

LIFE OUT LOUD: CREATING STORIES FROM THE EVERYDAY

by

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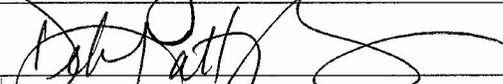
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Life Out Loud: Creating Stories from the Everyday

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

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Dedication

I didn't get here alone, so to all of the storytellers in my life, especially my most cherished ones: Ryan, Thomas, Taylor, and Carson, I thank you. Ryan, I see you in the everyday, every day, and I can't wait to hear your voice, your stories when I see you again on the other side. And for my husband, who gives me love, love, love, love, crazy love.

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Abstract

LIFE OUT LOUD: CREATING STORIES FROM THE EVERYDAY

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No matter the scale of emotion, we share our experiences with each other to try to make sense of our lives. In sharing these stories, we discover that we are not alone in our experiences. This is evident the moment we turn the event that impacted us into a story that holds meaning, share it with others, and receive an affirmative response from the listener. But what are our individual motivations for sharing experiences, specifically the transformation of an event into an oral story? What motivates performance storytellers to get on a stage and share personal experiences that have transcended to something so lasting that they begin to peel it back like an onion, reflecting on the elements that surround the experience to reveal them at the core and then share them with a room filled with complete strangers?

Setting the Stage: My Life with Stories

Just like any other kid, there were days when I didn't feel like being at school anymore. Maybe I didn't get enough sleep the night before, or maybe I forgot to do a homework assignment or study for a test, or maybe I just wanted out. I could fake a bellyache in the nurse's office better than the best of them. I learned that the nurse would send you back to class if you picked a smiley face less than five on her pain chart. If you told her you didn't feel good the night before, the nurse would call your parents at work to confirm. And I found out that if you did jumping jacks on the way to her office to warm up your body and flush your cheeks and told her that you puked in the girls' room that it was a guaranteed trip home, as long as your parents or anyone willing to give a shit about you could pick you up.

Faking a bellyache didn't work for most of my friends because 1. They sucked at lying, 2. They hadn't learned how the system worked yet, or 3. Their parents would tell them to tough it out the rest of the day because they couldn't take off from work. Their parents were more pissed than sympathetic that they were getting a phone call at all - you could tell by the look on my classmates' faces when the nurse handed them the phone and said, "Your mother wants to talk to you." They knew their kid wasn't sick; they knew their kid just wanted out.

Fortunately for me, I had Uncle Bob. Uncle Bob was my dad's younger brother. I didn't understand why until I got older, but Uncle Bob lived with my grandparents, didn't work, and generally stayed home all day. He could pick me up in their beige Pacer anytime. I knew this, but I didn't abuse this privilege. I savored the privilege for when I really wanted nothing more than to lie down on my grandparents' couch tucked in with a soft, electric blanket (even in the summer) by my grandmother, who ran a beauty salon from her basement, drink ice cold ginger ale from a straw, eat saltine crackers, and watch the "Sound of Music."

After tending to me, Grandmom would return to her customers in the basement and when she reached the bottom of the stairs I could hear their voices rise in conversation. At first they wanted to know if I was going to be okay and then the regular hum of gossip took over. Mainly, they asked my grandmom about the status of my parents' divorce and which customers were still going to my maternal grandmom's salon. Both my grandmoms ran beauty salons from their basements, which were less than a quarter mile apart and when my parents got divorced, customers took sides. They tried to whisper, but their voices echoed off the concrete walls and linoleum flooring. I wanted to hear what my grandmom had to say because it was the only way I could find out what was going on with their divorce, but Uncle Bob would close the door.

He'd sit with me for a few minutes then retreat to his room to smoke a J. I knew it was a J because it didn't smell like tobacco and when he came back into the living room, he'd light up a cigarette while I was on the couch watching the "Sound of Music." On days when I really had a bellyache, I would fall asleep to the movie and he would drive

the Pacer to the CVS up the road to get more ginger ale and saltine crackers, maybe even some Maalox. They were big fans of Maalox, which was white and chalky, unlike its tasty pink counterpart – Pepto.

Even with the Maalox, I looked forward to these days. My grandparents' house was my haven. Nothing was complicated here. There was cheese, bread, and mustard in the fridge if my belly felt better, vanilla ice cream in the freezer for a fever or sore throat, and all the sourdough pretzels, ginger snaps, and Hydrox cookies (again, not as tasty as its counterpart – Oreos) in the snack cabinet that I would sneakily eat on days when I wasn't really sick. Everyone was happy here. I only remember music and my grandparents laughing and smoking and drinking highballs of scotch-whiskey, sometimes dancing. More than getting out of school early, I looked forward to the end of the day when my grandmom closed the door after her last customer and my grandpop came home from work and began playing the organ, harmonica, or his Irish recorder. My grandmom would hum along in the kitchen while cooking a hearty dinner, sometimes singing the tune, and my dad and brother would walk through the door just in time to eat. Their house, made by their own hands, healed my worst bellyaches. Even the fake ones.

In the evenings, after we ate the hearty dinner, had tea or coffee, sometimes dessert, the table was cleared, and the dishes were clean, everyone would retreat to the living room. We'd watch the local news channel, a show on PBS, or Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy. If it was a Friday night they'd let me stay up to watch "The Late Show with Johnny Carson" and on Saturdays, when my grandparents weren't teaching Irish dancing at the pub and even though we had mass the next morning, they'd let me watch

“Saturday Night Live” with Dana Carvey, Dennis Miller, Kevin Nealon, Jon Lovitz, and my favorite, Victoria Jackson.

On occasion, my grandpop would set up a projector in the living room, bring in chairs from the dining room, and face them towards the wall, so we’d all have a place to sit and watch a slideshow of my grandparents’ last trip to Ireland or Spain or somewhere in Europe. I wish I had paid more attention because he also told a lot of stories during the slideshow about the places they traveled and the people they met. And maybe I would have if I hadn’t sat next to my brother who was teasing me the whole time or if I was at an age where I could appreciate the importance of these moments.

Other times, we’d just tell stories from our day, mostly my Uncle Bob talking about his long walks along the creek in the woods, which was across the street from my grandparents’ house, and how he found beer cans, dirty underwear, rusted shopping carts, needles, coins, and Indian arrowheads - he found lots of arrowheads on his walks. Sometimes his buddy, Tom, would come over and they would tell stories about their other friends and how they were all fucked up and did something stupid, meaning illegal. Tom lived with my grandparents for a short while before he left and overdosed on something that was never quite clear to me, even today. I could probably ask my grandmom, but it doesn’t really matter. That’s how a lot of my uncle’s friends died.

Sometimes I’d go into my dad’s room, where he lived with my grandparents for a short time after he left my mom, and get his voice recorder that he used for nursing school, grab a tape that I was certain was blank, and begin recording these conversations. I had always been fascinated by the microphones that reporters held – thick gray sticks

with a giant black smooshy thing at the top - and their serious tone when reporting news. My dad's recorder had no detached microphone, so I would shove the recording device right to people's mouths like reporters did and ask questions in that serious journalistic tone like everything was breaking news.

I'd pretend there was a camera crew in front of me and say things like, "Live from Norwood, Pennsylvania" or "This just in."

Everyone was great and played along. They got so used to me doing this that they would talk into the mic and just keep the conversation going, as if I was invisible, which is a reporter's greatest accomplishment. I guess they figured I was bored of listening to their stories and just needed something else to do. When really what I loved was the click on the recorder that let you know the tape had ended. I would go to my dad's room, shut the door, and rewind the tape to listen to the stories on my own. I could tell that after a few minutes they forgot they were being recorded. The theatrical voice they used at the beginning faded and the idiosyncrasies of their natural tone came through – pitch, pacing, and slang. Their stories became more interesting when told in a voice that was authentic.

When I was going through this phase, I rarely interviewed my grandpop because he would gather a few things from his bedroom and return to the dining room table and I knew that meant he was working. At first, I'd watch him from the living room and wonder what he was doing. Then on occasion, I'd sit quietly with him at the table with my chin or cheek resting on my folded arms, just watching. In front of him was bone-colored drawing paper and a yellow legal-sized writing pad. To the right, a Viceroy cigarette burning in the mossy-green colored ashtray that he and my grandmom bought

on one of their trips to Ireland. The ashtray was a dingy moss color; the type of moss that thrives through years of rain on the stone and straw-thatched roof that make up an Irish cottage. To his left, a glass of scotch-whiskey. Caramel on ice. Even though the noise of us talking over the television cut through to the dining room, the room felt far away and still. He stayed focused. The only commotion in the dining room was when my grandpop would rush the air with his hand to write Gaelic words and phrases on the yellow paper or sketch Celtic designs on the drawing paper. The swoosh of air would zig-zag the stream of smoke from his cigarette. I used to love watching that, too.

As a kid, I wondered why he was intent on writing in Gaelic and drawing Celtic designs. My grandmom used to joke that my grandpop did this because his brothers told him that his lineage was Scottish and that his family emigrated to Ireland, so he was trying to prove them wrong.

She'd whisper, "But don't tell him I told you because it'll piss him off."

As I got older I learned that he and my grandmother had been immersing themselves in Irish heritage for many years since before I was born. They traveled to Ireland annually to visit my grandmom's family in County Mayo, then south four hours to Cork, where my grandpop's family was from (although there were no longer any living relatives), then cross-country to places like Dublin to visit friends they had made over the years. In all of his trips to the Emerald Isle, my grandpop was never able to confirm if his family was purely Irish.

One couple they made friends with, Marty and Mary Bryce, moved stateside and opened up an Irish pub in the town where my grandparents had built their home. My

grandmom and grandpop were ecstatic and they spent a lot of time at the pub, especially on Saturday nights when they usually taught Irish dancing. In the 90s, Marty decided to update the pub with a fresh coat of paint and asked my grandpop if he would design and paint several new signs for the pub. My grandpop was flattered and began work immediately, which is why he sat at the dining room table most nights after dinner. He wanted to stay focused on his work. He took the job seriously. He didn't want to let Marty down and it would be the first time that he shared his artwork publicly. It took him several months to design and paint the new signs, seven total, and you can still find some of them at the pub today, and Marty and Mary Bryce, too.

The signs he created for the pub were the only pieces of art that he ever shared with anyone outside of the family. My grandfather was an avid painter, but I bet that even his closest co-workers at the apartment where he was the maintenance man wouldn't have known. On weekends, my grandpop would bring his paint easel, a canvas, and all of his oil painting supplies to the living room, and mimic whichever technique Bob Ross was teaching that day. Sometimes, I would sit in the living room with him. I used to love watching the transformation of Ross's blank canvas and listening to the stories that he told in between painting techniques. As I watched Ross, I would say out loud, "There's no way he's going to turn that brown looking stick into a full evergreen and the whole canvas is yellow, what's he going to do with that?" All the while my grandpop didn't say a word. Mostly because he had a lit cigarette between his lips that he would inhale and exhale without lifting a finger, but really he was just focused. My grandpop could tune out anyone when it came to his artwork.

Sure enough, by the end of the hour and after many happy trees, Bob Ross would produce a beautifully landscaped oil painting with mountains in the backdrop, trees in the foreground, and a lake, river, creek, or waterfall centered on the painting as if to draw your eye to that specific point. I was in awe every time because at the end of the hour, my grandpop had also produced a beautifully landscaped oil painting. He would sign his name “Fran O’Sloss,” even though that wasn’t his real name. I used to think that he signed his name like that because he wanted to seem more Irish, but now I wonder if it’s because his real name, Bob Sloss, sounded too similar to the television icon.

My grandpop passed away in 2008. His paintings, hundreds of them, were stored in a room that was my dad’s dark room for photography when he was a teenager, until it became my grandpop’s workshop, until it ultimately became my grandmom’s storage room because it sat behind her salon in the basement. The room, now only opened when my grandmom needs help finding her Christmas decorations or a crystal candy dish because someone is coming to visit is dark, smells like mold, and is scary as hell because you have to walk to the middle of the room before you reach the light switch chain that hangs from the bulb. Although it’s worth braving to look through all of his old paintings. Whenever I visit my grandmom, she tells me to take as many as I want. I know she is thinking that it would be easier on all of us if the house was empty whenever she passes away, which is the reason I just leave everything where it sits. Not many 36-year-olds can say that they still have a living grandparent, so I take nothing, with the hope that it will somehow delay the inevitable.

My Uncle Bob, the one that used to pick me up from school whenever I said I had a bellyache, was also an artist and his artwork is stored in that room, too. He painted watercolors of Mary and Jesus, Joseph and Jesus, or just Jesus by himself, deer and other wildlife in their natural environment and similar drawings in pen, pencil, charcoal, and pastels. I'm not sure if it was the amount of weed he smoked or what I came to understand was his diagnosed paranoid schizophrenia, likely a combination, but he also drew asymmetrical designs that whenever he colored them in would morph into something that made sense like a sun rising over a mountain with a snake in the valley below. He had a heart attack at the young age of 57 and died on my birthday in 2012. At the funeral, my family kept apologizing to me because they had to print that date on the service cards. I thought that it somehow made his death more special. I told my dad that since my grandmom wanted a strictly traditional Catholic service, with no eulogy written by anyone, that I wanted to help carry his casket. I was the only female pallbearer. I never realized how heavy a casket could be, it felt like lifting a car, but as much as he meant to me, I would have carried my uncle right up to Heaven if I needed to.

I didn't understand why my grandmom didn't want anyone to say anything about my uncle at his funeral and out of respect to her, I'll never ask. Maybe she thought someone would say something embarrassing about his mental illness. Thanks to the support of my grandparents, my dad, and my aunt, he had outlived all of his friends, so it's not like any of them could have stood in front of God and everyone to shame our family. If anything, several years before he died he was living a decent life – his own vehicle and apartment with cable television.

My brothers, cousins, and I had many great memories that I'm sure we would have loved to share like how he used to amaze us with his strength. He could lift his entire body off the ground from a sitting position using only his two hands. I would have liked to tell everyone these stories because even though he had been diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic when he was in high school, his life meant something more than that to a lot of people. I thought that those of us who loved him and knew him best hardly thought about his illness. But, something happened at the cemetery that made me wonder if my grandmother didn't think he was worthy of recognition or God's grace for that matter.

"Here, take this," my grandmother said, handing my uncle's crucifix to me.

"Nobody else wants it."

"Grandmother, this is from his coffin," I said.

"You can't bury that," she said. "They'll throw dirt on it and you can't throw dirt on Jesus!"

"Who will Uncle Bob have, then?" I asked.

My uncle was a devout Catholic and not just because he was raised that way, went to Catholic schools, or attended mass every day, but because he said that praying to God helped quiet the voices in his head. I was worried that if he wasn't buried with his crucifix that we might somehow ruin his eternal peace.

"Ah geez, are you kidding me? He's got the entire cemetery," she said. "Everyone I know is buried here. You got the Carey's, the Sweeney's, and she said softly and sweetly, even old Bill Stanton. *I'm* the only one still living!"

Before I understood that the crucifix was a magnet, I imagined my grandmom pressing one foot on my uncle's coffin for leverage, while wedging her delicate fingers in the gap between the coffin and the cross and pulling hard. I envisioned the veins under her skin on the back of her hands pushing up from the force in blue and purple humps until the cross miraculously released from the coffin. I thought about how the force would have jolted her petite frame back a few steps, away from the edge of the six-foot hole where she buried her husband four years ago and had now buried her youngest son.

"But don't you want it?" I asked.

"I don't need it," she said.

I took the cross to appease my grandmom and wondered why she would say such a thing. I whispered an apology to my uncle, not for what my grandmom said, but for not leaving the crucifix.

Her directness should not have come as a surprise. She had never held her tongue since I was a little girl, a somewhat fortunate gift that did not get passed down to me. My grandmom was born Elizabeth Ann Carey in 1926. She went by the nickname, Betty. From my earliest memories, she was always shorter than me. Her breasts are remarkably large for her petite frame, not the size one might think of as proportionate for a grandmom. Her skin is powdery-white and transparent enough to see the various colors of her blue and purple veins that trace under the skin of her feet, legs, hands, arms, and neck. Her hair has never been long enough to touch her shoulders and as she's aged, it has turned from different shades of blonde to pure white. She has lived in the suburbs of Philadelphia since she was sixteen, but when she tells me numerous stories about her life,

they focus mainly on being a coalminer's daughter from a mountainous Eastern-Pennsylvania town named Girardville.

Her grandparents were from County Mayo (May-oh) in Ireland, and immigrated to the coalmining town in the 1800s, although coal-mining didn't become an occupation for the area until 1900. Her parents were born there and so was she. She told me that it was a poor life but that everyone was poor, which brought them closer as a community and that that and the whiskey made them happy. She also told me about the day her father decided they had to leave.

"I'll never forget the day my father came through the kitchen door in his miner outfit," she said. "I was cleaning the fridge, not sure why because it was empty, but I was cleaning it anyway. The mine was a few miles from the house, so I never saw my father in his work clothes. They never brought those clothes home. But there he was, standing in the kitchen doorway holding his dinner pail and announced, 'We're getting the hell out of this place!'"

My grandmom found out that a serious accident at the mine had almost killed her Uncle Butch, her father's brother.

"My heart broke when I had to leave, and it's still broke," she said. "But I shouldn't say that. Philly has always been good to me. I met a lot of great people here."

She didn't leave Girardville immediately, though. Her father, mother, and younger brother and sister moved to Philadelphia and left her behind with her cousins to finish out her junior year of high school.

“This was a big deal,” she said. “But, I was the drum major. The school needed me. Otherwise, what would they have done without me?”

Her family wrote letters from Philadelphia and told her about how they could see the cars that drove up and down the big roads from their apartment window. At the end of the school year, my grandmom moved to Philly with her family and the following year, graduated from Bartram High.

“Well, I guess if you never married Grandpop you could have moved back to Girardville after you graduated,” I said jokingly, and then realized how terrible that sounded. Maybe I did inherit a little of her directness.

She paused, as if she had never thought of her position in such a way and asked, “You think?” Then continued, “Are you kidding me, if it wasn’t going to be your grandfather that kept me here, it would have been another guy. There were plenty of men – French, Dutch, Germans, and even the Eye-talians for Heaven’s sake. Besides, our family was involved and well-known within the community.”

Her father was in the choir at St. Joseph’s Catholic Church and sang a Latin mass every Sunday, while she and her mother helped at the Sunday school.

“I remember when poor little Bill Stanton’s brother came to me after mass, crying,” she said. “Cute as a button that little boy was. Anyhow, he came crying and told me that another little boy had bit him on the cheek.”

“Was it bad?” I asked.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “The other boy left teeth marks. I got him to calm down and told him, ‘This is what you’re going to do, you’re going to walk up to that boy when you see him again and punch him right in the mouth!’”

My grandmom is rough around the edges and I know that, yet I never cease to be surprised. My jaw dropped.

She laughed to herself, shook her head and said, “What else are you going to do with a kid like that?”

I might not have always appreciated my grandmom’s directness, but it sure as hell made for great storytelling. I can listen to her talk about her childhood memories, really any of her memories for hours. If not her directness, then I definitely inherited her passion for telling a great story. And when I was growing up, it was apparent that at least one of her kids did, too.

My dad might not use a paintbrush like his father or brother did, but like his mother, he is a great storyteller. When I was young I believed every story he told me and now, I’m never sure whether to believe 100% of what he says. His stories are like big fish tales. You want to believe them, but the stories are so fascinating that you can’t help but to question them. He told me one recently about a time when he and his buddies went on a fishing trip.

