Using Memoir to Explore and Heal

Trauma Inflicted by Emotional Abuse

accompanied by Excavating Me, A Memoir

Thesis

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## Contents

**Artist Statement** .................................................................................................................. 4
  - Background .......................................................................................................................... 4
  - Process of Work ................................................................................................................ 6
  - My Vision ........................................................................................................................... 7
  - Literary Context ............................................................................................................... 8
  - Significance of the Topic as a Christian Scholar ............................................................. 10

**Critical Paper** ...................................................................................................................... 12
  - Literary Traditions of Memoir ......................................................................................... 12
  - Comparable Texts and the Craft of Memoir ..................................................................... 15
  - Theories and Other Interpretive Practices of Memoir .................................................... 20

**Conclusion** .......................................................................................................................... 22

**Thesis Sections** .................................................................................................................... 23
  - Part One: Change Pt. 2 by RM ....................................................................................... 23
  - Part Two: Reflection by BTS ......................................................................................... 23
  - Part Three: Everything Goes by RM ............................................................................. 23
  - Part Four: Moving On by BTS ....................................................................................... 24
  - Part Five: Zero O’Clock by BTS .................................................................................... 24
  - Part Six: No. 2 by RM ...................................................................................................... 24
  - Part Seven: Yet to Come by BTS .................................................................................... 24

**Acknowledgments** ............................................................................................................... 27

**Note to Readers** .................................................................................................................... 28

**Part 1** ..................................................................................................................................... 29
  - Chapter One: The Christmas I Ran Away ..................................................................... 30
  - Chapter Two: Epiphanies ................................................................................................. 42

**Part 2** ..................................................................................................................................... 49
  - Chapter 3: Abandoning Validation .............................................................................. 50
  - Chapter 4: Seeking Validation ......................................................................................... 53
Part 3 ................................................................................................................................. 63
  Chapter 5: The Unraveling ............................................................................................. 64
  Chapter 6: Daehan Miguk ........................................................................................... 73
Part 4 ................................................................................................................................ 77
  Chapter 7: The Choice ................................................................................................ 78
  Chapter 8: The Outcome ............................................................................................. 86
Part 5 ................................................................................................................................ 90
  Chapter 9: Revelations ............................................................................................... 91
  Chapter 10: She Was Horrid ...................................................................................... 96
Part 6 ................................................................................................................................ 99
  Chapter 11: Finally Free .............................................................................................. 100
  Chapter 12: Devastated ............................................................................................. 107
Part 7 ................................................................................................................................ 114
  Chapter 13: Rock Bottom ........................................................................................... 115
  Chapter 14: Renewal of the Real Me ......................................................................... 126
Epilogue ............................................................................................................................. 133
Works Cited ....................................................................................................................... 137
**Artist Statement**

Are memories reliable? Looking at my life script, I would say yes, and no. Neuroscientist Beau Lotto said, “Context is everything. … The functional structure of your brain is literally a representation of your history. We only ever see what was useful to see in the past” (McQuater, 2014). *Excavating Me*, the memoir which I’m proposing for my thesis project, details how I viewed my childhood before understanding the emotional abuse I experienced and my journey toward healing once I had faced it.

**Background**

If asked about my childhood, for most of my life I would have said it was idyllic. As an only child and the only grandchild on my maternal side until I was eleven, I was showered with attention. Each generation of my family was heavily involved in the church, sharing values and traditions. We were a close family. When I was young, my mom’s sisters lived with us at different times during their college years. They introduced me to popular music that most preschoolers probably weren’t listening to but that I fell in love with. My mom’s brother, who is only six years older than I, was more like an older brother to me with all the joys and frustrations that come with that type of relationship.

Yet, throughout my childhood, I experienced situations with my parents that felt off. Children rely on adults to help form their understanding of the world. Often what I was seeing and what my parents said contradicted each other. Without proper context, when these uncomfortable experiences happened, I either brushed them aside or felt I was at fault.

At the age of thirty-five, I gained my first insights into the issues of my upbringing and for the first time came to understand that what had happened wasn’t my fault. This occurred during a home study visit with a social worker during the process to adopt my son from South Korea.
Over the next fifteen years, I would forge ahead and then retreat from coming to terms with the truth. As I approached the age of fifty, the realities of my childhood and the life decisions I had made based on those realities became impossible to ignore. After a lifetime of living to please my mother, who was emotionally abusive and likely mentally ill, and seeking approval from my emotionally unavailable father, I withdrew from the relationship. That decision also led to coming to terms with issues in my marriage that I had ignored from the beginning of that relationship. In the span of less than two years of looking honestly at my life, it had completely unraveled.

After six months of working on our marriage, which included marriage counseling, my husband and I decided to separate. This quickly progressed to him deciding we should divorce. I faced a future of being a single mother of a young teen son after twenty-six years of marriage as the world dealt with a pandemic. Our first two months of separation were spent under the same roof, thanks to the shutdown. When my husband moved out over the July 4th weekend in 2020, I thought the process was over; what I discovered was that it was only the beginning.

I was now forty-nine years old, on my own for the first time in my life, and my thoughts were filled only with moving forward. During those first six months, I felt good, positive about the future. I was righting the wrongs of my life and may have even felt that the worst was over. Finally, I was able to spend my time in ways that felt authentic to me; well, as much as the pandemic would allow. My greatest accomplishment during those early months was self-publishing my first novel.

Six months after filing for divorce the decree was final. It was January 7, 2021; the beginning of a new year and a new me. Over the next twelve months, that year humbled me in ways I could never have expected. During my first year as a single woman since the early 1990s, I
experienced work stress, the death of my mother, family drama, and my first car accident that led to litigation. I had no close friends living near me and few friends overall. The situation was so bad that I began to refrain from posting about my life on social media platforms. While I used social media more as a journal for myself, I hated the pity that resulted from sharing my trials and tribulations.

At the dawn of 2022, I was cautiously optimistic. I had gotten into grad school, initially pursuing a Masters in Secondary Education with the goal of someday teaching in South Korea. But the first few months of the new year held more work drama and disappointment, and by March I felt as though the future was dimming instead of becoming brighter. I began to look for a new job, each opportunity feeling promising only to lead to rejection. Every day my body thrummed with anxiety, although those around me would later say it seemed I was handling everything well. After three education classes, I knew the education degree program wasn’t where I wanted or needed to be. I asked to move into the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program and was approved. I started my first class in the program on May 9, 2022.

**Process of Work**

I entered the program with the intent to focus on fiction, which is my preferred genre, and thought I would present a work of fiction as my thesis project, although that was still more than a year away. Yet after taking the required courses of Writing Creative Nonfiction and Creative Nonfiction Workshop, I decided to shift the focus of my thesis project to memoir.

For me the real healing from my childhood trauma began during this MFA program. Several of the early courses in this program, including Writing Creative Nonfiction, required me to look at and write about my life. This is something I had done in bits and pieces through my fiction writing, but not something I had done transparently as myself. Journaling never felt safe in my
house, so while I had loved writing since I was in fifth grade, it wasn’t something I did to process my feelings or work through lived experiences.

I was one month into this MFA program when I hit rock bottom emotionally. It was June 2022 and what I believe had been functional depression was deepening and moving towards clinical depression. Life was complicated and I had little support during what was proving to be the hardest stage of my life. As I worked to move out of that dark place, I focused on doing one thing every day that I loved; many days that was working on this degree.

My MFA courses required me to write about hard things and my desire to do well in the program forced me to write with authenticity. Each week on Sunday or Monday I would look at the week’s assignment and groan. I would complain aloud, “Really?! I have to write about a childhood experience? Some of us don’t want to write about our childhoods!” Then I would focus and work through the lesson while contemplating the assignment. Each week, God nudged me toward writing about a painful experience. I would sit on my sofa, writing and crying, as I completed my homework. And each week, once the assignment was submitted, I would feel a little better. My grades were high and the feedback I received from my professors was positive. I often heard that I had a powerful story and a strong voice in telling it. Both encouraged me to keep going. I slowly began to rediscover the person God had created me to be and started to heal the wounds that had shaped so much of my life experience.

**My Vision**

Writing my story has been incredibly cathartic for me. My vision for the project is to take the reader through my childhood, presenting examples of the emotional abuse I experienced. I will then show how that abuse impacted my decision on whom to marry and how I ended up in a marriage that survived only because the toxic patterns of my childhood set me up to endure.
After this, I will show how my authentic self could no longer stay buried and how my healing journey started.

The adoption of my son from South Korea played an integral part in my authentic self-awakening. Becoming his mother also removed the blinders I had been wearing about my own childhood experiences. After becoming a mother, I began seeing the way my mom and dad parented me for control and manipulation instead of love. I will extensively recount how as I learned to parent my son, I began the process of reparenting my wounded inner child.

As I’ve processed my experiences through writing, I have also wanted to connect with the stories of others who have similar lived experiences. I have gained insight and encouragement from reading the memoirs of others who are healing from similar childhood traumas. This is why I feel that writing my memoir could be an encouragement to others. It seems society is just now coming to a deeper understanding of the traumatic effects of emotional abuse and toxic family relationships. Much of this abuse and toxicity was normalized by past generations, resulting in many middle-aged adults now understanding for the first time where their anxiety or insecurities are rooted.

As I’ve shared my story with friends and acquaintances, many of my experiences resonate with them. Ultimately it would be wonderful if my memoir finds a larger audience. Depending on the outcome of this thesis process, I may begin querying agents in hopes of finding a publisher for it. If that process isn’t fruitful, I could choose to self-publish it as a way of putting it out into the world.

**Literary Context**

Divided into seven parts, which are represented by lyrics from my favorite songs, my memoir takes readers on a journey of self-discovery. It begins with a moment at Christmas 2018 when I
realized my life was unraveling. Then the narrative recounts other pivotal moments in my journey to understanding the emotional abuse that has shaped my life.

This will be a work of literary memoir with the theme of transformation. In a post for Celadon Books, Jessica Dukes defines memoir this way: “To define memoir, we loosen the constraints of an autobiography. Memoir authors choose a pivotal moment in their lives and try to recreate the event through storytelling. The author’s feelings and assumptions are central to the narrative. Memoirs still include all the facts of the event, but the author has more flexibility here because she is telling a story as she remembers it, not as others can prove or disprove it.” (Dukes, 2023, 3rd para.).

While my story will be nonfiction, I plan to use some techniques from writing fiction to tell the story and make it engaging for the reader. In chapter twenty-four of Stein on Writing, Sol Stein encourages nonfiction writers to encourage their readers using techniques usually found in fiction. These include setting the scene using vivid descriptors and making characters come alive through characterization (Stein, 1995). Utilizing both techniques will bring my story alive for the reader and help them to immerse themselves in it.

Three memoirs that I’ve read in the last few months have either helped me heal or left me relating to the experiences of the author. The story that Stephanie Foo recounts in What My Bones Know: A Memoir of Healing from Complex Trauma resonated deeply with me. While the abuse she experienced was physical as well as emotional, the details of her healing journey led me to new books and modalities of therapy that have helped with my healing journey. In I Want to Die but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki: A Memoir, Baek Sehee details her functional depression by recounting sessions with her psychiatrist. Again, her personal story was relatable to me and led me toward introspection. Michelle Zauner’s story as told in Crying in H-Mart is one of a
complicated mother-daughter relationship and finding herself apart from that relationship. While not as relatable to me as the others, certain parts of her story paralleled my experiences.

It is through stories that humans form connections. “Stories are central to human cognition and communication. We engage with others through stories, and storytelling is a lot more than just a recitation of facts and events. As human beings, we are automatically drawn to stories because we see ourselves reflected in them. We inevitably interpret the meaning in stories and understand ourselves better” (Corson-Knowles, 2021, 6th para.). It is for this reason that I feel this thesis project is an important one, both for myself and for those who will read it. Just as I deepened my healing by reading the stories of others, my hope is that others will find connection, and possibly direction, through my story.

**Significance of the Topic as a Christian Scholar**

My faith and spirituality are intrinsically woven into this story. Church was important to my family; for some members, faith was equally or maybe more important. But for my mother, it was more about the act of being seen and recognized as godly than it was about deep abiding faith.

Growing up, being a Christian was narrowly defined in my family as being a member of the church in which I was raised. My family has been members of this non-denominational church for as many generations as I can name. While it was never stated implicitly, my general understanding was that if someone didn’t believe exactly as we did, and follow those same steps to salvation, they weren’t truly saved. Patriotism would come to be conflated with religion, so to be a good Christian meant to embrace America as the best in the world.

This church believes in strict, traditional gender roles, which set me up to accept abuse as God’s intended plan for marriage and family. These beliefs were so deeply embedded into who I
believed myself to be that I didn’t question any of it until I was twenty-seven years old and working for a different denomination. As I encountered a different interpretation of the Bible for the first time, I was forced to confront my own beliefs. This questioning would lead to more questioning as my views about myself and the world changed.

I believe it is important to acknowledge the ways that misrepresenting Bible messages can be used to justify abuse. My story is the perfect example of a family being devout and respected in the church community, while the private story was far from the loving family unit God intended. I’m sure stories like mine are prevalent in the church community, and that is why I feel it is important to speak out.

While it's true that many who were complicit in the abuse I experienced might have been doing their best, my speaking out calls them and future generations to do better. Maya Angelou is quoted as saying, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better” (Staff, 2021, 6th para.).
Critical Paper

“You make the past known in order to know yourself as changed” (Febos 139). Delving into the past, especially a past defined by trauma, isn’t an easy task. But as Melissa Febos stated in the above quote, seeing yourself as changed is impossible without looking back. It is through reflection that we face both ourselves and our histories. Some writers may not begin a memoir as a step in their healing journey, only to find the writing process leads to an unburdening or catharsis. By forcing personal reflection, memoir is the ideal literary genre to pursue when seeking self-discovery as one heals from trauma.

Literary Traditions of Memoir

Undertaking the writing of a memoir isn’t for the faint of heart. In the chapter titled “Why Not to Write a Memoir” of Mary Karr’s The Art of Memoir, she writes: “I’ve said it’s hard. Here’s how hard: everybody I know who wades deep enough into memory’s waters drowns a little.” She then includes several examples of this, one of which is Frank Conroy staying drunk for weeks in between writing chapters of Stop-Time (Karr 27). Karr lists several markers to help authors know if they are ready to join the literary traditions of memoir. She asks the reader to sit, eyes closed, and imagine the worst scene the author plans to include in the work. The goal is to experience the memory so completely that the author can see, smell, taste, and touch the experience. “If you’re doing this right, the whole thing should be arrestingly vivid, maybe even a little awful. … You should feel like you’ve been somewhere. … Now, here’s the pop quiz part: can you be in that place without falling apart?” (Karr 32) Karr’s advice: if, after this exercise, the author is either sobbing or feels nothing, the writer isn’t ready to tackle a memoir. If rage is all that is felt, then maybe the memoir should be skipped altogether (Karr 32). “Those of you who felt a living emotional connection to the past that struck you as real, those who’ve been
somewhere, who brim with feeling and may even be crying, but are not devastated—come on in” (Karr 32).

With the ground set that memoir must be an emotional experience, we consider what other musts the genre includes. In Memoir: An Introduction, G. Thomas Couser said it is often easier to say what memoir is not than to define what the genre is. “Memoir is not fiction. Memoirs are not novels. As a nonfiction genre, memoir depicts the lives of real, not imaged, individuals” (15). The line is blurred, Couser said, by the fact that truth in memoir is often enhanced and memoirs are written using the techniques of fiction, while realistic novels sometimes pretend to be nonfiction (16). The lines between memoir, autobiography, and biography are also intertwined. Memoir is either a personal story about the author’s life, just as autobiography is, or the telling of the personal experiences of another, just as biography is. The difference comes in the scope of the recounting; memoir traditionally focuses on one area of life or one experience versus autobiography and biography which seek to tell the whole story of someone’s life from birth to death or present day.

Thus, Couser sees the definition of memoir as a continuum that sits somewhere between biography and autobiography. “At one end of the continuum are those that focus on their authors, at the other, those that focus on someone else. … The point of thinking of them as arranged on a continuum is that, although there is an important conceptual distinction between writing about yourself and writing about another person, memoirs do not always do just one or the other. Indeed, in practice it is difficult to do one without doing the other” (20).

Throughout his book, Couser compares and contrasts fiction and memoir, but he notes that memoir has a significant limitation that fiction does not: “Life writing, including memoir, operates, then, in a highly constricted range: its scenarios must correspond to that which is, or
recently has been; its characters, to actual people known to the narrator” (56). Being grounded in truth is important in the genre of memoir, yet the recounting doesn’t have to be done verbatim. “Most autobiographical writers know that the emotional truth (how it felt to you) is more important to the story you’re telling than the literal truth (what day it was, exactly what your brother said, whether or not it was really raining that day). What happens is facts. Truth is how we react to what happens” (Lara 162-163).

Memoir must be truthful but also engaging. “In the fullness of time the epiphany came. And what it revealed to me was that all those elements I had thought the sole obligation of the novel also were de rigueur of the memoir” (Suberman 12). This includes writing from a defined voice, having fully developed characters, avoiding phrases that pull the reader out of the narrative, keeping word choices within the time period of the story, and building tension and suspense (Suberman).

Possibly the trickiest part of writing a memoir occurs in writing about others. As Couser noted, even if a writer plans to tell his own story, it is impossible for a memoirist to write in a vacuum. Life is lived in connection to others and thus a memoir must include the impacts of those connections. When a friend asked Melissa Febos, author of Body Works, where she found the courage to write so honestly about intimate situations, Febos responded, “I always let the writer win. I explained to her that in the course of my daily life, I was generally a very good employee, a good teacher, a good friend, a good daughter. But when any of those roles came into conflict with my writing, or I anticipated that they might, I was a writer first. I always let the writer win” (94). This approach served Febos well for years until it became a cautionary tale of how not to approach a memoir. An incident that occurred years after that conversation with her friend caused Febos to revise this motto, noting that each person involved in a memory has
experienced it differently. “It is profoundly unfair that a writer gets to author the public version of a story that has as many true variations as persons involved. When I think of narrative truth—the truth that lies beyond the verifiable facts of an event—I picture a prism, with as many facets as there are people affected. When a writer chooses to publish their version, that facet becomes the one visible beyond the scope of the people involved. Each person who was present for the events about which I have written has a different true story of them. … Here is what I now believe: I do not have free rein to write my story of events that happened to someone else more directly than they did to me. If I want to write about my experience of such an event, then I ought to talk with that person about it before I begin writing. … Sometimes, it’s important to let the writer lose” (95-96).

**Comparable Texts and the Craft of Memoir**

For this paper, I will look at three works of memoir from women writers all published in the last two years: *What My Bones Know* by Stephanie Foo, *I’m Glad My Mom Died* by Jennette McCurdy, and *Tastes Like War* by Grace Cho. Each memoir, using the recognized components of the genre, tells the story of facing and overcoming traumas, both personal and generational.

Foo’s *What My Bones Know* recounts her journey of healing from complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) after enduring a childhood filled with physical, verbal, and emotional abuse. Foo is a journalist who was diagnosed with C-PTSD in 2018. The diagnosis set her on a journey of healing, which she recounts in the book.

The book chronicles Foo’s journey from learning about her diagnosis to finding a healing modality that works best for her. She begins the book with a prologue that presents her learning of her diagnosis, then Part I details the abuse she suffered during her childhood at the hands of her mother and a father who failed to intervene. In an author’s note, Foo includes a warning to
readers that Part I could be triggering to abuse survivors and recommends skipping ahead if that is the case. Part II explains more about C-PTSD and talks about Foo’s early forays into healing. These included dietary changes, yoga, improving sleep habits, changing therapists, and working through a variety of different forms of therapy. Part III starts with Foo returning to her childhood hometown and reconnecting with teachers and classmates from high school. Her intent was to test her memories and compare them to how others remembered her and their largely immigrant community. She also re-engaged with extended family as a way to gain more insight into what happened to her and looked at how her parents’ immigrant experience may have played a part in what happened. Part IV details Foo contacting and engaging with her father for a time, but eventually severing the relationship as continued contact worked against her efforts to heal. Part V recounts how Foo’s childhood trauma began to show up in her body through various health issues. When this happened, she doubled down on healing and connected with Jacob Ham, a psychologist in the Mount Sinai Health System. The remaining chapters in this part show Foo’s sessions with Ham and how she was finally able to work through the trauma in a way that allowed her to heal (Foo).

Foo’s story is emotionally difficult to read, but she recounts it in an honest and engaging way that makes it memorable for the reader. What My Bones Know is a hybrid work of memoir as Foo shares information yielded by her research on C-PTSD as well as her personal story. She notes ways the disorder manifests, particularly in women through reproductive issues, and includes resources for those who are on similar healing journeys.

While the book covers stories from childhood to present day, it isn’t written in a chronological fashion as an autobiography would be. Most of her childhood stories are included in Part I of the book, however, some stories are scattered throughout other parts. Childhood
trauma resulting in C-PTSD impacts most areas of the victim’s life, thus making it relevant for Foo to include memories from childhood through the parts recounting her adult years. The story remains centrally focused on the why and how of the trauma, just as a memoir should. From the prologue through Part V, the reader sees Foo’s character arc—from victim to survivor to thriving. The use of dialogue and descriptive writing techniques taken from fiction helps the story come alive.

For Foo, writing the memoir wasn’t a therapeutic practice. She did not begin writing her memoir until she was in a good place on her healing journey after discovering that being a workaholic was a symptom of her trauma. Healing for Foo meant concentrating on other avenues of addressing the trauma, including mindfulness, looking honestly at her relationships, and therapy, all of which required her to be present in the moment without considering how she would write the experience in a book. “It wasn’t until I felt like I was in a pretty healthy place that I sat down to write the book itself, and that felt less like catharsis and more like plain old work. I think that comes across positively in the book. My voice sounds like a person who has healed, rather than as someone who is using this project to heal: there’s more hope, more perspective, more authenticity” (Koyama).

