

Read Without Listening

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Abstract

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One thing I observed, while sifting through artifacts and the memories of women I have known during the ten years I have been a single parent, is how our culture uses law to define and enforce right and wrong. I noticed that while the laws have changed over the past hundred years, a lot of the same problems still exist today as prior to the first wave of the feminist movement. Agendas slip through the cracks of language, under law's fine print.

CONTENTS

Since The Beginning	3
First Wave	5
Him	6
No Son Of Mine	15
Someone Told Her	16
Separation	24
Second Wave	26
Mother/Daughter	27
Leaving	34
Switch	47
Third Wave	50
Me	51
She	58
Service	59
Taken	70
(Not Included)	74
From All Angles: or, why I wrote how I wrote	78

SINCE THE BEGINNING

Nov 2, 2007

"I've come to my decision today. Because you've proven to me that you are an unloyal person through your actions, words and attitude, and your past reflects your present, I'm not gonna be there Chelsea. Its your problem not mine, because you pushed me away, remember that, and now you want to have a child out of wedlock with someone you're not even with or want to be with, for whatever reason.

That is very sad to see when someone is so full of themselves, they actually think they are on their way to Heaven. Because we are not married or devoted I've let go now, so you can go to hell! Seriously, I'm not going to hell for you or with you. Your blood is not on my hands any longer and there is no more guilt, for I'm striving to be worthy everyday in Gods eyes, and for the record, its not me who should be following you anyways. I was born to lead a family, not be led by my wife. Go read the bible and find out how to respect the man you are with!"

Dec 11, 2013

I am continually ridiculed on my skill as a mother. This is how my worth as a human is assessed. How soft my voice gets when talking to children is a means to decide what kind of mother or woman I am. The fact that my kids have different fathers is typically a dent in the view of my credibility as a person. The fact that I am parenting alone and both kids' fathers are estranged is the biggest criteria for judgment. If I choose to date a man it is viewed as reckless. It is as if our culture views men as irreplaceable and yet dangerous all in one fell swoop. And the fact that I am not married to a man will always be something that I answer for. It is an impossible situation, and now I've been on trial for it, though it is not relevant to the actual case: the case of an absent father requesting control over a family he doesn't know and a son he had never met.

In the courtroom, I was faced with every fear from the past, every fear that has been handed down from generation to generation. Since the moment I became a parent, I've been alone. My youngest, my son, was five and his father had been absent since the day I told him I was pregnant. Recently, his father tried to get both of my kids and I court ordered to move back to Washington from California to accommodate his newfound desire to be a father. This was the biggest court appearance I had ever needed to make. He was trying to get majority custody of my son. He had no relationship with my son to support his case, so his angle was to use everything he could to tear down my character and sway the court in his favor. If I were to be deemed unfit, the court would inevitably award custody to the biological father. Making me unlikable was his last chance. Watching this gave me the opportunity to see the reflection of a patriarchal culture in him and our culture that accommodates him.

FIRST WAVE

Nov 2, 2007

"I can only imagine the reasons you're telling me "I have a decision to make now," but you don't know how to grow spiritually or mentally, you refuse to admit your own faults, you refuse to drop your self righteous guard, and joining the marines did nothing for you. You and pride go hand in hand! You take only the parts of the bible you like and ignore the rest. That's not how it works. So you can think in your head that you have some sort of control over me now but it's evident in the words you say. The spirits speak right out of your mouth and you don't even see it.

I'm not putting my life on hold just because you say you are pregnant. I know what loyalty is and you resist my experience and leadership role that you never even took the time to understand or respect. I'm so sick of you falsely accusing me of "accusing you of things I think or say you are" when I've made very clear to you countless times now, that this is a spiritual battle. It is you who needs to start making some decisions because I'm not going to be there for you Chelsea, plain and simple. You're true colors of dictating and Jezebel characteristics have come to the surface. I suggest you get your facts straight before the truth comes out and everyone in the family, mine and yours will have to know."

Dec 11, 2013

HIM

The door opened. We all stood and watched the judge walk to his bench. The room had gray carpet, old and thin like in an elementary school classroom. There were no windows. The walls were bare, except for two flags set up behind the judge, one on his right and one on his left. The only comfortable chairs were given to the opposing party, his lawyer, and the courtroom employees. Spectators and witnesses sat on wooden benches behind us.

“You may be seated,” he stated. I sat down, but I felt like I could barely move, I was so nervous. My whole body tensed. “Ms. Carter, you are representing yourself pro se, is this correct?”

“Yes, your Honor.”

“You need to understand that if you choose to represent yourself for the duration of this trial, you will be held to the same standards as any attorney. Is this clear?”

I wasn't sure what the standards were, but I didn't have any other option.

“All right Ms. Carter, you are listed here first so you can start with your opening statement.” I was panicking. I had in front of me a yellow legal pad with the facts of our case written in chronological order. I had no idea how to make a proper opening statement. I tried anyway.

“J. has filed an objection to my family's relocation to California. I am arguing that the relocation be permanently granted and that my proposed parenting plan be implemented. I believe that the evidence used in this trial will prove that the move is in

the best interest of the child. J. has never met L., and there is no relationship to be damaged. All of L.'s existing relationships remain intact and healthy. "I felt my thoughts and memory wavering. I looked back to the notebook. I touched the cold table in front of me for stability. There was no comfort.

"J. chose not to meet L. and has been completely absent for the last five and a half years. He showed no interest in developing a relationship with his son until learning about our intent to relocate. Because of the decision to absent himself from his son's life for so long, I believe he is a danger to L.'s emotional well-being and safety. J. also has a thirteen-year-old biological daughter that he has remained estranged from and the court needs to know that his absence from L. is not an isolated incident, but instead, a chronic problem. If J. really wants to know his son, let him approach it gradually with letters. This will give him the chance to show that he can be a consistent and positive addition to L.'s life, while providing L. with time to adjust to the presence of someone he never knew existed."

J.'s lawyer stood up to give his opening statement. "Your honor, Mr. O. is just trying to be a good dad. The move to California wasn't necessary, nor was it in the child's best interest. It was just her personal desire and she has no means to provide stability for the child. It would be best if her and her kids were court ordered to move back to Washington and to give J. at least fifty percent of L.'s residential time. Anything the child needs, he can give him. And anything he struggles with, he can help fix. J. has the right to know his son and that right needs to be protected by restraining her from living in California and keeping them here, close to the father."

The judge looked at me, “Alright Ms. Carter, you can go ahead and call your first witness.”

I called my mother to the stand to testify for what she observed over the past five years. Then I called a good friend of mine to the stand that had cared for the children on a weekly basis for the year prior and bonded substantially with L. She had also visited us in California and testified to his happiness, well-being, and our family dynamic.

“For my next witness, I ‘d like to call J. to the stand.” I watched him walk to the stand with a smirk on his face and a cocky bounce in his step. It was funny; being able to observe forms of communication I did not notice when I met him years ago. He felt challenged through direct confrontation and wanted to show me I wasn’t a threat to him. I believed he wanted me to feel the threat.

After he sat and swore to tell the truth, the judge motioned to begin questioning. I approached the bench and was jarred by the look on J.’s face. As I looked up at him he was already staring in my eyes. The corners of his lips were tense and pulled up into a sinister grin. His irises were bright with anticipation. He wanted me to question him. I didn’t know how to react. He looked pleased, smug, like he had the opportunity to do dysfunctional things to me with permission from the world. He was going to love every second of it. How do you deal with a moment when you realize the person in front of you is relishing the thought of a possibly emotional, direct confrontation? I thought it would be best to let this show; to let him say what I knew was in him. I needed him to show that the focus of his intent was not actually on our son.

“Isn’t it true that you have never met L?”

“Yes,” he answered, staring at me with that grin. I’d never seen him look at me like that before today. He loved it.

His biological connection mandated that we turn our lives upside down the moment he felt like filing a paper. He filled out a court document. Because of this, we had to stop our lives, fly across the country, and put ourselves through scrutiny. The ones who would suffer the most are the kids. J.’s rights seemed to be protected above everyone else’s.

“Isn’t it true that you voluntarily absented-”

“Objection your Honor, leading question!” his lawyer interrupted. I did not know at the time what they meant by a *leading question*. Aren’t they all leading somewhere intentional? Isn’t that how you make your point?

“Sustained,” said the judge, in a very mellow, slow tone. “Proceed Ms. Carter, I may give you leeway, even if it is leading.” I still didn’t know how not to break the rules.

“Did you voluntarily absent yourself from the first five and half years of your son’s life?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t it true that this isn’t the first biological child that you have voluntarily absented yourself from?”

“Yes.”