“The charter boat was full that day,” he said. “At the first stop, a guy standing next to Marty (one of my dad’s buddies) asked him to watch his pole while he went to the bathroom. Marty told him ‘No problem,’ so the guy left his pole on the deck, leaning against the back of the boat where they had cast their lines.”

Then my dad took pause to provide context about how everyone had to rent the fishing rods from the boat company at the dock before they boarded and that if you lost your rod you'd have to pay the company upwards of \$150.

"It wasn't thirty seconds that the guy was gone when we saw his line pull," he said. "Before Marty could grab it, the pole went overboard. We couldn't believe it."

Then he stopped again to tell me how bad Marty felt and how when he told the guy what happened that he didn't believe them at first, but others around them saw it happen, too.

"The guy was out for the rest of the day," my dad told me. "There were no more rods on board and the boat wasn't going to turn back just for him."

My dad then straightened his body, sat tall on the edge of my couch, and leaned forward to finish the story.

"We were at the last stop of the day," he said. "The sun would be setting soon and the captain came over the loud speaker and told everyone they had two minutes before they had to pull in their lines before the boat would head back to shore."

At this point, my dad smiled and told me that a guy on the other end of the boat started yelling that there was something big on his line.

"He reels his line in slowly," he said. "And when he finally pulls the fish up, he sees two fishing hooks and two lines in the fish's mouth – one was his and the other was attached to the fishing rod that went overboard that morning!"

As if I wasn't going to believe him, he said, "Next time you see Marty, ask him about the fishing trip when the guy's rod went overboard, he'll tell you."

When I was a kid, if he didn't know the answer to a question I was asking him, he'd make-up a story. I'm not talking about a story that lasted a few seconds. I'm talking about one that lasted a few minutes. He'd never miss a beat and have so many details that it seemed there was no way he could have fabricated the story. Each one had a different beginning and turn and twist. There were never any consistent indicators like "Did I ever tell you about the time..." to cue me in and let me know he was about to tell me a made-up story.

Sometimes, my dad would know the answer to the question I was asking him, but still decide to make up a story. I'll never forget the time we passed a cemetery and I asked my dad why there was a big pile of dirt in the graveyard. Instead of my dad telling me they were getting ready for a funeral, he decided to tell me about a kid named Little Johnny whose mother sent him to the store to buy meat. On the way to buy meat, he stopped at the candy store and spent all of his mother's money there. On his walk home he thought of every excuse in the book, but knew none of them would make sense to his mother. He decided that he would go to the cemetery and cut off the leg of a dead person, grind the meat himself, and bring the meat home to his mother. He didn't think she would know the difference. It worked. But later that night Little Johnny heard the ghostly voice and footsteps of the deceased at the bottom of the staircase in his house:

"Little Johnny, I'm on the first step and I want my leg back."

The story continued for several more steps until the deceased opened the door to Little Johnny's room, pulled back the covers that Little Johnny was holding over his head, and then my dad yelled out to scare me, which worked. This story caused me many

sleepless nights. Some people might say this was cruel of him, but although his stories scared me, I loved to hear them.

If he didn't have a story to tell me, he'd find one to share through books or music. When my parents were still married, my dad would read me and my brother bedtime stories. I distinctly remember two books. One was a book that was thick and I imagined one-thousand pages. It was called *The Story of the Irish Race*. I remember two things about this book: 1. the author's name was cool, Seumus MacManus, and I swore I was going to name my firstborn son after him, and 2. that I kept on waiting for the race to start but the book was so boring that I couldn't stay awake. The other book was J.R.R. Tolkein's *The Hobbit*. If my dad was looking for a way to put me to sleep, this was the wrong book to choose.

I could listen for hours to the stories of the Hobbits who lived in the Shire. I loved the vivid imagery of the landscape, the depiction of their hobbit-hole dwellings where round, wooden doors peeked out from hillsides across a field and the distinct personalities of each character – Bilbo, Frodo, and Gandolf . I imagined what their homes looked like and what their voices sounded like when talking – the 2012 movie based on this book was pretty much spot on to what I had imagined. On my own time, I would borrow my dad's book and study the map and work to decode the Hobbitish language. The story of the Hobbits stayed with me and when I had kids, I read it to them, too.

Music was another way my dad found stories. I knew about folklore - a myth, legend, or fairy tale –and I understood that it was the telling of these stories that made these tales so fantastic, and even though there was a lot of singing of traditional Irish

songs at my grandparents' house, I never thought about folklore as a song. Probably because the songs my grandparents sang were not catchy enough for a nine-year-old to follow along, but my dad knew of an Irish musician named Mick Moloney and an American one named David Bromberg, whose songs were tales that any child would love to hear.

A song I remember from Christmastime is Moloney's "Miss Fogarty's Christmas Cake." Although I could have listened to it year-round, I usually forgot about it until Christmastime and then I would listen to this song for hours. It was about a gentleman getting an invitation to his neighbor's house, the Fogarty's, for tea. It seemed that this tea was an annual tradition and that other neighbors obliged as well. The chorus of the song was a list of the horrific ingredients of Miss Fogarty's Christmas cake to include glue. Then the rest of the song was a tale of how nearly everyone died from eating the cake.

Another of his songs is a tale about a man who joined Saint Brendan and his men on a journey to find an island. The song is "St. Brendan's Fair Isle" and it has demons and dragons and at one point the group of men is riding the sea for forty-four days on the "back of the world's biggest fish!" I tried drawing this scene. My dad's favorite song by Moloney is "Muldoon the Solid Man." Muldoon is a hardworking Irishman who loves to drink and is ready to dance, sing, or fight at a moment's notice. But more than that, he's a politician representative of the underprivileged Irish people living in New York trying to prove that he's just as educated as politicians wealthier than he. Moloney uses only his voice to sing this tale, there's no music accompanying the lyrics, which makes it that much more compelling.

Although I loved Moloney's stories and tunes, my favorite is still "Traveling Man" by David Bromberg, a folk and blues inspired singer/songwriter from Philadelphia. His song "Traveling Man" is a story about Bloom, a guy who was so fast that "he could turn off the lights and get under the covers before the room got dark." Between the New Orleans type jazzy tune and stories of Bloom running from the police until they finally were able to shoot him down, I was enthralled. Bromberg addresses the audience like he's telling Bloom's story from a firsthand account, as if he is a close friend of the fictional character in his song. My dad's stories were a lot like that, too.

I have memories of listening to songs and stories from my mom's side of the family, too. I'd go camping with my maternal grandparents' group named "No-Nay-Mee Campers" and in the evenings, even in the hot summer months because it always cooled down at night, they'd have a campfire roaring. The adults and kids, more than twenty people total, would sit around the fire and we'd sing popular campfire songs like "Home on the Range" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." The stories we told would be about the everyday to made-up ones, and sometimes the kids would get together and put on a skit. I also went with my maternal grandparents' to my great-aunt's house near the Pocono Mountains in Pa., where on cold days we'd practically be sitting on top of each other in the space in front of the fireplace, playing games like charades, or we'd tell jokes or stories that would start with one person and finish with another.

Surrounded by stories and songs of the everyday and my Irish heritage, and those which my paternal grandmom told me, the gossip from both of my grandmoms' beauty salons, the recorded conversations from my grandparents' living room, my own stories to

the school nurse, friends and family, too, and those I wrote in my journal but never shared, should have made it obvious that since my life was fueled by an appreciation for the arts and storytelling that I would grow to craft stories to tell in front of a large audience. Although, I'm not sure if storytelling as a performance art was around when I was thinking about what I wanted to be when I grew up. In the early 80s, storytelling was still more akin to folklore in that stories were told in an intimate setting and used to pass on a lesson or to gain an understanding and preserve family history. In other words, unless you were reading a eulogy at someone's funeral, stories about your personal life or the lives of your family weren't shared with a room full of strangers as they are today with performance storytelling.

Performance storytelling is telling true stories on a stage in front of a live audience. No editing. No second chances. Nothing stands between you and a room full of complete strangers except a microphone. Sometimes this art is confused with stand-up comedy routines, but it is completely different. A comedy act requires a comedian to tell jokes that might not be directly connected to each other and they are told in segments, sometimes 30-60 minute segments. At a storytelling event, one is required to tell a story that follows a traditional arc, generally with a cohesive beginning, middle, and end or some kind of obvious closure within a 5-7 minute timeframe. Also, storytelling audiences are much more forgiving than those at stand-up shows if you stumble on your words or if they just have no idea what you're talking about. And the most significant difference is that sometimes the stories that are told on the stage aren't funny. They are brutally honest and heartbreaking.

Performance storytelling is less than thirty years old and within the past ten years has become a craze across the nation, especially with the rise of podcasts. Podcasts are the Internet equivalent to a radio broadcast. Established storytelling companies from the late 90s like the Moth in New York are expanding their shows to other states across the U.S. like Vermont, Michigan, Oregon, California, Illinois, and Kentucky. In addition to expanding outwardly, storytelling companies are expanding within and changing the experience for their audiences, such as providing podcasts on the company website, getting air time on the radio, usually NPR, and keeping a theme of the month, but only accepting stories deemed funny. Of course, this doesn't mean that stories about cancer or death won't be accepted, but there's got to be a strong element of humor.

What these companies are doing is trying to find new ways to connect storytellers with audiences and provide a chance for those who have incredible stories and no interest in getting on stage a way to share their experiences. In fact, the latest trend is traveling storytelling companies, such as StoryCorps out of New York. For a fee, StoryCorps will come to you and help you to record your story based on an interview style discussion, which will then be stored in the digital archives at the Library of Congress.

Storytelling is not entirely complicated, but as soon as you add the elements of a stage, spotlights, cameras, a microphone, standing alone with hundreds of people almost sitting on the edge of their seats waiting to hear your voice and your voice alone, it quickly becomes terrifying. Although my upbringing has provided me with a surplus of stories to choose from and people know me as an extrovert, that wasn't enough to get me on a stage. I had to see several performances and take an introductory storytelling workshop

before I felt the slightest bit comfortable sanding up to the mic. Even after five shows, I still get stage fright.

Backstory: Why I Started Storytelling

A lot of what I do in performance storytelling is getting to the point. Cutting out context and content and hoping that body language or my audience will fill in the gaps when needed. That's not the case here. There's no telling this experience in short form, at least not right now, and I'm not telling it for a stage, so I'm using my liberties as a writer to tell you the whole story.

~

It was 2006 and my husband was depressed. In fact, he stayed depressed for another six years before either of us realized what the hell was going on. Or at least admitted to it. I'm getting ahead of myself, however, because a lot of shit happened between those years and, ironically, the worst of it came just when he learned how to manage his depression.

It was 2006 and I was due to give birth to our first child, a daughter. The year before, we had bought a townhome in Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. We chose this area because it was an easy commute to both of our jobs. We also chose this area because it was a suburb on the outskirts of the suburbs where my family lived that immediately surrounded the city. What this meant is that we saw a few less people and a few more trees on our drive home and that the horse farm directly across the street from the entrance to our neighborhood made our HOA townhome development feel rural, quaint,

and cozy. (Yes, I'm aware of the almost offensive paradox with saying quaint and cozy in the same breath as HOA.)

My family, who lived in a suburb closer to the city with fewer trees and more people, came through for us on this move, as well as several other moves that would follow this one, but especially with this home. It was our first move close to any family since we had both been honorably discharged from the military. We had a painting party and my whole family participated, not all at the same time, but still, grandparents, mom, step-dad, dad, step-mom, aunts, uncles, and cousins – they all helped us. We had drop cloths, rollers, angle brushes, wall brushes, edgers, blue painter's tape, ladders, gallons of paint in paper-bag-beige for the entire house, bright white trim for the entire house, a crisp green accent wall, because accent walls were the latest trend, in our Ikea furnished guest bedroom, Robbin's egg in the upstairs guest bathroom, a misty lavender for the powder room on the main floor, and later, a soft lavender paint for our daughter's room. Then they helped us open every packed brown box and unwrap the newspaper from each dinner plate, salad plate, soup bowl, casserole dish, the Waterford china that we registered for our wedding in 2004, coffee cup, pint glass, wine glass, and shot glass, one of which my cousin ended up breaking in the powder room sink later that night because he didn't want to drink the shot of tequila and was trying to pour it down the sink.

Before making the move to sub-suburban Pennsylvania, we lived in a historic district of Montgomery, Alabama. Home to Hank Williams eternal resting site, which we frequently visited at midnight, civil rights activist, Rosa Parks, the leader of the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and one of the top minor league baseball

teams, the Montgomery Biscuits (although they have since fallen in the Class AA rankings). Just like any other historic district, some areas were what you would expect to see driving through an historic southern town – plantation-style homes with beautiful landscaping and front porch wicker furniture. But, the part of the district where we lived only looked historic because it was run down.

It was the part of the district filled with less desirable neighbors like the one whose Rottweilers would bark all night outside our master bedroom window and another who hollered obscenities from his back door, flashed some part of his naked body from a window, and shot pellets from his BB gun at us and our friends while we were having a backyard barbeque. Luckily, no one was hit. As participants for meals-on-wheels, we had also met a lot of elderly folk in our neighborhood who had no doubt been around since before the civil rights movement, whose children had grown and moved away to Auburn, Birmingham, or Huntsville, and could no longer care for themselves, let alone the appearance of their homes. But, this was where we called home because it was where our home was after we both got out of the military, and it was where we made some of the best friends that we would ever have.

We went to the gym before work with our friends. We worked side-by-side with most of our friends. We ate lunch at least once a week with our friends. Immediately after work, we would hit the local bar, “The Keys” with our friends or one of our friends would have a party and we’d all go there instead. Needless to say, too much time together and too many late night parties that usually turned into all-nighters combined with cheap beer, great whiskey, a lot of people getting naked and then arguing quickly made us the

less desirable neighbors, and although we kept up with the appearance of our house, we let our friendships deteriorate.

We thought life would be better where the grass is greener, and by grass I mean money. Shawn found a job working for a company near the HOA townhome development in sub-suburbia Pa., which was close to my family, but not so close that we would fall into the same bad habit of spending all of our time with just one group of people.

Except we did.

Looking back, it was mostly our fault. We latched onto my family, mainly my mom's side, looking to fill the void of our broken friendships in Alabama. Most weekends, Shawn and I made the 45-minute drive down the Blue Route to see my family, mostly cousins our age, only to feel out of place, like we were interrupting a longstanding tradition. And we were. Weekend after weekend, we kept telling ourselves that since we were family that eventually it wouldn't matter. But it did. It bothered them and since my mom's side of the family doesn't do confrontations or honesty for that matter, we found out the hard way. We caught them in a bunch of little lies that added up to the whole truth, which was that it was too much for them to have us visit every weekend. We were hurt, but we didn't stop going down there. My family was all we had. We just went a little less often.

Ironically, it was a weekend that Shawn and I decided to go on a trip with my family to visit my cousin's boyfriend in Crofton, Maryland that I got pregnant with our daughter, Taylor. Although Shawn had two sons from relationships prior to our marriage,

this would be his first little girl and our first child together. I imagined that my pregnancy and the birth of our daughter was going to be an exciting time for us as a newly married couple, but it was a struggle. Shawn was not the excited first-time dad that I thought he would have been with me. He never wanted to spend time fussing over baby stuff, so I picked out her bedding, furniture, and bought her a coming home outfit on my own. He never wanted to take pictures of my growing belly. The worse for me though, was that he never asked or cared to place his hand on my pregnant belly when I told him that our daughter began kicking around in the womb. I was confused, busy working long hours, and assumed that he felt overwhelmed from missing our friends in Alabama, the letdown from my family, and his new job.

I should have known a lot sooner, but it wasn't until our daughter's first week at home that I thought about how miserable Shawn had become. He didn't take off the first week she was home. He barely took off two days. He never got up with her at night, although I can't remember if I ever asked him or if he offered. I'd ask him to hold Taylor so I could get a picture of them together and he wouldn't even make the effort to sit up from lying down on the couch. He'd tell me that he was too comfortable and ask me to lay her on the couch next to him. I hate to look at these pictures now, almost eight years later, Taylor bundled and snuggled into the curve of his body and him looking off in the distance at the television. To think about all of the time we both wasted not knowing.

He'd come home and complain about work. He'd do nothing but lie on the couch at night. He talked a lot about how much he missed our friends in Alabama and slightly more about how shitty he thought my family was for how they acted towards us.

“Why couldn’t they just be honest with us?” he’d ask.

I sympathized with his complaints. My feelings were probably more hurt than his, but because we had just had a baby and I wanted to have my family around for that experience, I was quick to forgive them and move on. Shawn had other plans.

Late in my pregnancy, Shawn asked if we could move back to Alabama. Although things had ended badly in our large group of friends, which was part of our motivation for leaving, everyone including us had reconciled with each other. We visited them several times while living in Pa., even during my pregnancy, and realized that distance was a good thing. Shawn and I discussed how things would need to be different if we ever moved back. How we would spend more time together as a couple, as a family, and only plan to spend time with friends a few days a week instead of almost every day. But once we had Taylor, I thought the idea of moving back would go out the window along with our days of sleeping in late.

I was excited to be close to family after giving birth to my first child. I was excited that Taylor would grow up to know her grandparents, even great-grandparents, and one day able to recall her memories from visits to their homes. I thought Shawn would be excited about this, too, especially since he never knew his biological father or anyone from that side of the family and his grandparents on his mother’s side had all passed away. None of that seemed to matter to Shawn. He was not happy. And all that he could focus on was that he thought he’d be happier in Alabama. I was frustrated that he was putting me in a position of having to choose between my family and our friends. Although I didn’t want to leave my family and make them say goodbye to Taylor, in the

end, I chose my husband and made the decision that I thought would make him a happier father, because I wanted Taylor to have those memories, too.

I agreed to move back to Alabama. This time, we bought a home in Wetumpka - a rural town thirty-minutes Northeast of Montgomery and most of our friends. This small town is home to the Wetumpka crater, a meteorite that hit the area millions of years ago, the Coosa River that runs through historic downtown and eventually forms the Alabama River, and the making of Tim Burton's film "Big Fish," which stars Ewan McGregor and Jessica Lange. Shawn worked remotely from the upstairs office of our new home for the same company that he was working for in Pennsylvania. This required frequent travel, often weeks at a time, back to Pa. for projects that the company needed him to work on in person. I, on the other hand, became a stay-at-home mom. This was a huge shift for me from when we lived here before. Before, I was out of the house every day, working full-time, and I did not have any children of my own. Now, I was working more than full-time and was homebound for most of the day with a five-month-old.

Although all of my other girlfriends had children, they had decided to go back to work full-time. So, other than Shawn coming downstairs to eat lunch whenever he wasn't traveling, I spent a lot of time with Taylor. These moments were what I like any mother would call "priceless," but I also felt alone and desperate to have a conversation during the week that didn't involve me saying, "Yay, Mommy is so happy for you" or singing the alphabet for the fifth time in a row because it was what kept her calm while I warmed her bottle. I had come from a life where I had begun working full-time at the age of fourteen, joined the military when I turned eighteen, became a government contractor,

and an assistant to five executives and the General Counsel of a private hedge fund.

Those jobs combined were never as busy or fulfilling as when I became a mom, but they offered a social dimension that did not exist as a stay-at-home mom.

The weekends were a social event, however, and days when I shouldn't have felt the void of a social life, but they weren't always satisfying. Shawn and I and our friends had fallen into the same bad habits as before – too much time together, too much drinking, and all the things that we said we would change, but we didn't. And when Shawn wasn't away on business, this is what we argued about the most. I was tired. I was getting up nearly every two hours to feed our daughter a bottle of formula. She would wake up around 5:30 a.m. and stay awake until her two-hour nap around 11:00 a.m.. She didn't care if it was a Saturday or a Sunday; days of the week were all the same to her. She would get her first nap in before everyone came over and then anything after that, to include her going to bed and staying asleep through increased noise from the stereo and friends having a good time and trying to talk over the music, was unpredictable.

