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Before, During, After

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Before, During, After

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
Professional Writing

by

Kelly Rose

B.A. University of New Orleans, 1989

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Abstract

Following in the footsteps of writers Mary Karr, Joan Didion, Russell Baker, and many others, Kelly Rose writes about her childhood, marriage, and subsequent divorce from a New Orleans journalist. Her writing is broken down into various sections, which address her writing influences, her troubled relationship with her mother and her complicated divorce. Finally, the author discusses how these experiences have shaped her writing today.

Nonfiction, creative nonfiction, memoir

Introduction

What follows below is the history of my life broken into three distinct periods: Before, During and After. To condense forty-six years of living into three chapters is an oversimplification, and the process forced decisions about what to write about or not. The only real truth to the process is that there are far more events omitted from this narrative than there are in it. But the stories that I tell below have some elements in common beyond the fact that I was an actor in every scene, and that the sorting into categories is not arbitrary. In the Before section, I write about some of the events that defined my childhood and ultimately shaped the kind of person that I would become in the During and After sections. In the During section, I write about the implosion that was my first marriage and trace some of the fault lines back into the Before section. In the After section, I write about my new marriage, a Brady Bunch-type of blended family, in which I finally feel I have the sense of home that I've been searching for my entire life.

Writing about my childhood and my mother reminds me of Pat Conroy. I read an interview years ago in which he said that he had toned down the actions and attitudes of his real father in order to create *The Great Santini*. Conroy said that to write his life as he lived it would have defied belief. I feel that some stories involving my mother sit right there with him in the truth-is-stranger-than-fiction category. The events that I depict in this section are all real, but they are merely a sampling rather than an enumeration. I have dialed down some of the crazier things that transpired and declined to write about some of the more severe ones because I am not yet ready to relive them by writing about them. One day maybe, but not yet.

Most of the stories I relate in this section portray my mother as unsympathetic at best, and at worst, mean-spirited. Like most people, she is more nuanced and complicated than the character I depict. Although all of the stories I tell about her are true, I didn't spend much time mining her

childhood for explanations about why she parented me the way she did or searching for early life experiences that shaped the kind of person she became. Instead, what I do is share my experiences with her as her child and relate how these experiences shaped my perceptions of her as my mother. Certainly, there were some good times and, for the sake of balance, I've written about our few positive mother/daughter bonding experiences. But it would be unfair and inaccurate to say that her behavior towards me was evenly split between good and bad. The most charitable ratio would be that she was a bad parent eighty percent of the time, but even that stretches the truth. The unfortunate thing about having her occasionally treat me with kindness was that it altered my expectations and lured me into dropping the barrier I'd erected for emotional protection. Just when I was ready to write her off for good, she would do something that made me think I might be wrong about her.

Writing about my relationship with Chris was hard. We share three kids and I had to figure out a way to keep the peace and let bygones actually stay gone. With my youngest son now playing baseball and his father as coach, Chris is at my house every day picking up James for practice or games. I still worry about him but no longer feel responsible for him. I have arrived at a place where I can put some emotional distance between us, which after seven years apart didn't come easily. I have moved on and remarried, but in writing about the thirteen years we were together I'm reminded how much I cared about him and how much I revered his talent as a writer.

In the final section, I wrote about finding my stride as a person, parent and writer (this is the first time I have described myself with the latter term). My life is so much better now that I struggled to create this section while avoiding a "happy ending" quality to the story. However, writing made me realize that things are far from perfect. The biggest difference between now and

then is that life is now manageable. My life had spun out of control in the During section and all I could do was react. Now I have a chance to be proactive and steer situations towards a more desirable outcome. This attitude doesn't ensure success in every situation, but at least I feel that I influence the outcome, which is important to me. I also feel an unresolved element at play in the After section since the story is unfolding and there is no clear end, other than the end of today. I suppose that is what makes life so interesting. It is easy to look back and reflect on the past and identify things that could have been done differently. But, with the future, you just put your head down and keep walking forward and do the best you can. My fondest wish for myself is to not make the same mistakes twice.

Before

One of my most haunting childhood memories goes back to the fourth grade. I was 10 and it was an ordinary day. My older brother, David, and I went to school; my mother had gone to work.

Later that night we all were home and by ten o'clock everyone was in bed.

In the middle of the night I woke up—why I don't know. My clock read two in the morning. I'm a light sleeper now and I guess I was back then. Or maybe I just sensed him. I looked to my right, and there was a man kneeling next to my bed. His face was serious; his hair dark. I didn't know him so I started screaming. He stood and ran out of my room, yelling behind him, "You're dreaming, girl. Go back to sleep!"

My brother opened his bedroom door and poked his head out. I suppose his slow pace revealed his own fear. My mother eventually opened her door too. Their responses seemed to take forever considering my bedroom was sandwiched between theirs in our small apartment. Through my hysteria and tears, I tried to tell them what had happened. My brother was fourteen, and being the only male in the house, he grabbed his baseball bat and started making his way down the hall, to see if our intruder was still inside. My mom called the police. I think everyone initially believed I'd had a nightmare, but there was no denying that our back sliding glass door was wide open and the chair that was usually there was moved out of the way. Our intruder had cleared his exit. The police came and took a report. Nothing had been taken and I hadn't been harmed, so there wasn't much they could do.

After the police left, I slept with my mom. I was terrified to be alone in my room. But after two weeks of sharing her room with me, my mother was ready to have her bed back to herself, so she told me one night before bed that it would be my last night bunking with her. I was terrified to sleep alone in my own room, especially since it had a sliding glass door just like the

one the intruder had come through in our living room. I begged my mom to please let me sleep in her room. I offered to make a bed on the floor so I wouldn't bother her. She acquiesced to that sleeping arrangement for another week. But then she put her foot down.

"You need to start sleeping on your own," she said.

"I'm scared," I cried. Please, can I sleep in your room? Please?"

"No," she replied. "It's time. You need to get over this."

I knew my mother well enough not to beg further. Excessive begging had the inverse effect on her; it only strengthened her resolve. So every night from then on I went to bed terrified that someone was going to kidnap me, or worse. I lived in fear of sleeping alone for years afterwards. I asked my brother to sleep with his door open instead of shutting it as he usually did. He was more sympathetic to my fears, so he left his door open. And he wouldn't complain when I'd show up at his bedroom door, blanket and pillow in hand, looking to sleep on the floor next to his bed. I slept on his floor almost every night for the next year. I only stopped when he moved out to live with my dad.

Growing up, I was one of the original latch-key kids. My parents were divorced, which meant that once school was over I had to get home, straighten up our apartment, do my homework, and get dinner started. I didn't participate in afterschool activities, nor did I bother asking if I could join any. I already knew the answer. My mother had no interest in going out of her way to pick me up from school, a ball field, or anywhere. That wasn't how my childhood worked.

I mean this with all due respect when I say my mother is difficult, maybe even crazy. I appreciate that she gave me life, but I guess my appreciation stops there. She married my father

when she was 19 because she was pregnant. My brother's birth cemented their relationship for a few years, but by the time David was two my father had moved out of their house. My dad was in his last year of college, stocking shelves at a grocery store to support his young family. His goal was to graduate college and get a better job, not have more kids.

For my brother's 3rd birthday, my mother baked a cake and invited my father to join in their celebration. That night after she put my brother to bed, she seduced him. (She told me this story when I was sixteen, so I'm not speculating here.) Nine months and two days later, I was born. My mother has always been honest that my conception was a manipulative trick to get my father to come back to her. He did come back, for a few years. Trapping a man through pregnancy doesn't necessarily make you crazy, but it does demonstrate a desperate and manipulative quality to her personality that ultimately scared my father away, as it did many men afterwards

When it became clear that their marriage wasn't going to work, my mother feigned a nervous breakdown. I was one and David was almost five when she went into a psychiatric hospital for 30 days for what was termed "nervous exhaustion." My maternal grandparents cared for David and me until she stopped threatening suicide. When my mother was released her doctors told my father that she seemed fine. She wasn't given a diagnosis; her doctors just thought that she was anxious and depressed about being 24, divorced, and a single parent of two young kids.

My mother was born in Costa Rica. Although her father was Mexican, when he was 20 he landed a job working for The American Fruit Company, which required him to relocate to Costa Rica. There he met my grandmother. They married and lived in Limon, a small port town on the edge of the Caribbean Sea. Although my grandparents were lifelong, devout Catholics, when my

mother was born they chose her name, Evelyn, to honor my grandmother's Hebrew lineage.

When my mother was eight, my grandfather's job required the family to relocate to Panama for a few years and finally, to New Orleans when she was 12.

In the mid 1950s, my grandparents, my mother and her younger siblings moved to a middle class neighborhood of New Orleans and adjusted to life in America. That adjustment didn't come easy. In Costa Rica, my grandparents had had a large social circle, and like most middle class families there, they employed a cook and a maid. During the day, their front door was kept open to allow the cool sea breeze to come through and also as a signal to their neighbors to drop in. Life in suburban Kenner wasn't quite the same as Latin America. My grandfather's new job required him to work a lot and my grandmother didn't drive. My mother, being the oldest of four, was required to pick up the slack. She was resentful about this and myriad other things regarding her home life. While she got along okay with my grandmother, she had a conflicted relationship with my grandfather. To this day, no one in my family understands her venom towards him, especially since none of her siblings shared her feelings. No doubt my mother's strong will was a challenge to my grandfather's love of quiet and order, two things hard to come by in a family with young children. In addition, my mother was not one to easily bow to authority, which my grandfather was all about with his strict Catholic upbringing. When he asked a question the expected reply was "Yes sir" or "No sir," not merely yes or no. If you opened a door to enter his house, you had better be sure to shut it behind you. If not, his calm veneer would become irritated and icy. He wasn't abusive in any sense, but he was particular about his home and insistent that his kids follow the rules that he set forth.

When my grandfather died last November at the age of 96, not much had changed in their relationship. With the softening of the heart that aging can cause in some, he desperately wanted

to make amends with my mother. But almost every time they were together, it would end with her becoming angry and storming off saying “never again.” Just when it would seem that maybe enough time had passed to let bygones be finally gone, the peeled away bandage would reveal the same sore. Nonetheless, they always remained in touch. If my mother needed money, he was quick to lend it to her. If she had a household issue that she couldn’t fix, my grandfather would show up with his toolbox in hand. My grandfather didn’t understand the problem with their relationship; he just knew that she was his daughter, he loved her, and he wanted her to be happy.

But happiness has always been elusive for my mother. When she graduated from high school, my grandparents made it clear they didn’t have enough money to send her to college, so she didn’t go. Her parents hadn’t gone, and in their household college wasn’t viewed as a necessity. Instead of attending college, she got a job as a secretary for Shell Oil. She made a friend there, another secretary, and they started carpooling to work together. Her friend said she wanted to set my mother up with her twin brother, David. He became her first boyfriend.

When my mom got pregnant the next year, my father was ashamed and embarrassed to tell his parents about his predicament. Growing up in New Orleans, he had attended Catholic schools his whole life. I guess that molded the shame and guilt he felt about sex outside of marriage. Although my dad had a good relationship with his parents, he didn’t want to let them down by telling them his girlfriend was pregnant and his college plans were now thwarted. There was no avoiding their disappointment with this situation. My father felt pressure to be the golden boy of the family, especially considering his older brother had failed out of college and his twin sister had opted not to attend at all. He begged my mother to terminate the pregnancy. She didn’t want to, but reluctantly she agreed under one condition: they still marry.

They eloped to Tylertown, Mississippi and moved into the married dorms on Southeastern University's campus in Hammond. He worked at a local grocery store and took a full-time college load. My mother got another secretarial job and to help put my dad through college. A year later, she got pregnant again. Since they were now married, the taboo of an unplanned pregnancy was gone and right before their second anniversary my brother was born. Although my mother had been desperate to get out of her parents' home, the life of working full time while having an infant in daycare and a husband who was never around wasn't exactly how she had envisioned married life. Their marriage lasted for seven years until my father left for good.

At the age of 26, my mother was a single parent, working full-time, and living in a small, roach-infested apartment. My dad dutifully paid child support and picked my brother and me up every other weekend for an overnight visit. My mother got stuck with the labor-intensive part of full-time parenting and she never let David or me forget it.

At that time, Evelyn was still hopeful about her future and her love life. She dated regularly. I didn't meet many of those guys because their relationships never lasted long. But each new relationship had a startling similarity to the next. She'd fall hard for a guy, vow her love, start making plans for their future, and then he'd bolt. Even though I was young, I had a vague idea of her love life, and it was obvious when her heart had been broken again. She'd cry a lot and lock herself in her bedroom. Her pain, sadness and disappointment were palpable. Eventually she'd snap out of it when another potential love interest starting paying attention to her, but for many years this was her cycle.

One Sunday night, my brother and I came home from a weekend with my dad. I had forgotten my Raggedy Anne doll when I left, so when I walked in the apartment I went to find

her. I looked in my room, under the bed, in the closet. I looked in all the obvious places I could think of, but to no avail. I even asked my mom whether she seen Raggedy Anne.

“No,” she casually answered.

Eventually, I found my doll tucked in between the seat cushions of our sofa. I grabbed her, happy to have finally found her. It took a second for it to register that my mother’s latest “friend” had drawn in black marker a devil face over Raggedy Anne’s cherubic one. Her once sweet face now had a long, black goatee and sinister looking eyes. I asked my mom who had drawn on my doll’s face. Instead of answering she laughed until tears came to her eyes. She thought the doll’s face looked hysterical. I cried. I was hurt and confused. I tried to shrug off my feelings because my brother was doing his best to make me feel better. David suggested we put her in the washing machine to see if the marker would come off. There was something so touching yet so wrong about my seven-year-old brother consoling me while my mother sat there and continued laughing. David was so kind to me that day. He seemed so sensitive and wise and I loved him for it.

My mother and David always fought. I was so young that I don’t remember what they fought about, but I remember their fighting was constant. While I had learned to quietly slip around, my brother was more confrontational. Even today, I avoid arguing at all costs, while my brother has never shied away from a fight. My mom and David had that in common. Their fighting often turned physical, but she was bigger than he and she’d ultimately prevail by pinning him down until he exhausted himself trying to throw her off. As David grew older and stronger, their fighting got scarier and more violent. Our apartment was small and there wasn’t a safe place to

escape the noise and chaos, so I'd just try to stay out of the way. During one of their huge blowouts, my mom started calling for me.

