community. Faced with the lunch table of colleagues that were grumbling approval of the suggestion that “we shouldn’t have to see these kids,” I did what I often do and hate myself for: I sat there in silence. I didn’t question. I didn’t issue a rebuttal. I just sat there chewing my sandwich and munching on my potato chips.

Although this lunch conversation was frustrating, I continued to join my colleagues for lunch in fear of isolating myself even more than I already felt isolated from adults in the building. One day I had an issue with a student refusing to sit in her seat or follow directions, which culminated in her challenge to me, “make me, bitch.” I was taken aback, this was not the type of behavior that was common in classrooms at Lutherville High School and it had been over a year since I had been stared down with such disdain and defiance as this young lady held in her glare. When I shared the experience at lunch, another colleague (not the one who made the comment about autistic children) explained, “It’s the damn Black Yankees coming down here thinking they can do whatever they want. Did you know they put up a billboard in New York City that encourages those hood rats to move to Lutherville for a better life? That’s why we have so many more Black students now. They come down here with their Yankee mouths and nasty attitudes. They’re probably all drug dealers or gang members. I don’t know what this school is coming to.” Again, I sat there, experiencing a myriad of emotion but unable to form an argument



in fear of retribution from what was obviously the popular prevailing opinion of the staff that I associated with. I decided after that it would be best if I had only working lunches and suspended lunching with the ladies.

**Passage 39: Family**

In the fall of my second year at Lutherville we learned my stepfather had leukemia. I don't remember exactly the type, I believe it was Acute Myeloid Leukemia. I don't know for sure and asking would dredge up those memories with my family. Most likely, if I don't remember they probably don't either. Sometimes details get lost, but you still wear the experiences that go along with them like an open sore. I received the announcement on a mid-summer on a day when it was still warm and I was wearing Capri pants and sitting outside on our back deck one afternoon after school. My dog of ten years had died recently, a blow that was still raw and that our family was still suffering from. As Mom explained the situation, I did what I do with most news of this magnitude, I did what I do with expertise, I deflected. As my mom sobbed on the other end of the phone line I comforted her with, "don't worry, I'm sure there are treatments that will work. Danny is strong; he's one of the strongest people I know. He's going to be fine." I continued with these generic reassurances until she calmed down enough to tell me the plan. They had to see some specialists, an oncologist and hematologist; they would run more tests and then form a treatment regimen. The process would take a few weeks and even up to a month.

I went up to Michigan for Thanksgiving break to help my Mom as Danny underwent his first round of chemo. He was in the hospital and we had to wear masks and gowns to see him and squirt hand sanitizer foam on our hands as we entered and exited the room. He was surviving. He was throwing up constantly and as white as the sheets he laid on, but he would put a big smile on

his face and act okay as I visited day in and day out. I spent the week cooking and cleaning and making trips back and forth to the hospital. My mom was not doing well. She often seemed more drugged than Danny did. I forgave her these indiscretions; who was I to judge when I went back to their condo every night armed with a bottle of vodka and sadness weighing heavily on my heart, mind, and body? At the end of the week, I returned home and Danny came home a week later, his first round of chemo complete. I did all I could do once I returned home, which mainly consisted of harassing his doctors on long distance phone calls at all hours of the day and night in hopes of understanding Danny's condition so I could research it, put it in plain speak, and relay it to the rest of my family. Although there were always undercurrents of resentment about the divorce of our parents and the switching of partners that had been the result, my family still spoke to each other civilly and even celebrated holidays, graduations, and births of our new members as a unit. After another round of diagnostic tests, doctors decided Danny needed another round of chemo. Like a soldier, he marched back into the cancer ward of the hospital three weeks later ready for battle. It was the week before Christmas.

The Friday before Christmas break, the students and I had a great day. I drove home ready to rest, relax, and prepare for the festivities of the holiday. About 7 p.m. I got a call from my Dad and he sounded panicky, "Ang, you have to get up here. June and I flew up this afternoon. They are telling us to gather family." He was met with my silence, then a litany of "what the fucks?!" from me. In retrospect, I should have known that I might have to go back up there. I had missed Thanksgiving with my own family to serve as the good daughter, which was a title I had been working slowly to regain since my younger years. I selfishly thought my duty was done, but on the Wednesday before the Friday phone call Danny had contracted necrotizing fasciitis, otherwise known as flesh-eating disease. He had endured two surgeries a day since

where the surgeons were cutting away the infected flesh, applying a wound vacuum to the freshly opened wound, and he was being pumped full of every broad-spectrum antibiotic the hospital had available. I knew this from talking to Mom and the doctors. I knew Danny was not well. I was just trying to wish it away in the hopes of everyone enjoying a restful and peaceful Christmas vacation, no matter our geographical location. No one could ever accuse me of having a poor imagination or the superpower of wishing away pressing problems. On this Friday, the third day Danny was suffering with this condition, he was becoming increasingly weak and in need of blood transfusions. The doctors feared that they were not getting the infection under control fast enough, so they wanted family to gather because they didn't know how many more surgeries they could perform before they would have to amputate his leg. If they had to amputate his leg, with his compromised immune system, they didn't know if he would survive it.

I took a few deep breaths and said, "okay Dad. Okay. I'm going to check flights. I don't think my car will make it up there; both Tim's and my cars have over 100,000 miles on them. I don't know if I have enough money to pay for a flight, we've been Christmas shopping for the kids. Oh my God." My Dad calmly replied, "don't worry, I can pay for your ticket. Just see if you can get a flight out tonight." I called the airlines and was met with even more bad news. There were no flights leaving for Lansing that night. There had been a winter weather system that had dumped a large amount of snow in the Snow Belt and flights were grounded until the morning, and they weren't even sure if it would be safe to resume flights then. I said, "I don't have until tomorrow afternoon! Can't you do anything?!" I was stonewalled with a no. No. and resounding NO in addition to a few "I'm sorry, Ma'am(s)." All this time Tim and I were ping ponging phone calls with Dad and my sister, trying to figure out how to make it work. My sister was in Florida with her in laws and was having the same issues finding a flight. My Dad finally

offered this plan, “Ang, drive to my house in Tennessee. Get the BMW. You can drive it up here. It only has like 15,000 miles on it and the tires were just checked and it just had its first oil change. It should be good to go. I’ll give you instructions for how to get past the front gates into my neighborhood and then how to get into the garage. I’ll call the guard now and tell him you’re on your way.” I was crying, scared, confused, overwhelmed, but managed to croak out, “Dad, are you sure?! That’s June’s new car! Are you sure? I don’t know about this.” He said, “We need you up here as soon as possible. June is fine with it. Just do it. Call me when you leave.” With that I packed a suitcase, kissed my children and husband goodbye, and took off to answer the call of my family in crisis.

I drove all night. In Indiana, I slipped and slid down the dark ice coated highway, too tired and scared for my stepfather to think about the dangers of black ice for myself. Never mind. Just had to keep going. Keep going. Keep going. I got to Lansing around 6 a.m. and went to Mom and Danny’s condo. Danny had made it through the night with my Mom standing vigil by his side, as she had throughout his entire chemo treatment. Maybe standing strong isn’t quite the right way to depict her; she was standing wobbly and in fear but with the look of a warrior on her face. I slept for a few hours then went to the hospital to be with the rest of the family. My stepbrother, stepsister, their spouses, my sister and her husband, and my dad and June peppered the waiting room looking tired, looking scared and confused and staring blankly at each other. There were tear stains on the women’s faces and strong-set jaws and tense shoulders on the men—the only thing saving them from developing the same stains the women bared. We were awaiting the news; did Danny have to have another surgery today? Could he have another one? Was he going to be able to walk when this was over? Was his leg going to survive? Could he survive without a leg? Danny was a 72-year-old man who had run five miles a day most days of

his life. Would he be able to handle it if they needed to take his leg? Would he think it was worth it? Would he let them? Did he have the right to say no?

Finally, the doctors graced us with their presence in the waiting room with news. They would do one last surgery. He would most likely need one or two blood transfusions when they were done, so if anyone in the family was a blood match they asked that we go down the hall to donate. My dad and stepbrother immediately got up and went mumbling that at least they could do something. The doctors told us if they did not get all the infected tissue today, they would have to amputate tomorrow. Danny was in a lot of pain. His chemo had been stopped and wouldn't resume until he could recover from the surgeries and get the wound closed back up. We could see him two at a time and had to continue the regimen of masks and gowns. But now we had to amp up the precautions to include covered shoes, covered hair, and latex-covered hands; no touching; no hugs or kisses or forms of physical comfort or contact. Any germs you take in the room must leave with you as well. We were given 15 minutes a pair. If he was up to it, we could visit him after he left the recovery room later that afternoon. They would know more after surgery.

We each took our turns, trying our best to convey love, understanding and support through our gazes because we couldn't show physical affection. We didn't know if this was the last time we would see him. He didn't know much of what was happening, his eyes were clouded with drugs and pain and fear. My Mom was fretting over him, "are you cold? You can't eat, but do you want ice chips? Are your feet okay? Do you need more pain medication? Do you want me to call the nurse?" Her litany of questions was exhausting, but tolerated by him and anyone else in the room. When Mom is scared or nervous, actually when she's in just about any situation at all, she can't stop talking. They wheeled Danny back to surgery and we waited.

We were met hours later with good news. The doctor's thought they had gotten all of the infected bacteria. Danny's heartbeat was strong and he was recovering in the ICU where he would remain overnight. The doctors recommended we all go home and get some rest. They would re-evaluate in the morning. Everyone dispersed to their corners, heading out in the snowy evening breathing sighs of relief. I convinced Mom to go to her house with me. She had not slept a night away from the hospital since Danny had been admitted. Her hair was stringy and she was slurring her words. I couldn't tell if that was the result exhaustion or anti-anxiety medications, which she was always in favor of taking whether she needed them or not. We got something to eat and showered and cried and visited. She recounted how scared she was and how she didn't know what she would do if Danny didn't survive this. At 3 a.m. we received a phone call from Danny. He was crying. He said, "Angela, your Mom doesn't have to come, I know she is so tired. But can you come back? I just want someone to sit with me. I don't know what day it is, what time it is, I don't know. I'm scared. I'm seeing things. Strange things. I don't know what they are but I think they're after me. I can't stand up. I can't move. I just have to lay here and they're coming after me." I assured him I was on my way. I managed to convince my Mom to stay home, that she needed to try to sleep, if nothing else she needed to lie in bed and rest restlessly.

When I got to the hospital I rang the button for the ICU and was granted admittance. I still had to wear the getup, but I could hold his hand. He actually looked a little better than he had that morning. There was some color in his cheeks and life in his eyes. He was crying. He was looking around wildly. The nurse said he was having hallucinations due to the pain medications. He confirmed her assessment by talking about the dragons on the ceiling. I grabbed his hand and mustered all the confidence I could stuff into my voice. I had experienced some bad

LSD episodes before and a bad trip is scary as hell. Who would think a bad trip experience could come in handy when comforting your parent? I just whispered to him, “it’s the medication. It’s the medication. You’re okay. They can’t get you. It’s your mind tricking you. Don’t be scared. Don’t be scared. Just breathe. Take deep breaths, very good, just keep breathing. You can look, but imagine you are seeing beautiful birds or the beach or a golf course of the most wonderful things you can think of. You’re going to be okay. Tell me what you are seeing. Describe them to me. That’s right. You’re okay.” After about two hours, he fell asleep. I waited until seven that morning and went home to get Mom. She was ready and waiting for me, itching to move back to her post by his side. I dropped her off and went home to get a few hours of sleep.

Danny survived necrotizing fasciitis. He lost half of his thigh muscle, but he survived and still had his leg. I spent the entire Christmas break in Michigan. Again I cooked and cleaned and played taxi driver. I spent Christmas Eve in the hospital and Christmas Day at my stepbrother and sister-in-law's house along with the rest of the family that was there. There were about twenty people there, most that I didn’t know well because I hadn’t lived in Michigan or really connected with this part of my family for more than thirteen years. At least my dad and sister were there too. My sister had come up her husband and we stayed at Mom and Danny’s condo. We prepared meals, cleaned, visited with family and friends that were still in the area, and we visited with each other. She had bought me Christmas presents at the few stores open the day that her and her husband drove up. We ate Christmas morning breakfast at Denny’s before standing vigil at the hospital. The entire experience is surreal in our minds; the prevailing emotions we recollect are fear and uncertainty. We have collectively named the experience “The Worst Christmas Ever.”

Danny finished his chemo, which was again unsuccessful. He enrolled in a trial at the University of Michigan and quit halfway through. He said he just didn't want to do it anymore. He wanted to enjoy the time he had left doing things he took pleasure in and spending time with his family. He had a hospice service that visited every day. About six weeks after he quit the University of Michigan trial, he was dead. We got the call midday the first day of my summer vacation and the last day of my kids' school year. We made plans to make the trek up for the funeral, with less urgency in the need to get there than the Christmas trip but urgency just the same. My mom didn't really have a strong support system; Danny had been her whole life. Although my step siblings attempted to offer support in the best ways they knew how, they were grieving their father. And let's be honest, do the uneasy feelings of a blended family ever get completely resolved? Emotional wounds heal but they leave scars. Mom and Danny's relationship had left some deep scars on my stepsister and stepbrother, although both did their best to mask them.

When I received the phone call that Danny was gone, Dad was in Tennessee, Tim was working, and the kids were in school. Gavin was in middle school, and we couldn't check him out of school because he was taking finals. I still can't understand why the school secretary felt so resolved and confident that Gavin's final was more important than the fact my parent and his grandparent was dead. I was frustrated by this, but it actually took most of the day for us to make arrangements for our dogs, our fish, pack clothes, and for Tim to get time off work. We set off late in the afternoon knowing we would have to battle Atlanta rush hour traffic, emotional exhaustion, and a long night ahead. We got to Dad's around 7 or 8 p.m. and loaded up in his Chevy Tahoe for the rest of the ten-hour trip. At least the weather was good this time. We drove about forty minutes and traffic stopped. There was an accident ahead of us with fatalities. As if



the universe needed to remind us even more than we already felt in that moment that life was fragile, we witnessed people being carried off on stretchers and sat impatiently in an effort to get to our victim and our survivors. We sat in the parking lot of the interstate for two hours with hungry and tired children and full bladders. We decided to forge ahead. Dad wanted to be there for his wife who was struggling to comfort her children and I wanted to be there for Mom. On the way Dad, Tim and I took turns driving. When it was my turn to drive, Dad got in the backseat with the kids. He said he was too tired and he needed some sleep. The driver shuffle awoke the children who gazed at us with sleep-filled eyes, confused about where their dad went and why their grandpa was so physically close. Dad kept moaning about how he was “sooooo tired...the lights are keeping me awake...I’m sooo tired!” He then proceeded to put a pillowcase over his head and continued moaning, and the kids; Tim and I couldn’t help but burst out in laughter. We drove all night and got there about 7 a.m. We slept until the afternoon and then learned about the double tragedy my sister was dealing with. She had received two calls the previous morning. One informed that her mother-in-law had a brain aneurysm and was on life support in a hospital in Florida. The other came about an hour later informing her that Danny was gone. Stacey and Chris (her husband) were in their late twenties; Chris’ Mom was in her fifties. She had been a healthy, cheerful, joyous woman enjoying the first years of retirement with her husband. Now she was on life support showing no signs of brain activity. She went to bed and never woke up. She would never see the two amazing grandchildren my sister would give birth to, she would never send the odd collection of interesting items she had picked up at the dollar store and packed up in a care package, her last care package was sent. Stacey and Chris came up for Danny’s funeral, then flew to Florida to witness when they took Chris’s Mom off

life support. My sister was dealing with two losses at once, two funerals and two grieving families on opposite ends of the United States.

By this time, I had lost both of my grandfathers and my grandmother Matinee, who I had lived with my first year in Atlanta. As with any death, I don't remember many details of funerals, grieving, or the aftermath. Always there is lots of crying, sadness, and regret that you didn't see them that one last time. That you didn't say *x*, *y* or *z*. That you wouldn't talk to them again. I'm not a religious person. To describe myself as agnostic would even be a stretch. I still haven't taken the time to sort out ideas of spirituality, life, death, afterlife, god, hell, and heaven. I don't know if belief in those things brings comfort in times of grief. All I know about grief is that it is acute pain that fades as you return to your daily routine. Then sometimes, usually often at first, then waning after time, you might see or hear something that reminds you of what and who you are grieving. The acuteness of the loss rushes back, then fades again. Eventually you remember with love, acceptance, kindness, even excitement, humor and joy who and what you have grieved and carry with you. At least you hope you make it to that point.

#### **Passage 40: Mom and the Aftermath**

After Danny died, Mom decided to move South. Her entire family was here and her support system in Michigan was limited. She decided to move close to me so that she could help with the kids and be a daily part of their life and mine. It was a secret dream I had been harboring since I was young, that my mother wanted to be not only a part of my daily life and wanted to support me, but that she wanted to be a part of my children's lives and shower them with grandmotherly love. I hadn't known what it is like to have a family member close geographically, much less one that I could call and that would be close enough and willing to help with all the daily chores of living, or one that I could share dinner and a movie night

laughing with. Mom packed up her stuff with the help of my stepsiblings and down she came. A few months after Danny died, she rented a house less than a mile from mine, a cute little two-bedroom ranch that she set about decorating and making home. Although Mom was determined to make a new life that included her grandchildren and daughters, she was struggling with her demons. She couldn't seem to keep away from the medications. The anti-anxiety, anti-depressant, muscle relaxant, or opiate painkillers like Lortab or Oxycodone. She would sequester herself in her house for days at a time, her only contact with the outside world incoherent phone calls to family members or the home shopping network at all hours of the day or night. She was spiraling. Stacey came down to help me confront her in the winter of that first year. We planned to sit with Mom and talk to her. We were going to insist that she had a problem with taking too many medications and that she needed professional help. Perhaps a hobby or volunteering would get her out of the house and help her want to stay sober enough to show up? We told her we loved her and that we were concerned for her emotional and physical wellbeing. We were worried about how she was living her life and sure that she would feel better if she got her prescription medication intake down to a reasonable level that was supervised by one doctor, preferably a psychiatrist. Although we were well-intentioned, we were naive to believe that Mom's issues could be solved with a stern talking-to from loved ones. Instead of acceptance or gratitude, Mom met us with anger and resentment and insisted that "she only took medications prescribed to her" and that she "needed them to help her with her knee pain and her back pain and all her pain." She had originally gone to the same family doctor I used but didn't like her because "she won't write my prescriptions, I've been taking them for years, I don't know who she thinks she is." In the interim she would visit the emergency room, becoming a frequent flyer, which helped her secure extra medications to help with all her alleged pain. Although Mom was

furious with my sister and me, Mom agreed to see a therapist at the very least after many tears, much pleading, and probably guilt and a need to placate us.

Her therapist hooked her up with a new doctor, and she began to get worse. I was scared about her driving. She regularly had problems sleeping, so she would stay up all night and then go to McDonald's or some other such needless location. She ran into the trees lining my driveway. She showed up at my house a couple of times at 3 in the morning where the whole house would be woken up by barking dogs and harsh words about how I was ignoring her. She would start yelling in the driveway, then proceed through the garage into the laundry room and eventually directly to my just woken, exhausted, and confused face. The truth is, I had started ignoring her most of the time. Watching a drug addict spiral down to the lowest points is like watching a train wreck you feel like you should have the power to prevent, but all you can do is just stand there frozen. She would call me ten times in a row and then try to talk with nothing but incoherent unlinked words stumbled out of her mouth. I was tired of her whininess, her dependence, and her whimsy and irresponsible behavior. I forbade her from driving the children anywhere or to even see them unless Tim or I were present. We fought about everything, including her excessive purchases from mail order catalogues and other all-night shopping television stations or commercials. She was relentless in her defense of her actions, any action, no matter how erratic or unexplainable.