“I thought we weren't going to do this when we moved back,” I'd say to Shawn the morning after a night out with our friends, as he was on his way out the door to go golfing with his buddies.

He'd make a joke to avoid my expressed concerns about the unhealthy routine that we had fallen back into with our friends and then leave. Only to come home several hours later, drunk, or call me from a bar and slur over the phone to meet him at one of our friend's house for a barbeque. If it was a Friday or Saturday night, I'd go to the barbeque and if I couldn't get Taylor to sleep in her port-a-crib, I'd take her home and pick up

Shawn and the crib from our friend's house the next morning, or whenever I felt like it. Eventually, I quit packing the port-a-crib and just planned on leaving Shawn behind.

The only relief I had is that I knew summer was approaching and that Shawn's two sons would be spending those months out of school with us. I knew we wouldn't keep up our routine when they were here. It was one thing to act this way in front of our one-year-old, but to act this way in front of his ten and eight-year-old would be dooming and fuel the fire that his exes liked to keep burning. (Yes, there were two baby mamas.) The only thought that made me feel slightly anxious about their visit is that it was an unspoken fact that it was going to be my responsibility to take care of them during the day, every day, and it was likely that Shawn would have to go away on business over the summer. *How could I possibly entertain a ten and eight-year-old alongside a one-year-old by myself for the majority of the summer?* I asked my girlfriends what they did with their kids while they went to work and they mentioned a few programs, but all were too far from where we lived (closer to their work), too long-term, and too expensive. I was looking for a day-camp program. I didn't want to send the boys away every day we had them; I wanted to let them enjoy their summer and time with their new baby sister – who they rarely had the chance to visit since they lived near Shawn's family in South Carolina.

I searched the Internet for programs and discovered one that ran for a few weeks at the YMCA, just a few miles from our house. It was in the opposite direction of how I would normally travel to go grocery shopping at Wal-Mart. The Y was hidden at the end of a long gravel road near the Julia Tutwiler Prison for women, which houses Alabama's

female death row inmates, so I never knew that the gym was there, or the prison. I also discovered that the YMCA offered, daily, a two-hour child care service while you worked out. The girl at the front desk provided me a schedule for the day camp for the boys, a tour of the child care area, which was colorful, lined with padded tumbling mats, and was run by an outgoing young girl in college for Early Childhood Education. She also gave me a tour of their workout room, which was fairly small with about thirty pieces of equipment, but none of that mattered to me. I was ready for a change and I wasn't going to let a small workout room discourage me, especially when the child care room was such a happy place and the young girl seemed so pleasant and trustworthy. I signed up that day to become a member and enrolled the boys in camp.

When summer break arrived, so did Shawn's boys, Ryan and Thomas. We spent the first two weeks hanging at the house and sightseeing downtown Wetumpka, and then camp began in mid-June. Our first morning getting out of the house was hectic. Shawn had been upstairs working since 8 a.m. and I needed to have the boys to the YMCA by 9 a.m. with breakfast in their bellies. I still had to make lunch for both of them (realizing I should have done that the night before), get myself into workout clothes, and feed Taylor as well as pack her diaper bag. It was hectic, but I was looking forward to those two hours of working out. I made a mental note that I would not waste one minute figuring out what I was going to do for a workout, so I planned out my week on a piece of paper and kept it by my side at all times. I'd spend the first 15-minutes stretching, the next 45 on any cardio equipment available – treadmill, bike, elliptical – another 45 minutes on resistance machines, and the last 15 minutes stretching again. After going every day at

the same time for one month (sometimes leaving the boys to sleep in as long as their father was not away on business and able to check in on them), I began to feel like a regular. Except that I wasn't, well, not entirely.

I was a regular in that my schedule in going to the YMCA was regular, but I when I think of being a regular, I think of that old television show, "Cheers." In fact, that show's theme song is the epitome of what it means to be a regular: "Where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came..." There were plenty of other women my age (late 20s) who were there every day and placed their kids in the child care room for the two-hour window. If I said "Hi" to them they would reciprocate, but when I walked through the door no one ever turned around to call from across the room "Kim!" although I heard other women greet each other in this way. The lack of that small gesture is why I did not entirely consider myself a regular.

Most of the other moms had known each other for years. Born and raised in Wetumpka or a neighboring town, they went to school together. Their older kids went to school together, too, and played football or cheered together. It was obvious by my Northern accent when I said "Hi" that I was not originally from Wetumpka or any neighboring town within a 100-mile radius. At first, I was just happy to be there, but when I discovered that so many other moms went too, I was hoping to get to know these women. I wanted to make friends outside of my current circle. *Maybe new friends would break the chain of our unhealthy relationships with our other friends.* But it never went any further than just "Hi," until I met Jamie.

Like me, Jamie became a regular. However, I also categorized us as loners. I put myself in the “loner” category due to the lack of a “Cheers” welcome after several weeks. I considered Jamie a loner for the same reason. Being a loner at the gym means that people know that you are there every day, but they never work to develop any sort of relationship with you because 1. They already have enough friends there, 2. You give off a vibe, such as not talking to anyone, that you’re actually there to exercise and not socialize, or 3. You wear headphones, so there’s no way anyone could talk to you even if they wanted to. After several weeks of nothing developing beyond our cordial hellos, I began to wear headphones.

Besides, the moms who were in a clique often huddled in one corner to talk about what they saw on the Today show or the town’s latest gossip, while Jamie and I were the type of gym-goers who moved around the room from one piece of equipment to the next. This method often put us in a position of having to share equipment. We were also cordial at first, but one day we took a step beyond that and asked what each other did for a living, and then another step, “How old are your children and what are their names,” and then Jamie took a leap and asked if we could hang out. I almost sounded too desperate when I immediately said, “Yes!” so I followed it up with a casual “Sure.”

I could tell Jamie this now that we’re still friends, but I would have never told her then that I was desperate. I was feeling misunderstood in my marriage, which made me feel alone. And the other wives in our close group of friends made it clear that they were tired of all the drinking and being together too much, too, which was distancing our relationships. I didn’t take it personally because I empathized with them. But I was a new

mom, a stay-at-home mom, and desired the company and reassurance of other moms that shared my interests, even though I wasn't entirely sure what those were anymore. After I met Jamie, I realized that maybe I wasn't a loner at the gym. Maybe I had nothing in common with those other moms who were so much like the friends I already had in our tight-knit group, with the exception that we all yearned for those two hours of personal time, where our toddlers were secure in the happy room with the pleasant and trustworthy young college student.

I can't remember if we went to a park or to her house for some coffee, but after hanging out for just a few hours with Jamie, I felt relieved. Her son, Andrew, and Taylor were pretty much the same age and got along immediately. Jamie and I had a lot in common, too. We weren't the same age, she's a few years younger than I, but we shared marital woes, religious beliefs, parenting beliefs, and a love for creativity. She told me that she was feeling frustrated from learning how to manage leaving the life of a 9-5 job and being a stay-at-home mom while continuing with her creative work in mixed media art and photography. I told her that I was once a creative person, too, and had been dabbling with photography for most of my life, but only recently began writing again, mostly poetry. The greatest part about our friendship is that it was mutually casual. Besides saying hello in the gym, Jamie and I hung out about once a week if we could make it work. She had her life and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I had mine.

Jamie informed me of several kid-friendly daytime activities in the area. We didn't always go together, but either way, when attending these events I met plenty of other stay-at-home moms or moms that used to stay at home and took the day off to

spend with their kids because they missed it so much. In talking with these women between sing-a-longs and diaper changes, I began to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of being understood because we shared the same concerns about motherhood with the main question being: *Am I only ever going to be (insert child's name) mom?* Most of the events were geared towards toddlers, but when I took the boys they didn't mind because they just wanted to be out of the house and, like me, be part of something. By the time Shawn and I drove Ryan and Thomas back to South Carolina in mid-August before they had to start school, I felt grounded. The feeling of desperation had subsided, but then I became highly aware that the life I expected to live was different from the one I was living, and that I needed to figure out who the hell I was and what I wanted as a 28-year-old woman.

I recognized the value of being able to spend one-on-one time with my daughter and that my husband might never be satisfied with his life and that I should make amends with that, but mostly, I recognized the elated feeling of re-discovering a sense of my individuality. A shimmer of my younger and more vibrant self, with better sensibility to boot. I was well on my way to returning to my old motto of living in the moment and not worrying about what will happen tomorrow, but still there was a definite void. On days when Jamie and I were able to visit with each other, we mainly talked about creativity and ways to stay creative. We threw around ideas about how we could help each other stay motivated and make ourselves accountable to setting aside time to do something creative each week. She showed me her mixed media artwork and photographs, and since I mainly write, I would email her my writings or what I will admit to now as my sad

attempt at poetry. Regardless, I was inspired by her work and good poetry or not, Jamie reminded me that I was an artist, too.

One way we kept tabs on each other is that we decided to start working together via email on a creative project. We would send each other a photo of our choosing, most likely one that we took with our own cameras instead of a stock photo from the Internet, and then we would each write our gut reaction to the photo and email our responses to each other by the end of the week. This was a creative assignment that we took part in weekly and one in which I generated bad poetry that ranged from playful:



photo courtesy of Jamie

The Grinds

by Kim Ruff

I wonder how much more of this crap I can take.

I scoop and I pour, each filter leveled – no mistakes.

My most favorite sip is the last one that holds,

The sugar, the creamer, the most booze,

A concoction for the bold.

Sip one and sip two, so careful to taste,

Every bit of each element, I try not to waste.

Yet, there they appear again and again,

The grinds,

Polluting my most cherished sip,

The one at the end.

to nostalgic:



photo courtesy of Jamie

Coordinating Conjunctions

by Kim Ruff

And

Sits this chair meant for me,

A place for more than a memory.

So

Here I should sit and laugh,

Maybe cry with you.

But

Now I am gone,

And you are gone too.

Yet

Somehow it seems,
Things are the same.
Nor
Time or distance,
Has caused us disdain.
For
In our hearts are memories,
A conjunction I shared with you.
Or
Maybe a hope that at the end of the night,
You might sit there too.

After just a few weeks, we became so busy with other creative work that we quit keeping tabs on each other and the exchange of pictures and writings via email dwindled, but the artistic gears were set in motion and we agreed to find a creative retreat that we could attend together. Finding a retreat would be the easy part. It was convincing each of our husbands that the trip was worthwhile financially and that they would have to stay home alone with the kids for several days that made us question whether this idea would become a reality.

“Coordinating Conjunctions” was the last photo that Jamie sent me and maybe I should have taken my nostalgic gut response to the photo as a foreshadowing because it wasn’t too long after, that Shawn came to me and said that he wanted to move back to

where we used to live in Pennsylvania. He said that he had been talking with a co-worker and that he wanted to leave his current job to go into business with him. Besides never having met this guy, I had also never known that Shawn had been thinking about starting up his own company. Between Shawn's frequent business trips for weeks at a time and his disregard for my desires to change the unhealthy lifestyle that we had fallen back into with our friends, our relationship became weak. I started putting up walls, became closed off, and any real communication – the kind where one person shares his concerns and the other person listens objectively – was long gone. We were both at fault.

The only part of him discussing his plans to start a new company that I really cared about was when he said that if I wanted to, we could live closer to my family. It was now 2008, only two years had gone by since we last lived in Pa. I knew I would miss certain aspects of living in Alabama, such as watching the sunrise above the farm across the street from our house, the small town parades through historic Wetumpka, our friends (even though our friendships had faded), and being in close proximity to the only other creative soul I knew – Jamie, but taking care of Taylor on my own for so long, day in and day out, was wearing me down. I needed support. Taylor was still young and so my grandparents, mom, dad, step-parents, cousins, aunts, and uncles hadn't missed out on too much of her quirks - the way she made "crazy eyes" at the dinner table on command, the way she loved to take walks and dig under rocks for earthworms, and her laugh that was so heartfelt and full of life that it made complete strangers smile and our closest friends tickle her just to hear it.

Shawn found us a home to rent just one mile from my mom's house. We decided to rent because we weren't sure where the new office might be whenever him and his co-worker decided to leave their current jobs to start their own company and we hadn't sold our home in Alabama, so we couldn't get approved for dual mortgages on one income. It was a Cape Cod style brick home, the kind I'd always dreamed of living in as a young girl, set diagonal from a large park, just down the street from a Catholic church (which is how I was raised and were few and far between down south), and a locally owned corner coffee shop. The neighbors on either side were the kind anyone would wish for – friendly and welcoming, but knew when to leave you alone. The rental was in an area that was considered desirable, populated mostly by retirees and young families. Mr. Smith, the older gentleman who rented to us was a soft-spoken and kind landlord. He lived almost two hours away near Lancaster because his mentally handicapped daughter lived near there in a home. His wife had died from cancer just a few years before, which made him realize that he was getting older and that he needed to have a plan in place for his daughter in case anything were to happen to him. He would call the house every once in a while to see if we needed anything, but otherwise he left us alone.

Since the rental was so close to my old neighborhood, I immediately felt at home. I didn't hesitate to put Taylor in a stroller and walk to wherever we needed to go because unlike in Alabama, the stores were close and there were sidewalks all along the way. Even the one mile walk to my mom's house was easy, although my mom made it clear by her less than enthusiastic welcome that she wasn't thrilled with the idea of me and Taylor popping in to say hello. She originally seemed genuinely excited when I told her about

the location of the rental. It had been more than ten years since I lived in my hometown. She even went and scoped it out before we moved in and gave us details about our street, the surrounding homes, and the park. I think she was just in love with the idea of us living close, but not the reality. I was surprised by her reaction and to avoid feeling hurt, I told myself that it was going to be her regret one day and not mine, although my heart was broken for Taylor. Luckily, I had enough going on for me and Taylor that I didn't have time to let it bother me. My high school friends were all stay-at-home moms, so we got together whenever we could, and since Taylor was now three, I was able to enroll her in activities that she was too young for before like dance class.

Not too long after we moved back to Pa., things became complicated for Shawn on the job front. Shawn told me that he and his co-worker, Gannon, an Asian Indian man several years older than Shawn in his late thirties whom I finally had the chance to meet, were ready to leave their current jobs to start their company. He said that the commercial side of the business was a wash and that they would need to become independent government contractors on government contracts to get a paycheck and then they would start to build their company through those networks. At the same time, his current company, not knowing his plans, offered him a promotion to become the Vice President. Shawn was at a loss as to what he should do, what would be best for our family, and for the first time in a long time, we had a real conversation like the one I mentioned before where one person listens and the other shares his concerns. Although the VP position was something that Shawn longed for, I came to understand that owning his own company was something that he desired more. After looking at our finances, healthcare costs, and

other accountabilities we agreed that if Shawn was ever going to start a company that now would be the best time. Four years later, it would be that decision that almost killed him and our marriage.

Shawn and Gannon, who became his partner over a handshake, decided that they would need the support of a larger company in addition to becoming independent contractors to build a strong network. Gannon had a contact in Washington, D.C. who could bring them in and introduce them to the system. He thought it best if he and Shawn rented an apartment down there during the week to immerse themselves in the environment and decide if DC was indeed the ideal place for them to start their business. There was never a consideration that Taylor and I or even Gannon's wife, Manasvi, would accompany them. Gannon made it clear that immersing themselves in the environment could only work without distractions. Shawn agreed. And as if there wasn't enough distance between us, with six months left on our lease in PA., Shawn moved to DC. He lived in DC Monday through Thursday, sometimes Fridays, and he'd come home on Saturdays and stay most of the day on Sunday until Gannon picked him up to carpool back to DC. I was almost too comfortable with this situation. I got used to making selfish decisions all week and essentially raising Taylor on my own.

This scenario had him gone way more than he was when we lived in Alabama, but I had a strong network and although my mom was being difficult, I still had her, my dad, my step-mom, my aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends all who I saw regularly. Plus, I was still in touch with Jamie and we were continuing to fine tune our hunt for the perfect creative retreat. We talked about the benefits of going to a retreat that offered no

instruction or guidance, but had an incredible view that could inspire creativity in anyone, such as Sedona, Arizona with its red rock monoliths and canyons. Compared to a retreat that was in a beautiful location, but was a five-day camp where you signed up ahead of time for the sessions you were interested in taking like photography, mixed media art, writing, yoga, mindful living, painting, and even a session on how to create art from whatever you find in your environment. At this camp there would also be regular intervals of meals provided in the mess hall and cabins you would share with several other people –men or women. I told Jamie that I didn't have a preference that I just wanted to get away and be creative. Luckily, Jamie had put a little more thought into what she wanted and we decided on the five-day camp with guided sessions. Jamie said that if she just went to Sedona or any other beautiful place that she probably would never create a single thing. I'd like to think that I could have been creative anywhere, but I knew she was right.

In the meantime, Shawn and Gannon were creating something of their own. They had built strong relationships with other companies over the six month period and were enthusiastic about where their company was headed. So, once again we found ourselves packing for a move. On mine and Taylor's last day at the Cape Cod, after we had said our goodbyes to friends and family once again, before I buckled Taylor into her car seat to drive us to our new home near DC, I snapped a picture of her. It was an early June morning when I took the photo. The cement staircase where she was sitting outside the kitchen door was cold, but that didn't faze her. The sun had risen, but that part of the house stayed in the shade until the afternoon. Taylor was wearing a polo-collar type dress

with one big horizontal pink stripe at the top, then white in the middle, and purple at the bottom with pink Dora crocks. Her hair was almost a white blond and cut with bangs and a bob at her chin line.

I took the photo so I'd always remember this place, so she'd find the picture one day and I would be reminded of how special our time was here. Our walks to the coffee shop that had a play area for kids. The Sundays we spent at the Catholic church up the road. Hours spent in the park exploring, bouncing basketballs, riding her Barbie Jeep, drawing in the dirt on the baseball diamond, and collecting rocks and acorns to bring home. Our short drives on the interstate to visit her cousins or my dad. The time we went on the Spirit of Philadelphia with her aunt and cousin for a Princess Cruise – she was the only Minnie Mouse princess on board and she ate as many cookies as she wanted. When her brothers came to visit at Christmastime and we made a mess in the kitchen making and decorating sugar cookies. I took the photo because I knew life would be different in DC. I wasn't sure how or if it was going to be for better or for worse, I just knew it would be different.

Again, not knowing what was in store for the company, Shawn decided that it was best if we rented a home. He said he discovered this great little town named Reston that had several lakes, playgrounds, and pools that were reserved only for residents of Reston. I had to admit that the rental he found was worth leaving our life in Pennsylvania. It was an end unit townhome located on Lake Audubon, one of the four man-made lakes in the area, with a view of the lake from the kitchen, walking trails, trees, playgrounds, and so many events for stay-at-home moms to bring their kids to, that one might be forced to

create a budget. These features offered me a feeling of renewal, mainly in my attitude towards my marriage. I was more relieved than expected to have my husband back in my daily life and it was obviously much better for Taylor to have her daddy around every day, too. Shawn's company was doing well and he was happy, stressed from the workload at times, but happy, Taylor and I easily transitioned to living in Reston, and the time was approaching for Jamie and I to take our trip to Squam Art Workshops, the five-day retreat we chose to attend in New Hampshire. Life was good.