"Kelly! Kelly, call the police!" she screamed.

I ran into the hallway where they were wrestling on the floor. She was holding off David with a baseball bat in her hand, telling me to call the cops.

"Call the police," she yelled.

I just stood there, not sure what to do.

"Call the police!"

I walked away. I was terrified of her when she was like that, but I wasn't going to risk getting my brother in trouble.

A few minutes later, she put down the bat down, David got up, and their tempers ebbed. Later on after she had calmed down, she looked at me and said with a mix of bitterness and anger: "Next time I tell you to call the police, you'd better call them or I'll take the baseball bat to you."

Living with my mother had an up side in that I learned at a young age exactly who I didn't want to be like when I grew up. Affection and words of praise were scarce; cruelty and manipulation were more commonplace. I remember a Saturday afternoon standing in our living room looking at her lying on the sofa. She hadn't been fighting with David or anyone that day, but that didn't matter. She was making fun of my hair, and I just looked at her and thought to myself I hope I'm nothing like you. I felt uncomfortable being around her; she made me anxious.

I also realized that my mother's behavior could be desperate and clingy, especially with men. While young, my mother was attractive and she had a wicked sense of humor. But she'd

inevitably scare every man away with her behavior, which often bordered on unstable and frequently crossed the line into scary.

When I was six, Evelyn dated Jack for six months until things went awry. When he broke it off, it must have triggered something deep within her because she went full throttle into stalker mode. She'd gather David and me and tell us to get in the car because we were going for a ride. She'd drive by Jack's apartment, looking for his car. She didn't do anything or knock on his door, she just wanted to know if he was home. Sometimes she'd call him on the phone, alternately begging him to take her back or hanging up if he answered. Jack held firm to his decision to not see her anymore. One Saturday morning, David was with a friend, so she and I were home alone.

"Get your shoes on, we're going for a ride," she said.

Off we went, again, to drive by his apartment. That morning she found his car and parked next to it. She told me stay put.

"I'll be right back," she said.

I couldn't see where she went but 20 minutes later, Jack came running out of his apartment looking for me. I'm not sure how she climbed onto the roof of his apartment but she did. Her idea was to spy on him through the skylight in his bathroom, but she lost her balance and fell through his ceiling. She landed on her back on the floor of his bathroom. He called an ambulance and my grandparents. My mother had broken her neck and wore an all in one back-and-neck-brace contraption for the next eight weeks. My grandmother moved in to take care of us. Whatever thoughts my grandparents had about my mother they kept to themselves. It was obvious to all, even to me at the age of six, that something wasn't right with her, but no one talked about it. As I grew older and figured out that the problem was more complicated than

anyone let on, I asked my aunts, my mom's younger sisters, if they thought her problem might be more than simply being "difficult."

"Well, that's the way she's always been," my aunt Sandra would say.

My aunt Marta would shrug and say, "I don't know. That's just how she is."

My mother also had a younger brother, Donald, although they hardly acknowledged each other's existence. There was a fourteen-year age difference between them so by the time my mom got married Donald was only five. He doesn't ever remember her living under the same roof, and they were never close.

My mother's youngest sister, Marta, must have sympathized with me, because she'd invite me to stay with her whenever she could. She was an elementary school teacher and during the summers when she was out of school, she'd invite me to come stay with her. We'd run errands, clean the house, walk her dog—simple things, but she was fun. She would sit close to me on the couch if we were watching television so she could play with my hair or scratch my back. She was affectionate, and she enjoyed my company. Marta never directly addressed my mother's erratic behavior, but it was clear to me that she realized my mother was difficult. I cherished those summers we spent together and always looked forward to the next one. It wasn't because we did anything special or because she spoiled me. We didn't, she didn't. But those summers offered me a much-needed respite from my home life.

A few years after the Jack incident, my mother started dating Paul. He was recently divorced and their relationship quickly escalated from dating to engagement. A wedding date was set. But just as quickly as things had moved towards happily ever after, they fell apart. Paul went from being a

knight in shining armor to “a piece of shit.” Just as fast as Paul had moved in with us, he was gone. I can’t say I really cared since one of my most vivid memories of him was when he publicly humiliated me because I hadn’t offered him any of the Fritos I was snacking on. The reasons for the break up were vague, but my mother later admitted to an affection for the medication she had been prescribed after her fall. Whatever the cause, my mother was despondent--alternately grief-stricken or angry.

Despite my mom’s difficult nature, I believe her biggest wish was for a partner to help her raise David and me and someone to love her and fill the big hole in her heart. In this way, she wasn’t so different from anyone else. But Paul grew tired of their incessant bickering, and her erratic behavior, so he broke off their engagement. He packed up the things he had at our house and moved out. Evelyn reverted back to her default setting: vengeful and mean. About two weeks after Paul left, my mother’s rage and obsessiveness got the best of her. She had been calling Paul on the telephone, trying to engage him in some way, even if it was just to fight or call him a choice word. Paul was done with her, so he stopped answering, which only enraged her more. This back and forth on the phone, hang-ups, tears, chaos, went on all day until finally she told me we were going to take a ride. By the time we got to Paul’s house it was dark. He lived in a remote, rural area with a lot of trees and few neighbors. She pulled up next to his van and parked.

“This is what you do when someone breaks your heart,” she said as she grabbed an ice pick out of her purse. “This is how you get revenge.”

She walked over to his van and repeatedly punctured all four tires on his 1969 VW van. I just sat there and prayed she didn’t get caught. I was only eight, yet I was embarrassed by her. I was also terrified of her.

For most of my early life, I did my best not to make any waves in our volatile household. I was the good kid. I cleaned, I did my homework, I got along with everyone. My M.O. was pretty simple: stay out of sight. I spent a lot of time in my room reading Judy Blume and Nancy Drew books. I played outside with neighborhood kids. I'd fallen into the habit of avoiding my mother. Every now and then, maybe on a lazy Sunday afternoon, she'd catch me off guard and ask if I wanted to play cards--Crazy 8's was her game. My mother was wildly competitive and nothing would put a smile on her face faster than winning a few rounds against me. Sometimes David would play with us too. The three of us would sit around the table laughing and smiling while we played cards. This is how I imagined other families spent their time together.

Getting along with Evelyn was difficult, but when I got sick she could be attentive and even warm. At six, I came down with the chicken pox in a case so severe and persistent that not an inch of my small body was spared. She would dutifully dip cotton balls in pink Calomine lotion and put it on my itchy, red bumps when I would complain. For two days, we lay on the sofa together, napping and watching soap operas until my fever broke and I could go back to school. I also remember a chronic affliction of boils that would erupt under my arms and required consistent applications of medicated cream before they would finally heal. Like clockwork, every four hours my mom would call for me because it was time to apply more medicine. One day while she was applying the cream, I stared at her as she was examining my arms to see if the boils were going away. She was so soft and tender in this moment that I temporarily forget her chronic bad moods. I knew hands-on mothering moments like these didn't come easily to her, so I apologized.

"I'm sorry you keep having to put this cream on my arms. I know the boils are disgusting."

“It’s okay. This is what mothers do,” she responded sweetly, sincerely.

In rare moments like this, I would desperately wish that she were always this gentle and kind. For a while, I’d drop the wall I’d built around myself and I’d feel such love for her. I’d think to myself that maybe she’d changed and our relationship was going to be different. I wished we had more of these moments. But just as abruptly as her kindness would come, it would be gone.

From a young age I knew there was something different about my mother, but I didn’t have the words to express it. I knew that her moods were mercurial, and I knew that she had a hard time getting along with other people. Both at work and within our family, her relationships were fraught with conflict. There was always an issue at work with a boss or a co-worker. There was an ugly confrontation every time our relatively small family got together for holiday celebrations. No one ever wanted to confront my mother and tell her that her behavior was out of line and bordered on insanity. Instead, everyone tiptoed around her, which I’m sure helped create the beast she would become, especially when crossed. Not once did anyone ever say, “You know, Evelyn, flattening your former fiancé’s tires in front of your eight-year-old daughter and climbing on your ex-boyfriend’s roof to spy on him is crazy!” To my knowledge, no one ever whispered the words “mental illness” or “medication”, or suggested a visit to a psychiatrist. Because of that, her behavior was never challenged and, therefore, it didn’t change.

By the time I was 12, I’d grown tired of my mother’s craziness and her volatility. I was often the target of her cruelty and anger if for no reason other than proximity. At his first opportunity, my brother beat a hasty retreat to live with my Dad, leaving just my mother and me to live together. She’d ridicule me every chance she could. She’d make fun of my newly

developed body, my unwieldy hair, my lackluster academic performance. Up until that time and in many ways, I was an easygoing, go along get along kind of kid. But one day I snapped. I had been out riding my bike with a friend. My mother had clearly told me my bicycle riding boundaries before I left. When I came back she asked where I had been. I told her knowing full well that I had exceeded the limits. This was one of the first times I had openly defied her and she was furious. She punished me and I stormed off to my room. Before I slammed the door, I screamed, “You’re just mean and miserable!” This new conflicted and confrontational interaction was the one that would soon take over our relationship.

When I would see my father, I would try to talk to him about my increasingly antagonistic feelings towards my mother. I knew he understood better than anyone else. While David was given the option of not living with my mother, the same opportunity wasn’t available to me. His parenting style was detached at best. When I asked my father if I could come live with him he said no. He made bad excuses about not being around much and not having enough room, but the underlying message was clear. He had little interest in single-handedly raising one child, and no interest in raising two. He had divorced his second wife, and his current lifestyle wasn’t conducive to having a twelve-year-old daughter around.

All of the anger I’d never been able to voice came rolling out after that first big fight with my mother. We had crossed a threshold and there was no turning back. I thought she was cruel and horrible, and I was tired of pretending otherwise. I don’t really think my mother cared. I was just one less person she had to deal with. She stopped asking where I was going or who I had been with long before I turned 14 and really started getting into trouble. All of my time out of the house helped me identify the other local kids who also had a lot of unsupervised time. One had started smoking pot and he offered to share. That was how I got introduced to marijuana. I didn’t

even like getting high, but all of my friends were doing it and I was now a part of this group of losers and misfits. We'd sneak out of house in the middle of the night and meet behind the Time Saver dumpster. There we would hang out, get high and maybe drink beer if someone was able to sneak some from their refrigerator. Someone would keep an eye out for police since it was well past curfew. While our parents slept, we'd walk the streets of our neighborhood and talk about music, our parents, and figure out how we could get more pot. Eventually I'd get tired and go home, sneaking back in through my bedroom window. I never got caught.

I was hanging out with this group one morning before school when someone pulled out a joint, lit it, and started passing it around. "Wake and bake," someone said as I took a hit off the joint. Most of us were loaded when the school bell rang and everyone walked to homeroom. That's where I was when the disciplinarian buzzed in over the intercom.

"Mrs. Webster, is Kelly Gluth in your homeroom this morning?"

"Yes, she is."

"Please send her to the office."

It was 8.30 in the morning, I was high, and getting nervous. While monitoring the schoolyard, a teacher had seen me smoking, and she also smelled the unmistakable aroma of pot. I was busted. The teacher saw me and one other person from my group smoke the joint, so we were the only ones that got caught. We both were expelled by 9 a.m.

My mom was furious with me. When we got in the car, she asked if I was proud of myself. I defiantly said I was. She didn't yell or scream at me that day since she had to get back to work. Her attitude and reaction were more resigned than anything else. It was as if she had seen this coming my whole life. I was just another letdown in her life of never-ending disappointments. The school disciplinarian advised my mother and me that it would be a good

idea for me to keep on top of my studies, since it wasn't in anyone's best interest for me to be permanently expelled from school. For the next month, I went to the public library most days and walked around our quiet neighborhood. I was bored and lonely. While I'm sure I earned some street cred within my peer group for not ratting anyone else out, I got a glimpse of my future and it didn't look promising.

Four weeks later, my mom took me back to school for a disciplinary hearing. Since I hadn't been in trouble before, the school lifted my expulsion. Nevertheless, I had missed a lot during the previous month so it wasn't a given that I would pass the ninth grade. My first day back, I felt like everyone was pointing and whispering about me behind my back. I had become "that" kid. I had already been humiliated in front of my fellow schoolmates by being expelled, and I didn't want to exacerbate that by failing a grade for the first time in my life. For the rest of the school year I studied and stayed after school working on extra credit projects. At the end of the year I was promoted to the tenth grade.

As part of the deal in lifting my expulsion, the school required my mother and me to start counseling sessions with a social worker. Dutifully we went every Thursday at 5.30, after she got off work. Evelyn wasn't particularly interested in going to talk to a stranger about her home life, but since my school career was on the line, she complied. Every week she sat on the coach in our counselor's office, with a look of unhappiness, annoyance, and resignation. When the counselor would ask why we were there and what she could do to help, my mother would reply, "Nothing. We're a perfectly happy family," her words angry and dripping with sarcasm. When the counselor turned to me and asked what I wanted out of life, I shrugged and meekly replied, "I just want to be happy." Based on her reaction, I think the counselor was expecting a more ambitious

answer along the lines of becoming the first female president, but even at the age of 14 my biggest wish was to live in an environment free of stress and conflict.

As soon as we met our mandated twelve sessions, the counseling ceased. Not much had changed in my home life; counseling neither helped nor hurt. It was as chilly as ever between my mother and me, but after getting expelled, I got a job at a local donut shop washing dishes as a way to do something more productive with my free time. Our mutual disaffection became less overt, but it still hovered in the air. Even when my mother came home from work and didn't say a word, she would nonverbally communicate through her chronic sighs and body language how miserable she was. We had reached a stage in our relationship where words weren't needed. My mere presence was enough to cause her shoulders to slouch from the weight of the world, the weight of our world. She radiated disappointment in me.

