Not a Flower to Be Smelled:
And Other Badly Translated Portuguese Adages for Budding Feminists

by

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Dedication

For my family.

For a younger version of myself.

And for all the flowers that are not to be smelled.

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The best part of acknowledgements is that there is no music to play you out like in the Oscars so… get comfortable.

A whole bunch of thank yous to:

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If I forgot to mention someone, I am really sorry. They were playing me out.

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Abstract

Not a Flower to Be Smelled: And Other Badly Translated Portuguese Adages for Budding Feminists is a hybrid dissertation situated at the intersection of feminist theory, stand-up performance, and memoir. Placing my personal experiences at the center of this project enables me to examine feminist comedic life writing from the perspectives of both practitioner and critic. Each chapter explores and re-writes a moment or period in my life in which I felt I lacked authority or ownership over my narrative. The chapters engage with issues ranging from growing up Catholic and its influence on my conceptions of womanhood and morality, to my struggles with eating disorders and alcoholism. Focusing on themes of wanting, and playing with the form of a twelve-step recovery program, the dissertation draws on the genres of comedy and memoir in exploring my process of learning to live with emotional excess and learning to feed my own wants rather than outsourcing them. By helping me to become self-sufficient while deepening my understanding of my connections with other women, comedic life writing has played a central role in my feminist practice.

In illuminating the process of writing a comedic memoir, *Not a Flower to Be Smelled* borrows from various genres and modalities, including stand-up comedy, music, recovery programs, and memoir. Several chapters are purposefully self-referential about the process of comedic life writing. The goal of this self-referentiality—meta moments when I step out of the framework of the narrative or chronological memoir structure—is to make transparent the process of writing about the self, to ask: What happens to the self during the endeavor of writing down a cohesive and meaningful account of a life? In revising and remembering personal

history, I began to rework narrative structures and disrupting linear chronologies. Thinking about critical moments not merely as chronological sequence but as juxtaposition, I was able to hold multiple temporalities in my mind, allowing me to pick out patterns across them and understand how I have (or haven't) taken up narrative and physical space as a woman. Writing comedic memoir also brought insight as to the reflexivity of humor, and what it means for humor to ebb and flow, to be added as a reflexive lens rather than being linked to a specific, affectively heightened moment. These are insights not only about the process of writing comedy and memoir but also the process of self-making and self-narration in our daily lives. As such, this project contributes to the fields of life writing and comedic studies in addition to the fields of addiction studies, feminist theory, and affect theory.

Not a Flower to Be Smelled is squarely centered in feminist studies both because of its content—touching on issues of female subjectivity, body image, female agency and desire—and its relational nature. It provides insights about Portuguese womanhood—how I came to learn about how a woman should behave, her place in the world—and it is an attempt to create a conversation with the reader, thus establishing dialogue, storytelling, and the sharing of life experience as feminist practice. By theorizing about ways in which gender, race, nationality, and class have shaped my subject position, my experiences, and my efforts to navigate those experiences, this project proposes self-knowledge, self-narration, and humor as tools for personal, feminist, and academic inquiry.

Chapter 1: Wanted: An Introduction

Soundtrack:
Jessie Reyez, "Sola"
Taylor Swift featuring Phoebe Bridgers, "Nothing New"
5 Seconds of Summer, "Me Myself & I"
Morgan Wade, "Last Cigarette"
Hunter Hayes, "Wanted"

Welcome to my dissertation! If you find yourself here then you are either contractually obligated to read it (a special welcome to my dissertation committee) or it's finally been two years and I'm too lazy to embargo this thing again, meaning the University has finally gone ahead and published it in their dissertation bank. Either way, regardless of how you got here, welcome!

Not a Flower To Be Smelled: And Other Badly Translated Portuguese Adages for Budding Feminists is a hybrid dissertation situated at the intersection of feminist theory, stand-up performance, and memoir. Placing my personal experiences at the center of this project enables me to examine feminist comedic life writing from the perspectives of both practitioner and critic. Each of the twelve main chapters explores and re-writes a moment or period in my life in which I felt I lacked authority or ownership over my narrative. The chapters engage with issues ranging from growing up Catholic and its influence on my conceptions of womanhood and morality, to my struggles with eating disorders and alcoholism. Focusing on themes of wanting, and playing on the form of a twelve-step recovery program, the dissertation offers a way to read emotional excess and genres associated with heightened affects, including comedy and memoir.

Not a Flower To Be Smelled is a dissertation, a memoir, an essay collection, a tragedy, a comedy, and yes—even a musical. It is at once a feminist manifesto, a love letter to the female

comedians who offered me comfort and a model to follow, and a time-warping exploration of alcoholism, disordered eating, private and public divides, and Portuguese womanhood. Most importantly, *Not a Flower To Be Smelled* is a work of translation. A few months ago, as I was discussing Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" with my undergraduate students, I emphasized the following passage: "Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate to me, my tongue will be illegitimate" (59). Like Anzaldúa, I sometimes feel tired of the continued need for translation—of my work, my language, my experience, my general selfhood. When the only choice for being legible or recognized is translating your experiences into another language or making them legible for another culture or institution, the process often feels more like hiding a part of yourself than making yourself visible. What I have discovered through this project is that translation can also be an invitation, a construction of something new and shared. Whereas I previously viewed translation in terms of fixity—rendering meaning stable—I now understand it as a living process.

Not a Flower To Be Smelled is a work of translation in its exploration of the relationship between practitioner and critic but also in its unapologetic borrowing from various genres and modalities. It is a work of translation in its exploration of insights about Portuguese womanhood: how I came to learn about how a woman should behave, her place in the world. The narratives of other women—whether those in close proximity, such as my mother and grandmothers, or those I have encountered in texts, such as Kate Chopin, Sylvia Plath, and Dorothy Parker—have offered me a guide, a path towards womanhood.

Although my relationship with translation has at times felt fraught, life writing, comedy, and music have helped me to understand translation as uncovering and making shared meaning, rather than as a process of exchanging one culture, or experience, for one more widely recognized. I make a subtle nod to translation in the "Soundtrack" lists at the top of every chapter. These "Soundtracks" are built of songs that were important to me at the time of my life when the chapter takes place, as is the case with "The Sentient Jukebox," or even at the time of the writing, such as the chapter "Desk Rituals." As I will discuss further in "The Sentient Jukebox" chapter, music has enabled me to do a kind of translation of my inner life for those around me, especially in times when I struggled with communication. Thinking about music as a form of translation also feels like feminist practice in the way that it has helped me make meaning, connect with others, render myself visible, and take control of my image and body through performance.

My dissertation is also a work of translation in its uncovering of the process of writing a memoir. Several chapters, including two "Interludes," are purposefully self-referential in discussing the process of comedic life writing. The goal of this self-referentiality—of the slightly meta nature of stepping out of the framework of the narrative or chronological memoir structure—and of clearly signaling these moments of doubt, of difficulty, is to make transparent the process of writing about the self, in order to answer questions such as: What happens to the self during the endeavor of writing down a cohesive and meaningful account of a life? What happens when we begin to rework narrative structures, revisiting moments and disrupting linear chronologies so that we may see them not as following each other but as simultaneous? What happens when humor is found through this process of looking back, and what does it mean for

humor to ebb and flow, to be added as a reflexive lens rather than being linked to a specific, affectively heightened moment?

Now that you have a working definition of what this project is, what it attempts to do, I think it is important to go further back in order to explain why and how the comedic life writing genre offers an opportunity for feminist engagement and self-construction—both at personal and academic levels.

As you will hear me say later in this book, I consider myself a first generation student and third generation addict. Both of these identities tie in with the fact that I've always had an excess of wanting, although the latter displays this fact a little bit more than the former.

I would characterize my 'studentness' as an offshoot of my biggest character flaw or best trait—my excess of wanting—depending on your perspective and the day. As a student, I was always wanting more praise and validation from authority figures like my teachers and professors, wanting to be better than my peers and to have authority figures validate that I was better than my peers (mostly through my high school and undergraduate years), wanting to know more about anything that didn't include numbers or any type of math. This insatiable wanting may very well be what broke me during my two years at the Berklee College of Music. Coming into classes like Music Theory and Ear Training with no previous formal training meant I often had to spend afternoons in my professor's office hours and ask my friends for help in learning basic things like how to read bass clef. As hard as I tried, practiced, or studied, I was never able to be more than mediocre. I achieved B's only out of the kindness of my professors' hearts, who saw how hard I worked despite still being terrible at things like reading music. The only classes I did well in were the liberal arts electives, like psychology or history, or ensemble classes, which were essentially the only performing classes we got to have aside from private lessons on our

main instrument—my instrument being my own voice. In fact, when I needed a letter of recommendation to transfer out of Berklee, I reached out not to my music teachers but to my History professor, who was elated when I told him I was looking to transfer out to study something other than music. I guess it's not surprising considering he was a graduate of Yale's History program. I did well in ensemble because all I needed to do there was the thing that got me into Berklee in the first place: sing. It was the only time I actually had fun in class and was reminded of what I loved so much about music: the performing and the sharing of music with other people.

Although I thrived as a student, I did so only in things I was already fairly comfortable with. Learning any new skill was painful for me because it meant that I would have to be bad at something until I got better, and I still, to this day, struggle with struggling. When my ex-boyfriend tried to teach me how to play pool, I gave up after three tries at the ball because we were in a bar and therefore in public and I would rather not participate than participate and look bad.

As an alcoholic, all I did was want, sometimes paradoxically so. For instance, one day I might drink to get more feeling, more connection; I was often much more successful at flirtatious interactions with males when I was drunk. Other days I might drink out of a desire for wanting less: less feelings of despair or loneliness, less voices in my head. And of course, as a classic marker of addiction, I was always wanting more. One day, eight shots of tequila were not enough, I needed more to get the same feeling as the night before. One day, Klonopin wasn't enough to turn me into an unfeeling sleepwalker, so I would steal my boyfriend's opioid pain relievers that he got from his wisdom teeth removal in order to return to that unfeeling zombieland my engulfing depression necessitated. One day, these drugs were not enough on

their own, so I combined them in a cocktail of disaster and ended up walking through a freezing Chicago September night to get to the emergency room, knowing that while my stomach wouldn't need to be pumped and I'd most likely already peed out all the drugs in my system, they might still not let me leave of my own volition once I signed in under "suicidal ideation."

My entire life has been characterized by this excess of want. My wanting often swallowed me whole, crushing any other instinct, including that of survival. Wanting, regardless of whether it is for something like attention, visibility, feeling, connection, or complete lack of feeling and existence, has shaped the way I think and move in the world. It seems to have even shaped me before the moment I came into the world. When I left for college, my mother wrote me a letter about how much she and my father had "wanted" me, how much they "desired" my existence, my entrance upon their lives. They were thrilled with the news of their pregnancy, elated when I came into the world, their perfect girl. I have often wondered what cosmic clusterfuck brought me to them, as someone who has wanted, so many times in my life, not to be, not to exist. I've spent a lot of my life almost as a conscientious objector to the whole ordeal of being alive—my alcoholism is the best example of my self-sabotage and attempt to disappear. What irony that someone so wanted by the people who brought her into the world could feel so unmoored while at the same time being crushed by her own desperate wants.

Learning to live with this excess of want is what has brought me to comedy and life writing. I identify with comedy in part because of the excessive nature of the genre. It also includes physical excess, in the way that emotion makes its way out of the body through laughter. Writing has always helped me temper my wanting, whether through songwriting, journaling, or even attempting to pass my wanting on to fictional characters in short stories as a way to rid myself of it. Narrative is a crucial tool for identity building, and having felt powerless

over my own narrative at different stages in my life, I was able to regain this agency at first through the narrative tools I learned in Alcoholics Anonymous. There is a nod to the twelve-step format of recovery in this project not only in the number of chapters but also in the way this project is intended as a manual for survival: surviving my excess of want, difficult academic processes, damaging relationships. It is both a manual for myself in the process of writing and revising it, but also for its readers. This project is the culmination of a process of learning to live with this excess through comedic life writing, learning how to feed my own wants rather than outsourcing that task, as I have done in the past, with dangerous results. This learned self-sufficiency is one of the ways in which comedic life writing enables the writer to enact feminist practice. I understand self-sufficiency as feminist practice not only because of its recognizable connection to independence or autonomy, but also because of my experiences with seeking validation outside myself. This validation was often informed by social messages about my body and my desirability and therefore my femininity and even womanhood. Comedy especially helped me to shrug off these messages by offering a way of aggressively rejecting them through female unruliness, by making a spectacle out of the things I specifically felt made me undesirable, such as gynecological humor, sexual desire, my relationship with my body, and my struggles with mental health.

In the title I've chosen for the dissertation: *Not a Flower To Be Smelled: And Other Badly Translated Portuguese Adages for Budding Feminists*, the 'flower' signifies a 'rotten' woman, a figure of disdain and potential treachery: yes, she is a flower, but she is also foul. This Portuguese adage reminds me of the criticism sometimes hurled at female comedians and "unruly" women—they are too loud, un-lady-like in the way they take up space and use humor, in the way they speak out about topics deemed off-limits, such as female sexuality. In *The*

Unruly Woman, Kathleen Rowe describes this figure as "an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of carnival," defined by "a special kind of excess" and, most importantly, by her transgressive laughter and willingness to "offend and be offensive" (Rowe 10). In short, the unruly woman represents "woman as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle" (Rowe 12). I imagine this flower, in other words, as an equivalent to Kathleen Rowe's unruly woman (but with added Portuguese flare). By featuring the flower in the title of this project, I am making clear my identification with this figure. I strive to take up space, for my laughter to be transgressive and loud. I am now defined not only by my excess but by how I have learned to transform my excess into feminist practice.

Also, and in a very real sense, I should not be smelled. Writing a dissertation is very time consuming. There's a good chance I haven't showered recently.

Let the unruliness begin.

Chapter 2 : The Grandmother Paradox

Soundtrack:
Banks, "You Should Know Where I'm Coming From"
Amália Rodrigues, "Nem Às Paredes Confesso"
Amália Rodrigues, "Lisboa Não Sejas Francesa"
Mariza, "Rosa Branca"
Ana Moura, "Desfado"
Celine Dion, "Think Twice"
Take That, "Back for Good"
James Morrison, "This Boy"
John Mayer, "In the Blood"

1. A Genealogy of Female Stubbornness

I come from a long line of very stubborn and rather broken women, whether broken by their own hand or by other women in their family.

On my father's side, we have women who lie both to themselves and others, who grow tired of the world around them and become not unable but unwilling to take care of themselves. Women who marry the wrong, violent men. Women who ingest venom and disperse it to their close relations, blood or not.

On my mother's side, we have women who manipulate, who charm and kill, scorpions who will always kill the frog, even if it means their own demise. We have women who get lost in the stories of others, living on only in a granddaughter's childhood memories. We have women who are jealous, greedy, black holes. We have women, like my mother, who are kind, forgiving, and hopeful, despite being lied to and drowned by the scorpion, who always give second chances at the risk of their own sanity and peace.

It may seem strange that early on in a memoir—a text that is superficially perceived to be about me, myself, and I—and as early as the second chapter, I am delving into history to understand the women in my crooked, dried up, brittle family tree. But these women make up my identity, how I understand myself, how I learned notions of womanhood, how women are supposed to behave, how they move through life and the world.

These women are my inheritance, a feminine legacy of stubbornness (in all its double-edged glory), survival, self-sabotage, paradoxes of fire and water. Although a blood lineage grants me this inheritance, it is not only through blood that I have found kinship. I inherited as much of this stubbornness, of fire, of drowning, from women in my family as from women whose books I have read, whose music I have listened to. I first learned wit and rebellion in high school from Dorothy Parker. I saw myself and the choices available or unavailable to me clearly for the first time in Sylvia Plath's fig tree, from *The Bell Jar*. I learned I didn't owe anyone a love song, let alone my voice, from Sara Bareilles's *Little Voice*.[1] I sang in English before I understood a word of it, sang it with feeling, because of Shakira and how she sang it. I understood her, her melodies, her voice, even if I had no idea what she was saying in her English songs.

The same goes for the kinship with the women in AA who taught me how to navigate sobriety as a woman. I could write paragraph upon paragraph about their importance in my life, how my sponsor saved my life, taught me how to survive my own thoughts and feelings without diluting them in booze. Instead, I will go with a less is more approach and say this:

Whoever said blood is thicker than water must have never tried to swim in vodka.

[1] Even though Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* tried to teach me otherwise. To hell with her and her perfect hair!

2. Mandona

I grew up as a stubborn, boisterous, social, and fairly independent child. I'd make friends with the customers at my grandparents' restaurant and go so far as to sit at their tables and steal their food. Unlike my sister, who could only be lured away from our parents by other family members or good friends with the promise of a pincho de tortilla, I'd happily stay overnight with any of our relatives and friends as long as they listened to me talk and sing all day and night. This meant that I was a lot closer to our grandparents, particularly our grandmothers, than my sister. While I had regularly scheduled sleepovers at my grandparents' house and spent weeks every summer at my other grandparents' house up north, my sister was once tricked into sleeping at my grandparents' house and woke up at 4 a.m. demanding buttered toast and swearing "those sons of bitches" would never trick her again.

I enjoyed solo time with my grandparents so much because I liked feeling mature enough to be left without my parents but also special, like I was getting moments and secret histories from my grandparents. I liked having their undivided attention. More to the point, I liked being around them without my sister. My sister has always been described as the funny one. I mean, she called my parents sons of bitches and we have actual footage of her flipping people off at four years old—it's hard to beat that. As we grew older, I decided that if she was going to be the funny one, then I would be the responsible one, the one who excelled at things like school and later college and work. That was my way to guarantee that I would be seen, even if it was a limited image of myself. I woke up before anyone else in the house, let the dog out, turned on the coffee maker, and got ready for school before my mom's and sister's alarms had even gone off. While my sister often walked to the car barefoot, shoes in hand because she would get up at the last possible moment, I had already eaten a leisurely breakfast while watching an episode of

whatever sitcom, reality show, or cartoon was rerunning at 7am (it was usually *Wife Swap* or *Courage the Cowardly Dog*, the latter of which I still love).

A family video illustrates this relationship with my sister before I was even old enough to realize it; it offers a sort of comedic foreshadowing. We're at the beach, standing with our feet in the ocean. My sister is probably no more than three years old and my dad stands next to her as she tests out wetting her feet in the ocean and whether the waves breaking on the shore are something she needs to be afraid of. She's wearing a bucket hat, a blue tutu over her diaper, and a striped t-shirt that happens to match my dad's swim trunks. I am closer to the water than my dad and sister, jumping, laughing, and waving my hands in the air saying, "Over here, over here!" so that my mom will keep the camera on me. When she turns it away to film my sister, I run and jump into the frame, continuing my chant for attention: "Over here, over here!" Amid my calls for attention, you can hear a family friend calling my sister's name, and the camera zooms in past my face and madly waving hands to get my sister's reaction to a wave crashing near her feet. I remain in the video only in audio for the next few seconds, until the camera pans over to the right, just in time to film me being caught by a wave, falling on my ass, and getting completely drenched. I recover quickly but now my hair and white t-shirt are sopping wet and my dad is coming over saying, "Hey! It's okay, it was just a dive!" I try to maintain my composure and act like absolutely nothing is wrong, like I almost planned to fall backwards into the ocean. "It's fine. What's the problem? There's no problem," I say as I shrug nonchalantly, walking away from the camera and my dad. Then I sprint back to our towels, out of reach of the camera, and the video stops.

Sometimes I still feel like I'm screaming and waving on that beach, except the ocean behind me threatens to completely take me under and away, with no chance of me getting up or swimming out.

The first time I read *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, I became obsessed with Edna's suicide by drowning in the ocean. Perhaps "haunted" is a better description than "obsessed." The image of Edna walking into the ocean continuously replayed in my head. A year later, while earning my Master's degree, I learned about Virginia Woolf's suicide. Woolf drowned herself by walking into a river, wearing a coat filled with rocks. I couldn't stop thinking about women willingly giving themselves over to the water.

I grew up near the ocean. I'm a strong swimmer but have always had a fear of drowning. I remember a time when a wave took me by surprise, making me double over myself so that my head couldn't find the surface. I finally managed to get myself oriented enough to know which way was up and out, and I came up taking greedy breaths. I had a boyfriend who was afraid of the ocean because it was too big, too many unknowns under the water. I wouldn't say I was ever afraid of the ocean because of its size or mysterious depths, but I apprehensively respect it. I'm wary of its volatility, its potential to change its mind at any given minute and effortlessly swallow you. While my boyfriend was afraid of the unknown in the ocean, I was wary of what I did know about: its strength, its transitory moods, its ability to overpower me. When I think about Edna walking into the ocean, I sense that she understood it the way I do. That she chose it to take her away because of its fickle nature.

My fear of drowning is not limited to water. My panic attacks often feel like how I felt swimming that day: something came at me unexpectedly and I just could not pull my head up to breathe. When I am overwhelmed, especially when I am overwhelmed by trying to maintain a

certain image of myself, for my family or my job, I feel like I'm being pulled under by certain expectations or responsibilities, and breathing becomes more and more impossible. The scarcity of air feels alarmingly similar to being underwater.

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Before I made the shift to being the responsible sister in my early adolescence, I had already displayed a knack for stubbornness, mainly as a mandona, or bossy person. I liked being in charge even if I didn't know what I was in charge of. As a child, this predilection translated into being in charge of the room, commanding everyone's attention with antics like singing Celine Dion or Take That (including a bow at the end of my performance) or speed-walking ahead of my parents, to make sure they knew I was leading the way and in charge. One day, my parents decided that the best way to tackle my habit was to traumatize me by hiding behind a building's entryway, so that when I looked back at the end of the street and didn't see anyone, I experienced fear like I had never experienced before. I don't know how old I was at the time, but I know it is one of my earliest memories. The image of that street without my parents (and my uncle, who was walking with us) is forever burned into my mind because of the accompanying mortifying feeling of being alone, of being lost, abandoned. Obviously, my parents showed up again, laughing at having pulled a fast one on me, delighted about scaring the shit and the bossy out of me, but I wouldn't be surprised if this moment is why I have trust issues. Also, it's convenient for me to blame other people for my own problems, so this memory works in my favor.

Aside from commanding attention by singing and walking ahead of everyone, my stubbornness was most prominently on display at this age through my relationship with my paternal grandfather. I was known to purposely put my greasy toddler hands on my Avô Manel's

freshly cleaned windows, just to annoy him, but that's really just the beginning of my attempts to assert dominance. I clearly remember four of these moments.

First, my grandparents had two TVs in their apartment. When I wanted to watch something other than what my grandfather wanted to watch, he would tell me to go into my father's old room and use that TV. However, I wanted to stay in the living room, so I would grab the remote from my father's room and keep changing the channel on the living room TV. This game would last until my grandfather, irate with the TV and the remote, would notice my giggling and find me out, typically resulting in him yelling, me and my grandmother laughing, and him retreating to my father's old room for some peace and quiet.

Sofia 1, Manel 0.

Second, my grandparents had a formal dining room in their apartment that was hardly ever used because we almost always ended up eating in the sun room. The dining room was filled with weird old tchotchkes and knickknacks. My favorite was a massive, life-sized, shiny, porcelain statue of a Dalmatian. As any kid would, I loved running around the dining room because: a) I wasn't allowed in it, and b) there were So. Many. Breakables. That fact was probably why I wasn't allowed in there, which only added to my fascination. I freaking loved sitting on the Dalmatian and pretending I was riding it like a horse. My grandfather was not so fond of me pretending to be a cowboy in his most fragile room, which leads us to our third story.

Of this third story I only remember the last part: the aftermath. I must have done something to annoy my grandfather (maybe one of the lovely behaviors exhibited in the two previous stories) because he was running after me and I ran away into the bedroom where I jumped over the bed, and safely on the other side, said with an evil laugh: "I am your worst nightmare!"

Lastly, after one of my weekend visits to my grandparents' apartment, I was leaving and my grandfather said something along the lines of, "Good riddance." I stopped and said, "I'm leaving… but I'll come back soon." Even at that age, I was unwilling to let someone else have the last word.

If my mandona personality was initially a display of my careless childhood confidence and stubbornness, as I retreated inside myself during adolescence, this stubbornness morphed into having strong convictions and not being afraid of being labeled difficult for having them. From a very young age, I had strong opinions about abortion and women's rights (in Philosophy class and model U.N., I chose paper and presentation topics such as a woman's right to make decisions over her own body or France's burqa bans), the importance of the arts in education, books, and music. I had a heated argument with a boy who insisted that John Mayer's song "Gravity" was the same as a different song by John Mayer, "In Your Atmosphere." This argument was also perhaps my first experience with mansplaining. I used to watch John Mayer's concert tape, in which he plays both of these songs, at least once a week, if not more. This boy, confused by two astronomy terms "gravity" and "atmosphere," was vehemently corrected, courtesy not only of my knowledge of John Mayer's catalog, but also of the stubbornness that served me well as a survival tool for the perils of high school. If I was stubborn, and labeled difficult, unmoving, unapproachable by my peers because of it, all the better for me, I thought. I sought validation not from my peers[2] but from figures of authority like my teachers, and none of them ever complained of this trait because it kept me engaged and seeking more knowledge—the fuel to my stubbornness fire.

[2] This isn't to say I didn't crave some acceptance from my peers. But the fact that I was the daughter of a public figure made it difficult to shape their opinions of me anyway, or to fly completely under the radar. I had enough good friends that I felt fine not being everyone's cup of tea.

2. Have you ever seen a flower set fire to itself?

I write notes about the women in my family from interviews with my mom, grandma, and dad in a notebook that features opened up, crinkled, parrot tulips. Some look as they have been dried or withered, their colors varying in brightness, from a vivid pink-red, to a joyful yellow, a stained white, and a fire-like ombre: a yellowed white at the stem, orange embers as it rises up to its crinkled petal edge, ending in a flame-licking entanglement of red and orange. I cannot help but think that the tulips reflect the women written about in the pages of this notebook. How we seem to set ourselves on fire, although when we do so, we do not look like a beautiful spectacle of warm color like the tulips. In fact, sometimes we may burn completely unnoticed, our fire never put out until we've burned half the family tree with us. This was the case with my relationship with my mother and her mother in my teenage years, and with their own relationship during that time.

I've set myself aflame in anger, drenching myself in it because I had nowhere else to direct it. I've set myself on fire in hopes of burning myself out, using alcohol as my match and gasoline. I've made myself into a blaze in hopes I would get so big, bright, and dangerous that they'd have no choice but to come and watch me burn.

Between my obsession with drowning and my penchant—shared with my female relatives—to set ourselves on fire, a word comes to mind that I've used to describe my maternal grandmother: volatile. However, after reading through these images of fire and water, I see that I have been volatile many times, too, and I resent that I may share that characteristic with my grandmother. Anything that happens to remind me of her—rose water and roses, corn, embroidered handkerchiefs, old gold rings—anything I do that may validate the things she used

to say about me—that I'm a liar and impulsive—causes a visceral reaction to push it away from me as far as possible.