“You have a teenage daughter that you have also been estranged from, correct?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been allowed to send letters to L. for three months now. How many have you sent?”

He leaned over the stand, over me, and began pointing down at me.

“Two. You’re just bitter, you’re bitter about the past. You know you are.” He turned his head toward the microphone and spoke straight into it, “It’s pathetic.”

I had to disconnect myself from what he was saying. I let him talk. I chose not to listen.

“I have no more questions, your Honor.”

J.’s lawyer began cross-examination. “Can you talk about Ms. Carter’s maturity level?”

“Sure,” responded J. “She’s very immature. I wasn’t fully aware of just how bad she was back when we dated, but looking back on it now, I can see just how dysfunctional she is.”

“Can you give some examples of you’re experience with Ms. Carter as a mother?” asked his lawyer.

“Sure, one of the things that I’ve looked back on and realized was really irresponsible on her part was.” He shifted his body to face the judge.

“Well, you know, she had a daughter that I had really bonded with and that was bad parenting, the fact that she let me meet her kid. I took a parenting class and it says that you are supposed to keep dating separate from your kids. She shouldn’t have let me in her home and let me know her daughter. That was really irresponsible. And she’s promiscuous too. I think back, there we were having sex, with her daughter in the next room. I mean, who does that? It’s so gross, thinking back on it. She should have never done that.”

Maybe I should have objected. Maybe it was good that he talked like that. I felt like I was having a pelvic exam in front of everyone. It wasn't the fact that his details were graphic. It was that my sexual decisions were actually being discussed in court, entertained as relevant, and in front of the male judge. It was in front of the male opposing council, the female clerk and the woman recording the transcript. It was in the transcript. It was in front of my mother and my friend. It was so everyone could remember this as their own image. I felt like because the courtroom was letting this happen maybe the judge felt it was relevant, that he was going to be swayed by my decision to have sex with my daughter in the next room. This should have been cut off. I believed I was going to lose my son. I believed that if his father were to raise him, he would grow up hating women, resenting his sister and me. And he is so sweet right now. I've done everything possible these past six years to improve my family's economic stability and overall happiness. I had barely dated anyone. I never imagined being labeled as promiscuous and irresponsible. But there I was, answering for those allegations.

"Can you tell me about your own maturity level?" asked his lawyer.

"Sure," he responded. "I'm very mature. I've grown up a lot. I knew Chelsea when I was really in my party days. I was young and stupid."

He was thirty when we dated. I was twenty-three.

"I have no more questions, your honor," stated his lawyer.

"Well I do," asserted the judge.

He started asking his own questions. "Can you tell me about your history leading up to today?"

“Sure,” said J. “We met about six years ago and we only dated for three months. It had become pretty clear early on that we had some pretty strong differences in our religious beliefs. We broke up before finding out that she was pregnant.”

“And prior to your objection to her relocation, when was the last time you had seen her?”

“The night she told me she was pregnant.”

“So why now? Why have you decided that right now at this moment, you need her to stay in Washington State with your son?”

“Because of my convictions. I’ve had a change of heart. The timing of receiving her letter about moving was really just a gift from God. It couldn’t have happened at a better time. I changed my mind.”

“So why have you only sent two letters in the last three months?”

“Well, you know, I wanted to be cautious and she was being rude. I wanted to give space and be careful about it. I mean, I tried contacting my daughter recently and her mom slapped a restraining order on me. I got it thrown out later, but you can see why I’d be careful about sending letters. And she was putting up barriers, making it impossible for me. She was stopping me. She won’t write back to my text messages. She refuses to talk to me and when she does, she’s rude. See, look what she wrote to me when I asked her if my mom could write to him too.

‘L. has a lot to process and comprehend already. I strongly recommend that she wait a little while to give him time to adjust to so much new information and his feelings about it. Also, I would prefer to know the people wanting to know L., even if that is only

by telephone. This is not a definitive no, just a request to wait and give him time and for more open communication with me to begin.'

"See what I mean? She's rude. I mean, who says no to a grandma? She's just a kind old lady."

The judge asked him, "I don't understand, what is it that you feel is her responsibility?"

"She's supposed to be talking to him about me. She's supposed to be working with me. She should be answering my text messages and not making everything so difficult. She agreed to work with me in mediation. She agreed to answer my questions and they'll testify against her if they need to. Parenting classes say that she needs to be working with me. She is supposed to be writing back to me. She is expected to talk to me."

"I don't understand. What does she have to do with you writing to your son?" asked the judge.

"She was putting up barriers."

I remember when J. and I met. He seemed like a normal guy. We had things in common, seemed to get along well, and I was attracted to him. But I didn't know him. I was twenty-three and thought I was a good judge of character. It was over the course of weeks that I gradually realized his desire to have power over me. It was over the course of weeks that I learned he didn't view us as equals. The moment this was clear, we stopped seeing each other. And then several weeks later, I found out I was pregnant. Though we had stopped seeing each other, I hadn't yet seen him in his most extreme state. When I last saw him in 2007, I realized just how bad life would be with him.

“Don’t you think we should get back together?” He asked, in a panic about the pregnancy.

“I have no idea what I think right now. I don’t want to decide that.”

“What about those abortion pills? It might still be early enough and I’ve heard that it doesn’t hurt as bad. It may not even be a big deal.”

With all of his talk about religion, I couldn’t believe he was suggesting abortion.

“Look, I thought about it already and decided I can’t do that. I’m telling you I’m pregnant because I’ve already decided to keep it.”

He looked at me, clearly frustrated and replied, “Then we have to get back together. I’m not having a baby out of wedlock.”

“We stopped seeing each other because we are completely incompatible. How can the existence of a baby fix that? The stress will make everything worse.” I knew it was wrong for me to be with him. While he was talking, I pictured walking down the aisle, laughing at myself for doing something I knew would only last six months at the most. I knew I would leave him eventually and hate myself for consciously putting my kids through a divorce.

“You either get back together me with and we do this right, or you have an abortion. Those are your options.”

“No. I will make my own options.”

He scoffed, “How do I even know it’s mine. It’s probably not even mine. I want a paternity test. As a man, I’m entitled to that.”

NO SON OF MINE

No son
No son of mine
No son of mine
No son of mine
No SON of mine
No son
No son
No son
No
No
No
No mine
No mine
Mine
Mine
No son of mine
No son of mine
No son of mine
Mine
She's thirteen
No Son of mine
No son
No son mine
No son of mine
No son of mine
No mine
Mine
Mine
Mine
Mine
No son of mine
Will live without a father.

SOMEONE TOLD HER

Cross your legs

close your knees

wear a skirt

keep them closed

quality

quality

mother

life

with

man

Someone told her

quality

son

I want

play

with

dolls

Superior

to

mother

look

Good

Girls

keep them

closed

how

cute

son

Keep your legs crossed shut
My my my my

Guarantee

I want

Rights son better

My rights guarantee a much better quality of life

My superior

Don't leave the house without makeup don't show your makeup put

quality of life rights better quality

rights superior to mother

my

son son superior my

much

guarantee son quality

The best job never shows

Face better

Your face on

The
 Try to be special to be father
 Keep your legs crossed shut
 my my my my

A father can guarantee stability

Don't forget to

Put your face on

Unrealistic to ignore my better quality
 rights

Best kind never shows

Someone told her to she will always struggle

A father can guarantee

She wasn't built for this

guarantee son quality

Me

Someone told her to never let it show

She'll never make it A father can guarantee

She isn't strong

Enough

Don't forget

Put your face on

Unrealistic to ignore my

better quality

rights

guarantee

my

I have no interest in doing She should be ordered to I have no interest I have no she

She should

Close your knees she

you're not a man

I have no interest

For

For me to have to do is unrealistic

guarantee

son

quality

what

have to

do

Superior

to

to

mother

Ordered to I have no interest she should be ordered to I have no interest she should be ordered to be ordered to she ordered to she ordered to I no she ordered to she

Someone

told her

she should be

Ordered ordered
 He deserves Try to the rights be
 special
 Someone told her She was Cold cold
 The quality of life Father can guarantee superior to the mother Your burden mother
 Mother has never proven to be capable of safety well being denied
 My son Equal a father can Mother has never capable
 Spit her out she was spit out this world
 All of the married ones are
 Mother has never shown to build to be
 Mother has never proven
 She will always struggle Mother can't
 For me to have to is unrealistic she should for me to have to in unrealistic she should
 for to have to is unrealistic she should for me to have to is unrealistic she should
 I will be relieving of her burden
 Good Girls play with d son
 I Do pretty
 To be build
 Play with dolls, play with dolls, look how cute, she, play with dolls Good Girls keep them closed