When I started high school, I found a new social circle to run with. My new group of friends wasn't on the honor roll or student council, but they weren't getting thrown out of school for getting high either. I took the easiest classes I could throughout high school. No one ever advised me differently and back then I never thought beyond graduation. College wasn't forbidden, but it certainly wasn't a given. The fairest description was that it wasn't a conversation we ever had. During my senior year some of my friends started touring college campuses and making decisions about which universities they would attend. I didn't know what to do, but I was on the brink of enrolling in beauty school when one of my friends suggested I try a semester at a local college.

“Just give it a try,” Gina urged. “Beauty school isn't going anywhere.”

My father also encouraged me to try college. He offered to help me with my tuition. So I got a part-time job and signed up for a full-time class load. I wasn't setting any academic records

with my performance at the University of New Orleans, but I attended my classes, worked, and continued to live at home with my mother where we'd settled into a routine of avoidance and silence.

The day before my 18th birthday, my mother and I had one of our biggest, ugliest fights ever. It was on a Wednesday evening in late November. By the time my mother came home from work it was dark out and so was her mood. After she changed out of her work clothes she sat on the sofa and she yelled to me in the kitchen.

“Did you cook dinner?”

“No.”

“What have you been doing all day?” she asked

I listed my day's activities: work, school, homework.

“You know it would be nice if you sometimes did something *nice* for me for a change. All you care about is yourself. You're so selfish,” she continued.

I tried hard not to laugh at the absurdity of her statement, but I guess she saw my smirk.

“What are you laughing at?” she asked.

“Nothing”

“You don't appreciate me. You don't appreciate anything I do for you. You never have. You favor your Dad even though he obviously doesn't love you. Do you think just because he is helping you go to school he loves you? He doesn't. You're pathetic. You're a selfish little bitch. You can't live here anymore. You need to get out of here. Tonight.”

I was a seasoned enough in my fighting tactics by that time in my life to not give her the satisfaction of a reaction. I knew better. I knew through our years and years of warfare that what she wanted most was a reaction, a mean retort, anything that would further the bitter engagement of battle. I wouldn't give it to her. Instead, I walked out of the kitchen, past her sitting on the couch, and went upstairs to my room and started packing. I called a friend who lived nearby to see if I could stay with her for a few nights. I called my dad to tell him about the latest drama.

“My God, are you serious? She threw you out?” he asked.

“Happy Birthday to me, huh?”

The next day after she went to work, I went and packed all of my things. I never went back.

When I was twelve and before I engaged in my own war with her, my mother stopped dating altogether. The last relationship I remember her having was with a married man. He'd sneak over to our house when he was supposed to be at work and tell my mother how miserable his marriage was. They'd drink wine, talk, and laugh. Eventually it became clear to my mother that despite the unhappiness of his marriage, he had no intention of leaving his family. It sent her into an alcoholic tailspin for weeks. She'd lie in bed, call in sick to work, not bother to dress or leave the house. I think she just gave up on love and the possibility of happiness. It was too painful to continue to believe that she would meet someone who would accept her as she was, as difficult as she was, when all others before had done otherwise. This loss of hope for happiness bled into our relationship. The few tender moments that we'd shared when I was young ceased altogether.

As easy as it was to be angry with her for her many maternal deficiencies, she believed she had done the best she could. At least that was what she would say after I left her house. When I was in my 20s and I had put distance between us, I asked why she had been so mean to me when I was young.

“You never appreciated me.”

“You don’t know how hard it was raising you and your brother.”

“You should have done more. You could have been *nicer* to me.”

By this time, I was in my mid-twenties and had started therapy. After my mother asked me to leave on my 18th birthday, we didn’t talk for six months. But after the drama died down, my resolve to not be in touch would weaken and my grandmother would gently chide me for not “respecting” my mother.

“The Bible says to honor thy parents. You’re not a good Christian if you harbor resentment in your heart,” my grandmother would preach in her thick Latin accent that never lessened during the fifty years she lived in America.

Out of guilt and confusion, I’d call my mother and try again. She’d pick up the phone and we would both pretend like nothing ever happened. This was our cycle. She would say something hurtful, I’d say no more and then eventually after a few months, I’d try again. Nothing ever changed in her behavior and I couldn’t accept her treating me the way she did, so inevitably we’d lose touch.

If you were to ask my mother if she was a good mother, she’d reply that she did the best she could. When assessing her parenting skills, my mother would selectively choose the elements of

childrearing on which she wanted to be graded. She'd point out that we always had an ample food supply and clean clothes. It's true that my brother and I always got to the doctor when we were sick and our teeth were cleaned every six months. But she would follow up that with, "Plus, who else was going to raise you. Your dad certainly had no interest in doing it." She couldn't let an opportunity pass without twisting the knife that she was the one who was there for me my whole life. My response was simple: "You're right, my dad isn't perfect, but at least he's kind to me."

My physical needs were met, but my emotional ones were a different matter. Now that I'm a mother myself I see how difficult it can be to meet the never-ending demands of a child, both physical and emotional. The workload is hard and constant--a battle on two fronts. What always struck me as so very odd was that although I had no hand in her choosing to marry and have children with my father, I constantly heard about his repeated failures as if I had. It felt like she blamed me for his failures as a husband and father. It seemed to me that she felt my brother and I had cost her the one shot she had at happiness. How we drove my father away was never clear to me, but I felt the blame for it on a daily basis.

Yet unintentionally my mother taught me much about life and parenting. She served as an example and role model of how I didn't want to be. A push away from something can be every bit as strong as a push toward something and I think wanting not to be like her was as defining as wanting to be just like her. Perhaps the most important lesson she taught me was to rely on myself. From a young age, I could prepare my own meals, entertain myself, and do my own laundry. My mother was self-reliant and independent. While I'm not sure she was trying to teach me those things, I definitely learned them.

For those lessons, I'm grateful. For many years I lived with a sadness that kept me in and out of therapists' offices, looking for some magic cure. It took me a long time to accept that our

relationship was never going to be warm or close. I would look at my aunts' relationships with their daughters and compare my relationship with my mother to theirs. I know plenty of women have conflicted, painful relationships with their mothers, but back then I couldn't help but think that maybe I wasn't deserving of one. I would look around at my friends' relationships with their mothers and wish Evelyn and I had just a little slice of their mutual affection and love. I still wish for that.

I still don't understand the enigma I call Mom.

During

The children had been fed, the dishes washed, the leftovers put away. I noticed we were out of milk so I asked Chris if he would go to the Circle K down the block and get some for our morning cereal and coffee. “Sure,” he said, “no problem.”

He left at eight and didn’t make it back home until three the next morning. No phone call, no text, nothing. I didn’t suspect foul play or a violent incident out of Law & Order. I pretty much knew where Chris had spent the rest of the night. Conveniently located next to the Circle K was our neighborhood bar.

I slept fitfully until he found his way home early the next morning. When I got up the next day, I discovered he had forgotten the milk. Chris’s all nighters had become regular occurrences in the mess otherwise known as our marriage.

The next day I told this story to my friend Elizabeth. My kids and I were at her house for the evening. We fed the under-six crowd grilled cheese sandwiches and apple slices, then settled them in front of a Thomas the Train DVD. We poured a couple of glasses of red wine, and slipped outside to her courtyard to talk and sneak Marlboro Lights. I told Elizabeth about Chris’s failed milk run. Elizabeth, never one to hold her tongue, was shocked, even pissed, when I told her the story. She was outraged that I wasn’t *more* outraged. “Why aren’t you mad at him?” she asked. I had grown used to these missing-in-action incidents. It wasn’t the first time it had happened and I was pretty sure it wouldn’t be the last. Elizabeth’s deck of tarot cards was nearby, so she offered to pull a few for me. The first card she flipped over was The Fool. She thought it fitting, considering the story I had just told her. While most tarot card readers usually interpret this card as a new beginning, Elizabeth chose the more literal interpretation. Chris’s

irresponsible behaviors and late-night binge drinking incidents were making a fool of me. Elizabeth had a clarity about my situation I still don't have. She could state her thoughts and opinions through the safety of distance. But for me, this was life, my kids, my family and probably the first thing I'd ever clung to. Of course, this wasn't the first time Elizabeth had heard a less than flattering story about Chris's drinking.

She held up the Fool card and repeated, "He's making a fool of you."

Despite Chris's drinking, I thought the good outweighed the bad. I focused on his intellect, humor, and warmth, not the drinking. We had been married seven years; we had three young children. Our marriage had its struggles, but overall, I told myself it was okay. This was my life, imperfect as it was.

For a long time and despite the drinking, I believed that Chris was wiser than I was, because he was older and came from a stable family. His family tree was full of long, happy marriages and everyone went to college. Chris was prep school-educated and he had graduated from one of the best journalism schools in the country. He had gone to catechism and had made his communion and confirmation in the Catholic Church. Although my Latin maternal grandparents were rigidly Catholic, my mother wasn't. My religious education wasn't a priority for either of my parents--my elementary education barely registered. I say this since I signed every one of my report cards from third grade on.

My mother still worked as a secretary, and my father caroused between his three failed marriages, which just gave my mother more reason to loathe him and provided more fuel to their never-ending war. With these two as role models, of course I wouldn't know the secrets to a

successful marriage. Thirty years after their divorce, my parents still couldn't have a civil conversation.

But I thought Chris did, and because of that, I was resigned to the bad that came with the good. I thought that was how it worked. He grew up in an upscale suburb of Washington, D.C., in a picturesque three-story white house that looked like it was taken from a Norman Rockwell painting. His mother had given up her nursing career to become a homemaker when she had her first of five kids. His father was a much respected and beloved dean of Georgetown Medical School, having earned a medical degree and Ph. D. on a G.I. bill after flying fighter planes in World War II. Chris's childhood was filled with friends, extended family, and pleasant childhood memories. He was given love, attention, opportunity. For those reasons, I believed in him. I thought his family had imparted some marital and familial wisdom during his youth that my own parents didn't even know existed. I thought Chris knew some of life's secrets that had been denied to me.

I had first met Chris at an Uptown Tex-Mex restaurant popular because of its strong margaritas and fun crowd. I was there having happy hour drinks with a friend when Lee, the restaurant's manager, insisted I meet his journalist friend sitting at the bar. I don't think Lee knew much about my dating life, nor did he know much about Chris's, but for some reason he insisted on this introduction. It was a Thursday in late July and major league baseball players had just announced their strike. Chris had just returned from a trip to Sweden and was jet-lagged. He seemed uncomfortable with our forced meeting, but he was polite. He wasn't classically good looking, but he had a self-deprecating sense of humor and he was charming in a boyish way. His

hair was dark and wavy. He had slim build wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses. We exchanged business cards and said goodbye. The next day when he called to invite me out for coffee, I accepted. On the day of our coffee date, while I walking to our designated meeting spot, I ran into him. He was holding a copy of my favorite book in his hand--*In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote. I was intrigued and I thought his book choice was a fortuitous sign. Our coffee date turned into a Bloody Mary date, which we sipped as we walked around the French Quarter and talked. One Bloody Mary turned into another, afternoon turned into night. He suggested catching music at a place nearby. That was my first venture into the sketchy neighborhood on the other side of the French Quarter known as Treme. That night we danced and laughed while listening to The Dirty Dozen Brass Band.

What made this experience all the more entertaining to me was that Chris wasn't from New Orleans. I am, yet I'd never heard a live brass band nor had I ever been to this colorful, funky and dangerous part of town. These circumstances explain a lot about my initial attraction to him; he continually surprised me. That first date turned into another, then another.

I had recently moved back to New Orleans from Los Angeles. After graduating from college in 1989, I had followed my college boyfriend to California. Initially I had been resistant to leaving New Orleans, but after getting a taste of the working world and 9-to-5 drudgery, I rethought my decision. In May 1990, Dale and I had decided we'd head west in September. The simplicity of youth and poverty made it an easy decision. Pretty much everything we owned fit into my Acura Integra. So, on a Monday morning, off we went. Four days later we arrived in Los Angeles.

But the dreams of movie stardom Dale was pursuing didn't go far, most likely due to his incessant pot smoking and general lack of initiative. I lived in L.A. a year longer than the

relationship lasted. Despite the city's bad reputation, I loved it there. I loved that if you went in one direction you could be seaside on the Pacific Ocean and if you went the other you could be skiing in the San Gabriel Mountains. I loved that you could get in the car, drive two hours and be in Mexico. I loved that you could go to dinner and be seated next to Jerry Seinfeld or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar or you could be stopped at a red light, look over and be idling next to Warren Beatty. I loved the vastness of California and the career opportunities it offered young, wide-eyed people like me. I loved that it was nothing like New Orleans.

But when the inevitable break-up came with Dale, I questioned why I was there. I had a few friends and a decent job, but that wasn't enough to stave off the depression that sent my life into a tailspin for the next six months. I gained ten pounds, and although I was talking to a therapist, my best friend was a jar of Jif peanut butter, which I carried around in my purse with a spoon. I was adrift, and despite L.A.'s charms, it's not a good place for the lost. For months I cried every day.

I'd call my dad, brother, and aunt Marta back home crying, hoping they had magic words that could make my existential pain go away. Of course they didn't, no one did. But I did set a goal that finally helped pull me out of my funk: I made a plan to come back to New Orleans. My father was planning his fourth wedding, so my arrival back in town would coincide with this event. To help fund my trip back home, my dad sent me a \$500 check with the word "Latitude" written in the memo line. While his money helped get me back home, it was being around friends and family that truly helped me.

Transitioning back to the slow pace of life in New Orleans took a while. I got a job with a local magazine and three years after I left New Orleans, I started over. I'd been back in town a year before I met Chris.

Chris had recently bought a modest house, which he welcomed me into. After ten months of dating, I moved in with him. I was twenty-eight, but this was the first house I had ever lived in. While I was growing up with my mother, life felt nomadic. Before I moved out when I was eighteen, we had moved fifteen times. Our homes were a series of bad apartment complexes.