One Sunday night at about 9 or 10 p.m., she called me and asked me to take her to the emergency room. I hung up on her because I was angry and tired. She was constantly asking me to take her to the doctor or the emergency room, and I always felt it was her way of acquiring more medications that she did not need. I did not want to play good daughter on a Sunday night; I wanted to go to sleep, wake up and go to work, and hope that I prevented her from getting high

for at least one night. However, she is a tenacious personality and didn't give up, so she kept calling and calling, insisting she couldn't breathe well. Finally, I relented and begrudgingly got out of bed, threw on some clothes, and headed over to her house. She got in the car and immediately started screaming at me, and I screamed back. She told me to stop the car, which I did, and she got out. I followed her, and she yelled something I don't clearly remember. In my memory, it sounds like, "ungrateful little selfish bitch. Who do you think you are talking to me this way or treating me this way!" I hurled hatefulness back at her, throwing pill bottles from her purse across the car hood at her face. Someone stepped outside their house and threatened to call the police. I told her to get her butt back in the car and she angrily complied. She slammed the door to let me know she was still fuming, and I told her I was dropping her butt off at the ER and leaving her there. I was sure this was another of her episodes in which she intended to procure a prescription. I hated her in that moment.

I walked her into the ER, as usual, not following through on my threat to abandon her there. I was so mad I wanted to physically assault her and I couldn't in that moment remember if I had ever loved her, or if she had ever loved me. I mostly just had a voice screaming in my head, "typical Mom! She thinks everything is always about her all the time! Doesn't give a crap about anyone else! Wants to feel good more than she wants to be present or responsible or helpful to anyone else! Doesn't think about the fact I have to get up at five am to go to work! Doesn't even know how to hold down a job! Spoiled brat!" While I was stewing in the waiting room, they were taking Mom's vitals and checking her in. Immediately the nurse came out and asked me to step in the tiny room that contained the blood pressure cuff, thermostat and scales. She calmly explained, "Your Mom's blood oxygen level is 74 and we like it to be 95 or above. We will be immediately admitting her to the hospital. First, an ER doctor will check her out, then we will

determine what unit she will be in. She will at least stay overnight.” I shook my head, only mildly understanding what was happening. Not fully understanding the scope of the issue, I told Mom I was going home and to call me when she knew more. At 2 or 3 a.m. she informed me that she was being admitted to the Intensive Care Unit. I secured a substitute teacher for the next day, lay awake and fretted about her condition, still angry with her for her foolishness. I was sure that this was her fault, whatever it was, and went to the hospital early the next morning. As I sat in the waiting room crying and reading the posted signs, I burst out laughing. There was a sign that said, “No se permite ninos que tienen menos que 18 anos en el ICU.” Whoever made the sign forgot the tilde in años and anos meant anuses—buttholes! The only other family in the waiting room glared at my inappropriate response to a very stressful and scary place and time as I doubled over in laughter with tears of fear rolling down my face. I called my uncle, my aunt, and my sister and Dad. After contacting the family, I talked to the doctor about mom’s condition. The doctor didn’t quite have a diagnosis yet, but mom was to be assessed by a neurologist and pulmonologist for more information.

Mom was in tiny little Marrow County Hospital in the ICU for three or four days. My sister came down and my dad did too, to offer support as the doctors tried to figure out why Mom was not improving. My sister and I had several conversations with the doctors about the amount of medications mom was taking. Tim and my brother-in-law, Chris, cleaned out Mom’s house of medications and liquor in hopes that when she got out she could get clean. The main doctor for the ICU speculated that Mom had taken too many medications and aspirated on her own vomit, causing infection in her lungs that was creating the breathing difficulties and low blood oxygen level. After no response to the treatments that the local hospital had to offer, they decided to transfer her to Rome Regional Medical Center, which had a pulmonary unit and a

team of pulmonologists. After several hours of reviewing records, taking blood work and examining evidence, it was determined that Mom suffered from ARDS, acute respiratory distress syndrome. The treatment was to put her on a ventilator that would breathe for her for an undetermined period of time, which would let her lungs heal and rest. There was a sense of urgency about everything in the situation, and the doctors shoved paperwork in my face to sign as her power of attorney. I hesitated in signing the paperwork and I asked for a moment to think about this, because my mom had put in her paperwork that she did not want any heroic measures such as ventilators or feeding tubes if she was ever sick enough to need one. The young doctor, bold and brazen and full of confidence with ego flying high, stared at me in bewilderment and said, “Don’t you understand? Your Mom will **die** if you don’t sign these papers. She might still die if you do, but she is young and relatively healthy, so I expect her to fully recover. If you don’t give us permission to do this you will be signing her death certificate. You **need** to do this **now**.” My sister, Tim, Chris and I looked at each other, and I signed the papers. How could I not? The last thing I had told my mother was that she was a selfish woman and that I was sick of her shenanigans. I felt like I had no other choice but to sign on the dotted line.

Six weeks after being admitted to the hospital, Mom was released. She had agreed to let Stacey and I drive her to a rehab in Greenville located at North Georgia Medical Center. We drove up to the building that instructed us to go to the emergency room. Mom had a walker and still had to use an oxygen tank, but she shuffled into the ER committed to get the help she was now convinced she needed. She was assessed in the ER and it was determined that since she was not suicidal she needed to attend an outpatient treatment facility. This assessment presented many challenges for Stacey, Mom and me. I did not want Mom to come to my home. As relieved as I was she was alive, I was just as angry with her for the situation and skeptical of her intention

to remain clean and sober. Lucky for Mom, her brother and his partner agreed to take her to their house for a week, after which we could reassess her living situation and attempt to get her into an inpatient drug rehabilitation facility. After a week of exhaustive searching by Stacey, our uncle and me, we could not find a place willing to admit her while she was on oxygen and recovering from her medical condition. Against my better judgment, I brought her to my house. She stayed with us for a week or two and was finally strong enough to return home. She seemed to be doing much better overall. I was administering her medications, and for the first time since Danny had been diagnosed with cancer, you could hold a cohesive conversation with her any time of the day or night. Everyone in the family was hopeful for her recovery. Mom decided she wanted to buy a house and launched a search for the perfect place. Mom got stronger and no longer required oxygen, and most importantly, Mom was sober. Things remained stable, Mom bought her house and moved in, and all was well—for a while.

### **Passage 41: Here We Go Again**

By the time the kids were a little older, 7th and 9th grade, Mom seemed evened out, Tim had a good job, and I had transferred to Sunny Grove High School from Lutherville High School and had assumed the position as the Foreign Language Department Head. I was working with an amazing teammate that I actually knew from my days at Colin, so I decided it was time to pursue my long-term schooling plan for myself. I enrolled at the University of West Georgia to pursue my degree in Instructional Technology. After that, I planned to enroll in an Ed.D. program or Ph.D program and go all the way. I loved going to school despite the challenging circumstances in which I worked through my undergraduate, and I wanted to finish and secure the highest degree possible. Perhaps a part of me also wanted to show all the people who said I would never finish my undergraduate that I could do whatever I put my mind to. I also wanted to model that



for my children. That's a much more noble reason than wanting to say, "I told you so," but honestly, I think a lesser one. It's probably also what I told myself to assuage the guilt of working full-time and being a graduate student, which in reality took a lot of time and attention away from my children and family.

I worked through the two-year program (which also included summers) and graduated with a 3.9 GPA. My undergraduate final GPA had been 2.9, but it included the 4 classes I ended up taking an F for my first semester when Daphne was born as well as two classes I had attempted to do off campus via VHS taped lectures the first six months of her birth. All in all, although it doesn't look good on paper, I'm happy with that 2.9—I scrapped my way through my undergraduate like a bullied kid in a back alley, and now I was shining. Mom was holding steady, she bought a house, had a knee replacement, and seemed okay. After the knee replacement, the falls and the cuts and the accidents started piling up. She started making visits to the ER more regularly and also to emergency clinics, but she had learned from her first experience of spiraling down the dark path of addiction not to let me get too close or suspect too much. We kept our relationship pleasant and to the point, she would tell me about the guys she hired to work on her lawn or the pest control man that were taking care of the ants in her kitchen, and I would complain about graduate school and having to pick Gavin up from wrestling meets at 12 and 1 in the morning on Friday nights. We kept our conversations easy, attempting to maintain calm waters.

I made it through my master's program, kept teaching and raising children, kept going about the business of life. I didn't walk at my undergraduate graduation because my sister graduated from the University of Tennessee the same day, so I went to witness her passage that she had struggled for in different ways, but just as hard as I had. She had failed out of UT her

second semester and had a bout with drugs and alcohol overuse. She came to terms with her mistakes and came clean with Dad about bad checks and bad decisions. Dad helped her clear up her financial messes and she went back to community college. Upon completing several classes at community college successfully, she reapplied to UT and was accepted again, and she never looked back. She had dated the same guy for several years, Chris, and they were married two weekends before Tim and I married the same hot summer. When it came time to decide about walking for my graduate degree, I decided again that it wasn't worth it. I wanted to wait because I knew I was going to go all the way. So, Tim and I went to New Orleans for Jazz Festival instead.

We had family beach vacations for a week during the summer, attended swim meets and wrestling meets, track meets, and football games. We did a lot of homework. We made family dinners and we watched the neighbor's kids and they watched ours. I decided to apply to an Ed.D. Program because it was my ultimate goal to accomplish a terminal degree. After much consideration and counseling from friends who had been through the experience, I applied to Georgia Southern and was accepted. I took students to Spain the first summer of classes at Georgia Southern. I will never forget trying to read Deborah Britzman on the flight over and thinking to myself, "What have I gotten myself into? I don't understand a word of this!" After being home from Spain for three days, I went to Statesboro for my first round of classes. Before going to the hotel I stopped at the local Burger King to grab something for lunch. There was a family of three in front of me: a wife, a child of about three or four, and a guy in camouflage and a bright orange hat. I could overhear their conversation, but the weird part was—I couldn't understand anything they were saying. Not a single word was comprehensible to my ears. I thought to myself, "maybe they're not speaking English." They got up to the counter and the girl

behind the counter took their order with ease. Still, I couldn't understand any words in the exchange. I got up to the counter and the girl asked me something. I assumed it was what I wanted to eat so I told her my order. She uttered the familiar words, "you ain't from around here is ya?" No. I'd lived in Georgia for 18 years at this point, but I guess I was destined to forever be an outsider when it came to the vernacular of standard Southern speech. Ironically, I had spent two weeks in Spain yet while I was there I not once had the experience of not understanding the conversations occurring around me. Standing in that Burger King line, I thought to myself, "we barely even speak the same language." I had secured a hotel to stay in online and was slated to stay a week. The place was a bit dated, but I just needed to sleep there, so it would work for my purposes. On day three, while sitting on the loveseat and reading a book for class, the ceiling caved in on me. One minute I was quietly sitting in my underwear focused on *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, the next there was wet drywall all over my face and hair and eyelashes, shoulders, arms and legs. I put on some pants, went down to the desk, got reassigned another room, moved in, settled back down with Ravitch (again in my underwear), and someone walked in the room. They just stuck that key card in and gained entry. Apparently, the front desk had made a mistake and assigned us both the same room. Thank goodness it was a woman, which at least for me eased the embarrassment of being caught unsuspectingly in my underwear for the second time in two hours--once by collapsing drywall and the second time by this woman who hadn't expected to find me in her room.

I worked harder than I ever had in my entire life at school. I tried my best to keep up, sacrificing the wrestling meets and swim meets, family dinners, and friends. I was experiencing an awakening while reading and writing and attending classes, an awakening about my teaching practice and my understanding of schooling, what teaching meant, and how and what I taught

said about who I was. It was the first time in my university experience where I wasn't inventing perfunctory lesson plans and unit examples or presenting information on a regular basis. We were discussing ideas that were changing the ways I thought about teaching and learning. As I became more entrenched in graduate schoolwork and less available to those standing in front of me, I started getting phone calls from Mom in the middle of the night again. Actually, at all hours of the day or night. One day she begged me to come because, "there are bunnies, Angela! There are bunnies dancing on my bed! They're really cute but I know they are evil. They are trying to kidnap me! HELP ME!" She called with elation and joy in her voice to proclaim her victory to me, "I got him! I got the little sucker!" I replied baffled, "Mom, what are you talking about?" "The rat of course! He thought he was smarter than me and I bashed his brains in with my shoe. Now the problem is there are rat brains all over the carpet." Her neighbor called to let me know she was wandering the neighborhood one afternoon and wandered into someone's home, laid down on the couch and fell asleep. The kind neighbor was not going to press charges but they did call the police. Then the DUI's started. There were phone calls proclaiming, "Ang, someone stole my car! Right out of the garage! They stole it! You have to help me find it!" After several calls to wreckers around the area we found it in an impound lot. The owners of a local gas station had found it in their parking lot running, lights on, radio playing The Eagles. They didn't know who the vehicle belonged to. I have no idea how my Mom got home from that gas station and neither did she. Then, the calls from jail started. I refused to bail mom out of jail, thankful because I thought she was safe there, but she bailed herself out. Then, she started needing money. She couldn't pay her electric bill; her water was shut off. Could she just come over and take a shower? I talked to my sister, my uncle (who I had grown very close to), and my

dad. We tried to talk to her about the medications. About the broken hand, the broken foot, the stitches in her head.

### **Passage 42: Going Down Hard**

My mom was increasingly under the influence of prescription medications. She was getting to the point of non-functioning. She was having hallucinations regularly. She was wandering around her neighborhood at all hours of the day or night. She was not paying bills. She would go missing for days at a time. I just turned a blind eye and endured, as did my husband, my children, her brother, and my sister. On Mother's Day, Tim and I had our mothers over for dinner. There was my mother-in-law, Tim's mother, who is a hard-working "good" Catholic woman who had endured her own hardships; in contrast, there was my mother, who could barely hold her head up. My Mom passed out in the middle of dinner, her face falling right into the mashed potatoes. I shoveled her up and took her home and waited for her to sober up enough to know she was going to be okay, at least for the night. My mom got 3 DUIs in 48 hours, two of them in the same day (she rammed into a cop car right after she had bailed herself out of jail her car out of impound). The police car she hit belonged to the arresting officer from the night before and Mom insisted "he had it out for her." After being arrested four times, and escaping arrest on other occasions, Mom found herself with no driver's license in a place where everything was five miles away. She also found herself with little support from me and Tim because we just couldn't anymore. We didn't know how to help her or what to do, and an addict always needs something. Mom had no friends, and she was broke from legal bills and too many emergency medical visits. Of course, the reality is that the root cause of her troubles was pursuing the pills. Mom got it in her head that she needed a roommate, so she invited her lawn guy to move into her house with his two children and wife. I tried to tell her, "Mom, this is a bad

decision. Who does this? It doesn't make any sense! Are these nice people, good people? Don't you think it's strange a family wants to move into a retiree's home? There are only three bedrooms and there will be six people living there. I don't feel good about this. I don't support this." After the lawn guy and his family moved in, Mom and I didn't talk as much. We saw each other sporadically, and I noticed she started to smell bad. Like she had wallowed in dog poop and urine; there were now three dogs living there, too. She always looked dirty but she insisted she was fine. She insisted the people were wonderful and the kids were a joy, and she said she was better than ever.

After the family lived there for three months or so, Mom ended up in the intensive care unit once again. Again, she recovered, and I don't know what was wrong with her because the wife of the family had been there at her admittance and Mom had changed paperwork to list her as the emergency contact. I was allowed to visit, but Mom did not list me as a person with whom the doctors could discuss her medical condition. Even though at this point I had limited contact with Mom, her neighbors kept calling me. One neighbor insisted to me, "the people living with her are taking advantage of her. You have to do something. You can do something." I called lawyers, asked friends, called doctors, the police department and all of them told me the same thing: "The courts will not let you do anything your Mom doesn't want. Courts are very stringent on this point, they will not take away individual freedom of choice unless the person is a threat to themselves (says they want to commit suicide) or others (threatens to kill someone)." Every time I broached the subject with Mom, her answer was the same: "I will not let you take control of my life. I will not. I know what you want to do; you are trying to take away my right to choose to live how I want. Angela, it's my life, and I'm fine."

The family who lived with Mom during this time consisted of a wife, a husband, and three children. They had been “down on their luck” and been evicted from their previous home and were left with nowhere to go. Mom allowed them to live with her under the premise that they would pay all the utilities and some rent, but it didn’t really work out that way. Instead, Mom ended up paying for everything plus some. Mom was asking me for money for groceries or gas (by this time she had lost her car, so it was gas for their vehicle), their utilities would be cut off and she would ask to come over to my house for a hot meal. I obliged for a while, but as she went deeper and deeper into the hole of poverty and drugs, she asked me more and more outrageous favors such as, “Do you want to buy food stamps? We got food from the food bank and we can sell the food stamps and have money to pay the electric bill.” Or “can you come take us to the store? Can you take the kids to school? Can you?” As she became more entangled with this family, I became less interested or more accurately, financially or emotionally less able to continue speaking with her. I have to assume that the family was also involved in drugs in some way. Perhaps I am wrong, but from the outside looking in, I knew that something was off. I had lived in relative poverty myself, and I could not understand how instead of Mom improving with having people around her, she seemed to be getting worse all the time. She seemed more incoherent, dirtier, hungrier, and more in need of money than ever before. I called the Department of Child and Family Services, as did my sister, concerned for the children living with my mother. When Mom would call me, I would ignore her calls and sometimes wouldn’t hear from her for weeks at a time, not until she needed something. I felt like Mom was being taken advantage of by the family that was living with her because before they lived with her, at least she seemed to be able to pay her bills most of the time. The family seemingly had control over her actions, her transportation, and most important to her, the ability to get her next fix.

However, I know Mom played a role in this just as grave as all those involved. She was an addict, and perhaps so were the other adults living with her. She was unwilling to seek professional help or admit that she had a problem. She was a woman who had means, although they were not unending means, but she had a fixed monthly income that was healthy enough to afford her a relatively comfortable lifestyle. Instead, she was involved in who knows what too high to be aware of what was happening. The family that lived with Mom moved in during the summer. By fall of the next year, about fourteen months later, Mom lost everything.

It seems like just when you think you are going to have a break things blow up. The Friday before my Thanksgiving break, it was an insanely busy day. The students had “food project day” at school; they had researched Spanish-speaking countries and prepared traditional recipes from the countries to share with their classmates. I believe this is the most surface way of teaching students about culture, but it is fun and they always cite it as their favorite thing we do as a class. I work to teach students regularly to present culture in deeper and more meaningful ways. For example, I often ask them to compare and contrast their culture with values of Latin culture. Culture is complicated and individual, and simply eating tacos does not in any way imbue any deep understanding of Latin culture. However, students do love to eat, so we examine food culture more deeply by learning about eating schedules of Latin countries and searching for authentic ingredients and recipes of Spanish speaking countries. It had been a joyous day, everyone essentially waiting for the clock to tick down so we could leave and not come back for ten days straight. As I was finishing the dishes from the day, exhausted and eager to walk out the door, I get a phone call from one of Mom’s neighbors. “Oh no,” I thought. My sentiment was correct. The neighbor said, “Angela! I don’t know where your Mom or the people she lives with are, but the sheriff’s office is here with a crew and they are cleaning out your Mom’s house. All



her stuff is in the front yard. The sheriff wanted me to call you because the cleaning crew found some ashes and he felt that they might be important. The ashes are laying here to be hauled away by the trash collectors. Are they important? He says you have an hour to get here if you want them or anything else.” I sat down in shock. I knew Mom was in a bad place. I had no idea she was in this much trouble.