My rights unrealistic to ignore my rights
 better quality
 She Need rights spit her out alive
 For me to have to do is unrealistic
 guarantee son quality
 Keep your legs crossed shut
 my my my my
 A father can guarantee stability
 Don't forget
 Ordered to I have no interest she should be ordered to I have no interest she
 should be ordered to be ordered to she ordered to she ordered to I no she ordered
 to she
 She's crazy she's crazy she's crazy Crazy she is going to hell
 with
 man
 Someone told her to me Don't forget
 Someone told her to never let it show
 To Build To be Son
 Never equal never
 Someone told her she can't she can't she can't
 His rights my rights
 A man told her it was easy a rich man told her
 Spit her out she was spit out this world
 Mother has never shown
 Mother has never proven
 Mother has never proven to be capable of safety well being denied
 Equal
 Mother has never capable
 Mother can't
 Easy
 Heartless coldhearted
 She can't
 quality of life superior to the mother
 mother
 life with
 She isn't built for this She'll never make it
 Someone told her She isn't strong
 Enough

Heartless

She isn't built for this
enough

She'll never make it

She isn't strong

I will be relieving her of her burden

Someone told her

The Best kind never
shows

her

Try to be special

Need a spit her out alive

Someone told her she can't she can't she can't
she can't

A man told her it was easy A man told her it
was easy

Heartless coldhearted she
can't

Cross your legs, close your knees, wear a shirt keep your legs closed **burden**

She was just she was just

She can't prove

A man

to be someone

You

Are

Not

A

Man

Someone told her to be something

Someone told her to be

Someone told her

Someone told her to be something different

SEPARATION

We're sitting at a round white plastic patio table at the top of a green hill. It's bright outside and we're under a white umbrella. There are three others across from me: one man, one woman, and one adolescent boy. I'm on one side of the table, and they're together on the other. The man has brown hair and light skin. The woman has dark hair and olive toned skin. The boy is light, like me. They look at each other. The man speaks to them. I can't hear his words. The woman and child nod their heads at him and respond. I'm watching their mouths move but can't hear a word. There is no noise, from them or our surroundings. Their faces smirk as they look back at me between their exchanges. I feel their stares and it's clear I'm not one of them.

They see me as an outsider. I'm not sure why. They continue, grinning and never talking to me. They always have one eye on me. It doesn't feel safe with them but it doesn't seem like they want me to know this. I stand up, as subtly as possible, to not raise suspicion. I slowly back away from the table until I have enough distance to turn and run without them grabbing me. I see in their faces that they know I know. I spin around and take off.

The grass is short and bright. The individual blades are too distant to see with the naked eye. The color is almost neon. I can't bring myself to look back. I feel them close behind me. I run down the hill.

I run faster than my legs should be able to move. I don't feel them moving. My lungs aren't struggling. I'm not even breathing. My body feels nothing but danger behind me. Nothing feels real but my fear.

I reach the bottom of the hill. Plunging my feet into the ground harder with every step, I gain momentum and start up the next. Looking ahead, I see a tree at the top. This tree is different.

This tree has only bright green leaves on it, no flowers. I can see through it, but I can't see the division from one leaf to the next. The closer I get, the clearer it becomes. There is someone in the tree.

My body loses the control of my feet, or the speed, or the run altogether, and the tree is approaching me faster than physically possible. The person in the tree has bright blonde hair and is facing away. They aren't sitting on a branch, or climbing. They are hanging, and still.

I step under the massive tree and can see the person, a girl, more clearly. She is hanging from a rope tied tightly around her neck. The only pigment left in her face is bruising and blood. Her head is drooping slightly in front of her body.

I look directly at the girl's face. I can finally make out who she is. Her eyes flash open. She turns her head, making direct eye contact with me, and whispers, "Chelsea."

SECOND WAVE

Nov 1, 2007

“You will always think you're independent through pride, while you still rely on others, ungratefully, until you submit to God and the truth. You still don't know what it means to be in "Submission" "reverence" "respect" and "loyalty" to God. You hate the word submission I know. I pray you learn someday and know that not everyone who warns you or tries to teach you something new is out to attack you but to lift you up to a whole new level.

I'm not going to hell for you so I'm parting from ever knowing you, not because I "hate you or think bad of you" but because you refused to open your heart to receive. I pray for your children for they are lost without God and I pray you find the truth, not the religious crap you desire in your heart to entertain.

I've gone to God about this and this is my decision. I have no ties to you, child or no child because you refused me. I have a responsibility to stay with you unless you make the decision to leave, and you made that decision, and the WORD of GOD is clear that I am free to go because you left!”

Dec 11, 2013

MOTHER/DAUGHTER

There were three of us working together in that trial. It was a time when my mother, my good friend and I all dropped everything and focused on what was best for L. It was as if nothing else mattered. My mother had testified earlier in the trial. The opposing council asked her, “Isn’t it possible that Ms. Carter has moved everyone for nothing? I mean, she hasn’t actually been accepted into a PhD program yet and she is still presently employed in Washington State. Isn’t it possible that she will not be accepted into a university and she could fail financially, creating an unstable environment for the kids?”

My mother laughed and said, “You clearly don’t know Chelsea. Once she decides she’s going to do something, it happens.”

I had never witnessed her say anything with this magnitude of confidence in me before. I sat there watching her defend me, my decisions; doing everything she could to help me protect L.

The lawyer smiled his condescending smile. “Oh, of course.”

It was frustrating that my stability was such a focus, when L. always had stability with me, and I wasn’t the one who left. The fact that I was a single mom was used as a major weakness. This might not have happened if I were married at the time of the relocation.

My mother was married while my brothers and I were the same age as my kids. There were times when our family was unstable. And yet, no one threatened our home

lives. No one attempted to save us from our situation or even help. I remember when I started passing out from not eating enough food. I was my son's age. There were times when we needed help. It seems that as long as a husband is present, no one questions a family's decisions. No one questions a mother's decisions. It wasn't until my parents divorced that I watched my mother lose power.

After the trial, my mother told me about her struggle advocating for us. When I was young, I had visitation with my father after their divorce. She told me that I would fall apart, cry before visits, ask not to go. She was afraid for me. She called a lawyer to find out what she could do. He told her that she could not do anything. Deviating from the parenting plan would put her in contempt. She had to wait for proof that there was anything unsafe or corrupt happening. A lot of times, in these situations, it is too late.

A good friend of mine that I met during the hardest point of my financial hardship is still struggling to dig her way out of her family's adversity. She has a restraining order on her daughter's father that only protects her, not her daughter. Her restraining order has been issued because he repeatedly abused and raped her. Her daughter also falls apart before visits, asks to not have to go. My friend has been in court every time a new piece of evidence presents itself, for the last four years. The court system has increased the amount of time the father spends with the child, while the mother is portrayed as spiteful. The different pieces of evidence that she has presented to the court have been swept away, one at a time. The only thing left for the court to believe is that she simply does not want the father to have what he wants. But this same court system felt it necessary to issue her a thirty-year restraining order for protection from him. The contradictions we have observed, going from judge to judge, has been unbelievable. The injustice I've

watched her family endure for years was an underlying fear that I tried unsuccessfully to block out of my thoughts during my own trial.

“Why did she choose to move now?”

“Her work depends greatly on networking. She can’t do that from here.”

“Isn’t it possible that she would need less resources if she were to move back here? To clarify, she isn’t paying rent, is she?”

My mother’s face switched from professional to disgust. “I have no idea how much she pays for rent. But what I do know is that she makes sure the kids have what they need, and she always has. The kids have been happier since they moved. That’s something I have witnessed.”

“I see. How have you actually witnessed this? Since they moved so far away from you.”

“My husband and I visit regularly, talk on the phone and skype every week.”

“Isn’t it possible that her graduate program could more easily help her get a job here?”

“I have no idea. But I know that she works a lot with media and the Ph.D. program that she wants is in Los Angeles.”

It was ridiculous. We were there for L. because his father wanted to mandate that we live in Washington to accommodate, what I believe to be, his need for control. It sounded like L. was not a part of it. My mother was there, on the stand, testifying on L.’s behalf. They were not focusing on him or how he might be affected by any of this. After I objected, she went and sat to observe the rest of the trial.

Hours later, she was still watching from the benches in the courtroom, her eyes red from exhaustion. The night before, we received his declaration and stayed up late figuring out if a new approach was necessary. He wrote in his declaration to the judge that I was violent, promiscuous, short tempered, financially incapable, incapable of creating a safe environment for children, and irresponsible. He wrote that for me to think about my career and academic advancement opportunities in California was choosing to neglect my children. He stated that the move was fulfilling a self-centered desire, not what was best for the children. He declared that I needed to stay so that he could save the day by being the father he never wanted to be before. In our hearing this past September, he attempted to get custody of my son and sole decision-making authority, while never having met him. My mother was watching then too, in support of me, as they tore apart the perception of my capabilities as a parent with allegations against my character.