When I met Chris, all of the things that I thought were supposed to happen when you grew up started to fall in place. He had an established career as a journalist and I had my own career in publishing. We stayed out late listening to music, talking, and drinking beer. Chris was kind and gentle. We'd exchange stories about our childhoods. His were filled with his lifelong friends and the silly jams they'd get into; mine were a little darker. I told him one story from my youth to which he replied, "It just sounds like you wanted someone to be nice to you." Chris was right, I did. And he was nice. Chris thought I could do no wrong. I thought since he was seven years older than I was that he was wiser and more mature. In many ways, I thought that he was better than I was. Certainly he had lived a much different life than I had. The house he moved into when he was three is the same house his parents live in today. While the dynamics of his siblings' relationship with his parents weren't perfect, they certainly had no resemblance to my brother and mother's relationship, in which concerned neighbors called to make sure everything was okay. I desperately wanted the security and the calm that Chris and his family represented.

Unbeknownst to me, for our first Mardi Gras together Chris was planning a marriage proposal. But the Sunday before Mardi Gras, I saw a version of Chris that I hadn't seen before. That Sunday a parade lined up in front of his house thereby turning his house into Grand Central Station. People were in and out, using the bathroom, saying hello, staying for a beer. It was a beautiful, warm February day that made you feel bad for the people who lived in Wisconsin, or

really, any place other than New Orleans. The parade rolled out at eleven that morning which meant by four most people were pretty drunk. Chris was one of them. In an idea fueled by too much beer, Chris and a few of his buddies climbed on the roof of his house so that they could throw beads to the steady flow of people walking by. I was standing on the sidewalk talking to some friends when a lit cigarette hit me in the head and landed in my hair. I brushed the cigarette off, but the burning butt resting on my shoulder caught me off guard.

“Hey, which asshole threw the cigarette?” I asked.

None of the guys on the roof made eye contact or answered.

Chris later told me it was his cigarette. He apologized, admitting that it wasn't his finest moment. He also told me he had been planning a proposal to me on that day. By the time he apologized, I was over the cigarette incident. My lifelong habit of avoiding confrontation was still a big part of me. I rationalized his behavior by thinking he didn't throw the cigarette at *me*. It was an accident. I forgot about it and we moved on.

That summer Chris invited me to go home to Maryland with him to meet his family. He told his parents, his siblings, and his many childhood friends that I was the one that he wanted to settle down with. We booked our tickets and planned our trip.

A few days before our trip, we had a huge fight. I still don't remember what we fought about, I just know that Chris shut down. He wouldn't talk to me, he wouldn't talk at all--he just sulked. And drank. This went on for days. The trip that we'd been planning didn't look as exciting. I didn't want to cancel, but I didn't want to go if we weren't talking. I didn't know what to do.

The day before I was supposed to leave, my dad called to wish me a good trip. He noticed I didn't sound very excited about going to Maryland. I told him I wasn't and I told him why.

Although my dad owned a horseback riding stable, he had a social work degree and he liked to think himself wise in matters of the human psyche. He asked if he could give me some unsolicited advice.

“Kelly,” he said, “Go on this trip, go find out who this person is and where he comes from. You will learn so much about him by meeting his family.”

Throughout my life, my dad had offered me a lot of advice. “Never, ever get in credit card debt” was one of his big doctrines. He was also a strong advocate for getting a college education.

“It will separate you from others out there in the world,” he believed. The irony in that advice was, other than him and me, no one else in our immediate family had a college degree. He also firmly believed and wasn’t shy to voice, “Men don’t get a lick of sense until they’re 35 or 40, at the earliest.” My father liked Chris’s wit and intellect so he urged me not to give up him believing he was on the verge on “growing up.”

Chris was 35 the summer of our trip to Maryland. I think that’s one reason why my dad encouraged me to go meet his family. He thought maybe Chris was mature enough to settle down.

My father’s advice turned out to be good because on that trip, I fell in love with Chris’s family.

Our travel plan was that Chris would fly to Maryland on a Tuesday and I would meet him the following Friday. When Chris picked me up at the airport, he was happy to see me and neither of us mentioned our earlier fight. That weekend was a flurry of new faces and meeting Chris’s large, extended family. I laughed a lot that weekend, we laughed a lot. Chris’s family loved him, loved his company, and they clearly enjoyed having him around. He was the fifth of

five kids who moved South and he wrote about presidential races, crime, and Louisiana politics. His stories were endless and entertaining. There was a lot of love in his family--it was obvious. My parents could hardly speak a civil word to one another, and our family gatherings usually ended up in a mix of foul language and slammed doors, followed closely by tears. My family was about hurt feelings, mental illness, and intentional slights. Chris's family was about big Christmas gatherings, happy hour at five, and laughter. I fell in love with them as much as I did with Chris.

Upon our return to New Orleans, Chris asked me to marry him. He had an antique family ring that had been in his family for decades and that his mother had given to Chris while we were visiting.

One year after that trip, we got married.

By the time Chris and I got married I was well aware that he drank too much. But I also thought he came from a solid family and that would be enough to pull us through the tough times that accompany having three young kids, separate careers, and a house note. A couple of years later, during a holiday visit back in Maryland with Chris's family, I was bonding with my sister-in-law, Diane, who is married to Chris's older brother, Richard. We had grown pretty close since Chris and I had married. She freely shared her many stories of Richard's younger and drunker days. She, too, had stayed awake many nights waiting for her husband to come home. Sometimes Richard showed up, sometimes he didn't. She thought about leaving him for many years.

"I figured I would end up living in some townhouse in the suburbs, working as a secretary, with an ex-husband who visited his kids on the weekends," Diane said. "I had no

interest in that life.” She didn’t realize that she had just described my mother’s life and I didn’t blame her for not wanting it. So Diane stuck it out.

One summer Richard and Diane had a trip planned. They were booked on an early morning flight, all set to take their two young daughters to Montana. The day before their vacation, Richard had gone out for happy hour after work. It was a usual occurrence in their lives, so when Diane went to bed that night and Richard still wasn’t home, she didn’t think much of it. This was how their lives went—she took care of their two daughters, he went to work, then drank for a good part of the night. But when Diane woke up at three that morning, she was concerned. She called a few of his co-workers. No one had seen or heard from him. She called the police department and the hospital. Nothing. Richard finally showed up at six the next morning after sleeping off some of his inebriation in his car. Remarkably, they still made their trip. Diane had a book full of stories just like this one.

But one day Richard grew up and quit drinking. He felt bad, he looked bad and he decided he was done with alcohol. He went to a thirty-day outpatient detox center and joined Alcoholics Anonymous. According to Diane, his sobriety saved their marriage. She also told me the family stories she’d heard about Chris and Richard’s father and his hard partying days. He too eventually outgrew the boozy late nights and the life of a sot.

As disturbing as these stories were, they also provided me with hope. I figured the drinking was just something you endured. *This too shall pass*. I wasn’t happy about it, but I didn’t want to think about the alternatives. Chris’s drinking caused much stress for our marriage. It was our one never-ending fight. I believed he would change. I hoped he would change. I had to.

Chris and I continued on in this way for years. When our ninth wedding anniversary came around we were still together, and although we had much to celebrate, I wasn't happy. We had three children, Chris's career was going well, and I was working as a freelance publicist. But our marriage was a wreck. The milk runs-turned-all night benders became a regular occurrence. I would vacillate between empathy for his "addiction" and outrage. When Chris and I were dating and newly married, I could temper his behavior because I was always with him. At midnight I'd say, "Last call, we're heading home in ten minutes." But after our three kids were born, I was usually at home. Long days that begin at six in the morning aren't conducive to late nights. I still had a social life, but it was much tamer than the one I had enjoyed prior to children. Most mornings I would wake up, feed three little people and get them out of the door. While I was doing this, Chris slept in until ten or later. By the time he poured his first cup of coffee, I'd done a bit of work, taken the kids to school, gone to the grocery, walked the dog, and straightened up the house. We settled into a dangerous pattern of chilly silences and unspoken resentments. While most of Chris's late-night outings were done under the guise of work, he could have been home by ten, eleven at the latest. But once he was done taking notes or covering whatever event he was assigned to, he'd have a beer to unwind. One beer could easily turn into six, six into eight, and it would be three in the morning before he made it home. Most of the time he would try to quietly slip in and sleep on the sofa, but he always woke me up. Always. I wasn't sleeping anyway. I was usually tossing and turning, wondering where in the hell he was.

Many weekends, Chris, the kids and I would head to Mississippi to spend time with my dad who was now married to his fourth wife, Augusta. We would pack up the car, the kids, and the dog and head out to the country for a weekend of swimming and barbequing. These getaways were good for Chris and me. It was good to get away from our routine for a few days.

My dad enjoyed Chris's company and he always had a lot of questions about his work, and what the latest political scuttlebutt was in *The Times-Picayune* newsroom. I didn't realize it then but I do now: my dad and Chris were a lot alike. They enjoyed their cigarettes and their beer—both in excess. Chris loved to entertain with his stories, intellect, and humor and my dad loved to be entertained. On those visits, the two of them would stay up late drinking beer and talking, while the kids and I would go to bed. Chris and I often joked that he fit in better in with my family and I fit in better with his.

On one of those weekend visits, I remember sitting and talking with my dad early one morning. I was drinking coffee, while he chain-smoked his unfiltered Camels. We were sitting on his back deck surrounded by pine trees and blackberry bushes while the kids ate Eggo waffles and watched the Disney channel inside. My dad and I were rehashing the night before, talking about how big the kids were getting, how quickly time goes by. Wasn't it just yesterday that my oldest, Kate, was born? My dad openly admitted that he was a flawed and absent father, but I didn't hold it against him. Unlike my mother, he was quick to admit he should have done better, but that he was too self-involved.

He regularly told me that I was smart and beautiful. Although he couldn't take credit for the way I grew up, he was proud of me. And because my mother never missed an opportunity to tell me what an asshole he was, he got the parenting bye. As any Divorce 101 manual will tell you, her words produced the opposite effect. I defended him and confided in him when I had problems; I thought he could do no wrong. So on that morning over coffee and cigarettes I told my dad about Chris's late nights and the endless hangovers. Later it dawned on me that my dad was more sympathetic to Chris than me. Here I was bringing Chris down to earth by continually pointing out that he had three young children to care for and that his place was at home, not in a

barroom. What I remember most from that conversation were my dad's final words on the subject.

“Well, at least you don't worry about other women. His weakness is alcohol, he's not a cheater,” he said.

I nodded in agreement.

My dad thought Chris had “the life.” He had a column in the newspaper accompanied by his smiling mug. That elevated his status in New Orleans to one of a minor celebrity. We were invited to fancy parties, and when we got there everyone wanted to talk to Chris or shake his hand. You could hear “That's Chris Rose” whispers wherever we went. I got the star treatment too simply by being Chris's wife.

Strangers would come up to me and ask what it was like to married to him.

“Oh, he must be so much fun to live with,” they'd say. “He's so funny.”

If they had any idea how much work it was to prop up this brilliant yet erratic alcoholic on a daily basis while simultaneously raising three young kids and trying to have my own career, I'm sure they wouldn't have bothered to ask. Not that I said anything. I politely smiled and replied, “Nice to meet you.”

Our marriage wasn't perfect and I was angry with Chris, but I held on to hope. I thought he would grow up as his brother and father had.

So I waited.

Shortly after our nine-year anniversary, I noticed I had some strange health symptoms. By researching my symptoms online, all signs pointed to a sexually transmitted disease. I knew I

hadn't done anything to put my health in jeopardy, so after a day of racing thoughts and worry, I went to Chris to ask him if I had any reason to be concerned about my health.

"No," he assured me. "Definitely not."

I believed him. I trusted him. I tried not to let my anxieties run away from me. I got on the phone and made an appointment with my doctor for two days later. The night before my appointment, after the kids were in bed, Chris came into our room. I was lying in bed reading.

He knelt next to the bed and stared at me.

"You do have reason to be concerned," he confessed.

And just like that, nine years of marital trust and thirty-six years of naïveté were ripped from me. I cried. I didn't know how to react so I just left the room, sat on the sofa and cried. Chris followed me. He tried to comfort me, to make feel better, but what could he say? He just sat there and looked at me, one of the few times I remember him wordless.

"You go in our room. I'll stay here," was all he could get out.

I asked the obvious question of who and when.

"It happened twice. It was with different people, but both times it was just a one-time thing." He said he was sorry. He had been drinking and had made bad decisions. He loved me, our family, and he didn't want our marriage to end.

When I visited the doctor a few days later, she said that I was fine. My health issue wasn't related to Chris. For a long time after that doctor's visit, I would think about how my life had imploded after Chris's confession. The humiliation I suffered didn't have to happen. Going to a physician and asking her to run a battery of tests for STDs was one of the more embarrassing experiences I'd ever endured. Ironically, Chris had confessed because he felt it was the right thing to do, but when it came down to it, his bad decisions had not affected my health.

What messed with my mind almost as much as Chris's infidelity was that he didn't have enough concern or respect for me to bother with a condom.

His total disregard for my health still stings.

The night after Chris's confession I called my best friend Tracey. Tracey and I had met when she and her husband, Mike, moved next door to us. We spent many evenings in our back yard grilling dinner and drinking wine. They came to our wedding, we went to theirs. We traveled together, and Tracey and I carpoled to work every morning. Tracey and I were the same age and eventually figured out that we had attended the same elementary, middle, and high schools. After a while it became clear why we had never met in school. While she was on the honor roll, student council, and the college-bound track, I was in typing class.

Tracey had been through a similar experience as mine a few years earlier with Mike. They had a young son and were trying to conceive baby #2 when she got an abnormally high bill for their cell phone account. On Mike's line there were dozens and dozens of phone calls to a number Tracey didn't recognize. She asked Mike whom he called fifty-two times the month before. He denied any knowledge of the phone calls. He said it must be a billing error. So Tracey called the number. A woman's voice mail came on after a few rings. Mike finally admitted that he had been seeing someone. When Mike finally confessed all of this to Tracey she had just found out that she was nine weeks pregnant. Understandably, she freaked. She sobbed, she called in sick to work, and she couldn't eat. Mike decided he was miserable in their marriage so he moved out when Tracey was ten weeks pregnant. Wisely, Tracey got into therapy.

That morning I called Tracey for support, but I also wanted the number of her therapist. Although Tracey and Mike ended up divorcing, Tracey didn't blame their therapist. In fact, she highly recommended her.

Later that morning, I made an appointment for Chris and me to go see her.