My reaction on the forty-minute drive to Mom’s house included tears, frustration, and periods of yelling at the top of my lungs, “I HATE HER!” I pulled up, and just as the neighbor had described, all the furniture and clothes and dishes and everything my Mom had possessed was piled up in the front yard. I met the sheriff, a man with kind eyes who said, “Do you know where your mother is?” I replied that I had tried to call her several times but got no answer. He showed me to where the ashes were and said, “I don’t know what they are or if you want them, but I just felt really bad throwing them in the trash.” I thanked him and picked them up. I informed him they were probably my stepdad’s. The head of the cleaning crew came outside and I asked if I could go in just in case there was any other important family memorabilia or items I needed to salvage. He asked me, “Ma’am, how long has it been since you’ve been inside?” I stammered, “I don’t know...(I thought for a moment)...maybe a year?” He averted his eyes and said, “Ma’am, there are cockroaches dropping from the ceiling onto us as we are clearing things out. There are bugs everywhere. There were two dogs left in the house, we had to call animal control to come get them. There is urine and feces everywhere, the carpet is soaked with it. We are wearing suits and masks the conditions are so bad. I don’t know how anyone lived in there. I can’t let you go in, the place is a health hazard and you probably don’t need to see how bad the conditions are anyway.” I thanked him, gathered up the ashes and left. His parting advice was, “I wouldn’t take that into your house. It might still have bugs on it or in it. I would spray it down

real good with bug spray then clean it real well before I ever brought it in my house.” The neighbors circled around me in support, offering kind words of, “we’re so sorry this happened. Your mom is a real nice lady and we tried to help her. We didn’t want this to happen.” Fighting back tears, I offered my gratitude, climbed in my car, and drove away.

### **Passage 43: Rock Bottom**

The next few weeks consisted of intermittent phone calls peppered with insults and accusations between me and Mom. There were also discussions between the rest of the family and me about how Mom had gotten in this bad of a place. The first time after I discovered the truth about the eviction, Mom called me, high as usual. She tried to convince me not to worry, that she and the family had rented a house and she was going to continue living with them. One Saturday morning about three weeks later, she called me to share that they had been evicted from the new house they had rented, but not to worry because she had given the adults in the family \$1,500 to put a deposit on a new place. They had dropped her off at the Jetson Inn, a shady locally-owned motel in our small town. She was planning to stay there until Monday or Tuesday, and then they were all going to move into their new place, which was even better than the old one. She said they had prepaid for her to stay there and she assured me she was comfortable and happy. All throughout this I was communicating with my sister about Mom, and with the person who had really been my rock through the last several years dealing with her antics, my uncle. It might sound strange that out of all people my Mom’s brother was a rock of support for me in dealing with the disaster that was my mother, but in actuality we had been each other’s rock. He is my mother’s youngest brother and he had assumed responsibility for my grandmother O’Shunn when my grandfather O’Shunn had died suddenly. Grandpa O’Shunn fell out of the shower the day before his 80th birthday and never got up again. My grandmother O’Shunn had

since been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and her condition had proved to be difficult in many ways. Throughout my mother's decline and my grandmother's, my uncle and I had formed an alliance. We had formed an alliance of family members who stood on the front lines of our matriarch's disasters.

My uncle is a brave, self-made man. A man who came out as gay to his working-class, beer-drinking, painting, military, patriarch, racist, God-fearing, transplanted-to-the-South family at a young age, around nineteen years old. He left home to find himself, and he understands what it feels like to stand on the outside of a family looking in. He also understands that despite the hateful words family might hurl at you about your lifestyle or life choices at any given time, many of them don't show up when the things get hard, like when mothers have to be committed to "behavioral health hospitals" or funeral bills need to be paid and arrangements need to be made. My uncle always shows up to help however he can, often taking the responsibility of managing and creating a plan. He shows up with resources, intelligence, and management skills matched by none. He and I joke that we should start a business to help families in crisis since collectively we have seen a rainbow of crises. In an effort to help his sister, he began researching rehabilitation centers for Mom. He was clear headed where I was miserable and angry, and as always, he got down to the business of drafting a plan. My uncle helped my sister and me prepare for the inevitable result of the Mom disaster while we collectively waded through a fog of emotions and helplessness. My sister tried to help as much as she could from Nashville where she lived by making countless phone calls to rehabilitation centers and keeping in touch with Mom, my uncle and me. We were all overwhelmed with what was happening, but we felt the pressure of impending disaster creeping up on us.

Now back to the Jetson Inn. The timeline went like this: seven days before Thanksgiving Mom got evicted from her house; three weeks later, about seven days before Christmas, Mom called to assure me she's okay and at the Jetson Inn. The next day, six days before Christmas, Mom called to ask me to come get her. I know she can't come to my house. My uncle had found a rehab that we could afford. The first thing we had to do was to get Mom to admit she had a problem and be willing to seek and accept help so we could get her into a detoxification program. After the detoxification program, we would drive her directly to a 90-day program we had found that was run by a ministry 100 miles away in a small north Georgia town. We had coordinated with the rehabilitation center and they had advised us about the process and their program. When the time came and Mom called for help, we had to make the conditions of help clear to Mom. My sister, Chris (my brother in law), Tim, my uncle, Mom's sister, my grandmother, and anyone else who my Mom might turn to for help were consulted and we all agreed upon the following conditions:

1. She cannot live with any other family member.
2. She must seek professional help at an inpatient rehabilitation center.
3. She must sign over power of attorney to one of us.
4. She must admit to having a problem that she cannot control or handle on her own.
5. She must submit to our (my sister, my uncle, and my own) conditions of contact and respect the boundaries we must enforce for the safety and stability (physical and mental) of our families and ourselves.

After one night at the Jetson Inn, Mom called me to come get her. My uncle and his partner had moved my grandmother to a senior living home close to where I live and happened to be visiting that day. I called them immediately after hanging up with Mom. I made excuses for Mom (as all

enablers do), “She can just come here, I can let her stay here tonight.” They said, “NO. We will meet you at the Jetson Inn.” In the meantime, Mom had called my sister in hysterics and threatening to kill herself. My sister was calling me, my uncles were calling me; mayhem ensued. I arrived at the Jetson Inn and my uncles were already waiting. They gave me a pep talk before going in. My uncle took my shoulders in his hands, looked me straight in the eye, and said, “this has got to end. Your mom needs help. Take her to the emergency room. Do not let her talk you into going to your house. Under absolutely no circumstance should you stop anywhere except at the emergency room door. Do not walk into the emergency room with her. You take her. Make her go there. Make it clear she is not allowed to come to your house tonight, or anymore until she gets help. She has threatened to kill herself. Tell her to tell the emergency room doctors this. Advise her she has nowhere to go. None of us will pick her up and bring her into our homes. Her options are to seek professional medical help or to go to a homeless shelter.”

One of the hardest things I’ve ever done, beyond shaming my father, beyond getting pregnant and deciding I was going to have the baby no matter what, beyond birthing that child, beyond breaking bones, beyond admitting defeat to the world by divorcing my first husband, beyond pee balloons and Taco Bell sauce packets, beyond fighting my way through school, beyond facing my fears and insecurities in front of one hundred students every day, beyond having no heat or electricity, beyond paying with my milk, bread and eggs with WIC vouchers, beyond watching Danny die, beyond watching a twelve-year-old struggle through rape and pregnancy, beyond it all, or maybe with it all, one of the hardest things was dropping my mom off and not knowing if I would or could ever see her again, not knowing what she would decide.

**Passage 44: Hope**

Mom tried to convince me to let her come to my house to shower, but with the words of my family echoing in my ears, I stood strong and told her no. I dropped her off at the emergency room and drove away, with all the feelings of frustration and emotional exhaustion and unknowing that came along with that decision. I wish I could say that I hated her or blamed her or wanted to never see her again. This drop-off was not like the others. It was scarier because I drove away this time, and it was scarier because despite the dire circumstances of other times, I knew that this time something had to change. As much as I was able to hold onto my anger the other times, this time sorrow and fear were the only emotions present. The truth is, I loved her. I loved her and hated her at the same time. I wanted her to be okay; in fact, I needed her to be okay. I had needed her my whole life. Even though she wasn't there to bake cookies, she was my Mom. I drove away wondering, "was she going to be okay?"

Mom called me at 3 a.m. and left a message. I was sleeping better than I had in the last few years: I knew she was at least safe for the night. I received her 3 a.m. message about 7 a.m. In her message she said, "Angela, they have asked me a lot of things. I am safe for the night. They asked me if I think that I need psychological evaluation, if I think I am an addict. I told them I think I am. I told them I wanted to kill myself earlier today, right before they kicked me out of that hotel. If they hadn't have kicked me out, I'm pretty sure I would have done it. They're going to transfer me somewhere sometime tomorrow." They transferred Mom to a behavioral health institute the next day, Monday. She was admitted and I didn't hear from her for 24 hours. It was now four days before Christmas. The way Christmas works in our family is: Christmas Eve we celebrate Wigilia (pronounced Velia)-a Polish Christmas tradition that included a 13-course meal, sharing of a blessed wafer, and exchanging presents at my in-laws. My Mother-in-

Law decorates the most beautiful table and makes the most delicious traditional Polish foods. We play games, we eat, and we share the blessed wafer, a little piece at a time, and tell each person present how important they are to us, and what we wish for them in the coming year. We celebrate Christmas Day at our house. Every other year June and Dad come too, and this was their year to come. So, in three days I would have 20 family and friends at my home for Christmas dinner, and in the meantime my mom was in a mental institution. My mantra was, “it is okay. Mom is safe. We can make this work.”

I couldn't see my mom the first day she was at the behavioral health institute. I dropped off underwear, changes of clothes, and toiletries at the front desk along with a note that said, “I'm proud of you and I love you. I'll see you soon.” I saw her the next day, Wednesday, and she seemed okay. I talked to her on the phone everyday at least once, if not more. On Christmas day, my uncles met me at the institute. I arrived there first and signed in. When the receptionist gave me the visitor's sticker, she jokingly said, “make sure you don't lose that-if you do we won't let you out! HaHaHaHa....” she jeered. I thought to myself, “Awesome.” This was four days into Mom's detox, and I was led through a series of doors that locked as soon as the group of five visitors walked through, all pressing our stickers to our shirts the entire trip to make sure they had adhered. When I got to the visitors' area, it was full of people. I sat down at the only table that was free and observed the woman across from me at the next table complaining, “they won't let us smoke, they won't let us do anything. Last night some guy put his head through the window. It was crazy! He broke the window with his head! Luckily, he was the only one hurt. They took him to the emergency room but he's back here today, and he has a lot of stitches.” At the table behind me a burly three-hundred-pound man was rocking back and forth was saying to his family, “Do you see that lady over there? She's looking at me. She's listening to me! She

wants something. She is making me nervous. I don't know why she keeps looking at me. I'm so glad you're here. I love you. I'm so glad you came." (I'm not sure who the man thought was looking at him, but I think he might have been talking about me looking at him. I kept trying not to look).

My mom entered and hugged me as well as thanked me for being there. I gave her meager Christmas gifts of coloring books and markers because she had said they made her color during group therapy and that it helped make her calmer. She told me they were playing with her meds and the psychiatrist had told her she might be bipolar. She was very shaky and she told me that was a symptom of her body detoxing. She had tears in her eyes as she asked about the kids and the family and our Christmas Day plans. My uncles came in (smashing their stickers onto their shirts) and we all hugged. We sat down and they laid it on the line. They told her, "Nannie, we all want you to get better. We're so proud of you. Angela, Stacey, and we have come up with a plan for when you leave here. Can we talk about the plan? My mom looked at the three of us and said, "yes." "This is the plan," my uncle began, "you have to go to rehab. We have found a faith-based rehab in Draton that Angela has spoken with and we have spoken with. We have worked out the financials, and they are ready for you to come when you are discharged from here. You cannot come stay with any of us. Also, if you want us all to help you, you have to sign over power of attorney to Angela or to someone else in the family. We will front the money for the rehabilitation program, but someone besides you has to be in control of your finances so we know we will be paid back. We will help you however we can. We're just so proud that you are here and have taken this first step." Mom, at her best and worst at the same time, put on her charming smile and said, "I will do whatever you want, whatever Angela says, whatever. I know I need help. I know I have no place to go. I know. I'm so sorry, and I know it's Christmas Day.



Ang, who is at home? Don't you have a bunch of people coming over?" I affirmed her assumption, "Yes Mom, I do. Tim is doing everything. He's cooking, he cleaned yesterday, we're fine, don't worry." With tears in her eyes, she looked at all three of us and just said, "I'm so sorry. I'm so thankful. I'm so thankful for you. I'm so sorry. I love you. I love you so much. I love you. I'm so sorry." We were all struggling not to have an emotionally tearful outburst, because this was the moment. The moment we had been waiting for. We were a collection of humanity: pieces of a family together in a locked-down facility for mental patients and addicts on Christmas Day, feeling a glimpse of hope for one of our own. For this one member of our clan we felt in hope for the first time in a very, very long time.

My uncles and I got up to leave the facility together. I had to get home and finish preparing a meal for a group, even though my partner assured me he had it under control. My Uncles were going home to their dogs and have some peace and quiet; they had been dealing with my grandmother and the demands of her care along with the demands of Mom's drama. We all just wanted some peace, and felt like what we sought might be in our sights sooner than we had thought. As we were walking out, in a group of about 12 people, again the doors opening and closing only with keys and cards, all of us clutched our visitors badges, fearing that if we lost them it would be assumed by the staff that we were as crazy as the people we were visiting and could be trapped in this behavioral institute. We all had looks that were mixes of fear, love, and hope on our faces and in our hearts, and then we heard the call over the walkie-talkie of our escort, "Code 99! Code 99! Secure! Secure!" Trapped between two locked doors in a hallway, we all looked at our escort with questioning eyes. He reassured us, "Nothing to worry about here folks. Nothing to worry about. We'll have you out of here in a minute." About five minutes later, we were granted access to fresh air and the outside world.

As my uncles and I enjoyed a moment of tears and hugs in the parking lot, we were all hopeful. My uncle said, "She looks so much better than she did five days ago. She has color and seems like she's eaten. She is making sense when she talks. This is a major step forward. It's going to get better." I drove home in tears, wondering what I could have done differently, wondering what we all could have done differently. When I arrived home, I dried my tears, stepped out the car, and put on my "I've got this" face. I walked in, found out where we were on dinner preparations, and assisted in any way I could to get ready to feed my friends and family and celebrate with fun, games, good food, good drink, and quality time together.

### **Closing: Distracted Again!**

I told you when this started that my mother has an uncanny ability to know when I am talking about her or thinking about her. I'm trying to write about her and the phone rings. I ignore it. It rings again. Ignore. And again. DAMNIT! It's her every time and I know she won't give up. Finally I relent and answer. "Hey honey, what are you doing?" I sigh and say, "Mom, I'm trying to write." She inquires, "Are you writing your paper? Are you still in the second part?" I answer, "No Mom, I'm well into the third, in fact, I think I'm almost done." She quickly moves on, "That's great honey. So...you know I had to meet with Brother Roger today about that girl who ran on my watch last Sunday right? Well...I was so afraid that he was going to fire me on the spot. I've seen him belittle so many people in front of others; I thought he was going to kick me out. But guess what? He was really kind and I'm shocked! I still have a place to live, and although I want to move out in July I feel so much better about being here. And guess what? I was supposed to go to a Bible study today but then Clara asked me to watch the house. So it looks like I'm a substitute house Mom still, even after that girl ran with her dealer or pimp, whoever he was. I just feel so bad about that. But he could have had a gun in that truck so I

wasn't going to chase him and put myself or the girls in danger. You know how people on drugs are, and heroin was her drug of choice, so God knows what either of them was capable of. Anyway, they found her and she's back in rehab, isn't that wonderful? I'm just so thankful she is okay. I'm also thankful that Brother Roger was nice to me. He can be such a jerk; I really expected to be in big trouble. So honey, when you're done with your paper, you have to edit it and then what?" I answer, "I have to write the first and last passages. I've written the first but it needs extensive revisions. I'm going to have to study a lot to finish them. I've been reading but I feel like I'll have to do a lot more to get it right. I think they will be the hardest to write." She responded, "Well honey, you are just like your Uncle Teddy. You are best in writing. It's really just in the last 12 or so years you've been able to be verbal. You never were very verbal. Especially not with your anger or your hurt. You just carry it around inside. Maybe it was Tim that helped you figure out how to express your anger or draw boundaries. Maybe it is being a teacher for so many years. What do you think? You can write it out though! You're good with words. It will be fantastic. I can't wait to read it." I thought about what Mom was saying, and I resented her a little for assuming my husband was the reason that I was able to write and think about my feelings, or the reason that I have learned to draw boundaries. Surely all my relationships have helped develop these skills, personal, professional and my search for meanings through self-study. I quickly responded, "Okay Mom, I've got to get back to it!" We hung up, and I think she's right; it's taken me a long time to be able to draw boundaries and lines in the sand in my relationships. In fact, I still haven't mastered the practice at all. If I had I wouldn't have answered her call, but for those that I love and for what I want to do, I always do. At least I try to. If you ask them, they might say that I answer half the time. Or 90 percent of the time, but 40 percent inappropriately or not in a way they need. At any rate, we're all always a

work in progress. A messy, hard at it, always imperfect but always doing what we can work in progress. Always.

### **Postlude 3: Teaching Choices Meet a Teacher's Life**

#### **Teaching Our Children**

This last section, the largest of the memoir, contains a lot of information that focuses largely on family, but also how personal life collides with a teaching life. The beginning of this section reveals my first experiences as a teacher, one who teaches in the rural South in a program federally funded by the United States government that is designed to give children a “Head Start” in their education. The second teaching position I held was as a teacher of children in a program that also received federal funding in an urban(esque) setting in a university town. Both positions challenged me to think about race and class in the context of the school system and larger societal system. Mrs. Ruth challenged me, “don’t look at these children colorblind. That is not honest or true. Be honest and true about the fact that they are Black and they are going to have a harder road than you have ever had.” Delpit (1995) reflects, “One of the most difficult tasks we face as human beings is communicating meaning across our individual differences, a task confounded immeasurably when we attempt to communicate across social lines, racial lines, cultural lines, or lines of unequal power” (p. 66). As I attempted to assimilate into my first two teaching positions, one as a White teacher in an all African-American classroom, and one as a White teacher to an all Latino classroom, I was challenged to communicate across “social lines, racial lines, cultural lines, and lines of unequal power” (Delpit, 1995).

Like many young teachers, although I had the privilege of a university education and the uneven experience of living with uncertainty and as part of the “underclass,” my experiences of living a low-class existence did not alone guarantee my success in teaching students who had very different backgrounds from my own. As the principal at Colin Middle School, Silvanus Jenkins, pointed out, “Perhaps these students need a teacher who looks more like them.”

However, as one who was once a teacher of Native Spanish speakers, and poor Black African-American students, I must agree to disagree. I only taught for the Head Start program for a short time, but during that time I learned (with the guidance of Mrs. Ruth), that my whitewashing of the world was not the way that people of color live in the world. As I moved to Colin, I walked in thinking that I would be able to relate to students through language; only to find that my second language was formed through academic experience, and thus, again, whitewashed, whereas their language(s) were acquired naturally. At first my instinct was to “prove” them wrong about their own native tongue, until I realized that was not my place. How could I, an imposter of their language with a gringa accent, improve on the language they spoke in dreams? Instead, we worked toward negotiating a space in which our languages mutually benefited each other. Delpit advises teachers, “Not only should teachers and students who share group membership delight in their own cultural and linguistic history, but all teachers must revel in the diversity of their students and that of the world outside the classroom community” (p. 67).