When J. was on the stand, describing our sexual interactions six years prior, I watched his eyes shift. He scanned my mother, and back to me, then back to my mother. He grinned slightly as he described the situation and the setting. He was trying to divide us, to disgust my mother and weaken the support she gave me. He tried to isolate me, to turn my allies into his. She didn't budge.

There were times when I did not think she would have stayed by me. We have had many years of not seeing eye-to-eye on morals and beliefs. But for the well-being of L., and the well-being of my family, at this trial she helped from start to finish. She could not imagine all of the work I had done to improve our situation taken away, for our lives to become dictated by someone who had been absent for five years. For a long time she did not believe I could accomplish so much.

I remember when change felt impossible, when everything felt impossible, when I was overwhelmed with two very young kids. I had no education, and only military experience. She told me that she had always wanted to move back to Alaska. She told me that the opportunity to go back never happened and now her life is here, though she still missed Anchorage and Wasilla. My family moved to Renton, Washington when I was three. It was supposed to be temporary. My mother ended up divorced with three kids. Two and a half years later she remarried, setting herself even deeper into Washington soils.

I imagine feeling stuck for twenty-seven years in one place, like her. I always wondered why she didn't just go. I know nothing is that simple. But I also know that you can make things simple, once you choose to make something happen. Now she has a wonderful job in Washington. She wouldn't give that up. That I understand.

I have several things working against me right now. I am a single mom, and my son's father expressed this is something that deems me incapable. I am also not a lawyer. I am a woman, and I have a low income. And here is the irony in all of this: I wouldn't be a single mom had he stuck around to help raise L. Our household income wouldn't be so low had he helped financially with child support and daycare expenses. I am not a lawyer, and I wouldn't need one, had he risen to the occasion of an unplanned pregnancy and taken responsibility for his actions.

In court, it was essential that I only show the parts of my character that encompass a devoted and loving mother. Career Oriented is not permitted. Chasing dreams would be the end of my family. My character and ability as a parent was the

irrelevant focus of the courtroom. Everything positive that was actually true was not permitted in the discussion. It was as if the room only wanted to know I might fail.

When my first child was born, when I was twenty, I did not have the chance to figure out who exactly I was or what I wanted out of life. I believe the desire to have children is, to an extent, culturally imposed. I forgot to think about it first. But since both of my children were conceived unintentionally, it would not have benefitted my relationship with them to consider the possibility of not actually wanting to be a mother. And while these words are crossing the page, I am aware of the judgment that might occur. But I cannot be a present parent without taking the time to figure out who I am, what I provide, or what I contribute to my children. I love my kids as much as any parent loves their kids, not because I am their mom, but because they are magnificent individuals. As I have developed as a parent, my intention has been rooted in being an example of developing whatever it is you want to become as an adult, no matter what challenges you are faced with. I just hope they absorb this and grow into who and what they want.

Sometimes the role of a mother could be a form of oppression within itself, binding a person's life and identity to others and required tasks, never allowing her to teach the way she would teach and love the way she would love. It takes the voice and power away from the mother and shifts her to the role of a provider, not an individual person, no longer unique.

Personal and professional growth and development can be one of the biggest contributions a parent makes to their children. It shows them that they can do it too. It teaches them to aim high for their selves and to work one step at a time until their goal is

met. It teaches them that they can be in control of their futures and of their happiness. It teaches them that they can create a life that allows them to be who they are and live how they want to live. And it teaches them that this is important and they are important as unique individuals, not because they are boys or girls. They can contribute to society by using their intellect and creativity; not by playing a gender role or conforming to socially imposed demands that limit potential.

LEAVING

I've come to my decision today.

Because of you

I'm not gonna be there.

It's your problem

not mine

Each word was

remember that.

pain

I don't take kindly
to Jezebels.

*He just can't see no in-between
He's crushing my knuckles*

That's my God given right.

and splitting my skin

I know more about certain issues
than the average person,
but you don't know how to
spiritually or mentally

*Sometimes I'm tempted
To give up
But I won't back down*

admit your own faults.

You refuse to drop
your self righteous guard.

*I shout, "I want to get away
from you as fast as I can,"*

You're such a liar!

hoping you'd understand.

So you can think in your head
you have control over me now

*Now I'm bound by the life you left behind.
My dreams just disappeared
I'm stuck
No turning back*

It's evident in the words you say.

You're disloyal

You don't own me

having a child

I'm not going to hell for you

your dishonorable ways

but you can go if you like

*He says, "You want to fly, you want to fall."
I wanted that thing
Like some other men do*

Your blood is not on my hands

*You're just gonna stand there
and watch me burn*

there is no guilt

I'm striving
I'm worthy everyday
in Gods eyes

*You're so fucking special
I wish I were special*

Be a follower
towards me

I should not
Follow you.

*Holy water
Cannot help me now*

I was born to lead a family
not be led by my wife.

I heard

Get that through your thick skull.

Church bells ringing

Go read the bible
and find out
how to respect
the man you are with!

Fool that I am

*What the hell am I doing here?
I don't belong here.*

Trapping someone like this
you say you are pregnant.
I will not take responsibility
having a child out of wedlock

*It's the same old theme
since nineteen sixteen*

you resist my experience
and leadership role

It's in your head

you never took the time
to understand or

*There's just too much that
Time cannot erase*

respect.

You have a lot of
respect to work on.

I would rather go blind

You're so damn ungrateful
it makes me sick!

I wish that you would just

I'm not going to be there for you
you should be trying to work it out
for your soul's sake.

I don't care if it hurts

Just stop haunting me

*Your face it haunts
My once pleasant dreams
Don't you see?*

You, dictating Jezebel.

It's not me

I want nothing to do with you
ever again!

I'm not a pretty girl

you're just as guilty as me
seeing you might have a child.

You got this pride
that is so anti God

I do not feel ashamed

I do not need to be saved

That is the biggest lie
Try not letting the devil convince you

I am attacking you.

Are you really crazy
or just crazy?

*You think I'm crazy
Maybe I'm crazy
Your voice chased away
All the sanity in me*

A woman who won't
allow a man to be a man.
You can't seem to be with a man
who doesn't allow you
to take charge

I pray in the name
of Jesus Christ
you confess your sins
your own faults

*Your rule of thumb
Makes me worrisome
And who will save your soul*

You hate the word submission
I know.

If that child is mine
You have to take responsibility
not me.

I used to think it was me

I will not be there. Ever!

*Now I see
it wasn't*

You will have to do it
all on your own
because the day that spirit of pride
entered your life.

*I am not a maiden fair
Something's got ahold of me
And turned me to gold*

I'm not going to hell for you
I'm parting from ever knowing you
I went to God about this
and this is my decision.

I have no ties to you,
child or no child
you refused me

Hush little baby

Don't say a word

the WORD of GOD is clear

You will be loved

that I am free to leave!

Goodbye!

By someone good

Please don't cry

SWITCH

The air is still. It is cool and yet there is no breeze. There isn't a bird in the sky. All of the grass is dead and the trees are bare. There is no cloud in sight and no radiance from sun, nor a hue from any ocean. The earth is gray and dull. I feel the grit from the dirt under my toes.

The ground begins to give way. The grains stir, wrapping around my toes and pulling my feet. Next, my ankles, my calves and then my knees. I run my fingers through the dirt as my hips begin to sink. In this earth, there is warmth that can't be found in the air above. My ribs, then my shoulders fall below the surface. Next my neck, then chin succumb to the pull. My chest and abdomen are compacted; I struggle and take my last breath.

My body is still, while my hands are the last to be pulled under. I convulse, deprived of air, though the ground keeps me still. The granules surrounding me continue to twist and stir, pulling me further below the surface. I lose consciousness.

My skin and muscles begin to sting and there is a muffled ringing in my ears. I slowly open my eyes and the sun is brighter than I can remember. I feel the live grass underneath my body pressing against the skin of my arms and legs. There is a calm breeze across my face. My body composes and I slowly stand. I see a pond a few yards away. As I approach it, hundreds of white and lavender water willows appear, surrounding the edges. I wade into the water.

A tree emerges from the center of the pond. I walk slowly toward it, collecting the water willows on my way. The water is warm, comfortable, and only waist deep. Approaching the tree slowly, the texture of the bark refines, the greenish brown color is

solid. I touch it. It is smooth and sturdy. I look up and the branches are gone. The leaves are gone and the sunlight is gone. I look down at my hands and the flowers are gone. The water disappears and my legs are dry.