Some people believe that by the time a couple goes to a marriage counseling, it's probably too late. I didn't know that back then and I'm glad I didn't. It was important for me to do whatever I could to salvage my marriage.

Our first session with Joan addressed Chris's drinking problem. Because his work often required him to be out at night, we agreed on a reasonable time for him to come home. Also, he agreed that while out working he wouldn't drink at all. And when we were together he would limit himself to three drinks. He wouldn't admit to a drinking problem, but he did agree that if he couldn't adhere to these rules that the three of us negotiated, he'd go to Alcoholics Anonymous.

It was hard for me to shake the humiliation that I felt. I became paranoid and felt like everyone except me knew what Chris had been up to. I imagined that when we were out in public with our kids, people were snickering behind my back. I felt like he made a fool of me, and he did, but what was harder for me to deal with was his lack of contrition. He apologized countless times, but all of his apologies seemed empty and more like he knew he had to say those words. To me they didn't seem heartfelt, they were just words that didn't have any tears or emotion behind them. And for a man who had a gift for creativity with words, his apologies were simply a series of uninspired "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," and little else. I would try to tell him that to me it didn't feel like he was sorry, but all he did was offer more empty apologies. One day he even suggested I should have my own affair so we could be even. As in every other fight we'd had in our relationship, Chris just wanted to ignore this huge, glaring problem and pretend that it hadn't happened.

The one important thing that therapy did was allow us to get every issue and hidden resentment out in the open. For the past six years, Chris had slept in while I woke up, fed, and dressed kids. I was pissed about it and I had been for years. In counseling, our therapist, Joan, pointed out that it was important for Chris to be a part of our family regardless of his preference to sleep in. “Whether you’re a morning person or not, you need to get up,” she’d say. To me this seemed obvious, but I was glad for Joan’s support.

She told me I could teach Chris how to organize his schedule since that came easy for me. She also encouraged Chris to go to the grocery, or pick the kids up from school—anything to help me out. Joan’s concept was pretty simple: help each other work towards the common goal of saving our family.

With her help we moved on in a more positive direction. Chris tempered his drinking and our weekly counseling sessions were helpful because it gave us a safe place to vent our feelings and frustrations. Slowly things got better. Chris’s abbreviated drinking certainly was a big part of it. For a while we didn’t tiptoe around each other.

Of course, Chris wasn’t the only guilty party in our troubled marriage. Although I wasn’t out drinking and carousing, I went around in a chronic state of anger and frustration, which didn’t make our relationship any better. I’m pretty sure Chris could have correctly called me a bitch, but he never did. Not once in our courtship or marriage did he ever raise his voice or yell an unflattering epithet at me. I can’t say the same about myself. I’m not endorsing Chris’s behavior, but I was aware that I contributed to our problems too. I didn’t flatten his car tires, but I did something else my mother had taught me to do: I froze him out.

After two months of counseling and after some of the initial shock of Chris’ previous behavior had worn off, his drinking became problematic again. It made perfect sense. He hadn’t

admitted to a drinking problem. In fact, he loved drinking. The only reason he agreed to a three-drink limit was because the metaphorical gun was pointed at his head. Eventually, when he went out to cover a story, he'd come home tipsy. Granted, he got home at a more reasonable hour, but he broke our deal, which was detrimental to rebuilding my trust. When I brought this up in one of our counseling sessions, Joan told Chris that since he didn't hold up his end of the deal, he needed to join AA. This was the promise he had made, she pointed out. He resisted. He said he didn't believe in AA and he had no interest in going to meetings and sharing his thoughts and feelings, especially since he didn't think he had a drinking problem. To prove he wasn't an alcoholic, he vowed to stop drinking cold turkey and on his own. He wasn't happy about it, but he was out of options.

To his credit, Chris did a pretty good job of holding up his end of his no drinking agreement. He also was waking up at a more reasonable hour and taking a more active part in child-rearing duties. Our roles became more balanced, which helped alleviate my anger. I felt hopeful that things could be different. I thought it was possible for our marriage to be saved.

Later that summer, we were moving forward and making positive changes. On a Saturday morning in late August, Chris and I were up early in the morning, drinking coffee, and feeding the kids. Chris turned on the television to get an update on a hurricane that was in the Gulf of Mexico, but was headed towards Florida. At least, that was the last update we'd gotten the day before. By the time we turned on the weather, the hurricane had grown by epic proportions and was now a huge mass of ugliness and it was headed our way. Growing up in New Orleans, I had never evacuated for a hurricane. No one did.

"Kelly, we need to leave here," Chris advised.

"I don't want to leave. I haven't left once, ever. Why start now?"

“Because we have three young kids and life without electricity, which we often lose on a clear, sunny day is a given,” he replied.

Late August in the New Orleans’ heat is almost intolerable even with air conditioning, so the picture started to become clear. I didn’t want to go, but I didn’t want to fight (or sweat) either. There was also the question of where we’d go. The drive to Houston would be hell, and we didn’t know anyone there. I had family in Baton Rouge and Shreveport, but it’s not easy for a family of five to just plop down anywhere or for an indefinite amount of time. Through a process of elimination, we decided to head to my dad’s house in Mississippi. He had enough room for us, plus we had a beach house booked for the following weekend in Fort Morgan, Alabama. I started packing, going heavy on bathing suits, flip-flops, and sunscreen since we were ultimately headed to the beach. Chris cleaned up the yard, securing any would-be projectiles. Later that day, with kids and limited belongings in tow, we headed to Mississippi.

It would be four months before I slept in my own bed again.

After

If making the decision to evacuate was difficult, making the decision of where you and your three young children are going to live for the indefinite future was even more difficult. Southern Mississippi had taken the brunt of Hurricane Katrina's wrath, so my dad's place in Picayune wasn't an option. After a week of staying with my aunt, uncle, and grandparents in their small home in Baton Rouge, Chris and I decided the kids and I would relocate to Chevy Chase, Maryland. My in-laws had generously opened up their large, beautiful home to the kids and me once it became clear we couldn't go back to ours. Chris stayed in New Orleans to cover the biggest story of his career. The Roses had plenty of room, an extra car, and they lived two blocks away from a great elementary school--all signs pointed east. Off the kids and I went one week after Katrina made landfall, while the city of New Orleans was officially shut down. We knew through friends that our home next to Audubon Zoo was damage free, so that made the decision to temporarily relocate that much easier to make.

My father-in-law, John, picked us up from the airport, drove us back to his house, now our house, while Chris's family and neighbors came by to welcome us. As stressful as major life changes can be, so far this one rated pretty low. The kids were familiar with their new environment, and everybody went out of their way to distract them from the chaos had taken place in their lives over the previous week. I thought then and still think how lucky we were to have this option open to us.

As far as the kids went, I was most concerned with Kate, who at the age of seven, was pretty entrenched in her school and social life in New Orleans. My concerns were quickly allayed when I picked her up from her first day at her new school. She walked out holding her

new best friend's hand. Both her transition and that of her younger brothers were that easy. They were seamless.

Back in New Orleans, Chris wasn't having as easy of a time adjusting to life post-hurricane. While I lived in a city that was remarkably functional, Chris drove around town taking in all of the destruction. He channeled all of his frustration and pain into his writing. In the early days after the storm, the newspaper was mostly read on the Internet since most New Orleanians had spread out in all directions. And this was how the first of many stories he wrote post-Katrina went viral. I wish I understood more about his creative process in those days, because everything he wrote was poignant and inspired. Remarkably, he was doing this sober and not with his long-time crutch of alcohol. This was still our pact, which he was keeping despite a natural disaster.

Mentally, Chris was doing well. He had turned our damage-free home into a bunkhouse for some of his fellow reporters who weren't as fortunate. He wasn't alone, so I thought that was good. He was writing a lot and the feedback he received was overwhelmingly positive. One morning after I dropped off Kate at school, Chris and I were having our daily morning conversation. We were talking about the kids and how amazing they were doing that morning.

"How's everyone?" he asked.

I started crying. I hadn't felt it coming on. I just had this spontaneous spring of emotion and tears.

"What's wrong," he asked.

"We are so lucky. Here the kids and I are living in Pleasantville, USA, happy and healthy. Our home is intact. Your writing is inspired. Our marriage is on the mend. *We are so lucky,*" I repeated.

He agreed. We exchanged I love yous and other terms of endearment that sometimes fall by the wayside after a few years of marriage. I felt connected to Chris, even more so living with his parents and being around his family and friends. In many ways, the storm had been cathartic for our relationship and it helped me find something that I'd never had: a solid family.

This conversation took place six weeks after the storm. It was one of the last, positive conversations we ever had.

Chris had been coming to Maryland every two weeks to visit the kids and me. It was good for him to get out of mentally draining New Orleans and his visits would come just as I needed a break from single parenting. Although the kids were doing great, they were still kids. James who was two and a half when we came to Maryland had regressed in his toilet training. Jack was in pre-school when his already intense attachment to me became stronger. Chris would come to provide parenting relief and that worked for a while.

My one-time roommate from my time living in Los Angeles sent me a box of paperback books when I got to Maryland and those books were my escape every night after I put the kids down. Reading, running and a nightly glass of wine were my personal retreats during those months away from home, my friends, and my life.

Thanksgiving was approaching and Chris was coming to stay for a full week instead of his usual three days. My dad and his wife Augusta were coming up from Mississippi. It would be the first time I had seen them in three months. The Roses and I planned a big holiday gathering for both Chris's family and mine.

But when Chris got to town, it was obvious that his mental health had turned. He looked tired, he was quiet, and he didn't have any energy. He slept in the next morning, and the next, and the next. When he was awake, he might as well have been sleeping because he wasn't engaged with his family or me. On Thanksgiving Day, he openly and without apology, drank in front of me. Over the course of that week, six months of therapy and healing came undone. I sympathized with him since I knew that he'd been under a lot of stress, but I also felt let down and betrayed. Again.

After Chris's disappointing visit, our daily morning and evening phone conversations became a perfunctory chat that would happen every other day. Maybe. It depended on whether Chris had the energy to talk. It was obvious to me that he was depressed but it was hard for me to understand. We had been so fortunate, we had so much to be grateful for, but none of that seemed to matter. Reason isn't a part of depression. A darkness settled over Chris that would not lift for quite some time.

In December, we got word that the kids' schools would reopen in January, which meant we could go back home. Chris and I talked about us staying in Maryland until the end of the school year since everyone was doing so well. We even considered permanently moving to Maryland, but for a reporter like Chris, New Orleans was the place to be. As much as I liked being in Maryland and didn't mind living with my in-laws, once our marriage became strained again, I found it hard to hold my tongue around them. I wanted their help in figuring him out. I wanted to ask them "What's his problem?" but I couldn't. Chris was their beloved youngest child and the favorite son. He could do no wrong. While they loved the kids and me, even enjoyed us being around, it was clear that Chris was their priority. I need to talk to process my emotions. That's how I make sense of things, but the Roses were from a different generation where talking

about problems wasn't encouraged. While I felt frustration and anger about Chris's depression, I was in the minority. Everyone else felt sympathy for him.

"Poor Chris," his sister in Florida said. "He's taking on the pain of the whole city."

I was sympathetic to a point, but I didn't feel either of us as parents of young kids had the luxury of falling into an open-ended funk.

With the onset of Chris's depression, once again our relationship reverted back to the dysfunctional mess it had once been. Chris was sleeping until noon most mornings and he had little energy to parent. Like a bone that gets broken more than once, our marriage was fragile and this setback showed how delicate our relationship still was. I begged Chris to go talk to someone, to get help. But just as he had resisted going to AA to get his drinking in check, he did the same with his mental health.

We came back to New Orleans after Christmas. I had only been to New Orleans for one visit since the storm. Four months later and after 80% of the city had been under water, there was still a surreal quality to walking around here. It was so quiet and empty. New Orleans was eerily peaceful. The neighbors were extra friendly and my front porch became a popular spot for folks to sit, have a beer, and talk. For a while, New Orleans was a kinder, gentler, and even friendlier place.

On one of Chris's visits to Maryland, he talked about an idea he had for a book. His columns had been well received not only by New Orleanians, but by people all over the country. He started doing regular segments for National Public Radio, and The Lehrer Report hired him to do monthly features for their show. Spike Lee wanted Chris to be in his Katrina documentary and

New Orleans-born writer Michael Lewis befriended Chris and became his mentor. Through Chris's writing many people had noticed that his mood had become dark. Still everyone--fans and family--was rooting for him, hanging on to every word he wrote, vying for his attention. One night in Maryland he gathered his childhood buddy who now owned a printing company, his graphic artist brother and me and shared his idea: he wanted our help in putting together a book of his *Times-Picayune* columns post-Katrina. That evening we figured who would do what in order to make this book become more than just an idea. Ten weeks later, and six months after Katrina, 7,000 copies of the book were delivered to our house. The book was titled *I Dead in Attic*.

The immediate, overwhelmingly positive reaction to Chris's book, helped pull him out of his depression. It didn't make it go away, but it gave him a huge distraction from the darkness that had taken over his mind. Since Chris and I had paid for the book to be published, that meant the profits were ours as well. And profitable this slender, paperback book was. For the first time in our marriage we had money. We paid off all of our debts, put money in our retirement accounts, started college funds for the kids, donated to various New Orleans' charities. We bought new cars, we ate at nice restaurants. From the outside looking in, we had it all.

Even though our marriage was still strained, our working relationship was pretty smooth. Our roles were clear cut--Chris did public relations for his book; I did everything else. I made sure that whoever wanted a copy had a copy, I scheduled his book signings, I set up a website, I made sure our accounting books were in order in case the IRS came calling. Chris was the talent, I was the business manager. We put all of our energy towards this book and that mutual goal carried us along for the next six months, before it all came crashing down.