Jamie and I decided to make a road trip out of the retreat. She would fly from Alabama to Philadelphia on a Tuesday night. I would pick her up at the airport after dropping Taylor off with my cousin and we would drive as far as New Haven, Connecticut, to spend the night. Shawn said there was no way he could stay home with Taylor because the retreat started on a Wednesday. Since the company was still in its early stages and he was working nearly 100 hours per week, he didn't want to risk taking any time off. He didn't want to turn his back on his partner during such a crucial time. I didn't think much about Shawn's decision because my cousin was the director of a daycare right outside of Philly, which her kids also attended, so she would be able to bring Taylor to work with her. The situation was convenient.

Mine and Jamie's choice to spend the night in New Haven was not random. Before we set out on this trip we both decided to make a list of things we wanted to see along the way. Check-in for the retreat wasn't until the afternoon, so if we woke up early and hit the road, we would likely be able to sight see. Jamie said the only place she wanted to visit was Yale University. She had never been there before, but had heard that

the architecture of the old buildings was any photographer's dream. Coincidentally, I had Yale on my list, too, but not for the architecture, although that was a highlight, but my reason was that I wanted to see the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The Beinecke Library is one of the world's largest libraries for rare books and manuscripts and because of this, holds the most unique exhibitions.

I wanted to visit this place because a professor I once took a class with mentioned a poem he discovered while conducting research at the library by a Renaissance woman named Martha Moulsworth. He said it was an autobiographical poem, which was a rare form for a woman from that era to write. I was curious to see what a place might look like that held so many rare treasures. The campus was beautiful, the old buildings held rich history, and although we couldn't touch anything, the library was as advertised – unique - but we had arrived less than one week after the murder of Annie Le, a Vietnamese American doctoral student whose body was found on campus in the wall of a laboratory basement. Having never been to Yale before I wouldn't know, but the population of students going to and from class seemed scarce for mid-week, there were candles lit in her honor at every turn, and Jamie and I felt a sense of melancholy and what it must be like to be a part of the Yale community during that tragedy. Neither one of us spoke to each other on our way back to my car.

From Yale, we headed North about 30-miles and made our way to Sleeping Giant or what is also known as Mount Carmel. We followed signs for the state park, in which it is located, parked my car, and found hiking trails that lead you to an opening to see the giant that supposedly sleeps on top of the Metacomet Ridge that extends from

Connecticut to Vermont. We got about 20 yards into the trail and Jamie expressed that she was afraid that hiking the entire way to the opening would make us late for check-in at the retreat, so we turned around. I told her that I was getting hungry anyway and suggested a place that Guy Fieri recommended on his show, “Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives” named O’Rourke’s Diner. The diner was 20 miles Northeast of the Sleeping Giant and we were still 3 hours from the location of the retreat. So we made a quick pit stop at this cramped diner with mouthwatering traditional Irish dishes and, with the exception of the other quick stop at the liquor store, we drove the rest of the way to the retreat.

The camp was located on Squam Lake in New Hampshire. The cabins were rustic, as in old and even equipped with an ice box, but still in pretty good shape. There were dense lines of pine trees surrounding us. It was a breath of fresh air, but we arrived close to when it was getting dark and lost all cell phone service, so I could see this as the backdrop to any Friday the 13th movie. Luckily, there were tons of other creative souls, mostly women, like Jamie and me walking the trails and trying to familiarize themselves with areas like the Mess Hall, the Welcome cabin, and the open area where we would all meet later that night for a fireside reception.

Jamie and I checked-in at the Welcome site and found that we would be staying in a cabin called the “Belltower.” It looked small from the outside, but when we walked through the front door and into the great room, we were in awe of the vaulted ceilings, the oversized stone fireplace, and the galley kitchen that ran the length of the back of the cabin with screened windows. There were bedrooms to the right of the great room, which had all been occupied by our cabin mates who must have been out walking the premises,

and there was one bedroom to the left that did not look disrupted by luggage or any other personal items, so we assumed that the others must have left this room for whoever arrived last. I noticed screened windows in our bedroom, too, and I worried about the lack of blankets and drop in temperature at night because I quickly remembered that our package that came in the mail said that these cabins were not equipped with heat. It was fall in New England, so I had high expectations of it being cold, but shit, this was bone-biting! By the time we set our luggage down, it was time for the fireside reception. We made our way down a gravel path in front of our cabin that led to a trail in the woods where we could begin to see the orange glow of a large campfire and hear the hum of more than one hundred conversations. It was a huge field in the middle of the tall pines with a fire pit in the center and tons of thick logs set around it for people to sit on.

By the end of the hour long reception, I was exhausted from the drive, the sightseeing, the singing along to campfire songs, and the thought of what I would do with so much time dedicated to something I wasn't sure I was good at anymore. It was easy for me to say that I was an artist when I was in high school. I spent an entire summer painting an underwater theme in my baby blue bedroom just because my dad wouldn't let me change the paint color on the walls. I even painted a trippy rainbow-colored seahorse on my ceiling that was the exact length and width of a twin-sized bed (what I stood on to paint it), but I hadn't had that much time in more than fifteen years to dedicate to artwork. Granted, Jamie and I had coordinated for a few weeks on a creative project and I began dabbling in drawing, writing, and photography whenever I could work it into my schedule as a stay-at-home mom, but I was at an artist's retreat and presumably

surrounded by incredibly talented people who had been at this for years. For the first time in a long time, I doubted myself.

Jamie and I returned to the cabin afterwards and met our fellow cabin-goers. There was Amy from Jersey, Gail from Connecticut, Stephanie from Canada, and Melissa from New York. They had a fire roaring in the cabin's fireplace by the time we arrived and we plopped down on whatever seats were left that were close enough catch some warmth. Even though we were all visibly tired, messy hair and yawns across the room, we stayed up to share stories of who we were, where we were from, and what brought us to Squam. The six of us immediately connected and yawns turned into laughs that turned into best practices on how to properly create the longest burning fire that turned into powerful moments of talking about what it meant to be an artist that, surprisingly to me, turned into a shared conversation of self-doubt. I understood then that most people here, like me, were probably looking to revive or reassure the artist within.

I don't know what the temperature was that first night, but I froze to the point that it hurt my toes to walk across the room to go to the bathroom. Even the extra blankets I brought from home weren't enough. I got up early and under the warmth of a quick shower. I made sure to save as much hot water for the rest of the Belltower Babes, the nickname we decided on for our group just before going to sleep. The first morning was a rush – showers, then getting dressed, and coordinating hair drying so as to not blow out the power in the cabin for the tenth time, then off to find the Mess Hall for breakfast, which was booming between people conversing, plates clanking on tabletops, and forks, knives, and spoons chiming against plates and cups. The Belltower Babes sat together

and over pancakes, waffles, oatmeal, cereal, fresh fruit, eggs, bacon, sausage, biscuits and jam, orange juice, cranberry juice, vegetable juice, coffee, and tea we talked about what we had on our schedules for that day. We wished each other well and since we all had scheduled different sessions, we went our separate ways. Jamie and I tried to play it cool and hide our excitement, but we were grinning ear-to-ear. We had made it!

My first day, I signed up for a poetry workshop with Lizzie Skurnick. She is a published author whose book “Shelf Discovery” had just been released. Our class was in a beautiful cabin, what they considered an instructor’s cabin, set on the lake and she had the fire roaring in the fireplace. She explained to us that we would discuss aspects of poetry, poets, and poems all morning, break for lunch, and then write poetry in the afternoon. Not all classes I scheduled were full day workshops, but this one was because I thought poetry was my thing. When we returned from lunch, Lizzie conducted an exercise in poetry and then sent us out of the cabin for inspiration to see what we could write in ten minutes from her prompt. I found a spot, sitting on the root of a large tree right next to a dock on the lake with birds chirping overhead. I looked out at the lake and the islands in the distance, then as Lizzie had asked us, I began to write what came to mind based on the influence of my surroundings. The following is what I wrote and read in front of Lizzie and the other four women in the room:

Untitled

by Kim Ruff

Me and my fishing pole, we sit here we two.
In the midst of my dock, in a rocking chair, too.

I listen to birds call from out of the wild,
“Cack-caw, cack-caw”
Calling out for their child.
“Come on now my dear,” sings the mother bird, sweet.
“Come on now, let’s go!” demands the father bird, “Let’s eat!”
So, I in my rocking chair watched as they flocked
And perched with great hope on the end of my dock.
They saw my line wriggle, they saw my line shake
These birds stood their ground, they think my catch they will take.
I in my rocking chair leaned up for the game,
And slowly reeled in the fish with no name.
Click after click, I reeled in my line,
And then something I saw, the birds saw it, too,
Made me stop reeling (and at this point Lizzie called us back in).

Lizzie and the four other women were too kind in their feedback and I know that now, but I will be forever indebted to their gentleness in delivering their thoughts. It didn’t take me long to figure out that my poem sucked and that they were being kind in saying so in an indirect way, but I felt myself closing in and giving up the entire idea of being an artist on the spot. I was embarrassed and to protect myself I made a joke that I had been a stay-at-home mom for too long and that my mind had obviously been warped by Dr. Seuss and “The Night Before Christmas.” They laughed and gave me credit for

coming up with so many lines, unlike the other four women. The day had to go on, however, and there was another poem that Lizzie was going to ask us to write. The prompt for this poem was to reflect on a single moment. This time I found a quiet corner inside the cabin, kept the poem short, and made it a point not to rhyme:

Untitled

by Kim Ruff

I am cold and you are dying.

I visit you one last time

You shake your head in defeat

“You’re leaving us again?”

I am cold and you are dying.

I felt better reading this poem aloud, more confident, plus it was so personal that I almost didn’t care what anyone else thought. It was about what my maternal grandmother said to me while she was sitting in her wheelchair at the nursing home when I told her that Taylor and I were moving to DC. The story behind this poem packed a punch for me and the other four women in the room. I could tell that their positive response was genuine, and while I appreciated that, I still never wanted to write another poem in my life. And I was okay with that. What I discovered from that first session is that poetry is hard shit to write and that I was more interested in the stories behind the work. That night, the excitement that everyone was feeling from the first full day of sessions echoed through the pines. In the clearing, the fireside reception was in full swing again with

guitars and singing and bodies of flames rising from the fire pit looking as if they could touch the night stars.

I woke up on the second day feeling slightly deflated, but knowing that my schedule of classes were different, I kept an open mind that today was a new day. The second full day of sessions was a nice break from deep thinking. I signed up for hands on classes where we made stuff that was pretty cool like a photo album or journal from two pieces of wood. We learned how to imprint elaborate designs onto the wood by simple techniques using household items like hair dryers, rags, newspapers, and crayons. I thought that this would be something that Taylor and I could do when I got home. I was missing her, especially since I couldn't call home to hear her voice. Jamie and I took this class together and over lunch, we agreed that we would have to drive off site later that night to get cell phone service and call our kids.

After our second set of classes were over, Jamie and I rushed to eat dinner and take off in my car towards town before dark. The small town was Sandwich, N.H. and as soon as Jamie was able to get cell service, she called home. We parked at the first store we could find, which happened to be a general store, but mostly a gift shop for visitors to the town. I assumed they must get a lot of traffic from cabin-goers at the lake and the many bed and breakfast homes we saw on our drive to town. I called my cousin and was able to speak with Taylor. Of course, she was all in one piece and having a great time, didn't even seem as if she missed me. I can't remember if I called Shawn, but I'm sure I would have. On the drive back to camp, the sky was black and the roads were curving. Although Jamie could see in the dark, she preferred not to drive. I almost wish she would

have though because I'm blind as a bat in daylight when it comes to driving in conditions this dark. I drove slowly and luckily no one ever came up behind us because we had to pay special attention not to miss the turn for the entrance back to camp, which was hard enough to find in daylight.

We made it back to camp and said "screw the bonfire, let's grab a bottle of beer," or was it wine, by the end of the night it was both, but not in an indulgent way. In other words, I didn't get trashed. Jamie and I walked down a trail that led to the open doors of a few different cabins where music and laughter poured from one room to the next. We introduced ourselves to anyone we met, even went our separate ways, and made genuine friendships that still exist today. At the end of the night, a bunch of women, myself included, followed a walking trail that traced the lake and came to a dock where we sat for at least an hour just looking up at the stars and talking about whatever. After a while, someone had the idea to jump into the lake. So, one by one, sometimes two at a time, we each took a running start from the dock and a polar plunge into the freezing lake water. I immediately rushed back to my cabin to get a warm shower, where a few of the other Belltower Babes and their friends were hanging out and drinking wine. When I joined them, we all laughed wholeheartedly about my polar plunge story.

On the final day of classes, Saturday, I was just starting to feel like I could relax. The night before, I had met so many kind and creative souls who had shared their story with me – where they came from, the type of art they were interested in, and what brought them to Squam. At the Belltower, once everyone retreated to their cabins and it was just us Babes sitting around, we connected in front of the fireplace once again. We

had meaningful conversations of what we learned that day, some of us even had artwork to show off, and how our brains and our hearts were digesting that information at that moment. It was bittersweet to wake up Saturday morning and know that it would be my last full day to take it all in and understand the feelings I was experiencing. One thing I was certain of is that I would never again put aside a life filled with creativity.

There's this thing that I learned from prior attendees at that last breakfast called "Squamorse." They explained that this was the bittersweet feeling that I woke up to. I began to feel so overwhelmed by Squamorse that I surprised myself when I cried at the breakfast table and told everyone how much I appreciated them. It was because I knew that we all had to go our separate ways and I was worried about how I would or if I could maintain a creative atmosphere for myself once I was on my own. That morning, I had a deeper understanding of how many other women were on a journey to either find new inspiration or, like me, find the strength that allows one to say, "I am creative." I would have included men, too, and I know that they are out there, but there were only two men in attendance at Squam and as far as I'm concerned that was just a rumor because I never saw them.

Having the confidence to say that you are an artist is a tough thing to admit, especially when you're at your husband's Christmas party surrounded by a lot of people who associate that with their friends who attended Woodstock, the original in 1969 or the 40th anniversary in 2009. I see the look of judgment on their face in their scrunched eyebrows and the wrinkles on their forehead, and I hear the borderline mocking tone when they utter an "Oh" or "Wow" or "That's cool," but I really know that they're

thinking, *hippie*, guess *Shawn's the only one who's making money in this family*. You can tell me it's not fair to make assumptions, but I'm not. Body language tells a story, too. I use it to my advantage when telling a story on stage because people can easily read body language.

To be fair, these people are not entirely wrong. I've never conducted a scientific study, but there's a reason for the term "starving artist." But I have to believe that if I chase my vision the payout will happen in the end. But what if it doesn't? And what's the payout when you're not getting paid? We all need to make a living, but should we make time for the stuff that really keeps us alive even when it can't put food on the table? What if I've been chasing my dream of who I want to be when I grow up down the longest dead end street known to man? There were three things I knew I wanted to be when I grew up and they were 1) a teacher, 2) a writer, and 3) a mother (I once thought I wanted ten kids). Coincidentally, or maybe I was just highly insightful for such a young girl, I wear all of those hats and there's one more that I didn't know I wanted to wear and only discovered twenty-six years later when I met Jen Lee, a storyteller from New York.

My last class was both the worst and the best remedy for Squamorse. I signed up for a class called "Storyweaving" taught by Jen. She is a soft spoken petite woman with strawberry-blond colored hair that spirals in loose curls whichever way the wind blows them. When class started she introduced herself and told us the story of how she followed her gut from Colorado to New York. Five years ago, she told her husband that something, almost like a calling, was telling her that she needed to be in Brooklyn. So they packed

up and left. She said that she was glad she followed her feeling and that she was also glad everything fell into place for her and her family.

She told us that she was a storyteller and that she had told true stories on a stage for the Moth, one of the nation's top storytelling companies. Someone in the class asked Jen a question I think most of us were thinking, "What's a storyteller?" She explained that there were storytelling companies all over the country and that typically, once a month, they invite people to come on stage and share a true story based on that month's theme. Some of the events are impromptu and others are planned ahead and include rehearsals. The main idea is that each person tells a 5-7 minute story that is not necessarily based on a major event in one's life, but it has to be true.

She said that the idea for the Storyweaving class was based on her experiences with storytelling and what she had learned from performing so many times. She talked about the elements of storytelling like visual details, pacing, structure, and shock value. She spent a lot of time on the latter, making sure we understood the consequences of telling the truth, especially when it came to sharing stories about our lives and those close to us. We went through a few exercises of writing down our own stories and some of us read them aloud. I didn't raise my hand because I had had enough of that on my first day. I just wanted to observe.

I listened to Jen more intently than I had any other class. I had kept journals all of my life, even started keeping one for Taylor so she would have the answers to some of the questions that she might ask when she got older. If she wanted to know what her favorite song was when she was two or her favorite saying, it would probably be written

in her journal. I wish I would have known more about myself when I was too young to remember, but now my parents are too old and they can't remember! So I just had to move on from that part of my life.

Other than journaling, I hadn't done any serious writing, especially about myself. At most, I had written a few long paragraphs of fiction based on events in my life, but I never took the time to complete the story. It just felt good to come up with ideas and structure sentences. I took Storyweaving because I was ready to write about my life and needed to understand how to get past the parts of the story that one must get past to find her voice and say what she means to say. There was a lot of shit that had happened to me, specifically when my parents got divorced and they each started dating other people that I wanted and needed to write down. I thought writing a story about my experience instead of just journaling would have helped me to make sense of what happened. From Jen's class, I learned that part of finding your voice means writing it all out as you would in a journal. Once it's written, then you can look for the story.

When I left her class I immediately felt torn between a state of melancholy and inspiration. Jen's session ended my time at Squam. Of course there was still the Art Fair that was going to be held later that night, but it was open to the public. I understood why they chose to do that, but it also stripped a bit of the intimacy of the retreat away. And my friends, so many women I had met. How would I ever get back in touch with them since I never asked for their contact information? I was Cinderella and had just lost my shoe – I couldn't go back, I had to keep moving forward because the clock was ticking. On the other hand, I was motivated to re-read my notes from the past few days to see what ideas

I had forgotten about since that first session. I told myself to keep an open mind and read the notes as advice on creativity as a whole instead of specific advice on any one style or genre. I was excited to think about all the new art projects Taylor and I could have fun with, especially on days when we're both bored and tired of being with each other. And, I was hell bent on visiting Brooklyn to see Jen perform at the Moth.

Because we were all leaving at different times in the morning, Jamie and I the earliest since we had the farthest to go, going to bed that last night was difficult because we all knew that saying goodnight really meant saying goodbye to each other, to the Belltower, and being immersed in a collaborative community of creativity. We sat by the fire for a while, showed off our artwork again, some of us reading what we wrote (still not me), and started playing one of the quiz games kept at the cabin. Then Melissa started packing, and the next Babe, and then another, until all six of us had our duffle bags or suitcases on our beds trying to squeeze in dirty clothes, blankets, art projects, note pads, pens, worn down pencils, and items purchased from the Art Fair. Without saying goodnight, we all started brushing our teeth and getting on our pajamas. It was inevitable. Squam was ending.

Jamie and I left the cabin around 6 a.m. and Amy from Jersey came out to wish us well and gave us both a big hug. Hugs are something else I learned about at Squam. Of course I had always known about hugs and hugging, but when the women at Squam hugged you, they meant it. The moment they felt you pulling away after only a few seconds, they pulled you closer and held you there a moment longer as if it might be the last time they'd ever see you. The sun was just beginning to rise when we drove past the

last curve by the lake before reaching the town of Sandwich. I had to stop. It wasn't the view, although it was a spectacular sunrise over the lake; it was the thought that I might never again have the chance to be this close to myself. I stopped because I needed to breathe and stand in the sublime surroundings one last time.