I found Foo’s recounting fascinating and the resources helpful. In Parts II through V the story skips back and forth from the past to present. Revisiting the past in the sections telling of more recent life experiences felt necessary to connect what happened in her childhood with what she was experiencing as an adult. Foo accomplished her goal of showing the hard while providing hope that healing is possible.

 McCurdy’s I’m Glad My Mom Died is similar in scope to Foo’s What My Bones Know, chronicling abuse, but her approach is different. McCurdy endured emotional and sexual abuse at
the hands of her mother throughout her childhood and young adulthood. The story tells of how McCurdy’s mother pushed her to become a child actor and then how her mother used McCurdy’s career as a catalyst for the abuse (McCurdy).

McCurdy writes her account in the present tense and details her story in a chronological fashion, allowing the reader to feel like they are experiencing McCurdy’s life along with her. Like Foo’s book, the story zeros in on the abuse, fitting it solidly into the genre of memoir. McCurdy uses dialogue to create depth and break up the narrative. The reader sees the character arc of McCurdy move from feeling powerless about her own life to recognizing that her mother’s treatment was abusive, and finally beginning to heal. However, at the end of the book, I didn’t have the same sense of healing that I did at the end of Foo’s book. The reader sees changes in McCurdy’s life that are evidence of healing, but the sense of her being in a solid place wasn’t conveyed as convincingly for me the way it was by Foo in What My Bones Know.

The stories that McCurdy shares are raw and another writer might have shied away from including them. In an interview, McCurdy said that including the stories she might have considered leaving out was an important part of her using the memoir as a tool for healing. “The more uncomfortable something was for me to put on the page, the more important it felt for me to put on the page. That kind of honesty has been truly liberating for me and has led me to a life of fulfillment and authenticity that I hope for everybody, so I hope that people take away the honesty and are maybe inspired to share some of those uncomfortable truths about themselves” (Bernabe et al.).

Although her story was more relatable to my personal experience, I found McCurdy’s book less interesting. While, of course, life is lived in a linear way, taking a less chronological approach might have created more depth to the story and allowed her to include more of her
healing journey. Her writing was less refined than Foo’s, which is understandable since Foo is a
journalist and thus better trained to articulate her experience to an audience. The book blurb calls
the book, “A heartbreaking and hilarious memoir by iCarly and Sam & Cat star Jennette
McCurdy…” (I’m Glad My Mom Died). I didn’t find anything hilarious about the book.

Tastes Like War is part memoir of Cho’s life and part the telling of her mother’s complicated
life experience. The book weaves through Cho’s childhood growing up as one of the few persons
of color in Chehalis, Washington, moves to her adult years on the East Coast, and intersperses
the story of her mother’s life both in Korea before marrying her father and life after immigrating
to the United States. Cho spends much of the book delving into her mother’s schizophrenia,
including causation and ways her mother might have been able to heal from the disease.

All of the markers of a good memoir are present in Tastes Like War. The reader sees
cracter arcs for both Cho and her mother, dialogue is used to tell a compelling story, and Cho
doesn’t shy away from the parts of either characters’ story arc that she might have wanted to edit
out. Reading the book is an emotional experience and one that compels the reader to move
forward.

Like Foo’s book, Tastes Like War is part memoir and part Cho’s research on schizophrenia
and the Korean diaspora. Cho first presented some of her research on the diaspora and mental
health in her published thesis, Haunting the Diaspora. Blending her personal story with the
research was important for Cho’s journey. “In psychoanalytic language, Cho said, bringing up a
topic that has been shrouded in silence is like ‘releasing the ghost in a public arena,’ she said, ‘so
that’s exactly how I have thought about my writing, as carrying the legacy of the trauma and
wanting to, I guess, escape the grip of the ghost so that it’s not so powerful, by making it public”
(Vickery).
All of these works show the crossover and separation between “trauma in memoir, healing through writing” that Febos talks about in Body Works (128). “The second phase of trauma recovery, and the primary work of it, is to tell the story of the trauma. Judith Herman writes: ‘This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated, not the survivor's life story’” (Febos 128). While the goals of Foo, McCurdy, and Cho might have been different, all three stories attest to this integration of writing memoir with healing.

**Theories and Other Interpretive Practices of Memoir**

Quoting philosopher Hermann Cohen about returning to one’s self, Febos writes, “Replace the word returning with writing, and you have a sentence that could confidently be uttered by anyone who has authored a memoir. ‘Writing is learning to know yourself again, to find your own agency in the actions that you have committed’” (132).

Part of finding one’s own agency relates to finding one’s voice as a memoirist. Karr claims that the voice of a memoir can make or break the story for the reader. “And the more memorable the voice, the truer a book sounds, because you never lose sight of the narrator cobbling together his truth—not everybody’s agreed-on version. Great memoirs sound like distinct persons and also cover a broad range of feelings” (40).

Karr states that the best voice for memoir is one that shows “a writer’s insides” (47). Someone writing a memoir must question her own perception, pushing past ego and allowing the reader to see the rawness of the feeling or experience. “A quest for self-knowledge drives such a writer to push past the normal vanity she brings to party dressing. She somehow manages to show up at the ball boldly naked” (Karr 49).
When telling my story during both Writing Creative Nonfiction and Creative Nonfiction Workshop, I found this to be profoundly true. Even as a victim of childhood and marital emotional abuse, the story only gained depth when I sought to fully show myself—flaws and all. It was uncomfortable at first as it seemed to imply that my flaws somehow caused the abuse that I had experienced. Yet, further exploration of this approach led to an understanding that allowing myself to be fully seen didn’t imply causation, but instead rendered me, the narrator, more fully human and thus more relatable to the reader.

Memoir plays a part in the journey of healing and self-discovery for many writers, and an author must be ready for that journey and the extensive process through which the story will be created. In Body Works, Febos notes that while her childhood trauma had made appearances in her earlier writing, it only occurred in passing mentions and was nothing she devoted time to considering in-depth. “I could not look at those experiences or that time in my life with any true depth until I faced the truth of them, or at least became interested in that project. Until I had that particular ‘strong desire to become whole again’” (126).

Once the truth of self and experience has been faced, the story begins to fill the page, but the process shouldn’t be rushed. Writing a memoir should be undertaken with ample time to devote to the exploration of experience. “As anyone who has recovered from trauma knows, this is slow and ambitious work. … Like the trauma survivor, the memoirist cannot hurry her process without impeding it. She must be awake in the telling. A detached reiteration of a detached experience can provide neither insight nor healing” (Febos 128).

As the writer recounts experiences, the roles others have played in the story become more defined. Febos describes the process as “enlightening” (133). These enlightenments might tempt the writer to edit out experiences or truths before the story is completed to avoid inflicting harm
on others. The writer might begin to reconsider how honestly she wants to write the story, especially one that details trauma inflicted by others, but Febos cautions against this approach. Instead, she suggests the story should be written in its entirety—hurt and all—before any pruning of the story is considered. “We write to understand things. If we already understood them, most of us would grow too bored to complete the immense task of writing a book about them. So, if you begin leaving things out, skirting around, or obscuring them, you may be leaving out vital organs that your book cannot live without. Put it all in. After you finish, and you know what parts are necessary, you can put your mom goggles on, read it through to imagine her horror at every lurid detail, and cut the unnecessary ones” (Febos 87).

At its proper place in the process, pruning is essential. The first draft is never the final draft, and editing always improves the story. Sometimes that is through editing out, while other times it is through expounding on an experience or feeling. Febos states that she doesn’t allow herself or her students to retain the first version of the recounting of their life story (75). It is through writing and rewriting that we test narratives, examine their truths, and consider the value they bring to the story. This is the process that leads to healing and transformation. “I refuse to let the narratives that once infected my thinking also infect my art. This requires a different kind of rigor—in thinking, living, and creation. Whereas writing was once an exercise in transcription, it has become an exercise in transformation. … This is an issue of craft, but it is also about joy—the joy of awakening to the full range of human experience, in all its ecstatic, uncomfortable, freaky, transcendent, holy realness” (Febos 75).

**Conclusion**

Compelling memoir usually presents experiences that are simultaneously relatable and appalling. Humans connect through stories, and we write to help not only ourselves but others.
“As memoirists, we, too, speak about the unspeakable in public in the belief that this will help others. While I know that the person helped most of all is myself, part of my own healing has come from the hundreds of strangers who have written to me claiming that I told their story, too, and that reading it showed that it was possible to tell” (Febos 145).

**Thesis Sections**

My memoir, *Excavating Me*, contains seven parts with part themes introduced using lyrics from my favorite songs. After completing the artist statement and critical paper, I have outlined my thesis to include seven sections. Each section is described below.

**Part One: Change Pt. 2 by RM**

The two chapters in this part detail days during which my life changed forever. Chapter 1 recounts Christmas 2018, which I spent in a hotel room as my family started to come apart. Chapter 2 contrasts this showing the days that our family came together in South Korea through the adoption of our son.

**Part Two: Reflection by BTS**

Chapters 3 and 4 contrast as well. Chapter 3 reflects on an event that shows me abandoning the need for validation from my mother. Chapter 4 includes moments during my childhood when I yearned for her validation.

**Part Three: Everything Goes by RM**

Chapter 5 recounts the last visit I had with my mother, how her emotional abuse of me blanketed the visit, and my decision to walk away from the relationship. Chapter 6 explains how and why Korean culture became so important to our family as I learned to parent my son.
Part Four: Moving On by BTS

Chapter 7 shows the decision I made in college—whom to date and eventually marry—and the role that my mother played in that decision. Chapter 8 reveals what my marriage was like a quarter of a century after making that decision, as I drifted further from my husband.

Part Five: Zero O’Clock by BTS

In Chapters 9 and 10, I tell the story of my parents finding out that I had lost my virginity and me learning forty years later that I hadn’t completely understood the dynamics that happened that night.

Part Six: No. 2 by RM

Chapters 11 and 12 share two devastating events—the end of my marriage and the day I was ordered from my childhood home by the police. Both chapters show hurt inflicted by those who were supposed to love me. And how each event forced me to focus on the future instead of the past.

Part Seven: Yet to Come by BTS

Chapter 13 recounts the summer I hit rock bottom, and how it took being at my lowest point to decide that I wanted to live. Chapter 14 tells the story of attending BTS’s last concert before their military service started and how that day redefined how I see myself.
Excavating Me,

A Memoir
Dedicated to my son.

You are the biggest blessing in my life.

Being your mom was instrumental

in excavating the real me.
The journey of self-discovery rarely happens in a vacuum. I would like to thank: friends who listened to my story and helped me see my experiences for what they were; my therapist for challenging me to dig deeper, which has allowed healing to occur; and faculty who taught courses in this creative writing program at Liberty University, for encouraging me and pushing me to develop my writing skills.

A special thanks goes out to Dr. Andrew Smith, my thesis committee reader, and Dr. Corey Latta, my thesis director, for their direction and instruction, not only during the thesis courses but throughout my time in the program.

This creative writing program has been instrumental in my healing journey, and I will forever be grateful for the experience.
Note to Readers

This memoir details my journey to self-discovery and healing after a lifetime of emotional abuse inflicted by both my parents and my now ex-husband. The content may be triggering to some readers.

The act of writing has been healing for me, allowing me to learn more about myself and process the emotions that have been discovered over the last few years. Many realizations have come as I’ve completed this thesis, but the processing began with several required assignments in courses leading up to this paper. A few of those assignments I started grudgingly and completed through many tears. But once I was finished, I was so thankful for the deeper understanding I had of myself and my experiences.

While writing has been therapeutic for me, my healing has occurred in conjunction with professional therapy and a year of dedicated inner work done using a variety of therapeutic modalities. Healing is a personal journey; what has worked for me may not work for others. I encourage those with similar lived experiences to find the healing avenues that work best for them.
Part 1

“Things change, people change, everything changes.”

~ “Change Pt. 2” by RM
Chapter One:

The Christmas I Ran Away

2018

The ding of the microwave cut through the fog of memories. Pulling the chicken pot pie from the oven, I mused at how this wasn't the Christmas dinner I had dreamed of when I woke up that morning. But it was the best option I could find at the convenience store at one o'clock in the afternoon on Christmas Day.

Picking up the cardboard bowl, I settled back in the spot on the hotel sofa I had occupied since early Christmas morning. I stabbed the fork into the crust of the pie and swirls of steam billowed out. I pressed “Play” on my laptop and resumed rewatching episodes of what was quickly becoming one of my favorite Korean dramas. For the next hour, I lost myself in the lives of the characters on the screen.

My phone lit with an incoming call interrupting my solitary holiday. The caller ID said it was my son. I accepted it.

“Mom, I’m sorry for the way I acted this morning.” My son’s voice was quiet and soft.

“Thank you for apologizing,” I said. “I forgive you.”

“Are you coming home?” The fear in his voice was evident, and I hated myself a little for leaving that morning.

“Yes, I’m coming home tomorrow morning. I’ll cook the dinner I’d planned for today then, and you can help me cook. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you, son,” I said, the emotion lodging in my throat.

“I love you too,” he said.
We ended the call, and the tears that had stopped a couple of hours before returned. My crying had left my face puffy and streaked. It seemed a fitting end to a year I was ready to forget.

***

“I can’t keep doing this. I’m just so sad and lonely,” I said, standing in the door of my son’s bedroom a few months before Christmas.

Tears welled in my eyes at the unexpected description that had just tumbled out. Yet I marveled at how accurately the words described what I felt. My son pondered me, his eyes wide, our argument now forgotten.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” he said.

I sighed, tiredness weighing heavily on me. “It’s not your fault. I probably shouldn’t have said that. But you need to understand that I just can’t counter the negativity right now.” He nodded. “We can talk more later, okay?” He nodded again, and I softly closed his bedroom door behind me.

Retreating to the family room, I collapsed on the sofa, sniffling back the emotions that now threatened to overwhelm me. Denial no longer seemed like a viable option as I looked at my life. On the surface it seemed full—I had been married for twenty-five years to the man everyone thought was my best friend; my son and I were close; and I had built a community of friends around us. Our American dream was now complete with the house, dog, and cat. Life should have been good, and in many ways it was, but I had just given voice to the truth behind all the pretending.

***
Few people go into parenthood thinking about the teen years. The early years—first words, first steps, and first day of school—fill the dreams of parents-to-be. But the thought of having a teenager kept me childless for years. I knew I would enjoy the early years, but would I still love my child once puberty happened? I now knew the answer was “yes,” even if not every day with a newly thirteen-year-old was one to document in my gratitude journal.

As I wiped down the dining room table after dinner one night, the click of the bedroom door told me that the boy who once curled up beside me to watch movies and read bed stories had retreated to his bedroom again. Soft music drifted under the door, and I smiled. The familiar refrains of K-pop told me that while everything changes, some things also remain the same. My young teen son still enjoyed the music he’d fallen in love with at age four.

An hour or so later, he came down looking for connection. “Umma! You have to watch this video!”

I paused the Korean drama that was keeping me entertained, as Haneul plopped down next to me on the sofa. He held his phone out and before pressing play explained what I was about to see. “It’s a Halloween dance practice video and they dressed as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs! It’s so funny! You have to watch.”

He pressed play and the members of BTS played rock-paper-scissors—gawi, bawi, bo in Korean—to decide who had to be Snow White. Once in costume, the music started, and the seven men danced through the intricate choreography, which ended with large cloth, dwarf shoes flying in all directions. Haneul laughed and his joy was contagious.

“Which one is Snow White again?” I asked, still trying to remember the names of all the members.

“Taehyung, Umma,” Haneul answered. “Look at Jimin! He can’t stop laughing.”
“Which one is Jimin?” I asked. Haneul pointed to the member he was talking about and cackled as the video ended with the group in a heap laughing.

Then he hopped up and headed back upstairs. “Okay, that’s all for now,” he said, disappearing again into his room.

I resumed the drama, but the scenes played out as I stared absently at the television. Music had always provided a connection between me and Haneul. During his toddler years, he often asked me to sing to him at bedtime, continuing the routine I had started when he came home as a baby from South Korea. Then I smiled remembering the years he was obsessed with the High School Musical trilogy.

“Here’s your mic,” three-year-old Haneul said as he pushed the plastic echo mic into my hand. “You’re Sharpay and I’m Rocket Man.”

Dressed in his Rocket Man costume of jeans, a red basketball jersey, a pink fuzzy scarf, sunglasses, and a green beanie, he moved “off stage,” which was the other side of our small living room, and waited as I sang Sharpay’s part of the duet. Suddenly, he jumped behind me and wrapped his arms around my neck.

“All I wanna do, is beee wif you, be wif yooooouu,” he sang loudly in my ear. I struggled to hold in my laughter, the cuteness of the scene threatening to overwhelm me. “Mom! You have to sing.”

I pushed the laughter down and resumed my part in the duet.

Now, as teen Haneul shared his BTS discoveries with me, I felt fortunate that our love of music helped bridge the widening gap inflicted by puberty and his need to individuate. I had always liked the music that Haneul was drawn to and that hadn’t changed. It made me feel sorry for my husband, Kirk, as I watched Haneul drift further away from the interests that they’d
shared. Now he preferred music, learning choreography, and art to the sports and video games that Kirk enjoyed. Although Haneul loved swimming, his disinterest in Kirk’s latest hobby—kayaking—left my husband frustrated.

One night at dinner Kirk asked, “Don’t you want to play baseball again this season?” His tone wasn’t inquiring but direct. When our son answered that he wasn’t interested, Kirk persisted. “But you loved it last season. Come on. You should play this season.”

Haneul shook his head. “I already told you, Dad, I don’t want to play this season.”

Kirk switched gears. “How about going kayaking this weekend then?”

Again, Haneul resisted with a sigh. “I can’t. We have a youth group picnic this Saturday.”

The teen then escaped to his room, and Kirk stalked outside. When he came back in, I reminded him that this is what teens do.

“I don’t think it’s too much to ask for him to spend some time with us,” Kirk grumbled.

“He does spend time with us,” I reminded him. “We have dinner together every night. We go to movies together and celebrate holidays together. But he’s starting to become his own person, so it’s okay for him not to want to be with us too.”

Kirk picked up the remote, a sign that the conversation was over, and settled on the sofa. Soon he softly snores as I finished the latest episode of a show we were supposed to be watching together.

The next day as Haneul worked on his latest origami creation he said, “Mom, I feel like Dad doesn’t see me. Or even try to.”

I carefully weighed what I wanted to say. I often felt that too—both for Haneul and for myself—but I didn’t want to criticize his dad in front of him. “You know, I think you growing up is hard on Dad,” I said. “Your interests are changing, and I think he misses doing things with
you. Hopefully, you’ll find something you both enjoy doing together again. But you discovering
your own interests is what you’re supposed to do as a teen. So, it’s okay that you’re doing that.”

A soft, “I guess,” ended the conversation.

Our family life was shifting as Haneul moved into his teen years, yet his behavior was age
appropriate. The tension building between my husband and my son put me in the middle, and I
struggled with Kirk’s emerging need to control Haneul. In many ways Kirk and I were vastly
different from the couple who met in January 1992 and married twenty-one months later. But
most of those changes had happened together, while now it seemed we were diverging. We sat at
a crossroads that all families experience; one I had anticipated and even in some ways looked
forward to. As Haneul became more independent, Kirk and I would again have time for just us.

Kirk and I were married twelve years before we became parents; we had created a
comfortable life together as a twosome. A part of me was excited about finding “us” again, even
though I had cherished each age and stage of my son’s life. Instead, the growing distance
between us eventually created enough space for the loneliness to find a home within me. It
happened so gradually that I didn’t realize it until its presence had consumed me.

The pressure inside me had been building throughout the Christmas season. Early in
December, I sat at the dining room table, my holiday planning binder open in front of me. As I
started to plot out our holiday traditions, I’d ask Kirk what day would be best to go to the local
North Pole-themed amusement park.

“I said last year that we wouldn’t do The North Pole again,” Kirk said. “Haneul’s too old and
it’s just a waste of money.”
“I didn’t think you were serious last year. I mean, he doesn’t enjoy it the same way he did when he was little, but it’s tradition!” I reasoned. “We’ve done it for ten years. We need to get the photo with Santa.”

“Last year was ten years. It seems like the perfect time to stop.”

With Haneul spending more time in his room or with friends, I looked forward to the family outing that we’d done since our son was three. But Haneul, who was lying on the floor of the living room drawing, joined in once he heard Kirk’s resistance. “Yeah, Mom, I’m too old for that now.”

I shoved all the papers back in the binder and returned it to the shelf in the closet. I refused to fight everyone in my house to continue traditions we’d once loved. Maybe I should have anticipated this, but for some reason, I hadn’t foreseen this massive, throw-it-all-out-the-window rejection of our family traditions. Probably because I hadn’t wanted to see it.

***

Growing up, Christmas had been a conflicted holiday for me. I remembered how each year Mom would drag the Christmas tree box into the living room and groan. “I hate Christmas! If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t do any of this.”

She never explained her dislike of Christmas, other than to say it was a lot of work. Yet, I started putting up the tree and decorating it mostly alone when I was nine. Dad helped with the lights, and then I took over. I wasn’t never sure what “work” she referred to.

Mom settled in her rocking chair while I crouched on the floor and began to unwrap ornaments. I held up a fake snow globe ornament as I looped the hook through its string.