Despite my efforts to disentangle from my maternal grandmother, the things I've learned from her are almost inescapable. I learned a lot from both of my grandmothers, mainly because I was a good, captive audience. Old people seem to really like retelling their stories and their wisdom and I was happy to listen. I was a curious child, but I was also taught very early on the pleasure of secrets. My maternal grandmother, Marina, first taught me about secrets and gossip. The fact that she would confide in me, that she would trust me not just to keep quiet but also to listen to family intrigue, made me feel grown-up and special.

Marina was always the saintly victim in her stories. Someone was always wronging her, whether it was the lady whose house she'd been cleaning for years, her sister-in-law, or Lady Luck herself. Whenever I was up north for the summer, I would usually tag along with my grandmother for work. Unlike Marina, I liked her boss. She was a little bit snobby and uptight, but she was always nice to me and let me roam pretty freely around the house while my grandmother worked. She even let me eat anything in the kitchen, my favorite of which was seeded bread with butter. I loved the little crunch and texture of the sunflower seeds with the saltiest, yellowest butter Portugal had to offer. My grandmother's main complaint about her boss revolved around her assumption that her boss thought she was better than her and would look down on her or remind her of her position as maid, almost forcing my grandmother to acknowledge her generosity as a boss who treated her well and allowed her things like bringing her granddaughter to work. This conflict boiled down to the fact that my grandmother always resented anyone in a better financial situation than her, or anyone who was in a better position at all.

When I started writing this chapter, I asked my mom to tell me a little bit about Marina's history: Did my mom know what Marina was like as a child? How did Marina interact with her family before she got married and became a mother? I also asked my mom to tell me more about her relationship with Marina when she was younger. What my mother reported was nothing new or surprising. It all fit with what I already knew and experienced of Marina.

What sticks with me the most from this conversation is how Marina's own mother once described her: as her hardest child to raise and as mean as a snake. You might feel bad, hearing someone's own mother describing them this way, but then again, you've never met Marina. Marina never neglected my mother's health, my mother explained, but she was never very affectionate, never warm, at least not towards her. In her extremes, Marina would grab my mother's head and hit it against her own. My mother was burdened with the responsibility to take care of the house at age eleven, and forced to work illegally starting at age sixteen. Of course, she would never see any of her earnings because the overwhelming majority of her money was to be given to her parents. At that point, both my grandmother and grandfather were struggling with gambling issues, often referring to my mother as bad luck because she seemed to be the most sensible one and repeatedly conveyed her dislike for gambling. My mother wouldn't just "shut up and eat"; she would "eat and talk back," but it sounds much better in Portuguese than in translation.

My parents got married on a Saturday. On the Wednesday before their wedding, Marina demanded my mom's unemployment payment. She said that if my mom refused to give it to her, she would skip her only daughter's wedding. My mom had been laid off from her office job because they couldn't afford to pay her, and while collecting unemployment, she was trying to save money to buy lingerie for her wedding night; it was the only thing she wanted to be able to

afford on her own, as my dad's parents had bought her wedding dress. Lingerie may seem frivolous, but I imagine my 22-year-old mother trying to decide between being able to buy something for herself on her wedding night and once again giving away her economic independence to this all-consuming woman so that she would be present at her wedding. My heart does break for my mother, but I also feel a burning in my stomach. Why was she not stronger? Why would she not eradicate this person from her life? Why would she stand for this? I wonder if upon reading this book my mom will have these same questions of me and the moments I stayed when I should have run.

It is important for me to write about not just my own direct experiences with Marina but also those 'overhearings'; what I remember from people interacting with her, and what I have learned from asking questions about her to other family members on whom she also had deep, lasting effects. These recollections passed down to me add to the lore of the female family line, the mysticism behind some of the women I share blood with, as I try to understand them and their choices. Sometimes, these recollections make my relatives clearer to me, but sometimes, they add to the mystery of why they set themselves on fire in the first place.

I stopped talking to Marina in 2017, after she pretended to forget my birthday and then called me the next day with some crappy excuse to make me feel sorry for her. Usually, her calls were an attempt to get money out of people, but considering I hadn't given her money since I secretly gave her my allowances when I was fourteen, this call was most likely meant just to make others as miserable as she was. She is the Portuguese equivalent of Dostoyevsky's man with a toothache in *Notes from Underground*, but toothless. Dostoyevsky describes the malice in outwardly expressing one's pain—in this case from a toothache:

> People don't rage in silence, of course—they moan. But these aren't sincere groans—they are malicious groans and the whole point is in this malice … And yet he himself

> knows perfectly well that his groans won't bring him any relief; better than anyone he knows that he is only irritating and overtaxing himself and everyone else for nothing … "I'm disturbing you," he says, "I'm lacerating your feelings, not letting anyone else in the house sleep. Well, don't sleep, you ought to be experiencing every minute of my toothache." (13-14)

My grandmother never let us get any fucking sleep, even if her metaphorical toothaches were all self-inflicted and a result of her own actions. Clearly, like Dostoyevsky claims, she found enjoyment in her pain, in its performance, particularly when she could make a spectacle of it and see her pain infecting others around her.

Although I stopped speaking to my grandmother, she has not stopped speaking to me. She will leave me voicemails on occasion, ranging from angry to apologetic in tone. One of the first of these voicemails was shortly after I stopped speaking to her, which I announced to her in a brief phone call telling her I would not be speaking to her again and she would do well to not speak to me again, either. In this voicemail, which went on for roughly 4-5 minutes, my grandmother berated me for being a lying child, bringing up random moments in my childhood in which she claims I lied to her or other people. In short, she was claiming I had grown up to be a horrible, lying, impulsive adult, just as I was a horrible, lying, and impulsive child. Well, she should've added to the list that I was also a snitch because I forwarded this voicemail to my mother, who proceeded to not talk to her mother for the next few months. This must've been more difficult for my grandmother than me not talking to her because it's my mother who sends her money.

My grandmother's love, if you can call it that—perhaps a better word for it is her attention—was a unique blend of manipulation, isolation, and guilt. While growing up, my feelings towards her were always feelings of protection: people wronged her and I needed to protect her. I could do so by spending time with her, listening to her, and, most importantly,

giving her money. When I would visit her in the north of Portugal, I would hide money from my piggy bank in my socks and smuggle it up to her. One time, when she told me she didn't have enough money to buy air fresheners (of all things), I went searching in our house for extra air fresheners and started putting them in a plastic bag. When my mother found me stealing air fresheners (again, I am aware of how ridiculous this sounds, but bear with me) I finally had to 'fess up to the fact that I was not only stealing bathroom luxuries but had also been giving my grandmother money for years. My mother was furious, and I was terrified. Not for me, but for what consequences my grandmother might face. I started seeing and talking to my grandmother less and less after that, partially because the spell was broken. I had seen behind the curtain, and the person behind it did not need care; instead, she was stealing both my innocence and my own need for care. I was not her savior but another pawn she could use to get her way. My mother told me that whenever I went to see my grandmother, my mother always gave her extra cash, so there was no need for me to ever give her extra money. After that, I always felt more like a cash bonus than a loved granddaughter and began to pull away from my grandmother.

Her phone calls got darker and darker. Threats of suicide became more frequent. One time, she told me she was going to shoot my grandfather and then herself. I remember sitting in my darkened bedroom, the image of their two bodies running through my mind: bloodied, with shotgun wounds to the head, in the house I used to play in as a child. I sat there for what felt like hours, thinking that I should share this information with someone, and not knowing who to share it with. I was afraid if I told my parents they would chastise her, and that if she followed through with her threats and killed herself, it would somehow be my fault. So instead I sat there, motionless, bound to my grandmother by her words and my silence.

It would be years until my mother and I managed to fix the relationship my grandmother had tried so hard to destroy. It made a lot of sense to pit me against my mother: it meant I would be comfortable lying to her, it made me more isolated and left me fewer people to turn to in my own home, and it meant my grandmother could tell us both different stories, or lies, without the two of us ever finding out. One night over dinner after I had already moved out (when my mother and I finally started healing our relationship and I was very rarely speaking to my grandmother), I made a comment about my grandmother's suicide threats. My mother said, "How did you know about that? I never told you any of that." It turns out I was a second generation victim of her abuse and neither of us had realized the extent of our parallel experiences.

I have never quite forgiven my mother for not properly protecting me from her own mother. After all, she had first-hand knowledge of this woman's capacity for evil. My adult brain understands that my mother has a forgiving nature, that she wanted to believe, as my paternal grandmother does, that we should forgive, and that her mother should not be punished by having restricted access to her granddaughter. In turn, my mother also thought I should not be deprived of having access to as many family members as I could. But my inner child is still angry and alone. She still resents the fact that I will always have to deal with the memories of my grandmother's emotional abuse, the loneliness and isolation, the anger and the sadness. My inner child can't help but make the connection that I fell into a dangerously toxic relationship years later because I recognized manipulative and isolating behaviors not only as familiar, but as love. I was primed for falling hopelessly into his trap of attention and wanting to believe someone would take care of me. I wanted so badly for this to be true that I was willing to give up almost everything if I could just be taken care of.

Even if Marina can no longer have a direct effect on me, the ripples of her actions continue to reverberate in my life. I don't trust easily. I quickly turn mean and harsh in attempts to protect myself. I constantly think people are out to get me, and I teeter between aggressive and apologetic. Most of the echoes of my self-hatred yell at me in Marina's voice.

3. Burned Hands and Other Stories of Portuguese Cooking

If my memories of Marina are of losing childhood innocence, earlier memories of my grandmother Lena are of a childlike joy and peace. I have more early memories of her than of Marina, as early as a toddler, while my memories of Marina start around age seven. I associate Avó Lena with warm feelings of home and food. When I was a toddler, I spent a lot of time in her restaurant, eating her food, stealing the customers' food, running around the restaurant kitchen and refusing to let her hug me until she took off her apron.

Because my grandmother cooked typical Portuguese food and lived in a distinctly 'Lisboeta'[3] neighborhood, she's also probably my biggest connection to Portugal. Although it's difficult to put a finger on my Portuguese-ness and say, "Oh yes, that's definitely the cultural marker that grants me my Portuguese card," certain things make me feel more connected to or heighten my heritage. Running into another Portuguese person in America and getting the best advice on substitutes for Portuguese ingredients like broa de milho or salted dry cod, my American boyfriend pointing out how much louder I am around other Portuguese people, listening to and singing fado, even spotting Portuguese immigrants at airports by the rope around their overstuffed suitcases: all these things make me attuned to the joy of being Portuguese, giving me a sense of belonging somewhere, of comforting familiarity.

[3] Of or from Lisbon.

In my earlier memories of Avó Lena, I remember her as happy, laughing, joyous. She laughed mostly at me and the antics I put on to get on my grandfather's nerves. I frequently spent weekends with them in their apartment, where I would kick my grandfather out of bed so I could sleep with my grandma.

When I wasn't torturing my grandfather, I was either playing in the apartment, riding my bike in circles in their shared terrace, or running errands in Alvalade with my grandmother. Alvalade—where my grandparents had their restaurant, raised my father, and lived the majority of their lives—is an old[4] Portuguese neighborhood, with historic churches (like the one my sister was baptized in and where we held mass when my grandfather died), cobblestone avenues with small shops, cafes, and bustling restaurants (all filled to the brim with regulars), and the soccer stadium of one of the biggest teams in Portugal.

Most of the errands I ran with my Avó Lena would take us to the food market. In this industrial building, you could smell the fresh fish, flowers, and leafy green vegetables that would make soups like Caldo Verde. It was a dizzying, constantly changing smell. One second I'd be gagging at the raw fish and seafood and the next I would be intoxicated with the smell of dewy carnations. Everyone knew each other, and I loved it when I would get complimented for helping my grandmother and wanting to spend time with her. Most of the time, we would walk home through a knick-knack shop that sold stationary items like scented, colored pens and notebooks, and whatever Hello Kitty paraphernalia was available in Portugal in the late nineties. Every time we passed this store, my grandmother would buy me a pen. My collection became so large that she gave me this lovely quilted envelope pouch to keep them in. I still have the pouch, filled to

[4] Old is relative when referring to things in Portugal. Pretty much everything is old, including our population. Portugal has a higher than average geriatric population, a result of lower birthrates related to economic and societal factors.

the brim with each pen she bought me, in my room at my parents' house. A few years ago, we were walking around Alvalade after visiting my grandfather's grave together, passing the time by looking around the shops while we waited for my dad to join us for lunch. We happened upon another of these shops that sells magazines and stationary items. I was taken by a set of notebooks in a toile pastoral pattern in shades of blue and pink. I was going to buy it myself, but my grandmother insisted on buying it for me, and I did not put up much of a fight. My grandmother takes a lot of pride in being able to give her granddaughters occasional gifts with her modest pension and being able to take us out to breakfast when we're in town. I helped her sort through coins for exact change, and for a second, even though I was wearing high-heeled, adult woman boots and towering over my grandmother, I felt just like a kid again, running errands with my grandmother on a weekend.

While Marina taught me the weight of secrets, Avó Lena asked me to keep certain secrets but hers were innocuous and endearing. For instance, on this same day of the notebook purchase, we went to a café to get some water and a coffee. Avó Lena doesn't have diabetes, but it's not for lack of trying. If my parents let her, that woman could eat bread and coffee with milk for every meal, snacking on muffins, hot chocolate, and any sweet baked good in between. So when we ordered our coffee, she said she also wanted a flaky pastry with dried fruits.

"Listen, this is between us," she said to me, slightly lowering her head as if he could hear us already. "Your father doesn't need to know about our snack."

"Fine, as long as you order a side of vegetables with lunch instead of rice and fries," I responded, with resolve. "And no dessert." She nodded and took another sip of coffee to wash down the pastry.

Well, she played me. She played me like a fool. When we ordered our food, she ordered the fried fish with a side of rice and nothing else. Astonished, I said, "Do you want to add a side of vegetables to that, maybe?"

"No, wouldn't want to get too full." I sat there, gobsmacked, as she very knowingly averted my attempt to make eye contact. What was I to do? Oust her in front of my father? I was raised better than that. Besides, she had just bribed me with a notebook.

4. On the possibility of furthering the stubbornness family line

As I said earlier, the women who have come before me in my family are my inheritance. This, unfortunately, includes the complicated mother-daughter relationships that have plagued us for generations. My maternal grandmother, my mother, and I have been the latest stars playing the roles of broken mother-daughter relationships, but as I get closer to closing out my twenties and the desire to become a mother myself becomes more prominent, I worry about adding another role to the drama. In reckoning with this inheritance, I have to ask: how can I responsibly pass it down?

I don't know the specifics of what is happening in my biology, but I do know I am one punctual motherfucker. I hate lateness and on the very, very rare occasion when I myself am late, I feel a burning shame, like I should go home later and self-flagellate with a pocket watch. I relate to the White Rabbit's anxiety on a very deep level. Even when I was young, while watching the Disney version of *Alice in Wonderland*, I felt the White Rabbit's anxiety in my own body. Most children are entertained by his wild, disheveled running and his repeated chant of "I'm late! For a very important date!" What child doesn't love a rhyme? I, however, remember tensing up in that first scene when he appears, recognizing his urgency and hoping I would never

know his anguish (though my mother and sister sure tried hard to make me late throughout my entire school life, dragging their feet each morning, while I waited patiently by the car.)

Whatever talking animal carries around my biological clock (probably a mongoose: cute but actually vicious) must currently be running around, waiting for the Queen of Hearts to chop off its head, because that damn thing won't stop ringing. It's not a soft alarm either, no iPhone chimes. Instead, it screams "BABIES" at the most inopportune moments, like when I am in the midst of writing a dissertation.

Some of my behaviors are normal: frequently offering to babysit, spoiling my 'nieces' and 'nephews.' But others verge on creepy. I've always been one of those people who greets dogs on the street. All of them. Even if that's a little odd, most people find it within the realm of normal because: dogs. Now, however, this behavior has transitioned to children. If there is a baby, I need to say hello to it, make it laugh, and speak in a voice that could probably turn every penis within a five-mile radius as limp as an Olive Garden noodle.

I've not always had baby fever or wanted to be a mother. As a teenager, I rebelled against the whole idea of motherhood like I rebelled against the idea of marriage. This rebellion was probably first sparked within my own house and by my contrarian nature. Because I had a complicated relationship with my mother, I set goals for my life in opposition to the choices she had made in hers. At twenty-two, she decided to leave school in order to be a wife and, soon after, a stay-at-home mom. So, around the sixth grade, I decided I was going to move far away

for college and be a career woman,[5] which my sixth-grade brain took to mean a woman who is very successful at work and completely self-sufficient.

As my relationship with my maternal grandmother continued to deteriorate, I kept thinking that relationships in my family between mothers and daughters and granddaughters were cursed, and that I would end the curse by not having children. I was also in the depths of my depression, which made me believe I would never be fit to be a mother if I had these clouds constantly hovering over me. While I was in college, one of Marina's doctors allegedly diagnosed her as schizophrenic. The diagnosis was never followed up on and Marina has never received any kind of treatment for it. I've been misdiagnosed enough by mental health professionals checking off a list of hot button words without so much as glancing up from their charts to look at me that I didn't put much weight on her diagnosis. Besides, a diagnosis didn't excuse her from being a shitty person for at least forty-five years. But the diagnosis seemed to reinforce in me the idea that our female family line was damaged and that I would be damning my child with our genetic and spiritual afflictions if I were to continue the family line. Even if the diagnosis was only a fluke, or a passing thought from one doctor and never really followed up on, just the mere possibility of it was enough to prey on my fears of being an irresponsible parent because of my mental health history.

In regard to marriage, I saw it as linked to motherhood and had no use for it. In high school, I'd never had a reciprocated crush like most, if not all, of my friends. Love and relationships were fantasies to me, fuel for songs and something I only knew from my parents'

[5] At that time my chosen career switched between doctor, musician, or something not quite clear but to do with reading and language, like a translator, writer, or editor. Of course, a musician is not what you might think of when you hear "career woman" and I was aware of this. Even in the sixth grade I was aware that being a musician was not the most viable or reliable career option, so I mostly kept that dream to myself. I guess in my definition of career woman I also saw someone who required a closet full of power pant suits and I didn't really see myself on stage in a pant suit.

perfect marriage, movies, and music. Instead of my parents' marriage serving as an inspiration for me to find something like it eventually, I saw it as a rare, miraculous exception and thus unattainable. The fact that I thought no man could ever be as good as my father, combined with all my friends' divorced parents, led me to the conclusion that marriage was not something I needed to worry about.

To put the final nail in the marriage coffin, I saw how losing my grandfather absolutely destroyed his wife, my Avó Lena. She was a completely different person after his death. She no longer laughed, and she wore only black. She slept all day and had panic attacks, during which she claimed she was dying. I never wanted to become this shell of a person, and I decided that giving up my personhood for someone else, whether in life or death, was too much to ask of me at that age, when I wanted so much to assert myself as an individual.

I can't pinpoint the moment when motherhood started to become attractive to me or feel like a viable possibility. I'm sure it was a gradual process of unlearning my fucked-up notions of myself and my familial ties. I think getting sober was a big part of it, too, as I learned to care for myself and seek balance, and I learned my capacity for love, forgiveness, and what I could offer to others.

It would be foolish to try to determine exactly what kind of mother I will be whenever that time comes. I expect it is one of those life experiences that is totally unknowable until that moment of becoming, inhabiting the identity of mother. I used to fear what kind of mother I would be, that I would have almost no agency because of the way these relationships tended to play out in my family. But here are some things I sense will be integral to my role as a mother:

1. I will most likely be embarrassing, and I doubt I'll be able to train myself to stop cursing.
2. I will play my children the music I listen to, none of that KIDZ BOP patronizing bullshit.

They're children, not deaf.

3. If my child kicks the dog, I will kick my child in return; discipline is important, and so is compassion for animals.
4. If my offspring are anything like me, we're both blessed and deeply fucked.

It seems only natural to conclude there is a "Best Mom" mug in my future, wouldn't you say?

5. The Grandmother Paradox

If you're familiar with the grandfather paradox, then you may know how I landed on the title of this chapter and this section. I am always up for adding some matriarchy to patriarchal notions, even if in this case it's a time travel theory. If you haven't heard of the grandfather paradox, it's quite simple: it's a theory about what would happen if you time travelled and killed your grandfather and how this would affect your own existence. Aside from my desire to time travel to meet Dorothy Parker, that's about where the similarities end between the traditional grandfather paradox and what I'm calling the Grandmother Paradox. Although Marina has caused waves of harm across generations in my family, I don't particularly fantasize about going back in time to kill her.

The Grandmother Paradox is not even as simple as the contradiction between my two grandmothers, their personalities, their influence on my life and identity. Marina was a force of destruction, manipulation, and loss. Avó Lena, the complete opposite: a source of light, laughter, and connection to my Portuguese heritage. The title of Grandmother Paradox would certainly work even if it just signified these differences between my grandmothers: one giveth, the other taketh away.

However, the Grandmother Paradox goes deeper than that. It is my Avó Lena who really gives us the Grandmother Paradox, because of the contradictions in what she tells me to do and how she has lived her own life. My Avó Lena grew up very poor, with a very large amount of brothers and sisters whom she had to help care for. She's always had a strong sense of familial responsibility and has always regretted not being able to go to school further than the fourth grade. At age eleven, she learned how to be seamstress, and one of her earliest jobs was making shoes. She would go in at nine in the morning and return home at seven at night. At age 24, she decided to move to Lisbon on her own. Working at a potato chip factory, she made her own way while staying with two family friends. Eventually, she began working in restaurants, learning how to cook, while still sometimes working as a seamstress for the military. When she was 28, she met Manel, my grandfather, and eventually they operated their own restaurant, where my grandmother cooked and I learned to walk and appreciate good steak.

Knowing this very simplified trajectory of Avó Lena's life, you may have an inkling of the advice she would have for me: get an education, make your own way in the world, don't let anyone walk all over you, eat good food. I've learned to follow these maxims, and I know she is very proud of how hard I've worked since leaving home and getting the education she never had. Surprisingly, though, Avó Lena is also just as concerned about when I am going to get married and have babies, and she has a general fear of me being alone. Often when we spoke on the phone while I was in America, she would tell me to get a husband so I wouldn't be lonely. She would make her concern for my loneliness known, more than whether I was successful in other ways, such as, was I happy, fulfilled, doing well at school and work? I admire my grandmother so much for heading to Lisbon from her rural town in the north of Portugal, all on her own, to look for better opportunities for herself. Yet, sometimes, it feels like the greatest achievement I

could have in her eyes—this woman who was so independent at a time when women were so dependent on men, who, by the standards of the time, became a mother later in life, who ran her own business and mouthed off to any customer who dared cross her—would be to trap a man into marriage.

The Grandmother Paradox is a question of what path to womanhood to follow. It's a matter of heeding "do as I say, not as I do" and creating my own fork in the road, taking what serves me from what I have learned and been given from the women who came before me. It means acknowledging my volatile nature, and knowing that it does not mean I am my grandmother Marina. It is my obsession with the ocean and drowning, and still keeping my head above water. It is knowing fire is in my blood, whether in the hands of my Avó Lena who no longer feels heat in the tips of her fingers from years of cooking for others, or in my heart: both in my resilience and in the very real heartburn I suffer from because, like my Avó Lena taught me, you need to eat good food, even if its hurts you later.

Chapter 3 : Everything's Coming Up Catholic

Soundtrack:
Amália Rodrigues, "Tudo Isto É Fado"
Amália Rodrigues, "Com Que Voz"
David Bisbal, "Ave María"
David Bisbal, "Corazón Latino"
David Bustamante, "No Soy Un Superman"
Rádio Macau, "Cantiga de Amor"

1. Growing Up Catholic-ish

My spiritual education has two distinct eras: that of the Portuguese Catholic childhood and that of the 'desperate drunk tries to get sober.' Both include the heavy hand of white women asking me, or telling me, to believe in god, first my two grandmothers and then the white women I encountered in Alcoholic Anonymous meetings in Chicago. To be fair, I encountered several religious aficionados in those rooms who were not white women, but my most distinct memory of someone hammering god-capital-G into me in AA is of an eccentric, bohemianly dressed white woman. The first time she met me, dressed in a maxi, probably paisley patterned, and multicolored dress, she shook my hand and before introducing herself or asking for my name, simply stared into my eyes and asked, "DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?"[1]

Although I was baptized, my parents had a laissez-faire attitude about my religious upbringing. Portugal is a Catholic country, and being baptized is almost as much cultural as it is

[1] At this particular AA meeting we had what is called a 'greeter.' Someone who regularly attends the meeting and volunteers to stand by the door and greet people as they come in, particularly keeping an eye out for newcomers to make them feel welcome and comfortable. I'm not sure how welcome and comfortable I felt after this woman's question but I was certainly amused. I was also deep enough into my sobriety that this was not my first awkward AA encounter so it didn't make me run out of the meeting to never return, in fear they may douse me in holy water or put a necklace of garlic around my neck.

religious, so I think for my parents it was a given that I would be baptized, but religious education or rituals stopped there. In fact, during their wedding at a church, my dad had to lip sync the Our Father because he didn't know the words. My mother, while not upholding any formal Catholic rituals like going to mass or praying every night, did at least know the words to the two main prayers: Our Father and Hail Mary. She also has little statuettes of Our Lady of Fatima on her nightstand and performs the sign of the cross whenever she walks into a church. While Catholicism is more of a cultural reflex for my mother, it doesn't seem to cross my father's mind until he attends a wedding,[2] baptism, or funeral.

Portuguese weddings are a long and extensive affair. Usually, there is a ceremony at the church (torturous, long, Catholic mass included) sometime in early afternoon followed by a few hours in which the bride and groom have to stand for pictures with basically everyone at the wedding. Then, when they've finally exhausted the photographer's second or third camera roll, everyone is finally allowed to eat. Eventually, there is cake and dancing, which lasts at least until two or three in the morning. Then, because we're Portuguese, there's more food, usually some kind of buffet. At one wedding I attended, they had beef sandwiches and omelets. It almost makes the mass worth it. So, to sum it up, we go to church, we hear about how we're all sinners, then two people who are probably extra sinners because they've most definitely copulated before marriage get officially hitched, and we all drink and eat and dance to forget about how we're sinners. Then we go home with blisters and heartburn.

My favorite wedding mass was the one when the priest talked about salty soup as a metaphor for a good marriage. This is sort of how his speech went: "Marriage is about working

[2] Up until a few years ago I assumed everyone had to get married in a church because everyone in Portugal gets married in a church. I literally thought only the church could grant you a legal marriage and that's why people had to get married there. Only when I moved to the US did I realize church weddings are not obligatory unless you are Portuguese and don't want your family to disown you.

together and compromise. It's not about calling the other person out on their flaws or berating them if something goes wrong. If your wife[3] makes soup and it's salty, all you have to do is add water. If it's bland, you add salt." This is not only solid marriage advice, it's also good cooking advice. If your priest doesn't give you cooking tips on your wedding day in Portugal, then you should be entitled to a full refund.