However we worked toward mutual understanding in the classroom, outside forces of teaching in a stratified system came to play, particularly when teaching at Colin. Colin Middle School was considered to have a disadvantaged population. It was a Title One middle school, where the students were 76 percent African-American and 24 percent Latino, with 99 percent of the children receiving free or reduced lunch. Although the facility was in no way what Kozol (1991) writes about the facilities he visits in *Savage Inequalities*, I would be lying if I said that it wasn't challenging to work in an environment where children were getting beat into the Latino gang after they got off the bus after school, or children were getting shot in their homes, or going to jail for various crimes. Thinking about Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities* and writing about my experience at Colin Middle School reminded me of the sadness and regret I have about my

time teaching there, and about where I teach now. After the experience with Patricia, I felt that I could not handle working in that environment for my entire career. I loved the students and my colleagues, but watching kids get hurt and make decisions that hurt themselves, despite my awareness of their reasoning and circumstance, was grueling. Knowing that only 50 percent of them would graduate from high school was difficult. In Kozol's (1991) description of the students he works with, I see the students I taught at Colin. Kozol (1991) writes, "Eighth grade graduation, here as elsewhere in Chicago, is regarded as a time for celebration, much as twelfth grade graduation would be celebrated in the suburbs. There are parties, ball gowns, and tuxedos, everything that other kids would have at high school graduation" (p. 47). The students I worked with at Colin were English Language Learners, and many of them did not plan on attending school after eighth grade. Many planned on going to work with their families or returning to Mexico. Therefore, for the majority of the students I worked with, 8<sup>th</sup> grade was their graduation.

Compounding the challenges English Language Learners faced at Colin Middle School were the physical conditions in which they were expected to learn. Although there are many parts of this memoir where the "names and places have been changed to protect the guilty" (Lawson, 2015), the story of the rats was not one of these times. In actuality, the English Language Learner classrooms were located in the back of the school, the building doors were locked for security, and there actually were rats (okay, maybe they were mice, it is possible I did embellish a little), in our classrooms. The fact that our classrooms were outside, and that the students and teachers were literally locked out of the school building was a message to the English Language Learners in the school. The message said, "you are Other, you are less, and you and your teachers can and will be locked out of the school." Kozol (1991) discusses even more deplorable conditions in our nation's largest urban area schools. Kozol (1991) points out

that New York City has systems to ensure its Wall Street brokers receive any and all information necessary to perform their jobs in the most efficient way possible, whereas school systems struggle to ensure learning conditions are adequate for children. Kozol (1991) explains

Efficiency in educational provision for low-income children, as in health care and most other elements of existence, is secreted and doled out by our municipalities as if it were a scarce resource. Like kindness, cleanliness, and promptness of provision, it is not secured by gravity of need but by the cash, skin color and class status of the applicant. (p. 114)

As a teacher in the trailer in Colin Middle School, at the time I saw the injustice of separating a population that was already isolated by its language and culture; which is how my reaction to the rats in the trailer came to a head. However, it wasn't until I began my work in my doctoral studies that I began to understand more fully the systematic powers at play in the challenges towards teaching in schools like Colin Middle School. Nowhere in my undergraduate education nor in my master's program did we discuss inequality in schools and systems; to the contrary; we were going to save the children! We love the children! In my role now as a mentor teacher, I work to ask teachers and students what it means to advocate for students and for ourselves, beyond loving children or the subject we teach.

I now work in a Title One school, but I would be remiss to claim that it is diverse. However, the previous schools I worked in were not diverse either. Reading about the poverty and sadness Kozol (1991) describes, as well as how power, race, and class plays out in the public school system, was painful. Kozol (1991) states, "About injustice, most poor children in America cannot be fooled" (p. 56). This is something I find exciting about working with young people. Even though many have perceived injustices because of their position in society and lack of



power in their decisions at a young age, when it comes to issues of injustice, often their eyes are wide open. They can feel when injustices are imposed upon them. In my view, it is the school's responsibility not only to fight for equality in funding and opportunity for students, but also to recognize and acknowledge on a very personal level the injustices students face and feel, and work with them to help them develop possibilities to overcome them.

### **Teaching in Contested Space**

My first four years in the role of teacher, I taught students of color in schools whose student populations were comprised of students of color. However successful or unsuccessful I was in navigating those spaces, the transition to teaching in a predominately a rural White school brought with it some culture shock for myself and my students. As I attempted to adjust to the norms of polite southern society, I struggled to find common ground with my colleagues' viewpoints on teaching and learning as well as with the predominant norms of the space in which I was teaching. In contrast to teaching at Colin Middle School, teaching at Lutherville High School was a paradigm shift of monumental proportions. Colin is located in a university town in one of the two counties that consistently voted for liberals in the last four presidential elections. In contrast, Lutherville is located in what is known as the "red" part of Georgia, and people in this area show their Southern pride with pick-up trucks and by patronizing Confederate flag sellers.

The location of Lutherville High School is in the same county where the "last mass lynching in America" took place (Wexler, 2003). The violence of this lynching is still felt in the county today. Two of my colleagues, one who was born and raised in the area and another who married into a family that had been in the area since its establishment, have the same reaction when I ask them about the lynching. They say, "people don't like to talk about that around here.

You better stop asking questions about that.” I am lucky enough to know both of these people well and so I simply ask them the question, “What do you mean?” The one who was born and raised in the area replies, “That lynching is the strangest thing. I’ve asked my dad about it, you know he worked in law enforcement for years and was always interested in that case. We’ve talked about it a little bit. He says no one that he has tried to interview about it will say a word.” My other colleague chimed in and said, “I tried to ask my partner’s grandmother about it. I asked her if she remembered when it happened and she turned her entire body away from me and ignored the question. I repeated the question, and she just kept looking away. Later my partner told me not to ask about it, because people are really strange about that incident around here.”

Lillian Smith sheds light on why people in the South, especially people like the grandmother asked about this particular lynching, are reluctant to discuss the history of racial violence in the South even today, in the year 2017. Smith (1949/1994) explains:

These things you knew as you knew your own name. But Southern Tradition did not think it enough. One day, sometime during your childhood or adolescence, a Negro was lynched in your county or the one next to yours. A human being was burned or hanged from a tree and you knew it had happened. But no one publicly condemned it and always the murderers went free. And afterward, maybe weeks or months or years afterward, you sat casually in the drugstore with one of those murderers and drank the Coke he casually paid for. A ‘nice white girl’ could do that but she would have been run out of town or perhaps killed had she drunk a Coke with the young Negro doctor who was devoting his life in service to his people. (p. 97-98)

The generation that were children when the last mass lynching occurred would be the generation of my grandparents, which means that for my students it would be their great-grandparents’

generation. Violence such as this, no matter if you are Black or White, still lives in the community in which I teach, and those who dare to question this are often met with resistance. The people who committed the “last mass lynching in America” were never discovered, and most likely the mystery will never be solved. Wexler (2003) finishes her book about the lynching,

When I began this project, I hoped to solve the murders, hoped for prosecution of the lynchers. But now, after years of investigation, I believe we’ll never know who fired the shots in the clearing. ...I wonder if that unanswered question, that hole where the center should be, isn’t the truest representation of race in America. (p. 267)

As a woman who did not grow up in the South, and one who was and still is not privy to the codes of silence that Smith (1949/1994) describes above, teaching in the contested space of the rural South brings about yet another set of challenges unique to its place, space, and history. I identify with Ross (2013) as she describes her drive to work, “...Two versions of the Confederate flag loom high to my right with their frayed edges blowing unapologetically in the wind. These symbols of a White supremacist social order insult my humanity as I drive to work” (p. 144). Yet, I still drive to work and I still teach the children within the walls of the school building that reside in the county where the last mass lynching in America took place.

The implications this history and this place have on my teaching are insidious; they are far under the surface and unapparent and particularly difficult for those who were born and raised here to conceive exist. Many of my colleagues were born and raised in the place where they teach, which was evidenced in the pride the principal of Lutherville High School took in saluting staff members who had graduated from the same high school that now employed them. I have been asked by many, “how do you survive teaching in the rural South?” Teaching anywhere

presents its own unique set of challenges, just as my experiences at Head Start, Collins Middle School, and Lutherville High School demonstrate. What matters is what teachers do and how they ask themselves and their students to explore, poke and prod at spaces and in the experiences that we occupy together. Through study, I have found comfort and developed understanding by searching for answers to questions such as, “how can I teach in the rural South?” Reading books, writing, and studying are all acts that help me realize answers to this question.

### **Sharing the Storied Lives We Live**

One of the most difficult parts of writing the memoir portion of this project was sharing the experiences of my family. I am proud of my family and my life, even if I am not always proud of the decisions we have all individually made at given crossroads in our lives. I chose to share those stories not because I wanted to be hyper-confessional in this project, and not because I needed a form of therapy. (If anything, I will need it after recounting those personal experiences.) I chose to share not only stories of my educational experiences in the classroom, but also include experiences outside of the classroom, in an effort to demonstrate how all of us, students, teachers, administrators, humanity, live storied lives. Beech (2014) talks about the beginning of our education,

Nonetheless, the very value and belief systems, the very language that is used around us, the very stories we are held to overhear, begin our implicit education—an education that is either reinforced or contradicted later by the formal schooling that we encounter. (p. 3)

I share my stories of family as a way to develop a deeper understanding of my value and belief systems, as well as to connect to other students and teachers. I included the stories of my stepfather’s death and my mother’s addiction in an effort to recount a personal experience of loss that many people, regardless of race, class, gender or place have experienced. As I researched

deeper, it became apparent that the challenge that my mother's addiction presents my family is not isolated to my own family unit.

According to the Bosman (2017), "Public health officials have called the current opioid epidemic the worst drug crisis in American history, killing more than 33,000 people in 2015. Overdose deaths were nearly equal to the number of deaths from car crashes" (para. 3). In looking to understand the lives of students more deeply, it is important to shed light on a multitude of areas that often remain hidden. Including my mother's struggle as seen through my own eyes, her daughter, and a teacher and a parent, I work to shed light on how the crisis that afflictions such as drug abuse cause for families. In addition to drug abuse, family members who suffer with mental health conditions also deeply impact family life. It is not polite to answer to someone who inquires about your day honestly. If someone asks, "How is your day?" the expected response is, "Good" or some other similar affirmation. As our students and possibly ourselves suffer with addiction and mental health, or as we watch them suffer alongside their family members, it is paramount that educators go deeper with our students than requiring expected, intended, and polite responses. Mental health and drug addiction are two conditions that are not limited to race, class, gender, or place; in reality, they are serious issues that have little bias in who are afflicted with the crippling and devastating effects they have on families. Access to proper treatment for these very serious health issues are affected by class and race, however, many families have had to deal with the challenges these conditions present and the disruptions that they cause in individual lived lives.

There are many points of entry and commonalities we share as human beings living in the world. When we step into our classrooms each day, teachers and students bring with them the joys and the burdens of the days and years behind them as well as their hopes for their futures.

Family is an integral part of the systems and experiences that compose our lives. From the time we are born, they shape our language, our world viewpoints, and our understandings of the world in which we live, far before a student ever steps into a classroom. Many times, our students walk into our classrooms with predetermined labels such as, “special needs,” “gifted,” “remedial.” These labels increase as teachers are asked to examine data of “subsets” of our students; “African—American,” “English Language Learner,” “Special Education,” “free and reduced lunch recipient.” The truth is, when it boils down to it, these labels tell us nothing about the children they are attached to. Just as teachers’ stories and lives are intricate and complicated, and the demands on teachers’ hours, work, and quality say nothing about the individuals themselves. I am thankful to now work with a team of teachers who are close enough to share our struggles, hopes, and fears about our own personal lives and the world we live in. As a result, we have also discussed how interesting it is that certain students (that we share) are drawn to a particular one of us individually because we impact them all separately while teaching them the same subject. Ayers (2010) discusses the importance of seeing our students and ourselves:

All conscientious teachers need to ask themselves what they need in order to be successful with this kid and with this one and with that one. Surely knowledge of subject matter and the curriculum and disciplines is an important part of the answer, and, of course, knowledge about the school and its expectations. And don’t forget knowledge about yourself. But no less important is knowledge about the child, and more: knowledge about the contexts and circumstances of his or her life—family, community, culture, and on and on—knowledge of the society and world we’re initiating youngsters into. (p. 44)

The memoir portion of this project is an effort to not only gain knowledge about myself, but a larger effort to shed light on conditions of the world which not only I inhabit, but that is shared

with our students. My singular experience is one of a woman who grew up in the Midwest, moved to the South, and made a lot of mistakes and had a lot of successes. All the while I was a member of a family who was working class, middle class, upper class, Northern and Southern, male and female, gay and straight, God-fearing and God-loathing, drug-addicted and afflicted with mental health issues, and suffered loss and tragedy along with great joy, forgiveness and love along the way. In the reflection upon this singular life lived, I see in my students all the conditions and more than I have experienced, and I hope to work for and with them in order to share with them that we will all persevere. The conditions of our lives are temporary and at the same time fixed; however together we can work to push and pull to shape our lives into the visions we have for ourselves and our loved ones, as students, teachers, and citizens of this world, and cohabitate and support one another in this journey.

## CHAPTER 5: OUR LIVES ARE MANIFESTOS

In this last chapter, I make meaning of my experience and I illustrate why my life is a manifesto. Building on the works of critical theorists such as (Apple, 2004; Ayers, 2004; Delpit, 2006; Freire, 2005; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991; Kozol, 1992; and Watkins, 2001,2004), autobiographical studies (He, 2003, 2010; Miller, 2005; Pinar, 1994; Schubert & Ayers; 1990), and memoirs (Angelou, 1993; Ayers, 2001; Barrington, 2002; Karr, 2015; Lamott, 1994; Lawson, 2015; Sedaris, 2000; Walls, 2005), I demonstrate how the autobiographical recounting of my life and experiences as rich, as poor, and as a teacher relate to curriculum, imagination, the arts, autobiography, place, class, and gender. I use memoir as methodology to recount passages that occurred during three distinct phases of my life: my life as a rich girl, my life as poor trash, and my life as a teacher. I illuminate how my personal experience of moving between socioeconomic classes, geographical places, and roles of womanhood shaped who I was and how I become who I am as a teacher. Throughout the experience of writing this memoir, I have realized more deeply the impacts that class, place and gender have on the process of becoming educated.

I entitled this work *My Life is a Manifesto* because manifestos work to uncover dominant power structures and to inspire the reader to think differently about the world upon the completion of their reading (Rich, 2005). The goals of writing this dissertation in memoir format align with the goals of manifestos: to work to uncover, discover and explore dominant power structures such as race, class, place and gender that affect the life of a teacher who is from the North and the South, who has been a rich White girl, poor White trash, and is now a teacher. Five major meanings have emerged from my dissertation inquiry: (1) My life manifests that class, place, gender and race help us understand who we are and how we become who we are but



cannot define who we are in a constantly changing and contested world. (2) My life manifests how education could be catalyst for greater understanding of ourselves, the power structures that dominate our everyday lives, and our choices in the world. My life manifests how being poor, being a woman, and being privileged in the United States carries a very different set of opportunities and challenges. My life manifests how my experience of being rich, being poor, and being a teacher influences the ways I learn, teach, and work against injustice in a contested Southern place to make a better life for my students and myself. (3) My life manifests that teaching is personal and political. My life manifests the importance of taking things personally and acting creatively to shed light on the conditions of learners, teachers, and the system of education. (4) As I further dive into the contradictions of my life, I have realized that writing one's life is a manifesto. It takes courage to write, engenders pain to remember, and evokes emotion to reflect. Crafting this memoir transgresses the traditional dissertation format and creates possibilities for dissertation work to move beyond epistemological, disciplinary, and methodological boundaries to dive into life and write into contradictions. (5) My life illuminates that life curriculum is a manifesto constantly in the making. This memoir embodies a pedagogy of liberation (Shor & Friere, 1986) that illuminates the power of liberating personal narrative for disenfranchised and dehumanized individuals and demonstrates how personal experience affects the process of becoming educated as a student, a teacher, and a critically engaged member of society (Ayers, 2004b; Freire; 2005; Kincheloe, 1999).

In his speech entitled, "A Talk to Teachers" Baldwin (1963) observes, "The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated" (p. 1). In working through this project, I examined the society in which I am educated. I have realized that if educators move past looking at curriculum

as a prescription for our jobs and instead look toward the personal, we have an opportunity to improve the chances and choices in our student's lives and in our own. As educators and students, we must work every day to make our own lives our manifestos. We must do as Baldwin (1963) describes, to become conscious and examine the society in which we are educated and in which are educating children. I have scribed three points to discuss the challenges that children and teachers who inhabit public schools in the United States face. Educators, curriculum workers and students, our lives and the lives of our students are our manifestos that are enacted everyday inside and outside of the classroom. We must be inspired in our lives to work towards a curriculum of hope, justice and understanding for all people of the world (Freire, 1994).

My life manifests that class, place, gender and race help us understand who we are and how we become who we are but cannot define who we are in a constantly changing and contested world (**Meaning 1**). During the events that occurred in the first section of the memoir, Rich Girl, I had not developed a formal understanding of what it meant to be privileged, materially, emotionally, by gender or sexual orientation, by class, place, or by race. As I worked into the second part of the memoir, in which I discuss becoming pregnant out of wedlock and a welfare recipient while simultaneously being a university student, I develop a deeper understanding of what privilege means in the context of my personal experience. This particular experience was not only difficult because I felt isolated from my family and friends, it was difficult because I felt like I had become "one of those people," which was contrary to all I had been brought up and socialized to expect in my younger years. "Those people" were the problem with America. "Those people" made a series of bad decisions that created their circumstances; "those people" are solely at fault for their circumstances and the conditions in which they live because their condition is the result of the bad choices they make. "Those" were the people

politicians talked about, “those” were the people discussed in hushed tones at dinner tables overflowing with food, and “those people” are the stain on America and the world. “Those” were the people discussed when enduring teacher trainings based on books with titles such as *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne (1996). I have been through the Ruby Payne (1996) training twice since I have been a teacher; I have two copies of the same book as souvenirs. In the training, teachers are asked to examine neatly scripted checklists about how to be the best teacher to underprivileged students. Teachers also listen to lectures that make countless generalized statements about people who live in poverty. Here is one of the many examples Payne (1996) offers as insight to help teachers understand poverty, “Often the attitude in generational poverty is that society owes one a living” (p. 47). There are pages and pages of charts and lists that graphically organize the differences between people living in poverty, people living in the middle class, and people from wealthy backgrounds. Payne (1996) describes students living in poverty, “Fighting and physical violence are a part of poverty. People in poverty need to be able to defend themselves physically, or they need someone to be their protector” (p. 24). The author, Payne (1996) goes on, “Also, individuals in poverty are seldom going to call the police, for two reasons; First, the police may be looking for them...” (p. 24). Reading these descriptions of people who live in poverty were belittling and frustrating for me. The challenges of poverty cannot be reduced to neat charts for educators to analyze. As I sat through two different occasions in which this book was the focus of professional learning, I again felt the shame of being one of the “those people.” The first time I sat through the training was the first year of my teaching, and I was still living in an old house in the country, and less than a year before my daughter was on the state children’s health care plan for low income children. No one around me realized that I was one of “those” people.

bell hooks (2000) tells us, “To be poor in the United States today is to be always at risk, the object of scorn and shame” (p. 45). What is most assaulting about being ‘at risk’ is when the poor are asked to move between the worlds of the more and less affluent; the haves and the have nots every day, and are subjected to the scorn and shame of not being able to afford the life they see reflected in the media and in the conversations they hear all around them. If you watch television, see commercials, listen to the radio, all of these mediums assault the mind and encourage consumption. However, when you are poor your means and ability to consume are limited. In her memoir about her childhood experiences of living with parents who suffered with mental illness and addiction, Walls (2005) describes seeing her mother when she is an adult, “It had been months since I laid eyes on Mom, and when she looked up, I was overcome with panic that she would see me...” She goes on to say, “I could never enjoy the room without worrying about Mom and Dad huddled on a sidewalk grate somewhere. I fretted about them, but I was embarrassed by them, too...” (p. 3-4). Living poor is an existence that is largely suffered in silence and the poor are often taught and often accept that the condition of poverty is their own fault. Their poverty is of their own making. hooks (2000) reminds us, “The hidden face of poverty in the United States is the untold stories of millions of poor white people” (p. 117). When asked to think about the poor, the average member of the middle or upper class will largely employ visions of disenfranchised poor African-Americans living in the inner cities of the United States. During the 2016 presidential election, candidate Donald Trump stated during an interview discussing those that live in poverty, “We have to create incentives that they actually do much better by working. Right now, they have a disincentive. They have an incentive not to work” (para. 4). This sentiment is shared by many living in the middle and upper class in the United States and even mirrors what workshops like Ruby Payne’s (1996) *A Framework for*

*Understanding Poverty* tells teachers about students who live in poverty. I cannot recount the countless times I have heard educators express the sentiment, “I do not want to pay for other people” or, as they express pity for a student living in poverty, “well, you know, their parents must just not care or only care about themselves.”