The tree reaches several stories high. Looking straight up, I see it is a brightly lit street lamp. All around me are apartment buildings and avenues. This neighborhood is familiar. There is a red door a few buildings down with its porch light on in front of cement entryway. I walk up three steps and open the door. Inside is a well-lit apartment. I step inside and look around. The room smells like cinnamon and nutmeg. I have been here before.

I walk into the kitchen and see a woman. She has long brown hair and is wearing slippers while she bakes. The woman turns around when she hears my footsteps. In her slippers, she smiles. Her face looks so familiar. I walk into the living room. There is a couch with purple, lavender and yellow floral print with plastic covering. I sit on the couch, lie back and take the mustard-yellow throw folded neatly across the arm, spreading it across my legs. I rest my head on the only cushion not covered in plastic. I see the floral pattern close enough to distinguish the flowers. It is covered in water willows embroidered into the fabric. I fall asleep on that couch, my skin, sticking to the plastic.

When I wake, I am sitting at the dining room table with my head resting on my arms. There is no one around. The woman I had seen earlier is gone. The kitchen has teal linoleum flooring that is comfortable and bright. I hadn't noticed it before. The table is round, wood, painted white and lined in chrome plating.

I walk over to the counter and see the bowl of unmixed flour and spices where the woman was working. The ingredients are in the bowl and the wooden spoon is on the counter next to it. I pick up the spoon and begin to stir.

I hear footsteps behind me, so I turn around. It is my daughter. She has dirt on her shoes, tracking it across the floor, her brown hair up, just like mine. She smiles and I watch her walk past me, through the kitchen, through the living room, and out the back door. The screen door smacks shut as she runs down the back steps. I continue mixing the dough in the bowl in front of me. I pull out the baking sheet; line it with Crisco, and separate spoon-sized drops onto the tray. The smell fills the apartment as the cookies bake. After fifteen minutes, I take them out of the oven, place them on the cooling rack, and repeat the process.

I finish baking and collect several cookies onto a plate and head outside through the back porch. There isn't anyone around. I stand there, in the backyard with the apartment building behind me and there isn't anything live around me. The air is still. It is cool and yet there is no breeze. There isn't a bird in the sky. All of the grass is dead and the trees are bare. There is no cloud in sight and no radiance from sun, nor a hue from any ocean. The earth is gray and dull.

THIRD WAVE

Nov 2, 2007

“I just don’t understand how someone’s heart can be so hardened to that truth. I tried to help you and I did, and now that you’ve gained some strength and support from me, you try and tear me down? Are you really crazy or just crazy? lol (kidding). I can’t be with a woman who won’t allow a man to be a man and bold at times. And you can’t seem to be with a man who doesn’t allow you to take charge and boss around. I’m long gone Chelsea.

And are you aware if you really are pregnant and that child is mine, and I did decide to be a part of that child’s life, they will hear the truth from me and everything there is to know about God. The things you don’t agree with will be taught because I know it’s the truth and you’ll have to come to terms with it. And the older they get, the more truth they will receive and begin to understand that all the things you said wasn’t worth standing for, is actually everything that shows whether or not you really desire the truth and desire to have a relationship with God. So you see, a child’s eternal future is prepared by the parent and if you care enough, you’ll teach them what is right and if you don’t know what is right, you’ll find out! You have to take responsibility, not me. I will not be there, ever! You will have to do it all on your own because you chose to do it all on your own, from day one, since the day you decided to prove to the world that you were stronger than everyone, was the day that spirit of pride entered your life.”

Dec 11, 2013

ME

“I don’t want my son raised by the daycare systems,” he said. But he was too late. L. was older and already in school. “She has failed to provide a safe environment for my son. Los Angeles has high crime rates and is a cesspool for pollution. I want full decision making authority, including religious and educational upbringing.” One thing the courtroom didn’t know was J.’s religious and educational upbringing. He had only completed a GED and had used his belief in God as a means to justify abandoning not one, but two, biological children. He doesn’t hold himself accountable for his actions. I remember opening up my email on November 2, 2007. It was two days after telling J. I was pregnant. There was an email from him. I opened and began to read. It was four and a half single spaced pages of him going off on me, declaring that he would not be a part of the baby’s life.

The Judge asked me to read the email. It was the last time I had received any communication from him prior to his objection to our relocation in September of 2013. He asked me to raise my right hand and swear that everything I said was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

“What is the date on this email?”

“November 2, 2007.”

“Go ahead and read it.”

I started reading. I realized that if I were to get through the emotional aspect of reading that letter out loud to everyone in the room, I had to block out the words, meaning, and memory of it. I had to block out the emotions I felt the first time I read

them, sitting in front of my computer, five weeks pregnant with my son. I had to block out the memory of closing my email, going to class, failing a mid-term, and continuing life without him. I read the letter to the courtroom, without listening. The words were finally out of my memory and into everyone else's. He couldn't pretend anymore.

Sometimes when a person holds the cruel or painful words spoken to them inside for long periods of time, they become who they are. I held this in for six years. I had these words running through my mind every time someone treated me like a promiscuous tramp for raising two kids unmarried. I thought of this email every time someone asked me where his father was, every Father's Day and every holiday. Every one of L.'s birthdays, I thought of these words. I thought of these words and how they led me to deliver my son with only a friend of mine at the hospital helping me through the labor. This was a memory and pivotal moment I've had to carry with me every single day for the last six years.

"She's an irresponsible parent," J. told the courtroom. This was based on allegations of my promiscuity. I didn't feel that it was necessary or relevant to address the accusation. Whether or not I liked sex, and engaged in that activity with whomever I chose held no bearing on my abilities as a parent. Sex does not define a person as irresponsible. It was my legal right to sleep with whomever I wished. But a courtroom was not the place to take this stance, since it had nothing to do with my son's absent relationship with his father. Since the beginning of time, men have used the degradation of a woman's character to win their case. Since the story of Adam and Eve, women have been treated as incapable vessels with weak ethics and values.

“Your Honor, I’d like to have the letter dismissed as hearsay,” stated the opposing council.

“Do you have proof that he did not write these words?”

“No, your Honor.”

“Well then, I will have to deny your request for dismissal. This document will remain in the record as evidence. You can proceed with your questions.”

“Isn’t it true that you refused to give him any pictures?” the lawyer asked me.

A week before this trial, J. sent me a text message asking for pictures. I didn’t reply.

“Those pictures are mine. I took them while raising L. and they’re pictures of our memories. If he wants pictures, he can go through the steps to develop a relationship and take some on his own.”

“That didn’t answer my question. Isn’t true that you refused to send pictures?”

“Yes.” I was more afraid of J. knowing what L. looked like than I was trying to be spiteful.

“Are you prepared to make drastic changes if required by the court?” I stared at the lawyer for several minutes.

“Healthy changes?” I finally asked.

“Oh, of course,” he stated with a disgusting fake sweet facial expression. The kind of facial expression a perfect stranger gives you on the side of the road while trying to convince you to get in their car to give you the ride you didn’t ask for.

“Sure.”

What I wanted to say was, *You mean like I've been doing since the day I found out I was pregnant? You mean make drastic changes like every parent makes starting from day one, putting their child's needs before their own? Sure, because drastic changes for kids is all that I do. That is what I did when I moved to California in the first place. That is what I did when I left the Marine Corps in the first place. All of what I do is for them.*

"Isn't it true that when J. requested a paternity test you replied, 'I should break your nose'?"

"No."

"She's lying," scoffed J. from his chair. I ignored him and listened for the next question.

"Would you like me to expand on what did happen that night?" I asked the lawyer.

"No thank you."

I've been portrayed as violent. Did I ever tell him I would break his nose, ever? Yes, I did. But not in the way that he alleged. We were sitting inside the mall food court. He was screaming at me after we had argued about the fact that I was pregnant and wouldn't get back together with him. He had already told me that if I wasn't going to marry him, I had to have an abortion. He said he wasn't willing to have a baby out of "wedlock." Apparently, ejaculating into my vagina wasn't enough information for him to have a baby out of wedlock, though it was if I agreed to marry him.

"Fine," I said. "But you know it's yours," referring to the exact night of conception that he and I both remembered very well while he grinned at me.

Then the yelling began. I got up and tried to walk away. He got in front of me, grabbed me by my shoulders, blocked me from leaving and told me I couldn't go. I threatened to break his nose. I stated very clearly, "Get out of my way or I will break your nose." This was very different than what the lawyer had asked about. Violence and self-defense are different things. I felt threatened by the fact that he was physically restraining me from leaving. I warned him. I didn't assault him.