Aside from baptizing me, the most my parents did for my religious upbringing was buy me an illustrated children's bible. I was fascinated by the stories, particularly the first ones, like Noah's Ark or Adam and Eve being expelled from paradise. I was befuddled in regards to Adam and Eve's behavior, why they couldn't simply follow directions instead of ruining it for the rest of us, and I wanted to know how I could collect animals for myself like Noah had been told to do. How wonderful it would have been to receive a message from god telling me I needed to surround myself with pairs of animals. I might have chosen to surround myself only with dogs, but maybe I could fool god by dressing the dogs up in different animal costumes. Of course, I was also frightened of the idea of the flood wiping the world clean, which I'm sure didn't help in my lifelong obsession with drowning. Adam and Eve were also especially interesting to me because they were illustrated as naked, with only a leaf covering their privates, and they were both in great physical shape! Adam is drawn with a defined six-pack and Eve is almost like a '50s pin-up cartoon: pouty lips, and great, big, bouncy… hair. Get your mind out of the gutter—this is a children's bible!

Although my parents were not very involved in religion, for my grandmothers, Catholicism is synonymous with breathing. The first thing my paternal grandmother does when

[3] Also, can the husband not make soup? Another reason I rebelled against Catholicism: Catholic men are apparently incapable of making soup.

she wakes up is kiss the picture of her husband[4] on her nightstand and the statuette of Our Lady of Fatima. She repeats it at night, along with her nightly prayers. Although she would on occasion pray the rosary, I haven't seen her do that in a long time. But she still does what we call "promises" to Our Lady of Fatima when there is an important event requiring divine intervention. If my father has an important soccer game, if someone is seriously ill, my grandmother will make a promise to Our Lady of Fatima: she will pray a certain amount of Our Fathers and Hail Marys and leave flowers at the church if Our Lady grants her these wishes like a Portuguese genie in a bottle.

My maternal grandmother shares this penchant for praying and rituals: she keeps an altar to Our Lady with a candle constantly burning and prays every night. The main difference between how my two grandmothers view God and religion seems to be his wrath and what is commonly known as Catholic Guilt. My maternal grandmother's most oft-repeated sentence was "God punishes" and it could be applied to the smallest things, like me talking back to her or someone doing something horrible and criminal on the news.[5] While my paternal grandmother believes in God's forgiveness and goodness, my maternal grandmother believes God will smite you if you displease her. This seems like an interesting paradox to me because my maternal grandmother is the one who constantly has to ask for forgiveness for the horrible things she does and for how she treats people.

I (obviously) have no recollection of my baptism, but I've been to my share of Portuguese Catholic weddings, one (Spanish) funeral, and one (Portuguese) funeral mass when

[4] To clarify, her husband, my grandfather, is dead. She's not just kissing his picture while he's sitting there next to her.

[5] This is another characteristic my grandmothers share: they both love sensationalized news items. The more gruesome the better. If there was a murder-suicide anywhere in the country they will know about it and retell it to you with a mixture of appalling excitement over dinner. They were the OG true crime podcasters.

my paternal grandfather passed. Our parents thought my sister and I were both too young to attend the funeral (I was eight and my sister four), but we were brought to the mass a week later.[6] What I remember most from this mass was that during communion, when everyone lines up to take the body of Christ from the priest (or as you may commonly know it: a flavorless cracker; I'm referring to what they feed you, not the priest himself), my little sister, in all her innocence and childhood glee, got up and said, "Woo! Intermission! Do we get hot dogs now?"

My paternal grandfather died in Porto, while visiting my maternal grandparents. He previously had heart issues but seemed to be doing fine. At the time, the explanation given to me for his condition was that his heart was too big for his heart box. I did not ask for more clarification than that; it didn't seem necessary to me at that time or even now, twenty years later. Because he was away when he passed, my mother first got the news over the phone. I don't recall how my father got the news; I don't think he was in the house while my sister and I were with my mom. I remember her embracing us and proceeding to make more calls while she continued to cry. The next thing I remember is being in my room, facing all my little statuettes of Our Lady of Fatima. I was crying and angry with her and god, for not protecting my family like I asked them to do every night in my prayers. In my mind, I was devoted to them, and they seemed to have ignored me, even abandoned me. The funeral was finally held after they transported my grandfather's body from Porto to Lisbon. Since my sister and I were not allowed to attend, a family friend stayed with us at home. We dragged a mattress into the living room and spent the night playing, with me feeling slightly more aloof and distracted than my four-year-old sister, who had not quite grasped the situation. At some point, though, I asked this friend why she

[6] Sometimes you can have mass for someone's death on the day of the funeral and then a week after, a month after, and sometimes even a year after. My grandmother insisted upon all of these but my sister and I didn't have to go to all of them.

wasn't at the funeral, to which she responded that she preferred to be watching over us tonight. That seemed like an okay response to me, but it made me wonder why she would stay with us instead of our own parents, if it turned out you had such a choice.

A few weeks later, I wrote my grandfather a letter, telling him how much I missed him and I hoped he was doing okay in heaven. The written word came to my aid, again, helping me process things I could not hold only in my mind. I showed my mom this letter, and she was struck by a specific sentence: "There are lights in our hearts which will never go out." My parents decided to engrave this sentence on a stone heart and place it with my grandfather's tombstone. If I'm ever lucky enough to get published, the experience may not compete with the pride I felt seeing my words, literally set in stone, on my grandfather's grave.

The first and only funeral I've attended to date was when I was fifteen. A close friend of the family died after medical complications with surgery in Spain, and since my father couldn't attend with my mother because of his work, I offered to go with her so she wouldn't have to be alone. I didn't really know what to expect, both in terms of formalities or decorum. I had seen grief before; I saw it in the deep depression of my paternal grandmother after her husband passed. I saw it in how she locked herself in her room, how she wailed and screamed, in her panic attacks when she said she felt like she was going to die, and in the sleepiness her anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medicine caused. Grief gave her an almost zombie-like existence as she alternated between fits of rage and insurmountable pain that manifested in guttural screams and chemically-induced numbness. But I didn't know what to expect from a group of grieving people. I didn't know who would take the role of inconsolable griever and who would take the role of the still-grieving comforter. I think my fear was that the latter would fall on my broad yet-still-fifteen-year-old shoulders. As soon as we got to the church, Nati, one of the daughters of the

man who passed, fell into my mother's arms, sobbing against my mother's chest while my mother pulled back her curly, auburn hair. I stood next to them, motionless. This is the extent of this memory for me. I don't recall how we moved inside, if someone ushered me in or even greeted me. I don't recall if my mother eventually pulled Nati out of her embrace and guided us both inside. This memory, this moment ends there, with me watching these two women hold each other while offering no real comfort to anyone in the picture.

Nati will always be paired with grief in my mind. I watched her go through not just the death of her father but also one of her miscarriages. Of the latter, I remember trying to cheer her up by giving her one of those tiny souvenir spoons that she used to collect. She had been locked in her room all day, with the curtains drawn, the door only opening once in a while when my mom or her husband would go in to try to get her to eat something or comfort her. One of the times when my mom went in the room, I recall looking in and seeing her sitting on the edge of the bed, holding Nati's hands as Nati cried and tried to hold herself together in the fetal position. When I recall giving her the spoon, my memory focuses on the darkness of the room, the only light coming from the hallway behind me. It's strange that I don't recall much of her reaction to me giving her the spoon. I recall her attempt at a smile, but nothing of what she said or what I said. Maybe it isn't so strange that the memory is focused more on how I felt, since I was so young and still learning about grief and loss. I recall thinking that how I felt was inadequate, as though I had not done enough to alleviate Nati's pain, and thinking that I was intruding on something.

Although Nati is paired with grief in my recollections of her, she is not reduced only to grief. No, this is the woman who taught me how to manage my curly hair, who first taught me only to brush my hair right out of the shower, how to apply Pantene hair mousse, how to scrunch

pumps of it into wet hair with my head upside down. Nati never went outside without make-up on, even if she was just taking us to the park or the grocery store. She makes the best mayonnaise from scratch. I see her now in her kitchen in Lugones with her handheld blender, the fryer on the stove with some of my favorite empanadillas de bonito turning golden brown. When I visited her, I would kick her husband out of the bed so I could sleep with her because she would scratch my back with her manicured nails until I fell asleep. But always when I think of her, I will also see her sobbing into my mother or curled into the fetal position in her pitch-black bedroom.

Recently, I asked Nati if she would allow me to write these recollections, if she would trust me with the responsibility of telling her personal stories that impacted me so much as a young girl. I've had to have these discussions with several people in my life. A memoir is centered on the author, but we do not exist alone. My life does not happen in a social vacuum, even if it sometimes feels like it does. In the telling of one's life, there will be moments when it is necessary to delve into someone else's experiences, and it's my responsibility to do so with as much care as possible while still being true to my experiences of events. This approach becomes particularly tricky when such events include trauma and disappointing or even harmful behaviors from those around me. Everyone I've spoken to about being represented in this dissertation has been graceful and generous, even if they have reservations. When I reached out to Nati, I asked if she would like me to change her name, or any identifying features, or even if she would like me to not discuss her at all. She said I should go ahead and write and feel free to include her name. Out of everyone I've spoken to, Nati had the most gracious and wise response of all: "Las cosas que nos suceden en la vida no hay porque ocultarlas," roughly translating to, "There's no reason to hide the things that happen to us in life."

I wish I could say that at Nati's father's funeral I was quietly stoic, mature, in no need of hand-holding through a formal tradition or process of grief. This, however, would be a lie. I may have appeared fine on the outside, like I was handling grief like everyone else, but inside, I was an anxious wreck. I worried about whether I was behaving correctly, sad enough but not too sad, just appropriately sad for my tier of grief, which I determined by the griever's closeness to the deceased. You never want to see a third-cousin-twice-removed crying louder than the widower. What a faux-pas!

My mom was comforting Nati and her family in the room where the body was being held, and since I refused to enter that room, I was left mostly to my own devices. I worried about whether it would be disrespectful not to pay my respects to the body, but if I was overwhelmed just being in the general presence of grief and death, then seeing death directly, reflected in the face of someone who was like a grandfather to me, was too much to fathom. Instead, I hung around the little café area, eating fried chicken sandwiches.

I had already started binge eating at this age, so it was natural for me to comfort myself by eating, filling myself up. To this day, I still overeat at airports and have an irrational fear of running out of food on a plane during a long-haul flight. (I have a baseline of anxiety any time I have to travel, especially by air.) It seemed like it would also be disrespectful, however, to chow down on sandwiches the entire day as if my parents hadn't fed me in a week, while mourners sat in the next room. To remedy this situation, I purchased some snacks: chips and strawberry licorice twists, snuck them into the bathroom, and sat in a stall, stuffing myself, trying to push down—to drown—the negative feelings with more and more food. If you're full enough, in my experience, you get to a point where you can't really think about anything else; the fullness is overwhelming and you get respite from your feelings, your thoughts. This fullness creates a

sleepiness that makes my eyes heavy, my breathing deep in attempts to make room anywhere in my body. It's almost like a trance, and for a while you can bask in the fullness of what once felt so empty.

The only other place I felt calm that day was in the main church. With the church completely empty, I could sit there without pretending to be deep in prayer. I sat and just looked at the windows, the stained glass, the dark benches, mosaics, and paintings. I've always found churches quite peaceful, as long as there's no mass going on. Naturally, being a contrarian, I just don't like someone telling me how to worship or have a relationship with god. I don't like the idea of a mere human claiming to speak for god. Especially since most of these humans tend to be men.

Having been introduced to religion not in any organized way but primarily by my grandmothers, I saw religion as something both very personal and matriarchal. The fact that most priests were men and that women were denied certain higher positions in the Catholic church simply because of their gender made no sense to me, since in my life, the experts on god and religion were my grandmothers. No one in my life was more devoted to god than they were, and to not see women reflected in organized religion certainly made me skeptical of it. The fact that both of my grandmothers also put great stock in Our Lady of Fatima also helped me to cement this idea of religion as matriarchal. My grandmothers would pray to god in general, but they would make their promises, their altar offerings of flowers and lit candles, to Our Lady. I found Our Lady and the Baby Jesus easier to connect to because they were the ones featured in religious figurines. As a child, I would fantasize about Our Lady visiting me, thereby anointing me as special, devoted, and worthy. It's worth noting that I didn't care about the visit itself as

much as I cared about what it would say to others about me, a recurring behavioral pattern I've carried well into adulthood.

Although they had differing views in regards to god's demeanor—my maternal grandmother believing more in the Old Testament, smiting version of god, and my paternal grandmother believing more in a kind, forgiving, and loving god—they both believed in the importance of continuous connection with god, and this connection happened through prayer. My paternal grandmother taught me about rosaries and how to use them, but both grandmothers taught me how to pray the Our Father and Hail Mary, sometimes having me recite it along with them at night. My solo prayers would sometimes include the formal Our Fathers or Hail Marys, but mostly they were conversations with god. I started these conversations with my intended audience: Our Lady of Fatima and the Baby Jesus. When my paternal grandfather died, I started praying to him as well. I still pray like that, as a conversation that starts with "Nossa Senhora, Menino Jesus, e Avô," like I'm calling out to them, making sure they're answering the spiritual phone.

At different times in my life, I've sought refuge in a church, particularly once I moved to America. Being so far from home, and alone, I was reminded of Portugal by churches, and being in a church gave me a sense of peace and connection, like I was still attached to my family, to my country. Later, I would start frequenting a part of the church I'd never thought about: its basements. Even though they're not as pretty as the main rooms, they're equally comforting to me now, and I feel equally held there, and at peace.

2. A Catholic Break Up

As my relationship with my maternal grandmother deteriorated, my depression worsened, and as my drinking became more ruinous, my relationship with god and religion faded. Like

when my paternal grandfather died, I felt abandoned, ignored by god. I wanted to put my faith in things I could control, or, in the case of drinking, things I knew the effects of.

I had also finally put a name to the more oppressive feelings I had never fully connected to religion, namely, Catholic Guilt. The realization came to me when watching *30 Rock*. In the episode that sparked my realization, Tracy Jordan (portrayed by Tracy Morgan) is considering converting to Catholicism because confession will clear him of whatever sin he commits. Jack Donaghy (portrayed by Alec Baldwin), who is Irish Catholic, comes in to burst his bubble: "There is a crushing guilt that comes with being a Catholic. Whether things are good or bad, or you're simply eating tacos in the park. There is always the crushing guilt" ("The Fighting Irish"). As he delivers the last line, Jack mimes self-flagellating his back, leading Tracy Jordan to claim he no longer wishes to be Irish Catholic. The scene ends with Jack saying, "Somehow I feel oddly guilty about that" ("The Fighting Irish") as he performs the sign of the cross.

Watching this scene play out, and registering Donaghy's description of Catholic Guilt, I realized that although I didn't have a name for it at the time, Catholic Guilt is what my maternal grandmother had taught me. If God was always watching, then I would always be bad, especially when I started thinking about sex. But it wasn't just limited to sex; everything that wasn't 'right' could cause guilt or a cosmic consequence. What if you ignore a phone call from your grandmother? What if she dies and you can never speak to her again? Welcome to Catholic Guilt.

My parents were quite open with sex-ed, providing plentiful books on the biological side of it but also the more romantic entanglements, gifting me a Judy Bloom novel that made me blush several times while reading it. However, I was also receiving other messages about sex. For instance, on Portuguese television, we don't have the "Rated R" warning on a program;

instead, a red circle is visible on the right corner of the TV throughout the entirety of the program. This circle could indicate violence, adult language, or sex. My sister and I were taught to change the channel if we encountered the red circle while watching TV on our own, but sometimes my maternal grandmother would let me watch some programs with the red dot, like this show about cheaters or violent action movies. I already knew I wasn't supposed to watch a red dot show, but she would drive the point home by telling me I shouldn't tell my parents about it.

This red dot programming was mostly aired in the middle of the night, when my lifelong insomnia often kept me wide awake. Even as a toddler, I was known to keep my parents up with demands for more Disney movies when I was wide awake at 1 a.m. So, naturally, sneaking in some TV during my common sleepless nights, I was bound to encounter some late-night programming with the dreaded red circle that featured a different kind of action than action movies. Anytime I saw anything remotely sexual or romantic with a red circle, I would quickly change the channel, for fear of my parents—or worse, god—seeing me be bad. But sometimes, curiosity got the better of me, and I would lower the volume to zero and watch some scenes, only a few seconds at a time, thinking maybe god would be distracted or confused if I watched in this way, like it was an accident that I kept running into that program.

It was mostly my maternal grandmother who really made use of this growing guilt (surprise, surprise). Anything I did could be used against me under these rules: if I didn't call her enough, if I told anyone (including my parents) about the money I gave her or the secrets she told me, even if I wasn't patient enough with the instant soup in the microwave and burned myself, it was all grounds to be deemed bad or sinful, and I should expect retribution from god.

My grandmother conflated her own expectations of me with god's, which would later lead me to avoid religion as I became more cognizant of her manipulative and damaging behaviors.

When you are raised to believe someone is always watching and that someone will punish you when you do something bad, that belief has a tendency to seep into areas of your life not related to morals or religion. Guilt and worry become the primary way you interpret things and hijack the way you make decisions. My guilt may not necessarily be Catholic anymore, but it is Catholic in training and pedigree.

3. Thou Shalt Not Drink

Once I got sober, I was forced to reckon with my fragmented relationship with religion. As you may have gathered from the opening of this chapter, religion and spirituality make up a large part of Alcoholics Anonymous. As someone who thinks about words a lot, I think it quite paradoxical that Step 3 states: "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him" (59 *Alcoholics Anonymous*). Clearly, the authors are trying to make room for something other than capital-G-God for those of us not totally sold on the idea, but the words themselves backtrack out of that effort. Not only do we have "God," with the capital G; we also have "as we understood Him," with a capital-H and implying the idea of a traditionally patriarchal religion. For me, it also did not help that the Big Book has a "To the Wives" chapter, as if only men can suffer from alcoholism and their wives need an instruction manual on how to support them instead of dumping their alcoholic asses. Still, in my religion-rebel stage, I made my thoughts and feelings known to my new AA sponsor. Thankfully, she had once also been an angry 23-year-old and knew how to move around my prickly disposition and Trojan-horse me into some kind of spiritual relationship. Because capital-G-God was associated in my mind with shame, authority, my maternal grandmother, and the Catholic Church, it felt like a regression for

me to go back to those beliefs and that relationship. Instead of pushing me right away to examine my history with religion, my sponsor suggested that I think up something I could still use as a Higher Power, explaining that some people at first use AA and the people in AA in general as their Higher Power: something bigger than themselves they can count on. I decided to make the women in AA my Higher Power, not only because women's meetings were my favorite, but also because it felt like a subtle way to be contrarian and still be spiritually evolved.

In lieu of my old relationship with religion, I started learning more about spirituality and where it could be found. I tried to find peace and comfort in the city of Chicago, in the bus and L rides I took to the church basements where my meetings were held, in the ivy that surrounded the university buildings where I worked, in the music I listened to, in the writing my sponsor assigned me to try to repair my relationship with myself, religion, family, and even Portugal. When I started to forgive myself, I was able to look back, to reflect on how I got to this point, and the things I needed to welcome back into my life or cut out.

Eventually, I would turn to my inner child to repair my relationship with god. I had to remember what it felt like to have that relationship, and the disillusionment that eventually came with it as my scope of religion widened. At a certain point in my life, religion meant safety, protection, stability, and someone to turn to. It was comfort and warmth. To fix my relationship with god, I had to recognize and assert that my relationship to god was personal and not structural or institutional, and that it could leave room for other ways of finding acceptance, peace, and trust.

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You may be wondering: would I still consider myself a Catholic? Some things certainly stuck: guilt, superstitions, the feeling of constantly doing something bad. But I wouldn't consider

myself a practicing Catholic. Maybe I'm a recovering Catholic or a cultural Catholic, like my mother. I've certainly expanded my understanding of religion, connection, and spirituality, so even if I considered myself a Catholic, it would only be a part of my spiritual identity. In a strange way, Catholicism is a means to hold on to a piece of home in America, where there are more versions of Christianity than iPhone models.

I still keep a rosary in my car, mostly because I'm a horrible driver and could use all the help I can possibly get.

Chapter 4 : The Sentient Jukebox

Soundtrack:
John Mayer, “The Heart of Life”
John Mayer, “In Your Atmosphere”
Sara Bareilles, “King of Anything”
Sara Bareilles, “City”
James Morrison, “Undiscovered”
James Morrison, “Broken Strings”
James Morrison, “If You Don’t Wanna Love Me”
James Morrison, “Nothing Ever Hurt Like You”
Shakira, “Inevitable”
Jack Johnson, “Better Together”
Alicia Keys, “Doesn’t Mean Anything”
Laura Marling, “New Romantic”
The Beatles, “Golden Slumbers”
Ella Fitzgerald, “You Go to My Head”
Frank Sinatra, “My Funny Valentine”
Bon Jovi, “You Give Love a Bad Name”

Although I began speaking, and speaking profusely, earlier than most toddlers, I’ve struggled with my communication skills ever since I hit adolescence. Nothing is wrong with my speech or diction. In fact, by age eleven I had a strong command of three languages, and because I was an avid reader, I could carry conversations with a broad vocabulary, both orally and in written form. What I really had trouble with was expressing myself and my inner life. At some point in my tween years, I began to turn inward, and if you ask my family, the best form of expression I had at my command in those years was anger. My family members are still slightly terrified of me and my “moods,” which can be useful when I need to get across my need for silence and solitude as quickly as possible.

Because I had these issues with connecting and expressing the inner turmoil in my head, different art forms became my preferred method of connecting and communicating. In my

teenage years, my preferred art form was music. When I played music, when I sang, and when I eventually began writing my own music, I found a release from the walls I had somehow put up that prevented anything from getting inside and prevented anything from making its way out of me that wasn't tinted with angst or anger. I'm not sure when or how these walls developed, but I have a few theories.

The first theory is that my maternal grandmother actually laid the foundation for some of these walls. She purposefully attempted to vilify my mother and sever my relationship with her. By casting herself in the role of victim, my maternal grandmother was able to control the narrative of the relationship the three of us shared, especially since my mother refused to intervene for fear she would in turn sever my relationship with my grandmother. In hindsight, I see how painful this situation must have been for my mother, to know that her mother was working her manipulative magic on me to turn me against my mother, but realizing how few family members we had and not wanting to take away one with whom I spent so much time. On the other hand, my inner child often wishes my mother had taken action earlier. Doing so would've saved both of us a lot of trouble and saved me an array of emotional trauma, inflicted by someone I sought to protect. It is easier for me to see now that I was the one in need of protection, not the other way around. But my grandmother was a master of narratives and manipulation, and my eleven-year-old self stood no chance against her years of experience.

My second theory is that media and pop culture had an influence on how I should behave and act. Movies, TV shows, and even books (although I would say most predominantly in visual culture) often feature mysterious women whose difficulty in opening up is their main characteristic and what makes them irresistible to the male lead. Their trust issues are what makes them worth relentlessly pursuing. As in *No Strings Attached,* with Natalie Portman and

Ashton Kutcher, or in any godforsaken Nicholas Sparks film adaptation, if the male leads can be the ones to save the women from their lack of trust, to make them open up again, then they have won the biggest prize. Whether purposefully or not, I latched on to this idea that a) no one could be trusted, and b) if you were worth knowing, getting to know you had to be troublesome.

In all the art forms I admired and sought refuge in, whether music, or books, or comedy, I've always had an obsession with proximity. I think it's because I felt so close to what a song expressed, or to the experiences behind a joke, that I felt I was inherently close to the person who created it, even if we couldn't have been further apart. Music was my first chosen method of communication, and I often fantasized about what a conversation would be like with Sara Bareilles, or James Morrison, or John Mayer. These imaginary talks always focused on what the musician could teach me, how they did what they did so that I could absorb their knowledge and do it, too. I'm fascinated with the inside of the machine rather than the shiny outside or the complete picture, and my fascination was (and is) always tinged with a desire to connect. I never felt very seen in my teenage years. You know, like every other teenager. I didn't have a great deal of musical friends, and even the ones who were musical loved music a reasonable amount, in contrast to my own desire to be overwhelmed by it, constantly. I once came to school after figuring out how to harmonize (although I did not have a name for it at the time) and tried to tell my friend how exciting it was that if the record played one note and I sang another, sometimes it made an utterly satisfying new sound.[1] The record in question was "The Heart of Life," a song by John Mayer. I found even more connection and relief when I started writing my own music,

[1] When my advisor asked me to specify the time in my life in which this happened, I was unsure if this moment had taken place in the 9th, 10th, or 11th grade. Then I remembered that it was around the time I had gotten into John Mayer, which was a few months before his album Battle Studies came out in 2009, placing this moment sometime in the late 10th grade or early 11th). This goes to show that even my measurement of time, or finding myself in time, was done through music—when my favorite albums were released, what concerts I had just attended, what song I had performed at a school event.

although this would lead to dreams where I met some of my idols and they absolutely hated the songs I wrote. Fear of failure crept in even in my own little sanctuary.

It didn't help my attempts to learn about music, or make connections through music, that my school's music program was the equivalent of trying to teach music to raccoons. Neither the teacher nor the student was very interested in or suited to the task at hand. It was common knowledge that choir was the class you took for an easy A. The other electives, art or drama, required more effort or had scarier teachers. It was harder to fake a clay sculpture than to move your mouth and pretend to sing.

I don't blame the teachers for their inability to provide a musical education that might closer resemble the programs America can offer, depending on the school and the school district. When I met a girl in college who went to a fine arts high school, I thought, "They have those?" My second thought was, "Did you get to sing your way out of calc?"

I had two teachers during my tenure in choir. I pity the first. She caught me at the stage when as much as I loved music, it was still cool to dislike choir and I really did not need to seem even stranger by being enthusiastic about it. I also suffered from horrible stage fright and was petrified of the thought of singing loud enough for someone else to hear.

One year, I auditioned for a solo in the Christmas performance. It was choir's biggest affair; we rented out an auditorium, and on the day of the performance, we didn't have to attend school so we could practice at the venue. I was given the solo and had my name printed on the program. When I chickened out two days before the performance and told my teacher I would not be able to perform (because in that moment I would have probably rather taken a shit on that stage than sing on it), I'm pretty sure she thought about wringing my neck. She replaced me with

a girl who also had my first name, and I always wondered if she did so simply to save face and claim the last name was a typo in case anyone asked.

The next time I would attempt a performance would be at the yearly talent show in my sophomore year. I auditioned past the deadline. My teacher, the same one I had previously left hanging with a bunch of useless programs, made an exception and still heard my audition. I really only made it to the audition because of peer pressure. It turns out some people thought it was kind of cool I could sing, and I turned into a musical pet of sorts. My friend sat in the audition with me to make sure I didn't escape, and my teacher offered to play the piano part for me since I hadn't planned that far in advance.