My personal experience, however, directly contradicts the idea that poor people have no incentive or inclination to work. I worked, as hard, if not harder, when I was poor than at any other time in my life. I worked doing anything I could, waiting tables was my main job, but I was also a full-time university student and a mother, and I worked doing odd jobs such as caring for other people’s children or cleaning houses or anything in between. I learned from my time as poor White trash that poverty is not an existence of luxury. I was not sitting around waiting for a government check. Instead, I was just thankful to feed my child from the meager allowances of WIC and my earnings and weekly budget for groceries. I never felt proud or entitled; in contrast, I felt thankful for what I had and ashamed for what I did not. I was privileged to know there were other stations and other ways to live; other people do not have this luxury. Ensclosed in the title of “Poor White Trash” is the abject reality: it is to be disposable, to be inconsequential, to be ugly, to be at the mercy of the systems of our lives, to be less, to have less—to be TRASH. This shapes our dreams, our chances, and our places in this world.

Throughout the experiences of living privileged and living poor in the United States, I have worked to take the biggest picture possible. I have pursued the study of a language that is not my own; I have pursued passing through multiple spaces, places, and classes. I have pondered the limits and limitations of places, I have longed for a place where I belong while I tried to create one in which I fit. It is always a disjointed effort; I can’t quite seem to master exactly where my place is, and it is an effort that I witness my students struggling to understand

as they move from their lives in the public school and grapple with what their lives do will look like after public school. Is it natural to be rooted in a place? For many, I think it is, for others, we seem to always keep searching for that place. Even those who seem firmly rooted in a place due to family, land, or perhaps a mixture of the two seem to be always grappling with the confines of their place while simultaneously insisting on the comfort and joy their rootedness provides.

As I think on this, and about our students who we work with to help them understand who they were and how they become who they are, I think about a recent podcast I listened to, called *S Town* (Reed, 2017). The podcast is called *S Town*; the *s* stands for shit, as in *Shit Town*. It is about a man named John and his struggles with understanding himself in the context of his place. John was from a small town in Alabama, and he calls the host of the podcast to ask him to investigate a possible murder in his small town. What begins as a murder investigation changes very quickly into an investigation of the life of the original caller, John B. McLemore. John B. McLemore is a horologist and a skilled craftsman and tradesman who restores antique clocks. He lives in the home where he was raised with his mother, which was also the home of his grandparents. John B. McLemore sounds like many of the students in my classes. He is White, lives on land in the house that belonged to his grandparents, and he is from a small rural community in the South. McLemore's struggles are mirrored in my students, and he reminds me of the pride of the principal of Luthersville High School as he demonstrated how many teachers had graduated from the very high school where they now teach. Throughout the podcast, you consistently hear John B. McLemore searching for answers about what his home means to him and his identity, and you also hear him struggle with his feelings of being tied to his place. During the show the host explores the subject's relation to his place, his family, and his life's work. McLemore says to the host of the show:

When I think about the end of my own existence I take the biggest possible picture. I don't just look at myself as a forty-nine-year-old semi-homosexual atheist living in a shit town full of Baptists in buttfucksville, Alabama; I look at myself as a citizen of the world. (Reed, 2017)

Just as John B. McLemore takes the biggest picture possible, we all need to take the biggest picture possible when looking at our lives and the lives of our students. Although McLemore's story mirrors the story of many of my students; I must remember that it is not their story, because they are individuals, and their stories are singular. Throughout the memoir I share the stories of one lived life, and as I stand at the end of the dissertation, I realize that all of the memoirs contained within this writing are small yet large. Every one of us lays our head down in a place and wakes up in that place, wakes up with our geographical locations and our class and race and gender still imprinted on our physical bodies and on our psyches. All these imprints are socially constructed constraints that mold our spaces, our work, our relationships, and our possibilities. Sometimes we become ensconced in what we might perceive as limitations, sometimes we project our limitations onto our students or let these limitations dictate our possibilities for ourselves. We need to work to be aware of our limitations and also work to move beyond them in our daily lives and teaching work. As John B. McLemore said, we need to "take the biggest picture possible."

My life manifests that education could be catalyst for greater understanding of ourselves, the power structures that dominate our everyday lives, and our choices in the world (**Meaning 2**). My life manifests how being poor, being a woman, and being privileged in the United States carries a very different set of opportunities and challenges. My life manifests how my experience of being rich, being poor, and being a teacher influences the ways I learn, teach, and work

against injustice in a contested Southern place to make a better life for my students and myself. Education should not leave the student feeling lacking. Yes, there is always more to learn. Yes, there are acceptable ways to express oneself; there are acceptable ways to express ideas. Yes, there is a difference between well-informed, well-formed thought and random, tired, frustrated thoughts that are expressed from places of disquiet and misunderstanding. However, education is, or should be, the process of working through the latter in order to come to the former. Palmer writes about teachers, “When I ask teachers to name the biggest obstacle to good teaching, the answer I most often hear is, ‘my students’” (p. 40). As I expressed in the last part of the memoir entitled “Teacher,” I often hear teachers discussing failures and expressing negative attitudes towards students. It is difficult to listen to teachers discussing their prejudices towards students who live in poverty, students that are not from the same geographical location as them, students with special needs, and students of color. It is natural for teachers to feel frustrated with people; teachers interact with countless numbers of students, parents, administrators, colleagues and community members each day. However, we must remember the moment we start blaming our students; we disconnect and disengage. Ayers (2004a) reminds us of our ethical commitments in the act of teaching;

We do not exploit or humiliate them; we resist especially the institutional working that reduce or erase them, for we are on their side. We create in our classrooms an understanding of the inestimable, irreducible value of each human life, and a sense that each has the unique capacity to choose, to shape, and in concert with others to create reality (p. 164).

As we stand in front of our students every day, remember that we must stand with them. We were once in their position and they are our children; too soon they will be us, yet always we will



all be ourselves. Just like I have shared my story with you, encourage them to share theirs with you. Share your own story as well, so they know that you are human, even though you may look different, come from a different place, or be a different gender, race, class, or sexual orientation than they are. Do not let these circumstances divide you. Encourage them to unite together in their uniqueness and their sameness; search for common ground. There is always a common ground; remember, we all need to take the biggest picture possible.

Wake up every day refreshed and know that you have the potential to make a difference in the life of a young person. For many of you, that is why you decided to become a teacher. However, do not stop at this simple explanation of your act. Teaching requires kindness and understanding, awareness, thoughtfulness, and intention. It also requires you to search and stretch. If you do not search and stretch, how can you ask your students to perform this act? Search for meaning and understanding of the complex systems of our lives; stretch beyond your comfort zone and be willing to try new things and have new experiences. In the memoir, I discuss Mrs. Ruth's advice to me, "Do not look at these children colorblind." Resist the urge to sex, class, race and place your students—the world works hard enough to do that to them already. I couple that with the words of Dr. Martin Luther King (1963/1994) in his own manifesto, "Go back to Mississippi; go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina; go back to Georgia; go back to Louisiana; go back to the slums and the ghettos of the northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can, and will be changed" (p. 104). Of course, Dr. King (1963/1994) was discussing the situation of segregation and the unequal conditions in which African-Americans lived when he gave his iconic speech *I Have a Dream* in 1963. However, just as there have been unjust conditions for African-Americans throughout our history, there are still unjust conditions today. Therefore, I expand Dr. King's (1963/194) call to educators and say: Go

back to the schoolhouse. Go back and know that situations of injustice and inequality can and will be changed. Be inspired to share this belief with your students; and inspire them to believe that justice is achievable. It is easy to become disillusioned. There is the daily struggle of planning, grading, attending meetings, calling parents, waking up early, and going to bed late, fulfilling your duties as a teacher to the best of your ability and trying to fulfill the duties we all have in our home lives to the best of our ability. Some days are better than others. Keep struggling. Keep moving. Keep searching. Model for your students that you “Demand the Impossible” (Ayers, 2016) and ask no less of them, as they are capable. So are you.

Boggs (2012) discusses in her book, *The Next American Revolution*, the importance of working within community to build a better world for all. Boggs (2012) calls on us, “What we urgently need are impassioned discussions everywhere, in groups small and large, where people from all walks of life are not only talking but also listening to one another” (p. 52). The schoolhouse is a place where people come together. Even when students look different or the same or come from similar or different neighborhoods and existences, there is difference in each and every one of their stories. There is also common ground in our stories. In the memoir I painted a picture of the multiplicity of experiences ensconced in one human experience; these are places where we can start. Schools are places where we can start modeling impassioned discussion, a place to model talking and listening to one another. Go back to the schoolhouse, teachers. Go back and commit to yourselves, your students, your community and your world and work to create educational experiences that enrich and develop our understandings of who we are, what we are doing, how we are connected to each other, how we can improve our conditions and the conditions of others, and where we could possibly go from here.

The genre of manifesto is one that is widely varied: there are political manifestos, manifestos that are art, commercials, speeches and documents. In an effort to develop a better understanding of the genre of manifesto, I read one of the most famous manifestos ever written, *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1888/2005). I read through the masterpiece that explores the history of the rise of capitalism, and as a teacher and part of the working class, its assessments of the struggles of living in a capitalist society still ring true. As they discuss the occupations of the working class, they observe, “The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, and the man of science into its paid wage laborers” (p. 32). I would add to that list: the teacher. The act of stripping away the teacher’s freedom in her curricular choices and replacing her with computers, scripted curricula, and mandated tests to assure that she is performing her job devalues her skills and experience as a professional. A teacher’s job description is often reduced to disseminator of information, and the system has transformed teacher focus from students to test scores, which has resulted in the dehumanizing of the profession. Teaching is a human act, after all. It would not exist without the interactions of human beings day in and day out of school, searching for understandings about their world. Today, society often reduces the act of teaching and learning to acts of paid wage laborers. As educators, we must always keep our eyes wide open; we must always resist looking at our craft and ourselves as one of paid wage laborers. We must do this by constantly paying attention and struggling in the systems that employ us. We must work for, in, and most importantly, against them. We have the unique opportunity to resist reducing education to an act to be completed as a means to earn a wage; we must push beyond this ideal and work towards education as an act of freedom for our students and ourselves. Ayers (2004b) tells educators, “Engagement,

thoughtfulness, connectedness, valuing youngsters as three-dimensional beings with their own hopes, dreams, and capacities to build on—these are the basics in teaching toward democracy and justice and care” (p. 18). Although the powers that be might want to reduce the teaching craft to one that serves the economic interests of the elite, we must remember Friere’s (2005) wisdom, “Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (p. 78). We must work to make our own lives our manifestos that constantly strive to become aware of this world of oppression and perceive it; we must work towards revealing to students there is a possibility beyond where we now stand; we must work to resist the world of oppression and work together to all become more wholly full and aware of our human condition.

In his manifesto, *Demand the Impossible: A Radical Manifesto*, Ayers (2016) asks his readers to demand the impossible and break open and away from the idea that our conditions in this world are unchangeable. Ayers (2016) writes:

Our common task is to face one another authentically and without masks, to tell our complex and various stories candidly, to break the suffocating stranglehold of common sense. ‘What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?’ asked the poet Muriel Rukeyser. ‘The world would split open.’ This is a call to go to the root, to question and seek evidence and to find alternatives, to speak our truths and join together in the business of splitting the world wide open once more. (p. 22)

I am one woman who told the truth about my life. I did it in an effort to do what Ayers (2016) asks of teachers, “to go to the root, to question and seek evidence, and to find alternatives” (p. 22). I have search for the possibility of moving meaningfully in and beyond one’s place, one’s

class, and one's gender in order to develop a more fully informed understanding of our world and to be conscious and examine the society in which we are being educated. Go back to the schoolhouse teachers, and make a commitment to work for justice and understanding of our world.

My life manifests that teaching is personal and political (**Meaning 3**). My life manifests the importance of taking things personally and acting creatively to shed light on the conditions of learners, teachers, and the system of education. In the introduction to his book *Teaching the Personal and the Political*, Ayers (2004b) discusses teaching as an ethical enterprise. Ayers (2004b) poses that in the act of teaching educators must keep their eyes open to their students and work to understand themselves in order to be intentional in their teaching choices (p. 11). Ayers (2004b) says, "Teaching as an ethical enterprise is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity and the life chances of others, to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles" (p. 13). As we look at our students we must also look at ourselves and look towards our world with a critical eye, always asking ourselves, "What do I stand for? What limits my freedom, my full humanity? What limits the freedom of people in this world?" We must ponder these questions daily and pose them to our students. Then we must move against these limits with intentionality in our practice, always returning to these questions as our world and our circumstances change. We must command knowledge of the subject we teach; we must also command knowledge of our world and what limits our full humanity in the world. We are living in a precarious time in the history of our democracy. Recently we elected Donald J. Trump to the office of President of the United States. In response to him taking office, millions of people around the world rallied in the streets and continue to rally to voice their concerns about our new president's policies regarding class,

women, race, education, health care, immigration, and many other social concerns. Millstein (2017) shares estimates of the turnout of the women's marches around the United States and writes, "...they collectively drew between 3.3 million and 4.6 million people. That's more than the populations of Iowa—and 21 other U.S. States, according to census data" (para. 5). In addition to the Women's March, there have been and continue to be protests in response to the policies of the new administration. When the Muslim travel ban was signed, an executive order banning travel from seven predominately Muslim countries, thousands of protesters rallied in airports and marched in cities across the United States and the world (Gambino, Siddiqui, Owen, Helmore, 2017). Even Earth Day, April 22, 2017, thousands marched in the streets to support science (Fleur, 2017).

Just as personal experiences affect our views on the world and education, the current political climate in the United States is impacting the classroom in ways I have not seen in the past fifteen years of teaching. The morning after the 2016 presidential election, my father sent my sister and I the following email:

*Ang/Stacey - I'm as shocked as you are about the election. I actually texted Stacey and said I hoped Trump won FL but lost the election.*

*Don't do anything stupid like move to Canada or something—I know you wouldn't anyway.*

*Love you both and it will be Okay. Ang - watch your blood pressure!!*

My sister, who is an elementary school teacher, responded:

*There were kids crying today in the cafeteria. Especially children who are immigrants—we have a large population of Asian and Hispanic students. They are afraid. They are scared that the president will send them back to their countries and away from their*

*families and friends. There were groups of children that were asking why the bully won. "How can somebody that says mean things be president?" He says mean things. Mean people shouldn't win." Today is a sad day. I am staring at the future of our country. They are sad and afraid. So am I. Love you too.*

I responded and shared my experience with them both:

*I had a similar experience today—I walked in and 3 boys in my class were chanting "Trump, Trump, Trump, Trump..." three Latina girls in the class got up & walked out. The only Latino who is a boy, a Dominican, and who is good friends with the chanting boys had his earphones in and his head down. The chanting boys don't know that one of the girls who walked out is an undocumented immigrant—brought here when she was 2. Another girl's mom is undocumented. The third girl has an older sister that is undocumented. When the pledge of allegiance came on no one of color in the room stood up—instead they put their heads down. It was messed up and sad. These kids—the boys chanting, the girls, everyone else—they are classmates and friends. Most of them have known each other since they were 5 years old. They all wanted to talk about the election but the staff was instructed not to allow political discussions about the presidential election occur in our classrooms. Since emotions were high among students and they all needed to say something, instead of saying things out loud they wrote their reactions to the election. I wrote back to all the students, my own little way of letting them know that their teacher is on their side and that she is listening to them. We will just keep our heads up! (I am not completely ruling out a move to Canada;).*

*Love you all,*

*Angela*

The personal experiences that my sister and I share are mirrored in reports about the impact of the 2016 Presidential election on school children and teachers. Costello (2017) reports what is being observed in schools, “(67 percent) of educators reported that young people in their schools—most often immigrants, children of immigrants, Muslims, African-Americans and other students of color—had expressed concern about what might happen to them or their families after the election” (p. 8). As we continue to walk into our classrooms and teach every day, we must remember the importance of developing a deep understanding of our students’ lives and circumstances, as well as a deep understanding of the power structures at play in our lives and the lives of our students. The impacts of all work in tandem and if we do not recognize our privilege as educators, we cannot stand fully with our students. Regardless of where we stand politically, we need to be able to comfort our students and ensure them that first and foremost, we stand in solidarity with them.

To many, President Trump is a product of everything that divides this country and our world. When reviewing Trump’s comments on women, immigration, poverty, and race, and coupling these comments with the people he has surrounded himself with in the White House, it is easy to see that gender, class and place still largely divide America. Trump was recorded saying, “Just kiss. I don’t even wait, and when you’re a star they let you do it. You can do anything...Grab them by the p—y. You can do anything” (Trump as cited in Marcus, 2016). Yet, women still voted for Trump. Despite what the numbers of the women’s marches might show, large amounts of women voted for a man who thinks it is acceptable to “Grab them by the p—y.” According to Ely and Roberts (2016), “He [Trump] received the strongest support from White women without college degrees, 62 percent of whom voted for him” (para. 3). In light of Trump’s well-publicized comments about women, one might expect that women with higher



education voted for a candidate other than Trump. However, Ely and Roberts (2016) report, “The second largest contingent of women supporting Trump was White women with college degrees. Forty-five percent of them voted for him” (para. 4). These numbers are confusing because even though they show that many women voted for Trump, millions of others marched in the streets when he was inaugurated.

Any discussion of the 2016 presidential election would be incomplete without what the media often reports as Trump’s base voter: working class White Americans. However, if you dig deeper, the case is, as it always is, more complicated than it appears. Many in the United States believe that working class people are uneducated and unable to make informed decisions about their lives and the world that they live in and want for their children. Sarah Smarsh (2016) wrote an article entitled “Dangerous Idiots: How the Liberal Media Elite Failed Working-Class Americans.” In her article, she makes the case that the media reinforces the idea that the average Trump supporter is White, uneducated, and prejudiced. Smarsh (2016) discusses numbers, “Earlier this year, primary exit polls revealed that Trump voters were, in fact, more affluent than most Americans.” She continues, “In January, political scientist Matthew MacWilliams reported findings that a penchant for authoritarianism—not income, education, gender, age, or race—predicted Trump support” (para. 8). Although popular opinion and media coverage might simplify the average Trump supporter, we must work to complicate and contest the idea that one’s place, class or gender predetermines one’s political views and one’s understanding of their world. Smarsh (2016) proposes a way to challenge the media’s depiction of the White working class, “We don’t need their analysis, and we don’t need their tears. What we need is to have our stories told, preferably by someone who can walk into a factory without his own guilt fogging his glasses” (para. 16).

Reading Smarsh's (2016) work speaks to me not only in the context of the media, but also in the context of teaching and learning in the public school system today. Students need teachers who can walk into the classroom without their own guilt fogging their glasses. They need teachers who are critical, coconscious, informed, and always searching for understanding of our world beyond what is easily packaged and delivered to them during professional development and teacher education programs. They need teachers who are willing to go beyond the focus of their own specific subjects and who are willing to broach subjects and work to better understand the human condition and how to improve conditions for all. They need teachers who work to do this every day, and they need teachers who impart on them the value of learning morally and ethically in order to move towards a more just world for all. They need teachers who inspire them to critically question their world and the power structures within it that limit chances, choices, and hopes for everyone.