With the exception of stopping once to grab a bite to eat and use the bathroom, Jamie and I drove directly from New Hampshire to the Philadelphia airport. I pulled in curbside to her departure terminal where we had to quickly get her bags out of my car. It was a rush to say goodbye, but we were both happy that we had had the opportunity to see each other again. From the airport, I would have a twenty minute drive until I picked up Taylor from my cousin's house. Not much time to think on my own, but maybe I didn't need to do anymore thinking for now. Maybe I just needed to let my brain go numb and enjoy the silence.

Taylor and I were, of course, thrilled to see each other and I was grateful to my cousins for taking care of her for so long. I was exhausted and still had to drive us a little more than two hours to get home, so we wasted no time gathering her belongings and packing them into the trunk to head home. She was curious about the stuff I had crammed into the trunk and then forgot about it when I handed her a brown moose stuffed animal wearing a yellow, knit sweater imprinted with fall colored leaves and New Hampshire written in black. I had purchased the stuffed animal when Jamie and I made a trip to Sandwich's general store. I remember our ride home being mostly quiet. Taylor probably had some thinking of her own to do and it's likely that she fell asleep at one point. I wasn't sure how, but I knew it was going to be a rough transition when we got home. Not

the adjustment of having been gone for five days, but how those five days changed me. I was determined to continue a creative state of mind and putting those ideas into practice, and I wasn't sure how Shawn would respond to my newly inspired self.

Shawn was happy to have his girls home. Taylor told him all about her time with her cousins and I told him some about mine. I didn't say too much because I hadn't had time to reflect on what I thought about my experience. So I just told him the basics of the everyday happenings – which classes I took, what Squam Lake looked like, what my cabin looked like, how I froze every night, the other women I shared a cabin with, that I only saw women there, but someone told me there were two men in attendance, too, and what I ate. I was excited to tell him about my class with Jen Lee, so I went into more detail about that class than any other. I told him that I would like to go see her perform at the Moth sometime and that one of the girls I shared the cabin with, Amy, had mentioned that she would be interested in going, too, since where she lived in N.J. was so close to Brooklyn. Shawn was happy for me, happy that I had had a break because he knew that I needed one, but I wasn't sure how he felt about my experience. I didn't give him much to go on and he didn't ask too many questions either, but conversations that didn't begin to scratch the surface were typical for us.

The trip to Brooklyn happened a lot sooner than expected. Amy and I had both kept in touch with Jen and she told us that she would be performing at the Moth on the upcoming Saturday, only one month after our time at Squam, and invited us to see her perform. Still reeling from my five day hiatus in the woods of New Hampshire, I immediately told Amy I could go and she said she could too. I wanted to understand and

see for myself a storytelling performance. With excitement, I told Shawn about the opportunity and when he responded with, “Is this going to be your new thing?” I went silent. I felt my body temperature rise and my face begin to turn red and sweat. I was clenching every muscle in my body so hard that for a moment words escaped me.

“What do you mean?” I finally asked.

“Are you going to be going to these kinds of things every month now?”

My body let loose from the initial tension and now I just wanted to fall to the floor in a ball of mush because I felt judged, just like those morons he worked with. Except it wasn't those morons, it was my husband. I thought he understood the goals I had set for myself, the ones that he had seen me, or at least I thought he noticed, put into practice by myself and with Taylor over the past few weeks. I thought he was on board with me when I told him how Squam re-ignited my passion for creativity and that I wanted a chance to explore what that meant. Unfortunately, because we weren't really communicating with each other, neither one of us ever thought that this might have nothing to do with me. It was only going to be an overnight trip from a Saturday to a Sunday, so there was no way I wasn't going. Shawn would have to give up work for one weekend and figure out what to tell Gannon if he called.

I called Jamie on my way and I should have been more thoughtful, but I couldn't contain my excitement about going to the Moth. I could tell she wished it was just as easy for her to get in a car, but by the time she would have driven from Alabama, the show would have been over. Because of traffic, I was late getting to Amy's house in Jersey, but

she said the venue for the event was only a twenty minute drive from her house, so we'd still have time to grab a quick bite to eat.

We ate just a few blocks from the venue, in the lively SoHo area, and it happened that when we got in the line that had already started to form at the Housing Works Bookstore Café, Jen and her friend Steve, another storyteller, were walking up behind us. Apparently, even the storytellers have to wait in line to get in. Jen introduced us to Steve and we all made small talk and then Jen, Amy, and I talked a little about Squam and a lot about what we had been up to since then. There was a natural pause in the conversation and I excused myself because I noticed a line starting to build up behind us and I wanted to step away to get a full view. The line started inside the door of the venue and then went down a couple of city blocks. Although Jen, Steve, Amy, and I were able to get seats, when the show started the place was standing room only.

The venue was an old building that had been renovated. The storefront boasted large open windows and there was a grand cement staircase leading up to the painted blue-green double entrance doors, which only one side was open. The person who sold us our tickets sat behind an old mahogany desk and beyond the desk was a large open space with twenty-foot ceilings. Spaced evenly from the front of the room to the back were several white columns each with decorative scrolls at the top and mahogany bookshelves wrapped around them at the bottom. The room wasn't very wide, but it was long and tall - probably to accommodate the windows that seemed to start from the floor and touch the ceiling. Towards the back of the room was the stage for the tellers, a seating area, and the café. To the left of the entrance was a wall of mahogany bookshelves with paneling that

showcased artwork. I hadn't noticed until I began looking around the room once we found a place to sit, but behind us was a wrought iron staircase with a mahogany handrail. There was a second floor, too, with more mahogany paneled balconies and bookshelves. The atmosphere was amazing, the conversations were lively, the drinks were flowing, and by the time the host of the event, Canadian comedian, writer, and actress, Ophira Eisenberg took the stage to get the night started, I was already hooked.

Each person who wanted to tell a story had previously pitched their story to the Moth and was pre-selected with their names placed into a fishbowl. Jen and Steve were two of the tellers who had been selected to have their names added to the fishbowl. When we arrived that night there was no guarantee that either one of them would get a chance to tell their story on stage. There were about ten open slots and probably thirty names available for Ophira to choose. Each teller had only five minutes and was judged on how loud the audience applauded them at the end of those five minutes. People were kind in their applause and I never heard anyone yell out anything in disapproval, which made the environment lighter and relaxing for all involved. Steve did not get to tell, but Jen, a Moth favorite, did get a chance to get on stage and tell her story.

Jen is naturally soft spoken, but I expected that when she got on stage her voice would change and that it might somehow deepen and become more robust, or that she would start jumping and dancing around, bouncing her curly hair everywhere to make the story more profound. Instead, she quietly approached the microphone and began telling us a story about her Evangelistic upbringing in Boulder, Colorado and how strange and distant that life seemed compared to who she is now in New York. And even though she

has abandoned that religious practice, she still finds that part of her life relevant to how she makes decisions today. At Squam, Jen had talked about staying true to one's self in her Storyweaving class, and at the time I thought I knew what she meant, but it wasn't until I saw Jen and all of the other performers that I finally understood.

When you get on stage you might as well be naked. For five minutes, you are telling a room filled with hundreds of people a truth about yourself. You are admitting to a fault, a mistake, a moment when weakness got the better of you. There's no point in trying to hide and as long as you are staying true to yourself then the story will resonate with an audience. The audience is there because they're human, too, and just like any storyteller, they want to feel connected.

Intrigued by this new (to me) form of storytelling, when I got home on Sunday I made it a point to find a storytelling company. I didn't know where the hell I was going to come up with a story to tell about my life that held any meaning and I wasn't sure if I could brave the stage like Jen, but I really wanted to try at least once. I discovered several companies in the D.C. area and only one in Northern Virginia close to where I lived called, "Better Said Than Done." When I looked on their website, it seemed that their stage operated pretty much the same as the Moth with the exception that there were only eight storytellers, so no fishbowl, each performer had upwards of seven minutes, and there was no voting. I told Shawn that I wanted to attend an event with this company to see how they operated in person because I was interested in eventually telling a story on their stage. I also told him that this time, he was coming with me. The stories at the Moth were so entertaining, even when they were on the more serious side, that I thought

everyone should have the experience of feeling connected for a little while, maybe even normal.

Finding Stories

I hate the laundry list of occupations I spurt out to people who ask what I do for a living. I don't hate my jobs, some of which I don't even get paid for, but when I go on and on about what I do, my tone shifts and suddenly my list of occupations doesn't sound like much of anything but a list. When in fact, I'm passionate about each one - from grad student to college instructor to assistant manager of a literary festival to storyteller.

"Ooh, a storyteller? What's that?" is the typical interruption that occurs before I've had the chance to say, "and all that with two young kids at home."

There are many reasons a person chooses to become a storyteller and mine is validation. I like to know that I'm not the only sucker out there experiencing life, making dumb decisions, sometimes good ones, but my answer to this question is a one-sentence-summary that I've developed through my experiences as a storyteller: "Storytelling is performing true stories to an audience."

When really there's so much more that needs to be said, but to get the conversation going might take several bottles of wine and not in the indulgent way I would normally drink wine, but slowly like a connoisseur. It's not that a storyteller's life is glamorous or complicated, but storytelling is a craft and there is a process. A slow, reflective, process that needs to be seen, smelled, swished around a little in your mouth, and savored.

Storytellers believe there's got to be more than what meets the eye. It's not enough for us to have experiences, we believe that our experiences matter enough to tell someone. But don't we all feel that way? Aren't most of us equipped with cell phones and pick them up at will to call someone we love after a song comes over the radio that reminded us of them, or don't we all have certain people we talk to when we did something embarrassing or have gossip or news to spread? For most people, a phone call or a text to that one person is where the story stops. But not for me. As a storyteller, I use my specific experiences to craft meaning and talk about something broader, maybe even important. Something that matters to a large audience, and for a brief time makes us feel connected or what I like to call "normal," because in performance storytelling it's not the re-telling of an experience that matters. It's the meaning behind it; the story that comes after.

When we hear the word "story" we think the experience must have been larger than life, but why? Our lives hold enough significance in just the everyday. Besides, not all of us can afford (and I mean that in so many ways) to pick up for an adventure and then come home with an exotic experience to share, so why not find meaning in familiar places?

Before performance storytelling, unless something extraordinary happened like Publisher's Clearing House knocking on my front door, I never thought about how a typical day held any storytelling value. At the end of the night when I knew the kids were sleeping, I just wanted to put on my pajamas, veg on the couch, catch up on whichever HBO series I followed that season, and forget the day. Reflecting upon a trip to the

grocery store to get milk was the least of my priorities. But performance storytelling has made me a keen observer of my surroundings and I have learned how to absorb what matters, craft meaning from the everyday, and share that story with a room full of complete strangers, because I think it matters.

The repetitive nature of everyday life is true for most all of us, but somewhere between the minutes that pass, in the hours we spend each day going about our lives, is a story waiting to be told. Like the one that begins for me at the end of a night because just when I feel like my day is over - it really is never quite over.

Somewhere between 11:00 - 11:10 p.m.

After I'm certain that my kids, ages 3 and 8, are sleeping, I go to my bedroom and begin my nightly ritual of putting on pajamas. At 36-years-old this means digging around the bottom drawer of my nightstand between athletic socks and workout shorts that I swear I'll fit into again when I'm done with grad school, and I have a steady job, and the kids sleep through the night, and my life is more settled, and...searching for what I deem "junk" underwear, meaning underwear I wear to bed, or when I have my period, or when I don't have time to shower but need to get the kids to school, yet the kind I wouldn't be caught dead in at an OB appointment, even though the possibility of the Gynecologist seeing my junk underwear should be my last concern. I find a pair of my purple Hanes briefs, though I'm sure the package identified the color as Lavender or Wisteria , and throw them across the bed towards the other side of the room where I keep my pajama pants in my dresser.

I round my bed, complete with a headboard (I'm married with kids and a steady income, doesn't that require a formal bedroom set?), and search one of the nine drawers of my dresser for cotton pajama pants or a pair of stretchy yoga pants, which I never actually use for yoga. As long as the pants are clean and comfortable, in that order (I refuse to pull dirty clothes from the hamper), and not a pair that sits snug against my bladder that guarantee at least two trips to the bathroom in the middle of the night, I'm happy. I find a pair of washed-out-black Yoga pants without holes (score!) and set them on the bed next to the junk underwear.

As I begin undressing and shaking off the day's clothes from my body, I contemplate before searching another drawer for a pajama top to decide if I should wear my bra to bed. Wearing a bra to bed is something I need to seriously consider for multiple reasons: 1) What if it's the night the house catches fire and I'm forced to stand outside - bra-less - for the entire world, or at least my neighbors and local firefighters to see. I have double-D-sized boobs (thanks to having children) and when they're not buoyed by a bra, they look like two sinking ships (again, thanks to having children); 2) I have a 3-year-old son, Carson, who wakes me up. Often. When I throw him in bed with me and my husband, he always wants to sleep on my chest and on the nights I wear a bra, he is uncomfortable and it takes him twice as long to fall back to sleep. Since the latter scenario is more likely to happen than the first, is that something I want to risk?; 3) Going back to #1, what woman wants to wake up to the sight of two sinking ships when looking in the mirror first thing in the morning?

I take the bra off.

To supplement a lack of support, I dig into my tank top/collectible coin/St. Paddy's Day paraphernalia/old birthday cards drawer and select a tank with a shelf-bra so I feel like a younger woman in the morning and less like my grandmom (God rest her soul). I throw the skinny-strapped, gray tank on the bed with my growing pile of pajama gear and dig into a different drawer that stores old shirts that I have deemed acceptable sleepwear.

I rarely choose the blue and white "Thrashers" softball shirt with my last name printed on the back from the time, two years ago, when the hubs and I played on his old company's softball team, or my brother's UPenn shirt that he gave me more than fifteen years ago when I was home on military leave because I promised I would wear it all the time, or the Bogata, Colombia Embassy shirt that a childhood friend on whom I had a crush mailed to me during his time in the Marines, or the 50th Anniversary of the Air Force shirt that I wore in basic training in 1996, and which still smells like it, or any of the shirts I received from fund raisers I participated in like a 5k for recovering drug addicts, a deer hunt for kids with cancer, a beer pong competition for Autism, a ten-mile walk for suicide prevention, or a BBQ Pork Roast contest to support, well, I think that one was just for fun. I can't get rid of those shirts and I can't wear them to bed either. I suppose I'm afraid I'll wash away the memories, so I wear my form-fitting royal blue t-shirt with a scoop neck or a lime-green and gray striped fitted scoop neck with long sleeves. I guess I do more laundry than I think. They're both in the drawer tonight and I throw the lime-green one at the pile on the bed and start to get dressed.

Somewhere between 11:10pm – 11:30pm:

Once dressed, I head to the master bathroom to brush and floss and brush my teeth. In that order. It's at least a ten-minute ordeal. Ever since I was a little girl, I watched my father struggle with gums so sensitive that they'd bleed like he'd just cut a tooth out each time he'd floss.

“Dad, why do you floss your teeth until they bleed?”

“I don't. My gums are just that sensitive because I never used to take care of them.”

This made me pay attention. After all we were related and I wasn't taking care of my gums either. I witnessed his move from dental floss to the water pick method, considered revolutionary in the 80s. The water pick system was slightly larger than the width of a square bathroom tile and as tall as two rolls of toilet paper stacked on top of each other. At each corner of the base of the system was a removable toothpick instrument. The four instruments were tube-shaped, fat at the bottom like the handle of a screw driver, with a clear, skinny, hard plastic hose at the top. In the middle of the four tubes sat a square container that you filled with water and once you turned the machine on and pressed a release button on the instrument, the removable toothpick shot pressurized water from the pointed tip. This system mimicked dental floss and what dentists used to clean plaque from teeth.

Although I became more aware of keeping my teeth clean based on what my dad had told me about his own teeth, because my dad had spent so much money on the damned thing, he practically forced my brother and I to use the system, too. Sometimes

watching over us while we brushed. Each removable toothpick had a different color – red, blue, green, and yellow – and he encouraged us to pick a color and make it part of our daily routine. What seemed like gallons of water shot off my teeth and all over the bathroom mirror, shower curtain, and wall, but my teeth did feel cleaner. Of course, there's always something new on the market, so the water system didn't stay in our house forever and I think at some point we even got back to using floss, but the practice of diligently cleaning my gums stuck with me, like a stubborn blackberry seed.

I wipe my mouth on the hand towel next to the sink, walk to my bedside and fold back the covers, and pass out as soon as my head hits the pillow.

Somewhere between 11:30pm – 12:30am:

I hear her feet walking fast across the carpet long before my 7-year-old daughter, Taylor, is by my bedside to wake me up and tell me that she is thirsty. This is complete bullshit. Okay, maybe not entirely. To be fair, there's a possibility that she's thirsty but she is also visibly scared of something. She keeps looking towards her room and her voice is shaky as she asks for something to drink. She is scared and I'm not going to entertain that idea for a few reasons: 1) because according to my cell phone, I have only been sleeping for ten minutes and bringing attention to the elephant in the room might make the whole going back to bed process a lot longer; and 2) although she hasn't talked about anything like this recently, my daughter has been known to see auras around people and spirits, ghosts, apparitions, what have you – either way, both of those options will likely keep me awake a lot longer than I need or want to be.

"Go pee while I get you water," I say, flipping the covers off my body.

"Okay, Mom."

In thinking about the second option as a reason that she might be scared, I have scared myself and, therefore, have had to turn on all the lights on my way down the stairs to the kitchen. On my way back up our stairs, which have large gaps between them, as I'm turning off the lights I try to pretend that Michael Meyers, Jason, or that girl from the Grudge isn't going to grab my ankles. I pin my ridiculous ability to scare myself on dropping too much acid as a teenager then watching Pink Floyd's "The Wall" and too many hours spent watching stories of true crime on Investigation Discovery as an adult. I try running up the stairs, skipping every other step. I forget that the last time I tripped and had horrible rug burn on my knees for weeks. Luckily, I make it to the top safely this time.

To my surprise, Taylor is snug under her covers and I set her cup of water on a shelf next to her bed. We share a hug and a kiss and an I love you, sweet dreams, don't let the bed bugs bite and I pull her door shut just a little and lay my head back on my pillow with the hopes that I will be able to go back to sleep. The last time I check my phone, it's close to 12:30am.

Somewhere between 2:02am – 4:00am:

The scurrying of my Carson's tiny feet across the carpet wakes me up immediately and I see the top of his forehead, and his blonde hair that stands up on end because the lady at Hair Cuttery always cuts it too short, at the edge of my bedside.

Why the f- don't they ever wake their father up?

I throw him in the sliver of space between my husband and me.

“I want to sleep on your belly, Mama.”

“Okay, bud.”

I turn to lay on my back, he rests his head on my chest, and falls instantly to sleep.

The decision to take my bra off proved fruitful. I check the time – 2:02 a.m. - and fall back to sleep until a swift kick to the back of my head from a toddler-sized foot jolts me awake.

What the...

My 3-year-old has somehow maneuvered himself so that he's lying the opposite way in our bed with his feet by our heads. The kick to the head was so startling that any dream I might have been having is lost for good, so I get up to pee and as I'm sitting there I begin to think about work, which is never good. What I mean to say is that I love my work, but just like the prayer tells us in the Bible, there's a time and place for everything, even to think about work, but that time and place is definitely not on the toilet at two in the morning.