On the day of the talent show, I was planning to wear the same outfit I had worn to school that day: jeans, my Chuck Taylors, a brown sweater with a white camisole underneath. Yes, I was a 15-year-old wearing a camisole. I was an awkward middle-aged woman stuck in the body of an awkward teenage girl. Add to the image my dorky, 2000s librarian glasses, which were the only things my friends could not change about my outfit. In hindsight, having my vision impaired might have helped with the stage fright. Is it scarier to sing to people whose features you can make out, or to shapes and blobs you're pretty sure are people?

My friends put me in a navy dress with a beige cardigan and boots and sent me off to the races. I still had to wear my camisole under the dress because the dress had a very deep cleavage, and the last thing my stage fright needed was for my boob to pop out mid-song. I still was not really quite sure what difference jeans or a dress would make for my performance, but have you ever tried fending off a group of girls trying to dress you? You can't—you just sit there and wait for it to be over, like Catholic mass but with fewer snacks.

Things felt very different to me after that performance.

Perhaps for the first time ever, I felt like people were listening and seeing me for who I was and who I wanted to be. But as soon as I stepped off that stage and shut my mouth, others were back to making their own assumptions. I felt that I had control over how people perceived me and that people cared what I was emoting—anger, or sadness, or power—only when I performed. When I sang, it was the only time they listened. It didn't matter if the songs were written by me or if I was covering someone else's song. In those performances, what mattered was that the emotions I held in my body were finally finding their release and making me simultaneously transparent in the vulnerability of my performance and less see-through. If before I felt like a human bulletin board, having those around me tack on their suggestions, thoughts, and narratives of who I was and who I should be, performing burned that board to the ground. Even if just for three and a half minutes. Or perhaps it is the other way around: performing made me care less about this board and its endless suggestions because I myself was surest of who I was when I performed. My voice was not just amplified so that others could hear me, but so that I could hear myself, too.

When I started performing, people also began treating me differently. Classmates I didn't get along with, or was mostly ignored by, high-fived me after performances. I guess they began to see something other than a self-righteous know-it-all (I truly was a nuisance in literature classes), or perhaps they overlooked my self-righteousness because of the more pleasant sounds I made outside of literature class. I saw an opportunity to outgrow the label of "daughter of celebrity" or "English class bitch" for something a little cooler like "librarian glasses songstress."

The last seismic change from that performance followed me all the way home. While I was scared of performing in front of relative strangers, I was absolutely petrified of performing in front of my family. Performing music necessitated for me a kind of vulnerability. When I

played music, I felt almost transparent, and like every emotion was visible. Having always tried to make my parents see me as responsible, stoic, and keeping most of my inner turmoil, well… inner, I jeopardized this cover by performing music in front of them. Or maybe it was a simpler fear of failure: if I failed in front of strangers, I wouldn't have to be faced with their disappointment. However, if I failed in front of my family, I'd be faced with that disappointment every night at dinner, from the people I truly wanted to impress in the first place.

My sister was the only one I told about my performance and the only one who was there to see it. A few weeks later, my mother found out and was furious. My school was very small (I think my graduating class had 45 students) and most of us lived around the same area, so it was not uncommon for us and our parents to run into each other. Shortly after my debut, my mom was grocery shopping when she ran into my friend's mother, who couldn't stop gushing about how wonderful my performance had been and who knew I could sing like that. My mother's fury was another case of someone pinning a thought on me: "What will the other mothers think of me if my own daughter hides her performances from me?" Her reaction shifted the focus once again to someone else; the focus was no longer my singing: the only thing that felt like my own.

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Music served as a kind of translation; it translated my inner life and thoughts to others in a tangible way: melodies, lyrics, tempo, volume. It made me feel visible when I often felt silenced or closed off. It allowed me to make order and clarity out of the infinite chaos in my mind. Although I've become much better at expressing my thoughts and communicating (due in large part to Alcoholics Anonymous), I still rely largely on music and songwriting to process events, thoughts, and moods. Nothing is quite as cathartic to me as writing, especially songwriting.

Two songs that I've written come to mind as especially cathartic, not only to me and my perception of a situation, but also in the way they helped others around me to really see me and understand me: "Shoulders" and "As the Waves Sing."

I wrote "Shoulders" about a year after I ended a very damaging, toxic relationship. I had recently found out that he was dating someone new, and while I wanted nothing to do with this motherfucker who stole years of my life, I kept thinking about her. In fact, the very first verse reflects how much I was consumed by thoughts of her, particularly whether she would have a similarly horrible experience:

"Been so many months since I felt you on my skin

Wondering who loves you now, if she'll be where I've been."

Thinking about 'her' (really a hypothetical 'her' since I knew nothing about her except her new affiliation with this person I had unfortunately come to know all too well), led me to think about this relationship I had stayed in for so long; why or how had I let it go on for that long when I was miserable, when I was constantly made to feel unworthy, isolated, small? After spending the better part of a year trying to forget the relationship and the suffering it brought, I was forced to contend with it again because of this new information: the possibility that he would be hurting someone again in the same way I had been hurt. The song gets its title from the following lyrics, which distill my three-year experience with this man into two lines:

"Made myself small, tore myself down so you could feel tall

What a big man, standing on the shoulders of your love."

"Shoulders" helped me understand that it was okay to have loved someone who hurt me deeply, that I was allowed to be sad about the end of a relationship that was so toxic and damaging. I cried a lot writing it because reliving those moments was painful, but by the time I

finished the song, I was crying because I had finally allowed myself to feel sad about the end of a relationship with someone I loved, rather than because someone hurt me. For the longest time, I thought I couldn't be sad about the relationship ending because I was so much better off now that this person was no longer in my life. I had finally made the right choice by walking away, and any pain I felt should be reserved for the pain I had already experienced and the consequences of that pain on my present and future self. Writing "Shoulders," however, allowed the new pain to exist, the pain of coming to terms with a three year relationship ending, even if it was a horrible one.

If "Shoulders" is cathartic because it helped me connect to a part of myself and an event that I had suppressed, "As the Waves Sing" is cathartic because I finally had the medium to convey a feeling that hovered over me for the better part of ten years: a depression from my continued fight for validation through academic pursuits. It is also a song that speaks to both my obsession with and my fear of figurative and literal drowning. "As the Waves Sing" gets its title from the music, the song that the waves sing "as they carry me down." It is a heartbreaking song in the way that it signals the speaker (me) giving in to the water, tired from trying "to keep my potential from engulfing me, [when] out here at sea it's like concrete on my feet." But in the way that this song acts as a translation between my inner life and the way others perceive me, it is a triumph, not a song about loss or giving in. I have never been good at opening up to my parents, particularly in regards to anything I have struggled with. For this reason, they've always thought any issues I had with my academic work were minor, rather than the all-encompassing distress, depression, and existential dread I actually experienced. After I played them this song, however, my parents were finally able to understand my feelings, which the song made undeniable. I may lie or seek to hide, but my music cannot.

Music has the ability to place us in the most specific of moments with the most specific of emotions. A wonderful sense of satisfaction emerges from finishing something that contains so much in such a condensed form. “As the Waves Sing” contains layers of emotion, of experience, and it’s all conveyed in about four minutes. And in each iteration, in each performance, it’s possible to change the music, to add a different interpretation. In a way, my songs are like their own mini-memoirs. I relive everything again every time I play one of them, while imbuing it with the sense of the present-me that performs it.

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When I lost my ability to make music, I was truly lost. I had gone to the Berklee College of Music expecting to expand my musical knowledge, to get an opportunity to make a living out of my love for music. Instead, I found myself falling behind, not necessarily in vocal or songwriting abilities, but in the more formal elements of music. I didn’t know how to read music, how to play scales, or what bass clef was. I essentially had to learn a new language, and I spent most of my time doing this incredibly difficult and annoying work instead of writing or playing music. I passed classes based on the kindness of my roommates and friends, who helped me write charts and sight-read music, and on the kindness of professors who saw that despite still doing so terribly, I was working hard. I was often the only person in my professors’ office hours, and I had to visit often just to be able to keep up with weekly lessons.

I wonder if my vocal lessons had been more rewarding, or if I had the ability to make better musical connections with other students (many of them started bands together and played gigs together), I would have stuck around and finished my degree. Instead, my first two vocal instructors often made me cry, telling me no one would ever want to work with me in a recording studio or that I needed to learn to sing jazz before I could sing pop properly. One even suggested

that I return my copy of Sara Bareilles's songbook for a jazz standards book. I had no problem singing jazz; I really enjoyed it, but according to my instructor, I sang it in a way that was inappropriate, too popified. Interestingly, my high school music teacher once told me I was singing in choir in a way that was too jazzified. Whatever I was doing, clearly I was doing it wrong, and it soon got to the point where nothing about music gave me joy or made me feel good about myself, and I decided to leave Berklee. It was an incredibly competitive environment, and on top of everything else, I was away from my family, adapting to a country I had only moved to because of this one school.

I am not good at being in the midst of the learning process. This may seem like an oxymoron considering that I've been a student for my entire life, but I've been a student in things I was already good at: interpreting, arguing, reading. The kind of learning I did at Berklee required me to learn skills, a language, I had not dabbled in before, while everyone else already spoke it fluently. I like being good at things, efficient. At Berklee, not only was I stuck in the learning process; there was nothing making it worthwhile. I wanted to feel smart again, and the way I knew how to do that was academia, and literature. With this in mind, I transferred to Emerson College, where I slid comfortably back into my close readings, theoretical concepts, and feminist interpretations of literature.

Somewhere between my first and second year at Berklee, I had moved further and further from the music I wanted to make, to the point where I could not make any music at all. I would panic just from holding my guitar or from trying to write a lyric to go with a melody in my head. I felt like a failure, as if quitting Berklee was the mark that anything musical in me had not only failed but died. It took me a long time to make my way back to this lifegiving art form. It took hours in therapists' (yes, plural) offices, and even moving away from Boston, for me to rebuild

my relationship to music. Most of all, it just took time. The more time passed, the less it would hurt, and the less ashamed I would be of quitting. I learned that sometimes quitting is not a weakness but the strength of knowing when to say when, knowing how to give yourself permission to walk away and heal. In the meantime, I took comfort again in my beloved books, happy that I could understand them, that they could still speak to me, and that I could talk about them with likeminded individuals for five days a week.

Eventually, comedy would speak to me in these same ways. It would become a lifeboat again when my love of books was not enough for me to succeed in the upper levels of academia, as a Master's student at the University of Chicago, and then as a PhD student at the University of Michigan. If music can place us in the most specific moments and emotions, I discovered that comedy can have similar effects. *She The People*, a Second City show, includes a sketch about two women being cat-called. Every time I watch that sketch, I am transported to the time I was cat-called by a passing truck in Chicago. The memory is so vivid that I remember exactly what I was wearing and can almost feel the cold Chicago air as I give this truck my best angry stare, not avoiding it or looking down, but actually hoping to light this truck, and the men honking inside of it, on fire with my feminine rage. As I watched the Second City sketch, it was almost as if comedy became Althusserian in nature: this sketch was 'hailing' me to contend with moments in my life when I had been cat-called, interpellated as sex object, as an object of a man's desire, at his disposal.

While I had connections to music as both listener and performer, my connection with comedy was mostly as a consumer until I started this project. Even though I would consider this project comedic, it still feels very different from something more traditionally performative, like stand-up. Writing a comedic memoir, however, felt like a natural process in part because of how

humor, like music, has become part of how I relate to the world. My fascination with comedy, perhaps not coincidentally, started at the height of my alcoholism and my early sobriety, and it also quickly became focused on women's comedy. I found it extremely comforting to see a woman taking up space on a stage in a way that was different from how I had been accustomed to doing it with music, and I was just as captivated by female stand-up comics as I had been in music concerts.

The first comedy show I became truly obsessed with was *30 Rock*. I watched my first episode in 2015, and after the first episode when the main character, Liz Lemon (played by Tina Fey), buys a whole hotdog cart's worth of hotdogs out of principle and to spite rule-breakers, I quite literally ate, breathed, and slept *30 Rock*. I mean it, I would fall asleep with the show playing in the background, and it would keep me company during any meals in my apartment. The fact that the show was short and light offered a contrast to how heavy my life felt as an alcoholic grad student. When I got sober, I further cemented my love not just of comedy, but of how humor played a role in my life, particularly in AA. I, like many others in AA, used comedy in an attempt to temper the difficulties of getting sober but also to connect with others in those rooms not just through shared difficulties but through shared laughter.

My affinity with comedy would become my Trojan horse in academia, a rebellion of sorts—first by studying comedians like Hannah Gadsby and Amy Schumer, and then by writing a highly unusual comedic dissertation. If I took comfort in watching women perform stand-up, because of the way they took up narrative and social space with their stories and voices, and I knew how it felt to do that on a stage through music, I wanted to try and replicate that feeling in an art form I had spent years studying: the comedic memoir. While writing may not be immediately considered performative, it overlaps with the kind of performance I was used to in

music and that I saw in women's stand-up. For instance, my use of the second-person, of directly addressing the reader in my writing, is an effort to create the intimacy or directness of stand-up. Further, the simple act of taking up space that I appreciated in women's performance is still present in writing: these words exist on my computer, on a potentially printed piece of paper, but more importantly, they have the potential to echo (and live rent-free!) in a reader's head.

Written comedy (such as a comedic memoir) as opposed to traditionally performed comedy (such as stand-up) also has the potential to be performative on the scale of the humor itself. You'll excuse me for getting meta for a second, as I analyze one of my own jokes from this very dissertation:

In "The Grandmother Paradox," you[2] came across a joke about motherhood: "If my offspring are anything like me, we're both blessed and deeply fucked. It seems only natural to conclude there is a 'Best Mom' mug in my future, wouldn't you say?" To point out the obvious, there is the second person, a direct hailing of the reader, to increase the feeling that this is a conversation and the reader is in on the joke. To go deeper, however, this joke, though at first glance praises my potentially unusual mothering skills through exaggeration and opposition ("best mom" and "blessed" versus "deeply fucked"), also touches on the profound insecurities I explored about motherhood, particularly passing on my less than ideal genetic qualities (read: alcoholism, depression, among other fun[3] ones). If I felt I couldn't hide when I performed music, comedy—even in this written form—works slightly differently, as it gives me both cover and truth. In this joke, for instance, the humor—the exaggeration, the opposition, and the deflection

[2] There's that second person voice! Does this feel intimate to you yet?
[3] A joke within the analysis of a joke.

to the reader by ending the joke in "wouldn't you say"—allows me to face the tension between my strong desire for and fear of motherhood.

Both music and comedy feel useful—life-giving, even—to me in the way they are both transformative. When I write and perform music, I am able to take some of the worst emotions in my body and make something beautiful out of them. Similarly, I can use humor as a safety net, a way to ease the tension in difficult conversations and make way for connection where before there was only fear and isolation. In all these art forms—music, comedy, and even writing in a more general sense—I have found a tangible way to connect both with myself and others. I once outsourced the fulfillment I felt from these acts, particularly with music. At Berklee, it often felt like music became something I wanted to be recognized for, rather than something I did because it was how I made sense of myself and the world around me. Sometimes it feels slightly dangerous to put this dissertation—a work that features writing, comedy, and music—up for academic debate, almost as if there is potential for my relationship with these art forms to sour again if I don't receive positive feedback. Yet, the work that I've done on myself through writing this dissertation allows me to see this project as an invitation for connection with others rather than how it felt at Berklee, which was an invitation for judgement by others. That shift—from criticism to connection—is key in my willingness to offer up this work and the pieces of myself within it.

Chapter 5 : Things I've Learned While Writing a Memoir(ish)

Soundtrack:
El Sueño de Morfeo, "Nunca Volverá"
Maisie Peters, "Look At Me Now"
5 Seconds of Summer, "CAROUSEL"

1. I've had to up my sleeping medication. Since I started rummaging around in my head, trying to make meaning of my experiences and the past, I have more violent dreams and have a harder time falling asleep. Last night, I dreamt I was stuck in the bottom bunk of my freshman year bunkbed and was being suffocated by a stray pillow. Sometimes, I relive memories in my dreams, although with some alterations. For example, my maternal grandmother once left me a voicemail in which she screamed all manner of insults at me. The other day, I dreamt she had a similar tirade, but I only saw her giant disembodied head, like a bobble-head on acid. I keep reliving one memory, in particular, in my dreams: I am standing by the microwave in my maternal grandmother's house in Northern Portugal, heating up Cup Noodles. She is yelling and calling me impulsive, probably because I was trying to eat the noodles before they were fully cooked or burned myself on them. Oftentimes, in the dream, I don't know what she is yelling, but I am frozen in time, standing perfectly still by that microwave.

I've come to the conclusion that my mind and my past are trying to kill me in my sleep, when I'm most vulnerable.

2. I am haunted by the question "Is this a feminist issue?" Because I am writing this memoir-like project to fulfill a Women's and Gender Studies PhD requirement, I feel like I

should be saying brilliant things about feminism and gender issues. Before I started writing, I saw my experience with eating disorders as an isolated issue. Sure, I was aware that society creates toxic narratives about body image, but I didn't think my experiences would necessarily count as feminist knowledge or even be related to larger narratives about body image issues. However, two years after writing my first chapter, I see that this is precisely where the feminist value of a project based on writing and self-reflection lives. It has been through the process of writing that I have been able to theorize both about ways in which gender, racial, national, and economic subject positions shaped my own experience, and about ways in which I have navigated these experiences. Writing about these experiences has been a kind of consciousness raising. It has not only validated my experience and self-knowledge but also created knowledge for others. This dialogue, both inward and outward, is feminist not just due to the content and my subject position as woman, but also because of its relational nature. The feminist dimension of this work comes in part from its unwavering reaching out, in its attempt to discuss what sometimes feels unauthorized, particularly from certain subject positions, such as disordered eating or alcoholism.

With my previous dissertation project, my advisors repeatedly asked me to articulate my contributions to the field of feminist theory. What are your feminist methods? What's your feminist question? What feminist theorists are you drawing from and expanding upon? Now, I also ask these questions of my life. In conversations with female comedians, I asked if they specifically set out to write feminist material. Several said they don't set out with that intention because it can make the comedy feel forced, but Sayjal Joshi told me that because she is a feminist, everything she writes will be tinged with that perspective. Everything she creates will be filtered through her and her experiences, including her experiences as someone who identifies

as a woman and mixed-race. Still, I worry that an assertion like this one is not enough for my dissertation committee, and I spend hours teasing out the intersectional feminist dimensions of the moment when I was groped on an airplane or the moments when men try to take advantage of me in AA meetings. I try to remind myself that it is feminist practice to validate self-knowledge and that I wouldn't force other women to apply this question—is this feminist enough?—to their experiences.

3. I have become annoyingly aware of my thoughts and of my body. Any time my mind shifts to the past, I am inclined to write it down. It's exhausting. If I was aware of my body before because of, well, being a woman,[1] now it's like someone turned the knob all the way up. I hear myself narrating what I'm doing in my head. I was making a sandwich the other day when I found myself thinking, "As she carefully laid out the turkey on the bread, she thought about how many calories were in a spoonful of mayo." Now that I've started narrating my life, it appears I can't shut off the narration, which is terrible. It's like I'm in my own *Twilight Zone* episode but without the ominous music or an overarching theme. Just turkey sandwiches and self-loathing. Maybe that should be the title of my memoir.

4. Chronology has ceased to exist/has become complicated. Spending a lot of time not only moving between present and past but also within different timestamps of the past means that I am constantly inhabiting different 'selves.' When I am writing about my maternal grandmother, I am momentarily thirteen again and hearing her say she's going to shoot her

[1] Refer to "Strawberry Jam Cookies" chapter for more information on body issues.

husband and then herself. When I am writing about a shitty, controlling ex-boyfriend, I am 23 and scared and alone. When I am writing about falling in love with comedy, I am 25 and semi-happily gaining weight after early sobriety and being single for the first time since I was eighteen. I inhabit these memories so that I feel three "me"s rumbling inside my brain: the one who lived it (the one I try to tease out), the one remembering it (the one who did the teasing), and the one writing it all down (the one who will make it sound clever and try to make feminist meaning out of these experiences).

In *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr speaks of these fragments of self, arguing that:

> the split self or inner conflict must manifest on the first pages and form the book's thrust or through line—some journey toward the self's overhaul by book's end. However random or episodic a book seems, a blazing psychic struggle holds it together, either thematically or in the way a plot would keep a novel rolling forward. Often the inner enemy dovetails with the writer's own emotional investment in the work at hand. Why is she driven to tell the tale? Usually it's to go back and recover some lost aspect of the past so it can be integrated into current identity. (92)

Several scholars, such as Paul John Eakin, Sid Smith and Julia Watson, and Leigh Gilmore, have discussed the multiplicity of selves, particularly the split between the writing/narrating self and the past self, in life writing studies, but what Karr says here points to an idea that rings true to me in my motivations for writing a memoir: writing can mend a conflict within the self. When I first got sober, I used to carry around this Sylvia Plath quote in my wallet: "What I want back is what I was." (Plath 13) (Put aside for a second how cliché my love of Sylvia Plath is.) As I worked to regain some sense of control over my life by acknowledging my lack of control when it came to alcohol, I held on to this idea that I could work my way back to a better version of myself, maybe one that was still tinged with youthful idealism. While I see this memoir that I'm writing as a way back to something, I don't know if it's necessarily back to a better version of myself.

When I proposed this project to my first dissertation chair, I explained it as a way to regain the sense of self and agency I lost over years of giving myself away to institutions like academia. I wanted to write and sing and laugh my way back to something that felt solid and familiar and strong, something I could recognize as myself and maybe something new as well. In my more traditional dissertation about female comedians, I hypothesized that comedic life writing gave authors a sense of regained agency, a feeling of ownership over their narratives. At some point in the past ten years, I lost that sense of agency in my own life. In looking to Plath and Karr, what I want back is not necessarily "what I was" but maybe, instead, my ability to lay claim to who I am, whoever that is. We're still in the editing process, so feel free to skip to the last chapter for the final reveal if the suspense is killing you. (Spoiler alert: I figure out I am *actually* the reincarnation of Sylvia Plath but much more vulgar.)

5. The comedic potential of my stories is not a given. I think about Hannah Gadsby's special, *Nanette*, in which she talks about shaping traumatic events in her life into jokes for her audiences and the toll that doing so has taken on her. Karr also argues that "painful events told for humor can be drained of the real pathos or terror they first registered with" (7). Humor in these instances is reflexive; it is added in later upon reflection and with some distance.

Some days, I think I can write up a hilarious twist on my experiences with academia or moving to America, but on other days, I am consumed by the loneliness of my job and the fear of not being able to stay in the country I've lived in for the past ten years. I could write and rewrite the same event, with a different tone, depending on how I'm feeling that day. In this way, writing this memoir feels similar to writing and performing music. Every time I perform a song I have written, I am reminded of the moment when I wrote it and the feelings that motivated me to write

that song. But every performance is also imbued with my current interpretation of that music and lyrics. Like performing music, comedic life writing consists of constant and imperfect repetition and reinterpretation.

6. My relationship to writing has started to change. At perhaps the lowest point in my academic career, I started having a violent, physical aversion to my work. I couldn't look at a draft of my dissertation chapter without throwing up and having panic attacks. Even before that point, my relationship to writing was one of necessity: I dreaded writing, but it was a crucial part of finishing my PhD and of getting my thoughts across in the academic world. While I started truly dreading writing during my PhD, I didn't have a happy relationship with it before that time, either. As I was earning my Master's, I was told that my writing was confusing even though the ideas I was trying to express were good. About one year into my PhD program, I was being told the opposite: my writing was typically clear, but my ideas were simplistic and didn't offer anything new or exciting. With these contradictory evaluations and no direct advice on how to improve, my hatred and fear of writing continued to grow.

I haven't fully overcome my writing-phobia with this new project. In fact, my fear of rejection is slightly heightened considering how personal the writing has become. Nonetheless, I find myself writing every day and looking forward to discussing the writing with other people. I even look forward to the editing process and rewriting, which used to paralyze me before. Now that the "so what" of my writing has become so personal, I've found a new way to approach previous questions about feminist comedic life writing. Many of my questions about female agency, narrative, and identity remain the same, but investigating them through the lens of the personal feels new and purposeful. It was in the act of writing comedic memoir—by becoming

both the researcher and the subject—that I was able to get a better sense not only of the possibilities for female agency and identity in the genre, but also its challenges. I'm sure this relationship is bound to change as I continue writing and editing, but for now, it feels less like hellfire on my skin than it used to feel before. (Spoiler alert: my relationship to writing continues to shift, and sometimes I have to sit for weeks without writing, lest it drive me into insanity or I remain forever stuck in one of my memories. Go ahead and skip to "In the Jell-O Palace" for proof.)

Chapter 6 : Desk Rituals

Soundtrack:
Sebastián Yatra, "TV"
Sebastián Yatra, Rauw Alejandro y Manuel Turizo, "TBT"
Camilo y Pedro Capó, "Tutu"
Caracol Televisión y Guita, "Fijación"
Caracol Televisión y Guita, "Siete Vidas"
Gelo Arango, "Fénix"
James Morrison, "Right By Your Side"

A candle gifted by my sponsor, that says "You Make the World a Better Place"

A sticker, also gifted by my sponsor, that says "Beautiful girl, you can do hard things"

A postcard from my sponsor, celebrating one of my AA anniversaries

A arrangement of stones:

A tiny, round carnelian

A jagged piece of crystal quartz

A large chunk of purple amethyst

A rectangular slab of selenite, gifted by the owner of a meditation store after I told her about my writing project

A rough, shiny piece of labradorite

A pen holder that looks like the classic Bic pen cap, gifted by my family one Christmas

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous

A Woman's Way Through the Twelve Steps

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions

Tina Fey's Bossypants

A tiny piece of paper where I wrote "The best dissertation is a DONE dissertation"

A picture of my paternal grandmother, with a birthday cake

A picture of my sister and me, wearing our school uniforms, being hugged by our dad

A picture of my family at my sister's college graduation

A picture of my dad and me at my high school graduation

A picture of my mom and me before my master's graduation

A picture of my dad's 34th birthday

A picture of my mom, on top of a step, resting her elbows on my dad's shoulders

A postcard from my sister, which came with a dozen cupcakes, to motivate me to write my dissertation

A sticker that says "Espresso Yourself"

A framed Tina Fey quote: "Bitches Get Shit Done."

Sebastián Yatra's *Dharma* album blasting on my headphones, interspersed with some songs from the TV show *La Reina del Flow.*

My dogs, usually one on each side. Kenny on his armchair, Bubba on a cat bed.

Labradorite is known to be a stone of spiritual connection, of protection, of transformation. But before it graced my desk with its protective properties, all my other knickknacks shared that task. All rest in easy line of sight for when I look away, for when I come up for air from my dissertation. They are constant reminders that I am loved, that someone believes in me, even if I don't most of the time.

Cheerleaders, protectors, come in many forms. They can come in the form of a tiny, wiener dog, or a lanky Labrador. Of melodies in my headphones that my body can't resist moving to. Of stills, snapshots of moving moments of celebration.