Being a member of the working poor in the United States limits one's chances to change to question their life, their world, and their place. When they write about poor White trash, Newitz and Wray (1997) observe, "Americans love to hate the poor" (p. 1). As I wrote this memoir, I realized more clearly the consequences and experiences of moving from materially privileged to what society would deem as the working poor, or even "poor White trash." I wrote about these deeply personal experiences in order to share that teaching lives are not limited to our classrooms, just as student lives are not limited to our classrooms. In contrast, our classrooms are a small part of the everyday world we all work through. When we walk into our classrooms as teachers and students, we bring our experiences with us and leave with our experiences, and what we do in the time we are together has the possibility to shape our understandings of our

world, our identities and place in the world, and help make sense of both the personal and the academic.

The 2016 presidential election is one example of how the outside world affects teaching lives and the student lives. Looking to our world with a critical eye helps educators be aware of the social conditions our students navigate each day. Understanding more deeply the social conditions our students navigate uncovers reasons our students are entering our classrooms scared and confused. The 2016 presidential election also provides a multitude of examples about how we live in a world that is raced, classed, placed, gendered, and sexualized. We must be willing to examine ourselves as human beings and then connect our examinations to the world we live in collectively as human beings. We must do what Baldwin (1963) asks and “begin to examine the society in which we are being educated” (pg. 1). We must question the world for ourselves and with our students; we must model questioning and critique; we must ask them to question their world and themselves in order for us all to continue in this process of education.

As I described in the introductory chapter, autobiographical research works from the inside out and asks the researcher to make connections between their own experiences and what they learn and study in order to uncover deeper meanings of the storied lives we live. Educators ask students every day to engage in material that often feels disconnected from student lives and disconnected from teaching lives. It is not enough to ask our students to listen to us and engage with us, we must also encourage in them a passion for learning for themselves. Kohn (2004) asks the question, *What does it mean to be well educated?* Kohn (2004) tells us, “Dewey reminded us that the goal of education is more education. To be well educated, then, is to have the desire as well as the means to make sure that learning never ends” (p. 10). Such is our goal with students and ourselves, to create space and inspire desire for learning to never end. In order to work

towards creating this space, we must start with the personal. We must search for answers to the question, “What motivates Maria or Trey to learn?” or “What life awaits Maria or Trey when they go home?” or “What do Maria and Trey share with me, their teacher, about their lives, their experiences, and their understanding of the world?” When we start here, with the personal and with the individual, our world and minds open instead of close. Palmer (2007) reminds us “Behind the critic’s comment is a trained incapacity to see that heart and mind work as one in our students and in ourselves. They cannot be treated separately, one by the professor, the other by the therapist” (p. 66). As much as we try to make the work of the mind separate from the work of the heart, our teaching and learning experiences are filtered through the paradox that Palmer (2007) discusses. Our education, what we hear and learn, is filtered through our experiences; we cannot separate them. Even though we might think of education as a list of facts or information to be memorized, in contrast, it should aim towards working to understand our bodies and minds in the world and how we can make our lives and the lives of others as meaningful as possible.

In autobiographical research lies the potential for uncovering how class, gender and place play roles in the lives of researchers, teachers, and students. Uncovering understandings arms teachers with the ability to move back into the classroom and work with students to ask them to begin with their own stories in an effort to develop deeper understanding of the curriculums of their lives. In her article about the autobiographical narrative approach for educational research, Hamden (2012) makes the case that autobiographical research gives voice to researchers and sheds light on stories that can inform curriculum workers about the worlds of their students. Hamden (2012) states, “I argue that [personal narrative] is a significant form of knowledge because it provides an insider account and analysis of weaved power structures that an outsider

cannot dismantle” (p. 587). She continues, “Through exploring others’ narratives, one can deconstruct myths about unfamiliar terrain and explore alternative readings” (p. 600). For our students and ourselves we must identify the power structures of our lives and society and listen to each other in an effort to dismantle structures that limit people’s ability to live with dignity in this world.

In the memoir, I worked to shed light about what it means to be a White woman teacher in the South who was raised in the North; who has been a member of the upper/middle class, working class, and low class. I was a poor White trash university student living life in between poverty and privilege. All of these layers complicate the images of Teachers and students sitting in public school classroom and University classrooms today. If you are a teacher, I encourage you to wonder about your students, “What are their circumstances, their experiences, their stories?” I encourage you to ask them these questions and engage with them as they answer your questions. Don’t seek what is simply the right or wrong answer; move beyond. Beyond is where learning becomes personal meaning. Personal meaning can then move outward and develop into deeper understanding of the why and the how, and what we are learning about and who we are learning for.

Every year, my sister attends a teacher training retreat that her school does in the summer before the beginning of each new school year. This last summer, she returned and told me that she had the most amazing experience and training she had ever had at any conference, school training session, or previous retreat. I asked, “Why was it so great?” She said, “Angela, we started the first day doing an exercise I think the organizers thought would only last for the afternoon, but it ended up lasting for the entire retreat. We each had to stand up and tell the story of our lives. At first I thought people would hold back and be sterile in the descriptions of their

lives. They did not. They got personal. There is this one woman in particular; whom I always thought was difficult to deal with. After hearing her story, I now understand why she seems difficult to deal with sometimes. She has had a hard life full of personal triumph and tragedy. I learned that we all have. Now when I go to work I don't just look at my colleagues as someone who I have to work with. I feel like I know them and they know me, and that we are all there for the purpose of working with students and working towards providing them the best education and opportunities available." My sister went on about how important, meaningful, and moving the exercise was, and how she was going to try it with her students in her classroom.

What would happen if we asked our students to share themselves with each other and if we share ourselves with them? What does it change? What potential does it have for developing greater understanding about each other and our world? I was watching a show called *Habla Ya* (2008), and one particular story by a woman named Irma struck me. She said (and this is condensed version that is partially translated),

Where does the American phrase come from 'don't take it personally?' ...What do you think, that I am a machine or a robot without thoughts and feelings? ...[Americans say] 'Oh you Latin people, you take everything so personal.' If you tell me that my accent is too thick to do a particular news story, or that I am too this or that, you are not doing this to the neighbor in front of me; you are doing it to me. If I express my emotions it is because I am a human being. What you do to a person, you do it personally, so the person is going to take it personally so please get you act together and stop saying nonsense.

(HBO)

Irma's litany about "taking it personally" reminded me of the movie *Erin Brockovich* (2000). After working hard to gather evidence in a lawsuit, the main character [Erin's] boss sets up a

meeting with an outside law firm and neglects to invite Erin. Erin shows up to the meeting and says to her boss when he advises her that it is business, not personal, “Not personal! That is my work, my sweat, and my time away from my kids! If that is not personal, I don’t know what is!” I offer these examples and comments about the personal and the idea of “not taking it personally” to remind you that all of us need to TAKE IT PERSONALLY. When we face our students and they face us, we must be personal. When we see injustice in this world, we must take it personally. When think about how we interact, present information, and what we expect from our students’ day in and out, we must take it personally—and encourage them to take it personally too.

Making it personal can start with the personal stories of our lives. These stories can be used as a springboard to connect the personal to the academic. I mentioned in the analysis of the third section that the county in Georgia where I teach was the sight of the last mass lynching in the United States (Wexler, 2003). Yet, many of my students are unaware of this as they drive by the site that this tragic historic event took place. If the curriculum asked students to learn about this incident and investigate it in conjunction with the historical events occurring around the United States at the time, perhaps history would move from the abstract list of dates and presidents to the personal. The story of this lynching impacted the life of the people who live in the same place my students now live. Perhaps the lynching impacted their parents or grandparents’ lives. Asking students to share their stories with you and with each other, and tying content to personal places and spaces are just two small examples of how we can “make it personal.” When we take something personally it becomes a part of us and we derive greater meaning from it; it uncovers what was previously masked. Taking it personally means we develop a passion for our craft that extends to a passion to search for understanding of each

other, the world we share, and how we move in it. Taking it personally means that injustice does not roll off our backs, instead, we stand up for justice. Taking it personally means that we put our sweat and our time away from our loved ones into meaningful work that means something to us and to those we work with. Take it personal, educators. Take it personal, administrators. Take it personal, students. Take it personal, lawmakers. Take it personal, parents. Take it personal, curriculum workers. Take it personal, researchers. Take it all personally. Take it personally and make it personal, and then work to make the conditions of your education and your world meaningful for yourself. Work and take a stand against injustice, against isolation of the conditions in which we live, and in favor of making the world better for all those around you. Taking things personally is much more difficult than viewing the work of a teacher as labor that is neatly scripted and controlled.

As I further dive into the contradictions of my life, I have realized that writing one's life is a manifesto (**Meaning 4**). It takes courage to write, engenders pain to remember, and evokes emotion to reflect. Crafting this memoir transgresses the traditional dissertation format and creates possibilities for dissertation work to move beyond epistemological, disciplinary, and methodological boundaries to dive into life and write into contradictions.

However, without examining where we have been, how can we know where we want to go? In order to be intentional in our life, in our choices, and in our practice, we must reflect upon the situations that we have experienced and that have brought us to the moments we are in now and the persons we are today. In the process of writing this memoir, I became more fully aware of my experience in light of the person I am today. It makes me think more intentionally about my teaching choices and teaching acts. When I look at my students, I work to find commonality with them. I work in my practice to create a space of kinship, kindness, joy, acceptance, hope,



and possibility. Writing one's life makes one examine the complexity of each individual story. Writing one's life helps place one's life experiences in the context of greater social issues. Examples of this are Lillian Smith (1949/1994), who uses her writing as a White woman raised in the south to shed light on the issue of race, Whiteness and southern femininity. Another, more modern example is Lawson (2015), who shares her stories in order to make sense for herself her struggles with mental health. Yet another is one that is commonly taught in the high school curriculum today, *Night*, by Wiesel (1972/2006), who recounts his childhood in concentration camps in the contexts of the atrocities committed by Nazi's against Jewish people during World War II. Yet another is the work of curriculum theorists such as bell hooks (1996), who recounts her personal stories and weaves them together with theoretical connections about the implications of class, race and gender. In her writing, Walls (2005) explores themes of addiction, addiction recovery, mental illness and poverty. All of these life stories are manifestos, they are aimed at uncovering and they are targeted against power structures such as neoliberalism, institutional racism, and patriarchy and poverty.

Teachers don't necessarily need to pen their memoir, however they do need to write about, reflect on, share, challenge, and consider their own stories. Karr (2015) says, "For everybody has a past, and every past spawns fierce and fiery emotions about what it means. Nobody can be autonomous in making choices today unless she grasps how she's being internally yanked around by stuff that came before" (p. xxiii). We as educators owe it to ourselves and are students to examine our stories in order to free us from stuff that came before. Write your life and reflect on it, examine it, make it a daily practice to think about your experience, your community, and your world. Let this practice inform your teaching practice and let it make you more intentional in the classroom and in your interactions with students. Ayers

(2004b) says, “Another basic challenge to teacher is to stay wide awake to the world, to the concentric circles of context in which we live and work. Teachers must know and care about aspects of our shared life—our calling is to shepherd and enable the callings of others” (p. 4). Write your life and think about what you stand for when you stand in front of students. Ask yourself the hard questions such as, “What makes people feel oppressed? What limits people’s freedoms? What has limited or continues to limit mine? What limits my students?” The answers will be different for every one, but it is important to examine them so that we can write our lives as our manifestos and enact what we stand for as we move through the world with intention.

Writing my own life as my manifesto makes me think about what I stand for inside and outside of the classroom every day. It makes me think about injustice in the world. It makes me think about how hard it is to overcome or move through obstacles and how we must not let obstacles and labels define us. It makes me think that I need to work in my teaching and learning to help students overcome their obstacles. It makes me think about how hard it is to make mistakes and own up to the consequences and take action when action you are unhappy in life. It makes me think about how hard it is to watch someone you love die, how hard it is to experience loss. It makes me think about how hard it is to experience and admit failure. It makes me think about how hard it is when someone you love is an addict. It makes me think about how hard it is when you do not feel supported by your family, or perhaps you do not have one. It makes me think about how sometimes when you do not know where you are going, life will show you the way if you are willing to take chances. It makes me think about the challenges of parenting. It makes me think about the students at Colin and how they impacted my life and my teaching. It makes me think about living in poverty and living in privilege and what that means for people and their perspectives on the world. When I walk into the classroom today, I look at the people

inside it and wonder about the circumstances of their lives. Writing my life has helped me think about how I want my life to be a manifesto that works in the world for justice, care, and hope.

As I continue to inquire into my life, it becomes increasingly clear that my life curriculum is a manifesto constantly in the making (**Meaning 5**). Life experiences are part of our curriculum; we learn more lessons outside the system of education than within it. Furthermore, we bring all the things we learn in the world with us into the classroom, we carry our life curriculums wherever we go. My life curriculum is a manifesto that inspires me to study, question, reflect, work, challenge, and be intentional in my teaching and my life. Said (1994) says

The intellectual's representations—what he or she represents and how those ideas are represented to an audience—are always tied to an ought to remain an organic part of an ongoing experience in society: of the poor, the disadvantaged, the voiceless, the unrepresented, the powerless. (p. 113)

My life curriculum is an organic part of my ongoing experience in society. As an intellectual who represents ideas to an audience, to students, I cannot forget the manifesto of my life curriculum. I want to keep writing my life as a manifesto, and reflect on what it means to be poor, to be privileged, to be a woman, to be White, to be northern, to live in the South. I want to expand what I learn from my life curriculum and share it with others, and I want them to share theirs with me. I want to read my students' manifestos. I want to listen to and learn from them but not to indoctrinate them. I want to challenge them to question what their life curriculum has taught them today and what actions they can take to change their life curriculum for tomorrow. This memoir embodies a pedagogy of liberation (Shor & Friere, 1986) that illuminates the power of liberating personal narrative for disenfranchised and dehumanized individuals and

demonstrates how personal experience affects the process of becoming educated as a student, a teacher, and a critically engaged member of society (Ayers, 2004b; Freire; 2005; Kincheloe, 1999). I sincerely hope that my memoir will speak to my daughter, my son, and other people's children as they compose their lives in a contested and unjust world.

## EPILOGUE: LETTERS TO MY DAUGHTER(S)

**May, 2017**

Dear Daughter,

I have one thing left to offer you at the end of this work. In her book, *Letter to My Daughter*, Maya Angelou (2008) writes advice and stories to her daughter in the form of letters and poems. She writes, “I gave birth to one child, a son, but I have thousands of daughters. You are Black and White, Jewish and Muslim, Asian, Spanish-speaking, Native American and Aleut. You are fat and thin and pretty and plain, and gay and straight, educated and unlettered, and I am speaking to you all” (p. 1). Angelou (2008) writes her letters about her life and her lessons, and offers her experiences and advice to her daughters. In a way it is a manifesto, for she makes proclamations such as, “You may not control the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them,” and, “Try to be a rainbow in someone’s cloud. Do not complain. Make every effort to change things you do not like. If you cannot make a change, change the way you have been thinking. You might find a new solution,” as well as, “Never whine. Whining lets a brute know that a victim is in the neighborhood” (p. 1). As I have described in the last chapter of this work, our lives can be viewed and lived as our manifestos. According to Caws (2001) a manifesto, “At its most endearing, manifesto has a madness about it. It is peculiar and angry, quirky, or downright crazed. Always opposed to something, particular or general, it has not only to be striking but to stand up straight” (p. xvix). Our lives have madness about them. They are always changing; every evolving; full of as many possibilities as there are limitations. We must work in them against injustices committed upon them and others. We must be striking and stand up straight. When we walk into the world every day and retreat every night, we must constantly act and reflect to make sense and find greater meaning in their contexts. Teachers

must work at this endeavor and include in their work with students an effort towards making our lives manifestos that stand for humanity and justice and work to uncover power structures that impede our humanity and perpetuate injustice. We must help each other discover what justice and humanity means for ourselves individually and our world collectively.

Modeling this epilogue on Angelou's (2008) work of *Letter to My Daughter*, I offer the following letters to you, my daughter(s) and son(s). The letters take the act of teaching and learning personally. They contain observations, lessons and advice about teaching, learning and living. Most of all, they encourage us to be our own manifestos to work every day in the ways we know how in a world that is contested, raced, classed, and gendered towards a world that is peaceful, meaningful, kind, loving, and accepting of all. I addressed each letter "Dear Daughter" and closed each letter "Your Profe/Your friend/Your Mom." Profe stands for professor; a title that my students honor me with daily and that is dear to my heart. I include "your friend" because I want you to know that I share my experiences in peace, love and friendship. I include "your mom" because to at least one child that I gave birth to, I am privileged to answer to this name, and although these letters are addressed to the world, they are also addressed to her. I want her to know that without her presence in my life, without her to work for, without her existence, I would not have found my path to teaching, I would not have pursued learning, and I would not be the person I am today. She truly did change my life, as have all the people and places and experiences I have shared. Although my own daughter is special to my experience, she is also a metaphor for all the daughters and sons I have been privileged enough to know, encourage, teach, and love. Without any of you I would not continue to teach and to learn, and without you I would not be the person I am today. Although the memoir section of this work discusses much about family, my hope is that it also sheds light on being a member of our human family. To my

human family, related by blood or by circumstance and everything in between, I share my experiences, I offer my stories, I work in my teaching and learning, and I work as a citizen of this world, and here are my letters to you.

Your Profe/Your friend/Your mom

~~~~~

**December, 2013**

Dear Daughter,

I have been working on my doctoral coursework for one year now. In this work, I have learned many things that have transformed my teaching. One of the biggest ways it has transformed my teaching is that it has encouraged me to share myself with my students, and to forge relationships beyond the material that I present to them every day. Today I received a letter from a student/daughter that touched me so deeply I feel moved to share it with you.

*Señora P,*

*I put a bible verse right here on the cards of my four other teachers because I knew it would get to their hearts the way I wanted it to, but I did not think that would be true with you. I do not know the best way to tell you how much you mean to me and how much you have done for me. When I got home from my last day at school, I cried my eyes out—not because I was going to miss my friends, not because I was going to miss all my teachers—but specifically because I was so upset to leave you. You have guided me so much in the past few years. I hope and pray that I become someone that you will be proud of. Your encouragement and advice will be with me always. Each Christmas I hope you see this ornament and let the painted lights remind you that the light you have shown*

*in my life continues to help me going and pursue my dreams every step every day of the rest of my life. Your influence on me will not end until the day I die.*

*You were hands down the best teacher that I have ever had. Just between us, you have been my favorite. I loved your class. You helped me better my Spanish in an unbelievable way in just half a year. I also loved being your office aide. You seemed to always be what I needed you to be whether that was a teacher, a mom, a friend, or anything in between. I felt like I could talk to you about anything, and you were real enough to relate. I felt loved in your room, and smart, and capable. You brought out the very best in me as a student. You have changed my life in such an impacting way in that you have lead me to a plan for my future. I was finally sure of what I wanted to do with myself when I realized I wanted to be just like you one day. I look up to you so much. I already miss you, so do not expect to get rid of me. I hope to see you at my graduation from the University of West Georgia in just a few short years! I could never thank you enough for simply believing in me. I love you. Merry Christmas!*

*With Love,*

*Your Student*

I share this with you not because I want to proclaim my awesomeness, but because it really demonstrates how much the work I have done studying, learning, and striving to improve my teaching practice and how my teaching life has been influenced by the experience I have had in graduate school. Often, people ask me why I teach. The textbook answer is, “I love my subject and I love to be a part of the lives of young people.” This is true, in a nutshell. However, this student hit the real reasons why I teach and brought them into the light for me. When she said she felt, “loved, smart, and capable,” my eyes welled with tears and my heart filled with joy.



Although this student says I taught her so much, I know that she is smart and capable, so much so that a monkey could probably teach her. In many ways she doesn't need a teacher, because she is curious and thoughtful and interested and always trying to make sense of her world. However, I learned from my conversations with her that her world was not the same world as that of her gifted peers. Her world involved social workers and a transient home life filled with addiction and uncertainty and resulted in responsibilities placed squarely on her shoulders that most teenagers could never imagine. No one in her family went to college, and few even graduated high school. These were not the aspirations of her family members; many days the aspirations of the adults in her home life were to feed the children in their care, and hope that they could keep the lights on and the cars running. Yet this child persevered. She navigated the difficult spaces of her life, accepting her familial fate while asking her school and her teachers some important questions: Is there something else out there? Are there other possibilities? Can I change my world and my life; can I make a path for myself? How do I forge my own path? Can school help me in this endeavor?

I want you to know, daughter, that you are loved, that you are smart, and that you are capable. I want you to know this every day when you wake up and every night when you go to sleep. I managed to make one child feel that way and will continue to work to make others feel that way. I want you to give yourself and the people around you grace. I want you to know that if you don't like something about your life you have the ability to change it in some way. I want you to know that I am here to help you and I will always be here, just as there are countless others like me in your school, your churches, and your community. Lucinda Williams reminds us with her lyrics, "You were born to be loved." You were indeed born to be loved, and I love you.

All My Love,

Your Profe/Your friend/Your mom

~~~~~

**October, 2015**

Dear Daughter,

Today I went with you to the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, Ga, merely 45 minutes away from where we live. I have been on my own twice already and thought it was a powerful and moving experience. To sit at the lunch counter, and feel the beats on the tables and on the stools, to be surrounded by Dr. King and see his speech in panorama; to be asked to listen to voices of the Others in the kiosks that explain what they are doing to fight for human rights across the globe. It is all moving. It always moves me, viscerally and profoundly, and often brings me to tears. However, I was not prepared for how it would move you. I don't know why; I should have known better, having been a first-time visitor myself in the past. I watched your faces as you listened to former politicians discussing "the state of desegregation" and making their arguments against it. The museum does an amazing job; you can turn a knob and see them over and over and over. I watched your faces as you saw footage of fire hoses and dogs being unleashed on protesters. You looked so confused. You looked like you had not learned this in your schooling, in your process of education. You looked like you were faced for the first time with the ugliness of injustice; like you had heard but never actually *saw*. You never actually *witnessed*. You need to know this world is complicated, contested, and hard; full of a history that is real and alive, a history your parents and grandparents remember. A history of oppression and hardship. In fact, the world is still full of this story.