“Those I made from a craft kit the year after your dad and I got married,” she recounted. Ornaments from students at the school where Mom worked comprised the largest category of
decorations. A few were mine. None of the ornaments predated my parents’ marriage, and none of them were things I’d made in school. Traditions weren’t a part of our family Christmas, not even collecting or passing down ornaments. While Christmas wasn’t magical in my childhood home, our simple celebrations brought the extended family together, which I always enjoyed.

Marrying Kirk added new and wonderful traditions to the holiday. His family loved Christmas and worked to make it magical for the kids. Real Christmas trees. Santa’s gifts left under the tree on Christmas morning. A family candy-making day at his granny’s house. I soaked it in and fell deeper in love with the holiday.

By the time Haneul entered our lives, I reveled in the traditions we created and the magical feeling of the season. During Haneul’s early years, I researched and implemented traditions that would focus the season on being together. When Haneul was three, I hung small stockings along the banister of our staircase, creating a unique-to-us Advent calendar.

As I put the last of the dinner leftovers in the refrigerator, Haneul ran into the kitchen. “Mom, can I check the stocking now?” Haneul excitedly asked, the year he was five. He had been waiting all day, and now bounced with excitement in anticipation of today’s activity.

“Of course!” I answered. “You remember which one it is?”

He nodded, moving to stand in front of the tiny mitten nestled in the row of stockings. He reached in and pulled out the card, then exclaimed, “It’s Yoon and the Christmas Mitten! We get to read about Yoon!”

Squatting in front of the bookshelf that now housed all the Christmas books, Haneul pulled the book out and soon we were snuggled together on the sofa reading about the little girl from South Korea experiencing her first Christmas in the United States.
Throughout the season, we baked cookies, made ornaments, watched movies, drove around to see Christmas lights, and went to see the light display at the zoo, all at the direction of the cards hidden in the small stockings.

When Kirk and Haneul turned their backs on the traditions I’d so lovingly established, it felt like they weren’t just rejecting the traditions, but that they were rejecting me. I lost something special, yet I tried to adjust and embrace new traditions. That was how I ended up in this hotel room alone on Christmas.

On Christmas Eve Haneul went caroling with the church youth group on its annual outing. A new tradition is born, I thought, yet it was a tradition for only Haneul, not our family. Still, I was excited for him to have the experience with his friends. The group finished the night at our friends’ house with snacks and games, and it was two in the morning before the party dispersed. I picked Haneul up, and he managed to stay awake for the five-minute ride home.

On Christmas morning Haneul was a boy excited to get up early and open his presents, which included the top items from his wish list. Once the excitement wore off, he was grumpy from lack of sleep, and after getting frustrated during a board game, he blurted, “It’s been a horrible Christmas! I didn’t even get anything good.”

I tried to be the stabilizer as I always had. “I don’t think you mean that,” I said, as calmly as I could. “Why don’t we play the game later?”

“I don’t want to play the stupid game,” Haneul said, his voice rising. He got up from the table, throwing his cards down, stomped upstairs, and slammed his door.

Anger rising, I followed. I opened the door and turned back to Kirk who stood on the bottom of the stairs. “Get the hammer. Slamming doors isn’t how we handle our anger, so the door is
coming off.” Then I turned back to Haneul. “I know you’re tired after being up late, but this is not acceptable behavior.”

“You never let me do anything!” he screamed, and I snapped.

“What?! I let you stay out until after two in the morning, even though I knew so little sleep would be hard for you! I got you the gifts you wanted! I have let go of all the traditions that are important to me because you and Dad don’t want to do them anymore! But I never let you do anything?!”

Something broke inside my sad, lonely self. I turned toward our bedroom. “I’m leaving. Book me a hotel room while I pack.”

Kirk followed. “Just calm down.”

I spun to face him. “I will not calm down. I cannot keep doing this. I’m sick of the negativity. I’m tired of the things that are important to me being trivialized, made fun of, and rejected. I can’t keep doing what I’ve been doing. I’m done. I would rather spend Christmas alone!”

I began to throw a day’s worth of clothes and toiletries into the canvas bag that was a souvenir of the family cruise we’d take three months earlier. I grabbed my phone and laptop with its charger and zipped up the bag. I turned to Kirk. “Did you book it?”

“I texted you the confirmation,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said, as I hoisted the bag onto my shoulder. “I’ll be back sometime tomorrow.”

As I drove away, the dam of tears finally burst, and I sobbed as I drove to the hotel.

***

The Year of Emotions would be a great title for my 2018. Most of my life I had been unemotional. I rarely cried and things that tugged at the heartstrings of other women didn’t affect me at all. Becoming a mother in 2006 opened a portal to my emotions. After Haneul came along,
Pixar movies made me teary, and I found myself being touched by others’ stories, especially those of children. But I remained largely out of touch with my own feelings.

For decades, my emotions were locked away. In 2018, work disappointment, drama with my extended family, and the shifts occurring with Kirk and Haneul caused the emotions to push to be seen. When sadness, loneliness, and desire finally surfaced, the usually numb, unemotional me didn’t know what to do with these big feelings. But now it was harder to pretend that everything was fine. That year, for the first time in my life, I began to ask for my needs to be met, instead of hinting or hoping that someone would ask what I needed.

“It’s our twenty-fifth anniversary this year. We should do something special.” Our anniversary wasn’t until October but mentioning this in February would mean we had plenty of time to plan.

“Like what?” Kirk asked.

“We need to go somewhere just the two of us. Haneul can stay with friends. We haven’t done anything big for our anniversary since our tenth. I want to do something special this year.”

“Okay. We have time to plan something,” Kirk replied.

A few months later, inspired by friends, Kirk booked a family cruise for us. We’d never done a cruise before, so I was excited until he explained his thinking behind it. “This can be a combined anniversary trip and family vacation.”

Confused, I looked at him. “I thought we were going away just the two of us for our anniversary?”

“What? When did we say that?”

“Earlier this year. I said a couple of times that I wanted to go away just the two of us for our anniversary since it’s a milestone one.”
“Huh. I don’t remember that. Well, we’ll have fun on the cruise and probably hardly see Haneul since they have a teen club.”

“But he’ll be sharing our cabin. Not my idea of a romantic anniversary trip,” I grumbled.

“Well, it’s already booked now. What do you want me to do?” Kirk’s tone was frustrated.

“Nothing, I guess,” I said, as I felt myself drift a little further from my husband.

I could no longer push my feelings aside to focus solely on my family's needs. The realization that sometimes I wouldn’t be able to be the strong one, the one fully in charge, rocked my life.
Chapter Two:

Epiphanies

2006

Sunshine streamed in through the patio door as the social worker looked over the questions in front of her. It was our second home study visit after beginning the process of adopting our son from South Korea.

“What was your relationship like with your parents growing up?”

I pondered the question; the answer wasn’t as simple as it seemed.

“Growing up I thought it was mostly wonderful. Things about the relationship were weird at times, though. We were close when I was younger, but as I got older, Mom became more controlling. Like, my curfew was earlier at twenty than it was when I was fifteen.”

The social worker made notes and nodded for me to continue. “Even now she’s that way with me and I’m thirty-five. When they visited last year, one day she told me I’d returned home from work just in time because she was about to rearrange my kitchen cabinets. She said the organization didn’t make sense to her. I said, ‘Well, you don’t live here so if they make sense to us that’s all that matters.’ She looked at me like I had just insulted her. Her controlling behavior has strained our relationship, but nothing I do seems to help fix it.”

The social worker looked intently at me and said, “You know that her control issues aren’t your fault.”

I watched the dust motes dance in the sun unsure of what to say. Growing up, everything had always been my fault. Anytime my parents and I had a conflict I heard, “You make me so mad!” or “You’re getting too big for your britches. Do I need to take you down a notch?” The family mantra that was brought up any time I struggled with relationships was: If you can’t get along
with one person, it could be a personality conflict. But if you can’t get along with anyone, the problem is you. The social worker continued speaking, pulling me from my memories.

“As a teen and young adult, you were individuating. That means you were exploring who you were and what you believed apart from your family of origin. And that’s exactly what you were supposed to be doing.”

Finally, I stammered out, “No…I didn’t know that.” I was quiet for a moment and then said what I had been thinking, “I always thought it was my fault because I was a bad daughter.”

The social worker shook her head. “No, you aren’t. Your mother was trying to prevent you from doing what you should have been doing at that stage of life. And as an adult it’s normal to have views and opinions different from your family of origin. You were doing what you were supposed to do, and she was trying to prevent that.”

This new perspective would cause me to look at my life through a different lens and eventually it would change everything.

***

Four months after that visit with the social worker, I watched as the little plane on the map in the back of the seat in front of me edged closer to Incheon International Airport in South Korea. I had followed our course throughout the entire flight, looking down to see Russia and China beneath us, too excited to sleep. Now, after being awake for more hours than I could count, the tires screeched at touch down and we were in South Korea. Our travel call had come a week earlier, and we’d quickly made plans to bring home Haneul. We landed in the early evening of September 12, 2006, and as we exited the airport, humidity still hung heavy in the air. Internally, parts of me were at war—one part wanting to speed time up so I could be with my son, while the other part wanted it to slow allowing me to savor each experience.
For decades, I longed to have a passport with stamps in it. Travel held an allure for me from the time I was young, yet I had rarely traveled more than a few hundred miles from my home. Once married, Kirk and I began to travel but he had no desire to explore other countries.

“I don’t want to go somewhere where they don’t speak English,” he would complain when I suggested going to Europe. I pivoted; if not Paris, then London. “I’m not sure they speak English there either,” he said, chuckling at his joke.

Initially, Kirk agreed to adopt from Korea because the Korean adoption program allowed volunteers to escort the adoptees to the U.S. By July, his anxiousness at seeing our son trumped his reluctance to travel to a country where English wasn’t the first language. Since I wanted to travel to pick up our son from the beginning, I eagerly applied for my passport and anticipated the day I would get to explore another culture.

Thunk! In a matter of seconds, my dream of having a stamp in my passport became a reality.

Nervous excitement fluttered in my stomach as we waited in the interior room at the adoption agency the day after arriving. Any minute we would meet our son, and I fidgeted with my wedding ring to expel the nervous energy. The sounds of office workers on the other side of the wall going about their day filled the silence in the small room. My head was swimming with thoughts—including wondering what my son now looked like—but I voiced none of them to Kirk. Only in the early days of our relationship, now more than a decade past, had we talked about our feelings. I knew if I asked what he was thinking now, he would respond “nothing” as he always did. We sat apart, him in a chair and me on a loveseat, quietly waiting for our lives to change.

A few minutes later, framed in the open doorway, stood an older Korean woman carrying a baby in a traditional carrier on her back. He slept peacefully, his cheek smushed against her shirt.
My heart danced at the sight of him—seeing him in person exactly six months to the day after I first saw his photo. Haneul no longer resembled the tiny two-month-old in the picture I’d carried since our match. This chubby nine-month-old still had a head full of dark brown hair, which had been recently cut, but that’s where the resemblance stopped.

The social worker brought the woman and baby into our room and seated them across from us. As the woman removed the carrier, the baby awoke and quickly began to take in his surroundings. Soon he happily sat on his foster mother’s lap playing and rummaging through her purse. “Jjak jjak goong,” the social worker said to Haneul as she clapped her hands together. He put his hands together and began to clap with her, smiling with his tongue between his lips.

“This game is like pat-a-cake in English,” the social worker explained.

Then it was on to peek-a-boo in Korean. The social worker covered her eyes with her hands, then opened them and exclaimed, “Kka kkoong!” Haneul quickly followed. This glimpse into Korean babyhood was priceless and I soaked it in so we could continue the games when he came home. He easily came to both Kirk and I, and holding my son for the first time was surreal. One of my favorite photos from that meeting shows Haneul and I gazing into each other’s eyes. I’ve always suspected that he was fascinated by my blue eyes, given that they were likely the first set of non-brown eyes he’d seen.

I went into our first meeting thinking of this boy as my son, whom I planned to name Gabe. I left thinking of him as Haneul, the boy I was being entrusted to raise. He was still my son, but I now recognized that he came with his own story. Gabe would be added as his English name, but I would rarely call him that—after that first meeting, he was Haneul.

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When I’d asked to visit the hospital where Haneul was born, I never expected the experience that awaited us. I hoped to get a photo of the outside of the building. Instead, we met his intake social worker and nurses who had cared for him. On the day between meeting Haneul and picking him up for our flight home, our adoption agency arranged for a tour guide to help us visit our son’s birth city. The suburb of Seoul, with its twenty-story apartment buildings filling the skyline, was nothing like the town I expected.

Back in the social worker’s car after the hospital visit, she turned around and handed me a square, colorful cardboard folder. Our guide translated, “When she knew you were coming, she reviewed Haneul’s original file and found this. She thought you might want it.”

I opened the folder to find two Polaroids of Haneul at birth and his inked footprints. Tears blurred my vision as I laid my pinky finger along the print. I blinked them back so I could see the length of my finger perfectly matching the tiny footprint from toe to heel. I choked out a “gam sa ham ni da,” but the simple phrase of thanks didn’t seem adequate for this gift. The card noted the time of his birth, something few adoptees know. Emotions threatened to surge over me, feelings that were unfamiliar yet not unwelcomed.

On the bus ride back to Seoul, I reflected on the day while Kirk slept in the seat next to me. In two short days, I had fallen in love with this country that was making me a mother. I wondered, *What’s this connection I feel to Korea? Is it just that it’s the first other culture I’ve experienced? Would I feel this way in another country too?* I didn’t have the answers but knew that Korea would hold a special place in my heart.

***

The day we officially took custody of Haneul, a hidden part of me awakened. For a torturous two hours, I sat in the same room with my son yet wasn’t able to hold him. His foster mother
held him tightly as she prepared for our departure. I understood her reluctance to hand him to me; once she did, she would be saying goodbye forever, so I endured.

Sitting with his blue travel bag between us, Haneul’s foster mother explained, through a social worker who translated, its contents item by item. I took meticulous notes; there would be no chance to ask questions again later. With Kirk helping another family who was taking custody of their daughter, I took photos of Haneul’s foster mother holding him, her anguish evident in her strained expression. With her arm wrapped around his chubby waist as he sat on her lap, she closed her eyes as if trying to shut out the reality of what was about to happen. Haneul watched me, deep brown eyes full of curiosity. The social worker showed me how to wear the baby carrier they provided and snapped it into place around my waist. Haneul’s foster mother approached me, holding the baby tightly and talking to him softly in words I didn’t understand. He had been in her care since he was three weeks old. Now at nine and a half months old, he had been with her more than double the time of most of the babies she had cared for. They had a bond, and I was about to break it.

She raised him up and gently slid him into the carrier. Then she wrapped her arms around us and began to sob. Until this trip, I had considered myself an unemotional person. It worked well for me during my years as a journalist, as I remained emotionally unaffected by fatal accidents or murder trials. But as this Korean woman sobbed against my shoulder, the emotions I had long buried surged forth and I began sobbing with her.

Kirk, who had only known the unemotional me, had gone to the restroom and returned to find tears streaming down my cheeks. “What happened? Did they tell you we can’t take him home?” Alarm was evident in his tone. I shook my head, unable to speak through the sobs. His tone turned frustrated, “Then what?! What’s wrong?”
I hugged the baby, who was also now crying, and kissed the top of his head. After a couple of deep breaths, I calmed and managed to whisper, “It’s just sad.”

“Oh,” Kirk sighed with what sounded like relief. “I thought something was really wrong.”

He turned to gather our things and I watched him, as I considered his statement. Something was really wrong—we were taking this baby away from everything he’d ever known: family, language, culture, sounds, tastes, smells, and more. Even if the emotions of this didn’t overwhelm Kirk, shouldn’t he be feeling something? Yet, none of it seemed to affect him.

Just minutes later, we were ushered into the airport shuttle. The motion of the car soothed Haneul and he slept for most of the ride. We shared the shuttle with another family, so I couldn’t explain my reaction to Kirk, but even if we’d been alone, I’m not sure I could have explained. Now I felt embarrassed about my extreme reaction. Yet somehow it also felt an appropriate response given the situation.

My tears were ones of empathy for the woman sobbing against my shoulder and the baby, both of whom were about to lose an important connection. I sobbed for my son, who was losing everything he had known in his short life and gaining only me. It seemed like such a great loss, and I wasn’t sure the gain balanced all Haneul was leaving behind.
Part 2

“지금은 행복한데 불행하니까”

(because now I’m happy yet unhappy)

~ “Reflection” by BTS
Chapter 3:

*Abandoning Validation*

2018

Sweat trickled down my back despite the cool spring breeze blowing into the sanctuary as the choir director motioned for us to stand. I refused to look at the congregation seated in the pews, even though it was filled with friends. I took a deep breath, fingers gripping my sheet music as the first piano notes rang out. To keep my nerves in check, I focused on the director, a close friend, who gave me reassuring smiles when our eyes met. The choir collectively inhaled and began to sing. I concentrated on the words written in hangul, the written Korean language, keeping my eyes a character block ahead to ensure correct pronunciation. At practice, the night before the director made sure I knew I would be the center of attention during the performance during Easter service the following day.

“Amy, all eyes are going to be on you tomorrow, so you better know the words,” he said. His teasing tone still rang with truth. I must have looked terrified because he continued, “Well, you’re the one who stands out. Everyone is going to be watching how well you do.”

“No pressure,” I muttered under my breath, as I committed myself to the rest of practice.

A couple of hours later, my voice rang out in the car as I eked out a few more practices on the drive home. I sang it in the shower and as I got dressed the next morning. The director had invited me to join the Korean choir for Easter service only hours before the last rehearsal. For years, I’d teased him that my goal in learning the Korean language was to be good enough to join the Korean church choir, but somehow, he’d discerned that I wasn’t joking.

While my language skills remained on the elementary level, I now sat fulfilling a dream of singing in Korean before the congregation. It wasn’t a flawless performance, but as we finished,
pride swelled within me. A day earlier fear coursed through me when I said yes to the invitation, but I did it anyway. After service, many of the Korean church members congratulated me on the performance and my bravery in participating. My friend, the choir director, said he was proud of me.

Kirk made sure I saw the full picture of my performance. “Everyone else looked relaxed during the song, but you looked petrified.”

I bristled but didn’t respond. *Of course, I was petrified!* I thought. *But I did it.* I smiled and allowed his comment to drift away. I’d done something that scared me, and I had done it well, if not perfectly. Sometimes done is better perfect.

Exhilaration flooded me as we arrived home that afternoon. I opened my phone and began to type out a Facebook post about the experience, but when I finished writing, my finger hovered over the “Post” button. If I shared, my mother would know that we were no longer attending the church I’d grown up in and she would be angry. During the last three years, I’d been careful to keep my social media presence free of anything controversial. My mother unfriended me for the first time in 2014 after we disagreed about immigration. A year later she apologized, and I accepted a new friend request from her. Our relationship had long been difficult and had only become more so as I changed to become the mother Haneul needed. So when we renewed our online relationship, I vowed to focus on family to make things easier between Mom and me.

I agonized over posting about the choir performance until the next morning. Finally, I decided that at age 47 I should not fear my mother’s rejection over something that clearly had nothing to do with her. I posted. Congratulations rolled in from friends across the country. Mom ignored it. The online version of the silent treatment had been utilized to show her disapproval. It irked me, but I decided it was her loss.
During Haneul’s preschool and early elementary school years, Mom appeared to be marginally interested in our growing love of Korean culture. She and my dad tried some of the Korean food I made when they visited. Dad, a notoriously picky eater, found something to dislike each time, but Mom seemed to enjoy it. She even asked Haneul questions about his favorite K-pop group when he rediscovered the music he’d loved as a baby.

But at some point, her willingness to engage with this part of our life faded. I suspect that early on she believed our adopting Korean culture as a family was a passing fad, thinking at some point Haneul would become just American, instead of Korean American. Once she realized it was a way of life for us, she could no longer support it.

Each time we visited with my parents, I hoped for change. During my teen years, when my relationship with my mother became strained, I looked forward to the day when I would be an adult and we could be friends again. Now in my late forties, I continued to wait. Instead of our relationship improving as I aged, it became more contentious.
Chapter 4:

Seeking Validation

1970s

The librarian slid my blue cardboard library card into the checkout machine, the metal band with my number scraping against the internal mechanism. I watched as she took a stack of cards and placed them one by one into the other side of the machine.

Duh-dunk! Dud-dunk!

The sound of the machine stamping the due date onto the card filled my preschool heart with joy. Each week I looked forward to story time at the library with Miss Turner. Not only would I be introduced to new stories, but after story time, Mom and I would gather a huge stack of books and I would get to hear the sound marking them as mine for the next two weeks.

“Mom, can we read them again?” I would ask a few hours after our library visit.

I left the library every time sure that the books would last us the whole two weeks, only to insist that we read them all that afternoon. Mom would smile and say, “Tomorrow. We’ll read them all again tomorrow before nap time.”

Visiting the library and stacks of books compromise some of my happiest memories from childhood. As an only child, books fueled my already vivid imagination allowing me to live in a world of wild things, terrible, horrible, no good very bad days, and ants who used teamwork to overcome the “I can’t” attitude.

When Mom left the room, I picked up the books and began to read them to Johnny and Roy, my imaginary friends; the paramedics from the TV show Emergency! went everywhere with me. Having no siblings left me in solitude much of the time, but I rarely found myself lonely or bored.
My friends lamented my status as an only child. “Don’t you wish you had a little brother or sister?”

I huffed. “No! I love being an only child.”

When grownups learned I was an only child, the standard response was, “Oh, she must be totally spoiled.” Mom and Dad would smile and say, “Spoiled with love.” The grownups would look at me and say, “Of course!” as I smiled back playing the part.