After the book commitments tapered off, Chris's depression set back in worse than it originally had been. After months of my continual pleas for him to get on medication, he finally acquiesced. The change in his mood and temperament was almost immediate. Although Chris had resisted taking antidepressants because he thought they would hamper his writing, that didn't turn out to be a problem. Actually, he found that he could get more done simply because he felt better. What I didn't know at the time was shortly after he started on his meds, he started supplementing them with painkillers. I don't know how long it took me to figure out that he was gobbling down Vicodins along with his Cymbalta, but I knew he wasn't eating very much. I also noticed he had taken a new interest in doing the laundry, an interest that after nearly ten years of my doing laundry for all of us, I welcomed. One day I found a bottle of Vicodin that was prescribed by his doctor. I didn't think it was a big deal since he only had thirty pills--they wouldn't last forever. But Chris soon became like any other drug addict in his single-minded determination to get his fix. After his doctor refused additional refills, Chris found a street dealer. The once daily and relatively mild Vicodins segued into the granddaddy of all painkillers, Oxycontin. This fine writer, who now possessed a Pulitzer Prize, a best-selling book, an enormously successful career, three children and a wife, was burning through his money to buy opiates off the streets. As his addiction grew stronger, I could hardly talk to him, much less look at him. None of my pleas for reason were heard anyway.

I started socializing on my own and planned my own family activities, not including him. He started sleeping on the sofa, which was a welcome respite from his ever-altered state of consciousness. I didn't know what to do. I started going to therapy on my own, since Chris had refused to go with me any longer. There my therapist urged me to take care of myself, to consider my own needs. I didn't want my marriage to end, but I felt my hand was being forced.

On March 1, 2007, a little more than a year after *I Dead in Attic* was released and after we had resumed our lives back in New Orleans, I told Chris we needed to talk. I had just dropped the kids off at school and he was sitting outside on our back deck drinking coffee. He looked unhealthy and old, but I knew I had to catch him early and before he got high to have a conversation that was long overdue.

We sat down outside on our back deck around our green picnic table shaded by an oversize umbrella and a tall cypress tree. This is where he spent much of his days and nights. In our backyard he cobbled together a makeshift office, which consisted of his laptop, cell phone and a yellow legal pad. My stomach was in a knot, but the stress in our house was becoming intolerable.

“Chris, I’m miserable and I don’t know what the answer is here. We don’t talk, we avoid being in the same room at the same time, we’re living separate lives. This isn’t how I want to live. I’m unhappy.”

He looked away. A minute later he responded. He did have an idea on how to deal with our problems.

“Look,” he said, “we have this beautiful house, these three great children, now we have a little money. Why don’t you do your thing and I’ll do mine, no questions asked.”

I sat there looking at him, silent. I don’t know what I had been expecting him to say, but certainly this idea had never crossed my mind. I guess I was hoping he’d vow to make our marriage better, promise to try harder, and tell me that we would be okay. But those words weren’t spoken.

It took me a moment before I told him his solution wasn’t going to work for me. Our conversation ended no better than it had started. After that, I just walked around in a cloud of

confusion thinking adultery, alcoholism, drug addiction...and now he wanted an open marriage. I was not only disgusted by Chris's comments, I was disgusted by him.

Irony had always been a common theme in our marriage, and that never changed. A few years earlier I had once run to the doctor ashamed and scared that I had an STD because of Chris having unprotected sex when that wasn't the cause of my health problems. Now, a year and a half after the storm, Chris was going to be recognized by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration for his widely read story about his experiences with depression that had been published a few months earlier. In the irony of all ironies Chris, now addicted to painkillers, was being recognized for his writing about the stigma associated with mental illness. This well-funded organization was going to fly us out to Los Angeles so Chris could accept this award. We had booked the flights and arranged care for the kids. We were set to go months in advance. But after that disturbing conversation with Chris in early March, I told him I wasn't going with him to L.A. I wasn't interested in being a part of the hoax he'd become.

A week later, I came home from dropping the kids off at school but Chris wasn't around. I knew he was awake and at home because his computer was on and open. In a moment I'm not particularly proud of but that I still feel no guilt about, I started reading his emails. That's when I discovered he found my replacement to accompany him to Los Angeles. She was from Chicago and they'd met a few months earlier. She had been touched by his post-Katrina writing, so when she was visiting New Orleans, she emailed Chris telling him she was a fan and asked could he meet her for coffee. While their emails started off innocently ("I just wanted to hug you when first met because you looked so sad") they soon turned X-rated. My heart raced as I read them.

Julie from Chicago wanted to know what she should pack for their trip. As I was finishing reading their exchanges, Chris walked into the room and caught me. I told him he had a week to find a place to live. His only response was he couldn't believe I would invade his privacy by reading his emails. More irony.

As painful and illuminating as that email was, it also gave me the motivation and courage to do something that I had put off doing for years. I hired a divorce attorney. But before I could go through with any of the legalities of dissolving our marriage, I forced Chris into rehab. In a scene out of reality T.V., I gathered Chris's boss, our former neighbor Mike, and a professional "interventionist," and we sat Chris down and told him it was obvious he needed help. The idea was to get him to enter rehab that day, not put it off for a day or a week. There was a script the interventionist gave us all to follow. It was filled with statements like, "We're all here together, because we're concerned about you," and "Will you accept help for your problem?" Chris hadn't seen this onslaught coming, and that's probably for the best since I don't think he would have gone otherwise. I had reserved him a bed at a facility in Lafayette, a safe distance from New Orleans where a local celebrity might not raise as much interest. Chris packed a bag and by noon he was on his way. He convinced Mike to stop off for an extra large daiquiri for the two-hour ride. Mike later told me that he stopped five times during their trip so Chris could smoke cigarettes and make a few phone calls. I'm guessing a phone call to Julie in Chicago was one of those many calls.

We weren't entirely honest with the kids about where Chris was going. Instead of engaging in the conversation with an eight, six, and four-year old about drug addiction, we simply told them daddy wasn't feeling well so he was going away to get better. I took them to visit on Sundays for family day. On one of those visits, Chris asked me take him back. He promised he'd

stay sober and that things would be different. Certainly in our eleven years of marriage we had weathered much together, but when I had asked Chris to leave a few weeks earlier, I meant it. When Chris was away and after his mind cleared from its drug-induced fog, he started writing me letters. "Please let me prove to you that our life will be different. Please don't do this. We have so much to save." Please don't do this was the plea in all of his letters. But after reading his email exchange detailing his latest extramarital dalliance, I had crossed an invisible emotional line from which I couldn't return. I didn't trust Chris. I still don't trust him today. After I was asked to leave my mother's house, I never went back, realizing that I was better off on my own. I felt the same way about Chris. I told Chris repeatedly that I was done and in his last letter to me from rehab he wrote that he understood. "I've been bringing you down with my problems for too long. You deserve better." While I had struggled to believe his apologies were sincere, for the first time since our marriage imploded, I felt that he meant what he was writing. This huge decision that affected the lives of my kids and me didn't come easy, but it's one I remained firm on. The divorce I had tried so hard to avoid was imminent. My mother and I had much in common after all.

Mentally I was okay, and more importantly, so were the kids. I kept their routine the same and I saw my therapist weekly. Anna would marvel at my composure. On the exterior I was together, but for months after Chris moved out, I couldn't sleep. I'd lie in bed at night replaying the series of drama-filled events that had taken place in the preceding weeks. I would sit in Anna's office and ask her how I could have been fooled so many times by Chris. She would tell me that it was a great quality to be trusting and openhearted, regardless of the outcome. My life was better

because I had married and become a parent, and that's what I should focus on. She also helped me see that the reason I was so drawn to Chris, was because I wanted to write. She believed I was displacing my career ambitions onto him.

“You're a writer too, you know,” she said.

I wanted to believe her, but I didn't believe that admiring writers and reading a lot of books made you a writer. I told her about my fantasy of Chris and me having careers like Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne. I discovered Didion's work by accident when I picked up *The White Album* at a garage sale. Once I read that book, I became a fan of her work. I was intrigued by her marriage and her life. She was the only child of a wealthy California couple, educated at Berkeley before landing in New York and working for *Vogue*. Didion and Dunne had earned literary credibility for their books, but they also wrote screenplays, which gave them entre into both New York and Hollywood. They traveled from New York, Beverly Hills, Hawaii, and Mexico while working, with their young daughter in tow. Their evenings were spent at cocktail parties socializing with other writers and intellectuals. I couldn't imagine a better life. I also told her about randomly meeting Judy Blume in the French Quarter a few years previously. Over the years, I've met quite a few celebrities, but I was never start struck until I met Blume. I could hardly get my words out when I told her I'd read everything she had ever written and now I give my kids her books to read too. I felt the same way when I met Roy Blount Jr., Julia Reed, and Donna Tartt. I admired these people and the way they were able to build successful careers that they created with their words and ideas. When I told Anna these stories, she encouraged me to pursue my dream. She became my biggest cheerleader. When I enrolled in a writing class you would have thought I was her daughter. She beamed with pride.

But my main priority in the early days of our separation was the three little people looking to me for signs that these major changes were going to turn out all right. I knew that my kids had suffered the brunt of my anger towards Chris and I hated myself for it. When I snapped at them for the most trivial behavior, I'd think about my mother and worry that I was turning into her. I wasn't behaving like the mother I wanted to be. With Chris gone, some of the tension eased. That was a most definite benefit, but my middle son Jack started having nightmares about the Earth erupting into a ball of flames. I guess that's what he felt was happening to his life: everything was erupting. My therapist assured me he was fine. Divorce is a process for all of you, she would counsel.

Chris completed his 30-day rehab program. He left the Lafayette facility with a few phone numbers of the friends he made and a long-term plan designed to help him stay sober. With all of this in place, we mutually agreed on a shared custody arrangement for the kids.

Two weeks later a friend of mine called me because she had run into Chris at a local Mexican restaurant.

"I thought you should know he was having a margarita," she told me.

Just like that, \$10,000 and 30 days of sobriety went down the drain.

If life married to Chris was chaotic, it was on the job training for what was to come after we separated. My lawyer told me that since Chris had completed rehab and wasn't on drugs any longer, he was entitled to shared custody of the kids.

“Drinking isn’t illegal,” she counseled.

She understood why I would be nervous, but she said that legally, nothing could be done to keep him from drinking. I started having conversations with the kids about never getting in the car with anyone who was drunk, even if it was daddy or me. I checked in with them every evening they were at his house to say goodnight and to make sure all was okay. Fortunately for my nerves, Chris worked from home and lived close to the kids’ school, thereby minimizing in-car time. For over a year, Chris kept his demons in check. He had resumed his writing for the paper and kept to our schedule with the kids. He met a woman he fell hard for. Chris introduced her to the kids and they started making plans for their future.

Our divorce was amicable; we even shared the same lawyer. We mutually decided who would get what—I got the house, he got his pension and 401k. One thing that I felt important to put in our divorce agreement was specific language about cohabitation outside of marriage. Both Chris and I agreed this wasn’t in our children’s best interest. But when Chris met Adrienne and found himself wanting to have her around all of the time, he came to me to ask if I’d bend on this part of our agreement. Since they had only been dating for six months and had broken up twice during that short time, I told Chris no. I told him we could talk about it again in a year. He reacted with anger and venom, asking if I was still in therapy, because obviously I was angry and trying to keep him from being happy. We went back and forth on this topic, but I didn’t budge. All of this was happening days before I was taking the kids on a summer trip to San Francisco. While I was there, he sent me a few emails begging me to reconsider. I didn’t reply to any of them.

When we returned home, he came to pick up the kids since they hadn’t seen him in a week. When I called them later on to say good night, Kate told me she had a new room at a new

house. While I was out of town, Chris had rented a new place that was big enough for our kids as well as Adrienne and her son.

Just as he had while we were married, he would do whatever he wanted despite the repercussions. Maybe he knew me too well, maybe he knew I wouldn't fight him on this. And I didn't because I didn't have to. Three weeks after Chris and Adrienne moved in together, she moved out. Behind Chris's back she had been seeing an old boyfriend who had decidedly less baggage than Chris since he didn't have an ex-wife or kids. To be discarded so easily and to have his own trust betrayed sent Chris into a tailspin. He started drinking heavily, he lost weight, he regularly called in sick to work.

As the other parent to the kids we shared, this was hard to watch. Chris was sleeping all day and drinking all night. He lived within blocks of their school so they still got there on time every day, but on the weekends they'd call me at one or two in the afternoon and say Chris was still asleep.

"We're bored. Will you come get us," they'd beg.

I knew the tough love approach would have been to say no, that it was Chris's responsibility to get out of bed and play with them, but I couldn't do it. Plus, I didn't particularly want them around their hungover, depressed father. I had spent most of their early lives trying to protect them from that and now that Chris and I were no longer together that impulse didn't just go away. So I'd go pick them up and bring them back to my house and try to let them be carefree kids for a while.

I knew that Chris was a wreck, but I didn't really know how bad he was doing until October. It was a Friday night and he had the kids. He left them with a neighbor and said he'd be right back, he had a quick errand to run. His hurt and rage mixed with alcohol led him to

Adrienne's new home. There he went, drunk and belligerent. He stood on the sidewalk and called for her to come out. While this echoed a scene from *Rocky*, this wasn't a movie. And it was disturbingly real. Adrienne's boyfriend came out and told Chris to leave. Pushing and punches were involved and the police were called. Chris was arrested for domestic battery. He spent the next ten hours in jail before he called in a few favors and was released.

Around midnight that night, I got a phone call from the neighbor Chris had left the kids with. She told me what happened. I picked up the kids the next day and told him they weren't going back to his house for a while because once again, Daddy wasn't feeling well. I didn't consult with my lawyer this time, I just made the unilateral decision. Chris didn't fight me.

I had the kids full time for a month when Chris' boss at the paper came to him to express his concern about his work performance, or more specifically his lack of performance. It was obvious to them that he wasn't doing well and management at the paper was well aware of his problems with alcohol and drugs. Chris' boss told him if he didn't complete a 30-day outpatient rehab, he'd be out of a job—a job that he'd had for 24 years. For the second time in 18 months, Chris entered rehab.

Kate, Jack and James didn't ask too many questions their father. I guess because they had lived with Chris their whole lives, this behavior wasn't different from what they had always known. For this go around in rehab, we told them the same thing we had told them the first time: Daddy wasn't feeling well so the doctors were going to help him feel better. Despite the chaos that he brought to their lives, they still thrived. Sure, they had some issues, but overall they were happy. James went through a phase in which he would cry every night before bed because he missed Chris. Jack got stressed out about going to aftercare for the first time in his life. But these

things seemed small and manageable, especially when compared to the huge life changes they had endured over the past eighteen months.