Or they may come as a greasy slice of pizza brought to me by my boyfriend, who never fails to read whatever chapter I put in front of him, my Protector from Typos, in shining sweatpants armor.

With lips covered in pizza grease, I dive back into the writing, knowing these charms, in all their varying shapes and forms, will keep me from being pulled by the undertow of my own memories.

Chapter 7 : Strawberry Jam Cookies

Soundtrack:
Lily Allen, “Hard Out Here”
Maggie Rogers, “Back in My Body”
Olivia Rodrigo, “Brutal”

1.

I don’t remember the first time I was photographed for a newspaper or tabloid magazine, but I do remember the last.

My family and I were vacationing with some friends in Madeira, a Portuguese island, the summer before I went off to college. We didn’t notice someone taking a picture of us while we played at the beach. I now imagine someone lurking behind the big sand dunes, peeping and creeping through a camera, their elbows digging into the sand as they tried to get a clearer shot of my dad. It’s an image that sits between a cartoon and a noir film.

I was simply the collateral damage, caught in the line of fire of a big media machine that is obsessed with tracking celebrities in order to tell you they are either just like you or not at all like you, depending on the ‘journalist’s’ mood or the context they dream up for you.

Or maybe my figure in that frame was intentional. To tell the readers, “Look, he is a family man. Look how he swims with his daughter in the ocean. They are just like us.” Either way, I was never intended to be the focus of the image or the story. At best, I was a useful prop that helped them to weave a catchy narrative and sell vapid magazines.

We were not aware of the pictures for the remainder of our trip. I only saw them after a friend from school pointed them out to me.

Did I mention we were at the beach? This fact is important for this next part. Because we were at the beach, and we are "just like you," we were wearing (gasp) beach attire! I don't even have to close my eyes to tell you the details of the picture. I was wearing an olive-green bikini with thin stripes that you could only see up close. I looked at this picture close enough many times. The ties of the bikini imitated the texture of rope, with knotted tassels at the string's end and a single wooden bead.

It has been ten years since I have seen this picture. But I remember that they captured me and my dad in the same position: standing near the water with our hands at our hips. In another photo, we are laying on our backs, and I am relieved that my stomach looks flatter.

I still sometimes hold my hands on my hips at the beach, as I wade into the water. Most likely, though, they are crossed above my stomach, in a casual effort to conceal it.

I should note that my face is blurred in these images. Because I was only seventeen, the magazine could not print my face without permission from me or my parents. But I guess the law permits them to print a more demure image than my facial features: my half-naked body.

The fact that only my body was on photographic display (without my permission) doesn't actually mean that much to me. Even if my face had been kept intact, I still would have focused on the fact that it was my belly, my thighs, my breasts, and my upper arms that everyone, my classmates included, could now gawk at. This mattered to me because I'd spent my high school career almost as focused on my grades as I was on creating fashionable illusions that would distract from the aforementioned areas, what Cosmo might call my "problem areas."

Now, I was no stranger to low self-esteem, shame, constant awareness of my body, and disordered eating. But seeing this picture opened up a new door of self-loathing. The day I saw that picture was the first day I dabbled with bulimia. Well, first I actually tried returning to

anorexia, which I had been acquainted with many years back, and attempted to simply abstain from food. But at night I got so hungry that I ended up eating an inordinate amount of my favorite cookies,[1] downed with a glass of milk. Realizing what I had done, I proceeded to shove my finger down my throat in the solitude of my bathroom, to purge myself of my weakness. It turns out that I hate throwing up. I'm really not even very good at it, either. I tried one finger at first, which did nothing. I then tried two, pushed further inside my mouth, and I at least started to gag but nothing came out. And it's not like I don't have a gag reflex. Ask any guy I've blown and they can all attest to the fact that my mouth is about as shallow as the rest of me.

Still, I remained full and vomitless until I grabbed my toothbrush and, sliding it against my tongue, stuck it as far back as I could. It was then that a mere sampling of the cookies I had eaten came out in mushy and broken pieces. They stared at me from the bottom of the toilet bowl, shiny ruby-red jam, mocking me. Even after all that effort, I clearly had not been properly emptied. I thought there must be another way that isn't so hard on the teeth.

I still eat those cookies. Every time I go home, I head to the bakery that makes them and buy a dozen to enjoy during my visit or to bring back with me. If I learned anything at all from my brief stint with bulimia, it's that I fucking love strawberry jam cookies.

There would be other times in my adulthood when I would again turn to vomiting in an effort to purge myself. But most of the time, I used[2] it as a form of punishment rather than weight loss. The last time I forced myself to throw up, I had eaten a Five Guys cheeseburger, their incredible Cajun fries, and a peanut butter and Oreo milkshake. Soon after the last sip of that milkshake, I felt such an overwhelming feeling of disgust that I could not stand to inhabit

[1] The cookies are similar to the British Jammie Dodgers, but with almonds and powdered sugar on top.

[2] I wrote in the past tense here, saying "I've used it as a form of punishment" as if I have put these problems in the past. I haven't. I wouldn't say that I currently suffer from bulimia or anorexia, like I did in my teens, but my relationship with food is by no means healthy.

my own body along with the things I had just consumed. So, I dove head first into the toilet, and using my fingers this time, started ridding myself not so much of the food but of my lack of self-control. As I felt each breathless wave of puke rising up to my mouth, I thought to myself: "Remember what this feels like," in the hope that in the future, the experience would act like muscle memory and keep my mouth literally shut.

***

As I type "hunger" into Amazon's search bar, trying to find the Kindle version of Roxane Gay's book, *Hunger*, one of the suggestions that appears is "hunger suppressants for women," right after "The Hunger Games" and "The Hunger Games DVDs." That's it. That's the joke—Amazon has written it for me. But, because as we have already established, I cannot keep my mouth shut, I will add to this sad joke. What first strikes me about "hunger suppressants for women" is the fact that it's listed as "hunger" suppressants rather than "appetite" suppressants, which is how they are always referred to on the packaging. Because I just finished reading *Hungry: A Memoir of Wanting More*, by Grace Dent and have previously read *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body,* by Roxane Gay, I associate hunger/hungry with more than its connection to food. I sometimes read it as a desire or form of wanting that cannot be suppressed, whether that wanting be physical or otherwise, like in this quote from Gay's *Hunger*: "I did not go hungry even as I hungered for so much" (77).

"Appetite" sounds more distanced and removed, less passionate or overwhelming, but maybe I've just been making these associations in order to make myself feel better about the fact that I have bought and used these suppressants, and in order to disconnect these suppressants from the sad truth that I am constantly wanting to make myself smaller. As a feminist, I never want to think of myself as someone who is "suppressing," but it seems that I've spent a large part

of my life not just suppressing my appetite for food but possibly my appetite for "wanting more," as Grace Dent puts it in the title of her memoir.

The second thing that strikes me is that the listing appears as "hunger suppressants for women." Not "hunger suppressants." "Hunger suppressants *for women*." I don't know if men and women experience nutritional needs that differently, but it does seem that an overwhelming majority of diet supplements, supplements intended for thinning, are aimed at women. For example, most feature female bodies on the packaging and are brightly colored. By contrast, bulking supplements are usually aimed at men. When I type "bulking" into the Amazon search bar, the first search is for "bulking protein powder" while the second is "bulking supplements for men." The packaging for these supplements is mostly black, although some are white, and all feature fairly muted colors with the exception of some red lettering. To conclude my close reading of supplement labels: the marketing department for these products is clearly onto the fact that women are taught to make themselves smaller while men are taught to make themselves big and take up space.

The first time I was introduced to appetite suppressants and other diet supplements was actually by a nutritionist. I asked my parents to go to a nutritionist in either my junior or senior year of high-school. I called my mother to see if she remembered the year, and her response was, "You never went to a nutritionist." After a few minutes of "Yes I did" and "No you didn't," my mother finally remembered after I reminded her of where the clinic was located. It's funny that I still defer to my parents for knowledge that is so much more meaningful to me than to them.

At our initial appointment, after taking down my weight (which was healthy and normal, by the way, in accordance with arcane BMI standards), the nutritionist gave me a detailed meal plan, of which I only remember two details: breakfast was one piece of whole-wheat toast with

low-fat cottage cheese, and I was allowed one glass of skim-milk before bed. The nutritionist then told me where I could find these magic pills that I was supposed to take before any meal that could be deemed unhealthy. Supposedly, these supplements would block fat from being absorbed? I can't remember. To be honest, as soon as he told me there was a pill I could take that could counteract the calories in my food, I stopped listening to the scientific explanation and just wrote down where I could get them.

I had never before had reason to enter the store "O Celeiro" (literal translation: The Barn) because as a sixteen-year-old, I had no interest in organic foods and supplements. However, after this nutritionist told me I could buy these diet pills there, with no prescription or adult supervision, O Celeiro became my new favorite store. It was a relatively average-sized store, probably about the size of any GNC or Vitamin Shoppe in America. (Who the fuck are they kidding with that extra "pe"? No one in olden times was buying slim shakes or ketone urine strips. They were too busy dying of syphilis.) But to me it felt like a magical kingdom of opportunity with walls stacked ceiling-high with appetite suppressants, diuretics and laxatives, meal replacement shakes, energy supplements, and cellulite-busting creams that made my butt cheeks burn and itch.

My binge eating and food hoarding got progressively worse following the first nutritionist consultation. The first night, along with my glass of skim milk, I had a square of a chocolate bar, which I had hidden in a dresser drawer. Thinking back on it now, I'm not sure why I started hiding food in my room. It's not that we didn't keep junk food in the house. I could go to the kitchen and find chips and chocolate. But after going to the nutritionist and being given a new plan for how to eat in order to make myself smaller, I knew it would be shameful to not follow it. The first night, I told myself the piece of chocolate was like a last supper, that I

wouldn't do it again. But, if anything, I started indulging more and more, and more secretly, than before the nutritionist. The reason for this was the increased pressure the nutritionist created, which consisted of two parts: first, I had added pressure to provide results—weight loss—because of the monetary investment in the nutritionist. Second, having an authority figure like a nutritionist confirm my belief that I should lose weight added even more urgency to my feelings of inadequacy and pressure to fit in. This added pressure and dislike of myself and my body became another trigger for my binge eating, which thrived on secrecy, shame, and my self-hatred.

I gave up on the nutritionist pretty quickly. It felt like a waste of money because I was not following the plan, and because I associated the nutritionist with shameful weigh-ins at his office, I grew to strongly dislike the guy. In the end, my experience with the nutritionist simply validated my certainty that I had no self-control and served as a gateway into the world of shiny diet products. I wish I could say I know better now, at 27, than I did at sixteen. But alas, just last week after feeling guilty about unfiltered holiday feasting, I purchased a $25 bottle of "digestive enzymes" that supposedly reduce bloating.

Luckily, I keep forgetting to take the pills because I'm in too much of a rush to eat my lunch.

This is also how I keep getting off Prozac. But that's a story for another time.

2.

I show my mother part of this essay. At the time of me writing my response to her response to this essay, my mother is doing online Pilates in her home office. I was originally writing in the kitchen, but she is making horribly graphic sounds and yelling out sets of reps, so I move to the bedroom. The cat follows me, probably just as disturbed by her sounds. I hear my

grandmother's snores and wonder if this is just the natural state of a Portuguese household: loud. I open the window for the cat, and he bobs his head around as he smells the outside world.

What was supposed to be an essay about my mother's response to finding out that I experimented with bulimia and anorexia, and that growing up on a mildly public level negatively affected me, is now about the trauma of hearing your middle-aged mother's yelps while doing online Pilates with other middle-aged women. Life truly is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get to write about: the trauma that you set out to discuss or the new one that you encounter along the way.

Aside from some short pieces I've written about my dad and part of my master's thesis, my family has not read any of my writing. When we moved out of our childhood home about seven years ago, my family members found a diary from when I was in middle school, read it without my permission, and mocked me mercilessly. I made them burn the damn thing, thinking that I would be safe from embarrassment because it was good old fashioned pen and paper and not splayed on the World Wide Web. However, it turns out my own flesh and blood are undercover internet trolls. Naturally, I have never been motivated to share personal writing with these loving yet unfiltered people. It's a little bit like wanting to be comforted by those TV fireplaces; a visual illusion makes you think it could be warm, but it will still electrocute you if you try to hug it.

I blame Alcoholics Anonymous for my naivete when it comes to wanting to be understood by my family. I think, "Look at all the work I've put in over these years. Look how open and honest I've worked at becoming. I've had some conversations with them that I would never have before." Yet, my sponsor warned me about potential misunderstandings before I came home. "Practice Step 10," she advised. Step 10 of Alcoholics Anonymous reads:

"Continued to take inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it" (59 *Alcoholics Anonymous*). My sponsor was essentially telling me to watch out for the emotional landmine that is spending 21 days back home with your family, and cautioning me not to fall into any self-made traps, such as showing your mother a very personal piece of writing about your experiences with disordered eating. Naturally, like a moth drawn to the light, I did not listen. At least my folly makes for a good story.

I hand my mother the computer and wait for her to read through the short piece. I wonder if she will understand the joke about blowjobs and am slightly tense, but I can explain that away as a necessary evil for getting a laugh. She finishes reading and says: "It's nice. Your writing, it's very nice, it's the kind of style I like." I nod, and I am pleasantly surprised by the response. I find myself validated in trusting our new relationship and think about how proud my sponsor will be when I tell her about this breakthrough.

"But I couldn't see any of what you're talking about reflected in your weight. I mean, you always looked normal. You never looked skinny enough that something would've tipped us off."

I hear my sponsor say, "I told you so" in my head as my ego deflates back to a healthy size.

"That's what you got out of that? That I wasn't skinny enough to have an eating disorder?"

She shrugs.

"Don't you remember when I didn't get my period for a few months? It was because I wasn't eating." I am trying to work this out without falling into any more traps.

"Oh, well yeah. I remember that. I wanted to take you to the doctor. You said you didn't want to go."

"Well. Yeah." I am exasperated and I stutter for a while, starting sentences but not knowing what else to add.

"Did you get the joke about the blowjobs?"

"Yeah, it was funny. I didn't want to bring it up because I thought maybe you didn't want to talk about it with your mother."

And that, my friends, is why you don't tell your mother you have an unhealthy relationship with food and your body. Because you will end up uncomfortably trying to make conversation about blowjobs.

***

In all the conversations I have with my mother about my unsavory behaviors, whether they relate to food or drinking, it never ends well, mostly because we are coming into these conversations with a specific goal in mind. I want to be seen, just like I did growing up. I want to finally be recognized and understood. I want her to have some sort of response that says, "I see you and what you have been through, and I understand." My mother, by contrast, and quite naturally, wants to be exonerated. She wants me to say, "This is not your fault. I did not do these things because you were a bad mother." We are shopping for shower gel and perfume, of all things, in a mall in Canada, when she asks me: "Was it us? Did we do something wrong?" She is referring to my drinking and my depression. I take a sniff of a raspberry shower gel. "No, mom." I want to add, "You didn't do anything wrong" but I'm sure they did. At the same time, I didn't almost end up dead because my mother once forgot to make brownies for the bake sale,[3] although that would make for one unique suicide note.

[3] This is a hypothetical example, although my mom once did get the date wrong for a school event, Portuguese Night. It was an event in celebration of Portuguese culture, including food. We were supposed to bring in these cod fish fritters called "pataniscas." We made hundreds of them and when we got to the school to find it closed we realized the event had been the night before.

3.

When I initially began writing this chapter, I wanted to write about the experience of growing up in the public eye and how that affected the way I saw myself and conceived of private and public divides. But as I started writing down my memory of that day and those pictures, I was assailed by the memories that followed of my body and my relationship with it. While the event of being photographed and displayed on a magazine in a bikini did not kickstart my awareness of my body, it certainly put it in the spotlight by forcing me to see my body as public spectacle, or at the very least, public entertainment.

As I spent more time thinking and writing about my body, I went back to Sid Smith and Julia Watson's book, *Reading Autobiography*. In their section on embodiment, Smith and Watson write that "it is easy to think that subjectivity and life writing have little to do with the material body. But the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied. And life narrative is a site of embodied knowledge (a textual surface on which a person's experience is inscribed) because autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects" (49). According to Smith and Watson, embodiment will always be a part of life writing because "the ability to recover memories, in fact depends on the material body" (49). Indeed, life writing became easier for me when I started writing about memories of my body and my relationship to it. By starting to write about my life with a focus on my body, I was able to summon memories and use my embodied knowledge to grapple with other topics.

In *The Art of Memoir,* Mary Karr also touches on memory and embodiment, except she uses the term "carnality." Karr begins her "Sacred Carnality" chapter by comparing carnality to the writer's oft-received advice to "show-don't-tell" (71). But in memoir, carnality is more than

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We ate pataniscas for every meal that week and still had to freeze half the batch. We were all at least 2% cod by the end of the week.

show-don't-tell. In Karr's not so humble opinion, "Carnality is the most primary and necessary" element of memoir. When she writes about seeking out difficult memories in an earlier chapter, Karr instructs the reader to

> with eyes still closed, approach the memory you're scared to set down. Start by composing the scene in carnal terms—by which I mean using sensory impressions, not sexual ones. … What can you see, hear, touch, taste? What do you have on? … I always liken the state I'm in before I write to waking too early to rise and looking for a wormhole to corkscrew down into that more honest place. You want a clear sense memory, a treasured (or despised) object. And most of all, you want your old body. Your cold hand wrapped around a jelly glass of grape juice. (31)

Like Smith and Watson, Karr is pointing to the importance of the material body in both our memories and in the process of recollection.

Referring to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, Karr close reads Angelou's descriptions of her body and her surroundings and concludes that she "puts us in a place and time only she can report on… you twig to her talent for placing our bodies alive in a scene" (73). Bringing Smith and Watson's views on embodiment together with Karr's explanation of carnality, it becomes clear that life writing is a physical experience not just in the evocation of memory for the writer, but also in placing the reader in a similar embodied state.

The memories I've recounted here are painful and unresolved: memories of hating my body, of being unable to sit with it, of bingeing and purging, and of thinking I know better after critically examining these memories even though I am still doing things that I know I shouldn't do (like buying "digestive enzymes" in the hopes of dropping a few pounds). Still, at least it brings me some peace to bring them out of the proverbial chocolate-dresser-drawer.

Chapter 8 : In the Jell-O Palace: An Interlude

Soundtrack:
Harry Styles, "Falling"
John Mayer, "Stop This Train"

I am, once again, struggling with my writing. This dissertation, which was supposed to be about self-construction, authority, and humor, seems to be turning into another chore I need to cross off a list in order to get my PhD. Sometimes I wonder if it just impossible for me to finish this program successfully, if I really, truly, have nothing more to give, and if I've ruined the potential of this project by associating it with something so at odds with the ideals I had for it. Academia has not been a place where I have been able to establish myself, hold any authority, or have any feeling of accomplishment, self-actualization, catharsis, or even new knowledge production. Yes, I must admit that I am still learning and realizing things I never had about my past, my identity (both how I see myself, how I came to be what I think I am, and how others see me), humor, and memoir. Most of these moments come both from the writing and the conversations with my committee chair, who often sees things in my writing, things about myself and the recollections in my writing that I somehow was not aware of until she makes me think and talk further about them during our meetings.

At what cost does this dissertation come? Both in its iteration as a passion project and in its necessity for finishing a degree I often don't feel attached to?

When I began writing, I had a direction I wanted the dissertation to go in, I had planned chapters, a trajectory, a cohesive idea of it. There are moments now, in the thick of it, when I cannot see past the middle, when I am stuck. It feels like my entire body, my brain, is walking

through Jell-O[1] to get to the other side. I look at the planned chapter list and the chapters I've drafted, and in a lot of them, it feels like I just drifted off, confused by my own words, as if they do not match what I had initially planned. A chapter supposed to be about the lack of privacy growing up as the daughter of a celebrity turned into writing about my relationship with my body. But it worked out; in fact, it's my favorite, and perhaps best chapter, and also the first I wrote. It sort of came out of me, almost fully formed, and I was just regurgitating it onto the page. In most of the other chapters, I'm not so lucky. I lose focus, it seems, getting stuck on the wrong moments and forgetting the initial purpose of writing about that certain relationship, incident, or era in my life.

Then there is the problem of the humor. While it seemed to come naturally at the beginning, as naturally as writing something objective like a grocery list, I feel now that I've lost it. Perhaps this is what happens in the middle: in the process of remembering, you also forget. I get stuck in mad moments. Reflection is sometimes a prison and not the empowering liberation I thought it would be. Sometimes, humor is not always there in the moment or in the first reflection. Sometimes it's like a curry or a stew: it tastes better the second day after letting it sit. And refrigerating it? I've lost the metaphor.

It worries me that maybe I only have one good story in me. Only one good laugh to offer. It worries me that nothing else will come as effortlessly as those words and that everything else I put on the page will be forced, inauthentic, just some faux artistic bullshit in order to get my committee to sign off on my graduation so that I can begin a different stage of my life. It worries me that I don't have the discipline to finish a project that could for once actually reflect my thoughts, selfhood, bluntness, and complexity. I broke myself like this once before, with my

[1] The perfect image for this feeling comes from the 2009 movie *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*, when Flint builds Sam a palace of Jell-O, and to get into it they need to wade through the Jell-O in slow motion.

songwriting. After music school, after being evaluated and criticized, for something that used to make me happy and feel special, like I was good at something (singing and writing songs), I was unable, for a time, to make any music. I didn't sing or play guitar or write songs. A mere attempt at songwriting or picking up a guitar could send me into a panic attack.

In this Jell-O palace I have built for myself, I sit and try to make sense of who I am, with the tools I've come to rely on for survival: storytelling and laughter. The survival is both big and small. It is big in the sense that the formula of storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous keeps me sober and therefore alive. The constant remembering and retelling in AA meetings encourages me to hold the past present in ways that are productive for me to keep learning about myself and how to navigate the world as an addict. The mere act of introducing ourselves at a meeting points to the necessity of remembering we are still alcoholics, even if in our recovery we have made progress: "Hi, I'm Sofia, and I'm an alcoholic." Narrative gives me the power to reframe, to reconsider, to revisit moments in my life when I may not have felt like I had agency, perspective, awareness—of myself or others. It is small in the sense that laughter is the comic relief that makes life more bearable, in that it is not the absence of my depression or anxiety, but the hope that I can still feel something despite its constant presence; it's the hope that I can make something with or out of the torment. Laughter is escapism but also grounding because it reminds me of my body, my audible laugh and visible smile even when I am alone, watching *Bob's Burgers* in the dark.

Chapter 9 : Private Jokes

Soundtrack:
John Mayer, "Daughters"
Ken Yates, "Get Me Out of Hollywood"
The Weeknd, "Blinding Lights"
The Rescues, "Break Me Out"

I don't remember the first time I was photographed for a newspaper or tabloid magazine, but I do remember the last.

My family and I were vacationing with some friends in Madeira, a Portuguese island, the summer before I went off to college. We didn't notice someone taking a picture of us while we played at the beach. I now imagine someone lurking behind the big sand dunes, peeping and creeping through a camera, their elbows digging into the sand as they tried to get a clearer shot of my dad. It's an image that sits between a cartoon and a noir film.

I was simply the collateral damage, caught in the line of fire of a big media machine that is obsessed with tracking celebrities in order to tell you they are either just like you or not at all like you, depending on the 'journalist's' mood or the context they dream up for you.

If you're getting déjà vu from reading the previous passage, then you've been paying attention. This memory and these words first appeared in "Strawberry Jam Cookies." But when I started writing this memory down, I did not set out to write "Strawberry Jam Cookies," a chapter about my connection with my physical body and disordered eating. Instead, when I initially sought to explore this memory, I was trying to write "Private Jokes," a chapter about the public and private divide, and how this divide became muddled in my childhood and adolescence

because I am the daughter of a national celebrity. This memory might be the perfect one to open this particular can of worms, as it's one of my most detailed memories of showing up in the press with my father, without my knowledge or consent, and one that had a profound impact on my relationship not just with my physical body but also with my general sense of self as I was growing up.

When you are being watched and photographed, you may not be aware of it. Usually, the moment of true surveillance is in its recognition: seeing the picture in the magazine, reading the exposé, seeing your words in print twisted by a careless gossip writer, overhearing someone ask, "Is that really him?" as you walk past. This surveillance manifested in me as a constant feeling of being watched and thus in constant performance, injuriously aware of my behavior in any public space, and sometimes even in private ones. It is an especially strange experience for a classmate to tell you that your picture has shown up in a magazine, for them to have seen private family moments of you at the beach, before you are even made aware they exist in a public forum. For someone else to make you aware of something that is yours, to make you recognize not just the infringement on your privacy but the removal of your agency. This experience feels like a fragmentation of yourself, your image, and your understanding of privacy.

What does it mean to grow up this way, with these mechanisms learned for better or worse, especially as a woman? What does it mean to feel always monitored and exposed, to be the topic of conversation but as a secondary object?

I would go to my father's soccer games as much as I could, but sometimes I preferred to be among the general crowd rather than in the family boxes reserved for us. Although the boxes had ample snacks, I liked being closer to the field, and being unknown: no one knew whose daughter I was in those spaces because I was not next to my father. Recognition for me came

from the proximity: walking with my father, having dinner together. With physical distance between us, no one could identify my features or last name, and I liked this anonymity.

My desire for anonymity does not stem from any sense of shame from being associated with my father. I am tremendously proud of him, both for his professional accomplishments and for who he is as a human being. But it was difficult to grow up with sets of assumptions being made about me because of what people thought they knew of my father. It was hard to escape the label in most areas of my life, particularly at an age when so much of my life was determined by school and my teachers and fellow students knew very well who my father was. So I liked being anonymous and unattached when I could, even if only for 90 minutes at a soccer stadium.

Because soccer is the dominant sport in Portugal, fans get very incensed about it. During my time in the stands, I often heard hilarious and mostly harmless quips directed at my father, which felt like eavesdropping, like I was collecting information while undercover. Once, I heard a fan scream that the only reason my father put a player in was because his daughter (hello, that's me) must be dating said player. I had never spoken to said player, let alone dated him, but I giggled to myself the rest of the game. Sometimes, this anonymity would allow me to cheer for my dad's decisions, hoping to positively influence the crowd, even though most likely no one was paying any attention to me. It may seem contradictory that I would want to sit with a crowd who would potentially criticize my father rather than sitting with my own family, but sometimes the allure of being invisible was too strong.

Of course, some criticism was not quite so innocuous or amusing. It was one thing for my father to coach a club team in Portugal but another thing for him to coach the national team. It's one thing for some of your classmates to support your father's team but another thing for ALL of your classmates to have expectations and sharp opinions about your father's job. Towards the

end of my dad's time with a popular Portuguese team, a Facebook group demanded that he be fired. Opinions on the internet are rampant, and although I despised criticism of my father, I understood it was part of the work he did. However, when one of my classmates joined said group, I was ready to set fire to his locker and feed him to my dog. To be fair, this student and I already did not get along. We frequently voiced clashing opinions in Philosophy class and were just not each other's cup of tea. Still, I thought it was common decency not to join a public group on the internet that sought to have my father lose his job. Holding the knowledge that my father will be criticized and disliked is something I've been practicing my entire life. But having this criticism reflected in the face of a classmate with whom I had to be civil, whom I had to see five days a week, was too much to ask of me.