For decades I bought the line that I’d been spoiled with love. Children rely on parents to help them understand the world around them, even if it leaves the child with a warped view. While happy memories are scattered throughout my childhood and teen years, I have just as many memories that are filled with confusion, anxiety, and an underlying fear I wouldn’t understand until decades later.

My parents claimed to spoil me with love, but I never felt spoiled. Emotional distance sat like a canyon between my parents and me. Yet family lore recounted how I was the apple of my dad’s eye.

Nap time provided opportunities to dig deeper into the intricacies of my family. I snuggled into the pillow as Mom draped a blanket over me. Tucked on the side of the bed by the wall, I felt safe as Mom lay down next to me. Cute animal photos gazed down at me from the walls of my childhood bedroom, each one espousing a positive affirmation.

“Tell me the story of when I was born,” I pleaded.

“When we were expecting, I told everyone I wanted a brown-eyed, brown-haired little boy,” Mom said. “Your dad wanted a blonde-haired, blue-eyed baby girl. And he got exactly what he wanted.”
Always a thinker, I wanted to ask, “What about you, Mom? Are you glad now that you got a blonde-haired, blue-eyed little girl?” But the fear of her response stopped me. Mom told everyone I was her world and that she wouldn’t be able to go on if anything happened to me. I was her constant companion, and for years it seemed like her only friend. Still, when I failed to live up to her desires, she could be cold and distant. I got the sense that if she could trade me for the brown-haired, brown-eyed little boy, she would make the exchange in a heartbeat.

Another day before nap time, I snuggled against Mom as we lay on my bed. I handed her the next book from the stack I had gathered for the day—a Little Golden Book titled, “Good Little, Bad Little Girl.” It was based on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem, “There was a little girl.”

There was a little girl,

Who had a little curl,

Right in the middle of her forehead.

When she was good,

She was very good indeed,

But when she was bad she was horrid (Longfellow).

The little girl in the illustration had blonde hair and blue eyes, just like me.

“Oh, it’s the Amy book,” Mom said, pulling one of my curls onto my forehead. She recited the familiar refrain, “When she was good was very, very good, but when she was bad, she was horrid.” Then she opened the book and began to read.

Others exclaimed I was good. Preschool teachers and other adults I interacted with praised me for being “mature for my age.” My grandmother and aunts told me how well-behaved and easygoing I was. My main fault in school was that I talked too much.
Yet when any adult praised me in front of my parents for being kind or helpful or having a good attitude, Mom and Dad would respond, “Are we talking about the same girl? That doesn’t sound like the Amy we know.”

Each time hurt and disappointment spiraled in my stomach. I tried so hard to be the perfect daughter they wanted. I needed to try harder.

As I got older, and I could recite the story of my parents’ desires for the child they wanted in 1970, I questioned whether I was really the child my dad wanted. If I was what he wanted, why doesn’t he seem interested in me?

Photos of me as a baby showed my dad holding me, while toddler and preschool photos reveal us hamming it up for the camera. But as I got older, distance and disinterest marked my relationship with him. One day, as I sat doing third-grade homework at the kitchen table, I asked Mom about it. She was busy making dinner and didn’t pause as she responded.

“Your dad likes babies and younger kids. So, I think he liked you better when you were little and less messy and loud,” she said.

I thought back to our dinner at my grandmother’s favorite restaurant the week before. Everyone was talking and laughing when I spilled my milk on the table. Dad jumped up and in a low angry voice said, “Amy! Why did you do that?”

A waitress appeared suddenly with a rag and insisted it was fine. She patted my shoulder and said, “Accidents happen, honey. I’ll get this cleaned up and get you another glass of milk.”

“No, it’s okay. I don’t need another glass,” I said.

I was careless, I thought. I don’t deserve another glass. The shame of my mistake settled over me. How could I be so stupid! Beneath the table, my fingers began to pick at each other.
fought the urge to bring a nail to my mouth and begin biting, knowing that would meet with the disapproval of my mother.

“Nonsense!” the waitress said. “Maybe you should have chocolate this time?”

I nodded and mumbled a “Yes, please,” but my eyes were fixed firmly on the tablecloth in front of me. I dared not look up at my dad for fear of the disapproving look I would find there.

The sounds of Mom chopping the onions for the meatloaf brought me back into our kitchen. *Well, I can’t do anything about my age, I thought, but I can try to be quieter and neater. The crusade for perfection renewed.*

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I don’t remember how I learned that tantrums weren’t acceptable, but I know the lesson was learned early. As a preschooler, the toy aisle at the grocery store held an allure for me matched only by the library. As Mom shopped, I carefully considered which one-dollar item most interested me. The pegs filled with small dolls and magic erase boards hung next to the book rack filled with picture books, coloring books, and crayons. Some weeks my contemplation over what to choose would last for most of Mom’s shopping trip. Usually, the tiny dolls or something to draw on or with were my top picks. I approached Mom with my chosen item, hopeful that it would go home with me.

“Mom, can we buy this?” I asked, holding it out. “It’s only a dollar.”

She looked down at my offering and shook her head. “Not this week; we don’t have the money. Maybe next week. Go put it back.”

I walked silently back to the toy aisle to return the treasure. If it was something that I desperately wanted, I would hide it on the back of the shelf, behind all the other items, hope that next week it would still be there, and we would have the money for me to buy it.
By age three or four, I felt the burden of our family’s financial woes. I knew I helped by sacrificing my toy each week, but at least once, I tried to solve our problem in a different way.

The spring sun shone brightly as I meandered through the front yard looking for flowers. I wandered closer to the house that sat on the front of the property owned by my grandmother. Our mobile home sat on the back of the property.

“Hi, Amy,” our elderly neighbor called.

I waved and skipped over to his porch, where he sat in a rocking chair. I sat on the porch step of the small wooden house, and we chatted about the flowers I’d found.

“So, how are your parents?” he asked, once we’d exhausted the flower conversation.

“Well,” I said, “Money is tight and they fight about it a lot.”

“Hmm,” he said. “Before you go home, let me get you some canned goods to take with you. It’s not much but sometimes even a little helps.”

I nodded, and a few minutes later walked slowly back to our trailer, careful not to drop any of the cans now filling my arms. I felt proud that I had found a way to help my parents and hoped that maybe now they wouldn’t be so mad at each other.

I sat the cans down on the step to open our door, before transferring them one by one onto the floor inside the house. Then I climbed inside and resumed carrying the load into the kitchen, where Mom was cleaning up from lunch.

“Where did you get those?” she asked as I stretched to put the cans on the counter.

“Mr. Smith gave them to me when he heard that money is tight,” I said, pride filling my voice.

“How would he know that money is tight?” she asked, her voice now clipped.
“I told him when he asked how you and Dad were doing.” My voice was now uncertain, as I watched the look on Mom’s face change from relaxed to taut and angry.

“How dare you share our personal situation with a stranger!” she exploded, her voice now at maximum level.

“He’s not a stranger!” I yelled back. “He’s our neighbor!” Maybe she doesn’t know who I’m talking about, I thought. Maybe that’s why she’s so mad. “You know, Mr. Smith, who lives in Grandma’s house?”

The hard tone of her voice when she answered told me as much as the words that came out.

“Yes, I know who Mr. Smith is. Creepy old man. What happens in our family is none of his business! Don’t ever talk about our family to anyone again. Now go get a switch.”

The racing spiral of anxiety began swirling in my stomach. How had this gone so wrong? I stomped outside, slowly making my way to the cherry tree in the front yard.

“How up!” Mom called. “The longer you take the worse this is going to be.”

I snapped a bare branch from one of the low-hanging limbs and carried it back inside. The anxiety spiral spun faster; my heartbeat at triple time, my breathing shallowed, and my mind raced with thoughts of how to make this right.

“Come here,” Mom called firmly. Standing over me, she turned me around and swatted the back of my thighs several times with the branch, its thin, flimsy nature making it more like a whip.

Tears swam in my eyes, but I blinked them back, my stubbornness refusing to let them fall. My mind chanted: I will not let her see this hurt me. I suffered the indignity as quietly as I could. Once the swatting was over, Mom folded the branch and threw it into the trash.

“Go to your room and think about what you did,” she said.
I suppressed the desire to pound my way down the hall, knowing that would result in another spanking, and softly slid the door to my room closed. I curled up on the bed, and gently rubbed the welts on the back of my legs. Silent tears rolled across my face, merging with one another and creating a wet spot on my pillow. My soft sniffles eventually faded as I drifted to sleep.

Later, I awoke to Mom softly shaking my shoulder. “Time to wake up,” she said, her voice sweet. She sat on the edge of my bed and pulled me into her lap. “I hope you know that I spank you because I love you.”

“I know,” I said, though the concept confused me. *I love Mom, and I never want to hurt her,* I thought. *So, why does her love have to hurt me? It must be an adult thing I don’t understand.*

***

1980s

“Can you believe her?”

“I know! She just had to try to be like everyone else.”

I ignored the whispers, as I looked down at the textbook in front of me on the kitchen table of my small Christian school. The day before, I had turned my ankle in P.E. and an accommodation had been made to let me do school in the kitchen instead of navigating the stairs on crutches that weren’t quite short enough for me. That afternoon I would see the orthopedist, but I suspected my ankle was broken. I’d always had an uncanny sense of knowing when I’d broken a bone.

The other seventh- and eighth-grade girls weren’t shy about their speculation that I was faking the injury. Both of our basketball teams had suffered a rash of sprained ankles recently, and they apparently believed I was trying to fit in. I shook my head in disbelief. Since the first day of seventh grade, I’d been shunned by the other girls. I had no idea what I’d done to be ostracized, but based on my parents’ mantra, I knew it was my fault.
All through elementary school, I’d been a popular kid with many friends. I wasn’t perfect—I could be bossy. I liked being the leader, often taking charge at recess and guiding us through the latest game of make-believe based on our favorite TV shows. My friends were easy followers. So, the sudden shift that occurred at the beginning of junior high school baffled me. Even Samantha, my best friend since we were toddlers, had turned on me. The only thing that had changed about me over the summer was my body. I had developed early and quickly, which I now suspect had much to do with how I was treated that year. I had always been popular with the boys, but was even more so now as teen hormone surges came into play. Those surges also meant that it was now harder to be friends with the boys, as I had been before.

The irony in the girls thinking I would fake an injury to fit in amused me. The whole year I had refused to change to fit in. I wouldn’t pretend to like a certain band or care about fashion just to be a part of their group. Why they thought I would go to the extreme of pretending to be hurt was beyond me?

It had been a lonely year, and the frustration of it spilled out in tears when my ankle rolled the previous day. I sat under the basket, alone, holding my ankle and crying. The rest of the girls stood around the gym and stared, but none approached in sympathy. The teacher made his way over and looked at my ankle, which was already swelling.

“I’m going to help you to the locker room and once you get changed, we’ll get some ice for your ankle,” he said. “I’ll have the office call your mom.”

Mom worked at school in the mornings as an aide in the office and a study hall teacher but went home at noon each day. When she picked me up that afternoon, she told me we would go to the clinic for an x-ray. The x-ray showed a break on the growth plate, so instead of casting it then, they made an appointment for the following day with an orthopedist.
When I arrived at school the morning after my appointment, my left leg in a cast from foot to knee, the disbelief was evident on the faces of my classmates.

“Is it broken?” one asked, now curious.

“Yep, fracture on the growth plate,” I said.

“Can I be the first to sign your cast?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

Soon my cast was filled with names and funny sayings from the other junior high and high school students. But their desire to make their mark on the cast didn’t lead to kindness in helping me up and down the stairs to my classes. Instead, five minutes before each bell, Mom appeared, grabbed my books, and helped me navigate to my next class.

I had always been Mom’s companion but now she became mine. In the loneliness of seventh grade, Mom listened to the music I liked and stayed up late on Fridays to watch music videos with me on the cable show, Night Tracks on TBS. We made fun of the strange outfits and learned all the words to our favorite songs. Her pop culture knowledge made her popular with her ninth-grade study hall students. I watched from a distance as they joked with her and talked about their favorite music or movies. Mom was cool and I was an outcast.
Part 3

“지나가 언젠가”

(It shall pass, someday)

~ “Everything Goes” by RM
Chapter 5: 

The Unraveling

2019

It’s never one thing that results in major life changes. And my guess is that for people who are honest with themselves, it’s also never as superficial as Hollywood would have it appear. Pop culture insists that a mid-life crisis occurs because we’re struggling with getting older and longing for youth. That idea never resonated with me. By 2019, I felt that a mid-life crisis had a firm hold on me, but I knew it wasn’t about the superficial. On the surface, my life looked idyllic, just as it always had.

So, if it wasn’t superficial what was it? One day I typed “sad and lonely in my forties” into a search engine in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of what was happening to me. One of the top results listed was a blog post by Brené Brown titled “The Midlife Unraveling.” I clicked the link, curious about Brown’s take based on the title. She insisted that what happens to us at midlife isn’t a crisis at all, but instead an unraveling. It’s the universe getting our attention and challenging us to live as our most authentic selves. But this paragraph especially resonated with me:

The truth is that the midlife unraveling is a series of painful nudges
strung together by low-grade anxiety and depression, quiet
desperation, and an insidious loss of control. By low-grade, quiet,
and insidious, I mean it’s enough to make you crazy, but seldom
enough for people on the outside to validate the struggle or offer
you help and respite. It’s the dangerous kind of suffering—the kind
that allows you to pretend that everything is OK. (Brown)
Pretending felt like an accurate description. But in the previous year, one thing after another had spun out of control. My life was a ball of yarn that had suddenly started rolling downhill. I was unraveling.

Brown’s article listed five ways to respond to this unraveling: embrace it, deny it, double down on who you think you are, numb yourself, or fight it like your life depends on it (Brown). By the time I read the article, embracing it was the only option. Brown’s list of responses made me wonder, though, how long this unraveling had been happening for me. I had lived in denial my whole life. During my twenties and thirties, I doubled down and became more judgmental and self-righteous about everything I believed in. Numbing had long been a companion too, whether through my imagination, food, or mindless entertainment. The one thing I didn’t do is fight it.

By the time I recognized the unraveling was happening, I was too tired to fight. Weariness sunk into me from denying and pretending and doubling down.

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Mom: Dad fell again yesterday. I had to have the neighbors come over and help me get him up. He’s OK but sore.

Mom: Well, I guess I can’t expect much more from my body with only 10% of my heart working.

A series of texts from Mom in the spring of 2019 about her and Dad’s health issues left me feeling the weight of obligation to visit. Mom’s coolness toward me started in December 2017 when Kirk, Haneul, and I visited for a weekend to celebrate my parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary. She wouldn’t discuss what was wrong. Anytime I asked, her response was, “Oh,
nothing.” The Facebook unfriending in 2018 left me resigned to the fact that nothing would ever change between us.

When I told them Haneul and I would visit in July, the anxiety spiral started to swirl. For three weeks, my thoughts raced as I tried to anticipate and rehearse every possible scenario. I turned inward, as I always did when anxiety took hold of me, distancing myself from those around me. I learned years earlier that Kirk didn’t want to hear about my issues with my parents.

Once we were on the road, my racing heart and churning stomach joined in. Haneul, now thirteen, served as DJ during the twelve-hour drive to Arkansas, playing our favorite K-pop tunes.

“Okay. We’re going to play a game,” Haneul said when we were about an hour away from my hometown. “I’m going to say a sentence and then play a BTS song. The song title will be the last words of the sentence, but you have to guess the title. No looking at the screen on the radio!”

“Okay,” I said, smiling. “I’m ready.”

From the back seat, he said, “When you’re driving…” A song began to play. I listened carefully, but while the tune was familiar, the title wasn’t.

“I don’t know this one,” I said.

He laughed. “Could you turn off your cell phone!”

I giggled at the game. “That’s a good one!”

“Next one. When you fart in church you’re…” The song began to play.

“Embarrassed!” I shouted.

“Yes! Good job, Mom!”

The game continued for the rest of the drive with him outsmarting me more times than I guessed. I appreciated the distraction more than he knew as I suspected this was going to be an
unpleasant visit. When we pulled into my parents’ driveway on Wednesday afternoon, no one came out of the house to greet us. My knock on the front door was met with a “Come in!” and Mom pushed herself out of her recliner as we entered, giving us both hugs. Dad grunted a “hello,” but didn’t move, his ribs sore from a fall the day before. A minute later the door opened again, and Jacob, the boy who lived next door and was like a grandson to my parents, entered without knocking. He greeted both of my parents and then invited Haneul to his house to play video games.

Mom and I settled at the kitchen table, and she started catching me up on all the family gossip. “Since Lenore’s death, Barbara has been living with Cynthia,” she said, talking about members of the extended family. “Barbara seems to be doing really well.”

“That’s good,” I replied. “I know her mom’s death was hard for her, but I’m glad to hear she’s adjusting well to a new environment.”

“Yes. And Fred has been collecting family memorabilia. Somehow, he ended up with lots of Granny’s things. At the family reunion he was showing us his collection. I hadn’t seen some of that stuff in years.”

“Hmm, I wouldn’t have expected that’s where Granny’s things ended up,” I said.

“I know! Dawn is teaching kindergarten now and her new husband is just wonderful!” Now she was talking about her brother’s daughter.

“So are Dawn and Ally speaking now?” I asked, seeking an update on the latest family feud that involved my first cousins.

“No, and Gerald isn’t speaking to Sheryl or Carolyn now,” Mom said, mentioning her siblings.
I shook my head. “That’s sad. I’d hope losing both his parents would help Gerald see that whatever petty thing he’s holding against his sisters isn’t worth losing family over.”

Mom sighed. “I know. I’d hoped that too, but he said he just can’t forgive them.”

The conversation continued as Mom made dinner, and included updates on church friends, more extended family, and former classmates at my school. Mom, Dad, Jake, his sister Bianca, Haneul, and I gathered around the small table to share a dinner of squash, fried okra, and hamburger steak.

“So, Jacob, how’s your girlfriend?” Mom asked.

Jacob filled her in on his latest relationship, and when the conversation lagged, Haneul spoke up. “My friends, Hyejin and Hyungjin, come over almost every Sunday afternoon and we play Aggravation,” he said. “This year we bought fireworks too and the three of us set them off the night before we came here. It was so fun!”

Mom didn’t respond and turned back to Jacob, “So are you playing basketball this year? You’ll have to get us the schedule so we can come to your games.”

A pang of hurt seared through my heart as I watched the dinner conversation play out. I wasn’t hurting for me, but for my son, as he tried to make a connection with my mom only to be brushed aside. After our visit in 2017, he told me, “Grandmom loves Jacob more than me, and he’s not even her real grandson.”

I tried to pass off Mom’s preference as proximity. “I don’t think she loves him more; she just seems more often since he lives next door.”

He shook his head, “No, she loves him more,” his tone matter of fact and resigned. Now, there was no denying my mom’s preferences.
As we drove away from the house that night on our way to check in at our hotel, my shoulders finally fell in relaxation. Haneul talked about what he and Jacob planned to do the next day, and I was thankful that they had fun together. At least, someone was enjoying the trip.

The minute we got to the house on Thursday, Jacob and Haneul disappeared to Jacob’s house. Mom was working that morning, so I sat on the sofa in the small living room with my dad. His soft snores as he napped in his recliner joined the hum of the air conditioner filling the silence in the house. I entertained myself by playing on my laptop and phone, which I put away when Mom walked in so we could visit.

She dropped her purse and keys on the desk, and asked Dad how he was doing. “Oh, all right, I guess,” he said. “Amy made me a sandwich for lunch.”

“That’s good,” she said. “It was a crazy morning at work, and I’m pooped.” With a heavy sigh, she plopped into her recliner and silently picked up her iPad, ignoring the fact that I sat just a few feet away. I waited for her to resume the conversation from the night before, feeling like I could only speak if she did first. Instead, the silence of the morning stretched into the afternoon.

Finally, I blinked back tears as I picked up my phone and started playing a game. Haneul came in and out of the house with Jacob, and again at the dinner that night Mom talked with Jacob and Bianca, as they told her about the day. She seemed energized as the kids talked. Haneul interjected a few details of the day, managing to be part of that night’s conversation while I watched, a mostly silent bystander.

As Haneul and I drove back to the hotel that night, he said, “Mom, they aren’t treating you very well.”

Tears filled my eyes. “No, they aren’t,” I said, thinking how obvious it had to be for my mostly self-absorbed thirteen-year-old to notice. Emotion prevented me from saying more so the
observation didn’t lead to an in-depth conversation, but it stayed with me. Once settled back in
the hotel room, Haneul sprawled on the hotel bed to watch a show, while I retreated to the
shower to cry.

On Friday, after we’d settled at the table for dinner at one of Dad’s favorite restaurants, Mom
finally broke her silence. “I have a book I want to give you when we get back to the house. It’s
about a first-class couple on the Titanic who both survived,” she said.

The kids sat at the other end of the table, chatting easily when the waitress arrived with our
food. Once plates had been placed, I decided to see if I could keep the conversation going.

“Sounds interesting. I don’t remember hearing about this couple,” I said. “I’ve just finished a
trilogy about a character with dissociative identity disorder. The three novels are the same story
but told from the points of view of each of the three main characters.”

“Send me the titles and author’s name. That sounds interesting,” Mom replied.

Reading had always been a connection point for us, and initially I hoped this conversation
would lead to a thaw in Mom’s iciness. Instead, it was a brief reprieve. Mostly finished with our
meals, Haneul dazzled the table, including my mother, with his origami skills, folding the tiniest
cranes from gum wrappers. But once we got back to the house, the silence returned and
continued into the next day.

By noon Saturday, I’d taken all I could; it was time to leave. I found Haneul and Jacob
outside. “It’s time to go in a few minutes,” I said.