I remember when I was in the Marine Corps, right after my daughter was born. A marine pinned me down and proceeded to shove his hand between my legs. I screamed for help while other marines ignored what he was doing, men that were only feet away. One marine knelt down to my face and looked straight into my eyes, "I don't see anything." When the assaulting marine was done, he let me go.

I got up as fast as I could, grabbed him by the neck, yanked him into a headlock and proceeded to punch him in the side of his head. Then, for some stupid reason I cannot figure out, I let him go. We proceeded to yell at each other, and I was, of course, a "Bitch" and a "Slut." Then the words that made me snap came out of his mouth. He looked around and saw all of the other marines watching. He looked up and down my body with disgust and said, "Are you kidding me? I would never touch that." He had the same grin J. had when he told me, "as a man" he was "entitled." I punched him straight in the eye. His arm pulled back and I dodged his hits. He was slow. Out of frustration he shoved me and knocked me down. \After all of this, the other marines jumped in and separated us.

The next day I was on the phone and told my mother a censored version of it. She lived in Washington, and I was stationed on Camp Pendleton in California.

“Chelsea! Are you crazy? You should never have hit him. Don’t you understand that they could take K. away from you for that?” Her voice was tense with panic and fury. It is the working-poor class that fears losing their children to authority figures as a daily part of life. I have yet to show this inequality. I thought of my daughter before hitting that marine. It was the final thought that pushed me to do it. If I didn’t defend and protect myself, I couldn’t teach her to defend and protect herself.

I remember when I was considering joining the Marine Corps. I grew up with brothers and I often felt inadequate in my parents’ perception of value. I remember thinking that I wanted to look back on my life and believe that I was an example of what I taught. I hoped that if I ever had a daughter, I would be a role model showing that she could do whatever she set her mind to, no matter who might say she can’t. So I joined the most masculine branch of the military.

I remember sexism being taught during training. The female drill instructors yelled in our faces about how we had to be three times as good as the men, and even then, we still wouldn’t be eye level. I remember meeting my recruiter for the first time. It was by chance. He was recruiting a guy I went to school with. I remember my brother telling me that he saw me in the recruits he went to boot camp with and he thought I might really like it.

I approached the recruiter. “Are there women in the Marine Corps?”

“Not very many. But yes, there are.” He seemed as apprehensive about talking to me as I did him. “Are you interested?”

“Maybe.” I said, smoking my cigarette like I wasn’t afraid of the campus police officer. I was seventeen.

I met up with him later that week and we found out together that only 4.8 percent of the Marine Corps were women. I was the first female to begin the enlistment process in that recruiting office. I didn't count towards his quota.

I remember checking in at my first duty station. I was briefed right away on the reputation of female marines claiming and reporting sexual assault the moment they arrived. I was warned not to. The ones that didn't speak up watched the ones that did lose their careers, and often worse. Reporting sexual assault or sexual harassment was viewed as what slutty, vindictive or scandalous women did. The assault wasn't viewed as the problem. Reporting it was.

When I warned J. to let me go, out of context, the words I used became an example of something I did wrong. Restraining me from leaving wasn't even mentioned.

SHE

We dated for a short period of time.

She refused me.

She moved on.

She was inaccurate.

She told me she was pregnant.

She was disloyal.

She contradicted.

She had no knowledge.

She had different moral beliefs.

She is unreasonable.

She is resistant.

She is not proper.

She is trying to make me look bad.

She makes false statements.

She is smothering.

She is rude.

She should be ordered to assist more.

She is selfish.

She did not respond.

She was expected to talk.

She uses tactics to make things difficult.

She is untrustworthy.

She is not willing to do her part.

She is impossible.

She acts as if she doesn't have to take any responsibility.

She is not willing to help me.

She is immature.

She was unwilling to work out.

She denied a relationship.

She should help encourage.

She didn't want me.

She is not perfect

She was pregnant.

She is in denial.

She is financially incapable.

She should not be allowed.

SERVICE

MMODRYDENMTINADRYEDENPRIESTMORGANPRIESTMMSTACYMTINAMCBETHJ
 OHNSON RRGAMSTATINACYDRYDENLAVENNEEMCMC MMTINAJOHNSONORGA
 OOORGANOOORRAANDSTACYNN SETMERIABRONBROWN SEEMCBMCMMMMTIN
 MM MC MPRIEST MTIN A MORG RR MORG GGANAN TIB MCLAVENAMYTIRADOR
 MCBETH MORGANNE MCBETH WM RO NGAMYM MWMPRIEST WM LA VEN A JOHN
 SON SETJOHNSETMM WM JOHM AMYLAVENA WMSET ER I ASTACY TINBROWNM
 MORG E RSR GG A NJOHNBSETER MCIABRWMCBETH MORGANNE MCBETH W
 M RO NGT IN A SO ME THING WM WR O NG PRIEST TINA MMMORG
 MORG ANMM M WRONG MWM M M MAMY TIR A DOROOO OOO
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 MM M M MOOO OOO RR RR GGA AAN NN NEE MC
 MC MMM MM MC M M O RR GG A N B MC MCBETH MORG
 ANNE MCBETH TIN WM BROWN WM STAC WM SET WMW RO NG WMWM LAV
 SO ME THING WRONG

Her called home
 Walking W telling M Mattress
 they said
 days later
 M16 Barrel to her heart they said
 they said WM they
 said investigators
 WM friendly wrestle
 pulled led the trigger her match
 with her toe they said she
 body slammed on concrete victim restricted
 They not charged military changed explanation
 M16 to her mouth shot herself in a burning tent
 Could not straight story
 Changed Changed I was invited
 On guard shot herself back of the head
 found deceased W M in a port
 able latrine
 porta potties W rape-traps I was invited
 cute boy can't talk
 bruises

sent out to the

field for the

first time

The only woman W

and 1500 men M

all thrusting

Could be twenty

Could be a hundred

All Ranks

All sizes

All ages

women

Iraq

laughter

fellow soldiers

pain

in and

out

consciousness

tearing

her

her
 always
 smiling barrel never
 Suicide
 “accidentally stabbed herself” changed story
 changed story all ages likely murder
 Suicide likely murder to
 Suicide likely a murder not charged and
 male free likely murder her and
 free
 sailor free likely murder never
 Male free
 Suicides accidental R Murders never talk

try to report Commanding Officer commanding
 Officer commanding Just shut up
 platoon sergeant friend Pre dators k now they can get a away with it.
 You 're no no no thing but a nothing no thing but a private

you want me to

com man

ruin the career

com man

of this guy who

wants to

Com mand

Maketh the military

his life his life his life his life his life his life his life?

Just sh shut up Tied up
 gag in mouth
 voices You're new new new meat them
 good friend someone on me me me on
 me wet bet between I was told
 not to talk
 self
 laughter the legs

another body

on me tears

another body

Just shut up

Victim

confusion

You are

going to be dead

another body

tomorrow

tears

Rap

ing you

just the

cost cost cos

of war

We'll chalk up your murder your

unsafe murder to unsafe un un un un un safe safe

fr ee secur

security

Case closed.

Medic me
 not reported It's like a joke they
 know they get away at door
 Commanding Officer Officer cer cer
 stern stern words MY military
 My military my behavior my told me if I talked if if
 if I I I I I I talked if I talked MY fault
 My fault
 prison prise son son son for "enticing"
 enticing It's like a joke Warned again If you talk warned
 you talk you talk you talk you die you die you die or
 worse came up with a rap song
 "I.A.M. STRONG." You need to... intervene! Motivate! Act!... Turnin' the
 strong other cheek I is a I is a thing of the past! Past
 still still still happening
 It's like a joke
 rap song it's
 a joke joke the joke

commanding officer of the r a un

unpunished un named other

continue contact contact continued all

sweating lots of pain smell of boo ooze s me all of tobacco

smell of sweat smell of sex

all groping

no help none no one no one no one to h h h h h hh hhhh he he

he he he he help no one to help

waking 1979 naked in the shower bruises and blood

everywhere scrub scrub put on uniform watching

talk they said never talk

goes free

It's like a joke

it's a joke

Got away with it Gulf Wa ra lone re
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Turnin' the cheek is a thing of the past 2008 they said never talk

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Likely murder

Never Talk

TAKEN

The smoke is thick and the room is dark. I'm feeling my way forward through the haze but I can't see my hands in front of me. Everything was burned and there are layers of shrapnel, ash and wreckage, scattered in front of me as I move my feet across the ground. I feel the steel beams; still hot from the fire that had consumed the building that was our home. The walkways that once led us from room to room are no longer here. There is light peeking through barriers of charred debris. There are steel bars, burned furniture, and unrecognizable materials blocking any clear path into the light. I run my hands along the wall of the room to find my way. The wood isn't smooth, like it used to be.