Needless to say, I was not very civil from that point forward with this particular student. You might argue, like some of my classmates did at the time, that it didn't matter because it was simply a Facebook group and he was entitled to have his opinion and make it known. Bullshit. People are entitled to their opinions, but share them like any polite and decent person: behind my back. I'm not sure if people expected me to be okay with this public criticism because I must have been so used to it by then. Perhaps they underestimated how much I cared about my father and assumed that I would respond to the situation with humor[1]—or grace. But grace was not a word in my vocabulary as a teenager. Anyone who knows me has learned this lesson: never underestimate my loyalty. I may be brazen, harsh, sometimes even cold. But I will set the world aflame to defend those I love. I am loyal to a fault, a behavior that I perhaps developed from

[1] Why is it that humor always seems to be the best defense against insult or offense? And worse, why is it the injured party who always has to have humor about things? By responding with anger, or even mild distaste, instead of humor, especially for women, we are seen as even further at fault. We are irrational, we are bad sports, while the offenders are simply honest, standing up for freedom of speech, pushing boundaries. This continues to strike me as bullshit of the first degree, just as it did back then.

growing up in the public eye. Public adoration, or even just opinion, is a fickle thing. When everyone has something to say about your family, or about a specific member of your family, it can seem hard to find allies outside your inner circle and immediate family. You survive by standing up for each other and sticking together.

Moving to America on my own at eighteen provided me with all the anonymity I had ever desired. Disclosing my father's job was finally a choice I could make, rather than something written on my forehead. Even better was the anonymity my father enjoyed when he came to visit me. We could go to restaurants unencumbered, walk down the street without anyone giving us as much as a second glance. My last name was not a marker of anything except my personhood, something I could say loudly and proudly, rather than in a whisper. First impressions were now my own to make, rather than an opportunity to amend an assumption. Yet, I still found it difficult to stop 'performing,' to stop curating an image of myself, to be vulnerable and open with others. To this day, even though I have set down significant roots and solid relationships, I fantasize about disappearing: moving to a remote area of the world without saying a word to anyone, and going by an entirely different name. The fantasy is to be completely untethered. In my experience, ties are weighty, whether they be to others or to my responsibilities or expectations, and I wonder who I would be if given the opportunity to float through the world.

I sometimes lie to strangers when I travel. Not huge things, like I'm the Princess of Monaco or I just won an Oscar for cinematography. They're more exaggerations, really: instead of saying I'm a teaching assistant, I might say I'm a professor. Sometimes I'll say I'm married, or that I'm ten years younger or older than I actually am, or that I'm from Chicago when I have merely lived there. Maybe this habit marks me as an unreliable narrator in a genre that demands truth, but it's just my small way to feel further outside myself. Sometimes, it's an opportunity to

try on different versions of myself. I don't think I'd actually like to be a professor; I think I could be of better service in other parts of academia. But sometimes it is nice to entertain the possibility, to see what that version of myself would be like in the eyes of strangers. If every day is an exhausting performance of some kind—dutiful daughter, dedicated student, virtuous teacher—what might it feel like to perform a role a little further from the everyday roles I've cast myself in?

Or maybe I'm just a pathological liar and you should never strike up a conversation with me on a tour bus.

I visited Alaska in 2021, a trip I had been dreaming of for ten years, and it was the closest I've ever felt to my untethered fantasy. It's hard to feel tethered to anything when surrounded by the overwhelming vastness of the Alaskan wilderness, its towering mountains, sprawling coast, and drastic tides. I didn't lie, or embellish, to anyone I encountered, and I met and talked to a fair amount of people. A tour guide even offered me a job, sending me the link for the application to work as a seasonal guide in an Alaskan train. I did not worry what people thought of me as a solo traveler, I did not worry about my weight, how I looked, or if anyone was judging the food I was eating or that I was eating it alone. It was perhaps the first time I felt like I wasn't performing anything or anyone. I could just be, and it was the freest I've ever felt. Because we were in remote areas, I often lacked cell service, and when I had an internet connection or cell service, the time difference often made it difficult to talk to my family or boyfriend, which only made me feel even more untethered and unpreoccupied with anything except the day ahead of me, the things I would marvel at. Keeping up my appearances as perfect daughter, student, or girlfriend could all be put on hold while I was just being a simple version of myself. And being that version of myself allowed me to feel amazed, fulfilled, and happy, unlike any other role I've played.

Growing up as the daughter of a celebrity certainty left me with a hazy public and private divide, but being constantly cast as a secondary object has also affected how I see myself and behave. In magazine or newspaper photos where I appeared with my dad, I was at best a prop, part of the scenery, and at worse, collateral damage. Whether my face was blurred or not, I knew that I was not the focus of the picture yet important enough to be featured rather than cropped out. And I was important not in my own individuality or personhood, but as an object enhancing my father's role as father or family man. I don't mean to say that my father ever purposefully used me, or my sister, or my mom to create this image. This is just what happened by nature of us being in the frame. Even if he would be asked to talk about us in interviews, the press would sometimes misprint our names or ages. These details were not important; what mattered was that our father was proud of us. Again, this was not my father's fault; he wasn't the one giving out wrong information about us, but it instilled in me the idea that we were stationary objects that served a specific purpose for the media.

As an adult, and specifically having moved out of Portugal, I did not expect to be featured again in Portuguese media. However, two years after I left for college, I got the opportunity to perform at a local festival in Portugal, leading to an unexpected (and once again, [spoilers!] unhappy) engagement with the media. I had made a connection with a Portuguese musician after telling him I was studying music at Berklee College of Music, and recognizing the school and its reputation, he invited me to stop by his trailer and play some of my music before his performance at the festival. I showed up with no expectations, just happy that someone I admired had made the time to listen to my songs. About 45 seconds into my song, which I played live for him in his trailer, he interrupted me and told me I needed to play that song with him on stage that night. I was terrified because I knew people would be able to track my connection with

my father, but I also could not turn down this opportunity to play with a great musician and to play my own songs on a stage. The performance would also be livestreamed on the radio, meaning that my song would play on the radio. I pushed my concerns aside, and after a sound check, I was to come back at showtime to perform for my biggest audience ever, alongside one of the most well-known Portuguese musicians. The performance went relatively well considering that I couldn't breathe for most of the day, and I only slightly tripped on my microphone cord upon exiting the stage. But later that night, after taking a cab home with my sister, I threw up all over my mother's garden, my body finally breaking from all the exhilaration and nerves, as if unable to keep anything inside anymore.

My father was present in the audience, and it was not long before the press confirmed that I was his daughter. A few days later, a magazine reported on my performance. Alongside a picture of my father at the performance, the cover said: "Daughter of (my father's name here) surprises by singing at festival." It did not matter to me that they were reporting on my performance. What mattered, what the magazine relayed to me in the way it composed its coverage, is that I had made a front cover not really for my performance, but because of my status as the offspring of a celebrity. In fact, the article itself offered no real review other than to say I played guitar, smiled, and seemed nervous. The piece made no mention of the fact that the song I played was an original and said nothing about whether the song or performance was good or bad. It wasn't a story about a talented kid; it was a story about how my father had a talented kid.

To add insult to injury, the journalist who wrote the article misquoted me and added words to my very short statement. She first approached me right after the performance, asking questions and asking if she could take a picture of me. I told her I would rather not take the

picture for the magazine, as I'm sure they'd have some photos from the performance itself. They ended up using a giant picture of my dad backstage and two small pictures of my performance and a close-up picture of my face they found on Facebook, despite my Facebook settings being set to private. I didn't answer any of the journalist's questions; I just succinctly stated that I was grateful for the opportunity I had been given by the musician I performed with. However, she quoted me as saying that the musician was "a darling." If you've been reading this far, does this word strike you as one I would use? Does it strike you as a word I would use to describe someone with whom I had a professional relationship and who wanted to help me with a musical career? No, because I am not a character on *Bridgerton*. I don't say "dahhhhling" in Portuguese or in English!

In writing about this incident, I thought I was very much over it and had outgrown some of the problems that came with growing up as the daughter of a celebrity. But when I looked again at the article as I was writing these last few paragraphs, I started crying. I wasn't just crying because I had done something worthwhile, something I was proud of, something I dreamed of that was overshadowed by my connection to my father. I cried for that girl from ten years ago, but also for how much of the past ten years I've spent trying to be better, seeking the validation of my parents, doing something they could be proud of, something that would make me undoubtedly not only special, but special in my own right. I've always been so in awe of my father, of how he conducted himself, of how he had raised himself up to his position from nothing. When you are raised by someone so special, so distinct, it is hard not to demand the same things from yourself. I wanted to be recognized for my music, for my writing, and when that didn't work out, I thought I'd be distinguished not through fame but through a position as a professor, as someone with a collection of degrees. I could distinguish myself by earning a

Master's degree and then a PhD. A piece of paper would validate my hard work, my brilliance, and say: "this is mine."

As a child, I was loud, boisterous, and loved attention. But as I entered my teens, I retreated inside myself. It seemed that everyone knew something about me and yet I never felt truly seen. Through music, and through my love of literature, I decided it was okay to take up space again, as long as I was exceptional. I had to write the best songs, put on the best performances, get the answer exactly right in each class. To let myself be visible only when I felt I was exceptional, and when I found it so difficult to believe I was ever good enough to be considered exceptional, meant I was spending most of my life in hiding, in a metaphorical darkness. Because of my father's fame, I thought nothing I ever achieved would be truly mine; it would always be given to me only because of that connection. For instance, after that picture of my father and me at the beach was published, I was talking to a friend about how I hated having grown up in my father's shadow. In response, she said I should feel lucky because of what my father's job would afford me: a way to pay for my education in America without debt. With this framework in mind, I questioned if anything I did would ever be enough to be considered mine, a result of my own efforts rather than a secondary object or derivative.

This inner conflict between wanting to be recognized as an individual and seeking to hide because of false assumptions or expectations because of my father still gnaws at me. If I were lucky enough to publish this book, would it be chosen for publication because of my writing, because my experiences might be valuable to someone else? Or because I made explicit in this chapter the connections to my father? While I want to share this work because I believe it to be valuable and entertaining, both readers and publishers may have different investments. How do I tell my story without making it my father's? Will I once again be the secondary object of my

own story, of my own work? I started writing this book to regain agency over my narrative, so much of which was taken from me as soon as I walked into a room where people knew who my father was. But I also know that once the act of writing is done, and the reading begins, it is no longer mine; it belongs to the reader, to do with as they please. I am someone who hates giving up control. The hardest part of getting sober was admitting that I had to let go of my constant control, that I was powerless over certain things. Readers' responses might be one of those things, but if I feel at peace enough with the writing, perhaps I can find peace in the act of sharing it with others as well.

Given my desire for privacy and anonymity, you may wonder why I would seek to write and invite others to read my (very) personal experiences. I considered writing under a penname, at first, but this project is about regaining my agency and taking ownership of my narrative, my life. It would be quite odd to do so while hiding under a fake name, even if I did have some clever ones made up. In putting my name to this analysis of my life thus far, I not only claim it as my own, I also cast shame aside. When asked if I could include her in this book, my friend Nati told me: "There's no reason to hide the things that happen to us in life." I have been hiding for very long, sometimes to make things easier on myself, sometimes for the benefit and comfort of others. I used to publish my words in anonymous blogs, not only because I feared someone would identify my father and worried about how my words would reflect on him, but also because I wanted my words to gain merit on their own, without the residue of fame from my father. I declined offers in the music industry in Portugal because I was afraid people would say I only succeeded because of my father's fame and connections.

Though this chapter has focused on the public and private divide (or lack thereof), this project has the potential to bring down other private divides, too. I am thinking specifically of the

confessional potential of this memoir not just if I were to publish it publicly, but if I were to allow my parents to read it in its entirety. My mother has read only one chapter of this dissertation, while my father has only read the first few pages of the same chapter and relied on my mother to give him the gist of it. The chapter they read discussed my history with eating disorders. My mother had her own reaction of self-preservation: she wanted to disavow wrongdoing by letting me know she tried to take me to a doctor when I started to show certain health symptoms, like missing my period for several months. I don't blame her for this. In fact, it is because of this first reaction that I fear letting them read further.

The point of this project is not to cause harm, either to me or to those in my life. While it has often been a painful process, the objective of embarking on this project has always been one of healing, of empowerment. How do I reconcile this goal with the potential for these revelations to cause my parents pain? While it is my right to tell my story however I chose to do so, my parents also have agency over whether they want to read it or not, and, especially if this work is ever published, I will not be able to stop them from reading it, if they so choose. Currently, though, my motivation to spare my parents from reading is not entirely selfless. While I truly do not want to cause my parents pain by asking them to read about some of the most difficult moments in their daughter's life, I also do not feel quite ready to discuss this work with them. They have been brought into the loop on everything that concerns them—for example, they both know exactly what parts of our family history I write about, specifically in regards to my mother's mother— but they remain in the dark about many things, particularly when it comes to my depression and alcoholism. It may seem paradoxical to willingly parse these moments in writing, to be willing to offer them up to a dissertation committee, and to say I consider publishing them for the general public, while also admitting that it would feel difficult to discuss

them with my parents. But I believe the project has potential to help readers in the way it offers up knowledge and possible points of connection about issues often looked down upon, like alcoholism and mental health. Specifically, I think the project holds potential for furthering understandings of life writing and comedy as feminist practice, as ways to create feminist knowledge and foster humans' engagement with each other. Life writing creates the potential to validate experience as knowledge, and it fosters connection through mutual understanding of lived experience, acting like a process of consciousness raising. Comedy has a similar potential for consciousness raising through shared emotion and what Rebecca Krefting calls "charged humor," a kind of humor that challenges "social inequality and cultural exclusion" (Krefting 2) and proposes real and humorous solutions to combat exclusion. By making public my individual and private stories, and by rendering more visible my experiences of exclusion due to my identity as addict, immigrant, woman, and first generation student, I challenge the misreadings and the lack of representation of these marginal experiences in various spaces, including my family, academia, the United States, and Portugal.

Still, the potential benefits for other readers do not mean that the project will be beneficial either for my parents or for my relationship with them.

Reconciling this difference between the potential benefits versus harms of my work is an ongoing conversation I have with myself, and one that I still struggle with even as this project comes to a conclusion. The closer I come to being finished, the more urgent my need to decide whether to publish this work and/or allow my parents to read it. While I still have no clear decision, I find myself returning to something I wrote in an earlier chapter, about music, comedy, and writing being an invitation to connection, rather than a form of one-way expression or an invitation to judgment. In my opinion, these artforms only work when vulnerability is in play,

but if my parents were to read this work, I would not only be offering my vulnerability but also asking them to be vulnerable as well.

This reflection on my private relationship with my parents also offers insights with regards to comedic life writing and its necessary relationship with vulnerability. While the vulnerability of the author is established and readily acknowledged, the vulnerability of the reader is less often part of the analysis. Comedy and life writing have the potential to enact change in perspectives, to create conversation around difficult topics. While these effects often depend on the vulnerability of the author—to be authentic, to share deeply personal experiences, and to take risks—they can only really come to fruition when the reader allows themselves to share in this vulnerability. What I mean by vulnerability here is twofold: there is vulnerability as receptivity, or openness. There needs to be in the reader a willingness to receive the experiences of the author, to interact with them. Secondly, there is the potential for vulnerability from the reader in that the work might spark not only difficult conversations or thoughts around particular topics, but cause specific moments of recollection from the reader's own life. Here there is the willingness not only to receive the experiences of the author, but to recognize them, or a version of them, in the reader's own life.

The factor that differentiates the vulnerability of an imagined reader from the vulnerability of my family is agency. While we may establish that a reader or audience member at a comedy show has agentially agreed to this vulnerability contract through their purposeful attendance, purchase, or sustained attention, my parents' agency in their vulnerability becomes uncertain when we consider their proximity to both myself and the material. In the end, it seems that trust is also a necessity: to take my parents at their word regardless of their decision to engage with the work or not, and to trust in myself that I have been true to my experiences, my

narration of them, and my intention to enact progress, healing, and self-authorization rather than harm.

Chapter 10 : Inventory

Soundtrack:
James Arthur, Back From The Edge
John Mayer, "Whiskey, Whiskey, Whiskey"
John Mayer, "I Will Be Found (Lost at Sea)"

"Ask your doctor about these medications," the medical discharge papers state on October 1st, 2016:

Bupropion, 300mg

Clonazepam 2mg

Fluoxetine 20mg

Trazodone 50mg

Yaz (Contraceptive)

Not listed:

NorCo, unknown dosage. Patient uncertain of how many pills she took.

Wine, one bottle. Probably of the white and cheap variety.

***

"Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous[1]

[1] This is fourth step of Alcoholics Anonymous, usually done under the guidance of a sponsor, and it requires you make a list of your resentments and examine it to find out what part you played in them. This chapter is, in a way, my list of resentments towards my relationship with alcohol, an investigation of my history with it.

My first drink, or the first drink I recall having, was a vodka with orange juice. There may have been sips of beer or wine before this artificial juice from concentrate mixed with potentially watered down vodka, but I guess they didn't make much of a lasting impression on me, perhaps because my vodka orange was my first, unsupervised drink, tying it inevitably to a feeling of misplaced or imagined independence. I was sixteen and at a friend's birthday party. I was on the younger end of the spectrum in comparison to my classmates, who had already been going out to clubs and drinking, so I asked them what I should order to drink. I was also, by all accounts, a good kid, so I only took this drink at my legal drinking age in Portugal and when sanctioned by my parents.

I would quickly abandon the vodka orange for my preferred tequila shots. I liked the sociability of a tequila shot and the fact that I didn't have to carry it around the club, making it easier to dance and not have to keep up with my drink throughout the night and make sure no one put anything unusual in it. If I did order something in a taller glass, it would be a vodka coke, although I still was not convinced about the vodka. If the bar wasn't too busy, I might ask for a fruity concoction like my favorite caipirinha, a Brazilian drink made with a sugar liquor called cachaça, limes, and more sugar. My favorite was black vodka, a vodka based liquor with wild berry flavoring, but not all bars carried it and it left you with the telltale sign of a black tongue. In the scant pictures of our after-prom, my smile is wide and my tongue is a faded black.

I quit regular vodka completely in my first year of college, after doing six shots of it in thirty minutes in a drinking competition with a male friend who was at least ten inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than me. I threw up for the rest of the night and woke up with cat whiskers drawn on my face. My friend shaved half his beard in the middle of the night, so there was no clear winner. I was surprised by how drunk I got, considering I used to be able to take almost

eight shots of tequila per night in high school and still get myself home and up the stairs to my parents' bedroom to let them know I was home safe, and then back down two sets of stairs to my own room. The phrase "tiny but mighty" comes to mind to describe my capacity for drinking. In my entire drinking career, I only threw up twice and had two serious, calamitous hangovers. My body took to alcohol like a fish takes to water. I would come to need it in the same way, too.

The next time I drank vodka would be straight and out of an annoying acquaintance's mason jar in her Chicago apartment, as I attempted to forget that my asshole of a boyfriend and I existed. I already knew I hated vodka but I would drink it "in a pinch." Shortly after drinking several shots of vodka out of this hipster's mason jar, I would be having a panic attack down the street from her apartment, asking the same boyfriend to just tell me who he wanted me to be and that I would be that girl. I would've gladly become anyone else, not just for him but for myself, too.

Later that night, I would end up alone in a bar drinking rum and coke, while my boyfriend thought I was only using the bathroom in there. I recall calling a friend in a park near that bar, crying, telling her, "I don't want to do this anymore." "This" was a vague and capacious term to mean my life, my drinking, my relationship, my ongoing graduate education.

Even later, I would be throwing a cup and a chair at my boyfriend back in our apartment, thinking, "You think I'm crazy, I'll show you crazy" after finding his distressed text to a friend of his about my alarming behavior. I said he was an asshole and I hold this to be true, but I never said I wasn't one, too.

The next morning I would apologize to him, to my friend, and do it all again the next weekend.

Minus the throwing. For the most part.

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Inventory: To take stock. A list.

Here is some alcohol based word association. A brief inventory of years 16 through 23 and the liquid that defined them.

If vodka meant beginning and desperation, tequila meant making friends, rubbing up to someone's arm, stranger or not, who is putting salt on the back of your hand. Tequila also meant next-morning-tequila-poops, nature's laxative. Tequila may have kept my intestines working for the better part of a year during grad school. Tequila is a catchy song, and what could be dangerous about a translucent liquid with a song named after it? Tequila is margaritas at after work drinks with the other girls who worked at the flower shop. Beer meant no-thank-you, not enough alcohol content and fills you up too quickly. This logic was sound, perhaps the most sound logic I had in regards to drinking. Long Island Iced Teas meant cheap and large and fast. Rum meant coke. Whiskey meant coke that was harder to drink than rum but that's what everyone else is ordering so I guess that's what I'll order, too. Whiskey meant the ugly, empty bottles of it he collected in our spare bedroom, even after I quit drinking. Bottles sitting there, reminding me of my mistakes, him being one of them. Wine meant civilized or familial drinking. Wine was masking insane behavior in an unassuming bottle. Wine meant and means the last drink I had before ending up in an emergency room, stripped of all my clothing and belongings so I couldn't kill myself with the underwire of my bra until the on-call psychiatrist could evaluate me.

They did give me some big, warm socks to wear while I waited, though, so you know… Pros and cons.

***

An inventory of my stomach contents, six sober years later:

A six dollar Starbucks coffee.

Addiction’s a bitch.

Chapter 11 : Fight or Flight

Soundtrack:
James Morrison, “Call the Police”
Camilo, “El Mismo Aire”
Nickel Creek, “Somebody More Like You”

1. The Feisty Passenger and the Metaphorical Weight of Her Carry-on

Flying is the bane of my existence. Sure, I’m terrified of being stuck in a metal tube with no escape. But mainly it’s the people who really make me dread the experience.

For example, as I write, the lady sitting next to me is having a loud conference call on FaceTime. There’s nothing wrong with being a workaholic; just do it quietly so the rest of us can focus on our escape plan should this plane crash. My plan is to use my seatmate as a floatation device.

She’s on this call right up to the moment our plane is speeding up to lift off the ground. The rest of us are clutching our armrests and praying we don’t die today, but she’s blabbering on about something or other. I’m trying to decipher what language she’s speaking as I pretend to be a super cool writer with my tablet keyboard.

The dude in front of me, who has been exchanging memes with his friend sitting next to me, reclines his seat as soon as we reach cruising altitude. This is when being 5’ feet tall really pays off. However, the judgmental bitch in me still rolls her eyes.

The woman who was FaceTiming as we were about two feet in the air, almost killing everyone on board because you know that electronics rule is serious business, has just taken out her computer after eating the salad the airline distributes for lunch. She types furiously, and I feel

wimpy now that she has pulled out a full-on MacBook and I'm still trying to figure out where the apostrophes are in this miniature keyboard. Still, I can rejoice in the fact that I started working before she did, and in a much less disruptive manner.

The guy next to me keeps trying to peek at what I'm writing. If you're reading this, guy in seat 11D, I see you. Stop it before I write more rude things about you.

I always get grumpy in airports because of the sheer amount of people who can't follow directions and are always in everyone's way. It's like everyone suddenly loses their sense of decency and decorum and it's a free-for-all. I don't know who needs to hear this, but they won't give your seat away if you're not standing in front of the gate with your thousand carry-ons an hour before the flight. Relax and go have another overpriced vodka soda.

That's another thing, even when I was drinking, drinking on a plane or airport never appealed to me. Planes crash. How are you going to survive if you're passed out on Chili's margaritas? Maybe that's natural selection. I've never met a culture that loves day drinking or creates cultural events as an excuse to drink as much as America. America, land of the free. Free to drink at whatever time of day to avoid meaningful connection and feel like you can tolerate your family and friends.

I will also add that I am not a complete saint and have my fair share of airport asshole moments. Walking into this plane, for example, I was struggling to put my very heavy carry-on in the overhead bins. I also didn't have much room for the arm movement necessary to hurl a carry-on half my weight into a bin I could barely reach on my tiptoes. So the man behind me, tired of watching me struggle, just jumped in and helped me properly insert the bag. I don't know if 'help' is exactly the right word. It was more a show of force and frustration than a kind gesture, like the man in my previous flight, who asked if I needed help taking my bag out of the

bins. The second man, the one who shoved me out of the way to get my bag in the bin, looked at me with disdain, even after I said thank you and sorry for taking up time on the aisle. This pissed me off because: a) If given the chance, I would've been perfectly capable of putting my bag in the bin all by myself. It may have taken a few tries, but I would have got there. I practiced at home and everything. b) I despise being manhandled or mansplained (unless it works to my advantage, like with my landlord and clogged pipes or free garlic bread because the restaurant owner thinks I'm cute. It's a tough economic time; don't judge me for using eyelash flutters to get free garlic bread). I especially hate being handled this way by men because it gives them reasons to keep thinking about women as weak and incompetent. They think my struggle with my bag validates their superiority when all it actually does is validate that most men are taller than me. And at 5' feet tall, I'm not sure they need that validation.

Look, obviously shoving my carry-on in an overhead bin is not the end of the world or the last straw for the upcoming feminist revolution, but it does warrant some thought, both about my emotional response to the event and about the man's motivation for assisting me and then being so impolite to me. I cannot guess his motives, but as the psychology of microaggressions tells us, this kind of behavior can be damaging to women, especially when we experience it on a daily basis and multiple times per day. Though the first studies of microaggressions focused on racial microaggressions, "microaggressions can be expressed toward any marginalized group in our society; they can be gender-based, sexual orientation-based, class-based, or disability-based" (Sue 5). Men's airport behavior tells us that we are incapable, that we and our baggage (figurative and literal) are a nuisance and a weakness that men must then pick up the slack for.

Like I said earlier, not every man will act this way. The first gentleman who helped me certainly didn't. If you're one of these men and you're reading this book: thank you for your

height and your kindness. Please don't ever take over a woman's personal space and do something like shove her bag into the compartment without permission. If you want to help, whether it's because you're a nice person or you just want her out of the damn way, just ask.

2. Death of the Polite Young Woman

Perhaps the fact that I have been groped on a plane adds to my dislike of flying, despite the fact that my claustrophobia began before this particular experience. I think this moment speaks especially to how we've trained women and men to think about ourselves. I was too polite to say anything, wanting to believe that the hand of the man next to me was simply slipping onto my seat and thigh as he slept. But the more I moved away from him and closer to the window, eventually running out of room, his hand kept shifting as well. When I got up to go to the bathroom, I tried to wake him, but apparently his sleep was as deep as his conviction that my body was his to touch. I carefully slipped past him, trying not to touch him. Miraculously, he woke as I was almost at the aisle and managed to run his hand on my ass to "help me through" after apologizing for not waking up. When I returned to my seat and asked to move through, he didn't get up. Instead, he sat up straighter, and I felt his knees on my ass again as I squeezed into my window seat. I held my pee for the rest of the flight and now always request an aisle seat when I travel alone.