He looked up at me from where he was crouching on the ground. “I thought we were staying
until later this afternoon,” he responded.

“That was the plan, but I think now is a good time.” He nodded. “Gather up your things and
say goodbye to the kids.”
I went back in the house and began collecting my things. “I think we’re going to get on the road,” I said.

Mom looked up from her iPad, surprised. “Oh. I thought you were staying until later.”

“I know, but I think it’s best that we get going now. It’s a long drive and I would like to be at the hotel in Kansas by dinner.” My tone was flat, resigned, the emotional exhaustion I felt preventing me from hiding my feelings.

Mom stood and I hugged her, then gave Dad a gentle squeeze. Haneul hugged my parents, said goodbye to Jacob, and we climbed in the car. I started our BTS playlist, but Haneul, who had a sleepover at Jacob’s the night before, fell asleep within five minutes of leaving. As I drove out of town, tears slid down my cheeks. I knew this would be the last time I would see one or both of my parents alive because I could no longer subject myself to abuse for living my life in a way that felt authentic to me. I had become the mom my son needed, which meant I could never again be the daughter my mother wanted. Thankful for the straight and familiar highway, I allowed the tears to fall, releasing my hurt, frustration, and anger until all I felt was numb.

Hours later, now in Kansas, I needed comfort. I called Kirk and asked if he could find a Korean restaurant in Wichita. He located one and texted me the address, which I put into my map app. Half an hour later, Haneul and I settled at the table and I took a deep breath. Korean pop music, including some of our favorite groups, played over the sound system. We savored the crunchy, spicy kimchi, grilled pork belly with a spicy soybean paste, and an assortment of vegetable side dishes. Korean food may have entered my life at the age of thirty-five, but now it was the taste of comfort.
After spending one night in Kansas, we arrived back in Colorado and the sadness of the visit settled over me. No matter how hard I tried to focus on the good in my life, the melancholy wouldn’t leave.

“You need to let it go,” Kirk insisted. “If your parents don’t want to talk to you, then good riddance.”

I didn’t understand how someone who had lost both of his parents before he was forty could be so callous about this break with my parents.

“It’s not that simple,” I said. “I’m an only child and always thought I was close to my parents. It’s going to take some time to adjust to this break. And I think being sad is normal.”

“Not for this long, it’s not,” he said.

Kirk’s lack of empathy for what I was feeling left me feeling even more sad and lonely.
“GOOOOOOAAAAAALLLLL!”

Haneul jumped up, fist in the air, celebrating the goal by the Korean national team in the World Cup game. While he had played soccer the previous year as a three-year-old, his interest in this game was mostly nationalistic. At the end of the game, it was back to YouTube and watching BigBang, a Korean pop group, sing the fight song for this World Cup team. Now four-and-a-half, he had recently rediscovered the Korean pop music he’d loved as a baby.

Since bringing Haneul home, Korean culture had become a larger and larger part of our family life. Our adoptive parent training taught us that keeping a connection to the culture was important, so I had planned to. But after falling in love with the country during our 2006 trip, I adopted the culture out of a sense of love and longing, not a sense of obligation. It started slowly, as our family adjusted to having a baby and then toddler around. At first, we made sure to celebrate major Korean holidays, complete with food and traditional games. But the Korean influence in our house steadily grew.

My cravings for Korean food outweighed our budget to go out to Korean restaurants, so I learned to cook our favorite dishes. I became a regular at the local Korean market, somewhat of an oddity as I strolled the aisles trying to match the label I’d found online with items in the store. I could read hangul, which helped, but I didn’t always know the meaning of what I read. I had gone from someone who thought opening a box of Hamburger Helper was cooking to a woman shopping at a Korean grocery so she could embark on making a meal that would take three hours of preparation.
The more I learned about the country, the more I wanted to know. Surface culture of Korea now filled our days. Haneul’s growing list of favorite K-pop groups played continuously. Music had been an important part of my childhood, too, so I loved that my son and I seemed to share this musical love language. Each afternoon, he would disappear into his room and come back down with his cut-off gloves and sunglasses on, and hair spiked with gel.

“Get ready, Mom! Please play ‘Breave,’” he said, which was preschool speak for “Breathe” by B2ST.

He grabbed the three-foot tall candle stick—a perfect standing mic—and assumed his first pose. Once the music started, the K-pop concert began, complete with choreography.

Once Haneul went to bed, Kirk and I settled on the sofa to watch the next episode of whichever Korean drama we were enjoying. Our local library had a good-sized collection of Korean dramas on DVD, but a short drive north to Denver brought us an even larger selection. Kirk’s layoff in May had resulted in bi-monthly trips north, the gas a minimal price for securing nightly entertainment.

My interest in Korea soon deepened past surface culture. I wanted to know the country’s history, its traditions, and the elements of deep culture that took me beyond what I could learn from television and music. Characters would do or say something on a show, and it would set me off on a path to understand why.

In my first favorite drama, the young female lead made what was translated as “burnt rice crust” for her mother-in-law. *Could that possibly be right?* I wondered. A little research told me it was *nurungii*, the crispy rice left at the bottom of stone-bowl *bibimbap*. I loved nurungii and was teased by my family for scraping to get every last kernel from the bowl. From this one drama alone, I learned about Korean family life; attitudes about single mothers, even if they were
widowed; prejudice against children of single mothers; and how the marginalized are often treated with disrespect.

As I gained a deeper understanding of the culture, I no longer saw Korea through rose-colored glasses. No culture or country is perfect, and I could now see the warts along with the beauty. That didn’t change my love for the country.

My view of my own country changed, too, as my worldview expanded. My dive into Korean history taught me the role that the U.S. played in the division of the country after World War II. Seeing history from another perspective left me with a sore taste for U.S. nationalism. My politically conservative, evangelical family bought into the belief that the United States was the best country in the world. But now I could see where South Korea far exceeded the U.S. in some areas.

Raising a child of color also expanded my understanding of racism in America. My parents’ generation viewed racism as organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, but I began to understand that now racism was conveyed in more subtle ways, including microaggressions. But the subtlety of racism didn’t make it any less harmful.

Becoming friends with people from varied lived experiences called everything I’d been taught as a child into question. For the first time in my life, my thoughts became mine, shaped by my new life experience, my love for my son, and a growing knowledge that challenged my long-held beliefs.

What started as work to become the mother my son needed—one who would embrace his culture and eventually his first family as a way of helping him shape his identity—became a journey to reconnecting with my authentic self.

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Often children who suffer emotional abuse struggle to form an identity of their own. That never felt like my truth. As a child, I recognized how different I was from my family—artistic, creative, imaginative, and confident. Mom sometimes marveled at my spunky, creative self. “I don’t know where you get it.”

Once in my life, I had known my authentic self well, but as an adult, I recognized that I’d let her slip away. At times throughout my life, she burst forth, resisting controlling boyfriends or refusing to change to fit in with the girls at school. The authentic me pushed back when Mom tried to control my choices until one day she stopped fighting.

Was she tired of fighting? Did she feel hopeless? Was she exhausted from longing for connection and love from the people who were supposed to give that unconditionally? Maybe it was all the above. But, for whatever reason, one day my authentic self decided to retreat, leaving behind just the shell of the woman I was supposed to be.
Part 4

“Everyone’s afraid of changes,

Staying, moving on, staying, moving on.”

~ “Moving On” by BTS
Chapter 7:

The Choice

1992

As I lifted the receiver of the beige, standard-issue dorm phone, the levity of what I was about to do eluded me. We rarely recognize a monumental moment as it’s happening. The spiral of anxiety started, heart beating rapidly as my stomach churned each beep from the keypad bringing me closer to this conversation I dreaded. All too soon Julian’s deep baritone voice, filled with warmth and affection, greeted me. The familiarity and loving tone shook me a little. I could see him—dark brown eyes twinkling as they usually did when he talked to me. I steeled my resolve. After our usual, “so, what are you up to?” conversation, I got to the point.

“Since we’re living across the state from each other, I think we should take this opportunity to date other people.”

I held my breath, the coldness of those words even shocking me. Silence filled the line for a minute and then Julian responded. “You’re breaking up with me?” His voice sounded bewildered, questioning if he had truly understood what I said.

I let out the breath I was holding and plowed on. “Yes, we’ve been together for a while and the last few months have been difficult,” I said. “We talked about the possibility over Christmas break, and now I think it’s for the best.”

The silence that followed lasted only a few seconds. Yet, even if it lasted the eternity that it seemed it have, it wouldn’t have prepared me for what he said next. Julian’s voice, now quiet and gentle, said, “I was going to ask you to marry me.”

The words rocked me. For the last two-and-a-half years, this man had been my present and future. Together we fought through the difficulties of the last eighteen months, determining that
our relationship was worth saving. Now, even as I questioned my decision, I replied, “I don’t think that’s best.” I paused and then added quickly, “I need to go.” I hung up.

I gave myself no time to grieve. After one deep breath, I dialed another number. At the sound of Kirk’s voice, I said, “I did it.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” I said.

I wasn’t fine. Yet, the twenty-one-year-old me who had just changed the course of her life didn’t know that at the time. In fact, it would be decades before I fully understood what I had done.

***

My relationship with Julian was different from the beginning. He wasn’t my first interracial relationship, but the only serious one. We met through one of my disastrous boyfriends and became friends during the spring of my senior year in high school. After watching me date a couple of guys who disrespected and took advantage of me, Julian said, “You deserve better.” No one had ever said something like that to me before, and I decided to believe it.

When he broke his neck playing football a year into our relationship, we weathered stress that neither of us was mature enough to handle. He escaped being paralyzed, but the injury destroyed his dreams and goals for the future when he lost football. His injury resulted in me moving into a caretaking role with him, a role all too familiar for me and one where I felt comfortable. Yet, he resisted.

“Come here,” Julian’s mom called to him one afternoon a week or so after he came home from the hospital. “I’m teaching Amy to clean your screws.”
Four metal screws attached to a bar encompassing his head that connected to a plastic, wool-lined vest held Julian’s head at the perfect tilt to allow his vertebrae to heal. In Arkansas’s August heat, drops of sweat would roll into the wounds resulting in the need for regular cleaning with hydrogen peroxide.

“Noooooo,” Julian called out, his playful tone no disguise for his reluctance to have me learn this task.

“I’m not playin’, Julian!” she called. “They need to be cleaned regularly and you’re with her more than you’re home. Come here!”

He stood, stretching his six-foot frame and ambled to the kitchen table where his mom had the supplies gathered: peroxide, cotton swabs, and a tissue. She gently cleaned around each screw with a soaked cotton swab, using the tissue to ensure the peroxide didn’t drip in his eyes.

For the next three months, I would regularly perform this task, never thinking anything of it. Caring for loved ones was what I did best. But he struggled with it, resentful that he could not care for me. The shift in our roles put a strain on our relationship, as did what I now realize was his depression after this life-changing injury. In the year following the injury, we fought to stay together, briefly parted, only to return to each other, newly committed to making it work. But all of that happened while we still lived just a few miles apart. Having a long-distance relationship when we both went away to college added to the stress on us.

Decades later, I’m still unsure of what propelled me to decide to break off our relationship. Maybe it was immaturity and not understanding that relationships ebb and flow through good times and hard times. Maybe I was expecting it to be easy, the way it had been in the beginning with us. Or maybe I was just tired of the hard. Julian’s injury added internal stress to our relationship, but external stress had been pressing on us since we started dating.
Verbally, most of my family supported our relationship. Yet, each time Mom and I went to the mall the conversation went something like this:

“Oh, look at the guy in front of Spencer’s. He’s cute. You should go out with him.”

“Um, Mom, do you remember the tall, dark, and handsome guy who is over at our house almost every night? I’ve been dating him for a while. It’s pretty serious.”

I tried to keep my tone light and teasing, but the more this happened the more frustrated with her I became. Or she would come home from the grocery store with this piece of advice about an ex-boyfriend.

“I just saw Roger at the store today. He always asks about you. Maybe you two should give it another try?”

I would shake my head. Roger was my first boyfriend, and I wouldn’t date him again if he were the last man on Earth. He had been coercive and controlling. I struggled to understand why Mom would want me to date someone who treated me poorly over someone who treated me well. The obvious answer was that skin color played a role in her preferences, but that wasn’t something I wanted to believe about Mom. She had taught me to see people for who they were, not the color of their skin. *Could she really teach me that but not actually believe it herself?*

Gerald, my mom’s brother, and his wife, Ann, also didn’t approve of my relationship with Julian. They hosted our family’s Christmas Eve gathering. My first Christmas with Julian, Mom explained that I could attend the party, and could even bring him, but I shouldn’t expect Gerald or Ann to speak to either of us. The pronouncement didn’t surprise me. Gerald had not spoken to his sister, Carolyn, in years after she married a black man. And he hadn’t spoken to me since Julian and I started dating. Why Julian agreed to go, I have no idea. We both should have had
more self-respect, but we attended and enjoyed the company of the other family members while enduring the silence of our hosts.

I suspect what motivated the breakup was my desperate desire to be accepted by my family. I had been thinking about us dating other people, but it wasn’t until I met Kirk that I put that plan into action.

Kirk and I met at our first newspaper staff meeting during the spring semester of my junior year. Within days of meeting, we said we were friends, but he was honest in expressing his wish for more. Some part of me whispered, “This one will be an easy sell.” He shared interests with both of my parents, he attended church (although not the “right” one), and most importantly, he was white.

***

I knew my relationship with Kirk had progressed quickly, but it wasn’t until we filed for divorce almost thirty years later that I realized how quickly. I dug out the journal I’d kept during the first year of our relationship and the timeline shocked me. Within two weeks of our meeting, he was talking about marrying me. If the red flags began waving that winter of 1992, I didn’t recognize them for what they were. In the beginning, Kirk seemed like the perfect partner. It was new and his desire for me was obvious. I basked in his attention after struggling with Julian’s depression.

Within four months, our relationship started to change. We fought weekly, and a part of me felt dead inside. A coldness, a feeling of nothingness, settled in my depths. Still, I persisted. I stayed through Kirk continuously choosing his job—a part-time sports reporting gig—over me. Date nights became accompanying him to games. Soon I was his helper, taking photos at the
sporting events he covered. I endured when he wouldn’t tell his dad how serious our relationship had become. He corrected that mistake by proposing to keep me from ending the relationship.

Fifteen months after getting engaged and meticulously planning and paying for the wedding ourselves, I gave up my special day when Kirk and I got married two months early so he could obtain cheaper car insurance. At the age of twenty with two accidents and four tickets on his record, only being married would gain him a lower rate on car insurance. My phone rang on my first day at the small daily newspaper where I’d taken a job and I was surprised to hear Kirk’s voice.

“So, do you want to get married on Friday?”

“This Friday?” I asked, my tone rising on the last syllable noting my disbelief.

“Yes. The sooner the better so I can get new insurance.”

The idea had been discussed over the last couple of days, but I hadn’t thought it would really happen. Financially, it made sense, but I began to mourn what I was losing.

“But that’s the day before my birthday,” I said. “If we do that, we’ll never celebrate my birthday. And what about the ceremony we’ve been planning?”

“We’ve already paid for everything so we can still have the ceremony,” Kirk responded. “And I promise we’ll celebrate both anniversaries and your birthday separately every year.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Two days later a justice of the peace married us in the publisher’s office at the newspaper where I worked. The staff tried to make it special, and I tried to let go of the disappointment. After the ceremony, we picked up dinner from Pizza Hut and scarfed it down before both heading out to cover high school football that evening. Definitely not the wedding of my dreams.
Two months later, I slid into my wedding dress, my high school friend, Natalie, helping me button the back. Kirk’s aunt began to pile my hair in an up-do with tendrils of curls spilling out.

“Kirk prefers my hair down,” I said. “Can we do a style like that?”

“Not with this dress,” she responded. “This high lace neckline begs for your hair to be swept up in a romantic style.”

Once she finished, I assessed how I looked. “Do you like it?” she asked.

I smiled. “I love it! You’re right; it’s perfect!”

Natalie looked me up and down. “You’re so beautiful! You make such a beautiful bride!”

I gave her a hug and thanked her, then we made our way downstairs. Since we were already married, Kirk and I decided to take pictures before the ceremony giving us more time to visit with our guests after. I entered the room and Kirk turned to see me for the first time. He said nothing, turned to the photographer, and asked, “So where do you want us to start?”

I suppressed the hurt I felt at his lack of acknowledgment as the photographer began arranging us and my massive train in various locations around the historic house we’d rented as our venue. Most girls dream about their wedding. For me, the details of the ceremony weren’t as important, but I’d always dreamed of the first time my soon-to-be husband would see me in my dress. I imagined him gazing lovingly as I walked toward him, and when I reached him, he would lean in and say, “You’re so beautiful!” so that only I could hear.

An hour later, I walked down the stairs toward Kirk who waited with our small wedding party. He smiled when I reached him and took my hand but said nothing. Hours later, in the car on the way to Memphis for our one-night honeymoon at The Peabody Hotel, I brought up my hurt.

“You never told me I was beautiful today.”
“What? Oh well, you were,” he said.

“It doesn’t mean much now,” I responded.

“Please! You’re overreacting!” he exclaimed. “Are you seriously going to let that ruin our one night away?”

I let it go, but the hurt stayed unsolved for years.

***

A year later, we returned to Memphis to celebrate our first anniversary.

“So, what are we doing for my birthday?” I’d asked a couple of days before we left.

“We’re going to Memphis,” Kirk responded.

“That’s for our anniversary. Are we doing something special there for my birthday?”

“No, consider it a birthday-anniversary trip,” he said.

When December rolled around and the anniversary of our wedding ceremony arrived, we did nothing to celebrate that either. His promise to celebrate all three didn’t even happen the first year and would not happen in any year to come. It was an empty promise made to get what he wanted.

***

Hindsight revealed that a firework best described the life of our relationship. It burned hot and bright for a very short time and then faded into nothingness. By the time we married, not quite two years after we met, we were more friends than spouses. We worked to build our careers and often worked for the same newspapers. As coworkers, we made a great team, but long hours filled with city council meetings and high school sporting events didn’t leave much time to be a couple.
Chapter 8:

The Outcome

2018

Now married twenty-five years, I started to awaken to the issues in my marriage. I had always taken on Kirk’s interests but when his new hobby involved water sports, I couldn’t follow. As a child, I never learned to swim due to my mother’s fear of the water. At age 30, in 2001, I took swim lessons but didn’t follow those lessons with practice. Being in or near deep water kept me on edge, always nervous about going under.

Throughout our relationship, Kirk rarely embraced my interests. He found art weird. Theater put him to sleep. And dancing with me was out of the question. We occasionally read the same books, but he wasn’t the avid reader I was. The biggest thing we had in common was our careers. When I decided to become a full-time mom, that connection lessened too. Now Korean dramas brought us together each night, this passive time together taking the place of any true intimacy.

We were adrift at a time in our marriage when we could have been reconnecting. I knew couples often lost their connection during the parenting years. Wives commonly found themselves as unfamiliar people after devoting their lives to their husbands and children. What I was experiencing wasn’t unusual, yet the more I looked inward, the more it felt like something other than the usual drifting. I sought ways to reconnect, uncomfortably voicing my needs and desires. Instead of hearing me, Kirk heard what he wanted.

Early in our relationship, I tried to share myself with him. My whole life I had approached my interests with passion that would light my entire face when I talked about them. I would tell him about music that resonated with me, and he would give it a cursory listen, but it would never be something we shared. Me loving something wasn’t enough to spark his interest. Eventually, I
came to understand that Kirk’s connection to me was never about me. Just as the basis of my relationship with my parents was about caring for their needs, my role was to fulfill Kirk’s needs while abandoning my own. I had chosen self-abandonment when I chose him.

***

When, in July, Mom unfriended me on Facebook for the second time, I speculated that my Easter post and our overall dedication to Korean culture contributed. Still, it felt odd, even for my mother. As I made dinner one night, I mentioned the unfriending to Kirk who was sitting at the table. “Oh, that might have something to do with me and what I’ve been doing,” he said, chuckling as he said it.

I turned to him, “What have you been doing?”

He confessed that for the last couple of months, he had been going onto her Facebook page and refuting every post that was based on inaccurate information. I shook my head in shock and disbelief. As Facebook had become more polarized, I refused to argue with anyone on their posts and wouldn’t allow disrespectful debate on mine. While philosophically my beliefs aligned with Kirk’s, I didn’t support what he was doing to my mother.

“That explains it,” I said. “You need to stop.”

“Oh,” he said, “I doubt what I’m doing really played a part in her unfriending you. And someone needs to tell her she’s wrong.”

“Oh,” I said, mimicking his dismissive tone of voice, “I’m sure it did play a part in her unfriending me. And what you’re doing will never change her mind anyway.”

He bristled against being chastised but agreed to stop. While our relationship had never actually been what I had built it up to be, now there were more days than not that he didn’t even resemble the man I’d met.
Enveloped in the dark of the vintage theater on a crisp fall night in October, movement next to me drew my attention away from the stage. A young woman sat next to me with her boyfriend next to her. His hand casually rested on her bare knee, the hem of her dress falling across her thigh. As they watched the musical comedy about the legend of a local cannibal, his thumb gently stroked her skin. It mesmerized me.

*When was the last time Kirk had touched me that way?* I thought. I tried not to stare, but my eyes kept darting back to the man’s hand, his touch loving and intimate.

I had spent a quarter of a century with the man next to me, but I wouldn’t describe our relationship as intimate. Haneul was now in the church youth group, freeing up time for Kirk and me to be alone. That was how we’d ended up at this quirky theater while our son experienced his first youth group lock-in.