This trip to the museum of Civil and Human Rights was particularly difficult for all my African-American students, based on my observance. I watched many of my African-American

students singing the freedom songs with tears rolling down your face; songs I don't know the lyrics to, but you do. In your community you understand. You know what this is about, but I am an outsider to these things. I work to read, learn, and understand. I have endured the hardships of poverty, but I do not know what it means to be Black in America. I know what it means to be White and poor and I know what it means to be a woman, but I do not know what it means to be Black. I am sorry for this shortcoming; I work to understand this struggle. Strangely, I saw your beautiful face crying and singing, and I know you, and I know you have even more economic privilege than I ever could imagine at your age. You are beautiful and special, but you will never know poverty. You will never know what it means to be poor; what it means to want, long, or hope for material things. You have never had to and will never clean a toilet. This is okay; this is not your fault. However, I ask you to ask yourself—where do our struggles meet? Do they ever meet? I would never minimize your experience, I am not about that life, and I am not about that paradigm. However, I must ask you: if you are always privileged, do you truly understand the struggle of your people? The answer is, of course you do. You do because you are scared when you are pulled over, you are worried when your father or brother is, you always feel inferior in this world because this world has told you that Black is less, you walk around with privilege and you wonder but inside, deep down, you know that things aren't quite the same as they are for your White friend. I want you to know, you navigate this White, privileged world like a BOSS. However, I also want you to know, I too am scared when I pulled over. I am your teacher; I am White, well-educated, secure. When I am pulled over I feel your fear. I remember the days (and even today) that I feel like I have done something wrong. They are always watching us, after us, wanting to hose down our bodies and to unleash dogs upon us because we are wrong, although we are not sure why. We are wrong for asking, questioning, pursuing, doggedly unwilling to

admit that there is equality and justice in this world. At the same time we are asking, questioning, pursuing, doggedly unwilling to admit that this world does not need to be as it is. It can change. We all have potential. We search for the humanity in each other and in ourselves. My charge to you, daughter, is to work to understand and make sense of your struggle and the struggles of others in the larger context of the systems that shape and mask our struggles. Your struggle is your own; but your struggle is that of not only those that look like you, it is the struggle of humanity. Don't let them piecemeal your humanity and break it down to haves and have nots, to those who deserve and those who do not. We all deserve. We all deserve to walk and drive and live without the fear of being questioned because of our race, our class, our gender, our sexual orientation, or anything else that might try to divide us. Don't let us be divided. Let us unite. I'm always trying to understand our struggles.

All My Love,

Your Profe/Your Friend/ Your Mom

~~~~~

**June, 2016**

Dear Daughter,

I have tried to infuse my passion for exploring and engaging in the world with my work, and not only am I lucky enough to share my love of the Spanish-speaking world with you with regards to language and culture by teaching every day, I am also lucky enough to go on trips out of the country with you. Honestly at many times this endeavor is exhausting because there are work weeks of hours that go into planning these trips. But I was lucky enough to go to Spain when I was a high school student, which literally changed my life, and I want you to have the same opportunity. Most of you are not from particularly privileged families. Most of you are the

first in your family to travel outside of the United States, much less to Europe. For many of you, this was your first time on an airplane. Yes, I have the privilege of traveling as I lead you to these unknown parts of the world, but more importantly I have the privilege of seeing your faces as you encounter a world that you never knew existed. It is an awesome and overwhelming experience, and I am thankful to be your guide and ambassador in your efforts to explore.

I went with some of you to visit Auschwitz today. What an emotionally exhausting, sad, and overwhelming experience it was. We stared at the piles of shoes. We stared at the luggage. We saw quotes bolted to the walls that reminded us, “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, 1905/1980). We marveled in sadness and awe for the capacity of tragedy humanity will inflict on human beings. We have watched documentaries and we have learned from our classes in school about the genocide that had occurred in this place. However, nothing prepared us to stand there amongst the ruin of humanity. In Berlin, we might have seen the bullet holes in the sides of buildings, but these were just reminders. We traveled from Prague to Kraków, Poland with a stop in Auschwitz. Seeing Auschwitz wrenched our guts. We all left in deep thought and amazement at the capacity for humans to be cruel and with a deeper understanding of the tragedies that occurred during WWII. We learned Jewish people were not the only ones who were exterminated; we learned that anyone who opposed the regime was targeted. This included academics, teachers, Gays, handicapped people and women the Nazis condemned as “whores.” We all had to leave the rooms at different times. We all had tears in our eyes; we all struggled through the experience. The words of our tour guide deeply affected us: “you need to see this to understand it. You need to be in this place to feel what was felt. The few survivors who left this place return to talk and educate us about what it meant to be a part of this experience. We must listen to them. We must heed their call. This must never be forgotten,

because the moment it is forgotten, it will be repeated.” After we left and were quietly settled back on our comfortable motor coach, we couldn’t help but connect what we saw from the past with the hatred still alive in our present. Reeling from the experience, many of us did not want to verbalize much. As Forrest Gump (1994) says, “Sometimes there are no words.” We tried, and I was surprised and proud that many of you made connections to genocides that had occurred in recent history, such as in Darfur. I was also surprised and proud that many of you made connections to the silencing of intellectuals, woman, and individuals that opposed Hitler’s regime to our current political situation. I have been on the road with you for days, eaten breakfast, lunch and dinner with you, and spent every waking hour with you. I never knew you were this thoughtful or reflective; you are so young. I never knew that you paid that much attention. You do pay attention, though, don’t you?

I don’t know who said this, but learning is sometimes hard. Sometimes it is an experience that is exhilarating; other times, it brings you to your knees in tears. Today brought us to our knees. However, thank you for letting me share this experience with you. It’s a giant world full of beautiful and amazing things; it is also a giant world and history full of injustice and pain. The dialectic of the two merge at times, and it is always important for us to remember that on this vacation, on this exploration of unknown places, languages, cultures, and spaces we did not conceive existed until we explored them together and witnessed, that we were learning. Learning is not always about books, though. In fact, most often it is about experience instead. Every time we explore our world together, whether in the confines of concrete walls or in out in the actual world where there are trees and music and sounds and each other, we are learning and we are growing. It is a special gift to be your teacher and witness you learn and grow, and I thank you for allowing me not only to bear witness, but to learn and grow alongside you.

Mil Besos,

Your Profe/Your friend/Your mom

~~~~~

**January, 2017**

Dear Daughter,

I want to share with you some experiences and a few reflections on the context in which this dissertation has been written. Just like I thought HOLY.OFFENSIVE.EXPLETIVES about the fact I was pregnant, 22, unmarried, employed as a waitress, and had plans to return to university, Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th president of the United States on Friday and my reaction was the same. HOLY.OFFENSIVE.EXPLETIVES. On this Saturday, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, I decided to attend the Women's March in Atlanta. I had been invited to go to Washington by some friends but declined because my whole family wanted to go, and I couldn't afford for us all to take a trip. So, I thought the next best thing was to participate in the sister March in Atlanta, Georgia.

Living in Georgia kills my soul at times. I look around, hear colleagues talking about "those Yankees" (and they don't mean the baseball team), the "blacks," the Confederate flag, and I think to myself, "What in the world?" During the summer, I drove by a guy every day selling Confederate flags on the side of the road, and people actually stopped to buy them. People honked in support. Driving by the stand on the side of the road, I felt disgusted and out of place. The Confederate flag stand was yet another reminder that I live in the South, and a reminder of a culture that I do not understand. This semester, on a panel of judges who were viewing student presentations on Health Care I had to hear a highly educated and well-respected female teacher colleague mutter under her breath multiple times, "I ain't payin' for no one else."

This same person described her master's program to me, "It was stupid. I didn't learn anything. All the stupid stuff I had to read just kept talking about social justice, social justice, and social justice. What is the purpose of that stuff? Social Justice has nothing to do with science education." Clearly, as she claimed, she didn't learn anything. These things kill my soul every day. Piece by piece, a little bit of my heart feels stomped on, smashed up, ground into bits, and it hurts. However, despite the pain and frustration, I am also inspired to fight harder and more clearly for social justice in my own teaching practice.

I know that we all must feel this about something at one time or another. Whether it's when we're teaching, or learning, or paying a bill that we can't afford, or we overhear people talking in a crowd, things chip away at us inside in little ways every day. If you're a teacher, it might be hearing colleagues say things you think are unethical; if you are a student, it might be your peers saying those things. For teachers, the stab might come in the middle of a lesson you researched and prepared and developed, just to discover it is not well received no matter how just you feel in its delivery. If you are a student, it might come in the response to a paper you write that you worked so hard on--not one that you wrote at the last minute, but the one for which you actually read the book and the book touched you deep down where you allow very few things to go. Then, when you get your paper back with red marks, disdain and a bad grade, it's clear that your teacher couldn't tell how much you were changed and how excited you were to share your thoughts. Maybe the stabbing feeling comes when you watch the news or check your social media and see one of your "friends" post something that you vehemently disagree with. Maybe it comes from your parent ignoring you or not being able to see the person you are and want to be, because they are blinded by what they want for you. No matter, it comes for all of us, many days and many ways, and we can't stop it. However, you're going to make it through. A light might



go out in order to make way for another to shine brighter and more meaningfully in its place. You just have to keep going.

On Saturday, January 21st, the day after Trump was inaugurated, I woke up to pouring rain and a hurting body. My daughter had to take the SAT. My son said, “I didn’t want to march in Washington D.C., I just wanted to go to Washington D.C.” My husband had to work. My few friends were either marching in Washington or taking their kids to soccer games. So I thought, “maybe I should just stay home in my PJs. With this rain, who’s going to go anyways?” Then I checked social media and saw, “Checking in from Edinburgh, we are with you.” “Checking in from Sydney, Australia, we are 10,000 strong and we are with you.” “London is out in full force, 100,000 people, we are with you.” “Checking in from South Africa, we are with you.” “Checking in from Berlin, we are with you.” “Checking in from Barcelona, we are with you.” I thought to myself, crap, I have to go, even if I’m alone. Not only was one of my favorite civil rights activists, Congressman John Lewis, speaking at the Atlanta march, but I had to go because what kind of a person was I if I chickened out and stayed home in my PJs? I had informed my father and uncle about my plan the night before, and they both said, “don’t get arrested!” With their warning in my ears, I got dressed. I was nervous. I was alone. I had never marched before. I left the house.

I arrived at the MARTA transit station and couldn’t believe what I saw: people, so many people. I was on the northernmost stop on the train and I had to wait in line for 30 minutes to reload my MARTA BREEZE card so I could board the train. The people in line with me had signs, were kind, spoke to each other, and were patient with each other. I got to the platform and boarded the train, which was packed full. We had seven stops to go and as we stopped at each station, people would kindly rearrange their positions to make room for more. Usually when you

ride MARTA, everyone is looking around suspiciously at each other, wondering if their neighbor is a pickpocket or seasoned criminal. In contrast, everyone was talking, laughing, and even chanting in anticipation of coming together with even more of our brothers and sisters in an effort to be heard.

When we got off in Atlanta, there were four blocks to walk to the protest site. You could barely move because there were so many people. We shuffled along, sharing umbrellas and ponchos as the monsoon poured rain down on us. We were patient with each other and obeyed traffic laws, slowly moving as a massive collective of humanity towards something we felt compelled to take part in. There were people in wheelchairs, with canes, or with strollers. They were young and old and everywhere in between. There was no turning back. We couldn't get into Liberty Plaza because it was already full, but we stood. We had no idea what was going on, we couldn't hear the speakers, but we stood. We stood for two and a half hours. We chanted. We sang. We raised signs. We turned toward the march route and waited patiently. No one pushed. No one yelled. No one made off-handed comments about the person who needed to move up or move down. Then we cleared a path for Congressman John Lewis, and we welled up behind him, and we marched.

Throughout the march we were asked, "Tell me what democracy looks like." We answered in chorus, "This is what democracy looks like!" Our ears were assaulted by hateful rhetoric about how our bodies weren't our own by counter-protesters. We turned to the source and chanted, "My body, my choice!" We thanked police officers as we walked by. They held up little paper hearts and waved back. We thanked the soldiers on the tops of buildings. We chanted, "Black lives matter, trans lives matter, gay lives matter! Women's rights are human rights!" We yelled, "No need to fear, all are welcome here!" We passed children holding signs that said,

“Save my planet” and “I was born here but don’t deport my mom” and “Future President.” I had to hold back tears several times, because I could feel the positive energy and it was so powerful. I soaked it up and felt those pieces of my heart that are stomped on daily coming back to life. Love is real. Hope is real. I am not alone. We are not alone. I marched behind (you know, a mile or so behind) the iconic Congressman John Lewis, which was a huge honor. Just like him, despite the warnings of danger from my family and friends, I showed up. I showed the freak up. By myself, in the pouring rain. I showed up to stand against something I don’t believe in and for something I do, and I learned that I wasn’t by myself. 60,000 of my fellow citizens showed up too, and 3.2 million showed up around the United States, in cities big and small, and even more showed up all around the world.

The march reminded me of the importance of women’s stories, of people’s stories. The march reminded me that in order to gain more perspective of our place in the collective story, these stories need to, deserve to, and must be heard and told. Without them, we each walk around with pain in our hearts, wondering if we are alone. We wonder if we are the only ones who see and hear injustices, if we are the only ones that suffer injustices. I wrote my stories for you so that you know that you are not alone. I am your teacher and you are my student. But you are also my teacher and I am your student. Our relationship is reciprocal, like forces of the earth, like wind in the trees. Sometimes I am the wind blowing hard against you, trying to bend you to new understandings of yourself, your world and your possibilities. Sometimes you are the wind and I am the tree, I stand steadfast and hard not wanting to move, but you blow and push and pull, and you ask me to bend, and bow in order to develop new understandings about myself, my world, and my possibilities. We work together in tandem to move each other from the places and people we are to who we want to become. I want you to know that the minute you feel yourself

breaking, push back, stand up, and keep working and moving and learning and engaging. Even if there is a monsoon outside, don't stay home. Get dressed and show up. I promise it will be worth it.

All My Love, Your Profe/Your friend/Your mom

~~~~~

### **Spring Semester, 2017**

Dear Daughter,

I know the timeline is a bit vague as far as the date, but I wanted to let you know I am thinking of you today and every day. I know that so far in your recurrence of cancer, you have had two surgeries and two infections. As if it wasn't enough that you had to undergo chemotherapy last year, now with this recurrence you have to go through it again. It's tragic to me because your cancer was originally ovarian cancer. I clutch my own midsection just thinking about it. You are so young; your ovaries should not already be assaulting you in the ways that they have. Ovaries and uteruses: they are amazing things that give life, and they are the things that torture us once a month. You have only experienced the torture. So, yesterday, I opened my Facebook feed to watch you shave your head. It was a beautiful and painful show of strength. It made me think about my own experience with witnessing someone I loved lose his life and his dignity to disease. I am currently watching my grandmother O'Shunn lose her life and dignity to a disease, lose her own mind. Disease is fucked up, and people always want to color it with pink or blue or purple and ribbons, but there is no making that shit pretty. Thank you for being the warrior of truth that you are and for showing your strength.

You said, "I know that a lot of people wonder why I want to shave my head and ask me why I don't just wait for it to fall out. And my answer is that I always shave my head before

chemo gets a chance to. I don't want cancer having so much control that I can't even decide when I lose my hair." Then I watched your hair come off and you sitting there and crying. When I first met you last year, I walked into a room where you were having a conversation with another teacher. This teacher is my dear friend; in fact, we call each other sisters. I burst in to talk about the new haircut I wanted to get. I talked about having long hair and how my hair had never been so long in my life, and I talked about how I liked my hair. I shut up for two seconds, and I looked up and I realized it was you. You were sitting there listening, and you had no hair. I thought to myself, "I am such an asshole." I was and I am. I didn't take the two seconds I needed to see you. Even if I had or hadn't seen you, I was being vain, I wasn't thinking of hair as a luxury. I want you to know, some of us wear our battle scars on the outside, and some on the inside, and others wear them in both places. You are more beautiful without hair than any human being I have ever known; since that first encounter I have had the privilege of being your teacher. I have had the privilege of witnessing your warrior spirit. I expected it to manifest itself as a student in sharing your struggle, but it did not. It manifested itself in you coming to class every day, working hard, engaging with your peers and me, and asking questions about your world and a world you long to explore. Already in your young life you have fought a great battle; I am humbled by your strength and your presence. Keep fighting against the very personal and real powers that are attacking you; that are literally trying to kill you. You stand in their face and say "I will not let you define me!" Don't. Keep standing. There is no one experience that defines us, our experiences are multiple and complex. I wish for you that you keep searching for other experiences beyond this one, this miserable one, and because I know you I know you will. You want this experience to be over, you want this struggle to end. Like all freedom fighters before you, keep fighting. You are an inspiration.

My Heart is with You Always,

Your Profe/Your friend/Your Mom

~~~~~

**February, 2017**

Dear Daughter,

This is the end of the second week Donald Trump is the president of the United States. Last Friday, on January 27th, President Trump signed an executive order that bans travel to the United States from these seven countries: Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. Now, I don't profess to understand the complicated circumstances in these countries. I know there are civilians being bombed in Syria, where millions of people are fleeing to find safety for themselves and their families. I know it is the worst human rights crisis the world has faced in decades, probably since the Holocaust. Even though I claim no expertise or deep understanding of the very difficult political situations of these countries, what I do know is that people are dying in droves, civilians like you and me. In response to the travel ban, people all over the United States have flooded airports and the streets to protest what they consider an unlawful and inhumane executive order. This executive order is just one of the many things President Trump has implemented in his first days as the President of the United States. Others include gag orders and hiring freezes of federal employees, an order that defunds federal aid programs for women's health, and an order to build a wall on the US/Mexican border and that included a directive to local law enforcement officials to "perform the functions of an immigration officer in the interior of the United States to the maximum extent permitted by law."