When Chris completed his second rehab he acknowledged he needed a support group if he was going to be successful in staying sober. He started going to AA. He went to therapy regularly. He stayed on his antidepressants. He resumed his custody of the kids again. He looked healthier; he started exercising. I thought to myself that maybe this nearly 50-year-old man was getting himself together. Just maybe.

Even though Chris and I weren't married any longer, in many ways I was still taking care of him. I still spent a lot of psychic energy trying to protect the kids from the things that were going on behind the scenes. Our kids had never seen us fight, and I wanted to make sure that didn't change. I tried my hardest not to perpetuate the bitter cycle that I had grown up in, one in which I was constantly put in the middle of my parents' mutual hatred of one another. Forty years after my parents' divorce, my mother is still consumed with vitriol for a man she hasn't seen in over a decade. Almost every conversation with her leads to my father and what a drunk asshole he was. In her defense, I'm sure he wasn't a good husband, but that wasn't my fault.

Maybe as a way to compensate for the guilt I felt about our divorce, I constantly tell my children how wanted they are. I regularly tell them the story of their births, the time of day, the day of the week, who their first visitor was, and how excited I was to meet them. In my early 30s when I was ready to have a child, I had taken getting pregnant for granted, thinking fertility was a given. But for me, it didn't happen that easily. After Chris and I had been married for two years, the time seemed right to start a family. Every month, I would dutifully monitor my cycle,

careful to capitalize on those four days when I could conceive. Every month, I would get my hopes up thinking this *is* the month, only to be deflated when my cycle commenced, right on schedule and more regular than ever. After more than a year of trying to get pregnant, I was dejected and depressed. My doctor talked about the fertility testing options available to us. A few weeks later I found out I was pregnant.

I constantly tell my oldest Kate how much I wanted her, how I willed her conception, how much she is loved. She was a nine-pound-plus bundle of thick black hair and docility. She was such an easygoing child that when I got pregnant with her younger brother, I thought no problem, I've got this mothering thing down. Jack was born on a dreary Thursday morning and almost as soon as he was born, he started crying. He didn't stop until six months later.

When it comes to parenting, I try to lead by example. How can I reprimand them for saying ugly things to one another, if I am doing the same with their father? One night not too long ago Chris asked if he could come pick up James and take him to a basketball game. We didn't have anything planned for the evening, so I said yes. After ten phone calls to James saying he was on his way, Chris showed up over an hour late, disheveled and unapologetic. James kept asking me when Chris was coming, which I didn't know how to answer. When Chris finally knocked on the door, I was angry with him for being so late and turning what was going to be a relaxing evening at home into chaos. Although Kate and Jack weren't going to the game, they wanted to tell Chris hello, so along with James, they waited by the front door for him to arrive. When he finally knocked, I told Chris I needed to have a word with him. Outside on my porch I lit into him about being late, unorganized, and taking advantage of my willingness to let him spend time with James on a night he was supposed to be with me. Chris just stood there and looked at me like I was unreasonable, not bothering to respond. When I walked in, Kate, Jack,

and James were crying. They had overheard my words with Chris and were upset. At the ages twelve, ten, and eight this was the first time they'd ever heard us argue. For all of their young lives, I had been trying to protect them from our fights and now I wondered if I was doing them a disservice. All relationships, good and bad, involve conflict, arguments, and disagreements. Shouldn't I try to teach them how to fight fairly instead of ignoring their feelings? Growing up with my mother had offered me a firsthand view of what a lifetime commitment to anger could do to you. I've always been scared that a propensity towards anger could be inherited much like a cancer gene, so I've spent most of my life trying to avoid it. My kids' reaction to this disagreement between Chris and me showed me that I wasn't helping them by allowing them to think that Chris and I always got along. I apologized for upsetting them, but told them there's a reason we're divorced.

When Chris and I were first apart, I was determined to keep our relationship civilized. The first Christmas after we separated, Chris came over to spend the day with my father, my stepmother and the kids. We sat across the table from one another, laughed, and enjoyed the day. Chris would make jokes about us having such a civilized divorce. If I were out of town, he'd watch the dog and even housesit. I'd bring him his mail and pass on the many phone messages I still got. One summer I planned a beach trip with five other families and their kids. I told Chris about our plans, letting him know how long the kids and I would be gone. By this time, we'd been apart for three years and we'd settled in to a cordial relationship. So when Chris asked if he could join our big gang at the beach, I didn't think much of it. He knew everybody who was going to be there and we had plenty of room. The kids and I got to the beach on Saturday, while Chris was supposed to arrive the following Tuesday. Tuesday turned into Wednesday, Wednesday turned into Thursday, Chris claiming his "night blindness" and work were keeping

him home. On Thursday, Chris called repeatedly asking for directions to a beach house he'd been to numerous times before. He finally showed up disheveled with a six-pack of Bartles & James wine coolers in hand. It was eleven in the morning. He walked in the house, took a quick look around and immediately jumped from the second floor balcony into the swimming pool below. That probably wouldn't have been such a big deal had not every parent there been giving stern warnings to all 18 kids present to not jump off the balcony into the pool, under any circumstances. While everyone woke up early, played board games with the kids, and pitched in to cook meals, Chris slept until noon and didn't contribute to our group effort. For the first time, I was embarrassed by him. I was also embarrassed for him.

Conclusion

I struggle with the conclusion to this story. Despite my difficult relationship with my mother and my troubled marriage, those experiences gave me plenty to write about. Those experiences are rife with conflict and personal struggles, while my life today is not.

These days my relationship with Chris is less conflicted. It took me years to navigate the uncharted territories of divorce while co-parenting our kids, but I think I've managed okay. We've settled into a cordial but cool relationship. At one time I thought we could be close, but it became clear after our last beach trip together that that wasn't going to work. I realized that not living under the same roof didn't necessarily eliminate our problems. As much as I would have liked to rise above my ego by being friends with Chris, I had to learn to protect myself. In the same way it took me years to end our relationship, it also took me a while to figure out that our friendship worked mostly to his benefit. I felt like I kept getting sucked back into the chaos that constantly surrounds him. Since we parted ways there's been a long list of calamities that only seem to happen in Chris's world. These days I keep a healthy distance and try to provide my kids with the stability I believe they desperately need. Chris and I evenly share our time with the kids so I can no longer protect them for his bouts of depression or his erratic lifestyle. I've come to accept that if he's sleeping until noon or gets them to school late, it's not my business. I can only be responsible for my relationship with them.

With the end of our marriage came the end of my close relationship with his family. When his father heard that we were splitting he emailed me. "Dearest Kelly, will you reconsider your decision?" As diplomatically as I could I told him no and I told him why. The few times I've been to Washington D.C. since our divorce I've stopped by their house to visit. I still send birthday and holiday cards and make sure they have recent pictures of the kids. I tell the Roses

how much I miss them and that losing touch with their family makes me sadder than my divorce from Chris. For a while I tried hard to keep our bond, but when Chris would fall into another mental funk and stop returning their phone calls or emails, they'd turn to me for answers and help. There came a point where I couldn't help Chris or them anymore. He's no longer my responsibility. I still hope that one day he can pull himself together and stop wasting his many talents.

My mother never remarried. She lives with two cats in Shreveport, retired and alone. Over the past forty years she's managed to alienate almost all of her close family. She rarely, if ever, talks to her siblings and both of her parents are now deceased. We haven't talked very much in the past four years, but I can easily bring to mind the event that caused me to cut off all contact with her. In June 2009, my father unexpectedly passed away and her reaction was borderline gleeful. She reached out to all of his lifelong friends, admonishing them if they dared show surprise or sadness about his death, since my father had lived such an unhealthy lifestyle. She told my thirteen-year-old nephew she was glad that he had been at the emergency room the night my father was rushed there. "It's good you were there to see him die. That's what happens when you live a life of constant drinking and smoking." Evelyn called one of my oldest friends to see if she'd heard about my father's death. Elizabeth, being a lifelong friend, called me immediately after she received that strange phone call. "Hey, I thought you should know that your mom just called me. It was a disturbing conversation because she sounded so happy about your dad's death. She went on and on about what a shit he was."

Although my mother had displayed disturbingly insensitive behavior before, I was still shocked considering that my father hadn't even been buried by the time she started this nonsense; he had only died three days earlier. The next time I talked to my mother I told her Elizabeth had relayed their conversation to me. I said I was disappointed to hear her comments. With that remark I had apparently poked the hornet's nest. Her mood turned dark and her comments vicious. "Well, you're a huge disappointment to me too, Kelly. You always have been. It works both ways, you know!" she said with bitter sarcasm. With that comment, she hung up, ending not only our unpleasant conversation but putting our troubled relationship on hiatus.

Two months later, she sent me an email detailing the many ways I had messed up my life and my children. "Your daughter hates you. How's that payback feel to you? You're raising a homosexual son. You're a joke." Her words were so absurd they were almost comical. Periodically, I still get an email from her unprovoked by any contact between us. "You're such a shit," were the only words of her last communication.

Last November, I saw my mother for the first time in years at my grandfather's funeral. As soon as I saw her walk in the church, I gave her a friendly wave, hoping to minimize the inevitable awkwardness of our forced reunion. Maybe it was caused by the soberness of being at her father's funeral, but on that day she was friendly and happy to see me. After the service was done, she came over to say hello. "You look great. Are you still running? How are the kids?" Her questions and interest in my life weren't reflective of any earlier ugliness between us. She asked if she could give me a hug. We shared a long embrace that felt natural and good. In that moment, 40-plus years of conflicted emotions towards her came back. I wondered why she couldn't always be like this. One tight hug didn't erase all the ugly encounters that have tainted our relationship, but it signaled a truce that still holds today.

A few weeks after my grandfather's funeral I got a birthday card from her. My immediate reaction was to dismiss it, so I quickly scanned her words then threw the card in the trash. We'd done this kiss-and-make-up game many times before: we'd have a huge blowout, then after enough time had passed, my guard would come down and I'd let her back in my life. But after her last vicious attack, which also took aim at my kids, I decided no more. How can you assess the sex preferences of an eight year-old? Katherine had never displayed any acts of hatred towards me. I couldn't imagine what possessed her to say such horrible things about her grandchildren. Her email was full of such hatred and conjured up accusations that I saved it as a reminder of why we no longer talk. A day after I threw away her card, I dug it out of the trash and reread it. While my initial reaction was defensive, I believe that just as her hug was sincere, so was her card.

"Kelly, It was wonderful to see you looking so happy and well. As a less than successful parent you always wish things could have been different. Please accept my apologies for my many failings and pain I caused you. With much love, Your Mother."

While I've been writing about my troubled relationship with my mother, I remembered being at a party with her when I was eight or nine. Someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. That one simple question has always stumped me. I hesitated and stammered before I said a teacher, my tone registering my uncertainty. My mother chimed in, "She would be a great writer. I think she should write children's books." My mother told me that more than once in my young life. I wasn't sure why she said this since she wasn't prone to doling out encouragement or compliments. I'm guessing she knew how much I loved books and reading. Regardless of why she said that, her comment planted a seed in my subconscious that has been trying to grow ever since.

Two years ago, I remarried. After four years of saying never again, I said yes. Fred and I met on the playground where all five of our kids attend school. It may sound Brady Bunch-esque, but the reality is much different. Our union has its own unique set of complications. We each bring complicated ex-spouses, five strong personalities, two mortgages, and a perpetually shedding dog to our marriage. It is rare feat to cook a dinner that everyone will eat, much less figure out an equitable chore schedule that doesn't have everyone complaining. It's a never-ending challenge of compromises and hurt feelings. When Fred and his kids moved in with my guys and me, everyone was excited about the new living arrangement. The kids thought it would be one big slumber party. It didn't take long for our two oldest kids--who are the same age, in the same grade, and at the same school--to butt heads. And if wasn't those two fighting, then it was another two. Bringing five kids together to live as stepsiblings introduced myriad new ways to argue and no shortage of people to spar with.

Then there were Fred's and my drastically different parenting styles. Fred, being a single father for five years, wasn't concerned with serving balanced meals like I was. After he moved in and went to the grocery store for the first time, I almost went into a diabetic coma just looking at the things he brought home: Bunny Bread, peanut M&M's, a gallon of cookie dough ice cream. Food was the least of our problems though.

I find disciplining my own children to be a thankless and tireless aspect of parenting and now I'm in the uncomfortable situation of having to correct two other kids as well. Fred doesn't share in my hesitancy to discipline my kids and this inevitably leads to complaints from my guys. The first few months after Fred and I married, Katherine and Jack would ask me "How come you never tell Brennen or Emma to pick up their shoes or clean their room?" I know it seems unfair to them and it probably is. But I feel that the structure and discipline that Fred

brings to our household will ultimately benefit my children. My kids' complaints are more about me and the way I treat their stepsiblings than about Fred.

I find step-parenting much trickier than regular parenting. While my rapport with Brennen was easy from the beginning, with his younger sister Emma it's a different story. She very much loves her mother and Fred, which makes it hard for her to figure out where I fit into this parenting dynamic. If she cares for me, is she betraying her mother? There have been times when Emma will come back to our house after visiting with her mother and not make eye contact with me, much less say "hello." This happened recently and went on for a few days before Fred pulled her aside and asked her what was going on. She admitted to jealousy and struggling to find her place in this loud, competitive, sports-obsessed family. Emma is an animal lover in a household of people allergic to cats; she's a vegetarian in a household of burger lovers. I know that one day when she develops a social life of her own she'll be grateful that I keep her father company, but until then, I try to be sensitive to the alone time she requires with him.

At times I feel defeated by the endless complaints (not to mention the grocery shopping and laundry) and bickering of five kids. But then on a random Friday night we'll all sit around playing cards, laughing, everyone enjoying themselves. This big, blended family is a continuing lesson in conflict resolution. Our household mantra is to treat others the way you want to be treated.

My relationship with Fred couldn't be more different from the one I had with Chris. Fred wakes up every morning at six, takes care of his health, quits drinking after a few beers, and never feels the need to be the life of the party. He has a will and life insurance and can't sleep at night

worrying about how we're going to put five kids through college. Unlike me in my youth or Fred in his, every single one of these kids realizes there's no opting out of college; there is no other choice. Obviously, we can't force them to excel or even graduate, but they will have to see what college is all about.