When I return to my side of the bed, it is clear that if I want to go back to sleep I have to risk moving my toddler without waking him because he has completely taken over my space, or if I'm going to risk it, I might as well try to put him back in his own bed. Yes, that's what I'll do. If I'm going to have to move him and wake him some, I might as well put him back in his own bed. This maneuver is successful and I snuggle up

under the covers on my side of the bed once more. I'm comfortable and settled, but I can't get my list of things that need to be done off my mind.

I use the same tactic I suggest to my daughter when she can't get to sleep. Just repeatedly say to yourself, "unicorns, butterflies, rainbows" and surely that will allow you to fall asleep and have pleasant dreams, but it doesn't work. Then I try another tactic. I try to organize my to-do list in my head, thinking that this is all I need to clear my thoughts and help me relax. Of course, my to-do list is longer than my grocery store list and I panic that I'm going to forget something in the morning, so I move to the third tactic and I get up and try to work on what is bothering me. I settle on the couch with my laptop and begin to respond to a few emails, update my calendar, upload some pictures for my great aunt that she's been begging me for months to email to her, and before I know it, it's 5:30 a.m. and there's no point in going back to bed now when my toddler will likely be up within the next 30-minutes.

Somewhere between 5:30am - 6:15am:

I'm focused on my writing and in the thick of a thought when my husband comes downstairs, having slept through everything, wanting to chat it up before he heads outside for his morning run. He has completely interrupted my mojo because I had not taken my eyes off my computer screen to that point and once he leaves, I realize that I'm exhausted before my day has even started, but I get back to work for another 15-minutes until I hear Carson scream from his bedroom.

"Mommy! Shoglat milk!"

I launch off the couch and run upstairs to quiet his demands before he wakes his older sister. My heart is racing, not from the run upstairs, but from his appalling and unnecessary shriek at 5:50 a.m.. Between his kick in the head and high pitched shriek, I'm pissed, and there's still another hour before sunrise!

"You need to be polite and use your manners!"

"Please? Mommy? Shogglat milk?"

His sweet, apologetic voice would make me forgive my worst enemy - my blue-eyed, blonde-haired toddler has me wrapped around every inch of each one of his fingers.

My daughter wakes up. My son gets his chocolate milk.

And while they're watching "Arthur," a PBS Kids cartoon, I'm thinking about everything I still have to do that day: prepare a lesson plan and teach English Comp (where the blue shirt I decide to wear inspires one of my students to ask me if I used to lift weights), English Lit (where one student admits to the class that he's just not a deep thinker, although his free-write suggests otherwise), conduct outreach work for a literary festival (is it possible to contact 150 organizations in an hour?), review two papers before my graduate-level writing workshop that afternoon (my essay is 3rd in the workshop and it sort of gets butchered), and modify my blog for a class that follows the afternoon workshop and ends at 10 p.m. (cops are everywhere on my drive home, waiting to pull someone over for speeding in a 25 mph zone. For once, I drive slow and enjoy not getting a ticket, though I feel bad for the young girl in a sporty blue car who is pulled over, until I see her speed past me moments later on her cell phone.)

It's almost 10:30 p.m. and I'm home and my story is over. Until the scurrying feet across the carpet in the middle of the night starts it again.

In this 24-hour time frame, I managed to slow down my life into timed increments and reflect on what was happening at each moment. This was not an easy task to take on, but I found the material surprising because as my life is unfolding, as I'm in the moment I'm not thinking about the story. The story comes after in a reflective process where I use my senses to help me remember the environment and understand the "why" of what I was doing. I was able to analyze the choices I made at each moment, which helped me to see how I could extrapolate multiple stories for the stage.

For example, I discussed how each morning and each night I brush, then floss, then brush my teeth again. This has been a long standing tradition with me and I knew why, but I had never thought to write out the story about my father's obsession with cleaning his teeth and describing the ridiculously large water pick system that sat on the back of our toilet, which is oxymoronic in itself. From the section where I discuss the practice of brushing my teeth, I could create an entire story with a complete arc about dental hygiene and talk about that through my experience with teeth cleaning devices my dad purchased and my learned paranoia about keeping a clean mouth. In the conclusion, I could even discuss how as an adult my paranoia continues and hence I have quit drinking coffee, tea, and sometimes I drink white wine even when I really want red just so my teeth won't stain. I would add the bit about coffee, tea, and red wine to drive the point home and also because most everyone in the audience likely drinks coffee, tea, or red

wine. Of course, the above-mentioned are just ideas, a good start. There's still the matter of how to approach a story, and those elements would be something I'd work towards when I'm crafting the story for the stage.

Stage Presence: What to Consider When Telling a Story

To this point, I have been given the benefit of the doubt as a performance storyteller. At least it seems that way because nobody ever comes up to me after a show and asks, “How did you remember all those details from when you were 18?!”

Honestly, I wouldn't want to answer this question because it's hard to place a finger on how you can remember details from twenty years ago, far less what you did over the weekend. In fact, that's exactly what happens to me on Monday mornings when I'm chatting it up with my colleagues and they ask what I did over the weekend. For a few moments, that deer-in-the-headlights look comes over my face and most of the time I can't remember, so I just shrug my shoulders and give them the same test back with an equal response. My weekends generally involve getting the family out of the house to unwind from our busy week, even though birthday invites the kids receive, voice and piano lessons, and church on Sunday mornings keep us busy, too, those types of everyday events must not be important enough to remember, or maybe they just aren't as meaningful.

Growing up in the 80s, I remember hearing adults repeating, “Everyone remembers where they were when they heard Kennedy or Lennon was shot” and for my generation it has become “When the first plane hit the twin towers.” It makes sense. These moments trigger an emotional response and we categorize our memories based on

emotion. This could be the reason why I can remember the details of a story that happened twenty years ago and not the weekend that just passed. Of course, my stories are not as monumental as the tragedies I mention above, but the details I remember for the stories I tell are triggered by emotion. An emotion based on the theme of a performance storytelling show.

Categorizing our memories based on emotion is why the theme of a show is crucial to the stories that are told on stage, and how I remember specific details from decades ago. Otherwise, if the theme of the show wasn't "15 Minutes of Fame: Stories of Celebrity, Notoriety, and the Quest for Stardom," I would have never remembered the Norman Bates-like horrific feeling my friends and I had when we stayed at a motel on our way to see Jerry Springer, where the greasy front desk dude repeatedly encouraged us to get a room featuring a mirrored jacuzzi tub.

“Page to Stage”



It was the "Holiday Cheer" theme that finally inspired me to tell a story on the stage because you see that guy in the picture? Yeah, the one drinking Bud Light at 9 a.m. in a luau inspired 1970s RV, tailgating at a Kenny Chesney concert? That's the hubbs and he's about as redneck as they come. I know it's hard to tell from his clean cut hairdo, but that hasn't changed since I met him around

Thanksgiving, while stationed at Osan Air Force base in South Korea fifteen years ago.

He was walking down the street in a wife beater, gym shorts, and carrying a case of Budweiser. And somehow I found this attractive. But that's not the story I told. I told the story of how I met his family for the first time on Christmas vacation in his hometown of Moncks Corner, S.C. - there were rebel flags, rifles, wrestling, bonfires, mudding, and moonshine.

I knew I had a gem of a story and I had written about my first Christmas home with my husband's family, but how would I translate that story from the page to a stage? The written story was twelve pages long and reading it would take at least fifteen minutes, probably longer. Two issues: 1) reading a story on stage is not an option, and 2) performances can only be 5-7 minutes long.

To tell a story in 5-7 minutes boils down to following the basic structure of a story arc:

1. Set Up - an understanding of my upbringing in suburban Philly and how that was different than the hubb's life in Moncks Corner, S.C.
2. Problem - my presumptions about folks who lived in the south based on what my upbringing (my parents' and their drunk friends at house parties & Dukes of Hazard) taught me.
3. Rising Action - the moment I walked into my now mother-in-law's double wide trailer to find a rebel flag that covered the length and width of one wall in the living room and thinking I had just walked into some kind of Hell's Angels club.
4. Climax - Christmas Day.
5. Resolution - realizing how much I felt at home and that this city (suburban) girl was really a country girl at heart.

With this structure in mind, I refined my first draft. The first draft, transcribed below, packed a punch right from the beginning and did not withhold enough information. In other words, I packed a punch too soon. The way I wrote it was similar to watching a movie trailer and realizing when you finally get to see the entire movie that all the best parts were in the trailer, essentially ruining your experience. When I went to rehearsal the week before the show and practiced performing my story in front of the other storytellers, they suggested that I re-write my story in a way that builds up to the heart of the story.

“A Celebration of Firsts” (First Draft)

When I walked into Mama’s double-wide trailer and saw a larger than life rebel flag hanging on the wall, you better believe this Yankee was scared, more scared than the time I was at my friends 8th birthday party and her dad whipped out a penis lighter to light his cigarette.

I was born and raised in the suburbs of Philly, and I was taught that anyone yielding a rebel flag on their car, their person, and especially in their home was a dangerous person, the most feared, a Hell’s Angel, a white supremacist or something.

“Mama” as I came to know her is my husband’s mother, though when I first talked to her I had only been dating her son, Shawn, for a few months, and long distance at that – realllly long distance, like South Korea to Alabama long distance.

Shawn and I met when we were both stationed at Osan Air Force Base in South Korea. We worked together, became friends, and then started dating. Although Shawn left Korea for another assignment in Alabama 5 months before my assignment was up, we decided to make it work and live together when I returned stateside. We also decided to spend our first Christmas together with his family at his mother’s home in Moncks Corner and that we’d stay 5 days, arriving a few days before Christmas and leaving on the 26th.

Now, I had talked to Mama several times over the phone before leaving South Korea, and she would tell me how much she loved me even though she had never met me because I made her son smile and she’s never seen her son smile so wide. Based on Shawn’s clean-cut appearance and his mother’s sugary southern draw, I began to develop

a picture of what she might look like, how she might be in-person, and what life was really like in the south.

Her birthname is Terrie Lee, after Robert E. Lee of course, and when I walked into her double-wide on that first day of Christmas vacation she insisted that I was not allowed to call her Miss Terrie, or Ms. Rollins, or anything else except Mama and I wasn't going to fuck with a red-headed bartender who wears Nascar t-shirts, has a tattoo on the loose skin between her thumb and first finger, and refers to herself as "The Bitch."

She proceeded to tell me that I was unlike her son's miserable ex-wife who punched him in the face one time in the heat of an argument.

"He got her back good though, he head-butted her in the middle of the night on accident cause he was havin' a bad dream."

She also insisted that I have some Lemonade.

"It's not as good as mine cause Aunt Dusty made it, but it'll do ya," she said.

Mama had greeted us in the living room of her double-wide and as I wondered who Aunt Dusty was, Mama hooked her arm in mine, escorted me down the long hall to the kitchen, and announced to a large group of people, who were each wearing at least one piece of camouflage clothing, "Kimberly's here y'all."

They immediately sat me at the kitchen table and poured me a cup of lemonade, which strangely came from a glass jar that was in the freezer. Mama went around the room introducing Shawn's fathers, yes, plural – his mother's ex-husband who adopted him when he was young and his mother's boyfriend of more than ten years, who Shawn

considers a father - aunts, uncles, brothers, and cousins, most of who Mama told me she adopted, which I have now learned that can mean pretty much anyone she knows.

On the second day of Christmas vacation, I learned that I was glad that I had not committed to going deer hunting the night before. Even though the entire family, including myself, had pretty much just gone to bed and were hung over from the “lemonade,” Mama insisted that unless you were out the door by 5:30am to go deer hunting, there was no point going. I laughed as Shawn stumbled to get his shit together in the pitch dark, but not for too long as I learned that the 5:30am wake-up call wasn’t just for those hunting.

After Shawn left, Mama banged her knuckles on the hollow, plywood door and sweetened her voice with that southern hospitality, “Coffee’s ready hun.” Over the years I have learned that this is code for *get your ass out of bed girl cause Lord knows there’s strength in numbers when going to Wal-Mart at the crack of dawn during Christmastime.*

Shopping at 6 a.m. on a Sunday morning seemed unnecessary, but I twisted my hair in a clip, swished around some mouthwash, and put my clothes on from the night before. When we got in Mama’s Dodge Ram extended cab pick-up truck, she bitched about the sticky Pepsi can and gum-wrappers that Rick left in the truck. She bitched about the way other people parked when she couldn’t pull her tank-like truck in the spot just right. She had a verbal and physical encounter with a shopping cart when it wouldn’t detach from the others, and pulled out a grocery list that filled the better part of a yellow, legal-sized piece of paper. That’s when I wished I had gone hunting.

I suggested to Mama that we split up the list but she wouldn't have any part of that. "Oh, that's alright honey," she said in that sweet southern voice. "It'll be quicker if we just stick together." *Strength in numbers*, right.

On the third day of Christmas vacation, I learned that the bedroom just past the hall bath that always had the door closed was Shawn's grandmothers room and that she had, in fact, been in her room this whole time. Which sort of creeped me out when I thought about it, but she wasn't being rude or antisocial, Mama told me she was very sick and bedridden - or so I thought.

That night, I set a full bottle of Crown Royal on the kitchen counter before we all went out to a bonfire and came home to find it empty.

I was like "What the..."

"Oh shit," Mama was piss drunk, fell laughing on the floor, and eventually told me that her mother is bedridden but can smell a bottle of alcohol from a mile away. She told me that her mother is an alcoholic and that she'd drink anything left on the counter, which is why they stored their alcohol in the freezer.

The fourth day of Christmas vacation was Christmas day. I woke up to the smell of pecan and pumpkin pies baking alongside of homemade breakfast biscuits, collards with ham bone flavor rising in the steam of the pot and the sounds of the thud from the cast iron skillet on the stove cooking sausage milk gravy and Mama yelling at her dogs "go on now, get out from under my feet" or to her cats "shoo, get off the counter, now."

Get into how we ate earlier in the south, started drinking much earlier, which lead to Shawn's brother, Kenny, and I getting into a fun-loving wrestling match, because they

loved WWF, me picking him up for a body slam, him grabbing my boob and then him and Shawn getting into a real throw down because his brother pointed a loaded shot-gun on him.

On the fifth day of Christmas vacation, as Mama cried, and hugged and kissed us goodbye as if it were the last time, I learned that even though Mama and her wall-sized rebel flag were rough around the edges, that I loved her because in the span of 5 days she made me feel more at home than I have ever felt before and I suddenly realized that this city girl was really a country girl at heart.

The following narrative is the revised “build-up” version that I developed after rehearsal.



*Holiday Show

“The Holiday Show: A Celebration of Firsts” (Build-Up Version)

(*If you have a “scan” app on your cell phone, please scan the QR code to watch the performance via YouTube)

I was born and raised in the suburbs of Philly and learned through shows like the Dukes of Hazard that pretty much anyone living south of Philly was redneck, which meant that everyone is related to each other because all the towns are that small and that the people in these towns wear denim overalls with oil-stained t-shirts, drive oversized loud, muddy vehicles, make their own alcohol, have a southern drawl that sounds like mumbling, and says “Hey Y’all,” or call everyone “Sugar.”

You can imagine my surprise when I met Shawn, my now husband, who did not wear denim overalls or oil-stained t-shirts and he told me that he was from South Carolina. We worked together, became friends, and then started dating. We decided to spend our first Christmas together with his family at his mother’s home in Moncks Corner. We would stay five days, arriving a few days before Christmas and leaving on the 26th.

I had talked to Shawn’s mom several times over the phone before meeting her and she would tell me how much she loved me even though she had never met me because I made her son smile. I was beginning to understand the “Sugar” reference because her

southern drawl was just as sweet. Based on Shawn's appearance and his mother's sugary southern drawl, I began to develop a different picture of what his family was like and what life was really like in the South.

On our first day of Christmas vacation, Shawn and I drove from Alabama to SC and as Shawn turned our car off the paved highway onto a gravel road and then down a long dirt driveway in the pitch dark where the only light came from the windows of his mother's double-wide trailer, I began to rethink my picture.

When I walked into his mom's double-wide trailer and saw a larger than life rebel flag hanging on the living room wall, you better believe this Yankee was scared, more scared than the time I was at my friend's 8th birthday party and her dad whipped out a penis lighter to light his cigarette.

Because something else I learned growing up is that rednecks who were proud of the rebel flag are dangerous people.

Suddenly the phrase, "Surviving the holidays" took on a literal sense.

Shawn's mother's name is Terrie Lee (Yes, after Robert E. Lee) and she greeted us in her living room and insisted that I was not allowed to call her Miss Terrie, or Ms. Rollins, or anything else except Mama and I wasn't about to fuck with a red-headed bartender wearing a Nascar t-shirt with a tattoo on the loose skin between her thumb and first finger, and who referred to herself as "The Bitch."

She proceeded to tell me that I was unlike her son's miserable ex-wife who punched him in the face one time in the heat of an argument.

“He got her back good though, he head-butted her in the middle of the night on accident cause he was havin’ a bad dream.”

She also insisted that I have some Lemonade.

“It’s not as good as mine cause Aunt Dusty made it, but it’ll do ya,”

As I wondered who Aunt Dusty was, Mama hooked her arm in mine, escorted me down the long hall to the kitchen and announced to a large group of people, who were each wearing at least one piece of camouflage clothing, “Kimberly’s here y’all.”

Mama sat me at the kitchen table and poured me a cup of lemonade, which came from a glass jar that was in the freezer.

On the second day of Christmas vacation, I learned that I was glad that I had not committed to going deer hunting the night before because even though we were hung over from the “lemonade,” Mama insisted that unless you were out the door by 5:30am to go deer hunting, there was no point going. I laughed as Shawn stumbled to get his shit together in the pitch dark, but not for too long as I learned that the 5:30am wake-up call wasn’t just for those going hunting.

Shopping at 6 a.m. at WalMart for Christmas dinner in two days seemed unnecessary, but, again I wasn’t going to fuck with the red head. When we climbed in Mama’s Dodge Ram extended cab pick-up truck, she bitched about the sticky Pepsi can and gum-wrappers that her boyfriend left in the truck. She bitched about the way other people parked when she couldn’t pull her tank-like truck in the spot just right. She had a verbal and physical encounter with a shopping cart when it wouldn’t detach from the

others, and pulled out a grocery list that filled the better part of a yellow, legal-sized piece of paper.

That's when I wished I had gone hunting.

On the third day of Christmas vacation, I learned that the bedroom just past the hall bath that always had the door closed was Shawn's grandmothers room and that she had, in fact, been in her room this whole time. Which sort of creeped me out when I thought about it, but Mama said she wasn't rude or antisocial, that she was very sick and bedridden, so then I felt bad.

That night, we decided to go to a bonfire, so I left my full unopened bottle of Crown Royal on the kitchen counter. Only to discover it empty when we returned.

I was like "What the..."

Mama was piss drunk, fell laughing on the floor, and eventually told me that her mother is bedridden but can smell a bottle of alcohol from a mile away. She told me that her mother is an alcoholic and that the doc cut her off, but that she'd drink anything left on the counter, which is why they stored their alcohol in the freezer.

The fourth day of Christmas vacation was Christmas day. I woke up to the smell of pecan and pumpkin pies baking alongside of homemade breakfast biscuits, collards with ham bone flavor rising in the steam of the pot and the sounds of the thud from the cast iron skillet on the stove cooking sausage milk gravy and Mama yelling at her dog, Duke, "go on now, get out from under my feet" or to her cat, Smokey, "shoo, get off the counter, now."

I thought it was a little too early for his mom to be cooking the full-fledged Christmas meal, but I found out that southerners eat earlier, which I thought was a pretty cool concept because you essentially get to eat Christmas dinner twice in one day, but this also means they start drinking much earlier, at least we did.