I must have been nineteen or twenty years old when this happened. I didn't think of it very much until recently. Sometimes, I would remember what happened and avoid it. I would shake my head as if it were an etch-a-sketch in order to erase the memory from my mind. I felt dirty. I still feel dirty, even though I know I did nothing wrong. I wish I would've acted differently. That I would've been rude to this man, instead of apologizing for having to go to the

bathroom when he made the conscious decision not to leave his seat so he could grope a girl in her twenties who was so afraid of being called a bitch that she would accommodate a disgusting man who feels so protected and entitled by society that he gropes her on a damn plane. I'm not saying I understand groping on a subway or any other public transportation system, but at least if you get called out in those contexts, you can exit at the next station. We had six hours to go on this flight. How protected do you have to feel by your masculinity that you think you can violate someone in a public setting you cannot leave for at least six hours? How sure do you have to be of a woman's vulnerability that you know she won't complain about your behavior or, if she does, that no one around her will do anything about it?

Sometimes, I wonder about if I had said something, if I had told the flight attendant or made a bigger deal. If I had taken up space and been loud instead of shrinking myself in an effort not to be noticed or touched and left alone, maybe I wouldn't have felt dirty and the man wouldn't have felt like he got away with it.

Let me be clear, this groping is not just a microaggression. It is harassment, assault, a violation. It is an actual crime. You may hear me say this quite a bit whether in this book or in general conversation: I know it could have been a lot worse. I know my experience would pale in comparison to some of the horrors faced by other women, especially women of color, who are even more likely to be assaulted than their white counterparts. But just because it wasn't worse does not mean it should be allowed to happen or that I shouldn't discuss it. It doesn't mean I should feel lucky that nothing worse happened or that I shouldn't talk about it because it could've been worse or because I didn't do anything about it at the time. This idea is part of what keeps women silenced and feeling like they are lucky to only be groped rather than raped. I do think the man's groping was a violent act; he touched my body without my consent and preyed

on my vulnerability as a young woman to take advantage of me. Just because he didn't punch me or have to use brute force in order to take what he wanted from me does not mean it wasn't a violent act to be touched and made to feel unsafe. Just because he used societal conditioning of my feminine politeness and his male entitlement to violate my body without consequence does not mean it was not violent.

3. Midair

As I sit by myself in the airport in Amsterdam, I am overtaken by a wave of sadness. I am lying on a bench, my backpack a makeshift pillow when I picture myself arriving at the Lisbon airport in a few hours. As I picture myself running to my parents and my sister and hugging them, tears pool in my eyes.

It has only been about seven months since I've last seen them, not an unusually long time for us, considering we've gone stretches of a full year without seeing each other before. But the weight, the grief, of this year makes it seem like so much longer. It makes me crave their support, their warmth, their comfort more than other years.

Is it the toll of a global pandemic, which dictated that I could not visit my home and my family could not visit me overseas? A governmental rule on my heart and family ties claims to be in place for the safety of everyone but now allows American tourists to traipse around my hometown while my family is still forbidden to cross American borders to see their daughter, their sister.

Is it the toll of a Trump presidency and its ongoing consequences, which not so long ago threatened to kick out all international students, again under the guise of public health safety? Or is it simply the straw that broke the camel's back, after ten years of fretting over legal

immigration status, being designated an alien and feeling like one? The power of this feeling is not to be underestimated. At one point, I would have married someone who made me miserable and mistreated me just so I could at least not worry about being deported.

Or is it the sudden death of both of my cats, my faithful and trusty companions through two cross-country moves, who could be counted on for companionship when everything and everyone else shifted? It may seem extreme, my grief over the loss of these two pets, but my existence has been so conditional and lonely in the past ten years as an immigrant (although the government labels me as a non-immigrant, which again adds to my liminality, my state of in-transition, of hovering over settled, firm existence), that they were one of the few constants, one of the few things that felt like home and belonging. When you spend ten years in a country that continuously tells you that you are not wanted here, when the law says that the past ten years you have lived in this country, paid taxes, worked, explored, and developed, are essentially ghost years for the purposes of legal immigration, it takes a toll on your perception of yourself and your impact on the world around you.

If I left now, who would remember that I walked the streets of Boston, smoked in its alleyways, got young-drunk in its packed bars? Who would recall the coffee I made in church basements in Chicago for AA meetings, the ivy I gazed upon at the University of Chicago, the words I wrote while looking at the arcane arches of its campus? Who would remember the blackboards I scribbled on in Ann Arbor, dusting the chalk off my hands, while teaching first-years about writing and feminism? I would be as easily erased as that chalk, leaving only an unintelligible trace of my meaning.

If I left now, would it be just as if I wafted through? A breeze that makes a momentary change in the environment only for the tree branches to return to their original position, for a few leaves to move further down the road?

4. Stuck

The first time I realized I was scared of flying was on a flight from London with my mom and sister. It all started off pretty well. I was sitting on the window seat, my sister sat in the middle, and my mom had the aisle. For as long as I can remember, this is usually our seating arrangement when the three of us travel. Maybe when we were younger my mom would sit in the middle, but there's something calming about thinking of my mom in the aisle seat, protecting me and my sister from harm. Or, more likely, orange juice spillage from the drink cart.

At some point in the flight, I started thinking that the ceilings were very low. In the window seat, I was close to that short curvature where the "wall" merges with the ceiling. I started feeling a little restricted, not just by the curvature coming down on me, pushing my head towards my sister in an attempt to escape its closing-in, but also by the thought that if I needed to get out, two people—my lovely mother and sister—were between me and the aisle, and even if I made it to the aisle, where the hell was I going to go? Would I have some impromptu sky diving session and hope to land close enough to my destination to hitchhike? I started breathing heavily just thinking about this lack of escape.

Ever since that moment, I have been a fairly diligent claustrophobe. At lectures, I always need to sit in the last seat of the row. In class, I sit in the chair closest to the door. At a concert or movie theatre, I note the emergency exits and am confident in my tackling abilities, should it come to that. My escape/survival techniques have certainly bled into my relationships. I can't

think of a single relationship in which I didn't have an escape route planned if things went south. Actually following these escape routes was a different story.

5. The Details

I sit in the car, parked behind the Whole Foods not even a mile from the apartment I've just escaped. I am crying and dialing my sponsor. I have just left a destructive boyfriend of three years. I've had to leave my pets behind, temporarily, until I am able to come back to the house when he's at work and leave them with sitters. When I contact the sitters, I have to swear them to secrecy, ask them to ignore any attempts he may make to contact them and find the whereabouts of me or my animals. I am ashamed of having to disclose my situation, my fear, my vulnerability. I am ashamed of having to ask for their help to house my pets because my house is unsafe and I cannot bring my pets to stay with my friend, who has gracefully allowed me to stay in her living room until my housing situation is resolved.

I packed the essentials in the trunk of my car before he got home, fearing that he might not let me leave if I did not have the element of surprise. He still tried to prevent me from leaving, but at least all I had to remove from the situation was my own body. Still not an easy feat, but easier than with a backpack dragging me down.

The details do not matter.

It takes me nearly five years to write these words. To be able to write these words. It takes me two years of learning to write myself on the page to be able to attempt writing these

words for an audience outside myself. I was forced to tell parts of this story to others, the first time out of necessity, because I needed their help. The first time I told it in full was to a therapist-in-training, two years after the fact, who kept telling me none of it was my fault.

The details matter.

He never hit me, but I still feared him. I feared the emotional repercussions of being honest, of standing up for myself, of making my own decisions. Once, he was mad at me for chopping off all my hair without considering whether he would like it. His preference was more important than what I wanted to do with my own body. He tried to control what I ate, who I was with, how much I worked, what I did with my time when I wasn't working, how much of my own money I spent. Once, during that stressful time of the semester when I had three or four seminar papers due at once, while still working 20+ hours a week at my part-time job, I had to lie to him about where I was because I was so tired that I needed to get a hotel room so I could nap for a few hours and get some work done. I could not rest or work in my own house. I lied to him about what I ate, hiding the remnants of takeout before he came home. Whatever shadow of independence I had was concealed in trash bags and lies about my whereabouts. Thank god location sharing was not yet a common occurrence. He went through my texts on my iPad, called me manipulative when I tried to be honest, shamed me when I had a cigarette with my friends from school. He would get upset if I spent too much time on the phone with my family, if I greeted my pets more enthusiastically than him when I got home. He disliked that my closest friend was a gay man, claiming he could be faking his homosexuality to get in my pants. When I finally left, he asked me if I was a lesbian now, as if that was the only conceivable reason for

leaving him and a relationship with so much gaslighting that, to this day, I question my own memories and repeat a chant of "I'm not crazy" any time my current boyfriend disagrees with me. When I finally got sober, he claimed that AA was changing me too much, that we no longer had fun, that I spent too much time going to meetings and talking to my sponsor.

When we stopped having sex, it was my fault, and on the rare occasion when I would take one for the team, I would lie there, silent and motionless, one time even vomiting after the fact because I was so disgusted with myself. When I did that, he said it made him feel like he was raping me, and that was my fault, too. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

My mother says he probably did love me. I tell her obsession is not love.

I don't know how long we sit there, me telling him I am leaving, that I am done, and him denying it. His body blocks the exit and he begins making claims that he will hurt himself, that he doesn't know how to live without me, that he does not know what he is capable of doing if I leave him. As he escalates and I try to leave, he again uses his body to block me. I say we should call his father, that maybe he will help calm him down. As I reach for my phone, he grabs it out of my hand and throws it across the room. I recall being against a wall, the dog barking at me, him wailing, throwing his hands up, moving in circles through the room. This must be how I manage to get my phone back and dial his father. As he is distracted, I finally make it to the door, and as I run to the car, I hear him yell, "If you leave now, there's no coming back." I don't think this at the time, but my response now is: "That's the point, dummy."

Although I removed my physical body from his reach that day, his harassment did not stop for another two months. That first night, there were a thousand phone calls, some of which I would answer on speakerphone with my friend sitting next to me, comforting me, because I was afraid of what he might do to himself if I did not answer. He threatened to hurt himself if I left. The next day, after an ominous text, he didn't answer any of my texts or calls. When I worried he had finally done something to harm himself, I desperately called his mother, who did not answer my repeated phone calls, and after I texted her to please check on him, he replied that he was fine. I never heard from any of his family members again. They may never know how their son or brother truly acted, but that is not my responsibility anymore, if it ever was.

What I regret more than anything was apologizing to him through a family member. Although none of his family ever responded to my attempts to contact them during that time, I sent a text saying that I was sorry about how everything turned out, and that I was reaching out to them, rather than directly to him, because I did not want to cause him more harm but still wanted to say my peace. My peace was a very edited version of events, with no mention of his threats, or manipulation. It was more of a simple reasoning for my choices, declaring that every story has two sides to it and I knew it was not my place to share mine with his family members because his side was always the one they would take. In hindsight, I know that I owed no one an apology, particularly not him, and the fact that I apologized only adds to my shame.

The details did not matter. But they should have.

In a way, I did eventually force him out of the house we shared. Despite the fact that I was the one who had done the leaving, I made it clear that this space was mine to return to and he should be the one to vacate it. If he chose not to leave, then I would find a different home and leave him with a rent I knew he could not afford. Either way, I would never be within his reach again. It was one of the first times I asserted anything during the time I knew him. Though he did leave, it was not quietly; he continued trying to undermine, harass, and threaten me through more phone calls and texts. I thought I would be able to stay in the house (after changing the locks) and save myself the trouble of moving, but after a few months, I realized this would be impossible. Even without him, that house felt suffocating, and I had to leave. Short of burning everything he had ever touched, vacating the house was as much as I could do to erase any physical memory or trace of our relationship.

The details mattered and there was an abundance of them.

And if the details matter, some of them may tell you that I was not blameless. That I willingly let this man into my life, attached myself to him. That by being drunk and high, by wanting to be wanted, I made room for my agency to be restricted. I gave myself away. That I was jealous, insecure, that I was afraid I'd never get married so I might as well settle now. These details are not so much details as excuses I have internalized. They're thoughts that a therapist has to undo by repeatedly telling me it's not my fault. By telling you these details, these excuses, am I still defending him? Protecting myself from any repercussions of telling this story, of people coming to his defense and asking to hear his side of the story? Maybe if I hadn't been such a nasty bitch, he wouldn't have had to be so controlling, so critical, so forceful.

Which of these details will matter to you?

For a while, after leaving the house, the details did not matter. I wanted nothing to do with them.

I tried to forget, to bury everything I felt in a place deep inside me, to cleanse him out of my mind and body with other men, who never stayed, whether I wanted them to or not. In the first few months after I left, I furiously went on dates to try and regain some confidence, some feeling of beauty, self-worth, independence. Of course this was the wrong way to go about finding these things, but it had been drilled into me for years not only that validation comes from the outside but that it comes from men, from being desired. It was the only way I knew how to move forward, to avenge the time I had lost as a young, eligible, desirable woman. Eventually, I became more comfortable on my own and realized I did not need to be desired by a man in order to be worthwhile. The next time I sought out a male companion, I knew what I was looking for. I wasn't doing it out of fear, loneliness, or a crushed self-esteem but out of a genuine longing to open my life to someone else.

I thought I was ready, but starting a new relationship without resolving the massive issues I had buried from the last one caused them to erupt in the most spectacular and inopportune ways. I had panic attacks, literally ran from conversations, kicked him out of my house at any sight of disagreement or perceived slight. I had given my body to others so many times since the leaving, but giving more than that turned out to be impossible until I let out all the poison.

It took me almost two years from the leaving to tell the full story aloud, sharing it only with my therapist—a stranger, in essence—at first. It took longer than that to share it with those in my life. My narrative of that moment was split into the different parts that people knew or did not know. I splintered it, made it smaller so the pieces would be easier to hide, leaving only certain details with important people in my life, in case I ever needed to get it back from them. My sponsor probably received the most pieces, which she held onto until I was ready to take them back.

I will not deny myself the details.

Not for fear of his hypothetical defenses, not for fear of feeling, not for fear of what others may think of me and whether or not I was to blame.

The details tell you that "fight or flight" is not as simple as it seems, that there can be fight in flying, too. Wings can pack a punch.

The details are mine, to do with as I please.

What will you do with the details?

Chapter 12 : COVID: A Second Interlude

Soundtrack:
Olivia Rodrigo, “Favorite Crime”
James Bay, “Let it Go”
Morgan Wade, “Wilder Days”

When the University of Michigan gave its faculty a COVID monetary bonus in December 2021, I used mine not to save up for my taxes, like a responsible grad student might do, but to take a two week writing trip. I decided I wanted to visit three specific cities in which I had flourished, fallen apart, and been stifled by a controlling and manipulative ex-boyfriend. It made sense to me to revisit these places alone when writing a memoir about regaining agency.

I wanted to walk the street in Boston that I had not been able to walk in eight years because of the panic attacks it spurred. Just looking at this street on Google Maps gave me shortness of breath and chest constriction. I wanted to go back to the places in Chicago where I got sober, be reminded of what I gained and lost within the span of two short years there.

I wanted to visit New Orleans at my own pace, revel in its magic, allow it to restore my sense of wonder. I didn’t want to acquiesce my wants, desires, or moods for anyone, but particularly not for someone who did not seem to share my entrancement with the city. I wanted to go back to see if it would feel even more wonderful without someone tracking my every move, judging the amount of beignets I consumed, or coercing me to have sex with them because that is what couple vacations and strange hotel beds demanded, even though eating a beignet would be a more pleasurable, and even more sensual, experience for me at that point. I fell in love with New Orleans while visiting with someone I had fallen out of love with. I wanted to

walk freely around the city without someone's heavy hands on me, keeping me in place and weighing me down, without someone's eyes on me, monitoring who I looked at or smiled at, who I struck up friendly conversation with.

With this memoir, I wanted to embark on a journey of healing and discovery. A painful dissection of my life, self, work, and academic interests would eventually heal me, I thought, from all the times I felt like a passenger in my own life. But overall, I expected it to be a kind of awakening, creating my own soapbox to stand on and speak about issues that plagued me and other women and how we might tackle these issues through self-reflection and humor. Searching for my own path to humorous self-discovery, for ways to analyze my experiences so that they would also matter to others and make them feel something, I studied female comedians who were bringing together life writing and humor, discovering Dana Schwartz's *Choose Your Own Disaster*, Amy Schumer's *Expecting Amy*, Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* and *Douglas*, Scaachi Koul's *One Day We'll All Be Dead and None of This Will Matter*, and Jenny Lawson's *Furiously Happy*. If comedic life writing could help these women regain a sense of agency over their narratives, then by my own logic…. shouldn't this work for me? If I were to write my own story, to imbue it with my own humor, curiosity, criticism, and trauma; if I were to lay myself bare like the comedians I studied, couldn't I regain the sense of agency that I sometimes lost through collusion with my gender, my status as an immigrant, and even my position at an academic institution? Would it be possible to both write myself anew and continue to explore questions of feminist comedic life writing?

While I anticipated an experience of liberating discovery and feminist-manifesto-genius-writing, I've actually spent the past few months having vivid nightmares. The nightmares either take place at different moments of my life, depending on what piece of writing I've been

working on during the day, or in my own auteur horror films worthy of Blumhouse Productions. Sometimes, I wake myself up through the sound of my own heaving and crying; other times, I am somewhat consciously aware that I'm crying, or screaming but unable to wake myself up or move until my boyfriend violently shakes me out of the dream. Even when I don't wake myself up with agitated sounds, I am likely to have panic attacks within the first 5-10 minutes of waking up. If I'm lucky enough that morning not to have a full-fledged panic attack, I will have difficulty breathing, feel my heart beating in the pit of my stomach, and experience an almost overwhelming inability to get out of bed. The only reason I do get up is because my two dogs will most likely pee on my stuff if I don't get up to take them outside. Dog isn't god spelled backwards for nothing.

This new reality did not deter me, however, from thinking that my three-city trip would turn it all around. I would be able to effect real change on my outlook, my current mental state. I would triumph over the shitty memories these cities held and skip through their streets, happily rewriting my history. The goal was to a) go back to places where unpleasant things happened, b) take up that physical space and not have a panic attack, c) write about it for personal and academic gain.

Here's one small detail you should probably know: I decided to book this trip at the peak of the Omicron variant in the United States. In my mind, the trip still made perfect sense because even though I faced the exterior threat of Omicron, I urgently needed to do something about the internal threat to my sanity and my grip on reality.

Also, flights were cheap. For clearly unknown, not-at-all-obvious reasons.[1]

[1] The reason was COVID. Shockingly.

The first part of my "Recovery Tour" went swimmingly. I started with New Orleans, where I ate beignets every day (sometimes more than once a day), and even rode a bike in the city—and I am absolutely terrified of riding bikes, particularly around cars. I took a tour and talked to the guide about her spiritual experiences in New Orleans. I ate muffuletta while I waited for the trolley. I went to a bookstore I had found last time but did not have much time to peruse because of my book hating ex-boyfriend. I was looking for a specific book about Louisiana folk stories, and, as if kismet, my hoped-for edition had just been delivered that day. The universe seemed to be reaffirming my decision to take this trip. If all these things sound very touristy, they were, but I was content.

In Boston, I faced a more difficult task: to walk the street where Berklee College of Music is located, the street I had not been able to walk since I transferred out of the school. Once I left Berklee, I avoided it as much as I could, and the more I avoided it, the greater its hold on me. The longer I stayed away, the more panicky I would feel about having to walk that street. When I eventually left Boston, my fear worsened. It got to the point where I would look up the address on Google Maps and have a panic attack just by seeing the building icons and street layout on my screen. After eight years of avoiding this street, I was finally ready to walk it.

I was staying in a hotel a few blocks from the main building, so I started making my way through the freezing air and arrived at the street about a block down from the building. I saw first that some of the mini marts and coffee places I had visited were closed, and then I crossed the street to face the building head on. It looked so… small. So much smaller than I imagined it every time I would picture walking in front of it. There was no pressure in my chest, no shortness of breath. It was so underwhelming that I started to laugh. I felt ridiculous, standing in front of this building that I thought held so much, trying to feel something when I felt absolutely nothing

except slight amusement. I had underestimated all the work and healing I had done away from this physical space. The catharsis and change had already happened and, apparently, I just hadn't paid close enough attention whenever it did. With this realization, I nodded at the building, as if in mutual understanding that we were now done here, and walked away, light and giggly.

Perhaps in another shocking twist of events, I got COVID at the tail end of my trip, despite taking as many precautions as I could. Most of my time was spent freezing my ass off walking all those (previously) nightmarish streets of Boston, or defrosting said ass on a New Orleans park bench. I ate outdoors in New Orleans, and when I couldn't eat outside in Boston, I brought takeout to my room. I was vaccinated and boosted. I wore my mask at all times. I didn't lick any subway poles or bathroom floors. But I guess I still probably should not have gone traipsing around the U.S. in peak pandemic while the most contagious variant of all was out there treating the world's population like its own personal all-you-can-infect buffet.

Shortly after I tested positive in a Chicago hotel room, I lost my mind. Despite what you may think of me now that you know I willingly and very consciously decided to travel during Omicron, I at least had the foresight to pack several at-home test kits. After a couple of days of repeatedly testing negative, I finally hit the jackpot when I was about four days from heading home. I canceled my flight and made plans to take the train back to Ann Arbor once my five full isolation days were up and I had tested negative. I DoorDashed some supplies, called down to the lobby to arrange for a longer stay in the same room, and felt lucky that my room had a window and that I had enough money to pay for the extra days and train ticket. My symptoms weren't terrible; I just felt like I had a particularly bad cold. Then, around three days after my positive test, once all my symptoms but sleep sweating had abated, I slept for a whole day. And I mean this literally. I woke up for two showers and a meal; I was awake for a total of about four

hours. In those four hours when I was awake, I noticed that I had a hard time remembering things or keeping track of my thoughts. I felt very slow and definitely should not have attempted to watch the *Loki* series on Disney+ because I understood none of it. Even less than every other person who watched it. When I had coffee with my friend a few weeks later and told her this story, she said: "Yeah, that show is trippy. You didn't hallucinate alligator Loki, that was real." To which I replied, "There was an alligator?"

That should give you an idea of my mental capacity as COVID worked its way out of me.

On what I estimate to be day four,[2] I officially, fully, and truly lost my mind. I've lost my mind a few other times before; I'm not new to the concept or the general feeling. But this was the first time I had lost my mind while I was sober. And it was one of the most terrifying moments of my life.

In an ill-fated attempt to write through my quarantine and make something productive out of it, I accidentally locked myself in a fun house mirror room of my worst memories. Here are excerpts of what I wrote on those two days. I have not edited them for clarity, punctuation, or spelling. This is exactly how these words came out of me as I lost my mind. The first is from day three:

> I find the hardest part to write about, the part where I trust my memory the least is over the course of a 2/3 year relationship and some moments in my childhood relating to my grandparents. I think, potentially, this is because I was already in emotional states that made remembering difficult, traumatic. Why would I want to commit those events to memory? That relationship thrived off my lack of memory.
>
> The people who those memories related to made it so I would not feel sure of myself, not trust my own mind, thoughts, recollections.

[2] I say estimated because I cannot guarantee you this was the 4th day rather than the 2nd, 3rd, or even 5th. My memory of those days is so unreliable, time so impossible to pin down, that the only way I can write these experiences with some modicum of confidence is because of the notes I took during that time, conversations I had right after that time, and what others have relayed to me from phone calls I made, conversations I had while being driven back to my house by my boyfriend's mother and sister, or behaviors my boyfriend observed while supervising me in my own house because I was a danger to myself.

I was gaslighted, isolated, afraid, made to feel worthless/like I was not enough. I still don't know whether to trust all my recollections.

I was also drunk for a very large part of them. In recovery for the other, meaning I was in withdrawal, learning how to life[sic] and feel again, how to see things without looking through the end of a bottle. I had to learn everything again, including how to trust myself and make decisions.

The except from day four reads:

Sometimes the best way to write about something difficult, vulnerable, something your mind has worked consciously to protect your day to day from is in a state when your defenses are down. For instance, I am currently struggling to write this through some very heavy COVID brain fog. I can barely keep my head up and my pen straight, so what better time to go back and examine some of my worst memories?

Is that why I dream so much, so violently? Because it is the only time my guard is down?

Below these two paragraphs, I wrote a list of memory flashes from the day I finally left my ex-boyfriend. I remember falling asleep on the notebook after writing some of the bullet points, trying to hold my head up, as more memories popped back up, too quick for me to jot them down neatly; I was afraid that if I didn't write them down now they may never come to me clearly again. My handwriting looks thin, and slanted, not like my usual large and rounded scrawl. M's and t's flow into their siblings so that "better" looks like "be+er" and "remember" looks like "rewwwewwwber)" but with less sharp, curlier w's than my computer can produce in Times New Roman. The ink looks more gray than black in certain words, as if I ran out of strength to push the pen's ink onto the paper.

Here are a few of those memory bullet points:

- "Bubba, barking?"
- "packed bags in car"
- "against wall"
- "phone thrown from my hand towards cat tree
  -don't remember getting it back but I had it back to call his dad"
- "I was on big couch @ 1st[sic], he was on ottoman chair"
- "I tried to leave, he blocked door"

- “Just asking please”
- “running to car as he says ‘if you leave now we’re done, there’s no coming back’”

I went on this trip to rewrite certain spaces, perhaps unlock something about them and who I was in them. In some ways, I may have got more than I bargained for. On the car ride back to Ann Arbor, my boyfriend’s sister told me that she often experiences brain fog because of an auto-immune disease. I nodded my head in silent agreement, but in my head I thought: “This is no brain fog. This is my brain reminding me of how easily I can destroy myself.”

Chapter 13 : Academi(nh)a

Soundtrack:
Ed Sheeran, “Gold Rush”
Take That, “Patience”
Olivia Rodrigo, “Enough for you”
Olivia Rodrigo, “Jealousy, Jealousy”
Shawn Mendes , “In my Blood”
John Mayer, “Slow Dancing in a Burning Room”

Minha: from Portuguese, meaning ‘mine.’

Academi(nh)a: (noun) a poorly crafted pun to signify a linguistic retaking of an institution and experience that seeks to suck the life out of me. Comes from joining the words ‘academia’ and ‘minha.’

I’m a first generation student and a third generation addict. One of these factors makes me a valuable asset to academia. The other is often a topic of derision. Both make me an unlikely and uncomfortable member of academia.

My first time back in a university setting after getting sober was the graduate student orientation in my English department. I had spent the months prior to this event in church basements, introducing myself with, “Hi, I’m Sofia and I’m an alcoholic.” So when we were going around introducing ourselves, I had to fight the lifesaving reflexes I’d been honing for the past ten months and only silently remind myself of my alcoholism.