*Maybe, I thought, this will be the beginning of a renewal in our relationship.*

Instead, we drifted further apart. We could easily win a Newlywed Game-style question and answer session; he knew the surface me. If I were an iceberg, he knew well the part that loomed above the water; yet the deepest parts of me remained a mystery to him, a fact that didn’t seem to invoke any curiosity or need for exploration on his part.

Looking back, I realize that I accepted crumbs in the place of real connection. During the first month of our relationship, I’d been impressed with his sharing of the details of his life and how he cried when he told me about his mother’s death when he was fourteen. But after those first few weeks, Kirk never talked about his feelings again. When his father died when Haneul was five, Kirk displayed a brief emotional outburst when he learned the news but became stoic after that. As I watched, he didn’t seem to grieve, at least not outwardly. Months and even years
later, I would mention how much I missed his dad, and he would agree, but not offer any additional information on his feelings.

Granted, I’d stopped sharing too. At some point early in our relationship, it felt unsafe to share the most private parts of myself with him. Without emotional intimacy, our physical intimacy suffered. Physically intimate moments occurred only a few times per year, but never led to feeling a deeper connection with Kirk.

During those first twenty-five years, I barely questioned this reality. We were busy building careers and then Haneul joined our family, and our lives were busy in a new way. On the rare occasion when I did consider this lack of connection, I attributed it to the fact that sex was no longer exciting since now it wasn’t forbidden. Shame and guilt washed over me as I struggled with how I’d ruined something meant to be sacred. It never occurred to me that something deeper was plaguing my marriage.
Part 5

“Zero o’clock,
And you gonna be happy”

~ “00:00 (Zero O’clock)” by BTS
Chapter 9:
Revelations

2021

When Mom entered hospice in September, I hadn’t spoken to her in more than two years. She slipped into a coma during what should have been a routine GI procedure and her siblings finally decided to call me when the doctor informed them there was little hope of her regaining consciousness. The deterioration of our relationship had resulted in the rest of the family ostracizing me too. After receiving a Facebook message informing me of my mother’s hospitalization, I started my hour drive home from work, and I called my aunt. It was a Tuesday and Mom had been admitted on Sunday after finally confessing to silently dealing with a month-long serious health issue.

“When they admitted her, she insisted we not call you,” my aunt Carolyn said. “She said she never wanted to see you again and this situation didn’t change that.”

One emotion after another washed over me: sadness, anger, betrayal, frustration, and back to sadness. I didn’t say anything, so my aunt continued.

“Today when the doctor told us she probably wouldn’t regain consciousness, Gerald and Sheryl still insisted that we follow her wishes. I said that you had a right to say goodbye to your mom, so I contacted you.”

I thanked my aunt and told her I would be in touch once I had made my travel plans. A numbness settled over my body as I finished the drive home. When I saw my mom for the final time two years earlier, I knew she was angry with me. In the months following, I mourned the loss of my mother, going through the final stages of grief. For years, I had vacillated between the
stages of denial, anger, and bargaining as I realized my relationship with my mom would likely never be healthy and loving.

After the visit in 2019, I entered the stages of depression and finally acceptance. My mother was still alive, yet our relationship had died and with it the hope of reconciliation. It would take both of us showing up in an honest and authentic way to repair the relationship, and Mom had never been willing to do that. Even in this place of grief with no hope for a repair to our relationship, I had texted her off and on over the last two years to check on them and wish them happy holidays. They were still my parents and part of me would always love them, regardless of the abuse I’d endured. I had made peace with the fact that I had repeatedly shown up for my parents, only to have them abandon me again and again.

As I packed for the trip to be at Mom’s bedside, the anxiety spiral began spinning. My heart beat at a marathon pace. My mind scrolled through one scenario after another trying to prepare for what lay ahead. And my stomach knotted, cutting off all sensations of hunger.

I called Brian, my paternal cousin, whom I had connected with over the summer to update him on the news.

“Do you want Janet and me to drive down and be there with you?” he asked.

The offer caught me off guard, and my first instinct was to refuse their help. I’d been going at it alone emotionally my whole life. Instead, I considered the offer carefully.

“Yes, I would like that. It would be nice not to be alone.”

The spinning eased a little.

My mom’s sisters and brother were cordial when I arrived, but our interactions were strained. My aunts and I kept vigil at Mom’s bedside, and the hours of conversations led to some stunning revelations and a deeper understanding of the family dynamics. One night my uncle’s wife and I
were talking, and she said, “The maddest I ever saw your mom at your dad was the night they found out you and Roger were having sex. Do you remember that night?”

Of course, I did; it was seared into my mind. “Why was she mad at Dad?” I asked.

“Because when he found the condom in the toilet and told her about it, he laughed. She told him to stop laughing and he said, ‘They’re teenagers and we left them alone in the house. Of course, they’re having sex.’ She called me and said, ‘Get over here now because I’m going to kill him. You need to stop me.’ And I don’t think she was kidding.”

My aunt proceeded to tell me how when they got to the house Mom told them everything and then would go on to tell everyone in the family, except my grandparents, about my sex life. As she finished, my aunt looked up at me, “Nothing in your life was private, was it?”

Embarrassment crept up my neck and onto my face. I had known that Mom often shared embarrassing things I’d said or done, but I’d had no idea she had shared this with the family. The day after Mom died, I asked Dad about his memories of that night. Mom had always portrayed them as a united front, both angry and disappointed with my decision, but if my aunt was telling the truth, at times they clearly weren’t united.

“Dad, do you remember the night you found out Roger and I were having sex?” He said he did. “What was your reaction when you found out?”

He smiled. “I laughed, and your mom got so mad at me.”

I shook my head. Learning this called into question everything about my youth. I had always thought my dad was uninterested in me, but now I wondered what role my mom had played in straining my relationship with my dad.

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“You're staying with her tonight, right?” Uncle Gerald asked.
I paused. I hadn’t been planning to stay. This visit was stressful enough without sacrificing sleep. Plus, Mom didn’t want me there to begin with, but that wasn’t the answer that came out.

“I can stay,” I said.

“Good,” Gerald answered. “I’ll be back up after work tomorrow.”

He said goodnight and I expected his wife, Ann, to leave too, but she settled in. Finally, around eleven, she got a text from my aunt Carolyn saying she was on her way.

“Well, I’ll go as soon as Carolyn gets here,” Ann said.

I sighed inwardly, unsure of why I couldn’t be left alone with my own mother. I wasn’t sure if this was for my sake or Mom’s. I resigned myself to not getting any sleep that night, pulled out packets of Korean coffee I had packed in my bag, and asked the nurses where I could find hot water.

As I write this, I’m struck by the fact that Mom’s brother didn’t stay. Maybe it was because I was there. But he gave up his last two days of being with his “favorite sister.” Instead, he went to work each day at the business they had run together for thirty years. Surely his clients would have understood if he’d canceled appointments to be with her. We all grieve differently, so maybe I’m reading too much into his absence. But now, it makes me wonder.

***

A couple of hours later Aunt Carolyn sat in the chair across from me knitting. Mom was breathing on her own but gave no indication that her spirit was still with us. After enduring the last several years with my family, I suspected this would be my last chance to get the answers that I’d been so desperately seeking, so I plunged in.

“Can I ask why Mom was so mad at me that she never wanted to see me again?”
Carolyn laid her knitting in her lap and looked at me. “She said it was because of something that Kirk was doing on Facebook.”

I chuckled sardonically at the irony of the whole situation. “I figured,” I said.

“You know what that was?” Carolyn asked.

“I do, but I didn’t find out he was doing it until after she unfriended me. You know what’s ironic about this situation?”

“What?”

“Mom assumed I supported Kirk, and instead of talking to me about it, she decided she never wanted to see me again. But I told Kirk what he was doing was wrong and told him to stop. If Mom had just talked to me about her feelings, instead of ignoring me and pushing me away, all this hurt could have been avoided.”

Even more ironic was the fact that the man I’d chosen to be a life partner in large part to please Mom had ultimately been the final straw that severed my relationship with her.
Chapter 10:

_She Was Horrid_

1986

A seismic shift in my relationship with Mom happened during junior high and high school. First my outsider status at school moved Mom more solidly into a friend role with me. But by ninth grade, when I ate lunch alone every day at a table for eight, the shame of it became too much for her and she encouraged me to start dating a full year earlier than the age she had always said I could date. At age fifteen as a freshman in high school, just a few weeks after I started dating, I found myself in a committed relationship with a senior from the local public high school who was two years older than me.

A couple of months after Roger and I officially became boyfriend and girlfriend, he coerced me into having sex after weeks of the standard “But if you loved me, you would do it” and “This is what you do in a mature relationship.” He had pushed with both his words and his actions; the pressure mounting for weeks, leaving me torn about how to respond. I wasn’t interested in moving our relationship into this intimate space, but I also felt compelled to not lose the relationship. I knew Mom would be livid if I had sex, but wouldn’t she also be angry if he broke up with me? If I couldn’t get along with him, what did that say about me? My grooming as a people-pleaser and caretaker left me feeling like the only option was to do it. Finally, I gave in.

This milestone, which our church insisted be saved for marriage, was neither memorable nor romantic and left me feeling used and dirty. Decades later I realized that this relationship set the standard for me to accept subtle manipulation and control from romantic partners. The need to please, and the fear of what being alone said about me, became greater than any of my needs. If the control became overt, like the time Roger canceled our date and ordered me to sit at home
and wait for him to call while he went out with his best friend, I rebelled. But the subtle ways he controlled me through manipulation wouldn’t become obvious to me for years.

A few months later, Mom and Dad found out about our sexual relationship, and as predicted, Mom was livid. Dad had discovered a used condom in the toilet and told Mom. She came in and asked Roger to leave. In the time it took him to gather his things and get to his car, several scenarios played out in my mind. I expected the worst: being grounded, forbidden to see Roger again, and likely an extended application of the silent treatment. What if she sent me away? But to where?

Instead, she yelled. “Why did you do this?! You know better. How could you do this to God and to me? This will ruin your life! And if you get pregnant, I’m sending you off to have the baby and you will give it up for adoption. No one will ever know.”

Her anger rested solely on my shoulders. No responsibility was placed on my boyfriend. She didn’t ask if I had pursued this sexual relationship or was even interested. Her disappointment and fury hit me like a tsunami. It built as it approached, gaining strength before it made impact. The racing began: my head and my heart speeding ahead to prepare for what would happen next. My stomach tied itself, steeled for either fight or flight. My role was the good girl; the one who worked hard to be well-behaved.

My sexual relationship with Roger had left me feeling guilty and now Mom’s reaction deepened my shame. Words and thoughts raced through my mind. Slut. Whore. Dirty. No one will want you now. God probably hates you after this. My numbness gave way to fear, and I started to cry. The tears weren’t for disappointing her, but for what this would mean for me going forward. What new struggles with Mom would I have to endure now that I had proven I wasn’t trustworthy?
As Mom went through the list of people who would be disappointed in me, I saw I had no one to turn to. My family had encompassed me in what I thought was a circle of love, embracing me in all my weirdness. Now I felt transported beyond the circle, an outsider looking in. In that moment loneliness settled over me. I had always believed that I at least had my family, even if I didn’t have friends; I now realized how alone I was.

Mom told me how disappointed my dad was, and I believed her because after they talked, he stormed out of the house and slammed the door. My already distant relationship with my emotionally unavailable father became more strained. I feared him and what he thought of me.

Thirty-five years later, on the eve of my mother’s death, I learned a different version of that night. It was nothing like Mom had portrayed it.
Part 6

“그대여 더는 뒤돌아보지 마“

(Dear, don’t look back anymore)

~ “No. 2” by RM
Chapter 11:

Finally Free

2019

Discontent brewed inside me, and the dam finally broke in December. After Korean school one Friday, I made a sarcastic comment about marriage to my friend, Beth.

“What’s going on with you? Let’s talk.”

We went into the church office and all the sadness and loneliness I felt in my marriage tumbled out. Beth listened, asked questions to help her better understand, and after two-and-a-half hours said, “You have to tell Kirk how you feel.”

Growing up in a house in which feelings weren’t discussed meant this simple fact felt like a monumental task. I knew she was right, but my anxiety began to thrum. My needs had never been important and the idea of insisting they now were terrified me. On Sunday, Haneul would attend an all-day event at church leaving me time to talk with Kirk about my feelings. On the way home from church that morning, I mentioned that we needed to talk, which led to us spending the afternoon discussing the state of our marriage.

The fact that I wasn’t happy floored him. He insisted nothing was wrong. If that were true, I asked, why had he stopped telling me he loved me? He couldn’t answer that. I asked why he didn’t hear me when I told him something was important. An example was our family cruise in 2018, instead of a romantic getaway to celebrate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

“You loved the cruise!” he insisted.

“I did, as a family vacation, but it’s not what I wanted for our anniversary trip. I had told you what I wanted, and you didn’t hear me.”
He asked if I wanted to stay if things improved. I told him I thought I did. He promised that things would change. A week later he planned a surprise for our wedding anniversary. I was excited, but my hopes were dashed when the surprise was a Christmas event geared toward families. My love of Christmas had soured the year before and I’d been vocal about my dislike of the holiday in the months since. I endured the evening, staying mostly quiet and he questioned me on it in the car.

“I know you didn’t have a good time. Can I ask why?”

“For our anniversary, you took me to a family Christmas event, even though you know I hate Christmas right now.”

“I wanted to give you back your love of the holiday,” he said.

“That’s not your job,” I said flatly. “Your job is to listen to my needs. It was our anniversary. I thought the surprise would be something romantic, just for couples, not something that forced me to celebrate Christmas with everyone else’s kids while our kid was with a sitter.”

The fact that I hadn’t enjoyed his surprise confounded him. I struggled not to feel like I was being ungrateful.

*He had tried, after all, right?*

Yet he really hadn’t. He had planned something for the woman he wanted, not the woman I was. I desperately needed someone to see me for who I was, not who they wanted me to be.

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**2020**

Once Pandora’s box is opened, there’s no going back. For my whole life, I had been the ballast, ignoring my own needs to stabilize the relationships in my family. But I could no longer set myself and my needs aside. One way or another my life would change, it was just a matter of
how. For a man who claimed to love me and wanted to save our marriage, Kirk’s actions didn’t reflect those same sentiments. All efforts that he put in were “grand gesture” level, foregoing the smaller daily intimate moments that actually build connection.

After two months of struggling on our own, we started discernment therapy. A couple enters this short-term counseling program to see if the marriage is worth saving. Our first session confirmed my growing suspicion that it wasn’t. During our individual interviews at our first session, I told the therapist two important things.

First, I confessed that it didn’t feel like Kirk was trying to make changes that would help our marriage. When we came together for the couples portion of that session, she told him what I had said (with my permission) and asked how he felt about that.

“That’s true,” he said. “I’ve only been giving a half-hearted effort.”

The ease with which he admitted this stunned me. The therapist asked how that made me feel.

I turned to him and said, “Using a sports analogy that you’ll understand, I think I’m worth a full-court press.”

“You are,” he said. Yet, in the weeks that followed, nothing would change.

Second, I told the therapist that much of what I was experiencing with Kirk felt like repeating my relationship with my mother. She asked if I thought Kirk might have the same personality disorder that I felt plagued my mom. I had wondered the same thing, yet they approached life in very different ways.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “He doesn't like to be in the spotlight or have attention focused on him. Yet so much about our relationship feels like my relationship with my mom.” The therapist didn’t push the issue, but her question stayed in my mind.
That afternoon I researched the disorder further and found a checklist to help identify if your partner might be suffering from it. Three-fourths of the thirty questions described what I experienced in my marriage. Devastation flooded me. If this were true, the likelihood of my marriage becoming healthy was slim. People with this disorder rarely recover because the first step to healing is recognizing there is a problem, which is something that doesn’t happen.

Regardless of the underlying cause, I now understood that I had experienced emotional abuse at the hands of those who were supposed to love and care for me the most. With both my mother and my husband, the abuse had been subtle, especially at first, and became more obvious with time. Both needed my full attention focused on them, expected me to adapt and change to suit who they wanted me to be, “resolved” conflicts through the silent treatment, and conveniently remembered or forgot things, which made me feel crazy. I began working through the trauma that resulted from this abuse during individual therapy.

After seven weeks of discernment therapy, in the middle of a global pandemic, Kirk and I decided to separate. I assumed we would take time to consider things before divorcing, but Kirk had other ideas. Shortly after we made the decision to separate, he found me in the sunroom.

“I just wanted to let you know that I’ve spoken with a divorce attorney.”

I was sitting but still felt unbalanced at his words.

“He said we should tell Haneul together, so we’ll do that tonight at dinner. I don’t see a need to move out right now, since we’re already sleeping in separate bedrooms, and probably can’t anyway with everything shut down. But I’ll look into it. You and Haneul can stay in the house. That will be easier for him.”

Just like that, every thought I’d had about the situation was turned upside down. My unhappiness had started us down this path, so I thought I would move out. My assumption that
we would take our time starting the divorce process flipped too. That night we told Haneul. With the COVID-19 shutdown keeping us home for the previous six weeks, he was aware that Kirk and I were having issues. In a smallish open concept house, it’s hard to hide conflict. We assured him that he and the dog wouldn’t be moving, which was his only question.

The next day I found a divorce attorney and called for advice. She explained the process and what I should expect, even advising that if we could work it out with a mediator that would be our best option. Over the next four weeks, I would gather more information and begin preparing the divorce papers to file. As always, Kirk had rushed the decision but left the work up to me.

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I filed the papers on June 2, just five and a half months after having the conversation about my unhappiness. The following week I found out Kirk had already set up a date using his Tinder profile.

As we went through counseling, I struggled with the possibility of ending my marriage. Growing up in an extremely conservative evangelical household, divorce was something I never imagined. My grandparents had been married for sixty-five years, and my parents for fifty-three years. But Kirk quickly jumping into the dating world was just the first of many actions on his part that confirmed I had made the right decision.

Kirk moved out over the July 4th weekend while I was out of town visiting a friend. He took only personal items and things that related to his family of origin. He took my wedding set but didn’t ask for any photos of Haneul. He took his mom’s high school yearbooks but left his hanbok, the Korean traditional clothing that had been gifted to us by a friend. He took his kayaks but left all the furniture. And he deleted all traces of me from his social media accounts, as if the quarter century we’d spent together never happened. It was a glimpse of what was to come.
During mediation, Kirk walked away from everything. He signed over his half of the house and all remaining contents. Kirk decided to forgo overnight visits with Haneul since he had rented a room instead of an apartment. Instead, he would pay maximum child support. He also refused to set up a visitation schedule with our son. The mediator encouraged him to establish it, even if he didn’t plan to follow it.

“Without a schedule in place, you will have no legal right to come to the court and ask for visitation if Haneul doesn’t want to see you,” she said. “It’s a protection to you long-term, even if you don’t follow it now.”

“No,” Kirk said, the finality in his voice obvious, “if Haneul doesn’t want to see me, I won’t force him to.”

“But if Amy decided to move him out of the country, say to Korea, you won’t have a say,” the mediator insisted.

“If she decides to do that, I’ll come help them pack,” Kirk responded.

My heart broke for our son. At fourteen, Haneul preferred almost anyone to spending time with either parent, but teens need their parents more than toddlers do, and Kirk decided to walk away.

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2021

Our divorce was final on January 7. A few months later, an acquaintance noted how “lucky” I was that Kirk and I didn’t fight over every possession and our divorce was final quickly, just seven months after filing. I knew that was true on some level. I had been spared the repeating trauma that happens in so many divorces. But watching my husband of twenty-seven years walk away without a fight at all was emotionally hard too. Seeing him walk away from our son was
even harder. I felt I had been discarded, the way cardboard is tossed into the recycling bin when it has served its purpose. Once I decided to no longer serve his purpose, he could simply walk away and start over with someone new.

I took the time to grieve; not just the losses I had endured, but the future I now wouldn’t have and the fact that nothing had been what it seemed. As I learned about emotional abuse, I found that my marriage had never been the perfect match I’d wanted to believe it was. We never experienced emotional intimacy, which meant that everything in the relationship stayed on a superficial level. Kirk didn’t share his feelings with me, and because of that I had stopped sharing my feelings with him. Vulnerability must be met with equal vulnerability for true connection to occur.

Life as a single mom who now worked full-time was hard in new ways. I started to reacquaint myself with me and indulge in hobbies I’d set aside long ago. I saw plays, instead of just musicals (which Kirk also enjoyed). I purchased an art museum membership and went often. I started going out with friends, and even briefly dated. I thought the worst was over. Being out of the relationship allowed the healing to start, but over the next two years, I would face the hardest days of my life. The journey was just beginning.
2021

By the time my mother died in September, I had completed the grieving process over her. It had been two years since I’d left my childhood home, refusing to allow myself to be disrespected and abused anymore. I responded when she sporadically texted me updates on Dad but didn’t share anything about our lives with her. Experience had taught me she wasn’t interested anyway. I didn’t tell her Kirk and I had divorced, but given that we had mutual Facebook friends, I figured she had heard. If she had, she hadn’t shared the news with the rest of the family because my aunts, and even Dad, were shocked when I told them. Still, Mom found ways to heap more abuse on my head from the grave.

In her anger with me, she had changed their wills, effectively writing me out of hers completely, and switching my dad’s power of attorney to her brother, Gerald. I had known about the change in the power of attorney, which happened in 2017 with her claiming it was because Gerald lived closer and could be present if something happened. I didn’t know about the wills until she lay dying. Once she was gone, a conversation with my dad informed me that he hadn’t wanted the power of attorney changed. He and Gerald had never really gotten along, and me being his only child, he said he wanted me to hold his power of attorney. I told him I would ask if Gerald would sign it over. I never imagined the chain reaction that one question would set off. It was not quite two days since Mom’s death when I called Gerald and told him what Dad had said.