By 4pm, Shawn, Mama, Shawn's 4 brothers, fathers, aunts, uncles and I had drank ourselves into a conversation about WWF wrestling. Eventually this turned into a northern versus southern interpretation of the famed show and Shawn's younger brother, Kenny, and I got into a fun-loving, drunken, wrestling match where I picked him up for a throw down and to save his pride from getting his ass whooped by a girl, he squeezed my boob and I dropped him. We laughed and drank more beer.

Later that evening and after more drinks, Kenny and Shawn ended up getting into a real throw down after Kenny pointed a shot-gun on him. Shawn held him down with a knee to the back and the rest of his weight pushing Kenny's face into the carpet until he cried "uncle." Which he did and then the two brothers cracked open several more beers together and we all sat around and laughed at how scared Kenny was when he realized Shawn was going to whoop his ass.

On the fifth day of Christmas vacation, as Mama cried, and hugged and kissed us goodbye as if it were the last time, as she still does today, I learned that even though Mama and her wall-sized rebel flag were rough around the edges that I loved her because in the span of 5 days she made me feel more at home than I have ever felt before and I realized that this city girl was really a country girl at heart.

“Connecting with an Audience”



While most storytelling venues offer guests food and beverages for purchase, to include beer and wine, a storyteller can't rely on satisfied bellies and quenched palates to connect with an audience - sometimes, we have to do the work on our own. There are two great tools to help make that connection that every storyteller comes equipped with: 1. A voice, and 2. A body.

Storytellers are performers and performers

transform themselves for the stage. Transforming for the kind of storytelling stage I'm talking about doesn't mean becoming someone else. It's worse; it means becoming more like the self that only you really know you are, the self that does the dishes and laundry in the nude or buys a pint of Ben & Jerry's Phish Food frozen yogurt and scarfs it all in one sitting before the kids get home from school. (What? It was frozen YOGURT!) This is the self that you might never share with your lover or best friend, only with the bathroom mirror, but it's the self you bring to the stage for a story.

When I come to the stage I bring my "raunchiness," as one audience member told me. My life experiences have been nothing less, so what other kind of voice could portray a story about the time I had to button the crotch of a piece of lingerie in front of my boyfriend's mother, or the time my friends and I smoked weed on a road trip to see Jerry Springer in Chicago, or the time I told a 5th grade classmate that he broke my bed

in front of the whole class - what kind of voice would you trust to tell these stories?

Mine.

I don't censor myself. I tell every story like it happened in a voice that is true to my experience. I do this because I want to provide an experience for the audience.

As for the body as a tool, of course I'm talking about body language, so I make sure not to move my hands around too much and wear something that makes me feel like I look sexy as hell, so that way if I think my story sucks, at least I look damn good telling it!



*15 Minutes of Fame

Finding Jerry Springer

(*If you have a “scan” app on your cell phone, please scan the QR code to watch the performance via YouTube)

The year was 1996 and I was your typical teenager. You know, the know it all type. Adults are lame. Friends are cool. In fact, pretty much the only time I listened to my parents is when I called my dad at work to tell him I was going to join the military. After all his begging, when he realized I wasn't going to change my mind, he said just don't join the Marines.

It's not that my dad didn't respect the Marines. In fact, it was the complete opposite. He was a Marine. A 3rd Force Recon Marine who fought during Vietnam and he just couldn't picture his daughter on the front lines, so I walked into the military recruitment building in my suburban Philly town, past the Marines, and told the guy in the next office, which happened to be the Air Force, to “Sign me up!”

This kind of spontaneous, not well-thought-out idea was my signature style in my teen years. My friends' parents called it rebellious, but my friends just called me “Crazy.” And what they meant by Crazy is that I was usually the one who had all the hair-brained ideas that would have us running from some pissed off parents, (usually not our own), the police, and sometimes we were lucky to survive the situation.

So, knowing that I was going to be leaving in a few months to go to boot camp, and thinking I would never be able to do anything “Crazy” again, I wanted to do something big. I didn’t know what, but I knew it had to top the list.

Now when I had this epiphany, I happened to be watching the Jerry Springer show with my best friend, Jen. We were big fans and stayed up late at her house most nights to watch this show and when I said to Jen, “Dude, let’s get tickets to Jerry Springer,” it didn’t surprise her, but she did have to think about it for a moment before getting on board because she knew this would mean we would have to drive from Philly to Chicago where the show was taped – 760 miles, 11 hours!

Our other friend, Kellie, said she would make the drive with us, while the rest of our friends passed on the adventure and joked that we would never make it. It had nothing to do with transportation because I had an 1987 Sparkly Blue Crown Victoria. It was a boat of a car, but reliable and plenty of room for us and all of our stuff. What our friends meant is that they didn’t think the three of us would be able to find our way out of Philly.

To prove them wrong, we decided #1, not to bring any weed because we knew that would fuck us up and we might actually get lost and #2 that we would videotape the entire drive, making sure to get every toll booth person to say hi and to say what state we were entering.

So when we made it all the way to Pittsburgh with no problems, we laughed in the face of our friends, through our video camera of course, because not only did we make it to Pittsburgh, but we had a great time along the way. Kellie was mooning truckers, Jen

had made a mixed tape and we were on our second round of that, and we were all chain-smoking cigarettes because we could.

And then it happened, our first major setback just past the steel city – not the tanker accident that closed the road and had us sitting in hours of traffic, which made us drive the shoulder to the next exit to a Bob’s Big Boy because Kellie had to pee - but the part where we decided to find a hotel because it was past midnight.

We drove for miles looking for a hotel and finally we found a motel and I’m not exaggerating when I tell you that there was a light fog when we pulled into the empty parking lot. Still, we thought it best to stay at the runned-down, Norman Bates-like motel with neon pink, yellow & green lights boasting “Free HBO” and “Mirrored Jacuzzi Tubs” which I entertained the idea of the Jacuzzi, but Kellie was like “No way in hell, there’s probably old sperm and pubes floating around in those things.” Besides, we really didn’t have the money.

None of us remember what the check-in guy looked like, but we do remember that he was way too excited about 3 teenage girls checking in and that he tried to convince us to get the Jacuzzi tub several times. We got our room key as quick as we could. Driving to our room it seemed like we were the only overnight customers and when we walked into the room we agreed that was probably because they normally only rent these rooms out by the hour.

There were doors on the left and right side of the room that looked like closet doors and then we realized they were doors that connected to the other motel rooms, we shoved chairs under the doorknobs because we saw that in a movie once. The room

looked and smelled like the sheets hadn't been changed since the 70s, the décor had definitely never been updated and we didn't shower because there was a brown ring around the bathtub that did not resemble a water stain. Needless to say, we barely slept that night and we left at daybreak.

When we finally reached Chicago, it was a sight for sore eyes. The buildings were beautiful and the familiar sounds of city life came as a relief. Even the Motel 6, where we were staying was elegant and towered over the city streets. We couldn't wait to see the view from our room!

The only problem is that the parking garage was not connected to the building. The front door person told us that the parking garage was next to the hotel, across a four lane street. So we had to drop our stuff off and then drive to the garage. Kellie stayed behind and Jen and I went to park the car.

So, we waited in the left turn lane for a green light and took in the sights of the towering buildings and busy traffic of the opposing four-lane street. The light turned green, but there was no left turn arrow. The traffic on the other side didn't budge though. So I asked Jen, "Should we go? Are we missing something here? Maybe they do it differently in Chicago."

Jen said, "It doesn't look like they're moving." So I went for it.

We crossed the third lane and had the opening to the garage in our sight...and then a cab came barreling down the fourth lane. We saw it and didn't have time to brace for impact. The cab nailed Jen's side at full speed and I remember turning away because I

was afraid to see whatever was going to happen to her, happen to her. Luckily, my Crown Vic was a heavy duty car with a strong box-type frame.

So, although the chrome grill was hanging from the frame, the hood ornament and passenger side mirror were gone, the sparkly blue paint was mixed with red paint from the cab, and the passenger side wheel-well was smashed in so far that the tire was exposed, Jen and I were fine and got out of the car, which the people of Chicago weren't too fond of because with no blood or dead bodies strewn across the street, all we were doing was holding up the lunch rush hour.

People started hollering out their car windows "Get your car outta the road!" and honking their horns. So, still shaking from the shock of the accident, we drove the car into the garage and parked. Then we walked ten city blocks to the nearest precinct to file a report. The cabbie never showed and the cops acted like it was nothing new.

In the meantime, Kellie was back at the room wondering what the hell happened to us. She thought we got kidnapped or something horrible and was obviously relieved when we walked through the door. We explained what happened to us and we all agreed to lay low that night with everything we had been through and since the show was the next morning.

It turned out to be a beautiful morning and the walk to the NBC building where the show was taped was not far and we giggled the entire time and said "I can't believe we're doing this, this is so crazy" about a million times. The familiar peacock logo stood out against the other buildings and we walked in, handed over our tickets just like we were at the movies, and a guide led a large group of us through the building to the studio

area, where they told us that Jerry Spring himself would greet us at the door and let us in. I haven't met too many famous people, but when Jerry shook my hand I thought he looks exactly like he does on TV as he does in person.

Well, once I got past Jerry, the idea of experiencing the show with Jen & Kellie went out the window. A guide rushed me to a designated seat. In fact, we were all seated separately. If we had had cell phones back then, I guess we could have texted each other but instead we just had to look at each other across our seats and wave like dorks because we were so excited.

The Jerry Springer show was forgettable. That's right, I said forgettable. Besides not being able to sit together, the show was about some dad who was heartbroken because his daughter smokes weed! Lame! It was a real heart-to-heart so no one got their hair pulled and no chairs got thrown. In fact, the most exciting thing that happened is that at the end of the show, the security guard asked us to stay for a second show, which must have been a dud too because none of us can remember what it was about.

Afterwards, we said we didn't care. After making it all that way on our own, we just wanted our fifteen minutes of fame to prove our other friends wrong and thank God Jen's parents recorded it on their VCR, or no one might have ever known because it's not like they let us bring our own video camera to the show.

On the way home my car overheated and the last four hours of the trip, smoke was coming up from under the hood. My dad said the belt stopped running and he couldn't believe we made it home alive without the engine blowing up. As it turns out, the military doesn't let you drive in basic training anyway. But this was the last of my

hair-brained ideas before leaving for boot camp. A success in some ways and in other ways not so much, but more than anything it topped the list.

“Quality Over Quantity”

When I'm contemplating about what to write for a show, demonstrated by the "candid" photo to the right (yes, I always look that kick-ass when I'm deep in thought), I think about the details that will get a reaction from the audience and then I think about the



photo courtesy of VivoPhoto

relevance of those details. Because it's quality over quantity when you only have 5 - 7 minutes to relay a story on stage that would take up to 20 minutes to read from the page.

So, what's a storyteller to do? How do we, as they say in the writing business, kill our darlings?

What we have to keep in mind is that we need to deliver a story. And, the story has to be interesting enough to captivate our audience for those fleeting moments when a storyteller is on stage. To do that does not require bells and whistles - that would be a piece of cake. In fact, on nights when the room falls silent at a part in my story that I thought would make everyone laugh out loud, I'd rather jump out of a cake, ringing bells and blowing whistles.

Our first impulse is to tell a story as we experienced it - in chronological order. Which is okay when you're having a cup of coffee with a friend at a cafe, but not so much when you're trying to entertain hundreds of people. To find a happy medium when crafting a story requires experimentation in learning which details will push your story forward, confuse the audience, or add a bit of flavor. For instance, when I first wrote my story for "Road to the Altar" I had to condense the details about the many dates I went on

with my ex-beau to keep the story moving and to keep the audience interested. Because no matter how funny my experiences were on these dates, there's only so much a person can stand before a story becomes redundant and then painfully boring. This is how I have learned to kill my darlings on the page and leave only the most crucial details for the stage - like the ones, in *Altar*, when I describe how I had to get dressed in front of my ex-beau's mother and realized I only had...well, I'll let you find out for yourself in the transcribed story below, or if your cellular phone has a "scan" app, you can scan the QR code below to see the performance via YouTube.



*Road to the Altar

Dream a Little Dream

(*If you have a “scan” app on your cell phone, scan the QR code to watch the performance via YouTube)

You know how people say that when a man sees an attractive woman he begins thinking with the wrong head, well I wish I knew how to translate that same thinking process for women because that’s what happened to me when I saw Ken (not his real name) for the first time while I was waiting in the hall dreading my 10th grade Algebra class. Ken was tall with thick, dark hair, the kind every woman wants to run her fingers through, soap-opera deep blue eyes - a soccer God.

I remember watching him that year argue quite frequently with his girlfriend, I assumed it was his girlfriend, in front of his locker that was outside of my math class. I thought *that girl is crazy* – you don’t treat a guy that hot like that. It became apparent to me that I was crushing on this guy, but I never made a move because he had a girlfriend, he was a senior and I was a lowly 10th-grader (only 15 years old), and I didn’t know shit about approaching a guy who I thought was hot.

So, I let it go and out of sight and out of mind since he graduated, I forgot about him. Then, he came walking into the steak and hoagie shop where I was working one summer. The high school crush feelings rushed back and I found out that he was home from college for the summer and working with a landscaping company owned by one of our regular customers.

It was a small shop, so in order to gawk at him while he sat down to eat, I had to act like I was cleaning the lunchmeat fridge or the milkshake containers or restocking the pickles. I told the regular about my crush once his crew left the shop and I was cashing him out. The guy ran out of the store immediately and when he came back he said that Ken would like my phone number so he can call me later.

Our first date happened to be on my 16th birthday in early July and by the end of that summer, our dates turned into scenes from a Nicholas Sparks book (well, they were at least adventurous): Ken got a ticket for making an illegal left turn; we smoked pot on the stairs of the Free Library in Philly before seeing a Pink Floyd laser light show; we laughed together as I sat in dog crap on a romantic night out to look at stars (and then he drove me home; we talked about making love for the first time on the beach, but instead did it in a twin-sized bed and only right after we both brushed our teeth of course; we hugged hard when he left to go back to college and we fell in love.

But then I grew jealous.

Sometimes when I called his dorm room, I heard girls giggling in the background. One time a girl answered his phone. It's not that I didn't trust him, I believed him when he told me these girls were his friends, but I wanted to be the one giggling by his side. I was afraid he'd forget about me – out of sight, out of mind.

And this is the part where I started thinking with the wrong head because I thought acting desperate would get his attention. What I didn't expect when I called him drunk off my ass and lied to him that another guy tried to kiss me, is that he would break up with me. Here's a dating tip for ya ladies: some guys don't find desperate women

attractive. He let me down easy with the “It’s not you, it’s me” line, but I was devastated – my plan had backfired. I guess I expected him to run home from college and be with me instead.

As I began my senior year in high school and he began his sophomore year in college, we kept in touch through friendly conversation over the phone even though we were officially broken up and I thought, maybe there’s still a chance and I felt even better about that when he invited me to a family wedding in New York for New Year’s Eve.

His mom, dad, older brother, his brother’s girlfriend of a few years, Ken and I piled into his parents minivan and made the drive from Philly to upstate NY. Ken was quiet and didn’t sit close to me and he barely talked to me. It seemed like he didn’t want me there, but I was desperate for more time with him, so I didn’t mind. And I knew the surprise I had in store would bring him around.

Since I thought this trip was going to be an opportunity to rekindle the flame, I decided to surprise Ken with a low-cut and very short red-velvet dress from Fredericks of Hollywood and I decided to buy a soft pink teddy from Vicky’s to wear underneath.

Now, if I had known that I was going to be getting ready for the wedding in the same room as Ken’s mother and his brother’s girlfriend, I might have thought twice about my selection of clothing AND snapping the lingerie at the crotch before I put it on because I then had to bend my head between my legs to try and snap the buttons together. At this point, there was no doubt what the elephant in the room was and I couldn’t figure out who was more uncomfortable.

This effort turned out to be a complete waste of time because Ken ignored me at the wedding, even avoiding giving me a New Year's Eve kiss when 12am rolled around. But when his brother drove the four of us back to his aunt's house where we were staying, he tried to get me to rub him off in the same room where his brother and his brother's girlfriend and the two of us were all watching television. Needless to say I was ready to go home. I sat silent on the ride home to Philly.

The part of me that was thinking with the right head told me, *Well, Kim, that was it. As terrible as it was, that's the last time you're ever going to hear from Ken and you need to accept that.* And I did.

A year after the wedding, after I graduated high school, I was home on military leave when I ran into him at a local bar. He was almost through with college and home on a break. This was another example of me using the wrong head because I did one of the dumbest things - I left the group of girls I was out with to take him home.

We started making out on the couch in his parents' living room and it wasn't until I tried to talk to him about everything that happened between us when I realized: 1) he wasn't interested in talking and 2) he was completely trashed.

I told him that I didn't feel comfortable doing anything with his parents right upstairs and he said okay, then he laid down on the couch, put his head on my lap, and passed out.

I was in a strange dilemma – I didn't want to leave, but I knew it was time to say goodbye.

I somehow got myself off the couch without waking him up, the way passed out drunken people do, and although my heart was aching I gave him a kiss on his forehead, walked out his front door, and drove away from his house for the last time and I haven't heard from him or seen him since.

Just like I always wondered about the first summer we spent together, I wondered when he finally woke up the next day, if he thought it was all a dream.

It's easy to tell at this point that each show's theme is based on common life experiences, like broken hearts, making resolutions, and lying. Storytelling companies always advertise a theme because:

- 1) It offers a prompt for the storytellers ,
- 2) It offers a way for the storytellers to focus their ideas and shape their stories,
- 3) It offers a way for the audience to connect with the teller and those around them - who wants to be the only sap in the room who's had their heart broken? Most likely you would go to this show because you've had your heart broken and guaranteed to be surrounded by people who can empathize with you!

A theme is what begins the story, keeps it moving forward, and brings us to an overall understanding and makes that human connection in the end. But, how does a storyteller transform their themed experience into a story that's worth telling? How do I make the story about how my daughter warmed my heart on one of winter's coldest nights? It's a process, and one that I share with you below.



*Winter Nights

Finding Warmth

(*If you have a “scan” app on your cell phone, scan the QR code to watch the performance via YouTube)

My first experience helping a homeless person was when I was fifteen, in Philly. I was taking the train from the Gallery, which is a huge inner-city mall with its own train stop, to get back to the suburbs where I lived. There was a bunch of us in a line waiting to board the train and I watched as this homeless woman, thin as a wafer, approached the line, going from person to person asking for money – she wasn’t giving any excuses, she was just flat out asking for money. I was the end of the line and the train had just pulled up.

I was young, some may say naïve, but I had a steady job with decent pay for my age and I had some cash on me. I knew I was going to help this woman. I have always liked helping people out ever since I was a little girl, whether it was my parents around the house, a friend with their chores, or my brother when him and his buddies needed a goalie for their street hockey game. I really enjoy being a part of making people smile.

When the woman approached me and asked in a soft, strained voice if I could spare some change, I smiled and handed her a folded 5 dollar bill and I felt good about myself because no one else had given her the time of day, let alone money.

She looked at me in such disbelief, that I thought she must be thinking about how kind I was and I almost said you're welcome before she said what she had to say which was "You're the devil!"

A 5-dollar bill in exchange for a curse. I was in shock, my feelings were hurt, but more than anything, I was scared – thank God I was getting on the train. This experience left me cold. One of those people who turned their heads when I saw a homeless person even start to look my way. I felt guilty about it because that's not who I was but I wasn't going to play the fool again.