In response to these orders, it is clear that White nationalism is at the top of the Trump administration's agenda. White nationalism is the belief that White people and their values

should be the rule of the land. This is a White supremacist belief system. All over my Facebook wall, which I must admit I have become addicted to and spent more time on than I have on writing this week, I see my friends saying, “He’s our president. Quit whining. Give him a chance.” I am deeply upset with the fact that people do not see the bigger picture here. I am White, I am middle class, yet I cannot imagine that I live in a country that values Whiteness over racial minorities openly. I understand that this has been the systematic way of the United States since its inception as a country. However, we have made some gains in the fight for justice for everyone and I am sickened to see that many people don’t want to advance that fight. I shake myself to sleep at night because I am devastated.

Now, to the more positive. On Friday night, Daphne, Tim, and I worked on our art projects: our protest posters. Daphne proved to be especially gifted and clever in this endeavor, and Tim also made a solid poster. I, on the other hand, messed up and went vertical on one side and horizontal on the other. It required me to hold my poster sideways all day, but you do what you have to. I did my best at the time. After we attended the protest, I posted this on my Facebook wall last night:

Our family went out today to show where we stand. We stand with the tired, the poor, the politically persecuted, the religiously persecuted, and the working people of this country.

#feelsgoodtospeakout

#lendingourbodiestowhatisright

#familytimeandmoralconviction

#buildbridgesnotwalls

#atlantastandswithmuslimsandrefugees

#lovenothatmakesamericagreat

#thisiswhatdemocracylookslike

I left it up there for about an hour and then I deleted it. You might think I deleted it because I am afraid of the social repercussions. However, that is not the case. I deleted it because I realized how self-righteous it sounds. How polarizing it is. I don't want to stop having conversations with people. I don't want people to think that I believe I am morally superior to them. I don't want to shame my friends who didn't have the time to go rally and stand up for what they believe in. I want to keep the lines open to others, I want to keep working amongst people and try, try to understand them and build bridges. I want to build bridges to a kinder place for all.

These last few weeks have been difficult; actually, this last year has been difficult. Living as a "bleeding heart liberal" (or as some people on my Facebook wall would label me, "a Libtard" or "A little Whiner") is so difficult. Dr. He talks about living in the in-between, and that is what we all do, day in and day out. Many people identify with one thing and then do another. Many pay lip service to one cause and then vote for another. We don't even know this is happening. This is what studying and pursuing education has done for me: it has helped me understand the concept of in-between and demanded that I take a stand morally and politically in my teaching, in my scholarship and in my life. Ayers (2004b) says that "teaching is an ethical act" (p. 13). It is an act that is inherently political, because if I do not address injustice, I condone injustice. This has given me strength to and courage to ask questions and the confidence to stand up for what I believe is right. It has given me the courage to question my own identity, my own story, and to share my experiences with others in an effort to gain a perspective that was shrouded to me before I explored the intellectual words, worlds and work of others. Perhaps I should get off the Facebook for a while and go back to James Baldwin, Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcom X, Derrick Bell, bell hooks, and the countless other leaders and writers who have lived



through and with White nationalism aware of it always and fighting against it with some success. I have to find something to ease the aches of every day.

This is my call of action to you: don't think one thing and do another. Take the time to examine your thoughts and actions and attempt to have them mirror each other. I have found scholarship helps me do this. Others find physical exercise or meditation or religion helps them in this human endeavor. Others don't think about it much at all. Don't be that person who doesn't think about it at all. Allow yourself to think, to be curious in a world that bombards you and tries to tell you that you simply need things to be happy, when in actuality you need something entirely different. We need each other and we need understanding. We need to rally behind humanity and remember that we are human. To my sons and daughters who are of Color, of war-torn countries, of different sexual orientations, of different places, spaces and experiences, I rallied this week for you. I have been rallying for you and will continue to do so. I lend my body to this political cause, and I also lend my intellectual and teaching work to this cause as well. I will keep reading, writing and asking questions, and my call of action to you is: keep reading, keep writing, and keep asking questions too.

All of My Heart,

Your Profe/Your friend/Your mom

## REFERENCES

- Angelou, M. (1993). *I know why the caged bird sings*. New York: Random House.
- Angelou, M. (2008). *Letter to my daughter*. New York: Random House.
- Apple, M. W. (1995). *Education and power*. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, M. W. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). New York: Routledge.
- Auster, P. (2012). Talking to strangers. In Morrison, T. (Ed.). *Burn this book: Notes on literature and engagement* (p. 66-70). New York: Harper Collins.
- Ayers, W. (2001). *Fugitive days: Memoirs of an antiwar activist*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Ayers, W. (2004a). *Teaching toward freedom: Moral commitment and ethical action in the classroom* [iBook version]. Retrieved from Apple iTunes.
- Ayers, W. (2004b). *Teaching the personal and the political: Essays on hope and justice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ayers, W. (2001/2010). *To teach: The journey of a teacher*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ayers, W. (2016). *Demand the impossible!: A Radical manifesto*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Baldwin, J. (1963). *A talk to teachers*. Retrieved from <http://richgibson.com/talktoteachers.htm>.
- Barone, T. & Eisner, E. (2012). *Arts based research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Barrington, J. (2002). *Writing the memoir*. Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press.
- Bateson, M. C. (1989). *Composing a life*. New York: Grove.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Beech, J. (2014). The pedagogic function of work(ing-class) stories: An exploration of culture in the deep south. In Reynolds, W. (Ed.) *Critical studies of Southern place: A Reader*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Boggs, G. L. (2012). *The Next American revolution: Sustainable activism for the twenty-first century*. Berkley: CA: University of California Press.
- Bosman, J. (2017, January 6). Inside a killer drug epidemic: A look at America's opioid crisis. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/us/opioid-crisis-epidemic.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/us/opioid-crisis-epidemic.html?_r=0).
- Bridges, T. (2017). There's an intriguing sociological reason so many Americans are ignoring facts lately. Business Insider. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/sociology-alternative-facts-2017-2>.
- Britzman, D.P. (2011). *Freud and education* [Kindle Version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
- Caws, M.A. (2001). *Manifesto: A century of isms*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Casemore, B. (2008). *The Autobiographical demand of place: Curriculum inquiry in the American south*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Chapman, D. E. (2010). *Examining social theory: Crossing borders/reflecting back*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Childers, S. M. (2014). Promiscuous analysis in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(6), 819-826.
- Clercq, E.D. (2013). *The seduction of the female body: Women's rights in need of new body politics*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clough, P. (2010). *Narratives and fictions in educational research*. New York: Open University Press.
- Coates, T. N. (2015). *Between the world and me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Costello, M. B. (2017). *The Trump effect: The Impact of the presidential campaign on our nations schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/>

SPLC%20The%20Trump%20Effect. pdf

- Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crowder, T., Forrester, C. R., & Morgan, D. (2016). *The liberal redneck manifesto: Draggin' dixie outta the dark*. New York: Atria Books.
- Dalton, M. (2015, February 25). *Georgia's fight over ap us history exam continues*. Retrieved from <http://wabe.org/post/georgias-fight-over-ap-us-history-exam-continues>.
- Dalton, M. (2015, March 12). *Georgia senate passes resolution challenging AP U.S. history exam*. Retrieved from <http://wabe.org/post/georgia-senate-passes-resolution-challenging-ap-ushistory-exam>.
- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- DeVito, D., Shamberg, M. & Sher, S. (Producers) & Soderbergh, S. (Director). (2000). *Erin Brockovitch* [Motion Picture]. United States: Universal Studios.
- Dimitriadis, G. & McCarthy, C. (2001). *Reading & teaching the postcolonial: From Baldwin to Basquiat and beyond*. New York: Teachers College.
- Dunbar, R. A. (1997). *Bloody footprints: Reflections on growing up poor*. In Newitz, A. & Wray, M. (Eds.) *White Trash: Race and class in America*. New York: Routledge.
- Edgerton, S. H. (1991). *Particularities of 'otherness': Autobiography, Maya Angelou, and me*. In J. L. Kincheloe & W. F. Pinar (Eds.). *Curriculum as social psychoanalysis: The significance of place* (p. 77-99). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.

- Ely, R.J. & Roberts, L.M. (2016, November 16). Why did so many white women vote for Donald Trump? *Fortune*. Retrieved from <http://fortune.com/2016/11/17/donald-trump-women-voters-election/>
- Falls, S. (2010). American dreams: Class in the united states. In D. E. Chapman (Ed.), *Examining social theory: Crossing borders/reflecting back* (p. 19-35). New York: Peter Lang.
- Finerman, W., Starkey, S., Tisch, S. (Producers) & Zemeckis, R. (Director). (1994). *Forrest Gump* [Motion Picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.
- Freire, P. (1970/2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Continuum.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*. [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
- Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P., Freire, A. M. & Oliveira, W. (2014). *Pedagogy of solidarity*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Frisch, (2011). *An answer from the silence*. Calcutta, India: Seagull Books.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gaga, L. [LadyGagaVEVO]. (2001, February 11). Born this way. [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV1FrqwZyKw>.
- Gambino, L. Helmore, E., Owen, P. & Siddiqui, S. (2017, January 29). Thousands protest against Trump travel ban in cities and airports nationwide. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/29/protest-trump-travel-ban-muslims-airports>

- Georgia Department of Education (2015). Georgia's 2015 College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) Data Calculation Guide for Principals and District Users. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/FjgNBE>
- Godfrey, A. (2015). When I think about myself: Identity building processes in Maya Angelou's autobiographical sequel. In K. W. Shands, G. G. Mikrut, D. R. Pattanaik, & K. Ferreira-Meyers (Eds.), *Writing the self: Essays on autobiography and autofiction*. Sweden: Elanders. Retrieved from <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:856577/FULLTEXT02.pdf>
- Gottesman, I. (2012). From Gouldner to Gramsci: The Making of Michael Apple's ideology and curriculum. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 42(5), p. 571-96.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Grossman, D. (2009). Writing in the dark. In T. Morrison (Ed.), *Burn this book* (p. 78-83). New York: HarperCollins.
- Grumet, M. (1988). *Bitter milk: Women and teaching*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Hamdan, A. (2012). Autoethnography as a genre of qualitative research: A journey inside out. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(5), p. 585-606.
- Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Haynes, A. (2008). A quiet awakening: Spinning yarns from granny's table in the new rural South. In M. F. He & J. Phillioin (Eds.), *Personal~passionate~participatory inquiry into social justice in education* (pp. 127-143). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

- HBO (2008, October 8). *Habla ya*. [Video File]. Retrieved from  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPZfTBYrzAc>
- He, M. F. (2003). *A river forever flowing: Cross-cultural lives and identities in the multicultural landscape*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- He, M.F., Phillion, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Personal~passionate~participatory inquiry into social justice in education*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- He, M.F., Haynes, A., Janis, S., Ward, C., Pantin, M. M., Mikell, C. (2013). Teaching courageously: In-between contested race, gender, class and power in the U.S. South. In Reynolds, W.M. (Ed.), *A curriculum of place: Understandings emerging through the Southern mist* (pp. 109-141). New York: Peter Lang.
- Heilbrum, C. G. (2008). *Writing a woman's life*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Henwood, D. (1997). Trash-o-nomics. In Newitz, A. & Wray, M. (Eds.), *White trash* (pp. 177-191). New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1996). *Bone black: Memoires of girlhood*. New York: Henry Holt
- hooks, b. (2000). *Where we stand: Class matters*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2009). *Belonging: A culture of place*. New York: Routledge.
- Hoy, D. C. & McCarthy, T. (1994). *Critical theory*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Hurst, A. L. (2012). *College and the working class: What it takes to make it*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Huxley, A. (1954). *The doors of perception*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

- Jaeger, M. M. (2010). *Does cultural capital really affect academic achievement?* [PDF document]. Retrieved from [http://cser.dk/fileadmin/www.cser.dk/wps\\_001.pdf](http://cser.dk/fileadmin/www.cser.dk/wps_001.pdf)
- Kaganskiy, J. (2007, September 1). The real Frida Kahlo. *Smithsonian*, Retrieved from <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/kahlo.html?c=y&page=2>
- Karr, M. (2015). *The art of memoir*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Kendall, F. E. (2002). *Understanding white privilege*. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/zchezp>.
- Kincheloe, J.L., & Pinar, W.F. (1991). *Curriculum as social psychoanalysis: The significance of place*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (1999). *How do we tell the workers?: The socioeconomic foundations of work and vocational education*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004). *Critical pedagogy primer*. New York: Peter Lang.
- King, M. L. (1963/1992). *I have a dream: Writings and speeches that changed the world*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
- Kliebard, H. M. (2004). *The struggle for the American curriculum: 1893-1958 (3<sup>rd</sup>.Ed.)*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Kohn, A. (2004). *What does it mean to be well educated?: And more essays on standards, grading, and other follies*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Kozol, J. (1992). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Crown.
- Lappe, F. M. (1971/1991). *Diet for a small planet*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Lake, R. (2013). *A curriculum of imagination in an era of standardization: An imaginative dialogue with Maxine Greene and Paulo Freire*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.



- Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Lawson, J. (2015). *Furiously happy* [iBook version]. Retrieved from Apple iTunes.
- Lawson, J. (2012). *Let's pretend this never happened: A Mostly true memoir*. New York: Penguin.
- Ledoux, D. (2006). *Turning memories into memoirs: A handbook for writing lifestories*. Lisbon Falls, ME: Soleil Press.
- Loewen, J. (2007). *Lies my teacher told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: The New Press.
- Malott, C., & Pena, M. (2004). *Punk rockers' revolution: A pedagogy of race, class, and gender*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Manifesto [definition]. (n.d.) *Merriam-Webster Online*. In Merriam-Webster. Retrieved March 26, 2017, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifesto>.
- Marcus, R. (2016, October 7). Donald Trump's remarkably gross comments about women. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [partisan/wp/2016/10/07/donald-trumps-remarkably-gross-comments-about-women/?utm\\_term=.67070caf16ff](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2016/10/07/donald-trumps-remarkably-gross-comments-about-women/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-trump%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-trump%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.67070caf16ff)
- Marx, K. (1848/2015). *The Communist Manifesto*. [iBook version]. Retrieved from Apple iTunes.
- Mellencamp, J.C. (1985). *Small Town*. On Scarecrow [Vinyl]. Belmont, IN: Riva Records.
- Millstein, S. (2017, January 23). Women's march turnout estimates from around the world are mind-boggling. *Bustle*. Retrieved from <https://www.bustle.com/p/womens-march-turnout-estimates-from-around-the-world-are-mind-boggling-32256>

- Miller, J. L. (2005). *Sounds of silence breaking: Women, autobiography, curriculum*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Miller, J. L. (2000). What's left in the field...a curriculum memoir. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 32(2), 253-266.
- Montgomery, L.M. (1992). *Anne of green gables*. New York: Bantam Skylark.
- Morris, M. (2008) *Teaching through the ill body: A spiritual and aesthetic approach to pedagogy and illness*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Morris, M. (2009). *On not being able to play: Scholars, musicians and the crisis of psyche*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Morrison, T. (2012). *Burn this book: Notes on literature and engagement*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Newitz, A. & Wray, M. (1997). *White Trash: Race and class in America*. New York: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, M. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- O'Dell, S. (1960/1990). *Island of the blue dolphins*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Palmer, P. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Payne, R. K. (1996). *A Framework for understanding poverty* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Highlands, TX: aha! Process.
- Passage [Def. 2]. (n.d.) *Merriam-Webster Online*. In Merriam-Webster. Retrieved March 26, 2017, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/passage>.
- Pinar, W. F., & Grumet, M. (1976/2014). *Toward a poor curriculum*. TRoger, NY: Educator's International Press.

- Pinar, W. F. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). New York: Routledge.
- Pinar, W. F., Reynolds, W. M., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. M. (2002). *Understanding curriculum: An introduction to the study of historical and contemporary curriculum discourses*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Pinar, W. F. (1994). *Autobiography, politics and sexuality: essays in curriculum theory* (vol. 2). New York: Peter Lang.
- Pinar, W. F. (1991). Curriculum as social psychoanalysis: On the significance of place. In J. L. Kincheloe & W. F. Pinar. (Eds.). *Curriculum as social psychoanalysis: The significance of place*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press
- Politics and Elections Portal: Donald Trump on the issues. (2017). Retrieved from <http://2016.presidential-candidates.org/Trump/?on=poverty>
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. [Google play version]. Retrieved from Google Play.
- Rawls, W. (1961/1996). *Where the red fern grows*. New York, New York: Delacourt Press.
- Reed, B. (2017, March 28). Chapter VII. *S Town Podcast*. Podcast retrieved from iTunes.
- Rich, A. & Hart, A. (2005). *Manifesto: Three classic essays on how to change the world*. New York: Ocean Press.
- Ross, S. N. (2013). The politics of politeness: Theorizing race, gender, and education in white southern space. In Reynolds, W.M. (Ed). *A curriculum of place: understandings emerging through the southern mist*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Said, E. W. (1999). *Out of place: a memoir*. New York: Random House.
- Said, E. (1994). *Representations of the intellectual*. New York: Vintage Books.

- Saltman, K. (2012). The rise of venture philanthropy and the ongoing neoliberal assault on public education: The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. In Watkins, W. H. (Ed). *The assault on public education: Confronting the politics of the cooperate classroom* (p. 55-78). New York: Teacher's College Press
- Salvio, P. (2007). *Anne Sexton: Teacher of weird abundance*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press
- Santayana, G. (1905/1980). *Reason and common sense: The Life of reason*. Retrieved from [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15000/15000h/vol1.html#CHAPTER\\_I\\_THE\\_BIRTH\\_OF\\_REASON](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15000/15000h/vol1.html#CHAPTER_I_THE_BIRTH_OF_REASON)
- Schubert, W. H., & Ayers, W. C. (1992/1999). *Teacher lore: Learning from our own experiences*. NY: Educators International Press. New York: Longman.
- Sedaris, D. (2000). *Me talk pretty one day*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Shor, I. & Freire, P. (1986). *A Pedagogy for liberation: Dialogues on transforming education*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Sirotnik, K. (1991). Critical inquiry: A Paradigm for praxis. In E. Short (Ed.), *Forms of curriculum inquiry* (pp. 101-119). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Smarsh, S. (2016, October 13). Dangerous idiots: How the liberal media elite failed working-class Americans. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/oct/13/liberal-media-bias-working-class-americans>.
- Smith, L. (1949/1994). *Killers of the dream*. New York: Norton.
- Snaza, N. & Weaver, J.A. (2015). *Posthumanism and educational research*. New York: Routledge.

St. Fleur, N. (2017, April 22). Scientists, feeling under siege, march against trump policies. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/22/science/march-for-science.html>

Sumara, D. (1996). *Private readings in public: Schooling in the literary imagination*. New York: Peter Lang.

Takaki, R. (1993). *A different mirror: A history of multicultural America*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.

Updike, J. (2012). Why write?. In Morrison, T. (Ed.). *Burn this book: Notes on literature and engagement*. New York: Harper Collins.

Walls, J. (2005). *The glass castle*. New York: Scribner.

Watkins, W. H. (2012). *The assault on public education: Confronting the politics of corporate school reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Watkins, W. H. (2001). *The white architects of black education: Ideology and power in America, 1865-1954*. New York: Teacher's College Press.

Wexler, L. (2003). *Fire in canebreak: The last mass lynching in America*. New York: Scribner.

Wiesel, Elie (1972/2006). *Night*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Williams, L. (2011). Born to be loved. On Blessed [Compact Disk]. Nashville, TN: Lost Highway Records.

Whitlock, R. U. (2007). *This corner of Canaan: Curriculum studies of place & the reconstruction of the South*. New York: Peter Lang.

Zinn, H. (2003). *A People's history of the United States: 1492-present*. New York: Harper Collins.

Zweig, M. (2000). *The working class majority: America's best kept secret*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.