When we were first married it felt odd to not to have pay all of the bills, or do all of the grocery shopping—basically to do everything. I would try to explain to Fred that it felt strange not doing more in our relationship, that it felt odd that he didn't need my help. It took a while for his answer to sink in. He tells me often, "I don't need someone to do my laundry. I can take care of myself. I want someone to laugh and travel with." And laugh and travel we do.

I think what's most promising about my relationship with Fred is that he and I are very much alike. His family background is eerily similar to mine and our biggest life lesson has been one of self-reliance. Fred grew up in the small town of Gulf Breeze outside of Pensacola, Florida. His parents divorced when Fred was 12 and his father moved out of town. Fred was the second of four children and his older sister took on the role of caretaker to his younger siblings when Fred's eclectic mother, Micky, mentally checked out. Understandably, having four young children and becoming their primary caretaker was stressful so she dealt with it by scooting her kids out of the house after breakfast and telling them not to come back until dinner. Until then, the door would remain locked. His father, much like my father, quickly remarried and he had little interest in being a parent to young children.

While my mother was cruel, Fred's mother was downright strange. One day, when Fred came home from school he discovered his mother had decided they didn't need their television and furniture any longer so she gave it away to a less fortunate family. She didn't give away their mattresses though, and that's where they ended up spending most of their time, reading then re-

reading the same ten books they owned. When Fred was 17 his mother kicked him out of the house and didn't let him come back. He's still isn't clear on what he did that warranted such a harsh punishment, but he was too stubborn to beg her to let him stay. He slept on the beach for the next six weeks until his father intervened and rented a guesthouse for Fred to live in until he graduated from high school. Certainly Fred wasn't an angel, having taking an interest in girls and beer as a teenager, but the soccer he played in high school kept him out of trouble since it took up most of his free time. Ultimately, his soccer skills would be his vehicle out of Gulf Breeze when he was offered a full scholarship to Oglethorpe University in Atlanta. From there he went on earn his masters and Ph.D, by the age of 27, thinking if people saw that he was a "doctor" that he could charge more for his services as a therapist.

As connected as I once felt to Chris's family, I'm pretty disconnected from Fred's. He hasn't talked to his mother in years and his siblings are scattered throughout the country. I've never met Micky, but I trust Fred's assessment of her when he says she wasn't very kind. His father lives two hours away and we see him regularly but it's not the same connection I once shared with Chris's dad. I find it interesting that had I used my father's family barometer to gauge Fred's character, he probably would have failed. Yet on all counts, Fred is a more mature and responsible person as well as a better partner than Chris.

Fred has met my mother twice, both times briefly. The first time was years ago and when we had just begun dating. That didn't keep her from sending him a letter shortly after we married two years ago. Fred called me one day from work and said he had received a letter at his office with "Personal & Confidential" written all over it in bright yellow letters. When he opened it, it read: "Congratulations on your recent marriage! I'm so glad Kelly married a therapist, she certainly could use one!" From there it only got more disturbing. "I'm not as bad as Kelly says I

am, I really am a good person. Her father was a total shit regardless of what she says.”

Ironically, she closed her letter with “I wish you the best!” Fred has dedicated his education and career to understanding the human psyche, but even he was confused by her motivations. When he called to tell me about the, he was laughing because it was so absurd. You would think after a lifetime of her strange, erratic behavior I wouldn’t have been surprised, but I was. I asked him to throw it away and not to bring it into our house, suddenly feeling the need to keep her negative words as far away as possible from our kids and me.

Having found a supportive partner like him has helped me realize one of my life-long goals. Earning my master’s degrees has been twenty years in the making, and without the stability that Fred brings to my life I don’t think I could have done it. Coming to the realization that I didn’t need to channel my energy into emotionally propping up Chris didn’t come easy, but once I made it through our divorce, I was finally able to speak my ambition aloud: I want to write. With the encouragement of Fred and others, I have only recently started to find my voice. While my writing is far from perfect, it gives me a way to make sense out of the chaos of my life experiences. Writing helps me make sense of my life experiences in a way that no therapist has been able to. Over the years and without fail, every therapist focused on how I felt, when my feelings weren’t what hung me up. What I always wanted to know was why. Why I was born into my family and why were Fred and Chris born into theirs? How come some of us hit the family lottery and grew up surrounded by love and support, while others of us basically raised ourselves? Those questions baffled me for years. I suppose there are no answers to such questions, or if there are, the answers would be so nebulous and vague that they still couldn’t be articulated. I know I’m not the first writer to think this, but I can’t overstate what a freeing feeling it is to put these life experiences into a narrative.

Despite the heartbreak of my divorce, I have these three healthy, beautiful children who have given my life a focus that was missing before they were born. My oldest, Kate, is now fourteen and still asks my permission every time she walks out of the door. While I know her straight A report cards are her own achievement, I like to think that it's the stable and supportive environment that I offer that makes her academic excellence possible. Jack, now 12, isn't a natural scholar like his sister, but he's a budding artist who is figuring out that it's okay to be a little out there. And then there's James, soon to be a fifth grader, who is happy as long as he has a ball in hand. He's a sensitive, affectionate child who loves without bias every member of his large, blended family. My kids' lives aren't perfect, but nothing makes me happier than knowing their childhoods are drastically different from mine.

My life today can be complicated. The difference between my life now and my life then is that this constellation of problems seems manageable. Today, I tackle issues with a husband and sidekick, another responsible adult who works every bit as hard as I do to address these problems and make them better, not with someone who adds to them. I believe that our issues are time limited and one day soon, our kids will grow up and begin their own journeys. I never had the sense when Chris and I were together that he would grow up or that our problems would get better. I figured I would always have to take care of him--my fourth child--the one who would never leave home.

Today I've helped build a family that I love, depend on, and support. Sometimes our home is loud and messy, but I'm grateful for it all.

My Writing Influences

For me growing up was a lonely experience. Although my parents were young and healthy when they had me, they both had agendas that kept them self-involved. My older brother spent most of his time out of our house, so I spent a lot of time alone. I read books to keep me company. When I was ten I bought a book named *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*. Judy Blume's fictional world became my own for a day, a week, or sometimes an entire summer. After I read *Are you There God*, I got Blume's other novels—*Deenie*, *Forever*, *Then Again Maybe I Won't*, *It's Not the End of the World*—I loved them all. When I finished reading Blume's books, I picked them up and read them again. Blume's fictional worlds provided an escape from my own.

Living with my mother wasn't easy, but there was one thing that she did that I still appreciate: she read. I remember her lying on the couch for much of my youth in her green robe that she changed into as soon as she got home from work. She bought her robes at Sears & Roebuck and after she wore one out, back to Sears she went to get a replacement in the same style and color. This became her after-hours uniform. Putting on that robe signaled her transition from the working world to one where the heroine lived happily ever after. If her own life wasn't going to work out that way at least she had a fictional world where everything did.

In my early 20s, I found a copy of Truman Capote's *Music for Chameleons* on a friend's bookshelf. I'd never read anything by Truman Capote, but soon I became intrigued by his writing. I thought *Music for Chameleons* was beautifully written and different from anything I'd ever read before. After reading that, I became a Capote fan. I read *Other Voices, Other*

Rooms, *In Cold Blood*, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. I even read *Unanswered Prayers*, his much criticized unfinished novel that he was working on before his death at the age of 59. I found Capote's writing style effortless and graceful. After I read the rest of Capote's books, I read Gerald Clarke's biography of him. Clarke wrote about Capote's frustration with his writing. Capote felt all of his time was spent rewriting, never having enough time for the new writing he was on deadline to create. Now that I write, I understand the frustration of trying to put your thoughts and experiences into meaningful prose. Something that comes easily to mind doesn't always come easily to the page, especially when on deadline. When I edit, my writing flow is interrupted—a good example of the left and right brain functions not working together.

Although Capote wrote both fiction and nonfiction, it was his nonfiction that I particularly enjoyed. *In Cold Blood* reads like fiction, yet the gruesome murders Capote wrote about were so haunting because Capote captured so vividly the personalities of the Clutter family and the impact of their murders on a small Midwestern town. Capote also humanized *In Cold Blood's* villains in such a way that readers even felt compassion for them.

Not long after I discovered Capote, I stumbled upon Joan Didion's work. Didion-- along with Capote, Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and many others--ushered in a new style of writing in which they became a part of the story. Didion's personal account of her struggles with mental issues in *The White Album* epitomized this style. By inserting themselves into their narratives, she and many others introduced a new genre of writing, which came to be known as creative nonfiction. These writers did more than report on their surroundings--they participated in them. Hunter S. Thompson's well known essay

“The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” is a memorable example of this kind of writing. Thompson’s raucous day at the Kentucky Derby is as much about his experience getting drunk and being appalled by the loutishness of the scene as it is about the race itself. Of course inebriation is a recurring theme in all of Thompson’s work, but while reading it, I learned about Thompson and the spectacle surrounding horse racing, all while being entertained.

Real life stories are what I appreciate most about nonfiction. *The New Yorker’s* “Talk of the Town” catches me up on the pertinent happenings for the week, while further into the magazine writers such as John McPhee, Roger Angell and Susan Orlean write (or have written) narratively about diverse topics like fly-fishing, baseball, and orchids. Once I started to have children fifteen years ago, when sleep was hard to come by and my attention span was fleeting, I’d always have my weekly *New Yorker* at my bedside even if I only had 20 minutes before nodding off.

Reading *The New Yorker* on one of those nights, I came across a review of a recently published memoir--*The Liars’ Club* by Mary Karr. Karr’s story about growing up in east Texas with eccentric and volatile alcoholic parents is haunting and powerful. While I loved Capote’s and Didion’s writing, Karr’s work spoke to me on a more personal level. She fearlessly wrote about sex, drugs, and her conflicted relationships with her parents. I related to Karr’s youthful experiences and I have deep admiration for her taking control of her adult life and becoming a successful writer, despite the many obstacles that were in her path. Her writing is honest, readable, engaging and laced with hard-earned wisdom. By channeling her energy and experiences into writing, she was finally able to achieve the things she most wanted in life--stability, sobriety, and becoming a loving parent.

In 2009, Karr's third memoir was published. *Lit* focused on Karr's struggle with alcohol, her divorce, and her acceptance of her flawed parents. I've read *Lit* three times now, each time finding her book just as engaging as my first reading. The second time I read *Lit* (although I knew how it ended), I paid attention to how Karr recreated past events and made them seem as if they happened yesterday. Karr used quotation marks sparingly, yet she was still able to recreate scenes and dialogue that were believable. On my third reading, I was struck by Karr's many references to her own writing influences. She cites Robert Lowell, Pablo Neruda, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Flannery O'Connor to name a few. What I realized on this read was the double entendre title she gave her book. While on the surface *Lit* is about her battle with alcohol, a closer look gives a mini lesson in the literary greats that have influenced Karr's writing. Knowing that she was familiar with the work of so many literary luminaries made me respect her writing even more.

Karr writes with self-deprecating humor about her problems. While I don't have an alcohol addiction, I relate to Karr's insecurities regarding her writing, her intellect, and her parenting. In the opening pages of *Lit*, Karr addresses the biggest problem in writing her story: her flawed memory. I find my memory to be tricky as well. There have been times in my life when I believe I've remembered something accurately only later to be proven wrong. It's clear from reading *Lit* and Karr's other books that she takes responsibility for many of her problems, never pushing them off on her parents or ex-husband. She's doesn't point the finger at anyone or feel sorry for herself. This latter virtue is one that I admire and the primary reason why I trust Karr's authorial voice. I try to avoid self-pity in my own writing, never wanting to come across as whiny or angry. For example, in my thesis I've tried hard to be fair in my treatment of my mother and ex-husband.

All of the creative nonfiction writers I've mentioned are flawed individuals, yet they bring their stories to life in compelling narratives that partially compensate for their shortcomings as people. They influenced my writing when I made the transition from reader to writer. All of these writers used simple language, yet still crafted stories that are beautifully written and accessible. While Capote didn't write memoirs like Didion and Karr, it was his nonfiction work that led me to creative nonfiction. In their creative nonfiction, Karr and Didion shared stories of pain and trauma and turned it into art by taking the role of participant-observer on their own experiences.

I appreciate the honesty in which Karr and Didion assess themselves and their troubled worlds. This is what I aspire to do. While I admire Capote's elegant prose in all of his books, I also respect Didion's reliance on short declarative sentences, which are reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway's. Now that I write, I believe I understand why she does this: when articulating complicated thoughts and feelings, clarity is best achieved through simple, concise language. While I can't say if this effort is a definitive truth for Didion, it is for me. Furthermore, in Didion's essay "Why I Write," she explains: "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means." This statement captures why I write as well. For much of my youth, I didn't feel I had a voice. Obviously I did have a voice, but I wasn't heard. When I asked my mother to stop putting me in the position of asking my father for more child support, she didn't listen. When I told my father how miserably unhappy I was living with my mother, he shrugged it off. Later in life, I married a man with a big personality and a weekly newspaper column in which he could voice his thoughts, ideas, and experiences. While he was heard, again I found myself without a voice in another important relationship.

Like Capote, I find writing frustrating. Putting thoughts into sentences, which turn into paragraphs, isn't for the easily deterred. It's a constant battle of edits and rewrites, but there are few things I get more gratification from. One of my greatest pleasures is the realization that with effort and time, I'm able to do this too. While I admire Truman Capote's style and try to emulate Joan Didion's, it's in Mary Karr's work that I have found the most inspiration. Karr openly writes about the shame associated with growing up poor and her experiences with sexual abuse, alcoholism, and divorce. I have identified a kindred spirit in her true tales of social isolation and an unhappy marriage. Like Karr, I also find meaning and achieve closure through the process of writing. To tell my story makes it real and helps shake off the sense of shame and self-doubt that accompany many of my experiences. I have never felt more at peace about those aspects of my life than I have while writing this thesis. I admire Karr's grit and determination to tell the story no matter how unflattering it is to her as a person. I hope someday to write about complex personal material as honestly as Karr and with the grace of Capote and Didion.

Vita

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