It has been at least a day since the bombs first began to drop. All of the women in the house attempted to hide in the underground shelter. Some made it, some didn't. While the hours passed and we listened to our home collapsing above us, we took stock of who was missing. We've lived here for a very long time and while our house sits in the center of a dip surrounded by hills and valleys, we've all been well aware of the need for protection. We hoped that we would never be found. There were forty-three of us living here. The last three that joined were a twenty-four-year-old mother and her two kids. We were just starting to get to know her. We had all reached points in our lives of irreversible subjugation, the longer we lived, the lower and smaller we became. And then we came here.

The house, the home we all joined was four stories high. Each floor was a rectangular structure with rooms that all faced inward. There were walkways and

railings that lined the internal perimeter of each story, leading to its black steel spiral staircase. The stairs all twisted down to the ground floor, which was a huge living room and kitchen. It was a beautiful house with old thick red carpet and wallpaper that had been there for years. It had been reinforced with steel rods when it was converted from a late nineteenth century brothel to a home for many families. Now, it's too damaged to repair.

I can hear the man responsible for the assault behind me, following me. He's wearing a black tuxedo and his hair is dark. It never moves. He walks smoothly without knocking into anything on the ground. Nothing blocks, delays, or derails him.

I continue as swiftly as possible, touching the wall, moving toward the faint light that is emerging from around the corner. There is a blackened green couch and an old television six feet away. The newest woman and I were just sitting there, listening to Duke Ellington's album *In A Magenta Haze*; the one record I hadn't yet distorted, before we heard the mortars. Replaying *Diminuendo In Blue*, she was telling me about her prior life, and then we heard them. Now, the living room is covered in ash, still hot from the flames that recently ceased.

I hear running and distant screaming, familiar voices, frantic and scared. Around the corner, I see the kitchen door that leads out to the valley surrounding the building. I run, jumping over broken chairs and charred walls. Stepping outside, the grass is dark green with no flowers or trees. Only steep hills that lead toward the blue, clean sky. The hills reach far above the height of where the shingled roof used to stand. The smoke, still trailing from the house is leading straight up in a never-

ending stream, never gathering or spreading into the clear sky, leaving no trace of pollution or contamination in the atmosphere.

The women are running across the hills. I take off sprinting, to get as close to them and as far from him as possible. The man in the tuxedo follows me outside. He is in the light and all of the women are screaming louder and running faster. He races over to the closest body, reaches his hand out and grabs the base of her neck. It looks like he barely touched her. Her body drops, lifeless. She was younger than me. Her hair is brown like mine and her clothes are frayed and damaged. She doesn't move. I thought he barely touched her.

He runs to the next closest woman, grabs her, and she drops. Dead. The girl next to me and I watch, frozen. He continues, taking one after another. All he has to do is touch them and they die. Their bodies just drop.

I grab her arm and run straight for the hill behind the house. The hill is so steep we're on our hands and knees, climbing next to each other. Our limbs sink through the grass, into the mud. I turn to my right to see her. She is covered in soot and because I know her, I know her hair was blonde but now it's badly burnt. Her tears clear a streak through the ash on her face. I see him through the corner of my eye. He's close. He reaches toward her shoulder, lays his hand on her, and her body collapses. I feel a grip on my shoulder.

My eyes open. The air around us is different, stagnant, and I can't smell anything. I see the girl next to me. Her eyes are open and her body is limp. The only sign of life in her is the concentration of burst blood vessels surrounding her irises and her plastered smile. She's looking at me, but she's dead. I feel my arms and legs

but I can't move them. I can't move anything. Our bodies rise, lifted by something much stronger than us. As my perspective shifts and I'm elevated upright, I can see all of the women he touched. They are all raised into an unnatural erect posture. Everyone's eyes are pulled open widely and their smiles are stiff. Our muscles aren't a part of this. Our bones are straight but unsupported.

Music kicks in from outside the setting of our sky. The girl next to me now has painted rosy cheeks and blue eye shadow with thick black eyeliner. Her once burned hair is now pulled into clean, blonde, curly pigtails. Her clothes are spotless and crisply ironed. She's wearing a new undersized gray skirt, a white button-down shirt, and suspenders. We're standing next to each other and a large spotlight is shining down from our new perfect solid pale blue sky. All of the women are lined up next to each other in vertical rows leading up the hill. The grass is sage green and the leaves are painted. Our faces and bodies are covered in makeup and toy-like attire. We look plastic.

We hear the music and start to dance. Our arms are stretched out across each other's shoulders. Our legs raise, one at a time, and our plastic smiles stretch wide. We dance in choreographed uniformity, our joints snapping in unison on the hill. With the spotlight surrounding us, our stage is set.

(Not Included)

Some artifacts that were not included in the trial:

K.'s first math exam is pinned with a magnet on the top left corner.

Her second math exam is right under it.

I remember when she showed it to me. She left it on my bed and discreetly mentioned, "I left papers for you to read." Then she waited out in the hall, clearly holding her smile back in anticipation.

I opened the packet of papers and started reading through them. At the very end were her most recent math and geometry test scores showing her proficiency in the advanced level.

"You got 100%!" I yelled across the apartment.

"Again!" She was so excited. I remember when we first moved here. She cried every night because the math was such a challenge. Now she's in the advanced levels of proficiency. This has been such a positive change for her.

On the right side of the refrigerator is a letter from the elementary school principle.

"Dear parent/guardian of L.,

L. is being recognized by X elementary school staff and faculty for exceptional performance with an increased amount of attention to his schoolwork. He has excelled in his coursework and we'd like to invite him to spend a day playing with the principle. There will be a number of fun activities such as softball, movies, healthy snacks and possibly some candy. If your child has any dietary limits or needs, please let us know in

the note portion of this form. Please sign this permission slip and have your child return it to his teacher before Monday May 12th, 2014. Congratulations to L. on his massive accomplishments this year!”

Below that letter was the award itself. It was a light blue sheet with a green border and a picture of the school’s mascot in the middle. It stated,

“E is for Excellence Award is presented to L. Carter for: increased attention to classwork. Thanks for being such a superstar!”

When I picked him up from school that day, he ran up to me so fast his hair blew straight up. The collar of his shirt blew back in the wind. His chubby cheeks shook every time his foot hit the ground. He reached me, dropped his backpack, unzipped it and yanked the award out. “Mom look! I won the school award! Again!” He was so excited.

There are two folded forms stuck with magnets titled, Standards-Based Student Achievement Report. K.’s reads,

“K. is a wonderful addition to our classroom and school. She adjusted to her new school very well and has made some great friends. She also has made a positive adjustment to the curriculum, which was very new to her. She has had a positive first and second trimester. She wants to do her best, and is gaining self-confidence in completing tasks or problems that might present a slight challenge to her. K. enjoys reading and writing, as she expresses herself well in written form. K. continues to be a positive member of our classroom.”

L.’s reads,

“Although L. has been in our class for a very short time, he has made a great adjustment to our school. The other students enjoy working with him and he has made a lot of friends. L., you have made great progress in learning new words this trimester. A little more push and you will have the Grand Finale down. I am glad to see you participating more in class. Continue to read and you will succeed!”

I remember taking the kids to a local farmer’s market one Saturday morning. On our way home, K. told me, *“Mom, I’m really glad we moved here. We get to do everything we love all the time.”*

I remember waking up one morning this past November. I went in the kids’ room and woke them up for school. L. stood, stretched his arms up in the air, yawned, and said, *“Mom, thank you for all of this hotness!”*

We were granted the relocation and I was granted full custody, but the jurisdiction of the case remains in Snohomish County, WA. Anytime we have to go to court in the future, we will have to drop everything to accommodate his rights. Even though the conclusion was, to an extent, winning the trial, we were not allowed any closure. The apposing council was tasked with transcribing the judge’s decision into orders for all parties to sign and file. It has been six months and nothing has been written. Until this is completed, we can’t get jurisdiction transferred to L.A.

Filling the drawer to the right of the refrigerator are eighteen cards addressed to L., from J. Six groups of three were mailed each month on the same day. Nine of them contain nothing but bible scriptures about the wrath of God. Seven of them tell L. he's going to go to Washington and stay with him. Two just say hello.

FROM ALL ANGLES: or, why I wrote how I wrote

I sat in the living room looking at boxes filled with files of court documents. I had just finished my custody and relocation case. How ever awful that experience was, it wasn't unique. One thing I observed, while sifting through documents and the memories of women I have known during the ten years I have been a single parent, is how our culture uses law to define and enforce right and wrong. I noticed that while the laws have changed over the past hundred years, a lot of the same problems still exist today as prior to the first wave of the feminist movement. Agendas slip through the cracks of language, under law's fine print.