I wouldn’t say I recommend my course of action to newly recovering addicts: moving not yet a year into sobriety and returning to the environment where you reached the height of your addiction. I will note now that the height of my addiction is different from my ‘bottom,’ to use AA lingo. Your bottom is typically the worst, most desperate moment in your addiction, the

prelude to admitting you have a problem and seeking help. While my bottom is mostly a singular moment in a Chicago emergency room, the height of my alcoholism spanned several months.

I reached the height of my alcoholism while completing my Master's at the University of Chicago. Although my bottom would come three months after graduation, I developed my full dependency on alcohol and prescription drugs as I worked to finish my degree. When I look back at those nine months, I see now how my academic work and alcohol became intertwined. In my mind now, it is impossible to tear them apart; they are too enmeshed and engrained in each other for either to stand alone. Thoughts of working at the library are synonymous with dehydration and headaches, consequences of the previous night's drinking. Thoughts of drinking are synonymous with attempting to stop my brain from working endlessly on my thesis. One of the bartenders at the local university pub even had my drink order memorized: tequila, sprite, and grenadine. I used to order tequila and orange juice, but the orange juice filled me up too quickly and I liked how sickly sweet the grenadine felt against my teeth.

Those nine months are defined by contradictory excesses: "How can I drink more? How can I work more?" The excesses were followed by wanting a complete absence of feeling: "If I drink more, will the feeling stop? Will my brain be still enough for me to rest a while and start up again in the morning?"

Alcohol and Klonopin became the only way to get a pause, the only momentary relief. I was so wound up that the only way to come down was to knock myself out of consciousness. And I had to come down. There would be no surviving the kind of intellectual and emotional work I had to do to survive a nine month Master's program without the alcohol induced dancing, laughing, and sleeping. At least I didn't see another way. At age twenty-two, I had no healthy mechanisms for coping with the stress I was under and the things the university asked of me.

Some other alcoholics in academia don't find that their drinking was necessarily related to their work, arguing that they would have had issues with alcohol regardless of their involvement with academia. This is the case for Cliff Lampe, for example, a "full professor at a top public university, in a supportive, forward-thinking department," who wrote an article about his experience as a recovering alcoholic in academia in part to help other academics in recovery. As Lampe states: "For me, I didn't abuse alcohol because of the stress of the job, I abused alcohol because I am an alcoholic. It's a bit of a family tradition. However, I've known a lot of people who feel like they have to participate in the drinking to fully participate in academia" (Lampe).

Another article by an anonymous literature professor, published in *The Chronicle Review*, also claims that while it wasn't the pressures of the job that made her an alcoholic, academia offers many opportunities for functioning or even acceptable alcoholism, often under the guise of networking at academic conferences or casually interacting with students over beers to lessen the formal hierarchy between professor and student, particularly in graduate school. This author writes: "literary photos with the glasses in the foreground, the department happy hours elongated into unhappy nights, the conversations and silences around alcohol—in short, the culture and discourses of academic life that make addiction possible or probable. No profession can make someone an addict, but every profession can enable addiction with its stories and romanticizations, and also with specific practices" ("Addicted in Academe"). While I needed no assistance from literature to turn to alcohol, I do see this same romanticizing in my relationship with literature, but in regards to depression and suicide. Some of my favorite authors and books featured women descending into madness, depression, or contemplating suicide. It's not for nothing that I have several tattoos on my body that reference Dorothy Parker and Sylvia Plath.

Good literature often comes from pain, and I connected with certain authors, like Parker and Plath, because I seemed to understand that my kind of pain was theirs, too.

During my Master's program, I certainly saw what the anonymous literature professor puts as "the culture and discourses of academic life that make addiction possible" ("Addicted in Academe"). Most events hosted by the school included alcohol, including a weekly social hour with administrators and professors in our program, which most of us saw as pregaming for the next stage of the night: the on-site school pub. After each social hour, a group of us would migrate over to the pub where we would continue drinking, bonding over the difficulties of academia and how exhausted we were. In my case, I was so emotionally and mentally drained each Friday that I couldn't just go home to rest; I had to wash (read: drink) the academia off of me at the pub before I was able to go home.

I'm not saying academia made me an alcoholic, but it certainly didn't help me, either. As I mentioned, at twenty-two, I had no healthy mechanisms to sustain my work. Academia is not necessarily the place to go to learn about balance, compromise, taking care of your mental or physical health, or healthy priorities such as prioritizing your wellbeing over your publication record—at least not in my case.

For me, so much of my identity was bound up with being a good student that I lost myself completely to the mechanism I thought made that end goal possible. When I ended up in the E.R., for mixing hydrocodone with alcohol, I had no idea who I was because I was no longer a student. Without the highs, I only had the lows left, and I had to keep taking more and more until more was no longer enough.

About four months into my full-time job and my status as a non-student, I was starting on my PhD applications. I was drinking copiously, alone or with company, only to make the

uncertainty and misery of the everyday seem bearable. I was unhappy with the job and not adjusting well to having only one full-time job instead of being a student with jobs on the side. I simply was not adjusting, even though I was seeing a therapist and was on a cocktail of anti-depressants. One day, as I was doing more mind-numbing data entry, I decided I was going to go home after work and just not do it anymore.

I took the bus home and opened a bottle of white wine.[1] I started off with just one of my boyfriend's pills. He had recently had a wisdom tooth removed and had not taken the pain killers they provided for after the surgery. And so, with some hydrocodone and a bottle of wine, I sat on the couch waiting to feel something, to gain the courage to take more of those pills and blissfully drift off into nothingness. Eventually, I started to feel drowsy, light as air, but it was difficult to take in air. Breathing required a lot of work and so did keeping my head up. I believe this is when I took a second pill (my mind was already a little hazy and although I know I took more than one pill, I don't know exactly at what point I did) and decided I needed to write my goodbye notes in case I couldn't write them later.

The notes were not long. I wrote "I love you" in Portuguese on one post-it note, for my family, and one saying "I'm sorry" in English, for my shitty boyfriend. I will say this for him: he was shitty, but I don't wish on anyone what I put him through that day. Coming home to your girlfriend who is coming down from the meds she stole from you and is on the phone with the suicide hotline is not something I would wish on my worst enemy. And he was probably my worst enemy.

[1] I know, I really wish it was a much cooler, less basic bitch, alcohol, like a more literary choice of whiskey, but I am bound by this genre to tell the truth, and the truth is I drank cheap white wine to try and kill myself. What a boring way to go!

I wrote something else in a notebook while I kept waiting for the strength to take the whole bottle of pills. It wasn't really a letter to anyone, it was more just me getting my thoughts out before I was finished having thoughts forever. Over four pages, I talk about being a failure and a disappointment to my family, about not being enough for my boyfriend, and about my education as a useless money pit. Overall, it's a testimony to how much I hated myself and how difficult just being alive had become. I still keep this notebook. I don't like looking at it often, but it is important to me to know it's there, that I've saved those words if I ever need a reminder of how dangerous it can be in my head.

The same notebook includes an entry from six days before, where I talk about the anxiety of needing to start my applications for PhD programs, and having dreamt I received two rejections from schools in England. The entry starts by saying that this was the "first night I've slept through the night in a while. Probably because of some relief I felt in going to the doctor. Telling someone else how scared I am of myself made me feel less accountable, now that someone knows how dangerous my head is."

Before I called the suicide hotline and before my boyfriend got home, I emptied the bottle of pills on the bed, where I was going to take them all and lay down. But when I saw them all spread out on the bed, I couldn't do it. I tried picking one up but kept sobbing, and one of my cats walked into the room, as if by divine intervention. I thought the people in my life would go on without me, but who would care for my cats?

I stuffed the pills back into the bottle, since my cats both have a penchant for playing with anything on any surface and the last thing I needed to make myself feel even worse would be to accidentally kill them. I grabbed my phone and looked up the number for the suicide hotline.

I don't remember much of the call aside from the fact that the voice on the other end of the line was adamant about me not hanging up until I was either at the hospital or with my boyfriend. My boyfriend got home after I had been on the phone for a substantial amount of time, and I felt myself sobering up, returning to my body. I explained what was happening and after some arguing about whether I needed to go to the hospital or not (me firmly in the 'not' camp), I called the on-call psychiatrist at the closest emergency room. I only agreed to come in after she promised me I would be able to leave if I wanted to, that she would not forcefully hospitalize me. I was pretty painfully sober by the time they asked me to remove all my clothes and pee in a cup. I was still tired, but I was alert enough to make the case that I should be allowed to go home and continue treatment with my regular psychiatrist. At this point, lying to mental health professionals to get what I wanted was like being on auto-pilot, and I was able to do it even with a foggy brain. Eventually, once all the tests came back and it was deemed safe for me to leave, my boyfriend drove me home and I had nothing more than another diagnoses of "depression" and "suicidal ideation" on my record. Two days later, I was back at work and it was business as usual, except for the fact that I would go to my first AA meeting later that week.

While I would not have survived long enough to even start my PhD program if I had not become sober, being a PhD student certainly didn't make recovery any easier. Again, the culture of drinking was very present, but the derision of twelve-step programs was what took me by surprise. Now it makes a lot of sense to me that some academics view recovery programs as the opposite of intellectualism due to their reliance on personal experience and faith. I was taking a class on modernism in my second year when the professor told us we would be discussing a text written by a recovering alcoholic. I heard two of my classmates laughing about alcoholism and twelve-step programs. I didn't hear the full joke, but even if I had, I doubt I would've found it

funny, considering I already thought these two male students were pricks who liked to talk in abstract terms and hear the sound of their voice bouncing off academia's glass walls. I emailed my professor the day we were supposed to discuss that text, disclosing my status as alcoholic in order to be excused from the class. I cited the comments I had overheard in class and told her I had no interest in participating in a discussion that would probably be very personal for me with people like those two classmates, even though my comments might be some of the most fruitful ones, considering my connection with the text. To her credit, my professor apologized that her classroom had been an uncomfortable space for me and encouraged me to share any thoughts on the text over email so that she could relay them to the class.

There has been no greater test to my sobriety in academia than when I convinced my psychiatrist to give me a prescription for Ritalin. Convincing him wasn't very difficult, to be honest. I don't know if he made commission on those drugs, but I've never before had a psychiatrist who so freely gave prescriptions. To be fair, in seven years I'd had a grand total of six psychiatrists, which averages to roughly one psychiatrist per year, so I had gotten very good at manipulating them and gauging their degree of attention to patients: aka ease of manipulation. For this particular one, all I had to do was say some trigger words like "difficulty focusing" and "mind drifting off" and I had the prescription filled the next day.

I truly did have difficulty focusing, something which I've noticed getting worse in recent years during my PhD. However, I think that's because of my overall exhaustion with academia and my own jaded outlook and ongoing depression. When I received the Ritalin, it was my third or fourth year in my PhD program, when I was supposed to be reading over 100 books for an oral exam and beginning to write my dissertation. I constantly felt like I was behind and I needed to be doing everything faster and better. I had tried Ritalin once before during my Master's

program, before I got sober, and it had done nothing for me. In fact, I managed to take a nap while I was on it. But with the mounting pressure to do well in my oral exam and create a great dissertation, I thought it wouldn't hurt to give it a try.

I can count on one hand the times I've actually taken Ritalin. It didn't make me that much more productive, though I certainly felt more focused. But I loved that it suppressed my appetite. One of the times I took it, I went a whole day without feeling hungry, and I knew that my elation about this fact was unhealthy and I was in danger of falling back into disordered eating. It also didn't help my anxiety. In the first half of my fourth year, I was really struggling with my dissertation, which was a very different project than the one you're currently reading. It was a much more traditional dissertation, a monograph made up of three chapters theorizing the relationship between women's comedy and life writing. I was about a month away from turning in my first chapter of that project and could barely put pen to paper. Just thinking about the chapter felt like my mind was wading through mud. I decided to take some Ritalin in hopes that it would kickstart my writing, but all it did was heighten all my stress, fears, and anxiety. I had a horrible and very long panic attack, and spent half a day gasping for breath and dry heaving, even actually throwing up at one point. The next day I contacted my dissertation chair to tell her I needed to change projects or potentially quit my PhD because my body was physically rejecting the process.

During this time, I remember my sponsor told me something along the lines of the following: "As alcoholics, we are capable of different things. If that means you work slower or less, then so be it. Do not put your health and life at risk trying to meet someone else's deadline or baseline of what productivity and success means." I had stupidly tried to fix an inner problem with a chemical that was never going to help the root cause, and I had put my productivity, what

I thought I owed the university, ahead of my sobriety. Once I had that realization, I knew it was time to ask academia to bend a little, so I wouldn't have to break. Again.

My identity as an alcoholic in academia was mainly an internal struggle with external factors, since I didn't feel the need to disclose this part of my identity often. However, my identity as an immigrant, foreigner, and non-native English speaker posed problems both to myself and to those interacting with me in academia, mostly professors. It was harder to hide this part of myself when the question, "So, where are you from?" is a lot more common than, "So, do you have unhealthy drinking habits?"

I've had a fair share of troubling interactions with professors revolving around my nationality. Some professors have relegated my written work and its potential issues to the fact that I am not a native speaker of English, while others have told me I should capitalize on my foreignness and study Portuguese literature. Both of these outlooks are equally detrimental to my relationship not only to academia, but also to my own work. Upon discovering my immigrant status and cultural background, several professors have questioned why I decided to study American literature when I could make myself stand out in the academic job market by studying Portuguese literature. This assumption is not only insulting but also inaccurate because no one with any kind of literature degree feels confident about the job market. I've been solely focused on American literature since my sophomore year of college, but even before that, I completed the highest level of English literature through the International Baccalaureate program. I fell in love with literature that I read in English, authors like Meg Cabot, Jacqueline Wilson, and the *Harry Potter* series in my tween years, and then later Dorothy Parker, Ray Bradbury, Edgar Allan Poe, and Margaret Atwood. All of this is to say that I may be Portuguese, but I know as much about Portuguese literature as the professors who suggest I take it up as the focus of my career. I have

been trained for years to study American literature, only to have someone suggest that my national identity should trump years of studying and my own interests. Being continuously reminded of and even encouraged to capitalize on my minority or foreign status has left me feeling further alienated and exoticized, not just by the institutions of higher education that seek to bolster their diversity statistics, but also by the professors charged with supporting my academic growth.

Before I was given the green-light for this project, which allows me to speak in a voice that sounds more like the dialogue I both grew up with and runs in my head (where every other sentence is peppered with a swear word), I had long sacrificed my mother tongue to write with the formality academia requires. My family makes fun of the way I butcher Portuguese because I have spent more time practicing my "therefores and indeeds" than having lively conversations in my hometown, around a platter of my mother's Bacalhau com Natas. In a painful paradox, while my Portuguese deteriorates as I sacrifice my mother tongue in order to live in America and write in eloquent, academic English, some professors equate flaws in my work to the fact that English is my third language, despite the fact that I have been living, breathing, and writing in English more frequently than in Portuguese or Spanish for the past ten years. Others' lazy and inaccurate assumptions alienate me not just from my academic institution but also, perhaps more importantly, from my own intellectual work.

Because my immigration status in the United States is based on me being a student, my identity as immigrant and student have often felt intertwined. Both identities share a certain temporary flavor: as a student, the expected goal is to graduate. As an immigrant (or non-immigrant, in my case), the expected goal is to return to my home country once I finish my studies in the United States. For immigration purposes, I am a drifter, a ghost. My purpose is, has

always been, to leave. The same could be said for my identity as a student. This fact has affected not just every relationship and every job I've ever had but also the choices I make, the way I live my life always looking forward so the cliff doesn't creep up on me. It has affected the way I see myself as temporary in anyone's path I cross, always with the possibility that I will need to disappear to some other state in order to keep my status or finally return to my home country. When I met my would-be-husband, I faced the difficult task of undoing this way of thinking and living, and I have to admit that I'm still learning how to see myself as something more permanent than a leased Nissan Altima.

I do, however, have my immigration status to thank for two things, though: the first is my PhD (fingers crossed, I haven't actually had this thing approved), because there is no way I would have suffered through it if my immigration status didn't depend on it. I would've quit in my fourth year if I were free to do so. The second is my life, because if I had not been afraid of getting arrested and subsequently deported, I definitely would have done harder drugs and fast-tracked my demise. So cheers to the threat of deportation for keeping me safely in the alcohol and prescription drugs niche of addiction!

Chapter 14: Conclusion: The Metaphorical Hotdogs

Soundtrack:
5 Seconds of Summer, "You Don't Go To Parties"
Camilo y Evaluna Montaner, "Machu Picchu"
John Mayer, "Emoji of a Wave"
James Morrison, "The Only Night"

A 5 Seconds of Summer song from their most recent album goes:

"It's 5:00 a.m. clinging to my couch
And everyone I ever knew is standing in my house
Oh, I wonder who I'm looking for
Cause you don't go to parties anymore."

Writing the conclusion to this dissertation feels a little bit like this song. After two years of combing through some of the most painful moments in my life, I can't help but feel like "everyone I ever knew," all my biggest conundrums, moments that are key to making up my identity, are all standing in my metaphorical house, and I'm not sure how to wrap them all up nicely.

So I won't.

We've spent the past 100-plus pages together. If you haven't encountered any insights yet, then I hardly think we can expect them to finally pop up here. Instead of being boring and just rehashing things I've already said for the past 100 pages, let me focus instead on things that still feel unresolved.

I embarked on this project because I needed change. I needed a different way to go about academic inquiry, one that would honor both my connection to the subject I was studying—women's comedic life writing—and my voice. I started writing this memoir at age 27, unmarried, and with a very loud biological clock. Many things were uncertain about my life. For

instance, I had no idea what would come after my PhD. As an international student conditionally in the U.S., I didn't even know where I would be living. A few things have changed from then to the time when I'm writing this conclusion: I'm just a few months shy of the big three-oh, I'm to be married in a couple of months, and I'll be applying for permanent immigrant status. My biological clock has remained the same, except maybe just louder.

Some of these changes—in my marriage or immigration status—may give the impression of resolution, and it is slightly tempting to give into the urge to say, "Look at that: I wrote a memoir and then things magically fell into place!" That's a nice, cathartic narrative, and everyone loves a clean, happy ending. Some changes in my life, particularly in myself and my wellbeing, are a direct product of the work I've done through this project. But there is still so much that feels raw, unfinished.

How do I write a conclusion from this place—not just from a place of irresolution, but also in the midst of living? Indeed, I am leaving you midstream—unless I die tomorrow,[1] I still have quite a lot of life to live and, perhaps, write about.

Let's start with that question then: will I keep writing after finishing this project? If some things are still unresolved (and we'll get to these in a moment), shouldn't I keep writing until they are resolved? The first issue with this line of thought is that I'm afraid one of the things I learned in this project is that more 'unresolvedness' will always come up. It is the nature of reflexivity, of looking back, swimming in your memory and identity, to find more loose threads and keep picking at them. So, it does not seem like writing in order to get a sense of being finished, of being completely resolved, is the best idea. Yet, when I started this project, I truly expected that I would find clear answers to questions of my identity and, in turn, would know

[1] If I do die tomorrow, then let it be known: I leave it all to my dogs. Also, if I die tomorrow, this book has a 200% greater chance of becoming a best-seller.

how to fix damaged relationships in the present, not just with people like my family, but also with things like music, academia, and my own sense of self-worth.

What I've found instead is that writing is more like Advil.[2] It is medicine, and it has the potential to make you feel better, but it also wears off (and it could fuck your kidneys if done excessively). Unlike with Advil, I haven't really been able to test out whether or not writing is something you do only when you have pain or as a more regular regimen, and this is because while I chose to embark on this project of my own free will, I have had to follow certain stipulations. For instance, I need to complete this project to graduate. At certain moments, even though all I wanted was to never look at my writing again, I have been forced to push through and keep writing and editing because I've had deadlines. In a way, these pressures may well have been what led me to finish it. Without the external pressure to write, will I abandon it, will I use it like Advil, only in a moment of pain, or, will it continue to be a part of how I make sense of myself and the world around me?

I don't quite have an answer to this question yet, but I can give an educated guess based on my history with writing. Although this dissertation is by far the biggest writing project I have completed, writing has always been a part of my identity. There are pictures of me writing in my diary on vacation dating back to my early teens, I had a blog in my later teens (like literally everyone in the 2000s), and I've been writing music since late high school. In ways big or small, writing has always been part of how I make meaning of things within and outside myself. However, and in all honesty, I am exhausted. This kind of writing, as well as academic work in general, has a nagging quality. It has a tendency to stay with you, taking up all your brain-space,

[2] I could have said ibuprofen instead of the branded version, Advil, but I'd really like a sponsorship from them. I've spent the last two years staring at this Word Document, reading and rereading from a computer screen—there have been A LOT of headaches.

even after you've shut off[3] your laptop. I don't think there's more than thirty minutes per day when my brain is, actively or passively, not thinking about my work, and I think this situation is common for a lot of academics and writers. In "Things I've Learned While Writing A Memoir(ish)," I wrote about how even my dreaming had changed as a consequence of this writing project: I often had vivid, disturbing dreams about different moments in my past that I was writing about, such as my relationship with my maternal grandmother or a controlling boyfriend. I also often had dreams about missing deadlines for my dissertation, my advisors hating my writing, and not being able to graduate. For this reason, I think my first instinct upon submitting this finished project to the University will be to completely step away from writing for a while, at least until it feels less like an obligation and more like a natural necessity again, like playing music, watching *30 Rock*, or breathing.

At the end of this project, one thing that still feels unstable, or uncertain, to me is my relationship to humorous writing. In contrast to other kinds of writing I've done in the past, this project has been, since the beginning, purposefully comedic. As I mentioned in "Things I've Learned While Writing a Memoir(ish)" and "The Sentient Jukebox," my relationship to comedy before this project was mainly as a consumer and casual user. I used humor in my daily life, as a way to express myself truthfully but also cover certain emotions, like pain, insecurity, or fear. It was not until this project that I began really thinking about both crafting humor and its role in my life.

Writing humor is time consuming and it requires revision. At times, I was forced to spend a lot of time on the same joke, or in the same voice. It is this key factor, the slowness of writing a longform comedic project versus offering a witty quip in my daily life, that allowed me to

[3] I don't think I've shut off my laptop since I started this dissertation—it's most likely been in sleep mode for actual years. My computer is probably even more exhausted than I am.

understand humor as reflexive. Its reflexive dimension is especially true with traumatic experiences, moments that in the moment are far from funny. Reflecting upon these moments with a comedic lens, rewriting them with a comedic lens, can potentially stagnate healing—and even be retraumatizing—by not allowing for resolution. However, reflecting on traumatic experiences can also potentially offer a sense of control and ownership over one's story. Gaining this sense of control has (luckily) been my experience, and I'm reminded specifically of something I wrote in the last section of "Fight or Flight:" "As he is distracted, I finally make it to the door, and as I run to the car, I hear him yell, 'If you leave now, there's no coming back.' I don't think this at the time, but my response now is: 'That's the point, dummy.'" The last section of the chapter deals with my decision to leave a very, very toxic boyfriend, and the previous quote is the only real instance of humor in that section. The joke is of course in the last part, the punchline "that's the point, dummy," but even the setup for the punchline makes explicit what I'm trying to illustrate about humor's reflexivity: "I don't think this *at the time*" versus "my response *now* is." While at that moment I was able to see nothing but my overwhelming fear, several years later, after working through the trauma of that relationship, writing a moment of levity back into this memory makes me feel in control of my own narrative and perspective. Yet, despite this revision, I am not replacing one emotion (fear) with the other (humor). Rather, both can exist in my mind simultaneously, as a kind of narrative, and personal, progression.

This ability to revise, to look back at trauma in a way that feels not harmful but productive, is inherently linked to the feminist potential of comedic life writing. As I mentioned in a previous chapter about my relationship to comedy, comedy affords both truth and cover, it allows for the experimentation with various affects over the same moment. Similarly, life writing, with its focus on narrative control, helped me regain authority at a moment when I felt I

had none, when it was purposefully taken away by someone else. By experimenting with these different affective overlays, I have been able not just to regain authority of my own narrative, but also to understand different things about myself as I was in particular moments, about the conditions of each moment, and about myself in the moment of reflection and revision.

In the spirit of reflexivity, I want to end by revisiting one last issue, one that, while I don't make it explicit in any of the chapters, is threaded through my relationship with authority and self-worth, including academia: my difficulty with assessment. It feels fitting to end on this note, considering that this project is being turned in as the ultimate assessment, the final requirement to achieve my PhD. For as long as I can remember, I have been outsourcing my self-worth by seeking external validation from figures of authority, and (for a time) men. Being raised by someone who is both exceptional and under constant public scrutiny left me with the sense that I also had a responsibility to be exceptional and that assessment was constant. My relationship with my maternal grandmother is the other side of this fucked up coin: her constant mood changes, paired with her criticism of me, made me want to always be the best, so I could avoid her volatility. This was, of course, an impossible task. I could've been Our Lady of Fatima herself and she would've found something to criticize, like I was too holy or my crown was too shiny.

Assessment is a normal part of life and a necessity for improvement. But here is the caveat: assessment is fine, as long as you know it doesn't define you or determine your value. Unfortunately, any time I have received less than stellar feedback has felt like a personal affront. And, as you can imagine, being a student means receiving a lot of feedback. This has meant that I am both terrified of assessment and sometimes closed off to criticism. By choosing a project that focuses on the personal, I have worried that receiving assessment and criticism might

become even more difficult. A criticism of this project wouldn't just be a criticism of the way it was written but of the way I think, of my experiences and feelings. I have feared that it would feel too much like what I experienced at some of my vocal lessons back at Berklee. It is very difficult to receive feedback, especially negative feedback, about something that comes from within you, something you see as such an integral part of your identity and that also emerges from your literal body, as was the case with my voice. At that time in my life, I was not equipped to tackle that issue to the extent that I am today. And while it still feels hard to receive feedback about something I hold so close to me—in this case, my writing—I'm learning to think of this work as an offering, and an invitation for dialogue, rather than an open forum on my worth.

I still have my relapses, but, for the most part, I do my own validating (except for parking). As with my overwhelming excess of want, I feed my own wants now, I grant my own value. In part, I've learned to do this through the process of writing, which has taught me how to validate the significance of my feelings, my experiences, and my ability to make myself laugh. By writing comedy, I've learned that while there is an imagined audience, someone external I want to make laugh, the first person I want to satisfy with my humor is myself. At the end of this project, I can proudly conclude that I've been able to satisfy myself not only by being able to look back at difficult things with a different, and open, perspective, but also by having the fortitude to look back at all.

All things considered, maybe I should think of this conclusion not as the end but as an intermission, albeit a potentially extended one. While this chapter, this project, might be coming to a close, my relationship with comedic life writing still feels very much at its beginning. Stand-up specials sometimes end in a callback: a reference to a previous joke that makes the audience feel more connected to the material, or 'in on the joke,' and also builds on previous laughs. So

I'll end with a joke uttered by my sister,[4] in her innocence at four-years-old, at my grandfather's funeral mass:

"Woo! Intermission! Do we get hot dogs now?"

CURTAIN CLOSE.

(For now.)

[4]I told you before, I can't help having the last word. Or, in this case, the last laugh.

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