“No, I can’t do that,” Gerald said, his southern drawl no longer cordial. “Your mom entrusted me with your dad’s care and I’m going to honor that.”
“I understand that, but shouldn’t we honor the wishes of the person’s life we’re talking about instead of what Mom wanted?”

Gerald raised his voice. “Please! Everyone knows you hate your parents! The only reason you’re asking is because you want the money!”

I laughed through the lump of tears that lodged in my throat. “I have no idea what Mom told you, but there are two sides to every story. Not everything was what you think it was. And what money? My parents don’t have any money and what they do have will now have to be used for Dad’s care.”

“No! Jane was my big sister and I’m not going to let her down now. No! You don’t care about them so no!”

“Gerald, I’m not going to allow you to verbally abuse me anymore. I’ll see what my options are and be in touch.” With that, I hung up.

My cousin Ally worked for an attorney and managed to schedule an appointment for the next day. My flight back to Colorado was Monday evening, so I didn't have a lot of time. Monday morning Gerald called but I refused to pick up. His voice message said he’d decided to sign over the power of attorney and be done with us. Two hours later he called back and in a second voice message, he dug in, saying he had to do what my mom wanted. I relayed all of this to the attorney during our meeting and left with a list of options, none of them ideal.

I got back to the house I’d grown up in and was sorting through family photos in one of the bedrooms where Mom stored a variety of memorabilia when there was a knock on the door. My cousin Brian stood to answer it and said, “It’s the police.”

I laughed. “That wouldn’t surprise me,” I called.

“No, I’m not kidding,” Brian said. “It’s really the police.”
He opened the door as I stepped into the living room. An officer stepped inside, followed by Gerald and Ann and a second officer.

“This man holds the power of attorney for the resident of this house and has invoked it. You all have thirty minutes to gather your things and vacate the premises. Mr. Holden will be moved to a care facility this evening.”

I stared in stunned silence for a moment. I looked at Gerald, “I thought we’d discussed keeping Dad home for a few weeks.”

“That’s my decision not yours,” he responded.

Ann added, “You need to worry about your own family and go home to your son who’s been home alone for days now.”

I looked at her. This was the woman who just two days earlier told me she loved me. “My son is none of your business,” I said. “The will says I can take anything of sentimental value. What about that?”

Gerald responded. “You can take anything now you can fit in their cars,” he motioned to Brian and my aunt Sheryl who had been at the house caring for Dad. “I’ll ship you the rest.”

The officer also responded, “We’ll be here until you leave. You need to hurry; you only have thirty minutes.”

My dad began to sob, which broke the dam of tears I’d been holding back. I’d never seen my dad cry before, and this wasn’t crying but heart wrenching sounds of grief and pain. Eyes swimming with tears, I began gathering my things. I had been going through pictures, so I dumped everything back in the plastic bins and placed them in the living room. Then I gathered the things I knew I wanted. I made my way to the shed in the backyard to get my great-grandmother’s rocking chair and found the trunk that belonged to my other great-grandmother.
Brian and his wife, Janet, began loading things into their car, while Sheryl loaded her own stuff and part of mine into her SUV.

Once I had everything I could locate quickly, the officers met me on the front sidewalk. “If you need to return to the house, you’ll need an escort. You’ll set that up through the sheriff’s office. And here’s the incident report number for today. We suggest you get a copy of it for yourself.”

I thanked them because they were just doing their jobs. I hugged Sheryl and she left, then I turned to Brian. I was far from calm, and now faced an hour and a half drive back to the city in Oklahoma that I’d flown into.

“Janet and I were talking and I’m going to drive you back to the airport. She’ll follow us in our car.”

“No, that’s out of your way,” I said.

“It’s really not,” he said, “and we would insist anyway because you’re in no condition to drive.”

I relented because he was right. As we drove away from the house where I had lived since I was five, I gave it one backward glance. I would never step foot into the house again.

Over the next several weeks I would talk with the attorney, Sheryl, Brian and Janet multiple times and ultimately I would decide not to pursue the power of attorney through a court battle. Doing so would require my dad to testify, which I didn’t want to put him through. If I lost and Gerald retained the authority over my dad, Gerald might never let me see my dad again. That seemed too great a risk after just reconnecting with him.

I talked to Dad daily during those early weeks. He was frustrated and angry at Gerald but also understood my decision. We talked about his childhood memories and mine, but we rarely
talked about Mom. When he did mention her occasionally, the picture I pieced together of their
last months as a couple didn’t paint my mother in a good light. I now suspected that her care of
Dad had been inadequate, especially as she began to struggle with her own health issues that she
kept a secret until it was too late.

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The night Mom died I helped call family members with the news. Then I had to ask Ann to
give me some time alone with my mother’s body. Once alone, I took her hand in mine and gently
rubbed its now cold surface.

“Mom, there’s so much about the last few years, well my whole life actually, that I don’t
understand,” I began. “I wish I knew why you hated me.”

I choked the last words out and began to sob. “I know I wasn’t the daughter you wanted in
the end, Mom, but I became the mom that Haneul needed me to be.” I took a deep breath and
continued. “I wish you could have loved him the way you did Jacob. He’s such a great kid and
he needed a grandmother. I don’t understand why you couldn’t.”

I told her I hadn’t approved of what Kirk did on her Facebook page and how simply having a
conversation about it could have prevented all the hate and hurt that followed. I noted how ironic
it was that I chose Kirk to please her, but he eventually caused the permanent break in our
relationship, and then I told her about the divorce.

After forty-five minutes of pouring my heart out to my dead mother, I was calmer and at
peace.

“I wish we could have had this conversation when you were alive, Mom,” I said. “I want to
play you a song that has comforted me and helped me through the last year. I wish I could have
shared it with you when you could have heard it. It’s BTS, and I think you would have liked them.”

I took my phone and navigated to “00:00 (Zero O’clock)” from BTS’s *Map of the Soul: 7* album. The message of the song is second chances, renewal, and hope. As the song played, I stroked Mom’s arm and cried. While BTS sang in Korean, I knew the words by heart:

초침과 분침이 겹칠 때

(When the second hand and the minute hand overlap,)

세상은 아주 잠깐 숨을 참아

(the world holds its breath for a very brief moment)

Zero o’clock

And you gonna be happy (Doolset)

When the song finished, I stood and walked around to the other side of the bed. I brushed back Mom’s hair and leaned to kiss her forehead. “I love you, Mom,” I whispered. I gathered my purse and walked out of the hospital where I was born, sad that we would never have a chance to repair our relationship, but at peace with being able to say goodbye.

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As I reflected on my last day in my childhood home, I searched for the best words to describe it. *Devastated.* Life had not always been easy, but until that day I had never been devastated. And the feeling wasn’t just for me but for my dad as well. In the span of less than three days, he had lost his wife of more than fifty years and his home.

This devastation had come at the hands of someone who claimed to love me. I had gone into the trip to Arkansas unsure of what awaited me. I expected rejection, but the venom with which
this final confrontation had been inflicted was nothing I could have imagined. The year had already been a difficult one in so many ways, and this added a layer of grief that I would struggle to process.
Part 7

“당신은 꿈꾸는가, 그 길의 끝은 무엇일까”

(Do you have a dream? What would be at the end of that path?)

My moment is yet to come.”

~ “Yet to Come” by BTS
Chapter 13:

Rock Bottom

2022

Everyone said the first year after a divorce was the hardest. So as 2022 dawned, I approached the new year with cautious optimism. The new year brought new opportunities. I was halfway through my first year of teaching high school journalism with an eye to someday teach in South Korea. As third hour started each day, twenty students poured into the classroom and began working on their projects including newspaper, social media, broadcasting, and a podcast. I loved the first semester of teaching so much that I had started a master’s in secondary education program in January.

By March, all those plans had fallen apart. After ten years working at the same school, new employees had created a toxic environment where I struggled to find joy. Commuting more than an hour to work each way and working as both a full-time director of communications and part-time teacher wasn’t going to be sustainable. And as much as I loved learning and was doing well in my master’s program, my heart wasn’t in the education classes. Hectic described the pace of my life, and my commitments left no time for things I enjoyed.

The first change I sought was in my master’s program, asking my university to switch to the master’s in creative writing program. Then I began looking for new jobs. The program switch was approved, and I started the new program in May. Immediately I knew this was the degree I needed to pursue. Just looking at the required courses made me smile.

Cleaning out my classroom at the end of May brought to mind a line from one of my favorite movies. “I’m heartbroken,” Kathleen Kelly says as she closes her store in You’ve Got Mail. I related. Teaching had been one of the most fun and fulfilling years in my almost thirty-year
career. But the lack of direction in my life weighed on me. At fifteen I knew what career I wanted to pursue. I had worked in a variety of different areas of journalism, communications, and publishing, always with an idea of what I wanted to try next. Now I felt aimless. I applied for jobs similar to the one I had been doing for a decade, and while they didn’t thrill me, deep disappointment settled over me when I wasn’t offered the positions.

By mid-June, I sunk deeper and deeper into discouragement. Amid the disappointment, burnout, exhaustion, and depression that consumed me, BTS, the group whose music had brought me so much comfort during this unraveling, announced they would go on hiatus to complete their mandatory military service and focus on solo projects. This wasn’t unexpected, but during the announcement the members, especially my favorite member, expressed the same burnout and exhaustion I felt. Watching him struggle with feelings similar to those that plagued me and believing that I was losing my emotional support music was more than my overwhelmed system could handle. The rest of the day was spent in bed battling bouts of tears.

Life started to feel hopeless. I, the eternal optimist who always sought the silver lining in even the hardest situations, couldn’t imagine good times ahead. During my struggles in 2021, brief flickers of suicidal thoughts visited me once. Now, after eighteen months of one hard thing after another, those dark thoughts deepened. I began to think about the best strategy for ending my life and the realness of the possibility scared me. I called my therapist, and we talked through what I was feeling.

“'I think you’re bordering on depression,”’ she said.

It felt like a fair assessment. I wasn’t just sad; I felt hopeless and wanted to the hurt and the hard to stop. At best, life moved forward for me on a line that either stayed static or went down; it rarely seemed to edge upward. Doing all that hard alone compounded my feelings. I longed for
connection but was also weary of relationships after so many people I’d trusted had either let me
down or betrayed me: parents, spouse, friends, and coworkers.

Was it me? Did I attract a certain kind of person? Did I do something to deserve their
betrayal?

The night after my lowest point, when the suicidal thoughts were the strongest, a migraine
kept me from sleeping. I’d had these headaches regularly throughout my marriage but was rarely
afflicted now. Dehydration and lack of food likely triggered this one, but whatever caused it, I
should thank them. The pain I felt shocked me back into life. As I lay in bed praying and begging
for the pain to leave me, I realized how badly I wanted to live. But I didn’t just want to live as I
had been, I wanted to thrive!

I knew that this desire and positive affirmations alone wouldn’t bring me out of the dark
place I had landed at the end of my mid-life unraveling. I would need to be intentional about my
approach to life and healing if I was going to turn this around. Throughout my life, I had lived by
all or nothing metrics—follow the eating plan perfectly or forget it; follow the Bible perfectly or
you won’t be saved. This way of thinking had to go. I needed to find one thing to focus on and
be gentle with myself if I messed up. It was new territory, but I was ready to embrace it.

I decided to do one thing every day that made me happy. Maybe that was getting ice cream
on a Sunday afternoon. Or it could be listening to a great audiobook on the way to work. A walk
along my favorite trail. Often it was homework for my creative writing courses in my master’s
program. It didn’t have to be big; it just needed to be something I enjoyed.

Over July 4th weekend, I decided to do one big thing—I booked a trip to Korea for Haneul
and me. Thanks to the pandemic it had been three years since we’d visited, and I felt we both
needed to just be there and see our family and friends. In the past, looking forward to such a visit
would have helped me find joy, but now it created anxiety along with anticipation. It would be our first trip just the two of us. While I’d done most of the work on our previous trips, knowing I didn’t have an adult safety net instilled an anxiousness I hadn’t felt since our trip in 2006. So much had changed since our 2019 visit, including my dream of someday living in Korea; now I wondered if I would love it in the same way.

One Sunday afternoon in July, as I scrolled through Instagram, I read a post that would change my understanding of myself and my situation.

“I believe complex trauma survivors start out as some of the most hopeful people we know. They had to be hopeful. They hoped over and over again in ways you can’t even imagine.”

This sounded like me. I read it again, then swiped to the next slide in the post.

“When we can bring curiosity to the hopeless feeling, we find it was once bursting with hope.”

Yes! My whole life had been one big ball of hope. I hoped that my relationship with my mother would improve. Each visit I hoped things would be different. I hoped that my husband would deal with his own trauma so we could truly connect with each other. I hoped for deep friendships. In each situation, I would tentatively put myself out there, offering to do my part to help that hope be realized, only to find I was doing the work alone. I swiped again.

“Can we see the hopelessness as hope that is exhausted? I think of the marathon runner who crosses the finish line and collapses in exhaustion. The collapse is a sign of how hard their body worked to get them there. Collapsed hope is hope that has been working really, really hard and is tired. It needs sustenance.”
This slide I read three or four times and started to cry. I related to this image of the marathon runner, who had been running alone as she battled herself and external forces, collapsing at the finishing line. I swiped again. The words swam as I read them through my tears.

“I’ll say it again. Collapsed hope is hope that has been working really, really hard and is tired. It needs sustenance” (Bryan 2022).

I took screenshots of the thread and added it to my gratitude app. Then I read the posts again. These four panels perfectly described the hollow, hopelessness that had held a grip on me for the last several months. Then I focused on two phrases: complex trauma and sustenance. If complex trauma survivors felt this way, was I a complex trauma survivor? I’d never heard the term before. I opened Google and began to search.

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2020

When I started individual therapy in February, I developed the vocabulary to describe the things about my childhood that had felt odd. I learned that my family was enmeshed, which is defined as a relationship that is “overly connected” to the point that one person’s desire to meet the needs of the other causes the person to lose touch with their own needs and feelings (Marie 2021). I began to understand that my mother had parentified me, placing me in a care taking role when she made it my job to befriend her and be responsible for her emotions (Goodman 2020).

At first, I resisted seeing these, as well as the silent treatment, the passive-aggressive behavior, and more, as abuse. I was not physically abused, aside from being spanked as punishment, often with a belt or a switch from the cherry tree, but every kid in the 1970s was spanked.

*Hadn’t my parents spoiled me with love?*
But the more I learned, I came to realize and define my experience for what it was—emotional abuse. For months, I hated it and myself for being a victim. Being labeled a victim was part of the reason that I didn’t want to acknowledge the treatment by my parents as abuse.

My therapist dug in. “Why do you bristle against being seen as a victim?” she asked during one session.

“Victims are weak and helpless,” I said, “and I don’t see myself as either of those.”

“But are victims weak and helpless?” she probed.

I thought of Jenna, the heroine I’d written in my first novel who had endured a horrendous sexual assault. Technically, Jenna was a victim, but I wrote her as a survivor. She was strong and independent, while still at times being fearful and struggling to trust.

“No,” I said, “they are survivors who are strong and capable.”

“Yes, they are. And you’re right that you are those things, even if you see what you experienced as abuse.”

The more I learned about my experience, the harder it became to deny the fact that my childhood and my marriage had been marred by emotional abuse. I am a victim of childhood and marital emotional abuse, but I’m also a survivor.

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2022

It wasn’t hard to locate information on complex trauma. My Google search yielded one article after another littered with the vocabulary I learned in 2020 to explain my childhood.

One article read: “It usually stems from trauma you experienced in childhood, though it can develop from trauma in adulthood as well. Some possible causes of complex trauma include: …
ongoing physical or emotional abuse…enmeshment or engulfing trauma, parentification (children taking on adult roles)” (Lebow 2021).

Trauma becomes complex when incidents occur again and again, reinforcing the nervous system’s definition of a threat and leaving the victim stuck in perpetual fight or flight mode. But I also learned that when hyperarousal is a routine state, our nervous system may “fawn,” a people-pleasing approach, or freeze causing us to not react at all. Childhood trauma causes victims to live in a state of constant nervous system arousal as we anticipate the next threat. Our homes and caretakers were unpredictable, which taught us to stay on alert. As children we learn that people pleasing will “fix” the problem if we do what the adult needs or wants in the moment. By fixing the situation, we create a safer environment for ourselves.

More research revealed that trauma is stored in the body and can be the underlying cause of many health issues. The migraines I’d had during my marriage that suddenly went away when we separated made sense. I had also realized that my lactose intolerance was not as severe as it had been my whole adult life. I could now eat yogurt, cheese, and ice cream without any issues, and only had mild issues when I drank milk. This affliction, too, can be linked to anxiety and depression (Dawson 2011). Even my bad posture, constantly hunched shoulders as I shrunk inward, could be a symptom of what I experienced during my childhood (Stress, Trauma and Your Posture).

With each discovery, I gained a deeper understanding of how every area of my life had been touched by trauma. This realization allowed me to see my family and what I experienced for what it was. It also allowed me to connect those childhood experiences with what I accepted and allowed in my marriage. Early on in my healing, I realized I chose Kirk to please my mom. But the more I learned, the better I understood how childhood patterns made emotional abuse feel
comfortable and healthy relationships feel uncomfortable. This explained a lot about my relationship with Julian, especially the times I had pushed him away. It helped me understand the early bond I had with Kirk and why it was so hard to walk away from this “perfect” relationship.

I also began to see how my parents’ interpretation of family relationships and a biblical marriage created the perfect parameters for the control and manipulation that governed most of my life. Growing up, the verses about obedient children were laid out as my ideal, while none of the ones about biblical parenting made it into the lecture rotation. Throughout my teen years, my parents, school, and church would teach what it meant to be a submissive wife, but rarely discussed the role of a biblical husband.

My search engine results also introduced me to books that would further inform my journey. I read *Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology and How You Can Heal* by Donna Jackson Nakazawa and *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel Van Der Kolk. This book introduced me to complex post-traumatic stress disorder or C-PTSD.

Now that I had a foundation on what complex trauma was, I needed to know how a survivor gives sustenance to that exhausted hope. It would take struggling with another toxic relationship, this one at work, to spur me into the next stage of my healing journey.

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Stony silence filled our office, the silent treatment being my officemate and employee’s preferred way of expressing her displeasure with the constructive feedback I’d given her during a review. When she did decide to talk, the conversations were filled with so many gaslighting statements that I wondered if she and I had actually been in the same previous conversations. The racing in my body became a daily visitor—heart beating fast, breath shallow, mind jumping
ahead to deal with the uncertainty of the situation. I now recognized this as being triggered: my nervous system seeing the situation as what I’d experienced before with both my mother and Kirk. My health issues returned: headaches, backaches, tight jaw, and more.

As I had moved into this role with a new employer, I prayed for emotionally mature coworkers and a professional work environment. Within five months of starting, I realized that was not what I’d been given. Frustration welled up in me.

“God, why can’t one thing in my life be easy? I left one toxic workplace and stepped right into another. Seriously, do I magnetically attract these toxic people? Are past lives real and I did do something horrible in a previous life? I just don’t understand.”

It wasn’t that I expected life to be easy, but one break would have been nice. I mentioned my prayer for an emotionally healthy workplace to a friend.

“But that’s not something you can control,” he said. “You need to focus on what you can control.”

I contemplated this and realized I had two choices. One, I could stay away from all people in hopes of avoiding the toxic ones. Or, two, I could learn to recognize the red flags early on, better understand the patterns of my nervous system, learn to calm the triggers when they happen, and focus on building relationships with people who are also working on their emotional health. While the first option was, and still is, tempting, I knew the only real path ahead would involve more education, more healing, and deeper commitment to gentle understanding of my life experience.

***

Healing becomes infinitely harder if a person remains in the place or with the person who is hurting them. For years, I tried to maintain relationships with the people who were hurting me
while I claimed to be healing. Now, I know that wasn’t healing; it was awareness. Once I set boundaries with my parents and separated from Kirk, I thought healing would be almost instantaneous. Looking back, I see that real healing for me didn’t start until June 2022. The first two years after my separation and divorce were ones of acceptance and learning to navigate life as a single parent of a teen. My life resembled a duck swimming, seemingly smooth and graceful on the surface while my feet were furiously paddling underwater to move me forward. Many friends have told me they had no idea I was struggling. I hid it well thanks to my conditioning of not talking about my inner life and desperately wanting to believe I was moving forward.

Three years ago, I thought I would heal and be done with it. I wanted to move on, fall in love, locate my tribe, and never think about my traumatic experiences again. How naïve I was about my life and about what lay ahead. Hitting bottom in June 2022 finally allowed me to face the realization that there is no separating “me” from my “trauma.” And that’s when healing truly began.

That’s when the cocoon stage started for me. I withdrew, being selective about who I spent time with and when. I stopped sharing my life with coworkers, deciding instead to reserve my thoughts and feelings for those I truly trusted. I cut back on social media posts and began journaling to process and document my journey. I focused on me: my relationship with my son, my master’s in creative writing program, reconnecting with my lifelong love of drawing, and filling my time with things I loved.

I saw healing from trauma much like healing a broken bone. During my lifetime, I’ve broken five bones: a wrist, ankle, tailbone, and finger (twice). The break is treated and immobilized in a cast or splint to allow it to heal. This is what the cocoon stage has been for me. I’ve limited my movement as I developed ways to process what has happened.
Once the cast is removed, the bone is stiff and maybe a little sore. The doctor says that the bone is even stronger than it was before, but the muscles surrounding it must be worked since they are weak from not being used. In healing from trauma, this is learning to recognize healthy people and build emotionally mature relationships. It’s learning triggers and patterns, so they don’t hijack relationships. It’s exercising new approaches through open communication, hard conversations, and lots of self-reflection.