We had a hearing early last autumn. I was able to find a lawyer to help with that, but the trial in December was too expensive. I was representing myself pro se and had no knowledge of the intricacies of law. I had in front of me all of the paperwork that I had to refute. I was swimming in allegations against my character that were untrue and irrelevant. I thought for a moment I would not get through the trial. The opposing party's approach was tangential and, at times, distracting and overpowering. I didn't know how to approach what I had to do, so I began to write.

In 2007, I received a letter that I held onto silently for years. This letter was the last word I had from my son's father. It was a rambling disjointed declaration of intent to never be a part of our son's life. I hadn't been what he wanted me to be, so the result was him leaving our lives. In order to have some clarity for the impending trial, I needed to isolate his language within this letter and every written document I had in my possession. I began erasing his tangents. As I started to narrow each sentence down to his ultimate point. I noticed a trend in his language that I had felt, but hadn't pegged, years ago. He

wasn't talking to me. He was talking to his understanding of women altogether. He was lashing outward with language that pushed women down and elevated him as a man through religion and a grandiose self-opinion.

I started picking through sentences and piecing them together with other clearly connected fragments. I began reordering them, shifting and breaking them apart. As I started to isolate the words that he used, it became clearer that he wasn't talking to me, and it really wasn't him talking. He had become a talking head for the voice of patriarchy. This case wasn't he vs. I, but rather patriarchy vs. women. I put the words that I had whittled the letter down to into stanzas and stared at them for months, trying to figure out my next move.

The use of court documents started as a therapeutic tactic and tool to approach an intimidating trial. My family's entire well-being was at stake. I needed to isolate the content of the documents and begin to discern what was being claimed, what was being asked for, what I needed to respond to, and what angle was most appropriate. It was the only way I could take my emotions out of the strategy. I needed to physically handle the case by taking the content off his pages, off his context, and see what was legitimately happening. I was overwhelmed. As I worked through the trial, it led me to the bigger topic of patriarchy's still present influence and power.

I thought about *Zong!* written by Nourbese Philip and her poetics statement about finding the underlying story, the underlying voices. Her words and methods have stayed with me over the past year while I have developed my own poetics. There seems to always be a truth that gets overlooked by the dominant interpreters and the dominant text. While reading and rereading these documents, while reflecting on the experience of the

trial, and really the past decade of parenting, I was able to see an underlying story of the bigger problem that is in our culture, not just in one story's villain. I was able to isolate this voice to lines and phrases such as, "Be a follower towards me, I should not follow you," and "Go read the bible and learn how to respect the man you are with!" My hope was to pull the words away from him to show that this voice has speakers that oppress from every angle.

I produced all of the poetry sections from various forms of documentation and communication that is a regular part of life. *Service* was written from a news article. *Leaving* was written from the letter I received in 2007 and lyrics. *Someone Told Her* was written from phrases and directions given to girls, as they grow up, combined with statements taken from declarations I received during the process of the trial. *She* was written from a collection of allegations against me curated from one declaration. I wanted to show the focus of the patriarchal voice on the she involved, rather than the welfare of the child. I wanted to show how this is a general and common approach. *No Son of Mine* was written from a statement made in court. It was a very poignant moment, made by the father of a son and a daughter, and yet the desire was only for the son. It was important to let the focus of the poetry distance itself from him and me, to show that it is more of a cultural than a personal problem.

I give a memoir-like recollection of the trial to present the topic. It is intended not to make me or my recent story the center of focus but only an example from a present day lived experience that symbolizes a problem within a larger context. I move from the trial to memories of past experiences to show that these aren't isolated incidences or extreme

situations, but rather an unfortunate part of society that I hope we can fix. This isn't only in my life but is still a cultural habit.

Reading Caroline Kay Steedman's *Landscape For A Good Woman* was helpful to identify how geographical movement impacts the type of life someone is trying to lead, as well as leave. My choice to move to California wasn't only for practical reasons but also for identity and agency. I had spent seven years prior to this event in a location that was a result of circumstance, not of desire or practicality. This was as important as anything else. I wanted to show all the layers patriarchy tries to control. My family and I were left alone, until we wanted to leave. Then the father threatened everything, especially the welfare of the child. Patriarchy might be kind, until agency is asserted, then the ability to control your own family's path is threatened. I wanted to exhibit the fact that my character was under scrutiny, as a means to have my whole family court ordered to move back to Washington after the initial relocation granting.

A woman is on trial. When all else fails, make her unlikable to win. It's the same strategy used when a woman reports a rape in the military. She is made to look promiscuous and dishonest, even suicidal or self-destructive.

I wanted to open up each chapter with an excerpt from the letter to show what started the real life story that frames *Read Without Listening*. The voice of the speaker is excessive and overly patriarchal to the extent that the reader might feel inclined to disregard his power. I felt it was important to maintain the integrity of that voice to show that this is a reality within our culture our laws protect. By choosing to turn a blind eye to someone who sounds too old fashioned, irrational, or too radical, we are consenting to this character's progression. If we take all of the different angles in which patriarchy

asserts its voice and its power, the voice may sound too extreme to be afraid of. But if this character has power over another human being, he is something to be feared. Our court system provides protection to this voice.

I wanted to show that what I've experienced is only a concentrated version of what is a massive part of our culture still. It isn't about the outcome but the still present experience. It isn't about the laws but the treatment. This treatment can be seen in our culture's representation of women, particularly popular song lyrics. Earlier last year, I collected lyrics that were stuck in my head throughout a period of several months. I compiled them and looked for some kind of underlying hidden story. It wasn't until listening to Caroline Bergvall's *One DJ Too Many* that I was able to see outside of the constraint that came with each song. As I broke them apart, jumbled them around and looked for themes, I began to see the emergence of different voices within the lyrics separate from the songs they came from. The songs themselves had one meaning. The combined lyrics had separate stories and separate struggles. I began to view the collection of lyrics as a population of individual voices, infiltrating the media's representation of women.

Lyrics are written and sung by women as often as men. Frequently, lyrics written by men are covered and repurposed by women. The lyrics are not solely responsible for the new meaning represented with repurposed work. The voice adds the melody and the dynamics. While thinking of lyrics as a tool for representing women, there are considerable complexities. There are truths and fallacies in the mixture of the media's and an individual's representation of self and gender. Patriarchy speaks to women as if we are all of one mind. This mistake silences the voice of the actual person. I wanted to

show this dialogue between the unified voice of patriarchy and the complex, divided voice of the representation of women. So I intertwined the lyrics and poems from the letter into a poem of conversation.

Lyrics can unify a voice repurposed and reused, layering intention upon intention. But words are only letters. Patriarchy speaks as if women are all one. We are all Eve, weak and untrustworthy. The words in lyrics can fuel portrayals and assumptions. But it's the melody that makes the meaning. It's the beat that sets the rhythm. The voice and emotional layers set apart the truth from assumptions. Court understands lyrics. Law interprets words. But the song is left unheard. Dreams can access the content left unheard.

I included dream sequences to conclude each mini book. These are all dreams that I have had, but they represent a more abstract look into the larger cultural conflict. *Separation* introduces the concepts from first wave feminism by showing the divide between genders, families and women. *Switch* represents the evolution of feminism and our lack of agency in domestic positions. It shows the unavoidable evolution in our own lives and the seemingly impenetrable resistance we experience while choosing anything different. *Taken* concludes the mini books by depicting the level in which we cannot control our lives without patriarchal permission. Even though the women's bodies are controlled by a larger power, their minds still possess freewill. In this story there is a possibility of hope.

This past year, I have been strongly influence by Kathy Acker. The way that she appropriates stories and people to create fiction that presents a metaphorical representation of a larger conflict has helped me build a much greater appreciation for the

impacts of fiction. Large conflicts take up not only the space in the physical world but also the subconscious. It is another angle, a metaphorical representation of the experience of oppression from patriarchy and the impossibility of it. Patriarchy doesn't work from one angle. It isn't a linear language and it oppresses from every avenue. Mixing genres is a way to represent these angles. It shows the same problems, just in a different context.

The feminist movement isn't close to completion. Our goals have not been accomplished. There have been massive triumphs, but we aren't done. We still do not have equal rights, which has always been the ultimate goal. And equal rights doesn't just mean in the legal sense but true equal treatment. Patriarchy is still the backbone to our society. The voice of patriarchy is loud: it takes up the space of our language, and to this day is impenetrable. I wanted this to come across in the text. So I chose to give the voice of patriarchy an element of space domination across the pages, with the hope that it may show the story of reality.

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