In 2006, I gave birth to my only daughter, Taylor, and anyone who has met her will tell you that she has an old and tender soul. Her teacher told me this year that when my daughter looks into her eyes, it's like she's looking into her soul. Taylor has never met a stranger and she's quite the character. All of these personalities combined make people warm up to her and love her instantly.

It was the year after Snowmagedden in Northern Virginia, which was an even colder winter because we had blistering winds, and my family and I lived in apartments in Reston. My daughter was 4-years-old and on the way home from her daycare, we would stop at a crowded gas station to fill up.

That's when Taylor and I noticed him. We'll call him John.

John carried his life's belongings in six plastic grocery bags. His clothes were weathered, discolored, too thin and too short to protect his ankles from the cold wind. I would see him walking the streets of Reston, sometimes sitting on the brick wall of the library or on a bench in front of Best Buy, and then at night he seemed to disappear.

Except that he didn't.

At night, he made his home behind the store of that crowded gas station and Taylor and I watched him as we waited inside our warm car for the tank to fill up. He seemed to be helping store management by keeping their entry rugs clean and picking up trash at the front curb and I guess it was a trade-off because he would go into the warm store, walk a few laps around the small isles, then leave and go back behind the building.

Taylor, also observant and curious as most kids her age, asked, "Who's that guy? What's he doing?" I explained to her that he was a homeless man and then I had to explain what that meant.

"You mean he lives behind that building, out in this cold weather all night long?"

"Yes, honey"

"He really doesn't have a place to live?"

"No, and he probably doesn't have much of anything else either, hun."

Our conversation almost brought her to the point of tears, and it upset me to see her so emotional. So when she suggested that we buy him a banana, because that's her favorite fruit, and some hot cocoa to keep him warm, because that's her favorite drink on a cold night, I couldn't tell her no.

With "You're the devil" still etched in my mind from so long ago, I was reluctant and scared to approach John, especially with my daughter. But she was so excited to help him out and I wanted her to have a chance to feel good about that, like I used to.

John's bushy, gray beard reached his belly and whipped in the wind as he graciously accepted the bag with a water bottle, pretzels, and, of course, the banana, and cup of hot cocoa.

Taylor said to John, in her sweet and innocent 4-year-old voice, "We got that just for you."

John thanked her and gave her a big genuine smile, then walked behind the building.

When my daughter turned to me and said she was glad that we helped that guy out, I could see the excitement in her eyes and I was happy for her, and even though she wouldn't have understood why, I wanted to thank her too because in this moment, she had warmed a part of my heart that had been cold for too long.

What Not to Wear



photo courtesy of Better Said Than Done

The best part about being a storyteller is that you get to see how horrible you look. And this is a good thing. Really.

The photo to the left is a picture from my

first storytelling event. With the

exception of my older brother, I'm what people call "athletic" or "big boned" when they can't think of a nicer word for overweight - my brother has absolutely no qualms about telling me I need to lose a few, but that's a story for another time.

Although it's hard to tell in the photo, I'm about 30lbs. of "big-boned" over what I should weigh, I haven't had my hair professionally styled in years, and I'm wearing something that I thought would hide all of this, but only made it stand out more - a thickly-ribbed, black sweater. And thick girls should not wear thick sweaters! Not to mention that my colorful lipstick wore off from drinking too much water before and then licking my lips during the performance because they felt so dry from being nervous. And, I'm always hardest on myself about my damn eyeglasses because my ears aren't even, so it always looks like my glasses are crooked - for anyone who requires the use of eyeglasses on a regular basis, you feel my pain!

Physical presentation in storytelling matters just as much as the story. Like I mentioned in my last post, it's all about a teller's voice and body language. And part of that body language includes your physical appearance. I'm going cliché' but because you never get a second chance to make a first impression, you have to play the part. If you

watch my storytelling videos in succession, you will see a noticeable change in my appearance. I go from frumpy, wanna-be stylish, hippie urbanite to a less frumpy and more aware of what looks good on me urbanite. I don't claim hotness; I don't care to claim it, but I think it's important to know what not to wear in front of an audience, and, especially, in front of the camera.

Here's my list of what not to wear for a performance (mostly for women):

1. Anything that is so form fitting that you resemble Dolly Parton in the chest, even if in reality you don't.
2. Anything that shows the audience whether or not you're wearing underwear, even with the slightest tilt of the hips or bend in the knees.
3. Anything that is too bright to stare at for longer than ten seconds, even if you don a thickly-ribbed black sweater over top.
4. For guys, any pair of jeans tighter than the ones real cowboys wear, especially if you expect any woman in the audience to listen to your story and not stare at your package.
5. Any combination of 1, 2, or 3, even if you're afraid your story sucks and are looking for ways to distract the audience - remember, this will go down on your permanent record.

I lost those 30lbs and felt great when I told the story below about being awkward.



*Awkward

Feeling Normal

(*If you have a “scan” app on your cell phone, scan the QR code to watch the performance via YouTube)

When I was in 5th grade my parents were going through their post-divorce mid-life crisis. Let’s just put it this way, my mom had her motto steam pressed onto a shirt that she got on the boardwalk in Jersey that said: Life in the Fast Lane...and we all know that you can’t have kids and live life in the fast lane and my dad, well, he was having so much post-divorce premarital sex that it would have killed my Catholic grandmother if it wasn’t for her rosary and her highballs of scotch. My brother, who had always been my rock was in teenager status, so he was too cool to acknowledge me because he had all these girlfriends and friends or whatever. I felt alone, left out, left behind.

But not for too long because I’ll talk to anyone. It’s a trait that I both love and hate about myself. I love it because it’s nice to meet new people, but it’s horrible for when you’re trying to do anything quickly, like ask for directions. But it was this trait that created a life-long friendship with Jen, one of my 5th grade classmates. In fact, we became best friends and I knew we were best friends because I passed her a note during class and she marked the box that said “best friends,” when clearly there was another option that just said “friends.” Pretty much solidified it for me.

So it seemed that things were looking up for me and even more so because Jen and I had built a good relationship with our teacher, Mrs. Dempsey. Every Monday we

would tell her stories about our weekend adventures – you know, typical kid things like seeing aliens, conducting a séance on Jen’s Ouja board and summoning a little girls spirit, and the brilliant idea of rubbing baby oil on ourselves and then lying out on my mom’s black tarred roof to get a tan. No matter how farfetched the story, Mrs. Dempsey always listened with patience and she never judged us, she just made us feel like she was genuinely interested in what we had to say and gave us a sense that she cared.

So even though my life at home was in chaos, I had Jen, I had Mrs. Dempsey, life wasn’t so bad and then our class got a new student – Paul. Paul was the new blue-eyed, blonde-haired hunk in town. I knew immediately that we were soulmates because his face turned beat red when Mrs. Dempsey introduced him in the front of the classroom, just like mine does when I’m completely embarrassed! I’m told that’s from my parents drinking too much when I was conceived, but anyway, so there was Paul and there’s all these other 10-year-old girls drooling and I was going to be damned if I wasn’t the one he picked to be his girlfriend. Because you know, all girls think the new boy has to pick a girlfriend.

The day Paul came in just happened to be that time of the schoolyear where we all had to move our desks around and it worked out (after much begging) that Mrs. Dempsey let me and Jen sit next to Paul, but then Jen forgot her glasses, so then she made us move to the front of the room. I guess I could have let Jen go alone, but I knew that wasn’t right. But, that didn’t stop me and eventually, I did get to sit next to Paul and I was going to fight tooth and nail to stay there the rest of the year. Nothing could discourage me.

And by nothing I mean, not even the time I leaned over to get my trapper keeper and ripped a big one by mistake right in Paul's direction, or the time I played a cassette tape for the entire class during recess where I recorded myself at home pretending to be Paul doing flips off my headboard onto my bed to the point that I broke my bedframe and I told Paul that he broke my bed in front of the entire class, or when he didn't respond to the love letters Jen and I wrote him (yes, Jen wrote him love letters too but it was ok because she was my best friend) and shoved into this strange looking white vent that shot out hot air by the basement window at his house. Again, nothing could discourage me...until the day he picked Stephanie to be his girlfriend. You know, I don't remember feeling let down or sad, I just remember that life went on.

In fact, it had been more than 20 years since I thought about those memories from 5th grade when Jen, who stills lives in our hometown and whose son also had Mrs. Dempsey for 5th grade, called to tell me that she saw Mrs. Dempsey's obituary in the paper. We shared a moment of silence and I knew we were thinking the same thing and it had nothing to do with our memories of aliens, séances, tanning, or all of my awkward moments trying to get Paul's attention.

It had everything to do with our appreciation for the way Mrs. Dempsey made us feel normal.

Backstage Pass: Words Not Spoken

One of my favorite bible verses of all time is not one that I heard, or at least remember hearing while sitting at Sunday mass with my grandparents, my dad, and my aunt, sometimes Uncle Bob, too, if his head was clear. The first time the verse made any impact on me was when I heard Kevin Bacon read it for his role in the movie “Footloose.” The verse is Ecclesiastes 3:1 “A Time for Everything,” and it’s a list of every “purpose under the heaven.” Just like the cliché saying, the verse suggests that everything happens for a reason and that for everything, there is a time and place.

This spiritually based proverb is something that all storytellers should take into consideration because there is a time and place for every detail. Storytellers are expected to accomplish the near impossible in under seven minutes by telling a meaningful story from start to finish. Which, according to a standard story arc includes exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and some form of a conclusion, whether things are resolved in the end is not required. In storytelling, timing is everything. Maybe there’s not enough time to cram every detail of the story into the 5-7 minute window, maybe the story doesn’t tie in with the theme so it needs to be told another time, or maybe the storyteller hasn’t thought enough about the experience and needs more time to reflect because he or she doesn’t yet know the story. So, there are details that we must leave out and, therefore, words that are not spoken.

When part of the story just doesn't fit the theme or it sidetracks from the main point for too long, it confuses listeners and they spend the rest of the time trying to catch-up in their minds and figure out where the story left off and what they should be thinking about to stay on track. Obviously in doing this, they quit listening and then the story becomes a wash for the audience. For example, in the section when I talked about the story of getting to the Moth to see Jen Lee perform, there was a huge chunk that after much deliberating, I had to cut. Granted that was an essay and not a performance piece, so there might have been a possibility for me to take advantage of certain liberties, but the story of that section was to talk about how I was trying to find inspiration and that my experience at the Moth influenced my drive to tell stories as a performance art.

There was the underlying story of juggling being a stay-at-home mom in an unhappy marriage, but those were just catalysts for why I started searching for inspiration. If I had kept the chunk of story that focused on my husband in that section, the essay would have taken an entirely new direction and I'm not sure that I could have brought my readers (listeners respectively) back to the story about the Moth, or made my experience going there as significant in comparison to what was happening in my relationship with my husband. To make that story work, I had to cut the section that originally followed the dialogue where Shawn asked me if attending artistic events was going to be a recurring theme. I cut this section because I wanted to keep the focus on what influenced me to start storytelling. The story about my husband will have a place of its own at another time and to help you understand why, I have narrated it below:

My body let loose from the initial tension and now I just wanted to fall to the floor in a ball of mush because I felt judged, just like those morons he worked with. Except it wasn't those morons, it was my husband. I thought he understood the goals I had set for myself, the ones that he had seen me, or at least I thought he noticed, put into practice by myself and with Taylor over the past few weeks. I thought he was on board with me when I told him how Squam re-ignited my passion for creativity and that I wanted a chance to explore what that meant. Unfortunately, because we weren't really communicating with each other, neither one of us ever thought that this might have nothing to do with me. It was only going to be an overnight trip from a Saturday to a Sunday, so there was no way I wasn't going. Shawn would have to give up work for one weekend and figure out what to tell Gannon if he called.

Shawn wasn't processing what was happening to him when he was going through it, probably because he didn't have the time with near one-hundred hour work weeks, and because we weren't communicating in that deep way, I had no idea what his life was like at work. We eventually grasped a few years too late that although Shawn allowed it to happen, that Gannon and his wife Manasvi, who also worked closely with Shawn on projects, were manipulating him and controlling everything he said and the way he conducted himself at work. They told him which suits he should wear depending on what they had going on that day. If Shawn had a meeting, Gannon would tell him exactly what he should say, who he should make eye contact with, and then he would send Manasvi to the meeting to make sure Shawn carried through with what was expected. One misstep and both Gannon and Manasvi would approach him face to face, call him on his cell, or

text him to express their immense disappointment in him, yet not at the same time. He'd have an hour long conversation with one in the afternoon, only to have the other call him on his way home from work at 8 o'clock at night. This went on every day for several years, never a break. And I only knew about a handful of times.

The calculating mind games they played with Shawn poked deeper holes into his vulnerable state of depression. They broke him down further both mentally and physically. Shawn had always been a trim, athletic guy with long and lean muscles. He didn't have to exercise, his good shape was in his genes, but in the three years he worked with the dangerous duo, he put on at least twenty-five pounds and had high blood pressure. One time, he was so stressed that he passed out and fell backwards towards me as we were walking. Somehow I managed to protect my 6'4", 235lb. husband from hitting his head on the ground. He was hospitalized for several days, in and out of consciousness, and then bed ridden for six weeks. The many specialists who examined him during his stay in the hospital could not decipher what had happened. They sent him home even though I thought he was dying from an unidentified illness because the energy he exerted even when I assisted him on the ten-foot walk from our bed to the master bathroom put him to sleep for hours. His family, my family, and I were prepared for the worst.

I'm sure Gannon and Manasvi thought that they would have him eating out of the palm of their hands forever, but when he was able to return to work, they tried to manipulate our home life, too, and that's when their puppet cut his strings. In 2010, I became pregnant with our second child. When Shawn told Gannon and Manasvi, they

criticized us and said that getting pregnant was the worst decision we could have made. Shawn said they said things much worse, but that he did not want to tell me. It was probably better for our baby that he didn't. Not because my blood pressure would have risen, but because I would have gotten all "Philly" on them, a term that means conducting yourself in a manner deemed ghetto like using a folding lawn chair to save your parking spot or that you are about to kick someone's ass. I was on the verge of the latter and if Shawn had told me anything else, I probably would have stalked their house, approached them when they came home, and threw my fist into whoever's face it landed on first.

Shawn and I might not have been communicating like a married couple should, but we liked each other, which is more difficult than loving someone. And because we liked each other we started communicating again about how he needed to get the hell out of this fucked up situation once and for all. He felt that he had my support and that helped him regain a sense of self. Shawn was our only means of a pay check, so we wanted to exit the situation tactfully. He had another government contract lined up, but that was still a few weeks away and the first paycheck even further, but Shawn said that he was done with the mind games and that he didn't want to delay something that he should have done more than two years ago when the signs first started. He wasn't going to wait a few weeks, a few days, or even a few hours. Shawn called Gannon and asked him to meet for lunch at a cafe in an hour. It was a Wednesday. I waited anxiously at home with HGTV turned on the television, but not really watching it. Shawn came almost skipping through the front door less than an hour later and said, "It's done! I did it!" He was choking back

tears and I could tell they were a lot like the ones that I cried at the breakfast table at Squam from an overwhelming feeling of serenity.

Our story doesn't end here. Although we liked and loved each other, our marriage was turned completely upside down at this point. We had left it in shambles for way too long due to both of us distancing ourselves and essentially living our own lives. And now we had two children of our own, one a newborn, and his oldest stepson, Ryan, now fifteen-years-old, living with us because his mother couldn't "handle him" anymore. Getting away from Gannon and Manasvi helped clear our heads, but there were still a lot of holes that needed to be patched.

If I had included this story, my experience at the Moth would have been lost. I would have had to flesh out the story arc of what ultimately happened in our marriage and our living situation with a newborn and a fifteen year old, which would have completely diverted the focus. That point in the story was neither the time nor the place to get into how our marriage survived through years of resentment developed by not talking to each other, or when our newborn had a seizure, or how after much consideration we decided to let Shawn's son go back to South Carolina to live with his mom because they both said they could handle each other again, and one month later we received a phone call that he died in a car accident. These are experiences that I have glossed over, but ones that should never be glossed over or only hinted at when telling a story. These experiences need time.

In the End

One of the worst stories I ever told was not for the stage. It was when I was fourteen and began working at my first job at a mom-and-pop, steak-and-hoagie shop outside of Philadelphia. It was owned by a mom and pop and one of their three sons. I wanted off on one of our busiest nights, a Saturday. I can't remember the reason, likely for a road trip with friends, a concert, or just because I was fourteen and didn't feel like working on a Saturday. With only a few of us on crew, I knew it would be near impossible to get the night off. So, I quickly surmised that someone in my family had to die. I planned to tell my bosses that I had a family viewing to attend. I knew they wouldn't tell me "no" under those circumstances.

I put a lot of thought into whom I was going to select. I was afraid that if I named someone in my immediate family my bosses would look in the newspaper for the obituary or they might approach my parents when they picked me up from work, maybe even send flowers. Any immediate family member was out of the question. The first person who came to mind after that was my uncle; we called him Uncle Moose. He was my grandmom's little brother and I figured that since he lived in Philly there would be no way of them knowing him or able to verify an obituary since the bosses didn't always read the city paper. Plus, his nickname would make it easy for me to remember who I told them had died.

The rule of six degrees of separation came back to bite me in the ass, however, because it turned out they knew my uncle. And I should have known – everyone knew Uncle Moose! When Uncle Moose was in the room you knew it and not just because he had the loudest voice. He was the one always telling stories that had everyone doubled over laughing, or singing songs that would have everyone in the room singing along. I remember once that he was singing and dancing on my grandparents' back patio with a woman my dad was dating and then he dipped her backwards and French kissed her. Even she laughed at Uncle Moose.

He, like my grandparents, was a devout Catholic who just happened to smoke and drink a lot. He also happened to be friends with one of my dad's friends, Sween (a nickname for his last name Sweeney). Sween had a bar in his basement and when my uncle visited our side of town, he'd stop in for a drink. Turns out that by mere coincidence, my boss's son was also friends with Sween and that sometimes my uncle and the son would be at the bar at the same time. In turn, they became friends, too. My boss made it clear to me that he knew I was lying, but his son, a guy in his late twenties told his dad, "She's just a kid, let it go."

I worked at the mom-and-pop shop for almost four years and never told another lie. Although I don't think Uncle Moose would have objected to what I did, I never got the courage to ask him. He died from lung cancer a few years after I had quit working at the shop to join the military. He always said everything in life was bullshit, so people might as well live it up while they can. I sure hope that whatever I did with that Saturday night off was deemed living it up.

On a ride into Philly to grab a bite to eat, my husband and my dad were talking about Uncle Moose and his death. They pulled into the parking lot and took a spot facing a brick wall. When they came out of the restaurant after eating and got back into the car, they were both stunned by the larger than life message scribbled on the brick wall that they had somehow missed the first time.

It read: "It's all bullshit!"

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Biography

After serving eight years in the U.S. Air Force, Kim Ruff has published numerous editorials, columns, and press releases for Alabama's leading newspaper in Elmore County, the Wetumpka Herald, and Philadelphia's premiere science museum, the Franklin Institute. Her interpretation of a short story by Ambrose Bierce was accepted for inclusion in the Literacy Reference Center produced by EBSCO Publishing. Her personal essays have earned her publication in the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Cornerstone magazine. During her standing as a graduate student in George Mason University's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program, she was an instructor of English Composition and Literature; the Assistant Festival Manager for the largest literary event in that region, Fall for the Book; and a performance storyteller in the Washington, D.C., area. Kim graduated with an MFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in Nonfiction from GMU in 2014 and now resides in South Carolina with her husband, children, and the self-proclaimed, red-headed "Bitch."