After a few weeks, the broken bone is deemed healed and is as good as new. But at times it aches, like when it rains, or the appendage is overexerted. The body recalls the trauma the appendage endured, but there are tools to help. Pain medicine might be used or maybe ice is placed on the bone.

Trauma healing is the same. I am at the point now where what I experienced doesn’t impact every day. But certain situations are triggering, and the ache comes rushing back. When this happens, I use the tools I’ve gathered to calm my overstimulated nervous system and remind it that while this situation feels like the past, it is not the same. I am no longer a child who is stuck in a situation where abuse must be endured. I am strong, capable, and resilient, and I can handle what life throws at me.

I know I’m healing because situations that once put me into a downward spiral of shame or fear, no longer hold that power over me. But I still have healing to do; I can’t expect to unwind fifty years of trauma in just a year or two. And I know that in one way, healing will be a lifelong journey. Triggers or patterns will rear their ugly heads again at some point, and I will dig deep into what I’ve learned to combat them. They are part of me, and I’m learning to love and accept those parts just as I do the prettier parts.
Chapter 14:

Renewal of the Real Me

2022

As I worked on an assignment for school in late summer, my text alert sounded.

Lola: Did you see that BTS will have a concert in Busan in the fall?

Me: I did.

Lola: You’re going to be there in the fall. What if it happens while you’re there? How cool would that be?! It’s your dream to see them perform in Korea.

Me: It is but what are the odds of that happening?

Just a couple of weeks after BTS had announced their hiatus in June, they signed on as ambassadors for the city of Busan’s bid to host the 2030 World Expo. Since two of the members are from Busan, and the group holds a place of national pride for their achievements, BTS would perform one last concert as seven in the port city sometime in the fall. In early July, I had booked our trip around Haneul’s week-long fall break. We would land on October 13 and return home nine days later. Our plans involved visiting family, friends, shopping and eating; a relaxed trip just to be.

Seven weeks after I booked the trip, the date of the concert was announced: October 15. Tickets would be free and distributed via a lottery. I laughed at the timing and debated whether to enter the lottery. Finally deciding that I had nothing to lose, I entered on August 30 when the lottery opened and created an account so Haneul could enter as well. Now I all could do was wait. Winners of the lottery would be announced September 7 at four in the afternoon Korean standard time, which would be one in the morning for me. When I awoke that Wednesday, I started my usual routine for checking a couple of things on my phone before I remembered the
date. I navigated to the notices on the WeVerse app where the group posted news and event updates. Under “My Events” it said, “You won.” I laughed. Apparently, someone wanted me to be at this concert. I quickly read the notice, took a screenshot, and navigated to Haneul’s account. It read, “We’re sorry.”

Now I had a decision to make. We were staying in Suwon, just south of Seoul, and the concert would be in Busan, three hours south by bullet train. Guilt rose in me as I pondered going without Haneul. Before making any decisions, I discussed the possibilities with him. He told me to go. Then I contacted members of his Korean family and asked if they could stay with him that night at our AirBnB. They said yes. At almost seventeen, he could have stayed by himself, but I knew he would be more comfortable if they were with him. He would be taken care of, and likely enjoy the time alone with them. Still, it felt wrong to put my wants ahead of my son. My waffling resulted in me waiting another week or so before booking a hotel for one night in Busan. That decision left few options as the concert would draw one hundred thousand visitors to the city. I found a hotel on one of Busan’s beaches for one hundred thirty dollars a night, which seemed pretty standard for a hotel in that area. I snapped it up and finished planning my one-night solo trip to Busan.

***

The stress I put on myself, combined with issues at our first AirBnB in Suwon, resulted in a less than ideal first day in Korea that October. This did, however, seem par for the course; each trip seemed to start off rocky and then even out. After switching to an apartment near Suwon’s bustling entertainment area, we settled in and didn’t leave the apartment that day. A part of me felt it was wasteful to have flown halfway around the world to just sit in the apartment. Then I reminded myself the purpose of the trip was to just “be” and to see family and friends.
I dug out my drawing pad and began to sketch. I had done a few drawings since June’s commitment to do one thing every day that I loved. Now I drew inspiration from the patterns so characteristic of Korea. Then I read a book, and later took Haneul shopping at the convenience store across the street for snacks. I started to relax and some of the physical manifestations of my stress and trauma eased.

Saturday morning, I was up early with my bag packed for Busan. During the three-hour train ride, I enjoyed watching the countryside pass by as I listened to BTS. Once in Busan, chaos best described the afternoon. While I had reserved my ticket, I needed to pick up the physical version, which meant waiting an hour and a half in line. Once the ticket was retrieved, I had time to check my backpack with my overnight things at bag check, and then it was time to line up to go into the stadium. Traveling alone and waiting in lines resulted in me eating only the almond bars I’d tucked into my bag, running out water with no chance to refill it, and not going to the bathroom for eight hours.

Thirty minutes before the concert started, I got a call from one of Haneul’s family members. They couldn’t seem to reach him via the popular messaging app that we always used to connect with his family. Worry seized me as I dialed his phone number. He quickly answered and I instructed him where to meet them outside the apartment. Fifteen minutes later he let me know they’d found each other, and I could relax and enjoy the concert.

My floor ticket meant I was close to the stage, but also left me at the mercy of the sea of people in my standing section. We moved as one throughout the concert, losing all control over where our bodies would go. Being packed in without water finally took a toll and I made my way to the edge of my section hoping to get some air. The night air was cool but wasn’t circulating in
the tightly packed crowd. Toward the end of the concert, a kind Korean concertgoer gifted me a frozen bottle of water she had in her bag, which helped me finish out the concert strong.

I would later describe the concert as amazing and awful. The concert itself was wonderful and I got to see BTS perform the songs that had comforted and befriended me over the last several years. When they began singing “Zero O’Clock,” I began to cry. The song meant so much to me and when the pandemic canceled their Map of the Soul: 7 tour, I thought I would never see the song performed live. I rarely video during concerts, but I held my phone up and captured part of the performance as tears rolled down my cheeks.

The logistical part of the experience left me frustrated, given the disorganization, chaos, and challenges of the standing section. Still, I was glad I’d gone. I had snapped a selfie as soon as I’d arrived at the stadium that afternoon and took another one before leaving the property. As I looked at those two photos later, serving as bookends of the day, I felt the woman in the first photo was vastly different from the one in the second. The day marked a moment of intense personal growth for me.

An hour after the concert I still sat outside the stadium unable to get the taxi app on my phone to work. I messaged an online acquaintance who had been at the concert about the issue, and she sent me a link to a news article. The data processing center for the app company had experienced a fire earlier that evening taking out all their app services. This also explained the issue Haneul and his family had in connecting with each other via the messaging app, which was part of the same company. As the crowd finally began to thin, I managed to flag down a taxi. The day had been physically exhausting and now I was so ready to be at my hotel.

Only the driver wasn’t familiar with the hotel, which was odd since it was on one of the major beaches of Busan. He headed in the general direction and kept trying different maps until
he located the address. I leaned back and took a deep breath as we made our way across the city. As the taxi drove down the street where the hotel was supposed to be, the driver still wasn’t sure he was in the right place. I pointed out the tall skinny building to him with “Q Motel” written at the top, and he pulled over.

“You’re sure this is the place?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes, this is it.”

I thanked him and walked up to the check-in window. The desk clerk, an older grandfatherly Korean man, greeted me by name when I said I had a reservation, as if I were the only person to have a reservation for that night. He handed me my key—an actual metal one on a thick plastic key ring—and a small package.

As I had approached the check-in window, I suspected that this wasn’t a regular hotel. But when I turned the small package over in my hand and saw condoms inside, I knew for sure. I had booked a room at a “love motel,” the type of facility that usually rents rooms by the hour. They are abundant in Korea, but it was not what I was expecting. Once inside the room, I slid the key ring into the slot to activate the lights, found the switch, and a red light flooded the room with color. I burst out laughing!

I plopped down on the bed because with the concert crowd filling Busan I would be hard-pressed to find another room for anything close to what I’d paid for this one. Somehow, this seemed the fitting end to the weirdness of the day. I got ready for bed and slept for a few hours before heading back north to Suwon to spend the evening with Haneul and his family.

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I see the day of the concert as another turning point in my healing journey. That doesn’t mean that there wouldn’t be hard days ahead, or that I had completed my healing work, but that
now I saw myself in a new light. After a lifetime of being ridiculed for the things I loved and being treated as if I weren’t capable of caring for myself, that concert day showed me otherwise. Things had gone wrong. It had been hard physically. But nothing that happened put me in a spiral of self-doubt or anxiety. The flaws of the day had also not detracted from the beautiful parts of the experience, one of which was fulfilling a dream of seeing BTS perform in Korea. I had taken the good with the bad and realized that both made the day memorable in their own ways.

For as long as I could remember, I’d been filled to the brim with self-esteem, the belief in my abilities related to the external things in my life. I made good grades and established a respectable career. And when it came to caretaking of others, I was an absolute pro. But at the same time, I’d long struggled with self-worth, failing to see my value, resiliency, or character for what they truly were. I struggled with setting boundaries, self-love, and feeling safe in my environment (Bennett 2023).

That twenty-four trip solo trip to Busan provided a major steppingstone in the building of my self-worth. When I started my new job a couple of months earlier, I began setting boundaries around off-hours work. As I met new people there, I tuned into the reactions my body had to them and bookmarked uneasy feelings to see if their behavior would prove or disprove those initial impressions. The trip to Busan showed my resiliency and bloomed a love for myself that I hadn’t experienced before. I liked who I was that day—strong, capable, resilient, confident, and adaptable—and I knew I wanted to see more of that woman.

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A week later as Haneul and I waited for our ride to the airport, we had one of our deep conversations. I asked if he knew why Korea was so special to me. He shook his head.
“For me, it wasn’t a man who made me a mom, but a country. Korea brought us together; that will always be special.”

“That makes sense,” he said, nodding. “You also feel like you’re seen as special here though, right? Is that part of it?”

“Maybe,” I conceded, “but I’m only seen that way when I’m with you. When I’m alone, I’m just another tourist without an obvious connection to Korea. I had several moments without you on this trip, but I found that even then, I feel so at home here.” I paused, and then decided to continue. “You know how I struggled with my parents?” He nodded again. “Well, I feel like as I tried to please everyone else, I allowed my real self to be buried. Finding me again has been like an archaeological dig, an excavation revealing the woman I’m supposed to be. Being your mom and learning about Korea played a big part in that discovery for me. And that, too, makes Korea special.”

“That makes sense,” he said. “I like the excavation analogy. It’s a good description.”

I smiled. “It is, and what a journey it has been.”
Epilogue

2023

In the last year, I’ve cried at more movies than I can count. As I write this in late September, Pixar’s *Elemental* has made me cry all seven times I’ve seen it. Of course, the love story between fire and water pulls me in; as a romance writer, that’s a given. The way Wade sees Ember and helps her see herself in a new light is touching, and I do long to be seen that way someday by a loving partner. But it’s not the love story that makes me cry. It’s this line that Bernie, the dad, says to his daughter, Ember, when she finally tells him that running the shop is not her dream for the future.

“I don’t want to run the shop, Ashva. I know that was your dream, but it’s not mine.”

Bernie steps closer to his daughter. “Ember, the shop was never the dream. You were the dream. You were always the dream.”

Every time tears slide down my face during this scene. I can only imagine what it would be like to hear one of my parents tell me I was the dream. That their love had nothing to do with my performance, caretaking, or people-pleasing. The part of me that will always yearn for that kind of parental love will cry every time I watch this scene. I see the tears as an acknowledgment of my experience, instead of sadness or grief. It’s a recognition of what parental love should be and it’s okay if that spot inside me is forever a little tender.

At times I’ve wanted to believe that my parents did the best they could. I think that comes closer to describing my dad than my mom. I know about my dad’s childhood and can, at least, see where his emotional distance and immaturity came from. But I don’t know if I’ll ever understand my mother. Subsequent conversations with other family members reveal that going
back generations, things I believed about my family weren’t accurate. Layers of generational trauma likely impacted my mother and her ability to be the mother I needed her to be.

Others struggle when I say that my mother didn’t love me. Mothers are the epitome of love in our culture, so when I say that, it flies in the face of who we want to believe mothers are. For a while, I instead said that she loved me in the only way she knew how. That, however, didn’t feel authentic to me and I’ve decided to speak my truth even if it’s uncomfortable for others. In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul defines love this way:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends (13:4-8, ESV).

Of course, no one meets this definition of love every day or in every interaction we have with those in our lives. We are imperfect beings who fail, yet instead of being complacent in our failures, they should teach us how to succeed. Times when we fall short should inform us of how to do better. My mother’s failure to love wasn’t an occasional misstep. She didn’t see a failure and seek to correct it. She routinely wasn’t patient or kind. Envy was a way of life for her. She insisted on her own way and was resentful if I didn’t comply. When I became an adult and tried to work on our relationship, she didn’t rejoice in the truth, which all of us can struggle with, but she refused to even hear it. She didn’t endure all things or bear all things through our struggles. Instead, she shut me out of her life; her “love” ended. If this passage in 1 Corinthians is to be a guide to loving, my mother failed time and time again.
Despite everything, I never hated my mother. I have wonderful memories of times we spent together reading or watching Night Tracks music videos when cable TV was a new thing. Yet even these wonderful memories of the times I thought we were close are tainted. That’s how emotional abuse works: like the fine dust that rained down when the World Trade Center buildings collapsed on September 11 and covered all lower Manhattan, even the happy times from my childhood are coated with the trauma caused by the abuse.

While I benefit from coming to terms with my experience in a time when the understanding of trauma is on the rise, each of us is responsible for recognizing patterns and hurts and healing them. My parents are still responsible for their actions and the harm those actions inflicted on me.

Someone needed to break the cycle, and that someone was me. I wish I had recognized my experience for what it was sooner. That might have resulted in less trauma for Haneul, but I can’t do anything about that now. All I can do is work on my own healing and show that I’m willing to do things differently.

Just as others struggle with my truth about my parents, what I now believe about my marriage also makes others bristle: how could it have been so bad if you stayed for 26 years? Unless someone has experienced the kind of emotional abuse I have, it’s hard to understand. The subtlety of the control and manipulation allows it to go unnoticed for years. Add in the fact that this dysfunction was normal and felt right to me and you have the perfect storm for a long marriage that was never what it seemed.

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After three years of convincing myself that I was good and the hardest part was over, this year I leaned into healing. Our trip to Korea and my solo excursion to Busan encouraged me to
dig in. That has meant cocooning myself when I’m not working, limiting those who have access to my time, and truly learning to be content alone. I started dating myself—dressing up to go to the theater, taking myself out to eat, and going to the movies alone.

It's been a year of devoting myself to learning more about what I’ve experienced and the ways the abuse continues to impact my life. I’ve read books, done trauma-informed yoga, started meditating, become a prolific journaler, and begun learning about the healing properties of somatic movement.

Sometimes I wonder who I would be if my childhood had been different. I love personality tests; they help me understand myself better. But now, as I read about the impact of trauma on the mind and body, many of the things I’ve thought were “just me” are listed as trauma responses.

Now I’m left wondering, what parts of me are embedded in my DNA and what parts are the direct result of the trauma? I can speculate, but I’ll never truly know. The trauma has shaped me in so many ways that it’s impossible to separate me from the trauma now. Still, I’ve learned that what I experienced doesn’t define me. It’s a part of me, but not all of me.

This unraveling has been brutal, just as Brené Brown said it would be. But the life I’m now stitching back together has beauty that I’ve never experienced before. And for that, I’m grateful.
Works Cited


The Holy Bible is the inspired word of God. The book of Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians at Corinth.


Bennett’s article on the Thriveworks site explains the difference between self-worth and self-esteem.


In this article, McCurdy discusses how writing her memoir played a part in her healing journey. Prior to writing the memoir, McCurdy said that grieving her mother’s death had been complicated and seemed almost forbidden given their relationship. After writing her story, McCurdy said she saw her mother in a different light and was able to allow herself to grieve, despite the abuse.


This article on Brown’s blog redefines the crisis that happens at midlife as not a crisis at all, but the universe’s way of insisting that we live our most authentic lives.

Bryan’s Instagram account shares information about complex trauma. This post shared that complex trauma survivors aren’t hopeless, but instead have hoped to the point that hope is exhausted.


In *Tastes like War*, Grace Cho weaves together her personal story of growing up as one of the few children of color in a small town in Washington State with her mother’s life story. Her mother, an immigrant bride from South Korea, struggled with schizophrenia later in life. Cho recounts how living in a country rebuilding after a three-year war, as well as her mother’s immigrant experience, could have played a role in her mother developing the disease. It looks at the Korean diaspora experience and reveals generational trauma.


This article details why storytelling is important. From understanding the world better to gaining a deeper connection with ourselves, storytelling has been pivotal throughout human history in shaping us and individuals and cultures.


This book unpacks all things memoir for the reader, but this chapter in particular works to define what memoir is and isn’t. Couser shows the blurred lines of memoir as he details
the ways it crosses over into autobiography and biography, while at the same time utilizing techniques that are seen mostly in fiction. This chapter deftly explains how memoir relates to and even utilizes other genres but if done well, maintains the uniqueness of memoir by staying focused on one time period or one aspect of the author’s story.


This article talks about the other triggers involved in lactose intolerance that aren’t related to lactose.

Doolset. “00:00 (Zero o’clock).” *Doolset Lyrics*, 5 Dec. 2020, doolsetbangtan.wordpress.com/2020/02/21/zero-oclock/.

This blog shares translations of all songs released by BTS, a Korean pop group.


This blog post is dedicated to the genre of memoir and includes a definition of memoir and a history of the genre. Dukes also details four different types of memoir: transformational, confessional, professional/celebrity, and travel. She concludes the post with a couple of paragraphs on writing memoir and how to get started.


Part writing how-to and part information on processing trauma, this book by Febos
provides insight into how memoir can be a tool in healing. The author discusses how to use care when telling a story that involves others, who have their own versions of the story. Febos uses personal examples throughout, which help the reader better understand the power of memoir and ways to carefully approach the story.


Foos’s memoir walks the reader through the abuse she endured as a child, her diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder, and how she eventually began to heal from C-PTSD. In the later chapters, the author includes her research on the plethora of ways that trauma can affect the body, especially a woman’s body through reproductive issues. Her story provides hope that healing from trauma is possible even after severe abuse.


Goodman’s article shares fourteen signs that a child has been parentified by their parents. Parentification involves requiring children to take on adult tasks, either physical or emotional.


This work is the publisher’s official webpage for McCurdy’s book. The official blurb for the book includes the description that the book is both “heartbreaking and hilarious.”

Karr’s book is an ode to memoir and a how-to for the author is feels she is ready to tackle the genre. A short quiz included in the book is Karr’s way of helping the reader assess whether they are truly ready to write personal stories with the honest reflection the genre requires. The author is brutally honest about the toll that writing memoir can have on a writer, ensuring that producing a memoir isn’t undertaken lightly.


This article, based on an interview with Foo, discusses her approach to the book. In the article, Foo discusses how she knew she couldn’t approach writing a memoir until her healing was well underway. Foo chose this approach for two reasons. First, she wanted to write the book from a place of hope that healing was possible and that could only be authentically shown in the book once it was true for her. Second, after identifying workaholism as a symptom of her C-PTSD, Foo knew that she had to focus on healing alone, ensuring that she was experiencing it fully, which wouldn’t happen if she was concerned about how to document the journey for a book.


Lara’s book is a how-to guide for writing a memoir. This book takes the reader through the entire process from formulating the idea to getting published and everything in between. She talks about the craft of writing, including creating your character arc and
writing compelling scenes and narration, then delves into the art of publishing, including both traditional publishing and finding an agent as well as considering self-publishing.


Lebow’s article on Psych Central shares the symptoms and causes complex trauma and discusses ways that survivor can begin their journey toward healing.


This poetry site shares a variety of poems.


This article explains what enmeshment is in both romantic relationships and family relationships.


McCurdy, a child actor who starred in two shows on Nickelodeon, recounts how her mother pushed her into acting and then used acting as way to maintain control over her. The abuse McCurdy endured at the hands of her mother was largely emotional abuse, but at times included sexual abuse as well. It wasn’t until after her mom’s death that McCurdy felt truly free from the control exerted by her mother and her healing journey was able to progress.

This article presents the thoughts of Beau Lotto, a neuroscientist who has done Ted talks on context. McQuater’s article discusses how everything we do and think is related to our own experiences, which provide context for what we see and hear.


This article lists some of Maya Angelou’s best quotes and saying from her poetry, speeches, and books.


In Stein on Writing, Sol Stein draws on his vast experience as a writer and editor to present best practices that allow all writers to craft their best possible stories. The chapter included in this paper describes ways that nonfiction writers can apply techniques from fiction that will make their stories come to life.


This article on the blog of a wellness office in Omaha, Nebraska, talks about the link between stress, trauma, and poor posture. It details the findings of a trauma study that found that trauma survivors slump in a defensive stance, resulting in poor posture.

Using her own published memoirs as examples, Suberman’s article discusses ways to engage readers using techniques used in popular fiction. She includes how the author can find the right voice, fully develop the characters, adjust or change memories to fit the story or modern sensibilities, and building tension and suspense.


In this interview with Grace Cho, Vickery talks with the author about why she chose to write *Tastes Like War*, intertwining her personal narrative with the story of her mother’s live and the research Cho did for her doctoral thesis. Cho discusses how healing it is to put a story out into the universe, not only for the author but for others who have similar lived experiences.